



Shopping for a Booty Call (Shopping for a Highlander)

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Category: Sport

Description: Getting a 3:00 a.m. booty call from one of Scotland's hottest footballers is every woman's dream, right?

No.

It's my worst nightmare.

My sister's marrying a billionaire. I'm a bridesmaid, and the groom's Scottish cousin, Hamish, is a groomsman. We're paired together in the ceremony, and the man is so full of himself, he's bulging at the seams.

Biceps bulging. Thigh muscles bulging. Everything bulging...

Overflowing with charm and oozing animal attraction, Hamish is irresistible sunshine.

And he knows it.

But I'm not looking or admiring, because once this wedding is over, he goes back to Scotland and does his cute little job, where he runs around with a bunch of other grown men who all get paid obscene amounts of money to chase a ball around on grass. And I can get on with my life and my goals.

That call, though.

That call changed everything.

How can I hate someone and want them so desperately?

Because it's him. That's why.

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Chapter One

Amy

Sweaty, shirtless, and rippling like a Kentucky Derby horse going for the finish line, a very late Hamish McCormick is in full sprint, wearing only red soccer shorts, white athletic ankle socks, sneakers, and a dazzlingly glorious grin as we assemble for a last dry run for my sister's wedding to billionaire Declan McCormick.

Who is Hamish's cousin.

I cannot take my eyes off the famous-in-Europe Scottish soccer player—er, footballer—who towers over even Declan and his brother Andrew. Declan watches Hamish's sprint with narrowed eyes.

I can't be sure, but it looks like a mix of envy and spite.

Competition is in the DNA of the McCormick clan the way frugality runs in my family: as blood sport.

Besides, I'm struggling to manage my drooling and that instant heat that creeps over my skin as I devour the sight before me. When a half-naked, increasingly famous athlete shows up in the middle of his workout, it's a bit like being allowed to see the dress rehearsals for the Emmys.

You take in as much as you can, while you can, and just appreciate the art.

In this case, muscled art.

“Ma apologies,” Hamish says in that Glaswegian accent, barely breathing hard. He slaps an earnest splayed palm across his sweat-soaked pecs, the sheen on his skin catching the sun as it caresses his auburn chest hair, my eyes unable to stop feasting on this buffet of visual delights.

I can’t stand the man, but damn, he is fine to look at.

Revulsion and arousal can’t coexist in the same body. I hate that I feel this way. Normally well in control of every part of who I am, this rush of desire is so abnormal.

And unappealing.

But most of all, completely unacceptable.

Approaching Shannon, he takes her hand in his and bows to kiss the back of it as she giggles, his dark red hair, nearly the same color as mine, bobbing insouciantly. It’s short in the back and on the sides but has a rakish wave that rests casually across his brow in front.

And it’s sweat-soaked, which somehow adds to the power of my response. Visceral and wholly biological, I’d have to be dead not to have a hormonal cascade at the vision before me, right?

The thrum inside me, followed by a tingling sensation that spreads everywhere tells me I am definitely alive.

As he bends, the thick chain of muscles rippling across his broad back, narrowing along the spine, and funneling down to dimples at his waistband, forces me to begin fanning myself.

No, it's not the July weather. Even I have to admit that .

“Forgive me, Shannon?” he asks, eyes looking up at her as he stays in the bow. All the women are now ogling him, and my mother is making a sound—“mmm, mmm, mmm”—that turns my stomach sour. Mom's libido is no secret—because she won't shut up about it—and normally I just roll my eyes.

A primal wave of possessiveness that freaks me out turns my reaction sideways this time.

What is wrong with me?

“Of course,” my sister says, giggling again.

Declan's look turns from annoyed to something deeper as his thick, dark eyebrows judge Hamish, moss-green eyes flickering with intensity.

The McCormick men have some gorgeous DNA floating through their double helixes.

“Hello, Terry,” Hamish says with a chin jut, acknowledging his other cousin, who is now filling in as best man. This extra rehearsal wasn't in the original plans, but we're doing it on the fly because the best man backed out of the wedding.

That's right.

Declan's youngest brother, Andrew, has pulled out of his duties at the last minute because the wedding will take place outdoors. He's terrified of wasps, though he'll never admit it. Billionaires have this ego thing about perceived weakness.

Like my sister and bees, he's highly allergic to wasps and had a meltdown when he

realized the ceremony and reception would be on the country club's lawn.

I mean, I get it, and yet...

So now Terry is filling in.

Terry is Declan's older brother, a guy who looks like he went to a Grateful Dead concert back in 1991 and never quite came back. He was on track to become CEO of Anterdec but walked away from it after their mother died twelve years ago, and how he could do that is beyond me. Shannon's told me part of the story, but the bottom line: He's a hippie leftover. Nice guy, but zero ambition.

I guess? I don't know. The McCormicks are so complex, it's like trying to understand the Krebs cycle (and I stopped being a chemistry major because of that). Shannon's love for Declan must be powerful beyond anything I have ever felt, because now she's deep in the complications of a family with so many secrets, layers, tension, and calculation that I couldn't even create a basic chart of it all.

You'd need a professional project manager.

More than that, an on-staff psychiatrist.

"Hamish. I see you're adhering to the dress code," Terry jokes. Hamish winks and spreads his hands all over his bare chest.

"Bit hot for a shirt, aye?"

"Oh, it's definitely hot," my oldest sister, Carol, says under her breath.

Did Terry just frown?

Mom picks this moment to insert herself, coming in from the side to give Hamish a hug, her face comical when she realizes too late how sweaty he is.

“Boston heat must be too much for a Highlander like you!” she jokes as Hamish smiles.

“I do what I can to manage.”

Then she looks him up and down and murmurs, “You manage all right. You’re more like a Thigh lander.”

“Marie!” Dad hisses, coming to collect her. Her glazed eyes meet mine before Dad hauls her off. As I watch them retreat, I see the similarity between Dad and Hamish.

No, not the rippling display of masculinity along bones so fine and elegant, they might as well be sculpture. Not that.

Dad, Hamish, and I all have the same auburn hair.

“Amy,” Hamish says, turning to me with a huge, engaging smile and a slight bow. “I’m paired wi’ ye, I know, and I promise no’ to be late fer the actual weddin’.”

“Why are you late now?” Declan asks in a voice more curious than upset. “You look like you just came in from a practice.”

“Aye. Of sorts. Needed to bang out a run and do some sprints. Lost track o’ time.” He looks over my shoulder.

“Do you need a handler for that banging?” Carol jokes, her voice lingering on the word handler .

As in, she'd like to handle him, all right. And let's not even start on the word bang .

That possessiveness rises up in me again as Hamish's hand knocks into mine for a brief second, the touch electrifying, my sister suddenly the enemy. Why is my body doing this to me?

I can't stand this shallow excuse for a human being. Sure, he's fine to look at, but nothing more. The man treats women like he's a human plunger. He's a blip in my life. He doesn't deserve my body's reaction.

But my sister deserves a smackdown for that comment.

I clear my throat, the minister watching us all with a mildly horrified expression. It's a look I've come to know all too well, but it's normally aimed at our mother.

"He's a grown man, a professional who can juggle his own schedule, Carol," I answer her, trying my best to sound bored so we can move on, get out of the humidity, and go back to doing what we do best at a wedding rehearsal.

Get it over with.

"Aye," Hamish says, squaring his bare shoulders and standing next to me at the back row of chairs, the wedding party lined up and ready to go.

My sister is marrying a billionaire and I'm not. Instead, I get paired with a sweaty European soccer—er, football —player with a reputation for sleeping around, a guy who just finished a Sports Illustrated photo shoot—in the nude—before coming here.

I instantly suck in my gut.

"Thank ye fer noticin' I'm a grown man," Hamish whispers as the minister begins

giving instructions to us. “It’s nice to know ye care.”

“I don’t care,” I say with a snort. “I just didn’t like how Carol was drooling all over you.”

“Jealous, are ye?”

“It’s humid enough. We don’t need Carol adding to the moisture.”

“I like it when yer wet, Amy,” he rasps in my ear, the words and touch and vibration of his voice making me, well...

Wet.

“OMIGOD, STOP!”

Every set of eyes turns to us as I let out a long breath, determined not to let this blithering blowhard get the better of me.

“Sorry. A bug was bothering me,” I say, waving my hand in front of my face to shoo the imaginary insect. Inspired, I smack Hamish’s chest as hard as possible, palm hitting solid granite under skin. “There. Got it.”

He leans toward my ear and whispers, “Ye like a good swat, do ye? Happy to return the favor.”

I will not make a scene. Ignoring him, I stare straight ahead.

“Yer hair is sae gorgeous, Amy. Perfect auburn ringlets. And ye got yer mum’s blue eyes, aye?”

“My hair is the same color as yours,” I hiss back.

“Aye. Gorgeous.”

“You are just an ego on two legs,” I snap.

“Been called worse.” He glances down at me, his breathing steady now that he’s settled down from whatever run he was on before. “Ye noticed ma legs? Ye like to look?”

With that, the minister cuts into the conversation and spends the next twenty minutes taking us through pacing, when to move and where to stand, all the things you do at a wedding rehearsal. This is a final final tweak. Things have changed a bit now that Terry is the best man. Plus, this isn’t just a normal wedding, it’s a billionaire’s wedding. There are a million details, and they all have to be perfect .

Don’t get me wrong. I was a junior bridesmaid once, and my older sisters have been bridesmaids a few times. I know you have to rehearse. But like everything else, Declan’s wedding has to be bigger. Bolder.

The best , whatever that means.

Add in Mom and her Scottish obsession, and the whole affair is just too much.

When my sister started dating Declan McCormick, my mother began planning the wedding before they’d even pulled out of the driveway to go to dinner. Not only was Declan the VP of marketing for Anterdec, one of Boston’s Fortune 500 companies, but his father founded the company.

Desperate to have one of her three daughters married at Farmington Country Club, she was in full-on activator mode. Her eldest, Carol, had a quickie Elvis drive-thru

wedding in Vegas. And I haven't dated anyone in so long, they all seem to think I'm asexual.

I'm not. I'm just... discerning.

So Shannon's relationship with Declan was wish fulfillment for Mom.

And by the time it became obvious Shannon had, as Mom said, "bagged a billionaire," it was clear there was no other option.

Farmington, it was.

For the McCormick family, Farmington is an okay choice. Not inspired, but traditional and safe. For Mom, though, it's like winning the lottery, or being chosen as a contestant on *The Price is Right*, then winning the car.

Down to the smallest detail, like the McCormick tartan ribbons on our outfits, Mom has been in a playground of wedding fun. Satisfied (I hope) by this whole extravaganza, she's getting it all out of her system.

At least, that's what I tell myself when she asks for my help and I find her cutting hair-waxing strips into the shape of the Scottish flag, complete with the cross in the middle, for the men to wax their calves.

Poor Dad. She made him be the guinea pig for those. The end result was patches that looked like the kid from *Home Alone*, so thankfully Mom gave up.

The upside to being the baby of the family is that no one blinks if I can't do something. It's strange. I'm one of the most organized people I know, on track to finally finish my bachelor's after being forced to go part-time and work because of lack of money. Next stop: my MBA. But my own parents and older sisters still think

I'm a two-year-old who can't safely walk with scissors in my hands.

So when I told Mom I wouldn't help with her waxing project, she just waved me away with a smile. Hooray, for once, for being underestimated.

"Amy? Step forward?" the minister prompts, shaking me out of my distracted brain that really doesn't need to ponder Mom's wedding oddities. I brush against Hamish's body, his strong, sweaty forearm emitting pheromones like a toxic waste dump, his muscles thicker than my, uh...

My own. I can't get away with all that "thicker than my leg" stuff because it's not true.

Staring down the aisle as we mark our steps makes me think about my own wedding, a vague, gauzy future thought that is more a feeling than an image.

And what I feel when I imagine it is pure happiness. I envision my parents beaming, my pride and excitement about starting a life together with the man of my dreams.

Like what I see on Shannon's face.

At the head of the aisle is a huge arch covered with roses, where the ceremony will take place. The minister points to where I'll stand, then smiles. "We've already had one rehearsal, so I really think you all have it down."

Hamish approaches me, leans in, and whispers, "Ye ever think about yer own day?"

"My own what day?"

"Yer weddin' day. Bein' the bride. Gettin' marrit. Staring into yer true love's eyes. Taking vows for eternity. How it'll feel."

“Of course. I played Barbies and all that.”

“Barbie dolls!” His laughter makes dimples appear. Of course he has them, this fine specimen of human physical perfection. “Aye. Ma sister lines up all her stuffies and makes them throw rice at the bride and groom.”

“Rice is bad for birds. It swells up in their stomachs and kills them.”

He presses his palm against his heart. “Yer such a romantic, Amy. Making me melt with feeling.”

“That’s the heat.”

“Come on. Don’t ye want to wear a fine dress like Shannon? Have everyone cheerin’ fer ye and yer soulmate as ye walk down the aisle?”

“I’m a realist, and I care about the birds.”

“Bet yer the kind of woman who goes to a concert and listens fer two hours, then complains about the single note that was off-key.”

“I—”

“Ye read the last page of mystery novels first.”

“But—”

“Ye look up every menu in town before ye settle on a place fer dinner, then ye pick out what yer orderin’ before yer even seated at yer table.”

I try to argue but I can’t.

Damn.

So I press my lips shut and go back to silence.

Hamish heads to the altar while I wait at the back of the rows of chairs. Shannon's best friend and maid of honor Amanda is already there, me standing behind Carol, and Hamish heads up to Terry's left. Declan and his assistant are scrambling to find someone to fill in for Terry, who is now filling in for Andrew, but that's not my job.

Good luck to them.

Declan's never struck me as the type to have a lot of close friends, though he knows so many people. I suspect Shannon is his best friend, and at the thought, a tug of envy surprises me, pulling at my heart. They're so close. So connected. Love like that runs deep and rooted. A pining feeling fills my chest.

I will it away.

The women in the bridal party do our processional and take our places at the altar, across from the men. The minister goes through the lines, each one sweeter and more emotional than the next. It's routine, and I've been to enough weddings to know how this all works, but it hits harder when it's my sister getting married.

Shannon is an adult. A full-fledged grown-up. Tomorrow, she becomes a wife.

I am so far behind in life.

The minister takes a few minutes to wrap up, and Mom fusses over details like the view of the wedding party, the color of the ribbons against the flowers, whether the music will overpower our visuals. These are trivial issues compared to the love Declan and Shannon share, but Mom cares about them.

Care infuses the entire scene.

I can't help but smile.

Even though it's just the rehearsal, a photographer is snapping pictures, and Mom runs over to Hamish.

"It's a shame to cover up God's own art, but Farmington has a dress code and the manager is having a fit," she tells him as she hands him a T-shirt, which he pulls on by lifting his arms high, his abs displaying all of these individual muscles that I didn't know belonged there.

Can you have a ten pack? Seriously?

The shirt is green with white lettering that says GROUNDS CREW.

"You look amazing," Mom gushes. "And I'll bet you're great working with bushes."

"MOM!"

"That Sports Illustrated nude photo shoot left you with a gorgeous tan. With you being a Scotsman, I'm surprised you don't burn!"

"Ma mum's side has some Southern European in it. Got ma hair from her and the better skin. I dinna burn much," he says, clearly uncomfortable with Mom's attentions.

"Well, whatever your genetic makeup, you certainly hit the body jackpot, didn't you?"

Out of the corner of my eye, I see a shirtless man pushing a wheelbarrow, headed for

a door marked MAINTENANCE. How on earth did Mom talk a landscaping worker out of his shirt ?

Oh, no. Bet she invited him to the wedding.

“Marie,” Dad says gently, with a breath that stops suddenly, as if he’s suppressing a long-suffering sigh. When it comes to my mother, aren’t we all? “The minister has a few questions.”

“Does that mean we’re done?” I ask, my obvious eagerness making Dad smile.

“You take Hamish’s arm and walk back down the aisle, but we don’t have to do that part if you don’t?—”

Without a word, I turn away from Hamish McCormick.

Because Shannon’s bachelorette party is tonight, and the last thing I want on my mind is a tall, muscled, hot-as-sin redhead with a mouth like velvet and an ego the size of an island.

Because him? I’m trying very hard not to care about.

As hard as I possibly can.

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Chapter Two

Hamish

Watching the back of a woman as she walks away from me normally involves having her scent on my hands and mouth and her number in my mobile contacts.

This one, though—she’s not my type.

One to flirt with, sure. One to sleep with—I could. Of course I could. The right words, the perfect tone of voice, the charm turned up a bit higher than usual to get around those defenses she has, and I’ll have her in my bed, writhing under me, calling out my name like I’m God.

But just because you can bed a woman doesn’t mean you should .

So why shouldn’t I?

Because I’m a man of morals. Sleeping with Amy would make family gatherings messy.

But mostly because my Uncle James ordered me not to.

“Look,” he said to me at the rehearsal dinner a short time ago, as he caught me scanning the room for all the possible bedmates, “I know this is a fanny buffet for you—”

I spat a mouthful of my drink.

“Excuse me?” I choked, setting the glass down on a table and picking up a fresh one.

“Isn’t that what you call it in the UK?”

“No’ quite, Uncle.”

His dismissive hand wave had come with a lowering of voice, a conspirator’s tone that forced me to lean closer. “I wouldn’t mind the publicity, you know, but the only eligible women in the room are Amy, Amanda, and Carol.” He’d given me side eye. “Unless you count the married women.”

“I may love women, but I’m nae a cad.”

He’d huffed through his nose. You learn a lot about people by what they don’t say and how they don’t say it.

“Declan is a very tightly wound man. Don’t make it uncomfortable. Sleep your way around the wedding but be discreet.”

“Maybe Marie was right. What she said at the rehearsal dinner.”

James had clicked the ice in his empty glass. “What’s that?”

“She said she had her three girls, ye have yer three boys, then there’s Shannon’s best friend Amanda, and me, yer nephew. We pair off nicely. Shannon and Declan. Amanda and Andrew. Terry and Carol. Amy and me.”

“Are you interested in her?” James had watched her just then, head tilted a bit. “She’s the smartest of Marie and Jason’s kids.”

“Uncle James! What a thing to say.”

“I’m pragmatic, Hamish. I speak the truth.”

“Every person has a special gift, ma mum always says. For me, it’s ma legs.”

“Your legs aren’t what get you nude Sports Illustrated covers, son,” he’d said dryly, looking me up and down as if I were someone else’s Ferrari that was parked in his spot.

The memory of the conversation is cut short by the smack of a palm against my shoulder blade, Declan giving me a stress-filled smile.

“Hamish.”

“Declan. Ye look like a man who needs a drink.”

His eyes cut over to his future mother-in-law, who was adjusting the sporran on a cat.

Aye. A cat . The woman is a bampot.

“I need the whole bottle, Hamish.”

“Good thing there’s yer party tonight.”

“We can’t stay out late again, like last night.”

“Then we need to start the drinking early.”

“I refuse to attend my own wedding hung over.”

“Ah, but that rule does na apply to me, cousin.”

For once, I see a real smile spread across his face, which lifts me up as he walks away chuckling softly. Making people happy is my job. Not really, of course—my job is playing football.

And yet, my mission in life seems to be to lift people’s spirits. Nothing warms my heart more than knowing I’ve made someone feel better than they did before I came across them.

In big and small ways, it’s how I go about my day.

When it comes to women, though—that’s my weakness. I can make anyone’s day brighter by spending a bit of time and attention, but women are like magic for me.

For parts of me, definitely. God gave my body a wand. Why not use it as much as possible to spread some magic?

I’ve never lost that feeling you have when you’re young and discovering sex, the marvelous realization that you can share your body with another person and you’ll both feel better than you can feel alone. Don’t get me wrong—a good wank feels fine when you need it and learning how to satisfy yourself means you’ll be better at making someone else feel good when they come.

But being naked, sweaty, uninhibited, all hands and tongues and other parts in a giant pile of fun—that is where pure joy is created.

For me, a woman’s body is a temple. And Amy’s ass—in eyesight right now—is an altar. Oh, how I’d love to worship between those legs.

“Hamish?” I’m interrupted by a sweet young thing wearing a catering staff apron and

a shy smile. “Would ye mind?” She thrusts a small notebook and pen at me. “Ma mum’s a huge fan.” The accent’s Scottish, so close to my own that I’m charmed.

“Aye?” I flash her a grin and wink. “And ye?”

“Mum is from Glasgow. I’m more of a Manchester fan maself.”

“Oof.” I pause mid-word on the page and give her a mock glare. “Mebbe I’ll nae sign this after all.”

“Blame ma da,” she says matter-of-factly. “He’s English.”

We both shudder, then laugh. I start writing, beginning with “Manchester sucks!” and ask her name.

“Lila. But Mum’s name is Gertie.”

“Gertie,” I mutter, “i-e or y?”

“G-e-r-t-i-e.”

With a flick of the wrist, I’m done, handing the notebook and pen back to her. Lila tucks it away in her bag like a Fabergé egg. I don’t know why moving my hand across a piece of paper while clutching a pen holds so much value for people, but if it makes them happy, then I’m happy to do it.

“Want a picture?” I ask as she looks me over, her phone already in her hand. Just then, Amy appears, peering intently about the area, checking the tables for something, her pretty face screwed up in confusion, brows knit together.

“Amy!” I call out. “Need help?”

“I left my phone here.”

Being tall has its advantages. I spot her mobile two tables away and reach it before she does, surprised to find it unlocked when I press the home button.

“No code?”

“No need, until now. You’re so nosy!” She reaches to snatch the phone from my hands, but my height really pays off in moments like this.

Holding it aloft, I type my number in her contacts, labeling it That Guy You Would Call. But then I delete it. If I put my contact in there, then she’s warned when I ring her. I like to retain the element of surprise.

“What are you doing to my phone?” she asks suspiciously. Lila watches us with the same keen interest as the caterer at my Sports Illustrated shoot.

“Improving it.”

“You better not have deleted anything!”

I don’t know this woman other than meeting at the first rehearsal dinner. Amanda and Andrew got shitfaced that night and had some kind of fight, and Amy’s mother made it clear she not only knows nothing about football, she knows nothing about baseball, hockey, basketball, or likely anything not involving drool, yoga, or sex toys.

Amy Jacoby isn’t special. She’s just someone I am stuck with by circumstance.

So why am I enjoying teasing her so much?

With a loud humph worthy of my mother after discovering that my younger brother

Darren yet again used the last square of loo paper and failed to put a new roll on the rack, Amy storms off.

Lila leans toward me and asks, “Angry girlfriend?”

“Me? Have a girlfriend? Nae.” I squint and watch as Amy runs off, propelled by sheer self-righteousness. “And if I did, wouldna be her.”

“Looks like you two have some chemistry.”

“Like ammonia and bleach mixed together, mebbe.”

The face Lila makes cracks us both up, but her words ring through me. Chemistry?

My phone buzzes, and I look down to find a text from Andrew’s executive assistant, Gina. She’s been handling the details of tonight’s stag party.

The limo leaves at 6:30 for the bachelor party. Dress is business casual. Please wear a shirt.

I see word has gotten around.

Lila walks over to a table and fixes chair covers while I deal with Gina.

I text back, Shirt it is. And only a shirt .

That’s not what I meant! Gina replies.

The cat doesn’t wear trousers in the wedding. Why can’t I go without? I reply with a grin.

Ha ha , she answers. I'd much rather see you without pants than Chuckles!

Gina. I've met her once before, the woman who talks as if every sentence out of her mouth were a question. I half expected her texts to be the same way.

Wonder if she's like that in bed. "Oh, my God? I think I'm coming? Do that thing again with your tongue? I'm so close? No, there?"

A bedmate worth his mettle could get her to the point where every word out of her mouth as she comes is a statement . That poor woman needs all the uncertainty banged out of her.

Wonder if I should give her a go?

Will I see your lovely face at the wedding? I venture.

Three dots appear. Then disappear. Then appear.

That's more like it. She's crafting a message...

You will, with my date, Louis.

...and that message is: No .

No isn't a word I'm used to hearing out of a woman's mouth, but I guess today is an exception. An aberration.

Anomaly, aye?

Between Amy and Gina, though, my "no meter" is full.

I give Lila a sly smile and as she catches my eye, she grins, waving enthusiastically.

That's more like it.

A breeze shifts to my left as a man jogs past me, pulling my prospect into his arms and giving her a fierce kiss.

So that's a no, too.

Three nos in a row.

The cat in a kilt walks over to me, looking up with a frown like the poor thing's face is stuck that way. Then he shows me his arsehole, like a puckered granny's face, disapproving.

This is not the booty I want.

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Chapter Three

Amy

We tried to ditch our mother by claiming Shannon didn't want a bachelorette party after all, but one of Shannon's coworkers from her old mystery shopping job, Josh, is weak-willed and easy prey for Mom. She can sniff out the weakest link in any situation and turn them into a snitch in two seconds flat.

She'd have easily won a season of Survivor .

Josh cracked under interrogation pressure, and now here we are at the Boston piano bar Shannon asked for, getting blow jobs in a private room.

All of us, including Josh, who—unlike Mom—was invited.

Yes. We're all getting blow jobs. In fact, I'm receiving one right now from our server, Chrissy, who smiles and says, "Just go slow and don't chip a tooth."

"That's what Jason says whenever I give him one!" my mother—yes, my MOTHER—jokes as she takes a shot glass from Chrissy.

A blow job, I now know, is the vulgar name of a drink. It's Kahlua and cream, served in a shot glass, and you drink it on your knees.

You lower yourself to the floor, hands behind your back, and open your mouth wide enough to cover the entire rim of the shot glass. Then you lift it up and tip it back in,

swallowing in one gulp while still holding the glass between your lips.

If you gag, you “fail.”

I have no idea who invented this game, but my mother likes it waaaaay too much. I didn't know a tongue could simultaneously wrap around the rim of a shot glass and touch the bottom of it.

“How many blow jobs you done, Pammy?” she slurs as she talks to Amanda's mom, Pam. Pam is normally not the partying type, an actuary who is more prone to recite facts about the manufacturing process for Kahlua or liability issues around pasteurization points for the cream. She's constantly quoting obscure statistics and determining the odds of horrible incidents happening to people. I love her because she appreciates a good spreadsheet just like I do. She has fibromyalgia and suffers from frequent flares, so she often cancels on social activities—understandably so.

But maybe a girls' night out is good for her?

Amanda told me that Declan's father's company is picking up the tab, so the food and alcohol are top shelf. She had to invite enough Anterdec employees to justify it as a business expense, and someone had the great idea to bring in a bunch of male strippers from the O Spa.

You know, the “fourth place” here in Boston? The one designed for women? It's not just a spa, it's a home away from home. With, you know... strippers.

Strippers who double as massage therapists.

Andrew's assistant is here as well, a woman about Shannon's age named Gina. She reminds me of every sorority member I've ever met, but slightly less secure. And she's going on and on about some guy named Louis.

Our party takes up two enormous tables in this private room, and the whole place is hopping. Whenever I run to the ladies' room, I see throngs of people, all smiling and sweaty, their voices hoarse from joyful singing.

It's so much fun.

A warm feeling spreads in my chest as I look at Shannon, my big sister suddenly so mature, an adult, marrying a man who will give her whatever she wants.

Literally.

What's it like to be with someone so wealthy, he can send a helicopter for a date? Pay off your student loans with a text to an assistant? Meet with members of foreign governments with a single phone call?

Declan's got deep, deep pockets, but he isn't exactly brimming with charisma like Hamish.

Which makes their relationship all the more special. Shannon would marry Declan if he made minimum wage at a YMCA desk, you know? They're so sickeningly in love.

I'm not jealous, not at all, but I'd love to find what they have.

"Is that Hamish?" Carol purrs as she catches me staring into space, my gaze catching the tall, muscled redhead she's pointing to. For a moment, my heart stops, because if Hamish is here in a G-string, oiled up like a Thanksgiving turkey and grinding his hips like a pepper mill, I have blacked out from too much alcohol and entered nightmare hell.

Or heaven.

“He—he looks so much like him,” I choke out, turning to a bucket filled with chilled wine coolers. Grabbing one, I pop off the top and start drinking, the cool sweetness making me thirsty for more. My neck is tight and I stretch it out, turning left, then right. I set the cooler down and square my shoulders, willing them down and back, transferring power from my neck down into my lower back. A trainer at the gym I go to taught me these techniques for weightlifting, but they help for reducing stress, too.

Power moves wherever you place it, if you can learn to control it. The hard part is remembering that you can .

Being a bridesmaid means smiling constantly, until your cheekbones ache and your jaw pulls back, muscles twisting like a Mobius strip. But the alcohol is like a prescription for loosening me up. This little wine cooler is doing my sister a personal favor. I feel my neck loosen, blood rushing in to help soften everything, and I drink more, looking around, taking it all in as we celebrate Shannon’s new life.

“That’s Henry,” Mom cackles, suddenly sitting on the table, her ample ass spreading enough to hip check the Champagne bucket. “He’s mine.”

“Daddy is yours!” I snap, peering at the redhead. She’s right, though.

The guy is not Hamish.

Disappointment and relief flood through me at the same time, like turning on two separate taps of hot and cold water in my veins.

“But he looks like Hamish, doesn’t he?” Mom nudges my non-drinking elbow. “I meant it when I said you two would make adorable babies.”

“Shut up.”

“Don’t talk to your mother like that!” my oldest sister Carol insists as she turns to the server, pointing to the Champagne and holding up two fingers. “I’m the only one allowed to do that!”

Amanda invited Declan’s assistant, an elderly woman named Grace, who has worked for Anterdec for decades. She was Declan’s father’s assistant before he began the transition out of being CEO, and Declan’s inherited her. I admire her. Efficient and effective, she’s normally all business. Now in her seventies, she’s married to a woman who was an avid rugby player.

That’s all I know about her, and it’s from my color-coded wedding guest spreadsheet.

“Marie! Good to see you,” Grace says to Mom, her demeanor more relaxed than usual.

“Shannon’s got one hell of a party here, huh? I could use a different kind of eye candy myself, but a woman can admire the fine lines of a man without wanting to sleep with him, right?” Grace winks and the horrified look Mom and Josh share makes me giggle as she walks away.

“I don’t understand what she just said,” Josh whispers, as if Grace’s words were heresy.

“Me, either,” Mom confesses.

“I mean, who would be satisfied with just looking?” Josh is now watching Grace with deep speculation.

“A voyeur? Maybe that’s what getzeroff,” Mom slurs.

Josh finishes his drink like he’s on fire and needs to put his stomach out.

Shannon walks over and smiles at me, giving Mom a half-hearted look that reminds me of Carol when she was in high school and Mom forced her to bring me to the drive-in on one of her dates. Mom, who was staring after Grace, turns and gives me the stink eye, then pivots to Shannon.

Uh oh. Here we go.

“You invited Grace but tried to ditch me and Pam?” Mom says in a bitter tone.

“Grace isn’t my mother ,” Shannon replies with a growl.

“She could be your grandmother!” Mom barks.

“She works for Anterdec! She’s Declan’s longtime assistant and like a mother to him.”

“ I am like a mother to him! If you’re going to include Grace, you should have included me!”

“MOM!” Shannon bellows. So much for my happy, loose sister enjoying her premarital freedom. Tension has been building forever between Mom and Shannon, and I knew this day was coming, but I didn’t expect it to happen while two pianists play “Bad Romance” by Lady Gaga. “You have taken my entire wedding and turned it into a giant clusterfuck!”

If my sister uses the F-word with you, you’re on the wrong side of history.

“I never wanted a Scottish-themed wedding! You took control! I didn’t care about Farmington Country Club!” Shannon screeches as the dueling pianists suddenly play louder but soften as Shannon resumes her shouting.

Mom's very, very drunk, watching my sister through a squint, the kind of look you give someone who isn't making a lick of sense.

Or when your eyeballs are floating.

"I have to dig tartan thongs out of my butt," Shannon screams. "And put up with having a cat as a flower girl. With life-size spun sugar figures of Declan and me next to the wedding cake, and let me tell you, that artist must have been high, because my face looks like Amy Schumer after she face planted off a stage. Declan looks like Liberace. And the ice sculpture. And the ninety-minute video that takes our lives and turns it all into a weird time capsule but in all the photos everyone's wearing red. The live-streaming video thing was way over the top, but did I complain? NO!"

All of us—Carol, Amanda, Josh, Pam, Grace, and a bunch of Shannon's co-workers I can't name—crowd around. It's like a schoolyard fight, but there are no teachers with whistles and permanent records to threaten us with.

"All I wanted was one night that was mine! Mine! One tradition, one ritual that was mine," Shannon flings at Mom.

I'm taking major mental notes here. If I ever get married, I'm eloping. "Just mine, the way I wanted it to be, with friends I could let loose with and party. But no, Mom. You had to crash it. You tortured poor Josh and got him to crack."

I look at Josh, who shrugs.

"You had to ruin this for me. I get one chance. One! I'll only ever get married once, and now... now... I'm not going to worry about your hurt feelings because I didn't invite you when you show no concern for my feelings!"

Mom's crying now, a low-key sniffing that is real. A fake cryer when she needs to

manipulate you, Mom can turn on waterworks like a hose. But this isn't contrived.

Shannon is panting, her top glimmering in the dark lights of the club, her breasts turning into shiny waves.

"Are you done?" Mom asks, then sniffs.

"I am."

Mom smiles, a sweet, wistful smile that shows no teeth. With tender care, she reaches out and pats Shannon on the cheek.

"It's okay, Shannon," she whispers. "I understand. I can tell you're having your period, and this is just the flood of hormones talking."

I close my eyes and count to ten.

Mom has the whole ditzy act down to a science. When I get married, I will not make the same mistakes Shannon's making.

In fact, I'm not sure I'll even tell Mom about my wedding.

Mom jaunts over to a stripper, a guy who is stretched out on his back along the length of a narrow table. About twenty green vodka-and-Jello jigglers are distributed along his shiny, nude skin.

Mom slurps one right off his upper thigh.

"HOW DOES SHE DO THAT?" Shannon screams.

Amanda's mother, Pam, slides on over like cooked spaghetti come to life.

“’S’okay, Shannon, honey. Did you know that nine percent of brides don’t even have a bachelorette party? Learned that from a wedding insurance project,” she explains with a grin that reminds me she was young once, too.

And so was my mother.

“And,” she continues, pulling Shannon close but speaking loudly, “don’t let Declan pressure you into sex.”

“Huh?”

“Because anywhere from twenty-five to fifty percent of brides and grooms don’t even sleep together on their wedding night.”

“Oh, God,” Amanda moans. “My mom is super drunk if she’s actually talking about s-e-x!”

Pam continues. “Don’ be a stasist–satis–statisicle–a statistic, Shannon. Have sex with the man you love. ’S’okay to lose your virginity on your wedding night.”

“Pam, you’re contradicting yourself. And also, I already lost my?—”

Amanda drags Shannon away before she can say another word, leaving me stuck with Mom and Pam, who are both eyeing me like I’m the home improvement project they’ve been dying to start.

“You planning to get married someday, Amy?” Pam asks me as she pulls the maraschino cherry out of her drink, peeling it off the little plastic sword with loose fingers. She drops it and it plunks on the table.

Pam stares at it like it’s covered in Ebola.

“I don’t know.”

Mom’s horrified gasp sounds like a banshee.

“You take that back!” she demands. “Of course you’ll get married!”

“Maybe I won’t, Mom. Not everyone finds the perfect partner.”

A loud snort, followed by a cough, makes us look at Pam.

“No shit,” she mutters. “I married a man who was a drunk, who lost our five-year-old at a Red Sox game, and who ended up in prison.”

I know the sad story, of course. But this is a bachelorette party, and Party Pooper Pam is really harshing on my fun.

A Garth Brooks song begins, and soon Mom and Pam are screaming about old friends and whiskey, and the drinks keep coming. Henry the stripper is in my line of sight over and over, though I’m not about to suck jigglers off his arms like I’m some kind of leech.

Also, he reminds me too much of Hamish.

Drawn irresistibly to the thought of that cocky bastard, if I give in to his near-twin, it’s like he wins. He gets me, he’s right. He’s right and he knows it, and I cannot let that happen.

If anything is worse than being attracted to someone you don’t want to be attracted to, it’s having them know you’re attracted to them against your own will.

It’s like being my own Benedict Arnold, only with my libido.

Somewhere in the corner of my peripheral vision, I swear I see a dog licking alcohol out of a man's navel, so either 1) I'm super drunk, or 2) my sister's friends are waaaay kinkier than I ever imagined. But instead of going over there, I decide to grab another wine cooler and drink half of it. Then I hold my hands up and dance.

Until the song winds down and the piano shifts to some old 1970s song that my mom and Pam know every word to. Something about a couple making out in a car with a dashboard light.

Old people and the music of their youth. How do they know every single word? Who has the brain space to remember every lyric? The rest of the crowd, who are my age, all have their phones out, reading along as they sing.

As civilized people do.

My body loosens, sliding into a liminal space that feels so good. So free. So warm and fine and connected to the music, the people, love infusing me with a grateful sense of a world filled with goodness and joy.

When I close my eyes, I think of Hamish and I'm instantly wet, instantly wanting. There's a tingly glow that wraps around me, imagining how he smells, what it would be like in his arms. Would it hurt to fantasize a little? The man is so physically open, with an always-casual, ever-happy way of carrying himself that makes me so envious.

I wish I could go through life so confident that people will want me. Will join me. Will let me enter into their world as I let them enter mine. He's made it clear there's a place for me in his bed, and he wants a place in me for his, well... you know.

Plunger.

A fantasy slams into me, his hands on my hips, his mouth on my neck, my fingertips

wandering across the thick, strong terrain of his body, palms cupping his ass, moving to the thickness of him. It's so beautiful inside my mind, my breath quickening, body swaying to a new slow love song that makes me move as if drawn by a magnet to the door, ready to find him, say yes to his come-ons, give in.

Give in to myself.

And then he starts licking my ankle.

"Wha...?" Startled, I look down to find Spritzzy, Pam's little teacup Chihuahua, giving me a tongue bath that scrambles my circuits.

"Sorry!" Pam says, dipping down to pick up her dog and stuff him inside her little doggie purse. "Spritzzy's having too much fun." Pam's completely plastered, her eyes unfocused in a hilarious way, like a compass being deviated by a magnet.

My heart hammers in my chest, pulses between my legs, and I swear I can smell Hamish on my skin.

"You look so transcendent right now, Amy," Pam says, reaching for a lock of my hair, her smile so free and radiant. "I don't think I've ever seen you this happy."

"Really?"

But Pam's face suddenly turns green, even in the darkness of the bar, and I instinctively step back as she bolts out the door. Mom gives me a look.

I point to Pam. Mom follows.

I look at my wine cooler and set it down.

The sensation of Hamish's imaginary hands on me lingers, all the what-if's swirling in my mind. All I have to do is find his hotel room, right? He's an open offer.

And as much as that would normally turn me off, he's so alluring. So mesmerizing.

So worth taking a chance.

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Chapter Four

Hamish

Being dumped off outside Farmington's main building, pissed as a newt, while Andrew and Declan head off to some exclusive cottage on the property, means that I strut through a mostly empty lobby.

Then pause. Because I am alone.

How the hell am I alone ? Me? This perfect balance of inebriation and horniness means I would be doing a disservice to the universe by not bedding a sweet, warm, wet woman tonight. Not as an act of selfish hormone-driven lust, mind you.

As a public service. An act of sacrifice, even.

Time to make someone very, very happy.

I have a long list of contacts I could ring right now. Been in Boston plenty of times and left a satisfied sequence of women behind me. Booty call is a vile term for connecting with someone and releasing your tensions together with a joyful noise. Can no one come up with a better term?

How about delight dial?

Romance ring?

Climax call?

Orgasm outreach...

Oooh, I rather like that last one. “Hi there, Ainsley. This is Hamish, ringing with an orgasm outreach. How’s about it?”

But maybe it’s a bit too businesslike. As if those door-to-door missionaries were coming around, but instead of saving your soul, they were trying to get your nuts off.

Which would be a better way of saving humanity, in my opinion, but I don’t make the rules. If I did, you can sure bet I’d make orgasm outreach a priority.

As I lean against a pillar and scroll through my contacts, I realize the one I keep thinking about isn’t in my phone.

She’s not in my phone because I’ve never asked for her number.

Well, there’s no time like the now.

A quick walk to the front desk yields a thousand-watt smile from a woman who, a minute ago, looked like a grumpy female version of Shannon’s dour cat. Seeing me made her smile.

“Yes? Mr. McCormick?”

“That’s ma da, pet,” I say, my mouth suddenly craving the taste of Amy.

Not this sweet woman with the sidelong flirt and the look in her eyes that says her ankle bracelets can double as earrings on me.

No. Amy.

“I’m Jasmine,” she says with eyebrows up, as if to ask, Would you like anal with your wake-up call?

“Call me Hamish.”

She takes my hand and writes her number on the back of my wrist. “Call me when I get off my shift at seven.”

If I had a pound for every phone number a woman wrote on my hand, I’d have a nice bank account.

“Ye can put yer number in ma phone, ye ken.”

“I ken?”

“You can.”

“If I did that, I wouldn’t have an excuse to touch you,” she whispers as she looks around. Before I can understand what she’s doing, she raises my hand to her mouth and sucks my pointer finger in, giving it a tongue treatment that makes my cock-stand feel like a cricket bat.

“Jesus, pet, that’s nae how I normally shake hands when I meet someone new,” I say, trying to fight biology, which is readying my muscles to give her the sweaty pounding we both need. But in my mind’s eye is a fiery redheaded woman who insults me every chance she gets.

Wait a moment.

My head's mince.

I've a gorgeous woman making love to my finger and I'm here to ask for Amy's room number?

Because that's why I approached the desk. To go find Amy's room and give the door a good pounding.

Jasmine, though, would be a better choice.

"I don't want to shake your hand," Jasmine says, pausing to look up at me with eyes that say, I'll let you do things you've only watched on free porn channels . "I want you to rock my world."

Just then, a flash of auburn hair catches my eye and I turn to see Amy, holding an ice bucket as she heads toward the desk, her mouth screwed tight like, well...

Her cat's puckered arse.

Shock covers her beautiful, flushed face and for a moment, as we lock eyes, I peer at her, realizing she's not here for ice, or to ask directions, or for any reason other than me.

Me.

Amy is searching for me .

Her eyes flick to Jasmine's mouth and my unfortunately occupied finger.

"Oh, gross," Amy declares before stomping back down the hallway, leaving aftershocks in her wake.

When I pull my finger out of Jasmine's grip, the sudden cold air makes me growl a bit. I have to jog to catch Amy. Explaining myself to an angry red hornet when Jasmine was back there using my finger as a lolly is the height of stupidity, but when have I ever turned away from making a bad choice, as Ma likes to say?

"Amy!"

She ignores me and breaks into a run, her cardkey in her hand in a flash, the door to Room 112 slamming shut.

Hands on my hips, the finger Jasmine tongued practically begging me for a post-coital cigarette, I stare at the number and shake my head.

What am I doing?

No, really. What. Am. I. Doing? I can go back to the front desk and fuck Jasmine until she screams my name so loudly, Amy will hear her.

I can go to the bar and find a lovely or three as well (though one at a time, thank you very much).

Blood and excitement race through me as I knock on Amy's door, the movement involuntary, as if a supernatural force made me do it.

Nothing.

I knock again.

Nothing.

I know she's in there, I saw her go in. The thought of the curve of her beautiful

bottom in her pajamas makes me study the door, debating my options.

My obvious option is Jasmine.

As I re-enter the lobby, though, I see her flirting with a man in a suit, the kind who wears a watch worth more than my flat back home. The clock says 2:41, and I remember why I'm here.

Not to get pissed and bang my cousin's future sister-in-law.

To stand up at his wedding.

My bones are loose and my body's feeling fine, but as I head toward the bar, I'm surprised by the sign.

Closed.

There goes my supply of lovely bedmates for tonight.

One look back at Jasmine tells me she's traded up—in the wallet area, at least.

I know a losing play when I see one. No need to pour good energy after bad.

I head for my room, taking the stairs three flights up. In a different part of the building from Amy, I'm closer to where the ceremony will be, while she's closer to the reception area. On the way up, my hands begin to tingle at the thought of touching her, sliding my palm under her jaw to cup it, the tease of her long, beautiful hair against my fingers, the press of her curves against my body.

Too much blood rushes to where I don't want it. Now I've got a stonner, dammit. In a fury, I open my door, slam the shower on, whip off my clothes, and climb into the

bitter cold spray.

Nights like this don't happen to me. This is a first.

And it's all Amy Jacoby's fault.

A shivering, icy shower doesn't do a damn bit of good for the thick icicle between my legs, but a hand and a rush of imagining her moaning my name does wonders, the quick wank easy but beneath me.

And speaking of things beneath me... I still can't get Amy out of my head.

A quick rinse and I towel off. When I emerge from the bathroom, my foot finds my ever-present football. Toeing it, bouncing from knee to ankle, over and over, gets me warmed up, but it does nothing for the testosterone that needs a woman's body to be fully neutralized.

Damn her.

The phone has a blinking red light, an old-fashioned alert that makes me grab it and listen. It's a reminder from the wedding planner to be at the men's dressing room at 3:00 p.m.

It's 3:00 a.m. now.

I drop to the floor and do a hundred push-ups, then a hundred sit-ups, ready for a round of burpees before I halt, panting and sweaty. Purging my desire through exercise isn't new, but it is rare to need it like this.

I hate that she makes me need it.

The phone catches my eye again, and a plan forms.

Room 112, aye?

The cold shower and exercise haven't taken away my buzz, and the impulse to find Amy, kiss her, make her see how good a night with me could be is so strong, I pick up the phone and press her room number.

Then I wait.

If she won't listen to me when I'm chasing her, maybe a sweet chat will do the trick.

When have I ever failed at sweet-talking a woman into bed?

Not about to start now.

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Chapter Five

Amy

What was I thinking?

WHAT WAS I THINKING?

I came back to my room, giving Hamish way more real estate in my head than he deserves, and changed into my frumpy pajamas as a defense mechanism against doing what I was thinking about back at the piano bar.

Finding him, having a fling, and—

And . That's the problem. The and .

And what?

I can't just sleep with my sister's new cousin-in-law. Do you know how many complications that would create? No matter how many orgasms the man could give me—and trust me, I'm creative enough to imagine plenty of them—it's not worth blowing up the extended family just to be banged senseless.

But then— then —I had to see that .

Watching the desk clerk treat Hamish's finger like a cherry stem she was tying into a knot with her tongue was revolting. But when he stared at me, I swear I felt a flicker

of regret.

Plenty of lust, too.

And it wasn't just mine.

But ewwwwwwww . Now I can't get that image out of my head. Does the man walk through life with women flinging themselves at him all the time? Is that the reality? Because the fantasy of Hamish McCormick is so strong, it almost made me make a fool of myself.

Almost.

Thank God for almost .

Ring!

The phone on the desk lets out a sound that makes me squeal with surprise. Why is someone calling me in my room at three a.m.? Did something happen to Mom, Dad, Shannon, or Carol?

I grab the receiver, unaccustomed to using a landline, the spiral cord in my hand feeling strange.

"Hello?"

"Ach. Amy. I wanted ta say—"

I hang up.

Because if Hamish McCormick thinks he's going to sweet-talk me, he's—

Ring!

I ignore it.

But the man is determined. I'll give him that. I count more than one hundred rings over the next five minutes before I give up and answer.

"Aye, pet, let me explain."

"Explain why you let that desk clerk turn your finger into a Blow Pop?"

"What's a Blow Pop?" His voice goes very, very low, making me shiver yet turn to warm caramel at the same time. "Because a Blow Pop sounds like something ye and I should share."

"Shut up."

"I can, ye know. Shut up. How about I come to yer room, and we don't talk? Words are overrated, Amy."

"How do you know my room number?"

"I followed ye! Knocked on yer door!"

"Right. Quit stalking me."

"I'm nae stalking. Just want to have a friendly chat."

"At three a.m.? The only reason men like you call women at three a.m. is... Oh, my God! Is this a booty call?" My skin tingles with amusement and, I'm not too proud to admit, happiness.

I've never had a booty call before.

It feels kind of good. I know it shouldn't, but it does.

"It isna, but... it could be."

His tone brightens, as if I've invited him over.

"You are a pig."

"But I'm a pig ye want to share a blow pop wi'."

"That sentence makes no sense."

"Which is why ye need to invite me over, so we can unnerstand each other better."

"I get the sense that your idea of understand doesn't involve clothes."

"See? We're already coming to an agreement."

"We are not!"

"I really do need yer help, Amy. Please."

"What kind of help?" Is he... giggling? How drunk is this guy?

"Ah need ye to come help me wi' ma ball sweat."

"You—excuse me? Did you just say ball sweat?"

He starts panting.

“Aye. The weather here in Boston is atrocious. I could slurp the air.”

He makes actual slurping sounds.

“What does the humidity in Boston have to do with your testicles?”

“Say that again.”

“What?”

“Testicles.”

“Why do you want me to repeat the word testicles? ”

“There’s something special about the way yer tongue hisses when ye say the ess sound, Amy. Verra sharp.”

“Sharp?”

“Like a dominatrix.”

“You want me to help fix your ball sweat because you think I’m a domme? ” This conversation has gone from stupid to ridiculous.

“Hmph.” The sound is distinct, from the back of the throat yet through the nose, and I can tell I’ve finally said something that shuts him up.

I’m about to hang up when he asks in a low purr, “Are ye?”

“Am I what?”

“A domme.”

“SHUT UP!” I snap into the phone. “And go away.”

“I’m nowhere near ye, pet.”

“We’re in the same building, and you’re harassing me.”

“How am I harassing ye? We’re nae even touching.”

“You’re using your mouth to harass me.”

“Oh, that’s a waste of ma fine mouth, then. I can use it on ye in much better ways.”

“Go powder your balls, Hamish.”

“So ye want me to touch maself while ye tell me what to do? Sounds good to me. A bit o’ foreplay.”

Is that the sound of a fly zipper being lowered?

“What are you doing?”

“Exactly what ye ordered. Touching maself.” His moan makes it clear he really, actually is.

Great. Now my mind is stuck on that visual.

“I did not order you to do anything! You called me! You’re the one who interrupted my sleep, calling at three in the morning, right before the most important day of my sister’s life, and blathering on about ball sweat.”

“Blathering?”

“It means you are saying a lot of stupid shit!”

“I ken what blathering means. I would say blether, but—”

“How about being a Chatty Cathy? A stupid Chatty Cathy.” Sure, it’s old-fashioned and something my mom says, but it fits.

“New American slang to remember.”

“Is there a Scottish equivalent?”

“Don’t know, lass. We do have a lot of words to describe stupid.”

“Hamish must be one of them.”

“Nae,” he says thickly. “It’s actually a form of James.”

“You’re named after your uncle?”

“Half-uncle. But aye.”

“There is no such thing as a half-uncle.”

“Ah. Right. Ma da calls James his half-brother, so we always referred to him as our half-uncle.”

“You’re even weirder than I thought, and by weird, I mean—”

“But tha’s a funny one. Different words fer stupid. Aye, we have plenty. Numpty.

Bampot. Choob. Doaty. Dafty. Dobber. Though that last one can also mean—”

“Please stop.”

“Ye asked.”

“I did not! Quit gaslighting me!”

"I want to light yer fire."

He cannot seriously think these cheesy lines work?

"And speaking o' dobbers, I've got ma hand on mine, like ye wanted."

"I never asked you to do that!"

"Nay. Ye ordered me. Mentioned ma balls. Mmmmm ."

"You are not masturbating on the telephone with me right now, Hamish!"

"I'm -- " his breath hitches, " - not?"

If it were any other guy, I'd slam the phone down and call security. But it's Hamish. And as much as I want to write him off as Ewww Gross Asshole, he's hot. Too hot. Too contradictory and compelling and hard to stop thinking about. I don't know if charisma is the right word to describe this quality he has, but it draws me to him. Makes me wonder.

Makes me want .

"D'ye want me ta stop?" His voice is low and husky. "Say the word and I will."

I lick my lips, my ears ringing as I'm suspended in time.

"No, I finally say. "You're a grown man who gets to do whatever you want to your body."

"Happy to extend that concept ta yours, sweetheart."

A laugh, deep and throaty and dare I say - sultry? - comes out of the base of my neck, at the collarbone, a sound I've never made in my life. It vibrates down my chest, under my breasts, pooling at the navel and beelining straight down for my clit.

"Amy?" His voice is suddenly earnest. Intimate, even. "Why did ye ring me in the first place?"

"I didn't call you! You called me."

"Nae. I dinna have yer phone number."

"You clearly do. You called me." I squint at the clock. "You followed me to get my room number, remember?"

"I'm a smart fellow, then."

"Look. It's now 3:11, and I want the last nine minutes of my life back. I'm quite sure I lost a few IQ points."

"Why don't I come over and help ye lose yer virginity?"

His laughter makes it clear he's joking but I freeze, my stomach dropping, throat going tight. A pull, something close to a magnetic force, makes my skin move toward him, heat warming me, his draw nearly irresistible. Men like Hamish are rare in my

life - so rare I've never felt this before. Every cell of my body fills with a flushed feeling, a craving that's wholly new, all-consuming, and that won't let go of me. All I want is him. His hands on me, mouth roaming and exploring, our bodies performing acts of giving and beauty with each other, sweaty and hot, urgent and fun.

All I can manage is, "Ha ha."

"What do ye really have to lose, Amy? I'm a grown man. Yer a lush, gorgeous woman. We're both a little pissed and horny. What's it have to be so complicated fer? Come on."

I have to fight this, whatever "this" is. If I give in, I'm just another notch on his belt, and for some reason, I can't give him the satisfaction.

"If that's your best line, Hamish, someone needs to take your phone away when you're drunk. You can't even make a booty call the right way."

"Do ye know this from experience? Regale me wi' yer finest pickup lines from all the booty calls ye've made, Amy. I'll wait."

"I've never been so desperate that I needed to make a booty call."

"Ye mean ye've never had the courage to let yer lust be in charge o' yer body."

A sharp inhale is my only response because he's right.

Damn him.

He's right .

Which makes this all even harder.

“Who are you to try to tell me who I am?”

“Is tha’ how ye took ma words? Telling.”

“What do you mean, telling? ”

“If ye equate being told ye need more courage to live life to the fullest with me telling ye who ye are or defining ye, think it over. That’s... deep.”

“You’re so shallow, you think a puddle on the sidewalk is deep.”

“And yet yer still talking to me on a booty call, Amy. One ye started.”

“I did not!”

“Tell me.” There’s a catch in his throat as he sighs, the sound so intimate, alluring, and authentic. “Why’re ye arguing wi’ me on the phone like this? If ye didna want a good shagging, ye’d hang up. By now, I’d have thought ye’d hang up. So...”

“Shagging?”

“A good lay.”

“See? That’s so arrogant. You assume I want to have sex with you, and that you’re good in bed.”

“Those aren’t assumptions. They are facts.”

“Why don’t you go shag that front desk clerk?”

“She moved on to a man with something much bigger than I have.”

“I do not want to hear about the size of your penis.”

“Wasna talking about ma boaby. I meant his bank account.”

“So the shallowest man in the world got ditched by an even shallower woman? Priceless.”

“Is this how ye talk to all the men who booty call ye, Amy? Because it’s nae sexy.”

“No. Only you, Hamish.”

“I’m the only man who’s ever rang ye fer some fun last-minute sex? I’m honored to be the first.”

"Go away."

"I canna. No' until I finish."

"Are you seriously touching yourself or just jerking me around?"

"I believe the correct term is 'jerkin' off,' Amy."

My skin buzzes, because is he? Is he really? If so, we're having phone sex. I've never had phone sex before. It shouldn't make my legs a little weak and my pulse migrate to between my legs, but it is.

What's the harm in having fun with him? He's certainly sexually open. Experimental. Explorative.

A little weird, but it's a sweet kind of weird. A "hey let's have fun" kind of weird. A part of me wants to join in, but it's a rusty part. A sheltered part. A piece of me that

doesn't get out in the world to do anything. It just watches and waits for its turn, but it's shy.

Scared.

Worried there's something wrong with, well...

Maybe liking this?

"Amy?"

"What?" I snap, startled out of my own thoughts, my body lit up and flushed, ready to leap. Just flirt back. Just say something sexy. Just --

He makes a humph sound.

"Well, then, if yer goin' ta ring me fer a little fun and then snub me and make ma balls the color of yer beautiful eyes, the least ye could do is help me find a new lass. Have that woman wi' the big social media followin' - whatzername? - Jessica Coffin's number handy?"

And that is the moment I slam the receiver down, unplug the phone from the wall, and throw all the pillows at the door.

He's such an ass.

But unfortunately, he's right.

No other man has ever called me for a shag in the middle of the night, and damn it, I am flattered.

But no way in hell am I sleeping with him. At the wedding, I have to stand in front of hundreds and hundreds of people in my stupid tartan dress while Mom's stupid idea about our cat being a flower girl proceeds, with Hamish McCormick at my side as we walk up the aisle together.

Him in a kilt.

Sweaty balls right... there .

I crank up the air conditioning, shut off the lights, and climb under the covers, hoping for at least five or six hours of decent sleep.

My body does not cooperate.

It buzzes. Hums. Vibrates with need.

Suddenly, I understand booty calls.

And wish I were the kind of person who said yes to them.

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Chapter Six

Amy

The Wedding Day

Standing in the eye of Hurricane Shannon, I watch my sister pace until she finally announces dramatically, “I’m reconsidering this whole wedding.”

Bridezilla, Episode One: The Reckoning.

Amanda bursts into the room, cheeks flushed, gripping a coffee tray filled with caffeine and love. Mostly caffeine, because Bridezilla here requires special handling today.

“Dude, the room is empty. You’re talking to yourself,” Amanda says, handing Shannon a cardboard cup.

“No, it’s not!” I expect to be acknowledged but instead, Shannon points down.

To a very angry pile of tartan and flowers.

I should be used to this, as the youngest sister, but come on .

Amanda gives Shannon a skeptical look. “That is a centerpiece. You are talking to inanimate objects. Did you get enough sleep last night?”

“Look closer.”

The centerpiece moves.

“Oh, no,” Amanda says, jumping back dramatically, palms up in surrender.

I peer around Amanda’s shoulder, horrified. That pile of tartan and flowers is Chuckles.

Our family's cat.

“Meow ,” Chuckles says pitifully, clearly desperate. Translation: I will shred all your vocal cords in your sleep and tie them in knots looped through bicycle tires .

Amanda picks him up carefully. Chuckles snuggles into her, or maybe just tries to escape his tartan prison. He puts his paw on her neck and a cold flush runs through me. He's sizing up her vocal cords, isn't he?

“She really did it, huh? What is Marie thinking?” Amanda asks incredulously.

“Mom put him in a tartan kilt. See the pin? She made Mr. MacNevin use an infant’s kilt pin for the—” Shannon starts.

Amanda interrupts. “Hold up. Infant kilt pin?”

Shannon shrugs, two curls sliding gracefully down her shoulder. “I guess it’s a thing. Anyhow, then they took a flower girl basket and Mom had it customized for Chuckles.”

Chuckles squirms out of Amanda's grip, scattering rose petals everywhere. She sets him down. He defiantly urinates all over the petals.

Amanda grimaces. “I hate to think about what he’s going to do when you throw the bouquet.”

Shannon bursts into tears. “My mother is ruining my wedding!”

Amanda tries to lighten the mood. “Well, there’s always elopement.”

“Is Declan using you to get to me now?” Shannon snaps.

Amanda raises her hands defensively. “Whoa, whoa there! That was just a joke!”

“Sorry,” Shannon sniffles. “He’s spent the last month or so begging me to just run away with him and bag this whole stupid big wedding thing.”

“He has?” Amanda asks, eyebrows raised.

“Plus, he’s angry I made him abstain.”

“For a month?” Amanda looks aghast.

“No. Three days.”

Amanda rolls her eyes. “Oh. Poor baby.”

“You’re not being very sympathetic! The maid of honor is supposed to be supportive,” Shannon whimpers.

Amanda gestures dramatically to the coffee. “I am supportive!”

“Not when you suggest eloping,” Shannon insists tearfully. “I’m so tempted.”

Tap tap tap

The door bursts open. Jeffrey and Tyler, our nephews and today's kilted ring bearers, tumble in like two tartan-wrapped tornadoes.

"Auntie Thannon!" Jeffrey shouts, burying himself in Shannon's skirts. Jeffrey has a wicked lisp that slips in when he's excited. He frowns, then speaks more slowly. "Why are you crying? Mom told me this is the happiest day of your life!"

Shannon's tears escalate. I step forward, watching helplessly as Tyler heads toward Chuckles. Chuckles, sensing trouble, promptly lifts a leg toward Tyler.

"No kitty! No! Turn the kitty off!" Tyler shouts, kicking Chuckles lightly, scattering rose petals everywhere.

"You don't kick animals, Tyler!" Jeffrey reprimands.

Tyler panics. "Turn the kitty off! "

Carol rushes in, instantly assessing the disturbance. "Did you kick Chuckles?" she demands.

Tyler hides in Shannon's skirt. Carol turns to Jeffrey, who hesitates.

Our dad walks in, whistling cheerfully. "Why does Chuckles look like a dying tauntaun?"

"Tyler kicked him," Jeffrey explains.

"Did NOT!" Tyler yells defensively.

“Why?” Dad asks.

Jeffrey points at their shoes. “Because Chuckles was going to pee on him, I think. Look, Grandpa. All our shoes have latheth.”

"Latheth?"

"Lay-ces," Jeffrey over-enunciates.

Dad goes red and looks down. “Oh, shit. You’re right.” Chuckles pees on shoelaces. It’s a thing.

“Dad! Language!” Carol admonishes.

“Sorry, Carol.”

“Shit,” mutters Shannon’s skirt, now inhabited by Tyler.

Carol shoots her father a look. “Great! It took two weeks to get him to stop saying that word last time.”

Dad leans toward Tyler. “Hey, Tyler, if I give you M&Ms, will you stop saying ‘shit’?”

Tyler emerges. “Okay.”

“Shit!” Jeffrey shouts gleefully.

Carol and Dad glare at him.

“What? If he gets M&Ms for not saying ‘shit,’ I thought I’d say ‘shit’ and then you

can give me M&Ms for stopping saying it, too,” Jeffrey reasons.

Jeffrey's future as a negotiator seems bright.

Amanda hands Carol and Dad coffee, which they gratefully accept.

Dad sighs and like a magician, pulls two Halloween-size bags of M&Ms out of a rabbit's ass. He hands one each to Jeffrey and Tyler. “Hamish is passing around whisky, and Declan isn’t here yet. Just me, James, and Terry.”

“How is Hamy?” Amanda teases. Oh, no. That's like ringing the dinner bell at summer camp.

Mom appears instantly, curious.

I know I'll regret this. Maybe I'm a masochist. Maybe it's the sentimentality of the wedding day. My second-biggest sister (by age, not size, as we often joke), is getting married today and all I got was a booty call and a tartan thong.

But I confess what's happening.

"He booty called me last night."

Carol leans in. "Tell us more."

“Except he says I made the booty call!” I wail.

“What?” Amanda gasps.

"Did you?" Carol demands, giving me a once-over with eyes like our mom's.

"A booty call?" Mom squeals. "My Amy is sleeping with a famous Scottish soccer player?"

"NO!" I snap. "I am not sleeping with him!"

"My God, why not?" Carol asks in a low, hurt voice. "Do you have a yeast infection or something?"

"NO! I'm not sleeping with him because he's disgusting."

"Your standards are so high, they could be a weather balloon," Mom says tartly.

"He's a scheming playboy and a liar, too! He claims I called him!"

They all stare at me.

"WHAT?" Shannon, Marie, Amanda, and Carol roar simultaneously.

"So I put him firmly in his place, and then you know what he did?" I continue dramatically.

"What?" they all ask eagerly.

"He tried to get me to introduce him to Jessica Coffin."

"Why would he try to do that?" Shannon looks disgusted.

"He probably thinks she's the best person for going viral," I explain bitterly.

"She's a disease, all right," Shannon mutters darkly, staring at the bouquet like it personally offended her.

I blink. “I mean for publicity,” I clarify, glancing around like I’m defending Hamish, which is about as appealing as wearing shoelaces around Chuckles. “He can’t stand the fact that he’s a celebrity in Europe but here in the U.S. no one knows who he is.”

Shannon snorts as Mom fusses with another one of her curls. Which, by the way, aren’t real curls. Shannon has pin-straight brown hair that’s allergic to volume. But today? She looks like she walked out of a Disney movie, thanks to enough product to gum up Boston’s entire wastewater system.

Honestly, I think an entire sewage plant is currently trying to locate the 700-pound clump of mousse and aerosol that’s gone rogue and formed its own zip code on Shannon’s head.

Carol peeks out the window, tensing like she’s spotted a sniper.

“Tyler’s at the damn pool again,” she says through gritted teeth. “I swear, if he does a cannonball, I’m calling in the National Guard.” She squints. "Oh, good. He's running back inside." But she's an experienced mom and heads outside anyhow.

Mom waves one bejeweled hand. “We’ll have someone close the gate.”

So reassuring.

I shift over to another crack in the curtains and peer out, just in time to see Shannon’s ex-boyfriend loitering near the rose wall like a bored groomsman with unresolved feelings who wants to make a terrible grand gesture. I turn back to my sister, trying to lighten the mood. “So... ready for your wedding night?”

Her eyes fill instantly. Dang it.

“I just want to see him,” she whispers. “Is Declan hung over? I need to see him.”

“It’s bad luck,” Mom snaps, yanking out a makeup brush that could double as a street sweeper.

Shannon swats at tears while Mom dusts her with enough powder to classify as a dust bowl event.

“I don’t care,” Shannon mumbles. “I haven’t gone this long without seeing him since he was in Singapore for that investor summit. What if he’s changed his mind? What if he calls it off and runs off with Jessica Coffin and makes beautiful Barbie children with her and drinks white wine with beef?!”

Mom pauses. Even she knows that white wine with beef is unforgivable.

“I had wedding day jitters when I married your father,” she says softly, putting down her brushes and taking Shannon’s hands. Her face goes tender, raw, vulnerable. “Every bride gets them.”

"Besides, Hamish is after Jessica," I say, mouth twisting.

“I know Dec loves me,” Shannon says, and it’s like watching her heart melting from her eyes. “It’s just...”

She lunges forward into Mom’s arms and the two of them sob together like a Hallmark movie that suddenly went off-script.

And then the door bursts open. And with it, chaos incarnate.

A tiny man strolls in like he owns the place, carrying what looks like a fur-covered leaf blower. Jordan. Our florist. In one hand, he has a bouquet. In the other? His dog, Muffin.

Who appears to be molting.

Mom squeals and launches herself at him, nearly knocking Shannon's veil off. Jordan hugs her like she's royalty, then scans the room—until his eyes land on Amanda.

He bares his teeth.

I'm not being metaphorical. His actual incisors shine like polished piano keys.

“Marie,” he croons, clinging to her arm. “Let's make this wedding even more beautiful with my creations.”

He proceeds to lay out what seems like every floral item for the wedding party like he's unveiling the crown jewels. Bridal bouquet. Bridesmaids' bouquets. Reception bouquet. Corsages. All carefully labeled and color-coded like a botanical battle plan.

He describes the groomsmen's boutonnieres in such florid detail, I half expect one of the roses to sing. Apparently, we'll be adorned in flowers native to Scotland—primrose, bluebell, and white roses, all coordinated with tartan.

On Pinterest, it looked like a disaster.

In person? It actually works. Somehow.

One hour to go.

The room explodes into motion. Seamstresses zip, photographers snap, mascara wands fly, brides weep.

Mom claps and squeals like she just found out the president will be attending.

Between the tartan underwear (don't ask), the tartan sashes, the tartan ribbons in our hair, tartan flower arrangements, and yes, even tartan nail polish, we don't look like bridesmaids.

We look like the Loch Ness monster ate an entire Scottish gift shop and vomited.

This wedding has officially gone plaid.

Dad and James come around the corner like Scottish GQ models doing a live-action ad for tartan couture. Swords dangle from their hips. Kilts swish dramatically. Bagpipes could've started playing and no one would have blinked.

Amanda's mom lets out a low whistle.

Dad blushes.

James? James doesn't blush. James smirks and glides over to Amanda's mom with the confidence of a man who once dated royalty and still sends them Christmas cards.

"Pam! Nice to see you! Don't you look stunning," he says, and then kisses both her cheeks. With intent .

Everything slows down. Like, movie-montage, dreamy-haze, Nora-Ephron-directed-this-moment slow. Except it's not romantic. It's Amanda's mom.

James is kissing her.

And his hand rests on her hip.

His actual palm. Is he caressing her? Is this happening? Is my optic nerve broken?

“James,” Pam says, her voice going all buttery like she’s the heroine in a Southern romance novel. “So good to see you again.”

James winks. Winks. “Have any good statistics for me to use to improve my life? How about some good wedding stats?”

Pam blushes. She actually looks upward, like she’s scrolling through the file cabinet in her brain.

“Married men live longer than single men. That’s all I’ve got.”

“Is that true for women, too?”

Pam nods, beaming. And James delivers the line with a chuckle: “Then I’m glad to hear my son and new daughter-in-law are giving themselves more time together by spending nearly seven figures of my money on this beast of a day!”

Dad, mid-sip into his coffee, sprays an impressive arc. He turns, mouth open, eyes wide, and stares at James like he’s just revealed he’s been secretly dating someone only twenty years younger than him.

And just as I’m trying to process whatever the hell that was , something out the window catches my eye.

Blonde. Legs for days. The shimmer of a dress that cost more than my car.

Jessica Coffin.

My blood turns to ice. She’s here . Not just on property—she’s mingling . She’s talking to a guest.

Taking selfies . Selfies for her social media poison channels. Social media where she makes fun of my sister, all because she's still furious that Declan didn't pick her, way back when they were in college and Jessica hit on him.

Jessica has been a thorn in Shannon's side for a long time, and there's no way I'm letting her hurt my sister on her big day.

Nope. Absolutely not.

I move quickly to the side, subtly stepping in front of the window where Shannon is seated in her makeup chair. I grab a curtain and pretend to fuss with it, shaking it out and pulling it closed.

“Why are you blocking the window?” Shannon asks, voice sharp with suspicion.

“I’m not. Just... adjusting the light,” I say with a fake smile and panicked eyeballs. “You know. For ambiance.”

Shannon narrows her eyes. “You’re not adjusting anything. You’re hiding something.”

“I’m absolutely not?—”

She’s up. She’s pushing past me. She’s flinging the curtain aside like she’s Joan Crawford looking for wire coat hangers.

She sees Jessica.

Her mouth opens. Her shoulders tighten. She sucks in a breath that could power a wind turbine.

“YOU INVITED JESSICA COFFIN TO MY WEDDING, MOM?”

Just then, Declan and Hamish burst into the room.

It is at this exact moment that my breath is stolen by a Viking god. Every bit of oxygen in the room disappears, every sensation in every cell of my body given over as a virgin sacrifice to Valhalla.

Because standing before me, in all his glory, is Hamish McCormick, wearing a full tuxedo kilt, looking divine.

More than divine.

Any revulsion I felt for him last night is long gone—poof!—replaced by a striking need to have this striker score a—kick a—well, whatever strikers do in soccer.

And I’m the back of the net.

As Mom and Shannon scream at each other, Chuckles hisses at everyone, Tyler tries to make the kitty fold into a different dimension, and Jeffrey argues with Dad over how much of a bribe it would take to get them out of here, I stand transfixed, unable to move, drool pooling in my mouth.

I have never wanted a man so badly.

And he's such a bad man to want.

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Chapter Seven

Hamish

I lounge back in my chair, casually nursing my whisky and pretending I didn't just survive the hangover from hell. Declan's pacing nervously nearby, sipping coffee like it holds all the secrets to the universe.

"Pure mental last night, aye, Dec?" I grin, waggling my eyebrows like a teenager who just discovered a Victoria's Secret catalog. "Ye mind the blonde wi' legs ta Sunday? Swear she could crack walnuts wi' those thighs."

Declan pauses mid-pace and gives me a look that would freeze lava. "Hamish, you're an endless parade of clichés."

"Maybe so, but I'm yer favorite cliché," I tease, flashing him my most charming, devil-may-care grin.

He rolls his eyes dramatically. "Debatable."

Despite myself, my thoughts drift—not to Miss Walnut Cracker, whose thighs would be very nice earmuffs—but to Amy, the red-haired firebrand who could slice my ego in half with one sharp glance. Those eyes haunt me more than my last missed penalty shot.

Declan notices my distracted smile. "Oh, no. I know that look. Who's in your crosshairs now?"

“No one special,” I say lightly, waving off his question. But Declan isn’t buying it.

“Hamish...” he warns.

“Fine. It's yer bride's bonnie wee sister, Amy.”

Declan's jaw tightens. Talk about cracking nuts.

He turns pale, then red, then some frightening shade between beetroot and nuclear reactor meltdown. “No. Absolutely not.” His green eyes turn dark. Here comes the famous McCormick temper. “Amy is off-limits, Hamish.” His voice drops lower, suddenly sounding like Liam Neeson in one of those movies where everyone regrets kidnapping his family members. “If you even think about it?—”

“Settle, cousin! Ye ken I'd nae cross ye,” I joke quickly, palms up defensively. “She's just fun ta rile up, is all. Only jokin'.”

Before Declan can further question my questionable morals, a blood-curdling scream pierces the walls. We share an alarmed look.

“Think that was yer bride?” I ask, forcing casualness into my tone.

Declan's out the door faster than I can down my whisky shot, and I follow closely behind, because there's no way I'm missing whatever spectacle this promises to be.

We burst into the bridal suite just as Shannon brandishes her bouquet like a Highland warrior about to storm the gates of Edinburgh. She's locked onto Marie like a guided missile.

“You wouldn't!” Marie shrieks.

“TRY ME!” Shannon bellows back.

Declan dashes across the room and swiftly grabs Shannon’s elbow. Marie squawks at him, “You can’t see the bride before the wedding!”

Declan, voice like thunder: “Watch me!”

Marie drops two octaves into a demonic growl: “You can’t!” The mutt erupts into frantic yapping. It’s like 101 Dalmatians meets Braveheart , and frankly, I’m enjoying the mashup.

Jason quickly ushers Marie out with some lie about problems with the centerpieces, and I lean casually against the doorframe, surveying the cacophony with genuine appreciation. Amy sidles up beside me, arms crossed defensively, scowling fiercely at everything and nothing.

Mostly me .

“Aye, pet, yer family dinnae do things halfway, eh?”

Amy shoots me a glare sharper than a ref’s whistle. “And your idea of helping is whisky shots before the wedding?”

“Och, whisky solves everythin’. Even weddin’ meltdoons.”

She snorts derisively. “Or creates them.”

Across the room, Shannon’s voice breaks as she turns to Declan. “What are you doing here?”

Declan kneels softly. “I heard you screaming. What did Marie do now?”

“She invited Jessica Coffin to the wedding.”

I whistle softly, shaking my head. “Yer maw’s nae ta be underestimated, eh?”

Amy mutters, “She’s so stubborn.”

I just stare at her. Apple, tree, all that.

Declan mutters fiercely to Shannon, “Why doesn’t she just drop a ring in your coffee for you to swallow while she’s at it?”

“I know!” Shannon cries. “She invited the woman who almost ruined our getting together, and who is my biggest online bully, to the most important day of my life!”

Declan holds her face tenderly. “Honey, this isn’t the most important day of your life. It’s the first of many. Right up until the day we die together, well into our nineties, after I give you the best orgasm ever.”

I chuckle, nudging Amy playfully. “Aye, tha’s some proper romance, is it no’, Amy?”

Amy elbows me hard, blushing furiously. “Shut it, Hamish.”

Shannon giggles weakly. “That’s one hell of a bucket list you have, Declan.”

“I never back down from a challenge,” Declan replies, helping her stand.

Shannon whispers tearfully, “I don’t want this.”

Declan frowns. “Don’t want to marry me?”

Amy and I share a glance that says we're both sad to see them in pain. It's a tender catch of the eye and all my breath stands still in my chest. Amy's worry and love shine through her face. Her loveliness is compounded by her caring. I feel a tug in my chest.

“God, yes I want to marry you! But this? The pompous pageantry of it? No! Mom’s completely taken over, and no matter how hard I try, I can’t win.”

Amy takes this moment to step out of the room. I don't follow. This is too juicy to miss, and I love watching other people's drama.

Declan embraces her tightly. “Sometimes the only way to win is not to play.”

“What?”

“Bow out. Fold.”

“Our wedding isn’t a game of poker, Dec!”

“It sort of is, Shannon,” Declan insists. “Is this how you imagined it?”

“Absolutely not!”

“Do you want this?”

“Do you?”

“No. But I’ll go along with it because I love you.”

“I don’t want any of this! I would have been happy getting married on one of the Harbor Islands or even eloping to Vegas!”

Declan quickly pulls out his phone. "I can arrange either one. You pick. We can be gone in twenty minutes."

I notice Shannon's ex-boyfriend Steve chatting with Jessica outside, making my eyebrow shoot upward.

My cousin beats me to it before I can say a word.

"Is that Steve?" Declan roars, aghast. "Your mother invited STEVE?"

Shannon desperately turns to Amanda. "What do I do, Amanda?"

Amanda pauses. "Hon, you're on your own. I love you, and I'll lie for you. I'll block a door for you. I'll hold Jessica down while you rip out her hair extensions, but I can't decide for you."

Shannon steels herself and declares firmly to Declan, "Do it. Let's escape. Now."

Just then, Amy reappears. She hasn't heard the bit about the bride and groom running off, and I realize I have a chance for some fun.

Fun fun.

Declan makes rapid phone calls, and I watch appreciatively, leaning toward Amy again. "Ten quid says they scarper, pet."

"Scarper?"

"Reckon this weddin's going to end in a proper Scottish leg-it."

"I am loath to ask, but: What's a 'Scottish leg-it'?"

"It's where ye run off."

"Elope?"

"Aye."

Amy sighs, then cracks a reluctant smile. "I'd actually pay to see that."

Declan finishes his calls, his eyes flashing a silent warning at me as he escorts Shannon out. Message received, loud and clear:

Don't touch his almost sister-in-law or I'll lose my kneecaps.

And I'm rather fond of them.

Unfortunately, all his warning does is make me want her more.

Amy's eyes narrow as she watches Steve through the window. "Guys like him should come with a hazard sign."

I feign offense, hand over heart. "Careful, pet. I've been told I'm hazardous tae women's hearts."

She scoffs. "You're hazardous, all right—but mostly to my sanity."

"And yer libido."

"You literally can't go thirty seconds without talking about sex, can you?"

"What would be the fun in that?"

Amy and I stand side by side, watching Declan effortlessly spin Marie around with the kind of smooth maneuvering you'd expect from someone escaping Alcatraz.

“What do ye reckon yer new brother-in-law is up to?” I ask, leaning closer to Amy, keeping my voice conspiratorial.

She eyes me suspiciously. “With Declan, it's anyone's guess. But if he’s smiling like that, it's probably going to end in disaster.”

I chuckle softly. “Fancy a wee wager on it, pet?”

Amy narrows her eyes. “What are the terms?”

I grin wickedly, leaning down so my mouth hovers just near her ear. “If I’m right an’ they ditch this weddin', ye sleep wi’ me.”

She jerks back, cheeks flaming scarlet, eyes wide in outrage. “Excuse me?”

I shrug innocently. “Come on, Amy, ye canna deny the chemistry. Besides, ye’re the one who made the booty call last night.”

Her face turns an impressive shade of red. “I did NOT! You called me!”

I raise an eyebrow, grinning wickedly. “Funny, pet. The phone records dinna lie.” I waggle my eyebrows suggestively. “It wasna my voice on the voicemail askin’ if Hamy wis awake.”

Amy crosses her arms stubbornly, but there's laughter flickering at the edges of her eyes. “You're delusional. None of that happened.”

I shrug lightly. “Maybe so. But delusional can be fun. Ye should give it a try

sometime.”

Outside the door, Declan gives Marie’s backside a firm slap, the echo ringing out loud enough to be heard on social media.

Amy’s jaw drops. “Did he just spank my mother?”

“Aye, looks tae me like he just gave her the Glasgow goodbye,” I say dryly.

Amy groans, burying her face in her hands. “My family is so bizarre.”

I pat her comfortingly on the back, then slide my hand lower, just enough to make her jump away and scowl at me. “Hamish!”

“Och, Amy, dinna be so uptight,” I tease. “I’m just preppin’ ye fer when I win our wee bet.”

She eyes Declan and Shannon, clearly considering the odds. “Fine. But when you lose, you’re wearing Chuckles’ tartan kilt for the entire reception.”

"There's but one body part o' mine that'll fit, lass." I narrow my eyes and peer at the wee puss. “But then again, it may be too small.”

"Men always think it won't fit, but it always does."

I hold out my hand.

She shakes firmly, eyes sparkling with challenge. But as Declan swaggers out looking like he's just masterminded the greatest escape ever, I can't help but grin.

Chuckles better keep his wee kilt handy, just in case.

Chapter Eight

Amy

On this sunny July Saturday, the ceremony begins just like every other overly orchestrated wedding, complete with soft piano music and row upon row of pristine white chairs. Standing at the glass door, I peer outside, mentally cataloging the scene.

Jordan's floral arrangements, with heather, thistle, and primrose, give each row a burst of color and Scottish charm. Ushers shepherd guests into their places, meticulously mixing our relatives from the Midwest—who look as bewildered as cows at a barbecue—with Declan's polished associates from Anterdec, impeccably dressed and probably wondering how they ended up at this tartan-themed circus.

My eyes land on good old—emphasis on old—Agnes and Corinne, dressed in outfits that scream vintage chic—assuming vintage chic involves hats that could double as satellite dishes. Agnes, resplendent in bright red, has a hat pinned to her curls that Jackie Kennedy probably wore first. Corinne, never one to be outdone, sports something Coco Chanel would rise from her grave to reclaim.

I spot Josh, Shannon's old boss Greg with his wife, Judy, and—oh, dear God—is that one of the strippers from the piano bar sitting next to them, wearing a suit? Nice touch, Josh. Real classy.

Then there's Mom, blissfully unaware she's seated two rows ahead of Jessica Coffin, the queen of hashtag cruelty. Jessica is next to Pam and coos over Spritzzy, snapping photos as Pam cheerfully encourages her, oblivious to the inevitable social media

disaster brewing.

Perfect. While we're at it, why not just ask Dorothy Parker to pen a biting poem about us all?

Declan waits at the altar, cool as ever, the minister and his older brother Terry flanking him like they're his security detail. James sits front row, dignified and calm, completely at odds with the mounting mess I'm anticipating.

And then someone ceremoniously places Chuckles at the foot of the aisle. My heart sinks. Our family cat is about to steal the show—or destroy it completely. Chuckles lifts his head like royalty, taking deliberate, measured steps forward, scanning the crowd left and right as if deciding who lives and who gets clawed.

I brace myself, stepping into my place, and take a deep breath, waiting for disaster to strike.

Hamish sneaks over, looking extraordinary in his tuxedo kilt. As pure pheromones pour off him like homing signals, I clutch my bouquet and wish for a cold shower. The quartet is softly playing the prelude as if we're all civilized human beings and not about to witness a complete fiasco.

Hamish leans closer, whispering in that annoying, irresistible Scottish burr, “Ye nervous, pet? Ye look ready tae bolt.”

“I'm not nervous,” I snap, lying through my teeth. Nervous doesn't begin to describe it. I'm absolutely petrified—mostly because of him. This stupid bet I agreed to sits heavily in my mind. Sleep with Hamish if Declan and Shannon actually escape their wedding? What was I thinking?

“Dinnae fash,” he teases, nudging me lightly. “Ye'll nae regret losin' tae me. I'll go

gentle wi' ye." He tilts his head and smiles wider. "Unless ye like it rough?"

"Keep dreaming, McCormick," I fire back, but my heart does an unwelcome flutter. He disappears out the back, then reappears at the altar, winking at me.

My attention shifts abruptly as Amanda strides forward to help wrangle Chuckles down the aisle. Watching her wrestle with an irritable cat in tartan is amusing enough until a sudden flurry of barking, hissing, and absolute animal madness erupts.

"Oh, no," I groan, as Muffin, Chuckles, and Spritzzy become a furry ball of fury, rolling straight toward the swimming pool.

Amanda lunges after them, stumbling a little as her dress snags on the gate to the pool—of course, because why not? The dress tears spectacularly, and suddenly Amanda is topless in front of God, Agnes, and every internet troll from here to Glasgow.

With their queen snapping pictures and already counting her content paychecks.

The dog-and-cat pile splash right into the pool, sinking immediately, and Amanda jumps right in without hesitation. Bubbles appear and it's hard to see what's happening underwater, but none of it is good.

"Jesus!" Hamish shouts, eyes wide. He immediately moves forward, alarmed. "She's drownin'!"

Hamish starts fumbling urgently with his sporran and kilt. My eyes widen as he tosses his sporran aside and begins unclipping his kilt, revealing an always startlingly toned body with deep, V-shaped indents at his hips that make my pulse jump irrationally.

And—oh my God. I sprint toward him.

“Hamish! You’re not wearing underwear?” I squeal.

He winks, utterly unapologetic. “Aye, lass. True Scotsman, right doon ta the bone.”

Nearby, Agnes and Corinne suddenly perk up, their attention riveted, openly gawking and elbowing each other enthusiastically.

Blushing furiously, I grab Hamish’s hands, trying to stop his public—and increasingly pubic—striptease. “For God’s sake, you exhibitionist! Stop undressing!”

His green eyes glitter mischievously, and he grins broadly, easily out maneuvering me and beginning to unbutton his jacket and shirt. “Och, Amy, cannae keep yer hands off me, aye? Mebbe we don’t need the bet?”

My embarrassment skyrockets. Before I can retort, Andrew—Andrew, the human hermit crab who never steps outside in warm weather and thus bailed on being best man at this outdoor wedding—charges across the courtyard like an Olympic swimmer on a caffeine overdose. He leaps into the pool after Amanda.

Hamish pauses, kilt hanging precariously from his hips, the muscles of his abdomen taut with readiness. “Ach, looks like ma cousin’s got it,” he says, sounding disappointed, snapping his kilt back into place. Agnes and Corinne sigh dramatically.

And sadly.

Meanwhile, Andrew emerges heroically from the pool, dripping wet, holding Amanda close as they get all three soaked animals out of the pool, Chuckles splitting off from the canines, hiding under a chair. Cameras flash, Jessica Coffin smirks, and the entire event spirals into a disaster worthy of its own hashtag. And then Chuckles,

the most savage of felines, strolls up casually to pee on Jessica's designer heels.

Hamish nearly chokes on laughter beside me. “Wee beastie's ma hero now.”

“What a complete circus,” I say, biting back my own giggle.

Hamish nods, grinning broadly. “Best weddin' ever. What's Declan got planned next?”

My stomach flips. Escape. Sleep. Sex. With Hamish. Bad idea? Great idea? My brain scrambles to reach a verdict.

Amanda and Andrew share an intimate, heartfelt moment, completely oblivious to the melee around them. Despite the humiliation, Amanda looks happy—truly happy—and a pang of envy hits me. Could Hamish make me feel like that?

As if sensing my thoughts, Hamish bumps my shoulder gently. “Thinkin' about surrender, are ye?”

“Dream on,” I mutter, but my resolve is weakening dangerously.

The last shred of dignity has now left the building. I glance sidelong at Hamish.

He smirks, waiting for my next move.

Maybe, just maybe, losing that bet wouldn't be the worst disaster today.

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Chapter Nine

Hamish

It starts with a sound—low, rhythmic, almost like a heartbeat, if the heart belonged to a massive mechanical beast. Amy looks up first, eyes narrowing at the sky.

"Do you hear that?" she asks, her head tilting.

I follow her gaze, brows raised. A small black dot hovers in the hazy blue sky, growing larger with every passing second.

"That a drone show or somethin'?" I ask.

"No," she murmurs. "That's... a helicopter?"

The whoop-whoop-whoop of the blades grows louder, slicing the air into bits as the thing descends like it owns the sky. One by one, heads start to turn. Guests squint upward, murmuring questions and clutching their pearls, the carefully arranged rows of white chairs turning into a sea of craning necks.

It's not every day you get to watch a billionaire fake a presidential fly-in to elope with his bride, fooling her mother, who thinks the president is about to descend in full tartan glory.

And it's even less common to watch it all unfold while standing next to the lass you're about to win a bet with.

A bet with massive benefits.

The unmarked black helicopter descends like a cinematic fever dream. The blades kick up air that sends hats flying and floral centerpieces trembling. Jordan's monstrosities are holding on for dear life.

"Ye seein' this, love?" I say, leaning in just enough to shout without having my face ripped off by rotor wind. "That's the sound o' victory."

Amy's eyes are wide, her mouth hanging slightly open. "That's a helicopter. What is going on?"

"Nae idea," I say, full of false innocence. "Could be the president poppin' in fer the open bar."

And that's when Declan appears, strutting toward the maelstrom like he just got nominated for Sexiest Man Alive: Kilt Edition. Marie flails toward him, her face lit up like she's about to be knighted.

She shouts something about the president and I nearly lose it. She really thinks the bloody president is here?

"Shite," I mutter, unable to stop grinning. "He really pulled it off."

Amy turns slowly toward me. "Wait. You knew?"

"Oh, aye," I say, smug as sin. "He told me this mornin'. Said if things went sideways, he had a wee getaway plan."

"A helicopter getaway plan?" she repeats like she's auditioning for the role of Stunned Bridesmaid in a disaster film.

“Would ye expect anything less from a McCormick?”

Her mouth opens, closes, then opens again. “Oh, my God. I think I just lost the bet.”

I lean closer. “Ye thinkin’ about payin’ up?”

Before she can answer, Marie screams again. “THE PRESIDENT IS HERE!”

Andrew wraps his arm around Amanda, trying to preserve her modesty with a jacket that’s doing exactly zero percent of its job. She’s half dead with embarrassment. Meanwhile, Marie is pointing skyward like she’s directing air traffic.

Declan and Shannon make a break for it, her dress flying behind her like a bridal parachute. They’ve got that look—the ‘we’re in love and nothing else matters’ look.

The helicopter lowers again, close enough to scatter every bobby pin in a hundred-meter radius. Shannon’s tartan sash flaps like a flag in a hurricane as Declan helps her in. Then the thing starts lifting and Marie goes sprinting as if she’s at the greyhound races.

Amy clutches my arm, eyes still locked on the sky. “Are they actually?—”

“Aye,” I say proudly. “They’re elopin’.”

She gasps. “No. No way.”

“Ye see, lass,” I say, taking her hand into mine, “McCormicks dinna just plan a wedding. We also have an exit strategy.”

Amy stares at me, still reeling from the shock, hair wild, cheeks flushed, and absolutely stunning.

“Ye still think I won’t win that bet?” I ask, waggling my brows.

She narrows her eyes. “If you say one more word, I swear to God, Hamish?—”

“Ye’ll rip ma kilt off yerself?” I say, eyes wide, raising my voice to make sure I make Amy squirm for me even more. “Ye should buy me dinner first, ye know.”

Two old ladies—Agnes and Corinne—whip their heads around at the same time, eyes laser-locked on me.

“Ladies,” I say with a wink. “Enjoyin’ the show?”

Amy groans and facepalms. “I cannot believe I am even slightly attracted to you.”

“Only slightly?” I feign offense. “Pet, ye stopped me from rescuin’ Amanda earlier. I felt yer hands on me.” I lean in. “And I liked it.”

She makes a strangled noise that sounds like a laugh and a scream had a baby.

The helicopter rises, Shannon shouting “ELOPE!” like a battle cry, and Marie hits the grass with a sound like a tossed cabbage.

And me? I just stand there, basking in the wind and glory, thinking one thing:

Best. Wedding. Ever.

There’s actually a moment—just a moment—where I think Marie might launch herself into the sky and physically grab the helicopter, like King Kong on a bender.

She’s shouting at the clouds now. “WHERE ARE YOU GOING?” she bellows, jumping like she’s trying to slap the rotor blades back down to earth.

Just then, the bagpipes start playing. Good old Scottish timing.

I glance over at Amy. Her jaw's slack, her eyes still glued to the sky like she's expecting it to deliver answers. Meanwhile, I'm basking in the warm, smug glow of being one hundred percent correct about this elopement scheme. My inner smug-o-meter's bursting like a cheap thermometer at a habanero-eating contest.

Jason reaches Marie just in time to catch her next meltdown. He's squinting after the helicopter, hand above his eyes like a kilted pirate spotting sails on the horizon. Marie's shaking her fist in the air, and thanks to the fact the blades have stopped trying to peel our faces off, we can all hear her, crystal clear.

"ELOPE? THEY CAN'T ELOPE! GET THEM BACK HERE, JASON! THEY ARE RUINING MY WEDDING!"

Jason looks like a man questioning every life choice he's ever made, including not changing his name and moving to Paraguay.

"This is better than cheesy reality television," Andrew comments nearby.

I snort. "Och, Love Island could ne'er dream o' this madness."

Pam, bless her, decides now is the perfect time to drop some unsolicited statistical wisdom. "Did you know," she says to James, Carol, and Terry like she's delivering a TED Talk, "that people who elope are more than twelve times as likely to divorce compared to those who marry with a wedding of two hundred or more guests?"

Carol snaps, "I eloped."

James sighs, wistful. "Elena and I had more than two hundred guests and were happily married for more than twenty years."

Pam suddenly looks like someone swapped her bingo card mid-round. “I eloped,” she adds sheepishly, glancing at Amanda. “And we know how that turned out.”

I nod slowly. “Let me guess. Therapy and three restrainin’ orders later...”

But none of that applies here. I watch the chopper fade into the clouds, and I know, deep down, Shannon and Declan aren’t statistics. They’re the outliers, the kind that shift bell curves and ruin academic averages.

“ANDREW!” Marie roars. It’s like being inside a malfunctioning foghorn.

Andrew jerks upright like someone just shoved an ice cube down his pants. “What? Why me?”

“YOU NEED TO GET ANTERDEC’S HELICOPTER NOW. NOW NOW NOW NOW!”

He blinks like he’s trying to reboot his whole personality. “I’m sorry, Marie. The helicopter is being used right now in Central America to help deliver medical supplies after the floods. It’s a corporate humanitarian mission.”

“THAT IS NO EXCUSE. WE HAVE MORE IMPORTANT PROBLEMS HERE. CALL IT BACK.”

Amy groans softly next to me. “Is she serious?”

I grin. “Oh, aye. Deadly.”

Jason tries to calm her. “Honey, we can’t do anything about this. Shannon and Declan decided they wanted to get away and?—”

“DON’T YOU DARE TELL ME THAT! I AM NOT MISSING WATCHING ANOTHER DAUGHTER GET MARRIED. I DID NOT SPEND THE LAST YEAR OF MY LIFE RESEARCHING TARTAN THONGS FOR THIS!”

Jason blinks like he’s been unplugged. “Tartan thongs?”

Andrew leans close and slaps a hand on Amanda's ass. “Tartan thongs?” he repeats.

She groans. “We were forced to match.”

“Why not go commando like we kilt wearers?” I ask.

“We tried! Marie wouldn’t let us,” Amanda explains. “Said if we didn’t have balls, we couldn’t go commando.”

Andrew smirks. “You have balls. Bigger than most men’s.”

I nod, then narrow my eyes. “But not mine, aye?”

“JASON! CALL THE POLICE AND REPORT A KIDNAPPING!”

Jason looks like he’s aged ten years. “Shannon hasn’t been kidnapped, Marie.”

“MY WEDDING HAS BEEN KIDNAPPED!” she screeches.

He digs into his sporran and pulls out a roll of antacids like it’s holy communion. Peeling the last ones off, he tosses them back like a man accepting his fate.

Meanwhile, Marie’s still screaming. “WHERE ARE THEY GOING?”

Everyone around us just raises their hands like this is a school play and we’ve all

forgotten our lines. Carol and Terry are drinking Champagne like they're on the set of *The Great Gatsby* . The caterers have clearly clocked out emotionally and are serving hors d'oeuvres like nothing happened.

I turn to Amy, who's watching the chaos with a stunned look, and I smile.

Then I nudge her side and say, "Sooo... my room or yours, pet?"

Chapter Ten

Amy

"There will be no room!"

He smirks at me, looking around. "The bushes don't give much privacy, but we can give it a go. Didn't know ye were an exhibitionist, Amy."

I ignore him. The helicopter is a dot now—just a whisper of a noise as it disappears into the sky. I blink at it, mouth open, my brain trying to catch up with what I've just witnessed. My sister. My people-pleasing, approval-seeking sister just escaped. With her billionaire fiancé. From her own wedding.

I stare at the sky, then turn to Hamish.

He's grinning as if he just scored a goal, got knighted, and found an unlimited haggis buffet all in one day. I look from him back to the sky, then back to him again, stomach sinking.

"Ye all right there, pet?" he asks, that smug twinkle lighting up his eyes.

I snap my mouth shut. "Don't start."

"Start what?" he says, all faux innocence and smugness wrapped in a kilt.

I'm just about to tell him to screw off because he clearly cheated when Agnes—yes,

nonagenarian Agnes—drops into a crouch like she’s about to do downward-facing dog in a St. John suit.

Her red hat slides under Hamish’s kilt like it’s on a mission from God. Then she shoves one arm up like a geriatric spelunker reaching for treasure and pulls the kilt aside. Hamish looks down, eyebrow arched so high, it practically dislodges itself from his face.

“He’s authentic, Corrine!” Agnes crows, clearly delighted.

Corrine hobbles over, looking like a fashion-forward velociraptor, clutching her pearls and smiling like this is the most exciting thing she’s seen since color TV. With over-dyed blond hair swept off her face in Farrah Fawcett wings, she looks like Charlie’s Angels did a Golden Girls crossover featuring Kathy Bates.

“I owe you ten bucks,” Agnes sighs.

“Here. We’ll call it even,” Corrine says, fishing through her vintage clutch and coming out with a compact. “Take this, open the mirror, and angle it just so?—”

I want to dissolve into the lawn.

Hamish, for his part, doesn’t even flinch. “Americans are so bizarre,” he mutters.

“Just take ten bucks for our bet, too,” I say dryly, handing him imaginary cash. “We’ll call it even like those two, and I can move on with my dignity intact.”

He grins wide. “Nae chance. The bet’s nae aboot cash, pet. It’s aboot principle.”

“Your principle is to blackmail me into sex?” I ask sweetly, though my pulse skips. “You cheated!”

He softens, just enough. “Only if ye want tae, and only when. I’d never push, Amy.”

And just like that, the heat in my cheeks flares again—for a different reason.

Then his hand brushes my bare shoulder. Lightly. Casually. But my skin goes molten.

I tense.

And he notices.

His fingers trail down slowly, stopping just shy of my elbow, then slip away like it never happened. My heart stutters. I’m about to say something—anything—when his fingers reach for mine. He doesn’t grab. Just lets his pinkie graze mine.

Before I can react, Dad comes in for a hug. Poor guy. He kisses my temple.

“STOP THAT! YOU SHOULD BE ON THE PHONE ARRANGING THE CORPORATE JET FOR US!” Mom’s voice screeches through the mayhem like a preschool teacher who’s lost control of her class as the ice cream truck appears.

Her hair is trying to escape her skull, curling away in stiff, terrified spirals.

“To go where?” Andrew calls back casually from Amanda’s side, where he’s wrapped around her like he’s never letting go.

Mom turns her fury on them. “YOU TWO KNOW!”

Amanda and Andrew look caught—but not sorry. She leans into his shoulder, her whole body exhaling against him like it just found its home.

My chest aches a little.

Mom catches Amanda's eye. Her gasp is cinematic.

"Oh, no—not Las Vegas!" she moans. "Not like Carol and Todd. Please tell me they didn't just run off to Vegas."

"They didn't just run off to Vegas," Andrew deadpans in a robotic voice, then kisses Amanda again.

"ORDER THE CORPORATE JET TO TAKE US THERE!"

"Right now?" Andrew mumbles into Amanda's mouth. "We're kind of busy."

Mom laughs like a cartoon villain. "BUSY? YOU ARE BUSY GROPING AMANDA AND I AM BUSY PICKING UP THE SHATTERED PIECES OF THIS?—"

"We're trying to make up!" Andrew says.

"MAKE UP IN VEGAS!" she bellows, grabbing Chuckles from Dad with the delicacy of a drunken linebacker.

Andrew looks at Amanda. "Vegas?"

"Make up sex in Vegas?" she suggests.

He whips out his phone. "You have a way with words."

Two guests, a petite blonde with a very worried, pinched look on her face, and a brunette who seems mildly familiar, someone I saw Shannon pointing to earlier, are whispering. They're sitting on a garden bench, the very picture of a beautiful serene audience for a lovely bride and groom's nuptials.

Nuptials that aren't happening now.

Something about the blonde makes me move closer, and I overhear her making a soft groaning sound.

"James is going to kill me," she mutters to the other one, who takes a sip of her drink and just nods. Then I realize who she is. I don't remember her name, but she's the person who works for Anterdec, managing the wedding. Candy? Callie? Something like that. Mom complains about her a lot, mostly that this event planner isn't taking Mom's recommendations seriously.

As I watch Chuckles chew on his kilt, gee . I wonder why.

"Katie, no one - and I mean no one , could have predicted any of this. You can't anticipate this kind of dysfunction," the brunette says softly, and I almost start laughing because, well....

With my mom involved? You absolutely can.

Katie looks around the chaos as the other woman does as well, taking it all in.

"Someone should, though," Katie muses. "Imagine something more than just event planning. Like disaster preparedness."

"You mean FEMA for weddings?"

"Kari!" Katie gasps. "What a thought." She looks at Amanda. "I really should get her a towel," but instead, she picks up her tote bag and looks at Kari. "Want to get a drink?"

The two women walk across the gardens, headed for the parking lot.

Around us, it's pure disarray: Mom tearing across the lawn, Chuckles hissing his displeasure, children plotting amphibious missions to the fountain, and the caterers serving sliders to stunned guests.

And Hamish.

Hamish is still standing there. Shirt fitted to sinful perfection. Legs sculpted by some ancient kilt-wearing deity. Kilt flapping like it owns the place. Agnes is now asking for his autograph on her upper thigh. Corrine's got her phone out, and I think I just saw a flash.

He turns and catches me looking.

"Ye're still starin', love," he murmurs, voice low and warm.

"I'm staring in disbelief," I say. "At your entire... existence."

He steps closer. Inches. Heat rolls off him like he's a furnace in a kilt.

"Ye ken," he says, brushing a knuckle along my wrist, "ye dinnae have to resist. Sometimes, impulses are good things."

I swallow hard. "My sister just eloped."

"Aye. She chose what made her happy. Reckless. Brave."

"I'm not her."

"Ye don't have tae be. I like ye just as ye are."

His hand reaches for mine again, but this time I press my palm against his chest to

stop him.

I give him a long look. “You’re too used to getting what you want.”

He raises an eyebrow. “No' today, apparently.”

He’s right.

But also? It makes me feel seen.

I turn on my heel and storm off across the lawn—aroused, aching, fuming, and absolutely not giving in.

Even though I really, really want to.

:)

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Hamish

“I’m sorry, Hamish, but the contract’s broken with Towelz2Teamz. No photo shoot, no ad campaign, no media appearances.”

My agent’s voice has a cringing tone, as if he thinks I’ll blow.

Might as well prove him right.

“WHAT? Why? ” I scream into the useless glass screen of my mobile. I’m in a hotel room on the thirty-third floor in New York City after a three-day modeling shoot for a new kind of kinesiology tape, and check out is in forty minutes.

“Turns out the chief financial officer was embezzling from the company. Hid all the money in cryptocurrency. The Feds are sorting it out and T2T has decided to end all contracts.”

“Yer kidding!”

“Nope. I never kid about money. You know that. You get to keep the kill fee, though.”

“Kill fee?”

“They have to pay you if they cancel the contract.”

“I get paid not to work?”

Jody chuckles softly. “Basically.” His low voice drops a bit, as if I’m supposed to know this already.

“Then sign me up fer hundreds of these contracts and let 'em cancel!”

“It doesn't work that way.”

“Dinna tell me it doesn't. They're canceling and I'm being paid.”

“It's not the full amount of the contract.”

“How much is it?”

He quotes a pathetic figure. Still, it's a figure I've done nothing to earn.

“That's bloody awful! And I'm stuck now.”

“Stuck?”

“I'm here in New York. There's some stupid American holiday coming up. I'm in the airline app on ma phone and there's nothing. Nae seats on flights home.”

“No seats at all, or no cheap seats? I do not understand your obsession with flying coach. For a guy your size, it's like human origami.”

“If it's ma own money, I fly economy. And I even looked at business class. Three thousand dollars fer a seat! And that's just New York to London! If I'm spending three thousand on a seat, it better be a good shag and cook me breakfast in the mornin'.”

“It's Thanksgiving weekend. Today is Tuesday. Everyone flies the Wednesday before. Good luck finding a seat in coach.”

“I'm giving thanks to nae one fer this, Jody. Get me home.”

“I can't. Book first class.”

“The damn towel company should arrange fer ma ticket home to Scotland.”

“They aren't required to.”

“Damn it, Jody! I told ye—”

“Cool your jets, Hamish.”

“I have nae jets! That's the problem! Get me on a jet across the pond to where I belong!”

“It's an expression. Means calm down.”

“Why the hell would I be calm right now when I just got screwed?”

“Before you blow a gasket, I also have good news. There's another contract.”

“Well, why in bloody hell didn't ye lead wi' that? Ye start with the good to soften the blow from the bad.”

“It's not the greatest offer. I knew if I started with it, you'd reject it.”

“But now that I have nae options, ye think I'm desperate enough to say yes to anything?”

Silence. I get nothing but silence from Jody.

My long sigh betrays me. “Jesus, ye know me well.”

“Right. It's in Boston.”

“ Nooooooooo ! Why is all the work up there?”

“What's wrong with Boston? I thought you had relatives there.”

“I do. They're all a bit crazy, though. Rich buggers, the lot of them. The minute ma uncle James learns I'm in town, he'll be using me as his wingman.”

“What's wrong with that?”

“The guy's older than Solomon and thinks he's ma age.”

“Well, that's the thing—the contract is because of James McCormick.”

“What?”

“He reached out. Said his company is looking for a spokesman for some of their properties. Boston is such a sports town.”

“Boston has nowt to do with football!”

Did ye know ye can hear a man choke on his coffee through a phone? Either that, or Jody swallowed his tie.

“Have you heard of a little football team called the Patriots, Hamish? Six-time Super Bowl champions?”

“That's nae football. That's a bunch of overpaid men in tights chasing a coohide turd.”

“Stephon Gilmore earned \$13 million last year, plus bonuses, for chasing a turd in tights.”

“I’ll be damned. Maybe I’m playing the wrong kind of football. But mine isna misnamed.”

“Soccer, Hamish. It’s called soccer here.”

I make a sound.

It’s not a polite one.

“I know damned well what it’s called, but that doesna make it right. Just because ma gran called Da her baby doesna make him wee again.”

“The negative attitude doesn’t sell product, Hamish.”

“I’m never selling American football, Jody.”

“I’m not talking about endorsements. You’re the product you’re selling. Don’t forget that.”

“I thought I was selling ma football skills.”

We both laugh heartily at that.

“Speaking of your skills, there’s a nude photo shoot coming up for Peak Performance Magazine. You ready?”

“If by ready, ye mean have I plucked all the mutant escape hairs off ma body and done a bowel cleanse formulated with more precision than a chemical engineer uses at a pharmaceutical plant, then na.”

“No?”

“The shoot's in two weeks. I'll do a shred and cleanse before then.”

“Right. Makes sense. You'll stuff yourself silly at Thanksgiving, anyhow.”

“Why?”

“ Why? ”

“Is there an echo, Jody?”

“People eat until they can't fit in their pants, Hamish.”

“And then what? A post-prandial orgy?”

He sighs. “You really know nothing about our Thanksgiving?”

“Battle of Culloden.”

“Huh?”

“What do ye know about the Battle of Culloden?”

“Uh, nothing.”

“There ye go. Don't be smug with me for no' knowing about some day when ye all worship turkeys.”

“That's not what Thanksgiving is about.”

“What, then?”

“It's celebrating the settlement of the English colonies in America. We eat turkey,

mashed potatoes, cranberry sauce, sweet potatoes, squash—”

“Ye go into the woods and find a big bird and kill it?”

“We buy them at the grocery store.”

“That's no' as exciting.”

He laughs. “Nothing's ever exciting enough for you, Hamish. You're an adrenaline junkie.”

“That's just another term for footballer.”

“Absolutely.” A buzz in the background makes it clear he has a text on his other phone. Jody carries three. I half expect two are for wives he’s hiding from each other, and the third is for work. “Gotta go.”

“Right.” I sigh. “Nae way home?”

“Charter a jet.”

“Canna afford it.”

“Then take the Boston contract.”

“Fine. But James McCormick uses me as eye candy.”

Another silence ensues.

“Eye candy?”

“Aye.”

“Eye or aye?”

“Yer saying the same word, Jody.”

“E-Y-E or A-Y-E candy?”

“E-Y-E. The other doesna make sense.”

“Neither one makes sense. How does he use you as eye candy?” He begins to choke.

“Is it—are you and he..?”

“DEAR GOD, nae!” I thunder out. “He's ma uncle! And he's ancient!”

“Right. Of course.”

“Besides, he's no' ma type.”

“You have a type when it comes to men?”

“Ha. Na. I like women. James is fine for an uncle, but he's a bit of a priggish braggart.”

“Then how is he using you as eye candy? I thought you said he turned you into his wingman.”

“Same thing. He brings me around fer attention. I do draw a crowd, ye know.”

“You sure do, and I hope that continues forever. Your looks are moving the money needle in the right direction.”

“But it all starts with ma footwork.”

He coughs discreetly. “Of course.”

“I think James brings me places so he gets attention.”

“What's wrong with that?”

“Nae one likes to be used.”

“Use him back. Take the contract.”

A flash of Amy Jacoby, that sweet young firebrand who's the sister of my cousin's wife, makes Boston more appealing.

“Fine. I'll sign. Canna be worse than anythin' else I've done.”

“I forgot to mention the hot dog costume.” His voice makes it clear he's joking, but for the right price, I'll wear damn near anything.

“A sexy dog? I'm no' into fetish work, Jody. Ye know, even I have a line.”

Jody's heavy sigh comes through loud and clear. “Good luck getting back to Scotland, Hamish. I'll let McCormick's people know it's a go.”

The call ends and I go back to the airline app, running a frustrated hand through my damp hair. Fresh out of the shower, I was packing up when Jody called. Now I have to check out, find something to do and a way to get to Boston, and be in limbo while Jody talks to James' people.

My stomach growls.

And I need lunch, too.

What I need more is a personal assistant.

Auburn hair a few shades darker than mine, attached to a snappy mouth and a fine, lush body, comes to mind.

I wonder what she's doing now?

Amy

It's the call no one ever wants to receive.

You know the one.

Where your father tells you your mother broke her leg while they were having wild sex?

Right. That one.

I'm at the gym, thirty minutes into a stair machine that's destroying my glutes, and it feels so good. Burning off nervous energy from turning in huge projects for my MBA has become a ritual.

Group projects are the worst. Half the people don't listen, everyone wants to be a visionary but not an implementor, and the posturing for status makes my teeth ache.

Cursed by an intuitive sense for optimization, I am usually left being visionary, implementor, and coffee deliverer.

And I can't help myself.

So here I am, at the gym at one in the afternoon, just after the lunch rush, working out my stress hormones, feeling them leak out of my pores in the form of sweat, when an

innocent ring tone upends everything .

“Amy, honey, before you worry, your mother is just fine. We're at Metro Hospital. She's being taken into x-ray. They're pretty sure her leg's broken,” Dad explains, sounding weirdly contrite.

“Dad? What? What happened? Broken? How?”

Silence. Dead silence. Creeping into my senses, my dad's hesitation makes my skin prickle.

“We had an unfortunate accident.”

“Car accident?”

“No.”

“You... tripped?”

“No.”

“DAD!!”

“We were in bed.”

“In bed? How did Mom break her leg in bed– ohhhhhhhh .”

“It's—I don't want to get into it. But I need your help.”

“Okay.”

“I need you to call Marco Aleandro.”

“The carpenter?”

“Yep.”

“Why?”

“There's a problem with the ceiling beam in our bedroom.”

“Wait. Whew . So, the beam fell on Mom while you were in bed sleeping?”

“Not quite.”

I don't like the direction this conversation is taking.

“The beam cracked in half and fell on you two while you were watching television in bed?”

“Um... not quite that, either. And I need you to remove the swing before Marco arrives. The ceiling hook might have caused the problem.”

“Swing? I thought you said you were in your bedroom. What does the swing set in the back yard have to do with this?”

His pause feels like falling over a cliff into a black hole.

There's nothing you can do about it, it's endless, and you'll never be the same again, no matter where you end up.

“Um,” he says, lowering his voice. “It's actually a sex swing.”

“DAD!”

“The beam might be cracked, which is an expensive repair, and when we heard the creaking sound, your mother panicked and began twisting. Then I lost my footing and Marie pivoted and—” His voice cracks a little. “I didn't know a penis could bend like that and not snap clean off.”

“ENOUGH!”

“Sorry, honey. But you asked.”

They say couples start to take on each other's attributes over time. Mom is definitely rubbing off on Dad.

In more ways than one.

Excuse me while I go puke.

“Amy? I'm really sorry.” Dad sounds mortified, his voice hoarse, the ends of words dropping off into sighs. “But before you call Marco, get the swing off the hook and put it in the closet. He'll let me know how bad the damage is. Plus, he's a sheetrock guy, and there's definitely some cracking in the ceiling. How close are you to home?”

“I'm at the gym.” I grab my keys and water bottle off the machine I'm standing on. Thankfully, it's quiet here, and no one's super close to me. This is a conversation best kept private.

“At the gym? Good for you. You always were disciplined, kiddo.”

Apparently, I was at the gym. I see how my afternoon is going to go.

Cleaning up my parents' messes.

“Great! Five minutes away. Could you do this... now?”

“Of course.” I'm already halfway across the cardio floor, headed toward the glass double doors.

“And set up the pull-out couch.”

“Huh?”

“Your mother broke her femur. She won't be able to use stairs for weeks. We'll have to create a makeshift bedroom for her in the living room.”

“Poor Mom.”

“Yeah,” Dad says. “And can you let Shannon and Carol know? Just leave out the sex swing part.”

“Oh, I promise. Last thing I want to do is talk about your sex life with my sisters.”

His chuckle makes my stomach hurt.

“No one likes to think about their parents like... that.”

“No one likes to be asked to move their parents' sex swing off a hook because they broke the house frame, Dad. You owe me for some therapy bills.”

“Add it to our tab. I think we're up to the year 2076 for your sessions.”

“Fifty-four years isn't enough.”

A long pause comes next, stretching like emotional taffy, the hesitation clear even though I can't see Dad.

Then I realize what he's about to ask.

It's a big ask.

“Um, any chance you could stay with us at the house?”

“I am staying at the house, Dad.”

“I mean, through the entire long holiday weekend? I know you have your place in Amherst, but I could use the help.”

“It's okay, Dad. I'm here anyhow. No problem staying until Sunday.”

Mumbling comes through on the phone, then Dad's rushed voice. “You're a doll. Gotta go. Thanks for handling this, honey.”

I stare at the phone for a second and then open my texts, creating a new message between Shannon, Carol, and me.

How do you even begin to describe this?

The direct route is best.

Mom broke her leg while she and Dad were having kinky sex. They're at the hospital, I type and send.

Instantly, three dots appear. And then:

Mum and Da haven't had sex in years, ye silly fool. Quit joking, Shannon replies.

Or at least, I think it's Shannon.

What? I type back, staring dumbly at the reply.

The prank isn't even good, she answers. Try better. Grease a guinea pig and put it under the sink where Mum keeps the cleaning supplies.

Mum? Da? Why is Shannon writing so weirdly?

This isn't a joke! I type back. Mom broke her leg while she was hanging from a sex swing in their bedroom. I now know way too much about how Dad's penis bends, too.

Three dots appear. Oh, goody. What's next?

Now ye've gone too far. Da has nae todger and ye know it. Mum keeps it tucked nicely in her sewing box wi' her escape-the-marriage money.

Shannon must be drunk. That's literally the only explanation I have for this. Todger? Come on.

Or Declan is punking me. Except he's not the type. That wouldn't be an efficient use of his time.

A red wall of pure rage fills me as I pull up the contact info from the text stream and call her. I hate this phone, something Mom got on a mystery shop. The font is huge, and the screen only shows last name, first initial.

The ring stops as the call is picked up, and I shout before she can say a word, "Are you drunk? What are you babbling about? Mom actually broke her femur and you're going on and on and—"

"Who the hell is this? C'mon, Darren. Ye can do better. Ye got an American girl tucked in that hovel of a bedroom of yers and ye're using her to prank me? I'll tell ye what, pet, dinna look under his bed. The socks are balled up fer a reason. They died of sheer exhaustion."

“SHANNON?”

A pause.

“Ma name is Hamish McCormick. Not Shannon. Are ye with ma brother Darren?”

“This is Amy. How the hell are you on the phone with me, Hamish? How did you get Shannon's phone?”

“Hello, Amy. What're ye nattering on about? Ye called me .”

Ding!

I look at the screen. Text from Carol.

I knew it would happen eventually, but I thought it would be Dad who died during kinky stuff. Meet you at the hospital as soon as I can. BTW that's not Shannon's number.

“Hamish?” I squeak, cursing this stupid phone. How did I call him?

“Aye. And who're ye again? Amy? Darren has a new American girlfriend named Amy?”

“I have no idea who Darren is. This is Amy Jacoby. Shannon's sister. Declan's sister-in-law.” It seems silly to explain myself to him. We were paired in my sister's wedding, walked down the aisle together as bridesmaid and groomsman. Before the wedding, Hamish booty-called me at three a.m. to talk about “how to use my hands on you.”

So if I'm overexplaining myself, it's a purely defensive posture intended to distract him from the fact that I'm the idiot who accidentally called him .

“Aye. I know who ye are. Caller ID, ye know?”

“Then why did you pretend you didn't know who I was?”

“Because it was more fun that way.”

“That's rude.”

“In fact, I was just thinking about ye, Amy.”

“Really? It's not three a.m., Hamish. Your timing's off.”

Silence, then a burst of deep laughter that makes me hotter than an hour on the stair machine.

“So ye do remember.”

“And why would you be thinking about me right now, Hamish?”

I slide behind the wheel and shove the key in the ignition, but stop myself from turning it. Driving while talking to an egotistical jerk who I've just accidentally told a very private detail about our family is only going to get me into an accident. I don't need to add yet another way that Hamish McCormick infuriates me.

His long pause is driving me nuts.

And then he says, “Oh, nae reason. And now I see it's fate.”

“Fate?”

“Ye texted me about yer poor Da's willie. It's fate that it was me, and nae some stranger that would embarrass him even more.”

“Embarrass him ?”

“Nae man wants his daughter running around talking about his todger.”

“I didn't do this by choice!”

“And I'm sorry about Marie. Broke her leg?” I feel his shudder through the phone.

“That's the kiss of death fer footie players like me.”

“Then don't have kinky sex and you'll be just fine.”

“I'd rather give up ma leg than give up the kinky good stuff.”

The leer in his voice isn't as sickening as it should be. In fact, it's...

Making me blush.

Hamish McCormick represents everything I cannot stand in a man. He's full of himself. Cocky. He approaches life with a blithe attitude that takes nothing seriously except pleasure.

What kind of life is that?

“I must say, Amy, that I'm surprised ye still have ma number in yer contacts. That says something, nae?”

Through gritted teeth, I answer, “All it says is that we were in Shannon and Declan's wedding together and I added it for emergencies.”

“Sure,” he says, drawing the word out. “But the wedding was years ago, and ye kept it?” A suggestive tone in his voice, flirty and light, makes my skin tingle. I don't want to like him. I truly don't.

But he has a point. Why didn't I delete him?

“Amy?”

“What?”

“Yer beamin.”

“Beaming?”

“Ach, what's the word ye use? Blushing?”

“How would you know?”

“I can feel yer heat through the phone.”

“Shut up!”

His laugh makes heat rise from every pore of my skin. Maybe he did feel it.

“Ye clearly miscalled me. Who're ye trying to reach?”

I put the phone on speaker, searching contacts.

Aha! I've mistyped Shannon McCormick as Hannon, the missing S putting her next to Hamish McCormick. I never should have accepted a free phone from one of my mother's mystery shops. A simple font problem and bam! –I'm on the phone with a talking testosterone syringe.

I quickly correct my error. Like all humans, I make mistakes.

Unlike most humans, I make them once, learn from them, and never, ever make the

same mistake twice.

“I had Shannon in my contacts without the S. You're next to her, alphabetically,” I explain.

“Ach. Good. Because when I thought it was ma younger brother texting about Da's todger, I figured he went on a bender.”

“I noticed.”

“But if it's ye talking about a boaby, that's an entirely different matter.” Voice dropping low and rich at the end, Hamish's innuendo ignites parts of me that have been in hiding for years.

Some of them, forever .

I have two options here: stammer or attack. I go for the latter.

“You are nothing but an uncontrolled impulse on two legs,” I snap back. “Do you think about anything other than sex and soccer?”

There's a brief pause.

“It's football .”

“No one is that shallow.”

A throaty laugh, rumbling with the lilting tones of his Scottish accent, makes it that much harder to resist him. “If ye mean do I think o' naught but sex and football, I am justly accused.”

“You are ridiculously infuriating.”

“So much passion in ye fer me, Amy. I like that. I like it verra much.”

I can practically hear him wink.

“There's more to life than sex and football!”

“Is there? I hadna noticed. Right now, ye've an abundance of both.”

“WHAT?”

“Yer parents' sex life, and me, the footie player.”

“You? There's no abundance of you in my life!”

“We could change that.”

“Oh, no. No, no, no. I'm not falling for your lines, mister. I know what you are.”

“What am I?”

“Dangerous.” The word's out of my mouth before I can stop it.

Hamish's laughter fills my ear as I end the call.

Heart slamming in my chest, I press the phone against my breast.

It rings. I answer.

“I will never, ever, EVER sleep with you, so don't even try your flirty bullshit on me,” I snap into the phone.

“Uh, sweetie? It's me,” my dad says meekly.

Oh, hell.

“I–sorry, Dad! I thought you were Hamish.”

“Hamish McCormick?”

“Do we know any other Hamishes?”

“No. But...”

“I don't want to talk about it. How's Mom?”

“She has a cast, a lot of pain pills, and she's muttering something about using cornstarch instead of flour when you make the gravy.”

I inhale sharply. “That's blasphemy. Are you sure she didn't have a brain injury when she fell? Mom never uses cornstarch!”

“I know.” He lowers his voice. “I think the accident has altered her somehow.”

“Jason!” I hear through the phone. “Who's that?”

“It's Amy,” he answers. A shuffling sound makes it clear I'm being handed off.

“Hi, honey,” Mom says, voice dreamy and a little slurred. “Your dad and I made a boo boo.”

“Right.”

“Can you take care of Chuffy? He needs to pee.”

“Of course.”

“Your dad hurt my chuff when we were playing trapeze, like in The Greatest Showman . You know the really bendy woman in that movie? Turns out I'm not like her.”

“Mom. MOM! I have to go. Love you!”

Pressing End Call never felt so good.

Bzzz

On my way in two minutes! It's Carol. She started a new group text, this time with Shannon's actual number.

This sounds bad. Let me guess: sex swing? Shannon texts.

How did you know? I reply. Dad asked me to remove it before anyone sees it.

Carol made a bet with me six years ago that one of them would die via sex swing , she types back.

Who bet on death? I ask, sidetracked.

Carol sends a thumbs-up emoji. You owe me \$100, Shannon , she adds.

Nope! They're alive. We said death, not dismemberment or broken limbs.

Cheapskate. Amy, I'll clean up the house if you go to the hospital with Shannon and handle the Mom interface.

I pause.

And pause.

And pause for so long, Carol finally texts: Hello?

Still trying to decide which is worse, I finally answer: Sure .

The screen erupts with GIFs I don't want to even try to describe, but most of them involve sex swings.

Leave it to my sisters to find those .

And every single one of them makes me think of Hamish.

Damn it.