



Mafia Boss' Surprise Baby

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Adult, Crime And Mafia

Description: He's not just my boss.

He's the man who could ruin everything.

And the father of the baby I swore I'd never have.

The air inside his office is colder than the Boston streets.

Mickey O'Halloran — Irish Mob royalty.

Deadly. Untouchable.

And now, my new employer.

I took the job to stay afloat.

He hired me to keep me close.

But every glance burns.

Every touch unravels the rules I swore I'd follow.

Behind closed doors, he claims me like I already belong to him.

And maybe I do.

But now I'm pregnant.

And Mickey is about to find out.

Because in his world, betrayal is blood for blood.

And I've got everything to lose.

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1

MICKEY

“I’ll ask you one time. Where the fuck did you get them?”

The idiot doesn’t answer. Not even when Carlos shifts beside him and I hear the crack of Tito’s shoulder.

Lightning flashes, a snap of scorching light that rips the darkness for a second, followed by a heavy rumble of thunder that bellows as soon as we’re plunged back in darkness. His face, visible for that instant, is in an ugly mix of pain and terror. If he hopes a summer storm will distract me, he’s in for a disappointment.

“I’m done here,” I say with a shrug and climb in the waiting car. Carlos nods. He’ll finish up.

In less than fifteen minutes, I shrug on the jacket, fix the tie and take the stage at the charity gala to accept an award. If the foundation knew that the pediatric oncology expansion’s platinum sponsor just ordered the extermination of a drug dealer, they’d be shocked. Or they might not care that it’s dirty money.

People shock me all the time, what they’re willing to do to get what they want.

If you don’t have a code to live by, you’ll do damn near anything and find a way to justify it. That’s why I stay between the guardrails. The gambling business is profitable enough for my organization. Street drugs may be lucrative but they’re not

worth it. Too many unstable characters involved in the distribution, and it trashes the neighborhood bringing that junk onto the sidewalks and alleys.

It's too hard to control and does too much damage. I'm a man who likes a calculated risk with a predictable payoff. Junkies get irrational about a fix, go around robbing gas stations and stabbing each other. Nothing would convince me to get involved in that garbage.

After my acceptance speech, I pose for pictures with some board members and shake hands. A grateful woman approaches me and grabs my hand and weeps, thanking me for her son's life, for the facility that gave him life-saving treatment. I nod, tell her I'm glad it worked out. She shows me pictures on her phone, some little kid with a bald head and a Batman cape. There's a tube coming out of his nose taped onto his face. My chest hurts when I see that picture.

I want to tell her something, reassure her. Promise her this kid is going to grow up in a place where nobody's pushing meth at the bus stop. There isn't a good way to say that—to tell her that I'm the head of a criminal organization that dates back to tea smuggling in the colonies and I'll keep the streets safe. Kids around here—a blue-collar chunk of Boston—don't grow up rough if I can help it.

And I damn sure can afford to smooth the way.

"The physical therapy program has helped him so much, getting his strength back," she continues. I nod. "I know the nurse said it's a financial relief program, but I looked it up online. You're the one who sponsors it, the PT and OT and art therapy and the service dogs—everything that made this a little more tolerable for my son and the other kids. I can't ever thank you enough."

"You don't need to thank me. It's enough to know it helps even a little bit," I say and stride toward the canapes like I'm starving.

A corporate sponsor who owns a bunch of gyms, claps me on the back. He nods toward the mom.

“She was into you. You not lookin’ for a grateful woman who’d show you a good time?”

I narrow my eyes, “She has a sick kid. She was just saying thanks.”

“I bet she’d like to show her appreciation,” he says broadly.

“What is wrong with you?”

“What? Nothing wrong with it. She’s young and easy on the eyes—”

“Her kid has cancer. Jesus, Will.” I shake my head and walk off.

This is what the legit businessmen act like—like everybody owes them something. Even the weary and weeping mother of a sick child looks like an eager piece of ass to him. He was honored by the Greater Boston Food Bank last week and made an inspiring speech. I used to think they were a bunch of pricks giving money away out of guilt. I miss the days when I didn’t know better.

Will and his cronies think they’re the good guys, that they’re on the up-and-up. Predatory jackasses every one of them, out for what they can get and looking to be congratulated on acting like a hero when they write a check.

I leave early. Most of these people disgust me. Tito calls to confirm that Carlos took care of the two guys we caught pushing pills in our territory. He didn’t get a name out of either one of them.

“I bet there’s a mad mom or a mad girlfriend that’ll tell us what was going on. I

always tell you, if you want info, you find an angry woman and she got a long story to tell you,” Rory says.

“Start looking into it tomorrow. But tread carefully.”

“I will. I’m not new at this,” he says. I make a noise of agreement. We grew up in this life. Rory’s been my best friend since I rode a bike with training wheels. We understand each other beyond words.

“Right,” I say. “And make sure they’re taken care of, I don’t want some widow going hungry.”

“We take care of our own. That’s what Pop always said,” Rory says.

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“Damn right we do.”

If there’s one rule I live by, it’s that. We take care of our own. Loyalty above all. I take my responsibility seriously. There’s thousands of people in Boston that depend on my organization for wages, for under-the-table supplies without the hassle of customs or tariffs, for security. And I’ll be damned if I let them down.

2

KATE

“This sure as hell isn’t a Hallmark movie,” I mutter as I drag my bags and boxes out of the rental car myself.

Rory sidles out the back door of the house we grew up in and grins. “You complaining already, little sis?”

“You could help me, you know,” I grumble.

He heaves a box out of the trunk and groans, “Jesus, Katie, whaddaya got in here? Cinderblocks?”

“Books.”

“Hey, I’ll let you in on a secret—everything’s online now. You don’t have to haul seventy-five pounds of books around anymore. While you’re here I’ll teach you about the internet,” he teases.

“Ha, ha. I can look up porn on my own thanks.”

Rory lets out a chuckle. “I’ve really missed you, mouth and all.”

I follow him in, loaded down with two duffels and my wheelie suitcase. A rush of nostalgia hits me when I walk in the kitchen. He’s changed stuff around since our parents died, but the kitchen table’s in the same place where I used to do my math homework and chatter to Mom while she did dishes. I swallow hard, blinking back tears.

Rory drops the book box on the floor, peels the duffel bag straps off my shoulders and folds me into a hug. “I know,” he says, “It still hits me sometimes too. Out of nowhere.”

I sniffle and hug my big brother, grateful that he gets it and we’re together again. It takes a little of the sting out of my failure.

“It doesn’t smell the same,” I say, my voice small.

“If that’s a fart joke, I swear to God, Katie, just ruin a sweet brother-sister moment,” he says and I give a watery laugh. He’s trying to cheer me up so I let him. I sniff bravely and step back, pick up my bags.

“It wasn’t, but now that you mention it, you might wanna cut down on the beans while I’m here. I like to burn a scented candle once in a while and I don’t want a gas fire to break out.”

“That’s not how gas fires work,” he replies.

I dump my bags in my old room and go back to the rental to finish unloading.

“What the hell did you do? Eat nonstop all the way from California?”

He surveys my wrappers, empty water bottles and fast food receipts strewn about the truck. I roll my eyes, grab a plastic bag from a gas station and start stuffing trash into it. Rory shuts the trunk and starts dragging stuff out of the back seat, a laundry basket full of random junk from my apartment, a couple more boxes, and the overnight bag I used on the trip.

Once the car is empty, I follow him back inside. Exhaustion hits after so many days on the road and I drop onto the living room couch. “I’m gonna need you to follow me to drop off the rental and bring me back here.” I sigh.

“Let’s do that in the morning,” he says. “You’re tired. Eat something, have a shower, go to sleep.”

“It’s four in the afternoon. I’m not a toddler. I don’t go to bed at five o’clock,” I say. “We could pick up some Chinese after we drop off the car—catch up and maybe I’ll kick your ass at Uno like when we were kids.”

“That sounds nice and all, but I gotta go to work.”

“No problem,” I say, “We can hang out some other time. It’s not like I’m going anywhere.”

“Good deal, I’ll see you in the morning. We can drop off the car, maybe go out for breakfast.”

“Sounds great,” I say too brightly.

Rory’s out the door in no time. It’s not like I expect him to make me a cup of tea and watch Great British Bake-Off reruns with me or anything. I just thought I’d get to

spend more than ten minutes with my big brother before he took off. I should have expected it, really. He's in thick with Mickey O'Halloran who inherited the organization when his dad died a few years ago.

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I don't object to the organization itself much—I grew up in Southie and our dad was part of the syndicate all his life. I guess I just wanted better for Rory, and I wasn't sorry to move away for college. Something about being part of the O'Halloran's organization feels like extended family or a really small town—where everyone knows your business and it can be stifling. A new city and a new start suited me just fine...until it didn't.

I'm back home living with my brother because I can't afford to do anything else. It's the cold hard truth and it's embarrassing as hell. I was always good at school and numbers are my thing. I worked part time in data analysis while I did my accounting degree in California. Problem was, I couldn't get a full-time job once I graduated with honors.

It's so competitive and there were a ton of applicants for every job that opened up. For months I got by on part-time jobs and gig work, but there was no hope of a career doing what I love without my CPA, which I couldn't afford to pursue if I kept living hand to mouth out west. So, I packed up, rented a car, and moved home with my tail between my legs. When I talked to Rory on the phone he was understanding, but hesitant to have me stick around permanently. I think he was just as happy to have me away from the family.

I get up and go to rifle through the fridge for something to eat. Apparently, my grown ass brother still lives like a frat boy based on the contents. I snag a takeout menu from a stack on the counter and order myself some Chinese before settling back on the couch and cable surfing to find something mind-numbing to binge.

My first night back in the old neighborhood isn't exactly exciting, but I don't need it

to be. This is a temporary situation until I can get my shit together and head back out west.

3

MICKEY

Rory doesn't ask for much. I count on him, and when he talks I listen. So, when he tells me his little sister's in town and could use a job to get back on her feet, I make it my business.

"You think she can wait tables?" I ask him.

"Probably. She's been out in California, did her degree in accounting."

"Oh, a math whiz," I whistle. "Is she any good at counting cards?" I'm joking but Rory scowls. "I'm kidding, man," I say.

"I don't want her part of anything crooked," he says, and there's something like shame in his voice.

"You okay?" I ask.

"Yeah, I just don't want her mixed up in any of this. It'd tear me up if she got hurt. I know it's shitty to ask for your help and then tell you how to help, but I don't want her working on anything that's not on the up and up, you know?"

"Makes sense to me," I shrug. "No counting cards, no cooking the books, or running odds on shady shit. Got it."

"Thanks," Rory says.

“I’ll see if they need any help at the Oyster,” I say, naming my most successful legal gambling joint.

By that afternoon, I’ve got a job lined up for her. I have my secretary give her a call to have an interview with me. I haven’t seen this kid in years, and I get a kick out of the fact that I’m hiring Rory’s baby sister to do math for me. When she strolls into my office, she doesn’t look a thing like I remember and I’m momentarily at a loss for words.

If Edna hadn’t just buzzed my office to say Mary Kathryn Donahue was here to see me, I’d never have recognized her. She has the strawberry blonde hair I remember, but it’s in sleek waves past her shoulders, not in a messy ponytail.

“Katie Donahue,” I say and hold out my hand.

“It’s Kate now,” she says. “I gave up Katie when I went to college. Thanks for making time to see me. I have my resume here.” She holds out not a sheet of paper but an iPad.

This is a formality, but if she wants me to look at her resume, I will. I tap the screen and see her master’s degree in accounting, her grades and honors, her work experience. She’s done some part time work in the nonprofit sector and did freelance bookkeeping and budgeting for some small businesses.

“Have a seat,” I say. “Tell me how you’ve been.” I set the tablet on my desk.

Instead of returning to my chair behind the desk, I lean against the corner, keeping close to her as she takes a seat. Fuck me, she’s wearing a skirt. Katie Donahue is all long smooth legs and it makes my heart hammer everywhere at once. My pulse is jumping, and I watch her breathe in and out with more interest than I should.

She's telling me about college, her time learning to communicate with a Ukrainian family displaced by war. I try to imagine her learning Ukrainian or Russian or whatever they speak, but all I can do is make my breath saw in and out, chest heaving like I've run a mile, because I can almost feel her legs around me.

Holy shit, this isn't part of the plan. I try to shake it off. She's my best friend's baby sister. I can't allow myself to imagine railing her against the wall, over my desk, right there with her back pressed against the window.

I'm supposed to be listening, not planning where I'll take her to seduce her to get those long legs over my shoulders. My skin is overheated, and I rake a hand through my hair, making it a bit of a mess, but I'm trying to hold it together. Any second she's going to notice I'm acting weird, looking at her too intently. I struggle to follow the story. It's not Ukrainians anymore. It's about finding and eliminating redundant expenses. I nod, able to appreciate the value of that.

She arches her back, rubs her neck once, not in complaint, but because I think she's restless. "So, you always wear a suit now?" She asks.

I shrug in response. "When I took over, it made sense to dress the part. If I was in my old Levis and a Red Sox shirt, nobody would take me seriously. I couldn't get a meeting with half these charities."

"That's what it is now? Charity?" She asks archly.

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“I do what I can.”

“I bet,” she says.

“What about you? Did you run around LA in a skirt and heels?”

“No, but I did freelance work from home mostly. You don’t want to see me come in here in my pajamas do you? That won’t get me a job. It’s like you said. Nobody would take me seriously if I didn’t look the part.”

“Your skirt’s too short for an interview,” I say, and I sound like a grumpy old man. She grins.

“You think so? I guess by Boston standards you’re right. Sister Mary Agnes used to make me prove my hem was as long as my fingertips if I put my arms down to my sides.” She’s smiling and it’s like getting an arrow to the chest.

“I sound like a nun now?”

“Maybe a little,” she says. “You’re just not used to seeing me grown up. Besides, I’m not applying to be the accountant for a parochial school, Mickey. Or do I call you Mr. O’Halloran? I forgot you’re the head of the family now. Do I kiss your ring?” She teases.

The idea of her bending or kneeling to kiss anything of mine chokes off my air. I can’t begin to answer her for a second. I have to get a drink of water before I do.

“You’re thinking about the pope, love. I’m a sinner through and through.”

“Are you now? I thought when I was a kid that you were the good one and Rory was the troublemaker.”

“That’s not far off from the truth,” I admit. “But he’s grown up some since those days and I screwed up plenty on my own. The only thing that kept me out of real trouble I think I was always too aware that there were eyes on me. I was the heir apparent and if I acted a fool, if I didn’t stay in line, that could cost me. The territory, the respect and security from these people. It’s worth too much to take risks.”

“Let me get this straight. You’re the head of the Irish organization in Boston. You run a huge gaming industry both legitimate and otherwise, and you don’t like risks?” She looks at me in disbelief.

“You could say that,” I reply, uncomfortable. I’m trying to act normal in spite of my reaction to her, but I’m failing miserably. I’m about to sweat to death in this dumb suit. I take off my jacket and unfasten my cuffs. I’m rolling up my sleeves when she gets to her feet.

“I won’t take up any more of your time,” she says abruptly. “I appreciate you giving me a job. I know it’s a courtesy to Rory, and I’m going to be mindful of that. I’m excellent at what I do, and I’m not going to let you down. It was—good to see you again,” she finishes a little awkwardly.

Then, as I live and breathe, Mary Kathryn Donahue, grown up baby sister of my top lieutenant and best friend, steps way too close to me, lifts on her tiptoes and kisses my cheek.

For a second, electric current rips down my spine and my vision goes spotty at the edges. Even in her heels, I’m too tall for her, because she sways a little toward me,

and I steady her. I don't do it right, I don't catch her elbow and set her on her feet nice and politely. Instead, I get her around the waist and hold her still, against me.

I'm about two seconds from crushing her to my chest, breathing her in. She shouldn't have kissed my cheek, because I'm going to replay that moment tonight along with the soft pillowy lips, the cute swell of her ass in that skirt. I hold her against me for a moment, close enough that I can see the skittering pulse in her neck. She looks up to meet my eyes. I can see her pupils blown wide, her nervous energy.

She's so hot, the warmth of her skin, the flush on her cheeks that looks fevered, the way she steadies herself with a hand on my shoulder that is searing through my shirt to practically scorch the skin underneath. She sinks her teeth into her glossy bottom lip and steps back a little.

"So, thanks again for the job," she says, straightening herself and smoothing her hair.

I want her in every way that a man wants a woman, and that's impossible. I shouldn't have had her come downtown for a meeting. I could've just texted her brother the address of her job. That's what I'll do from now on. I'll just contact Rory about her work and they can handle it from there. Otherwise, I'll push that skirt up and fuck her senseless before she has time to react.

"Yeah, no problem. Good to see you."

With that, she practically runs from my office, and I let a ragged breath out of my chest. Fuck me, she is going to be the death of me if I don't get it together.

As soon as she leaves, I notice the floral scent of her perfume, the way my palms remember touching her. All I know is everyone will be better off if I steer clear of Rory Donahue's little sister.

KATE

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph,” I mutter to myself.

I knew the second I walked in his office that I’m just as stupid as I was years ago when I had a huge crush on Mickey O’Halloran. He was rebellious, sexy, a little dangerous. Now he’s more dangerous and even sexier if that’s possible.

Dark hair and pale blue eyes with that sharp gaze that misses nothing combined with the square jaw and nose that’s been broken like a prizefighter in an old movie. All masculine power and the promise that he can be as tender as he is tough, that he can put the stingy line of his mouth to good use outside of work.

It took all of four seconds in the room with him before my impure thoughts went off the charts. I chattered, nervous and talking too much, while I tugged at the hem of my skirt, the one he noticed is too short, because I was trying not squirm in my chair. I practically started dripping the minute he shook my hand, that big, calloused palm engulfing my own. I wanted to feel his fingers in tight, slick places I had no business thinking of during an interview.

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There was something about his ice-cold eyes when they met mine right after I kissed his cheek, that gaze that said I could ask him for anything and he'd give it to me. He'd probably think I'm stupid to get all hot and bothered over some one-second stumble on my part, and his chivalrous rescue so I didn't fall and smash my head on his desk or something.

It wasn't even my shoes with the sky-high heels or tipping too far forward on my tiptoes. I got dizzy from desire and grabbed his shoulder. A big, heavy shoulder that I want to bite when it's above me, when he's working deep into me. Lord, I want his mouth, his tongue, his hands. All of him on all of me.

I drive home in one of my brother's cars and try to get my mind right. Instead, I'm laying on my bed, my hand working between my legs while I think about Mickey O'Halloran. Just like I did in high school.

He calls me back as I'm leaving the office, says there's one more thing. He presses me up against the door with his big body, those broad, heavy shoulders blocking out the light as he bends his face to mine. He licks at my lips softly, slowly. I urge him on, tug on his hair. He works my mouth open and plunders me, his tongue stroking deep and making me moan in pleasure. I'm already trying to hold back the yes I want to scream.

Then he shoves his hand in my shirt, grabbing my breast and fondles the nipple, making my blood spike and heat as my nipples grow to hard points under his touch. Ripping open my top, he dips his head and captures a breast, stroking my nipple with his hot, wet tongue. I arch toward him, and he takes more of my breast in his mouth as if he's starving for me. I moan, arch even further up to him and try to wrap my leg

around him to force closer contact between my hot, pulsing core and the pressure I need, the friction I crave.

“You want more, baby?” he asks, his voice gruff as he moves up my body to claim my lips again.

I nod, unable to answer because I feel strung so tightly, vibrating with desire and mindless with need. I try to swallow but I can't. Not until he unlocks me with a hand moving up my skirt. Then I'm moaning everything filthy I can think of, how much I want him inside me, how I want to watch us join, and how I've always wanted this from the time I was old enough to know what wanting meant. He presses a knee between my legs and I grind on it shamelessly. He murmurs encouragement, a sly smile curving his mouth. He's every bit as cocky as I knew he would be, and he has reason to be arrogant. No one else could hijack all my senses like this or make me beg.

It takes him no time to drive me mad. My nails score his back in pure, petulant frustration while he works two fingers into my tight passage. I clench around him, ready to come but I refuse to let go until he's inside me. I've waited my whole life for Mickey O'Halloran to fuck me, and I'll be damned if I can't hold out until he's sheathed within me where he belongs.

I babble, half begging for him to take me. He scissors his fingers inside me and my head falls back. A wire snaps inside me and all I can do is convulse, molten and helpless as he spears my core with his clever hand. After I come, I'm weak, languid and warm, the urgency to have him subsides and I sink to the floor with him. He rolls me on my back and spreads my legs. The look he gives me is so good that my blood heats and all that adrenaline spikes right back up.

I fumble, helping him unzip his pants and groan at the broad, heavy cock that springs out into my hands. My body shakes hard with wanting him now.

“I’ve got you,” he says, soothing me with his voice even as he sets his hips between my quivering thighs.

When he rocks forward and the fat, damp head of his cock kisses my slit, I moan way too loudly. A wash of embarrassment floods me, but he grins, pushes forward with a slow, deliberate movement. Everything inside me lights up like a pinball machine, every place he brushes against feels electric, charged and sizzling.

My hips take over, a life of their own, lifting, reaching, rocking in rhythm with him while delirious waves of pleasure take us both. The sound I make starts as a scream and winds down to a helpless mew as I feel wrung out by so much intense pleasure, but I can’t quit rubbing against him, my too-sensitive pussy still desperate for more even when we’re spent.

I come hard on my own fingers and breathe out a sigh of relief.

But even in my fantasies I know once would never be enough with him.

Not that I’ll ever have the chance.

5

MICKEY

“Thank you, gentlemen,”

Numbers are up for this quarter, outpacing my projections from July. It’s good news all around. I finish shaking hands with the legal team and finance guys, then I ask Ben Ragucci to hang around for a minute. He’s the forensic accountant, and he’s been around since my dad was in charge. He’s the guy who’ll give it to me straight.

“You got a minute?”

“For you, boss? Always,” he says and sits back down at the table in the board room.

“Thanks, it won’t take long. I was thinking with profits way up, I can funnel some more to the robotics program, food banks, maybe the women’s shelter.”

“You can cross off the food bank. You got them set up for the next six months at least. Roxbury and Mission Hill already looked at sending the holiday donations from the community down to Somerville and Medford. Spread the wealth.”

“Good. Then put the surplus on robotics and the women’s shelter.”

“You talk about charities the way your old man bet on the ponies,” he chuckles. I nod. There’s nothing I can say to that without insulting the memory of my father.

Ben looks up from his calculations. “You wanna put all this on those two?” he asks.

“Why not?”

“Most guys would take a vacation at least. Buy yourself another car.”

“I’ve got four. And two bikes. I don’t need another car.”

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“Right. I’m just not sure the robotics program needs this much money. They have all new equipment. The teams will go to competition with their travel expenses paid already.”

“Then give it to the libraries.”

“Okay, will do. You know, you and your old man couldn’t be more different,” he says.

I know it’s a compliment.

“Thanks,” I say. I want to be a better leader and a better man than my father, but it’s awkward having Ben Ragucci mention it to my face. “Save the compliments for my eulogy, okay?”

“You got years ahead of you, boss,” he says and nods to me as he leaves.

I know he’s right. I have years of this job ahead of me, of guiding this organization and building my legacy as long as no one else gets the crazy idea to try to challenge me or take it from me. Frankly, I get a little tired just thinking about it.

I like what I do, and I like being in charge, but there’s never peace for very long and another forty years of this doesn’t sound like heaven right now. It feels good to give to charities and know I’m changing the face of the city little by little, but all I have to look forward to is going home dead tired at night and doing it all again the next day. It’s no wonder my dad was such an asshole—the grind is unforgiving and it never stops.

I open up my laptop and look over the email from Kate's boss. She does great work, and all reports indicate she gets along fine with everybody there. The only downside to her re-entrance into my life, is the nonstop hard-on I seem to have whenever her name is brought up.

I've got a case of lust that I can't seem to slake. She's not even a possibility for me. An employee at the very least, but the little sister of my best friend. Nothing about that situation lends itself to what I want, which is to pluck her, ripe and wanting, and get a taste.

Being the object of my fantasies wasn't in the job description. I have no business thinking about her that way. Hell, I don't need to think of her at all.

Concentrating on work is impossible now. All I can think of is getting home where I can relieve some of the tension in my body that's all for her.

6

KATE

Everybody in the back office at The Oyster is nice to me. I got the hang of their software program pretty quickly and the work is easy. I had to do twice as much for less money out in California every day, but in LA I wasn't hired through the back door by my brother's best friend.

Speaking of Rory, he's frustrating me now. I see him about ten minutes every day. The guy's never home. He's always working or going out. Part of me wants to ask if I can go out with him and his friends sometime, but that makes me feel like a tag-along, like when I was a kid and he didn't want me around. Maybe I just wish he wanted to ask me along sometime, get to know me better as an adult. He's the only family I have left, and it makes me sad that we keep missing each other.

I'm in the employee lounge getting coffee when I get an alert on the group chat for the accounting team. Boss in building.

I turn to Martha who's right behind me for coffee and raise my eyebrows. "Do I need to run back to my desk before he gets here?"

"Nah, he never comes to accounting. He'll go to the executive floor. It's just nice to have a heads up in case you have to go up there for anything."

"Is he that scary?"

"He can be. But he's also hot as hell." She giggles nervously. I nod, because I get it. I also stare at my coffee for a second, dejected, because it might have been nice to say hi and see a familiar face since it's not like my brother makes time to see me. I feel childish and irritated with myself as I go back to my desk.

I'm reading an email about an office potluck the next week when I sense him.

He steps off the elevator and a combination of expensive peppery cologne and pure sex hits me. My heart kicks up reflexively in response. I shut my eyes for a second and breathe deeply for the sheer pleasure of it. I glance at Martha and notice she's holding a manila envelope in both hands. I know for damn sure it's empty. We don't use interoffice mail—we email or text. It's stage business, something to do with her hands while she ogles him. She's a genius, I decide.

He breaks off from the two suits walking with him and heads for me.

"Mr. O'Halloran," I say.

He gives me a wry half-smile. "I came to see if you're settling in okay."

“I am, thank you.”

“You’re liking the job?”

“It’s great. It’s easy, everyone’s nice to me. I appreciate it. But you don’t have to check up on me.”

“I want to,” he says. “It’s a big shift from LA to back home I bet.”

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“It is. It’s discouraging to know I failed. I mean, I’m grateful for the opportunity to start over and get my CPA, ride back into California in triumph, that kind of thing.”

“Sure. You’ll be riding in no time,” he says and my heart nearly jumps out of my chest at the double entendre he surely couldn’t have meant.

His gaze heats my blood and makes my breath come faster. I know I’m flushed. His dark gaze feels heavy on my face, my lips specifically. I want to step toward him, go around my desk and meet his eyes, be brazen and forget that the stakes, the rules, the fact that he’s not only my boss, but he’s Rory’s closest friend.

There might as well be an electrified barbed wire fence around him.

Looking at him now, I can almost forget that he’s been on the periphery of my world all my life, picking Rory up in his car while I waved from the front window. My brother’s friend, big and powerful and as out-of-reach as the moon. Handsome enough that I used to sneak pictures of him with my first cell phone—mostly crooked and sometimes blurry because I was trying to hide my spying.

“You okay?” He asks. I snap to attention and realize I’ve been daydreaming.

“Yeah, sorry. It’s just weird being in this position. But I really do appreciate everything you’re doing for me Mick.”

He laughs. It’s such a good laugh, deep and expansive and it twists something in the vicinity of my chest. “I mean Mr. O’Halloran.”

“Mick is fine, Kate.”

“You can call me Katie,” I say. I have to start thinking before words come out of my mouth, because this shit is embarrassing.

“Are you sure? You said in the interview it’s Kate now.”

“It is. Professionally.”

“Well, you’re at the office and I’m your boss. I’m not sure how much more professional it gets.”

“I know I’m at work,” I say, “but Rory still calls me Katie. You might as well.”

“I’m not your brother,” he says, and his deep voice feels warm and crackly when he says it.

“I know that too. Is this a memory test? I may be a nepo hire but I know who you are and where I’m at,” I roll my eyes at him. He is trying not to crack a smile but his eyes, those icy blue eyes I’ve always found so captivating are sparkling a little with amusement.

“You always did have a smart mouth on you,” he says.

“And you always thought you were hot shit,” I say in a low voice, grinning in spite of myself.

“Because I was,” he says matter-of-factly.

I can’t help but laugh. Wishing I could stand here and talk to him all day, I realize I might be sliding into dangerous territory. “Well, you’ve probably got some big

meeting here and I'm keeping you from it."

"They'll wait for me," he says nonchalantly.

He's funny and sexy and I feel my cheeks heat. I probably have banners of feverish bright pink on my face right now. Flustered, I swallow hard. He's crowding me. He smells amazing and the heat coming off his body is like being too close to the fireplace in winter. I stand there dumbly, unable to form another coherent thought.

"I can take a hint. I'll let you get back to work."

"I don't want my boss thinking I stand around talking all day," I say.

I sit back down at my computer, aware that he's standing nearby and watching me. I sit poker-straight and log in to my workstation. After a minute he walks away and I watch him from the corner of my eye, those broad shoulders and that commanding stride.

I let out a breath I didn't realize I was holding and get back to work.

7

MICKEY

"Son of a bitch," I mutter under my breath.

"What's that?" My bodyguard perks up.

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I shake my head.

“Just got a message. I have to make a call.”

When I stand up, everyone else in the board room stands out of respect. I step out of the room and press ‘call’ instead of replying to the text message. My chief accountant’s wife answers on the first ring.

“Mr. O’Halloran. It’s so good of you to call,” she says. Her voice is shaky.

“How’s he doing?”

“I don’t know. I just followed the ambulance here and texted you when I parked.”

“Where’s here?”

“They took him to Beth Israel,” she falters.

“You want him at Mass General?” I demand.

“Well, I would’ve but they didn’t ask. They just pushed me aside. I tried to tell them who his cardiologist was—”

“Let me make a call. I’ll get him transferred.”

“Oh, no. I’m sure this is fine. It’s just not what we’re used to.”

“Is your daughter on her way?”

“She’ll be here in about an hour. She offered to stay on the phone while she drives, but I don’t want her distracted in traffic—” she breaks off.

“You have what you need right now?”

“I have my purse and my rosary.”

“Somebody’ll be out there in ten minutes to check on you to make sure they’re taking care of him and you,” I assure her.

“Thank you, Mr. O’Halloran,” she sniffs.

It takes me all of two minutes to dispatch two of my staff to Beth Israel to meet up with my accountant’s wife. They’ll have Ben transferred to a private room at Mass General as soon as he’s stabilized.

Half an hour later I get a message that it’s handled. Benny’s got an ICU bed waiting for him at Mass Gen and the daughter will meet them there. Jack will drive the wife to other hospital while Nicki goes to her house to pick up a few things the lady thinks she might need.

I pinch the bridge of my nose and take a breath.

My chief accountant is in ICU and I need a replacement. It looks like little Mary Katherine Donahue is up to bat. She can fill in for a few weeks. It’s office work. She won’t be at any risk so Rory can’t object, at least not on those grounds. If he had any idea the way I think about his sister, he’d have a reason to protest.

I could have my secretary call her, get her to come to my office and explain the

situation. They can offer her the temporary position filling in for my chief accountant. Or I could call her myself. That sounds like more fun. So much for keeping my distance.

I message her and ask if she has time to meet for a quick drink to discuss a work matter. We can meet in public, a brief one-drink situation with a specific focus. The tone I set is brisk, businesslike. The thoughts I have in my head for her are anything but that.

She says yes, naming a spot I never would've guessed she would pick. An old townie bar that I went to with Rory when we were younger, gritty and loud with reliably good drinks and a bartender/owner older than the hills. I go on with my day trying to pretend I'm not willing time to go faster.

8

KATE

It's no big deal. I'm meeting the boss for a drink. It's just to talk about work. Maybe there's a project he wants me to work on. Or maybe Elaine bitched about how I didn't change the toner in the copier and now he has to take a break from running his complex and largely illegal organized crime syndicate so he can deal with an HR issue involving his buddy's annoying little sister.

Riley's is how I remember it.

Mickey is already at a little table in the corner. He gets to his feet when I walk in the bar like we're at some fancy supper and you have to stand up when the queen enters or something. The thought makes me laugh. I make my way through the cluster of tables set too close together in the little room that's dominated by a gleaming, if nicked and scuffed, bar and a massive TV anchored above it.

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“What’s got you laughing?” he asks after we sit.

“Nothing. I just thought of something funny.”

“Okay,” he says and doesn’t pursue it. A barmaid comes by and asks what we want.

“Get us some of the beer cheese dip with pretzels and you like spinach artichoke?” He asks me. I nod because who the hell doesn’t like that? “You can bring us that too. I’ll have a beer and she’ll have, what? Shirley Temple?” he teases.

“I’m twenty-seven, Mick.” I roll my eyes at him. “Vodka cranberry, please.”

“I never thought I’d be taking you to a bar,” he shakes his head like he can’t believe it.

“I grew up.”

“You sure as hell did,” he says, and something dark flashes in his eyes so quickly I almost convince myself I didn’t see it. Still, it makes me go warm all over, cross and uncross my legs beneath the little table. I accidentally kick him.

“Sorry,” I say, “Close quarters.” I try to hide the heat that rises up my neck in reaction to that accidental touch.

“Did you have a good day?” He asks, awkwardly attempting to make small talk.

“It was fine. You?”

“Not so good.”

“What happened?” I sit up straighter. I’m on alert.

“One of my employees had a heart attack.”

“Oh no! Is he okay?”

“He’s in ICU at Mass Gen now. They said he’s stable but he’s got kind of a long road ahead, rehab and all that to get back on his feet.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I said.

“Me, too. He’s a good guy. And I depend on him. It’s Benny Ragucci.”

“Mr. Ragucci still works for you?” I ask. “I thought he was old when I was a kid.”

“He probably was. Were you in school with his daughter?”

“No, Jen was older than me,” I say. “Like five years.”

He nods and takes a long drink of his beer as the waitress delivers two big platters of apps that barely fit on our tiny table.

“I hope he makes a full recovery,” I say out of obligation.

I rip off part of a soft pretzel and dunk it in steaming hot cheese dip. I groan out loud.

“Good, right? They make it with Guinness,” he says. He scoops some up and nods in agreement, making an appreciative grunt of his own.

If I shut my eyes, I could imagine him making those noises from between my thighs. I press my legs together tighter and force the thought away. I shift in my seat, uncomfortable, sure that my cheeks are flaming and a familiar tug low in my belly pulses.

“This is where you come in,” he says a minute later.

“Hmm?” It’s all I manage to say.

“Ragucci’s down for the count for at least a few months. I need someone to take his place, someone I trust.”

“Who’s his second in command? Surely at his age he’s grooming someone to take over.”

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“Yeah, the nephew,” the way he says nephew might as well be a slur. I know all I need to know about the man Ragucci’s training to take his place—unsuitable, slick or incompetent or both, but shady. Shady is a given from the tone of his voice alone.

“That good?” I say sarcastically.

“Whatever you’re imagining, make it worse, then add too much hair gel and a suit that looks like he got it on clearance at a factory outlet.”

“All suits 29.99?” I venture.

“That seems like he got ripped off if he paid 29.99 for it. Acts like—”

“A baller? I know the type. God, you should see them out in LA. Every guy that goes to the gym or has decent shoes acts like he’s just one audition, one dental floss commercial from getting to thank the Academy for his Oscar. They all know a guy and say they have anin.” I roll my eyes heavily.

“I bet you were besieged out there.”

“Besieged?” I lift an eyebrow.

“Surrounded? Bothered constantly in grocery stores and coffee shops and clubs, hounded by guys with shiny teeth and empty promises?”

“I wouldn’t say I was besieged or even especially popular. All you gotta be out in LA is easily impressed, that’s what they like. Somebody to look wide-eyed and amazed

when they tell the same shitty story for the fifth time about how they're gonna make it big or they got in on this crypto deal—it's the fakest thing you've ever seen. They're literally all the same. Every guy, the entire time I was out there."

"None of those boys knew where to get good cheese dip?" he jokes. I give him a shrug.

"Nobody eats dairy or carbs so there wouldn't be a market for cheese dip."

"God forbid I should see that place," he says with a mock shudder and I laugh.

"It's not bad. A lot of the food was good, it's just really healthy and there's sprouts on everything."

"Even dessert?"

"What's dessert? Dessert is a spirulina algae smoothie with kale and whatever else gets blitzed in there to make it a muddy green color that tastes like a can of paint."

"You're not gonna get a job for the tourism board at this rate," he says wryly.

"I'm not trying to convince you to go there," I point out, "I'm just making conversation. You brought up thenephew." I say the word just like he did, like it's a major insult. He chuckles.

"Was I that obvious?"

"Worse," I say.

"I want you to take over for Ragucci. Just till he's back on his feet."

I'm taken aback by the offer. It seemed like a huge opportunity, seeing that Ben was the chief accounting officer. With all the projects that Mickey runs, it seemed like a large amount of workload to take over. Plus, it might not all be legit.

"You have a team of finance guys, I bet. Surely one of them or three or four could handle this in Ragucci's absence. They'll know how he does things and have a feel for his methods. Be familiar with the software he likes, stuff like that," I protest.

"You're telling me you can't do the work?"

"No, of course I can do the work," I say hotly. "It's not that. Rory would be so pissed if I worked for the real side of the business. He wants me on the fluffy side where it's fully legal. I don't know if he thinks I'll turn to a life of crime and go knock over an ice cream shop for extra nickels or what."

"You're worried what your brother will think. That's respectful, I like that, but he isn't in charge of your decisions. You are. Do you want to learn the ropes behind the scenes at the Pearl?"

"The Pearl," I repeat, tasting the word. A kick of adrenaline zips through me, excitement to peek behind the curtain at the illegal businesses and learn how they run. It could be educational—a chance to apply all the skills I learned to watch out for, obvious mistakes, sloppy cover-ups that could expose suspicious activity.

"I can give you a tour, then let you make up your mind."

"I'd like a walk-through if you have half an hour," I say, trying to dampen my enthusiasm and failing.

"It takes more than half an hour to see all the Pearl has to offer, but we can keep it brief. Are you considering my offer?"

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“To step into Ragucci’s job for a couple of months? I’m a math nerd, always have been. Basically, it’s like you’re offering me a shiny new puzzle I’ve never solved before.”

I want that job. I want to prove to myself and maybe to him that even if I had to slink back from LA defeated, I’m smart and I’m the one who can run rings around old Mr. Ragucci. I’m sharp and hungry to show off my skills, I’m young and energetic. The two things holding me back are how Rory would see it—as putting myself at risk when I promised to work only in the legitimate and legal side of the organization. And the more palpable danger that I’ll make a fool of myself over the guy across the table from me, who would for sure be People Magazine’s Sexiest Man Alive if they featured crime bosses instead of just actors.

The practical voice in my head, the angel on my shoulder, reminds me that I don’t need a tour of the illegal gaming establishment where I’d be working because I can’t take the job. Spending time alone with Mickey O’Halloran isn’t going to strengthen my resolve to refuse his offer. I already have enough impure thoughts about him to fill up six or seven confessions.

Riding in a car with him, getting on the elevator just the two of us—there are too many possibilities. It’s not a half-hour tour, it’s a minefield of opportunities for me to act like a besotted jackass. It’s a hell of a reason to turn down a job I want—I’m too attracted to my boss. I can’t afford to work closely with him. One smile from him and my panties would fall right off. Not to mention the fact he needs a forensic accountant not someone who needs to go in a bathroom stall and shove my hand in my panties to take the edge off what he makes me feel.

My cheeks heat at the thought. It's shameful. It's humiliating. It's something I actually need to do. I clear my throat and excuse myself.

In the tiny bar bathroom, I lock the stall door and lean my head back against it. I breathe in and out slowly, trying to calm my frenzied body. I shut my eyes for a second and that's a mistake. Images flash through my mind.

Raking my nails down his bare back, urging him on.

His big hands spreading my knees wide and seeing the mess I've made of myself, the flushed wetness that makes every breath a terrible distraction. My damp panties are riding up between my plump lips, scraping against the tender spot where I want to touch. I could do this, just put one foot up on the toilet seat and plunge my hand into my panties and relieve the pressure. It might help me think straight and be less preoccupied with this ridiculous craving I have for him.

I stifle a moan as my fingers trace through the slippery wetness and skate along the swollen bud of my clit. I pant, hold back the noises I want to make while I stroke myself. Soon I'm rubbing hard and fast, frantic for release. It's not enough. I shut my eyes and bite my lips, delve my fingers inside my throbbing pussy, wishing it were Mickey filling me up as I tremble and bite down on a cry.

I put myself back together, wash my hands, and splash cold water on my face. The pressure relieved, I'm able to think straight again and prepare to head back out into the bar.

I make my way through the crowd of other people crammed in at other small tables and reached my seat.

"Are you okay?" Mickey asks. He has real concern on his face and I wonder what he'd do if I told him why I was gone so long.

“I’m fine.”

“If you’re done eating, we can see about that tour,” he offers before I can sit back down.

“Okay,” I agree smoothly, eager to see the place. “Should I follow you or?”

“You can ride with me. We’ll get your car later.”

He opens the door for me and I feel embarrassed walking through it ahead of him.

“Are all the guys out in LA a piece of shit or what? You act like you never had a door opened for you.”

“I’m not sure I have,” I say with a shrug.

“You been hanging out with the wrong crowd then,” he says.

We drive in relative silence and soon arrive at our destination. He parks outside a building that looks like any other old brick building in this part of town. It’s a little nicer but nothing fancy and there’s no sign. Nothing to indicate what it is.

“I’ve probably driven by this a hundred times and never knew it was here,” I remark.

“That’s the idea. It doesn’t open for another hour so we have the place mostly to ourselves.” He takes me to a door around the side and enters a code, then scans a fob on his keyring.

We walk in and I half expect it to be a bank lobby or something similar. Instead, it’s beautiful. It doesn’t look like some shiny plastic Vegas casino. It looks like it belongs in an old movie. The carpet is thick and plush burgundy, the walls are covered with

cream and gold wallpaper that shows rows of faint outlines of oysters.

The man inside the door wears a nice suit but he's the size of two refrigerators so that tells me he would be the bouncer. He only nods. A woman at a reception desk gives a lipstick smile and tells us good evening.

"I'm giving a tour. I'm not in," he says and she nods in reply. These people respect him, and they are not about wasting his time.

There's a stairway to our left and a bright brass elevator straight ahead. I expect we'll take the stairs so I can admire the restoration of the historic building but he places that big warm palm in the small of my back again. An intense shock of heat short circuits my entire body. I wonder how I'm not flopping around on the floor from the electrical current running through my veins. He guides me to the right and swipes the fob again to reveal a private elevator.

My eyes cut to his face and search for his gaze as if to see if he felt what I did. The shock of recognition, of searing lust that poured into me at his polite touch. The door slips shut on us and we're in a small elevator, the floor marble, the walls mirrored, and the man beside me filling up every inch of space, crowding me and making me take in the scent of him, like leather and cigarette smoke and the burn of something sweet.

Our eyes lock for an instant. I register his shock and something feral and deep. His handsome face hardens, something dark flares in his eyes that draws an answering leap and swoop in my chest.

I swallow hard in the confines of the elevator. He steps in toward me, leans down. I don't know what he's going to do, but I'm positive I'll let him. He lifts one big hand and brushes the backs of his fingers to my neck. My body jolts at the contact, frantic pulse thrumming against his fingers. I don't know what to do, so I grab him. My

fingers twine around his thick wrist to hold his hand there, right where it is.

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Heat climbs my neck and flushes my cheeks. I can't meet his eyes anymore. The moment is too charged, too vulnerable somehow. Later I'll tell myself it's just the confusion of a radioactive level of lust, that it's nothing more intimate than that. My boss is hot, plus he's Rory's friend so there's the added kick of forbidden fruit.

Just a cheesy leftover teenage crush ratcheted up by hormones and whatever wicked alchemy makes him smell so irresistible. Purely physical, that's what I'll tell myself. There's no attraction on any other level. His objective off-the-charts sexiness and the aura of dark power he wields as head of the crime family make for an intoxicating blend.

The faint brush of his knuckles down the side of my throat is now his hand hot on my throat, holding my neck tenderly but with a hint of possession, that dominance that seems to be an intrinsic part of him. My thoughts scatter when I'm near him, which is surely not a good sign, and everything in the universe concentrates on the place where his hand is on my neck and I'm holding his wrist.

I feel the beat of his pulse, as quick as my own, pumping against my fingertip. I stroke the inside of his wrist and see and feel his reaction. A breath rushes out of him, and his eyes drop shut. He holds himself very still. With his eyes shut, mine feel free to roam his body. I see the unmistakable bulge in his expensive trousers. It makes my mouth go dry.

"Did you push the button?" I ask hoarsely.

"Button?" he frowns before the question registers.

He takes a step back, disentangling himself from me. I have no choice but to let go of his wrist even though I'd like to keep holding it. He steps to the panel and presses a button. The elevator begins to move and I grip the brass rail beside me. I'm no longer crowded in a corner by him but I still feel off balance. I want to say something, tell him he's incredible and that I've had actual sex that was a lot less satisfying than him touching my neck in an elevator.

But I don't.

When the doors slide open, I follow him to a door that unlocks with a code and a scan of his thumbprint. The room itself isn't that large, but it's beautiful. The walls are deep green and the wood trim is rich and old-fashioned. There's a table that seats four, a couch and a couple of chairs, a bar cart in the corner. But the focal point is a broad window that covers the wall opposite the door. I go to the window and look out, or rather I look down. It's an interior window that looks out over the main floor of the casino.

"That is some classy James Bond looking shit," I mutter. He chuckles and I hear the warmth of his laugh close behind me.

"Glad you approve," he says.

"I went out to Vegas with some friends last year. It was unbelievably tacky and crowded. So loud. Everywhere we went I just wanted to leave."

"That's bad for business. You want your customers to get comfortable, settle in, lose track of time."

"Makes sense."

"On the main floor, it's just a mirror. I had it made when I took over, so I could watch

the action without those below knowing they are being observed. When I'm not here there's a floor manager who oversees the place and this is where he's stationed during open hours."

"So we could see them, but they can't see us," I say, my voice breathy and embarrassing.

"If there was anyone here, yeah, that's the idea," he says. "This is my favorite spot, but there's more to the tour."

He crosses the room and opens the door for me. "Make a right," he instructs. We look in offices and an executive lounge, a big security space with a bay of surveillance monitors showing multiple locations throughout the building. All the exits, the hallways and stairwells, even the elevators. I try not to think about the guy who's manning the surveillance hub watching the heavy breathing and the part where I gripped Mickey's wrist in the elevator earlier. I remind myself that all the staff here is employed for discretion as well as skill. That doesn't do much to calm my nerves though.

A few doors down from there, I meet Brad, the IT guy. He's introduced to me with a longer title than that, but it's pretty clear he's the IT guy. He gets busy scanning my thumbprint and setting me up with a secure laptop. Once I'm equipped with that, we return to the first room. What Mickey calls the crow's nest.

He takes out a tablet and starts showing me the latest quarterly report to give me an overview of the kind of numbers I'm dealing with and the budget allocation. I look around after a minute.

"Is there paper and a pen anywhere?" I ask.

He cracks a smile. "I should've known you would want to do this old school. Do you

need a quill pen or is this okay?” he teases, offering me a pen from his inner pocket.

“I like to write things down.”

“You have a state-of-the-art encrypted laptop in front of you,” he points out.

“Sometimes you can’t replace a classic,” I counter.

He produces a notebook from a drawer and I jot down some thoughts on the projected earnings, the rough numbers on overhead and staffing. I fill a couple of pages and then look up at him.

“Okay, I’m ready,” I say.

He taps back to the chart and then loads a spreadsheet. I think my mouth drops open a little as I read it. It’s an intricate breakdown of the assets of the operation and The Pearl itself is worth even more than I anticipate. For something that has zero marketing budget, a casino hidden in plain sight, I expect a number significantly less than what I’m looking at.

“This is crazy,” I say.

“I’m good at what I do,” he remarks with a shrug.

“I’ll say.”

I go back to making notes, trying hard not to think about what other types of things he might be good at.

9

MICKEY

As a rule, I don’t take meetings in the crow’s nest. I’m there most nights, and Ragucci spent a lot of time in there going over things with me. But apart from the head of security, I’m not sure I’ve ever had another person sit at that table with me. Until tonight when Katie leans over her notebook with a serious crinkle between her eyebrows, I find out with breathtaking suddenness that apparently watching her do math turns me on. In all my years running this joint, I definitely never felt that about my old accountant doing the books.

When she traces one pink nail down a column of numbers it might as well have trailed that line down my belly because my abs tighten and I harden so much I’m not sure I’ll be able to stay in these pants. There’s no way to adjust myself even under the table that would give me the slightest relief. I need to calm my body and leave.

She makes me laugh, and she keeps getting more real. I want to stay detached and just let her be another employee. But she’s not. She’s smart and curious, takes a ton of notes. She’d be a terrific employee if I could stop wanting to fuck her senseless on this very table. My body just keeps making decisions before my brain could stop it.

She's starting to understand the scope of this business, the thousands of people who depend on me for their livelihood. This isn't just a corporation—it's a family and the Pearl is the highly profitable and secret beating heart of that family. The revenue this place generates supports not only families but also funds the anonymous nonprofit foundation that administers assets from a huge, interest-bearing principle I started five years ago.

It isn't just software and numbers. It's more than that. It's the weight of the goddamn world someday, and the greatest of privileges on others. It's something greater than my life or legacy. It's the power to mold my end of this city into a better place for the future generations. I feel like an asshole saying any of that, so I just show her the charts, the numbers. I send her a file on the nonprofit's portfolio and the organizations that currently benefit from its proceeds.

"This is separate, then? From the charities you sponsor like the ball teams and hospital wings and stuff," she asks.

"Yeah."

"Why hide it?" she challenges.

"I'm not hiding it. I'm distributing funds efficiently without anyone wasting money on throwing some dinner to honor my contributions so everyone claps for me and I get a plaque with my name on it." I rub the back of my neck and don't want to look at her.

"You're embarrassed," she says almost gleefully. "You don't want to throw your weight around or let everyone know what a good guy you are. That would ruin your reputation if this city knew how generous you were."

"You make me sound like the Grinch."

“No, more like if John Wick bought teddy bears for sick kids and poured enough money into the fire department that they never had to have another chili cookoff to upgrade their safety equipment. Jesus, Mick. This is amazing.”

She looks at me like she thinks she is perfectly safe. Like it is no risk at all for her to sit here across from me, alone in a dimly lit private room with a security code and a scanner set to my thumbprint, and then look at me like I’m Captain America. She has no idea the things I’d like to do to her right here and right now.

“John Wick, huh?” I say and I’d be lying if I said it wasn’t flattering. “Except I don’t have a dog.”

She laughs and the sound is music to my ears. Making her laugh like that feels like I won the Heisman Trophy or something. I’d think I was drunk or something, but I haven’t had a drop apart from the single beer.

I set up a meeting for her and the rest of the accounting team for tomorrow. They can brief her on the software and procedures. The nuts and bolts. What I need to show her tonight is why this matters. Not for greed, not even for success which is nothing but greed in nicer shoes.

The joint’s open for the night and there’s a few dozen people down there trying their luck. Mostly the usual crowd, a well-heeled set from the corporate world and a few privileged tourists who have to accompany a club member to enter. I don’t host games of chance for people who are down on their luck, already in debt, or have trouble with the law. It’s a classy place and I plan to keep it that way.

Katie’s gazing out the mirror at the action downstairs.

“Want to go out on the floor and try your hand at roulette?” I offer.

“No way. I lost eighty bucks in half an hour in Vegas last year. Plus, I’m not dressed for it.”

I look her up and down and she looks fine to me.

“What?” I ask.

“What?” she says dubiously. “Look at them and then look at me. I don’t have on silk or sequins or red-bottom shoes.”

“So what?”

“I don’t fit in down there. I’d feel conspicuous. Like the help wandered out of the servant’s quarters in some old movie.”

“This ain’t Jane Austen, Katie. Nobody’s hung up on class differences. You and I come from the same place. No way in hell any member of the Pearl would look down on you.”

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“Well not if I show up with the boss,” she says sarcastically.

“Not because of that. You’re smart and you’re a good person. You should never feel like you don’t belong.”

She sort of looks at me different when I say it. I go over what I said in my mind and realize I said too much, made it too much about personal admiration.

“I overshot there,” I say. “I was trying for the speech where it’s what’s inside that counts.”

“How would you know if I’m a good person?” She asks which isn’t what I expect.

“You think I didn’t get you checked out before I hired you?”

“Rory’s my brother!” she says indignantly.

“Yeah, that don’t mean you’re the same person as him. You said yourself he didn’t know half what went on with you even as a kid. I’m not letting someone near this organization until I’m sure of them.”

“I’m still insulted. I’m from the neighborhood, Mickey. You think I went out to LA and now my head ain’t on straight?” I question.

“Okay, now you’re gonna take off your earrings and fight me. I see how it is.”

“No, I’m just surprised you didn’t trust me going in.”

“I wanted to trust you if that counts for anything. But I didn’t invite you in here blindly. I’m not an idiot.”

“I know you’re not. I just thought—loyalty, right?”

“Because your dad worked for my dad? Because your brother’s my friend and works with me? You’re your own woman, Katie. I thought you’d want credit for that.”

“I know I’m a nepo hire.”

“No, you’re not. If I wanted a nepo hire I’d get Ragucci’s dipshit nephew with the hair gel. You’re qualified. You just happen to belong to a family that’s been associated with mine for a long time. It’s something to be proud of but it didn’t get you hired. You did that yourself with your credentials and the way you talk, everything you know.”

“Keep talking all nice and complimentary like that and everybody in Boston’s gonna find out you’re not an asshole.”

“Well, I can’t let that happen, can I?”

I shove away from the table and throw the door open to the hall with a bit too much force.

10

KATE

“Don’t overcomplicate the disclosure notes. That’s the main thing.”

“When I studied the Uniform Commercial Code, I learned the basic red flags,” I say,

“but I need to learn the ins and outs of all this. What’s it look like on Peachtree or SAP?”

“Facts are facts, and we stick as close to them as possible,” Sal Vilamonte tells me. “You’re a fresh set of eyes and it helps to have that, to be able to spot anything that looks fishy to you when you look at the numbers.”

“I don’t have the criminology expertise a certified forensic accountant needs to investigate, but this looks seamless. Ragucci’s a damn wizard. I’ve looked at these transactions till I could recite them from memory and I’m not seeing a damn thing.” I shake my head in astonishment.

“He’s been cookin’ these books for thirty years. He oughta be good at it,” Sal chuckles. “He’s doin’ good this morning. I talked to his missus before breakfast.”

“I’m glad to hear it. I’ve been praying for him. And now I need to pray for myself because I don’t have anything near this level of ability to conceal things in the numbers.”

“It’s about a delicate touch. Mostly he and the boss take care of it, but we handle the day-to-day stuff. Logistics, inventory, payroll. If you have questions about any of it just let me know.”

“Thanks. I will. I just want to keep us out of audit until Ragucci’s back in action,” I say.

The guy isn’t just a wizard, he’s an artist. It’s incredible. I comb through the last quarter’s records, the projections for the remainder of the fiscal year. Not one decimal is out of place, and if I were auditing this, I wouldn’t know where to begin claiming if I suspected misappropriation of funds.

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Sal goes through the email from Ragucci with me, the one that lays out what he does in a day and in a week for the most part. A lot of it is networking, it seems like. Keeping in touch with the different departments, checking in on the legitimate businesses and keeping tabs on the operations under the table as well.

I'm writing out a sample schedule to look over with Mickey later. The job is part politician, part accountant and reports direct to the man himself. It makes me sweat just thinking about it.

All I've done for the last couple days is learn about the job, ask questions about the job, and avoid my brother who does not know about the promotion yet. He's high enough in the organization he's bound to hear about it sooner or later and I'd prefer that he hears it from his friend and not me. Me, he'll yell at for putting myself at risk. I can't imagine him shouting in Mickey O'Halloran's face.

By three-thirty I'm closer to figuring out whatever his method is of hiding the illegal funds in plain sight. I had to go back seven quarters to pick up on it. Cleaning supplies and services including personal protective equipment expenditures. Seeing big budget numbers for those line items after Covid is unremarkable. It's just the fact that I've traced the billing and know the actual cost of those products and processes so I know the figures are padded. I know that's not the only thing, but I feel triumphant knowing that I cracked this much of his method.

My phone beeps, the new secure one I was issued yesterday. It's a text from Mickey asking if I can come to the crow's nest early. I programmed my contacts to list him as BOSS in all caps to remind myself exactly who he is to me. Not a friend. Certainly nothing more than that either. So, I reply in line with that resolution. Be right there,

boss.

When I reach the third floor I square my shoulders.

I press my thumb to the scanner after I type in the code. The lock clicks and I open the door. He's waiting for me. He stands when I walk in. When he looks me up and down in a surreptitious sweep of his gaze, I feel it. My nipples tighten, my thighs clench and I can't swallow.

"Katie," he says by way of greeting. The way he says my name, his voice dark, the curl of his tongue around the word, is as insinuating as a touch on my upper thigh.

"Mick," I say and keep it brief, neutral, officious, and professional. Like someone who absolutely does not need to remove her panties because they're soaked already.

"I've heard good things about you the past couple of days. You're knowledgeable and eager to learn the best practices," he says. I should thank him for the compliment but I can hardly concentrate on a word he says. "You okay?"

I nod too enthusiastically. He goes to the bar cart and brings me a bottle of water. I thank him and gulp down half of it in one go.

"Did I forget to show you where the water cooler is in the lounge?" He teases.

"I think I got overheated."

"Overheated?" he says, plainly unsure how that would happen in a perfectly climate-controlled space. I clear my throat.

"Anyway," I say, "I don't want to bother Mr. Ragucci during his rehab, obviously. His health comes first, but—"

“You have questions,” he supplies. “If I can’t answer them, you can email him. With the disclaimer that he can get to it when he feels up to it, no rush,” he says.

“That’s reasonable. Thank you,” I say. “So what did you want to see me about? Or are you babysitting me while I settle in?”

“That’s what you think this is? That I’m holding your hand till you can cross the street by yourself? We spend a lot of time together, my lead accountant and me. He oversees the business end while Rory watches the streets. They’re my two closest contacts in the organization. So while he’s recuperating, you’re it. You and your brother are my conduits to what happens in the system in real time. How’d he take it?”

“Take what?”

“When you told Rory about the promotion. Was he pissed?”

“I wouldn’t know. I haven’t told him,” I mutter miserably.

“Wait, are you scared to tell him?” He asks and at first I think he’s giving me crap about being a coward but I let his tone register and realize what he means.

“I’m not scared of him. He’s just going to yell at me for being stupid and I don’t want to deal with it.”

“Just? That’s not how we treat family.” His voice goes cold. “You want me to talk to him?”

“That would be worse I think,” I sigh. “For him to hear it from you. He was fine with me working on the legit side for a while, make some money and get my feet under me so I can start on my CPA prep. But nothing risky, nothing where I’m involved in

illegal activities that could be a problem down the road in my career.”

“Do you think I’m asking you to do something unethical?” he challenges.

“I grew up in the life and it never bothered me that my dad packed a gun everywhere we went. I accepted it. But as an accountant, I’ve worked my whole adult life to make sure the math is correct, everything is clear and concrete and true. Numbers are black and white, right and wrong. You can’t manipulate that system and pretend it’s all true. It’s tax evasion and money laundering and racketeering. Those are crimes. So, yes, what I’m doing is unethical.”

He doesn’t say anything for a moment, just looks at me with an unreadable expression. I feel myself starting to fidget.

“I’m sorry. I should—”

“No. Don’t be sorry. You’re the first person who’s ever told me what they really think of the organization I run. You described it with confidence—it’s illegal. You like the predictable number system and manipulating that to suit my needs is distressing to you. You don’t want to do this job.”

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“That’s not it at all. I want this job. That’s part of the problem. I know it’s wrong to work here, to cover up the illegal transactions no matter how much good you do with charity on the side. It’s against everything I was trained to do. In fact, I had to learn more about forensic accounting so I could protect you from audits which exist to hold people accountable. I knew that when you offered me this and I wanted it anyway. This is new for me. I’ve always been a rule follower, Mickey. I work hard to get what I want. When I crashed and burned in LA I think it broke something fundamental in me. I can’t get ahead in life just by being a good girl. I’m not guaranteed happiness. I know how to set a goal and work for it. This is my first time wanting the wrong things.”

“Like what?”

“This job, for one thing,” I hedge.

“And two?”

“To learn when to keep my mouth shut,” I say ruefully. “I don’t love the idea of getting caught and not being able to work in my chosen field ever again, facing charges, all that.”

“I think ‘not getting arrested’ is a reasonable thing to want. If you’re half as good as Sal says you are, we don’t have anything to worry about. You’re looking over the receipts and the accounts payable. Making sure no one gets creative in an obvious way or that they don’t keep it accurate.

“I think you want to be independent, and that’s you, but part of being independent is

owning up to your choices. And that starts with you being honest with your brother about what you want. I can tell him about the job or you can,” he says it as open-mindedly as a nearly all powerful mafia don can say anything I guess. He waits for me to answer.

“I’ll tell him,” I grumble. I don’t want to, but I also don’t want to lose what feels like a high stakes game of chicken to a literal crime boss.

“What will you tell him?” he asks.

“Does it matter?”

“Maybe it doesn’t,” he says. Then he shrugs off his coat and rolls up his sleeves like he’s about to really dig into something serious. I sit across the small table and watch his deft fingers unbutton his cuffs and fold the fabric up. He has meaty forearms, a light tan, and he has ink. I nearly swear when I see it. Heat suffuses my face.

“Did you have ink in high school? Rory got in major trouble for getting a tattoo one time when I was a kid. Did you guys do that together?”

“We don’t have matching tattoos. It’s not that kind of friendship,” he says wryly. “I got my first one after I was in lockup at sixteen.”

“You were in jail? How did I not know this?”

“Probably like you said, you were a kid. I got picked up for stealing a car. I wasn’t stealing it, just borrowing it for the evening—” he cracks a self-effacing grin.

“Did the owner know you were borrowing it?”

“He figured it out and that’s how I got picked up by the cops. My dad’s rule was if

you're dumb enough to get caught you can rot in the cage for twenty-four hours."

"That's harsh. My dad would've bailed me out and then beat my ass for stealing."

"Would he? Even though he was a fence?"

"Yeah. Hypocrisy was not something he worried about," I say with an eyeroll.

"My dad wasn't a hypocrite. He knew what we were and what we did and made no apology for it. Unless I was stupid, and then he let me have it. When I was in a holding cell at county jail, there were a couple other guys there. Drunk driving, vagrancy, drugs. The dude who was picked up for vagrancy showed me some of his ink that he did himself. He was a fuckin' pro. Coolest shit I ever saw. I asked if he'd do one for me after we got out, and I'd pay him cash."

"What did you get for your first one? I mean, assuming you have more than one," I can't resist asking. I'm wrapped up in his story, his excitement at retelling it, the way his language lapses into the slang of our youth.

"This was my first one," he says.

He unbuttons his shirt. Transfixed, I can't look away from his fingers undoing his buttons one by one, agonizingly slow. It's torture of the best kind. He's really going to take his shirt off, right here in this room. Alone. With me. The obvious fact of this breaks my brain.

I feel like alarm sirens should go off, that police lights should spin red and blue across the walls of the room. Because if ever there were an emergency, this is it.

Forget professionalism. Forget my dignity.

I am going to lose my damn mind.

“Right here,” he says.

His shirt is unbuttoned to the waist. He pulls it open on the left side like he’s starting a seated yet steamy striptease one half of his muscled chest at a time. I was already glutted on eye candy from seeing him roll his sleeves up and checking out those beefy forearms. Now this. The cut lines of his pectorals, his abs.

Greedy, I want to slide out of my chair and peel both halves of his shirt open, kiss that exposed skin so smooth and bronze with a thick line of dark hair down the center running straight to his belt and below.

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The tattoo runs from his left pec right up past his collarbone and over his shoulder. Dark lines, fine and grid-like form a shape I can't quite make out in the dim room. I squint a little, will myself to remain in my seat.

“Tim gave me a good deal on this one. I set him up in a shop and got him back on his feet. Old dude's still there twenty-five years later, doing tattoos and piercings, got three other guys working with him.”

He gives a half smile like it's just a pleasant memory that he was a teenager whose reckless behavior landed him in jail. Where he proceeded to pluck an incarcerated vagrant from his fate and set him up with a job and livelihood. His guileless kindness, his generosity are too potent to look at him directly now. I feel the whole catastrophe start. I'm tumbling right off the cliff headfirst into love with him.

“I'd compliment you on turning his life around and helping him out but I don't want to add to my workload having to manage the books for another nonprofit to hide your goodness. So, what's it a tattoo of?”

“It's the blueprint of Fenway Park. Even though the Sox break my heart every damn year.”

“You got the entire blueprint of Fenway Park tattooed on your chest and shoulder? How long did that take?”

“A long fuckin' time.” He chuckles.

“Do you mind if I—?” I ask and leave my seat to lean in for a closer look.

“Sure,” he says and sits back in his chair a little so I can see. My fingers itch to trace the delicate lines etched in his skin. I turn my lips under and furrow my brow in concentration. I do not allow myself to breathe through my nose because I’ll smell the distinct and heady scent of him at this proximity. I’m holding together by a very thin thread and one whiff of him will make my knees crumple till I’m on the floor beside his chair. Ready to offer something I shouldn’t even consider.

“It’s beautiful,” I say.

“Thanks. I always liked it. I have five or six more. Tim did all of them.”

“Loyalty. Why am I not surprised?” I say as I step back.

“You’re flattering me again. I have a reputation to protect. Don’t go spreading that around.”

“You can’t tell me a sweet story like that and expect me not to react. I’m not made of stone,” I grumble. “If you don’t like compliments start acting like a jerk.”

“I’ll put that on my list,” he says sarcastically and starts to button his shirt.

“Finally, now I can concentrate on work,” I quip.

Suddenly, the smile slips from his face. “I didn’t make you uncomfortable, did I?”

My brain starts to whirl in my skull. “No, not at all.”

“Are you sure? I mean, I realize I had my damn shirt open in the office,” he says as if he’s actually only now realizing it.

I feel the need to reassure him, only I go too far. “It’s not a problem Mick. I wasn’t

uncomfortable. You could never make me feel uncomfortable. Never. No matter what lines you cross.”

Well shit.

“Don’t tell me that,” he says quietly. “Swear to God the last thing you need to say to me is something like that. It’s like an engraved invitation to be my worst self. There’s lines all around you. Don’t you know that? There’s the red line about a mile wide that says you work for me and then there’s the death trap around you with signs saying ‘Rory’s little sister! Do not touch!’”

“You may think that,” I say, hardly knowing my own voice or what I’m saying, “But you put those lines there. I don’t see them at all anymore.” That’s the most dangerous thing of all. Not that there are sacred trusts we can’t breach or lines we can’t cross, but the fact that all that doesn’t matter. I’ve said way too much. I might as well have climbed up on the table and stripped off my ridiculous, modest outfit and lay myself out bare in front of him.

I see his hands on the table. First he holds them out palms up as if helpless. Now though, they’re balled up in fists, knuckles going white. I wish they were in my hair or on my hips, thick fingers pressing into my bare flesh.

“Don’t do this to me, Katie. You got it all mixed up thinking I’m some kinda saint. Don’t trust me this far.”

“I do trust you. There’s not a limit on that either.”

“Then you need some goddamn limits. What are you trying to do?”

“Make a fool of myself it looks like,” I say ruefully.

“Do you know how hard I have to fight myself every day, every time I’m in a room with you?”

“Then why ask me to come here? To the crow’s nest where you know we’re alone and it’s private?”

“You know why.”

“It’s your favorite? You don’t like to be disturbed in a meeting?”

“Don’t play dumb with me,” he says.

“You want me?” I ask and feel absolutely clueless. Does he? Is he suffering just as much as I am?

“In the interview, you came over and gave me a hug. I thought you were going to know instantly how much I wanted you.”

“I didn’t hug you. I kissed your cheek,” I correct.

“That’s right. Then you lost your balance and I caught you.”

“I swayed and lost my balance because desire hit me like a ton of bricks, Mick. I got too close to you and there was no denying it. I went to kiss your cheek and realized it was the stupidest idea I ever had.”

“Why?”

“Because I had to go home and dosomethingto get my mind right,” I admit.

He smirks, his pupils blown wide. “Did you touch yourself while you thought about me?”

I'm too far in to lie now. "Maybe."

"And did you come?" his voice drops even lower.

"Harder than I ever have before."

An involuntary grunt leaves his lips and I'm jolted back to my senses.

I can hardly stay in my chair.

"I've got to get out of here," I gasp.

"Probably a good idea," he says.

11

MICKEY

"Well fuck me," I mutter to myself while pouring two fingers of whiskey into a glass and draining it in one gulp.

I'm pissed at myself for how far I let that conversation get. I get back to work and try to ignore the riot of sensations rocketing through my body and the constant loop of her words on repeat in my brain. Harder than I ever have. That is an image that is permanently seared into my memory now.

I should've left well enough alone. I should've promoted that greasy nephew to cover for Benny Ragucci. At least I wouldn't be tempted by him. Tempted to jeopardize my longest friendship, to cross the line with an employee. To do more than have a filthy bad-idea fling. To lay my damn heart at her feet like an offering.

Because I love the way she looks at me, and the way she teases me and laughs and tries so damn hard to be perfect at everything. How she doesn't want to let anyone down. Not me, not my organization, not her brother that hardly pays attention to her. Even though it sounds to me like everybody has let her down time and again all her life.

The next day, Rory and I go for lunch after a meeting uptown. He asks me how his sister is doing with the job.

"She still staying with you? You oughta know," I shrug.

"We don't talk much. It's weird. I didn't have much time for her when she was a kid because the age difference. It's not like I wanted to sit around and play Barbie and crap like that. Now she's back home for a while and doing shit like trying to make Mom's meat loaf recipe and asking why I'm not staying home to eat." He shakes his head. "If I wanted a ball and chain, I'd get hitched."

"Think maybe she just wants to spend time with you?" I hazard. It's mixed up, the way I feel about this story he's telling me. He's my best friend, so my knee-jerk reaction is to say, 'hell no, you're a grown man she can get over it'. But this is Katie and all she wants is to get to know Rory better as adults now. I can tell how it hurts her when she goes to the trouble to look up their mom's meatloaf recipe and make it for him and he acts like a jerk. So part of me feels disloyal to him about taking her side, but the rest of me wants to knock sense into him.

"It can't be that bad to have actual blood family that wants to hang with you."

"Are you taking her side?" He nearly chokes on his beer.

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“Not taking sides, just sayin’, if she did something nice for you like cook a dinner and you got no emergency you gotta get to, sit your ass down and be nice. Talk to her about old times or what you did today or if the meatloaf was hard to make. Make a fuckin’ effort is all I’m sayin’. I wish I had family alive I could still talk to.”

I take a bite of my burger and wait for him to clap back at me and tell me to mind my damn business. Instead, he drains his beer.

“I dunno what to do, Mickey. She’s back after six years away. I don’t know how to be around her since our folks are gone. It’s like she wants something from me and I dunno how to give it to her. I wish she’d go back to LA. I don’t like her mixed up in the syndicate even just working at the Oyster in a boring office. Part of me’s worried she’ll get her hands dirty trying to help or whatever. She’ll end up caught doing something illegal and it’ll fuck up her career for the rest of her life. She was better off out in California. I felt good about that, her getting away from this place and going out where it’s warm, have a better life. I helped with her college, you know?”

“You did? Good on you.”

“She thought it was all from Mom and Dad. They saved some for her college, but it wasn’t enough for her to finish, not the way shit costs nowadays. So when she’d message me and ask how much was left in the account or whatever, I’d just ask what she needed. I know she got by on a lot less than she could have used. Katie worked the whole time she was in school. Even with my help and what Mom and Dad had put back, she hustled. Answered phones, waited tables, did data entry and some bookkeeping and shit. I was so damn proud of her, a hard worker, always got her eye

on the goal. Damn near broke her heart to have to quit and come back here.”

“That’s tough,” I say, not really knowing how to comment on this. He’s proud of her, but has he ever told her that? And he wants her to go back to LA as fast as she can? I have the uncomfortable feeling of being at cross purposes with my best friend and top lieutenant for the first time.

“Really is. I thought she’d do great out there. I guess there’s a shit ton of accountants out in LA and they got bigger degrees and connections. She says she’s gonna work on her CPA while she’s here, but I ain’t seen her do it. She’s wastin’ time makin’ meatloaf and corned beef and cabbage—okay, the corned beef and cabbage was fantastic, but I’d rather she do her CPA and get outta here.”

“Did you tell her that?” I ask.

“I told her she don’t gotta cook for me, we’re not roommates. She’s just using her old room till she’s back on her feet.”

“What do you suddenly have against Boston?” I ask, indignant.

“Nothing, man. I love Boston. You know that. But I want my baby sister out of here and away from the business. I’d never forgive myself if she got mixed up in the dangerous shit. She’s better off out in LA.”

“You can tell her that. If you think she doesn’t know why you blow her off and never go home when she’s there, explain it to her like you did just now. I know it’s awkward as shit, but do you want her thinkin’ you just don’t want her around? Because acting like you want her gone and not telling her why is shitty.”

He shrugs. “I guess. You know I don’t like to get all emotional.”

“I know you don’t, but this is your family, your blood. And you’re damn lucky to still have some left. Some of us don’t have that luxury. Don’t fuck it up.”

After lunch he goes to one of the warehouses to check on a delivery and I have a meeting at The Oyster. Once it’s done, I see a message from Katie on my phone. She needs to see me today and offers to meet me wherever I want.

In my office at the Oyster now. That okay? I ask. She gives a thumbs-down.

Where? I reply, wondering what this is all about.

She says she’ll meet me at the café across from the Pearl in an hour. I wrap up my business at the Oyster and head over there. I’m early but she’s waiting. I clock that it must be her day off because she’s in jeans and a sweatshirt, strawberry blonde hair in a messy ponytail. I sit across from her and wonder when all the tables in this goddamn city got shrunk down. Everywhere we go, our legs brush against each other. It doesn’t matter if she’s got on denim and I have on a light wool, I feel her like the heat of her skin is bare on mine. She’s drinking water and a waiter brings her a cup of tea with a coffee for me. I glance at her for a second and take a sip.

“That’s how you like it, right?” She says and she looks smug, not really asking. She knows I take two sugars no cream. I nod and thank her.

“What’s goin’ on?” I ask.

“I didn’t want to come to your office because I would’ve had to go home and change clothes. I can’t go in the Oyster looking like this.”

“Like what?” I say.

“Like I went to the bank and the laundromat and the grocery store today, not like I’m

an accounting executive.”

“You can dress however you want. Nobody at my office is gonna say a word.”

“They’d want to. I’m still a new hire and I don’t want to seem like I don’t care.”

“You can wear a damn sequin dress if it makes you happy. Tell me what’s up, because it sounds like you’re meeting me on your day off.”

“It’s too important to wait and I didn’t want to tell you over the phone.”

I cut my eyes to her, then I take out my phone and shut it off. She does the same. She takes out her notebook, the same one I gave her that night in the crow’s nest when she took the job. She hands it to me and I scan her notes, flip a couple of pages.

“You think Ragucci was making mistakes?” I inquire.

“No. I think it’s something else,” she says carefully.

“Money’s going somewhere,” I supply. She nods.

“You looked at both sets of books.”

“Of course.”

“It’s nowhere?”

“Gone.”

“How much?” I glance at her notes again. “This?” I indicate a number, six figures, near the bottom of the page.

“At least.” Her face is grim.

“We’ll follow up on this and get to the bottom of it. Sal might be able to help you investigate.” He doesn’t seem as worried or angry as I thought he’d be.

“Have you talked to your brother by chance?”

“He texted me a short bit ago,” she says softly. “Said he’s proud of me and wants better for me than this. And he says you handed him his ass for being a jerk about the meatloaf. Thanks for that.”

“I just suggested he should stop being a shithead.”

She laughs. “It’s Rory, you know? At least he talked to me. I told him I like it here.

I've started my prep course for the first test, did that weeks ago. He keeps offering me money to pay for all of it. I think he wants me out of here as fast as possible," she says. It's obvious this hurts her feelings.

"If you don't like staying with him, I got a couple of buildings in the neighborhood with apartments."

"I know you do," she says wryly. "I looked over all your holdings. But I don't want to move. Like he says, I'm not here for that long. I heard back from Benny yesterday, and he says rehab is going well. He gets tired easy but they say that's normal. He gave me a couple tips on how to pick out specific techniques when I go over the financials. I didn't bother him about this discrepancy, and I won't unless you think I need to."

"No, you're right. Let's give him time to get back on his feet. For the time being, just be proud of the fact you found something missing when my top accountant didn't catch it last month. It's not everybody can say they got one up on Benny Ragucci," I say, trying to let her know I'm impressed with her.

"I'm gonna head home now. Besides you got plenty to do without me hanging around on my day off."

"You're always welcome there. Your fingerprint's on the lock, Katie," I say, stating the obvious. We haven't spoken of our mutual attraction since that conversation and it's for the best. We both decided to behave like adults and coworkers. Leave that nonsense in the past. I try to tell myself that's my goal, to keep this all business.

We cross from the café to the Pearl, still talking. I insist on sending her home in one of my cars. We walk around the back. There's a couple guys hanging around by the corner of the small private parking lot and it sets me on high alert. Nobody loiters around here. We've got cameras and security and the fact is you'd have to be a

complete dumbass to do a deal on my property in this city. I tap my phone and tell the guy on the door that I want these people cleared off my block.

In seconds, two big guards exit the back door and head for the pair of men. Jeremiah, who's worked security for me for years, tells them that they're trespassing on private property and they should get lost. The taller of the two losers shouts back something profane. My security men head toward them, but they come closer instead of backing down. I hear Jeremiah's stern and commanding tone as he tries to talk them down but the tall one's getting irrational, wild. He's on something that's for damn sure and I don't want him on my property or anywhere close to Katie.

"Come on," I tell her. She's standing by the car, hesitant.

"It's not necessary," she says, eyes on the disturbance unfolding a few yards away from us. "I can drive myself. Hey! What the fuck?"

I grab her in my arms and turn her so she's against the car, shielded by my body as I hear the glass break. One of the loiterers has thrown a rock in our general direction and busted a car window. I glance back and see my men have the guys on the ground now.

There's no threat. Some idiot got high, tried his luck dealing in the wrong place at the wrong time. I tell myself it's over and we're fine. But when I turn her around, I run my hands down her arms, over her back, as if I'm checking for broken bones or something. She seems shaken but okay. When she looks up at me, there's a scratch on her forehead, a bright line of blood welling near the hairline.

"Shit, you're bleeding," I say.

I wrap an arm around her shoulders and usher her inside.

“I’m fine, Mickey. I swear. I’ll go home and put a band aid on it. It’s no big deal,” she’s babbling, too bright and cheerful, too dismissive. It’s going to hit her in a second and I want her somewhere safe and quiet when it does.

She doesn’t object when I guide her onto the private elevator and we head to the crow’s nest. Once we’re inside the room, I go to the bar cart and pour her a finger of whiskey. She shakes her head.

“No thanks,” she says.

“Drink it,” I tell her. “It shook you up whether you wanna be a cowboy about it or not.”

She sits not at the table but on the couch, legs tucked under her. I grab a blanket off the back of a chair and put it over her. She sips the whiskey, winces, then says, “That’s pretty good.”

“Irish, of course,” I tell her and she barely manages a half smile for me.

I get the first aid kit and clean the cut on her forehead. She shuts her eyes, holds still as I clean her up and bandage it. I’m aware of her paleness, the blue veins on her eyelids, the almost translucent skin and the tremble of her lips. I feel pent-up, like I want to roar and break things, destroy the fool who threw a rock and caused her any pain. Instead of raging, I put the first aid stuff aside and take her hand.

“Your hands are cold,” I complain. She shifts a little beside me on the couch.

“I’m freezing,” she admits, “It’s not even that cold outside.”

“It’s the shock and the stress,” I tell her.

“I thought he had a gun. I thought he shot at us at first,” she says in a low whisper.

I can’t help it then. I stroke her hair, kiss the top of her head. She moves into my arms and nestles against me, feeling small and cold and shaky. I kiss her forehead, rub her back, trying to get warmth back into her, to cherish and protect her. That’s the word, cherish. It keeps coming up and I’m not the most comfortable with it, but here we are.

“I’m so cold, Mick,” she says, her wide eyes still frightened, her gaze locking with mine. “Make me warm.”

I don’t need her to ask me twice.

KATE

I know what I'm doing when I ask. The chill, the aftermath of our run-in in the parking lot outside. Now I'm closeted in the crow's nest, a dim, warm room like an emerald green and gold jewel box at the top of the casino with a big window looking out on all the action, disguised from the other side as a mirror.

Mick has already reached for me, holding me against his broad chest. I'm safe in the circle of his arms, and he kisses the top of my head, fond as any friend. But there's more to it. I feel the unmistakable difference in the way he looks at me and touches me. I wonder if he's going to take his time. Or if all the pent-up tension between us will explode in one swift, fierce coupling. It doesn't seem like it would be anywhere near enough.

"I always thought it would be different," I confess.

"Different how?" he asks.

"That we'd just get past the breaking point and do it up against an office door or in a stairwell—" I trail off sheepishly.

"You thought this was inevitable," he says a little wonder in his voice.

"Well yeah," I say. "I just wasn't sure how it would happen. I held out hope though. That we'd both give in eventually." I smile at him. Something hits me when I meet his eyes. "You were worried," I accuse.

"You got hit with broken glass," he says, fingertips stroking my hair back near where the bandage is. He kisses my temple and I clutch at his shirt. "I saw you bleeding and damn near lost my mind. I wanted to destroy them. Only thing that stopped me was you're too precious to leave standing there. I had to get you in the building, get doors

and walls between you and any danger. I wanted to bring you here.”

“I’m glad you did,” I say, I set the glass on a side table and turn back to him, not sure if it was the whiskey heating my veins or his nearness. I’m curled up in his arms on the couch and I tip my face up to look in his eyes. His big hand cups my cheek, strokes his thumb across my cheekbone. He really studies me and everything is going red and hazy at the edges.

I’m feeling pure sensation now with heated blood and trembling cold hands grabbing for his shirt and jacket. I clutch at the fabric in my fingers, waiting breathless while he cradles my face and then closes the inches between us.

I let my eyes drift shut but he stops about half an inch from kissing me for the first time.

“Look at me,” he commands. My eyes flip open, my body wants to obey him. My gaze clashes with his, my heart stuttering.

I watch him kiss me. The contact is brief and chaste, but my body goes molten at the first touch. My arms wind around his neck decisively and pull him down to me. Our mouths lock together, a perfect fit, and he nibbles at my lips, kissing me like it’s the only thing he ever wants to do.

He goes slow and take sensuous bites of my lips like little bee stings, licking and sucking until I’m thoroughly weak with desire, my body thrumming and tingling from his kisses. I slide my hands down from his neck until I’m pressing on his chest, my fingertips tracing his hard pectorals that I glimpsed when he showed me his tattoo of Fenway.

He lifts his face from mine and looks down at me, his eyes hazy and his mouth reddened from kissing me. He dips down and nips my lip again, unable to stop. I push

in closer to him, resting my cheek over his heart like I wanted to the night he showed me his tattoo. I rub my face against his chest and wish I could make the fabric of his shirt disappear. He lifts me off of him and drags my sweatshirt over my head. I watch his handsome smolder and his composure shatter when he sees I'm naked beneath the shirt. His lips part but no sound comes out.

“Have I made the great Mickey O'Halloran speechless?” I tease.

He's beyond teasing now though. It's like the sight of me stripped bare to the waist does something to his resolve. He captures me, I don't have a better word for it. He has me by the waist gripping me hard and lifts me to his mouth and tastes my nipple. It becomes a firm bud that strains and distends under his filthy ministrations. Every lick and pinch make me want to scurry away. It's too intense, too perfect, too aware of everything we can't be to each other.

In a matter of seconds, I practically climb him anyways. He's holding me up and feasting on my breasts, flushed and heavy with arousal. Boldly, I swing my leg across his lap and he groans approval. His arm slides around my hips, anchoring me to him. He keeps licking at my nipples, sending sharp bolts of pleasure down my spine. I dig my hands into his thick dark hair and tug a little at his scalp. He responds, head tipped back, eyes on mine to ask what I want next. More of this, all of this, I want to say. I don't even know if I can survive it. The intent way he devotes himself to me, the lavish caress of his tongue on my nipples, threatens to undo me completely. I start to shake all over. I pull away, his flushed face upturned to meet my gaze.

“Are you okay?” He asks, and everything feels blurry and warm. I sink down onto his lap, aware that I'm topless and he's fully clothed.

“No. It’s not fair,” I manage, “take off your shirt.”

When his shirt hangs open, I run my greedy palms up his chest, shoving the fabric out of the way and rub my face on his tattoo, half kissing, half nuzzling. I feel him squirm beneath my thighs. I kiss his shoulder and collarbone, push my bare chest up against his. The thick mat of hair makes my breasts tingle, abrading my tender damp nipples and sets me alight. I rub myself on him like a cat, satisfied with the riot of sensations. His head has gone back and he’s staring fixedly at the ceiling, his hands fisted by his side.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, kissing his jaw and giving a purr of pleasure.

His voice comes through gritted teeth. “I want to make this last, goddammit. I don’t know if I can.”

I can feel the heat and frustration rolling off of him. He’s vibrating with arousal. I reach for his face and bring him down to kiss me again. When our mouths meet it’s like a wildfire. There’s no softness or exploration this time. It’s mating pure and simple. All these weeks of yearning, the nights I lay awake with my hand stuffed in my panties trying to get relief, every meeting I sat through trying not to shift in my chair or bite my lip over how much he turned me on.

“Do you want me to stop?” I ask.

“Ineverwant you to stop,” he grinds out, and his resolve snaps in two.

He pulls me down over the length of him, rigid and thick, curving hard to the right.

My thighs shake and wetness slicks me. He works me over his length a couple of times and just that friction is sending sparks behind my eyes. I grip his big shoulders to steady myself and for the enjoyment of grabbing him with my greedy hands. He keeps kissing me, his tongue claiming.

As much as I love gripping the powerful shift of his shoulders as those muscles bunch beneath my fingers, I have to touch his face. I know what's coming. My body is so ramped up that it may take no more than a single touch to set me off, and I feel some of his hesitation to rush to the finish, an urge to linger here a moment and savor this. I stroke the sharp lines of his jaw, brush his hair back from his temples and study him, that handsome face I used to sneak pictures of as a teenager, the stern lines and steep hollows, the eyes I used to think of as icy now as molten as a blue flame when he looks at me.

I kiss his cheek on a wave of fondness. I lean forward until our foreheads touch and, breathless, I smile at him, almost shyly.

“Finally,” I say, a little giddy. “Do you know how long I’ve wanted this?”

“How long?”

“I had a massive crush on you when I was growing up. I had trouble dating in high school because every guy I went out with was just a boy—awkward and skinny and nothing compared to you. And I did. I compared every one of them to you. You were a man by then. I wanted a man. Always have.” I murmur, kissing the corner of his mouth softly.

Mick runs his hands up my arms, raising goosebumps in the wake of his touch. He gathers me to him in a crushing embrace for a moment and the next thing I know I’m on my back, pressed down into the couch cushions with his bare chest looming above me, his arms bracketing my head. I giggle a little from sheer delight that he flipped

me on bottom so easily and that here he is, above me, ready to have his way with me like I've imagined ten thousand times at least. It is so much better than in my fantasies because here he is, hot and hard and real, moving over me.

I help him work my jeans down and kick them off. Then I start on his belt. I fumble with it, too excited to take my time. I gasp out loud when his erection bursts free, long and heavy, dark and wet. He gives it a squeeze, tight and almost punishing, and a bead of precum glistens at the head. I swallow hard, craving him. The key to a world of pleasure lay right in front of me and I wasn't sure what to do first.

"Yes," I whisper, sounding rusty like my voice is broken.

This sofa is big, but it feels narrow with him crowding on top of me, around me. I'm surrounded by him and consumed, and when he moves his knee between my legs, my head goes back as I indulge in the pleasure of having Mickey O'Halloran shove my thighs apart with his big body. He lowers himself a little, kisses my forehead and my lips, deliberate and taking his time. My hands travel all over his chest and back, squeeze his biceps, skate across his abs. I love the brush of his hairy thighs on my smooth legs and every way he is bigger, harder, rougher than me. My softness and curves yield to him gladly.

He drags my panties off with an air of exasperation and resettles himself there, now placing the damp head of his cock to kiss the tender lips of my pussy. That intimate touch makes me groan, a precursor of what was to come. He rubs it up and down the length of my slit to tease me and I grab my knees in my hands and pull them up toward my shoulders, opening myself wide for him and pushing my hips down, capturing the head of his cock just inside my passage, urging him to go further. It took everything in me to not come all over him from that simple penetration.

His eyes lock on mine and all of a sudden, my greatest fantasy is about to come true. He lays my legs over his shoulders and slides into me with ease. He bottoms out deep

in my pussy and I feel the instant he does. It's so good and so fierce that I feel it in my teeth.

He rolls his hips and gives me short, shallow thrusts, each one going deeper than the last. I reach above my head and grab the arm of the couch for something to hold onto. His every movement seems to draw me out, stretch my body, open me up more until I'm his completely and he molds me into the shape he wants. I reverberate with every slight shift or touch, highly sensitive and yet poised on the edge of a cliff.

"Look at me," he commands, and I open my eyes. I'm awash in the steamy blue of his gaze, the bright heat consuming me. He goes still for a moment, lips drawn back over his teeth with the effort of stopping and holding himself motionless. He lowers my legs from his shoulders. Confused, I release the arm of the couch and reach for him, for his face.

He turns and kisses my palm as if it were the most natural thing. Then he sits back and pulls me with him, into his lap. My pussy sinks over him, and I feel my eyes drift shut. He nudges my lips with his and we kiss. Then he gathers me close in his arms, spread across his lap. I can repose on his chest, his arms around me warm and strong and I feel myself loosen, going lax and pliant for him now. I give a satisfied sound and kiss his neck. I hug him back and everything slips into place. What felt wild and overwhelming has shifted along with our position and now it feels so right, a key fitting inside a lock. I moan his name and he moves me by my hips. I surrender to him to the perfect feeling, the momentum and the nudge of him inside my body.

Mick kisses me, passionate and fevered. I hold on to him tightly as it builds. Everything flashes to a single sharp point of light and my arms are thrown wide as if by a shock when the climax ripples through me. He feels it because that's when he growls, a primitive sound that matches the way he anchors me tight to his chest and thrusts in once more. The rush of his climax jars me, breathtaking and purely masculine. His hot, thick seed pour inside me, mixing with my own juices. He gently

pumps in and out, riding out the pleasure and making sure to fill all of me.

A second orgasm sweeps me, drags me under in reaction to his finale. I whimper, too sensitive and spent to endure it. He cradles me then, gentle, reassuring as I ride it out.

He draws the blanket over me and holds me close. The rhythm of his heartbeat as much as the languor in my satisfied body lulls me to sleep. When I wake, he is still here holding me, and he gives no sign of annoyance that I fell asleep in his arms. Patient and warm, he strokes my messy hair back from my forehead, kisses just above my band aid tenderly.

“Did I wear you out?” he says a little smug.

“Yeah, you did,” I confess. “I don’t usually fall sleep like that.”

“That tells me that you haven’t had anybody good enough to wreck your sleep before.”

“I wish I could deny it just to wipe the smile off your face, but you’re not wrong.”

“I told you LA guys were losers,” he quips.

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“If this is what I’m comparing to, there’s no other possible answer. It was unreal.”

“Oh, it was very real,” he counters, making me smile.

He traces his fingers over the band aid on my forehead and frowns.

“Don’t worry about it. It’s just a small scratch.”

“I don’t care how small it is. You got hurt when you were with me. I won’t let it happen again.”

13

MICKEY

The two guys that Jeremiah took down in the parking lot were dealing drugs. One of them worked for me until that moment. I won’t have drugs on my bottom line. I don’t care how profitable they are or how people will find a way to score them with or without me. I refuse to allow anyone on my payroll to deal. They better not so much as charge somebody a dollar for some Tylenol because I’ll fire them no questions asked.

I know someone in the organization is dirty. Somebody is using my territory and part of my network to move drugs and sell them on the downlow. It isn’t just the principle of the thing. It’s the risk of impaired judgment for the individual and the overall harm to the community—people driving, working, raising kids while they’re high or when they need a fix. I won’t feed into that cycle. Rory still thinks it’s hilarious that I run a

criminal organization, but I insist on random drug testing for all my workers, him included. I run a clean operation and I want everybody's head on straight.

When Jeremiah reported to me that one of the men had a bunch of pills, I sent Rory in ahead of me. We flushed the pills while the asshole cussed about their street value and what he's gonna do to get us back for destroying his inventory.

He won't do much in the way of hands-on revenge anytime soon since we broke his right hand. The hand was for throwing that rock that could've done worse than it did. I had a guard take care of it because I knew if I got my hands on him I'd tear him the fuck apart. It's supposed to be a punishment for stepping out of line and going against our values, not a vent for my fury. And fury possessed me then.

"It takes a real man to keep a cool head like that, sir," Jeremiah says to me. "I woulda bet that you were gonna beat his ass from here to the Canadian border."

"Don't mean I didn't want to," I grumble. "But losing my temper is a shitty business practice. Nobody wants to trust a hothead."

"I sent Vito and Dante to the guy's apartment to clear out anything he had hidden over there. Drugs, cash, guns. Anything we can use to tie him to the drug ring, any clue about who's running that shit show."

"Thanks, man," I say.

Then I tell my secretary to clear my schedule for a long lunch. I spend a couple hours in the gym to clear my head. I'm not used to feeling powerless. When I saw blood well from the cut on Katie's forehead, it was like a trap door beneath me dropped open and I plummeted twenty stories down. Fear, powerlessness, then the swell of protectiveness. I want to hold her against my chest, put my arms around her and dare anyone to come near her.

If I had no self-control, if I was the hotheaded punk I'd been ten years ago, I'd have pulled my gun and double tapped that son of a bitch before he knew what hit him. But just because it would've been satisfying to kill the guy doesn't make it a sound business decision. Impulse control is the hardest part of my job. It didn't used to be much of a problem, but having Katie Donahue around has rewired my brain from efficient and dispassionate to sometimes homicidal.

I am not a man who fears much less one who panics. Finding myself with a physical need to see her, to be with her and assure myself she is fine is humbling, alarming. I have a business to run. I can't freak out about this or waste my time and energy worrying about Rory's sister. That's what I have to call her in my mind, not her name. To make myself remember she's not mine and never will be.

It was madness, a one-time mistake brought on by the incident in the parking lot. Danger, threat, adrenaline—that accounts for it. Being with her last night has nothing to do with anything beyond the fact we were both keyed up after an intense shared experience.

After I inspect progress on a nightclub I'm building on a Zoom call, I follow up with my executives on a couple of things. All my scheduled meetings finish on time and I'm ready to head over to the Pearl. Before I leave my office, I check my messages. I have two from Katie. One is a picture of the cheese dip we had the other night at the bar. The second is, You hungry? Meet u there 6:30?

I scrub my hands over my face and try to focus on the fact that she's too young, she's my best friend's little sister, and she works for me. Not one but three disqualifying conditions that make her an impossibility for me.

But I can't seem to quit fixating on what could've happened to her, how it could've been a gunshot instead of broken glass, how it could've been me holding her half on my knees and begging while she bled out on the concrete. The ache in my chest gets

worse. I'm torturing myself now, and I can almost feel the gush of hot, sticky blood pouring out over my fingers as I try and fail to stop the bleeding.

I cough to cover a strangled noise that wants to escape me. I'm alone in my office but I won't sit here and let myself cry over something that didn't even happen. The possibility, the danger to her, was too real, and I have an eerie sense that it'll come back to me in nightmares until the day I die. Maybe that's why I text her back, and why I'm sitting at the same little table by 6:15.

Katie's wearing a dark red sweater dress that clings to her in all the right ways and tall boots. Her hair is in a ponytail again, and the small bandage on her forehead is the only sign of what happened to her last night. I stand when she gets to the table and I reach for her hands. I take them in mine and brush my lips against her cheek. I couldn't just sit back down once she was seated, with no greeting, without even the slightest touch.

Katie's smile is as bright as her eyes and after we order, I ask her how she slept.

"I think I could sleep about three more days," she says ruefully. "I went home, showered, went right to bed. I scrolled on my phone for hours because I couldn't shut my brain off."

"You were pretty sleepy before I took you home," I comment.

"That's different. I was snuggled up with you." She looks wistful for a second and then takes a drink, looks around ready to change the subject.

"Did you sleep okay?" she asks.

This would be a good time for me to lie, but I don't want to.

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“Not for more than an hour probably. You’d think I would’ve been exhausted, but I couldn’t get to sleep.”

“Did you doomscroll like me or what?”

“I sent some emails, looked through the preliminary contracts on a paving and concrete business I’m buying. Then I gave up and watched some crap on YouTube.”

“What’d you watch? Goodfellas? The Sopranos?” she teases me. I don’t crack a smile but it takes an effort to keep a straight face.

“Jackie Chan,” I say.

“Really? Kung fu movies?” she wrinkles her nose.

“The guy’s made something like 150 movies. They’re pretty good.”

“I had no idea you were this adorable. You’re so dorky about this, I can’t stand it.”

“Dorky?” I repeat, feigning offense.

“Does Rory know? About the Jackie Chan thing?”

“Not really. We typically have more important things to discuss.”

“How many times have you seen Kung Fu Panda?” She challenges.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” I lie, grinning.

“You were how old when the first one came out? I was eight or nine so you’d have been like, what, thirty?” she teases.

“If you were eight or nine, that made me...” I wince a little at the thought of being fifteen years older than her. “Twenty-three.”

“Wow,” she says. “I was being a smartass about your age but when you put it like that, it just really shows the contrast. I still had baby teeth and you were old enough to drink and have tattoos and shit.”

I drink the rest of my beer and try not to think about it too hard.

“So, when you got your driver’s license I was like one year old?” She ventures. I nod.

“I never heard the end of how they made Rory put a booster seat in his first car so he could pick me up from daycare,” she says.

“I remember he didn’t love that,” I say. “I tried to tell him it made him look like maybe he just had a baby mama and knocked up an older broad.”

She laughs, “God, he was so embarrassed. I remember that from when I was little. He said it was disgusting, that he had to think about Mom and Dad having sex when he was a teenager because they got pregnant with me.”

“Your parents weren’t that old,” I say.

“My mom was like thirty-five when I was born. God, I miss her. My dad was probably about your age.”

“Jesus, Katie. Could we keep my age and your dad out the same sentence?” I nearly spit out my cheese dip.

“No way. If I knew it was this much fun roasting you about your age I would have done it a long time ago,” she says visibly enjoying herself.

“You miss them a lot,” I say. She nods.

“Don’t you miss your parents?”

“I don’t remember my mom. She died in an accident when I was pretty little. And my dad worked a lot. I guess I miss Fiona. She was my nanny.”

“Did she pass away?”

“A few years before my dad, yeah,” I say. “She was great.”

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Just like that, she reaches for my hand and squeezes it. “Growing up without a mom must’ve been awful. I’m so sorry.”

“It was fine. I don’t remember her or anything so it’s not like I miss her.” I say, uncomfortable.

“At least I have Rory. You don’t have any family left, do you?”

“I got some cousins. They work in the business. Marco runs the car dealership,” I say.

“That dealership, that was like the coolest thing to me when I was a kid that your family owned the biggest dealership in Southie. I thought you probably got to drive all the new cars.”

“Not really,” I say. “I washed some of them, filled the gas tanks just to help out around the place.”

“Did your dad have the Pearl or is that something you started?” she asks.

“My dad had the Oyster and the car dealership and a couple loan shark joints, pawn shops. I wanted to diversify the business holdings and open up a classier casino. Less video slots and more old school gaming tables—roulette, craps, blackjack, high roller poker tournaments. He was against it.”

“So that beautiful place was all your idea,” she says, “you did a great job. It’s a long way from pawn shops and loan sharks.”

Something stops me in my tracks. If I was gonna act stupid about something I would've naved guessed it would be Katie Donahue saying I did a good job with the casino. But here we are. Because it doesn't hit me so much as I feel aglow like embers kindle to life in my chest or behind my eyes. I feel the warmth of it all the way down to my fingertips. She's proud of me. And maybe I've waited all my life for someone who matters to be proud of me and say so. Or it could be that I've been so goddamn lonely all these years that this is what it feels like when there's a crack in the ice.

I'm breathing hard like I've sprinted half a mile flat out. Her smile is soft and fond, warm as a fire crackling on the hearth in a room I can see through a window, from outside in the freezing cold.

So, I reach for her hand. It feels like something in a movie then—like she's pulling me free of icy water that threatens to engulf me, like she's bringing me in from the cold.

“Mick?” she says, holding my hand in both of hers. I have to clear my throat before I can answer her.

“Yeah?”

“Let's get out of here, okay?”

“You want me to take you home?” I say.

“No,” she says. “I want to go with you. Are you going home?”

“I can,” I say. “I had planned on going to the Pearl, but I'd rather take you home.”

“Where's home exactly these days?”

“I’ve got a couple different places. Some nights I stay in the apartment above the Pearl.”

“But where do you live? Your actual home?” she presses.

“I got a place out on Castle Island,” I say.

“Castle Island? And to think Rory thought he was the shit when he got an apartment on East 8th Street that was about 100 square feet and the stairway smelled like a dead rat. You live on Castle Island?”

“Yeah. It’s pretty. Got a little roof deck, nice view,” I say. I keep my answer short to try and hide how much it excites me to get to show it to her.

“Take me there?”

I’m touched by the shyness in her voice. I pay the check and walk her out to my car. In the haze of the streetlight, I stand there and look at her face for a second. I can’t help leaning in and kissing her forehead right by the bandage.

“I don’t ever want to feel like that again,” I say with a reluctant groan.

“Pissed off that some jerk threw a rock at you?”

“I looked down and saw the blood running down your face. I wanted to buckle, just go to my knees, drag you down with me. I didn’t know how bad it was. Scalp wounds bleed like a sonofabitch. I know that. But when I saw you bleeding, it was the worst thing. And I’ve seen some terrible shit, Katie.”

She hugs me then, hard, just throws both her arms around me and squeezes me as tight as she can. I capture her in a bear hug and kiss the top of her head. Then I take

her to my place.

14

KATE

Everything's happening like I'm watching a video at double speed. One minute I'm wrestling with my inappropriate attraction to my much-older boss. The next minute it seems like I'm having my morning coffee up on his roof deck, watching the bright trails of the kite surfers out on Pleasure Bay.

I always loved Boston, even the noise and the bars and the shouting matches that turned into fistfights out on the sidewalk about half the time. But here, still in Southie but a little removed from the fray, it's pure luxury. The wind and the water and the fact that Mickey's place is a whole detached house with plenty of windows and smooth pale wood floors, sleek countertops and everything is open and bright.

"This isn't what I expected," I told him the first time I saw it.

"What? You think I was gonna move to fuckin' Beacon Hill?"

"I can't imagine you leaving Southie behind, no. I just meant I thought it would be some huge mansion with dark colored walls and tons of woodwork. Imposing and manly and really old-fashioned."

"My dad's house was like that. I sold it after he passed away. It was always like being suffocated. It was stale in there, full of stuff but it never felt like a home where you could relax, know what I mean?"

“Did Fiona the nanny not make it warm and fun?”

“Eh, she tried, but she went home to her own house and her own kids every night. I spent a lot of time in the kitchen growing up. The cook we had for a while was this guy named Jackson. He came from New Orleans, and he liked to talk. I’d hang out down there, help out when he’d teach me what to do, and just have somebody to talk to.”

“I’m surprised you don’t have a cook now,” I say.

“I eat out a lot. Or I cook for myself. I don’t mind it. When I think about it, the people who were kind to me when I was a kid, were people who worked for my dad. I don’t want to surround myself with people that are here just for a paycheck. I’d rather be on my own.”

“Well, I work for you, so I’m not sure if I belong here or not,” I say. Then I just lean my head against his arm because I actually know how good it feels to be here. I wouldn’t mind hearing him say that he wants me here all the time, that I look like I belong here or he wishes I didn’t work for him anymore. Anything, something to let me know that he feels it too. That this grew out of being a fling and became something a lot deeper. The truth is I’m not sure it ever was a fling.

We’re careful. No disappearing together for a long lunch or anything that wasn’t common practice when Benny was on the job. For one thing, if word gets out about our relationship, it looks bad. He’s my boss, way older than me, and that’s before anyone factors in my brother being his closest lieutenant in the organization. I recite this to myself like ten times a day as a reminder why we can’t really be together, not in real life. We can sneak around and have fun, and we can even care for each other more than I want to admit. But anything more than that? Out of the question.

I spend as much time working with Sal and his team as I do with Mickey. It’s his idea

when I start spending half my days in an office on the executive floor of the Oyster. That way I'm established in the legitimate business and if Rory comes looking for me, my secretary (Ragucci's secretary actually) answers the phone there. I don't like being away from the Pearl because it's special to me now, but I understand the point of separating my work from the more clandestine operation.

The hardest part isn't working in a different building from him and seeing him less. The problem I have is going home. It's not home, not anymore. Not since I was eighteen years old. When I was nine, Rory moved out to live with a girlfriend. Until now, that was the last time he and I lived under the same roof. He moved back into our parents' house when my dad was sick, gave up having his own place. This isn't quite like I imagined it to be. When I had to give up in LA, I hoped that we'd be close, have long talks and inside jokes and be like a family. When we were never really like that to start with. It makes me sad that we're not close, but nothing I've tried has bridged the distance.

Sometimes Mickey wakes me up in the morning with a phone call, telling me something he was thinking about while working out. I think about how lonely he must have been all this time. Maybe for his whole life. He wants to talk and listen and show me the movies he likes, play me his favorite music. I'm awash in sides of him I never suspected.

On the roof deck, which is my favorite place, he asks me about LA one night.

"What was so great about it?" he asks it with the flat vowels of a man who loves Boston with his life's blood.

I curl up beside him on the outdoor couch he has up here, his arm around me. The steady thud of his heartbeat, the rise and fall of his chest beneath my cheek is everything right now. I'm obsessed with him and I know it. It's hard not to tell him that, not to say it out loud every time I think it.

“The weather’s nice,” I say.

“The weather?” he says with disgust.

“Yeah, and I saw Gracie Abrams once when she was doing a show at some club a few years ago before her career really took off. She was amazing.”

“You lived in LA for, what, six years or so?”

“Almost seven. I did my bachelor’s and master’s degree there.”

“And the most unforgettable things you can tell me off the top of your head are the weather’s good and you saw some singer once. You’re gonna go live in some overpriced city where everybody’s had plastic surgery and eats vegan because it doesn’t snow there?”

“That’s not why,” I laugh. “You better talk to my brother about this, because I think he keeps offering to pay for all my CPA stuff and ship me back there at least twice a week. The man wants me out of Southie.”

“You think he’s worried about you being in some kind of danger?”

“Maybe, or maybe he liked me better when I was thousands of miles away,” I say and I mean to say it lightly but the joke doesn’t quite land. He hears the hollowness when I say it and hugs me tighter.

“You still want to go back there?” he asks. For a second, I think he means the house where I live with my brother. I want to stay here with him, want to live in this house and wake up beside him every day. But I choke back the words, clear my throat.

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“That’s the plan,” I say, “save some money, do the prep courses, take the tests and start job hunting for a position in LA.’

He doesn’t say anything for about a full minute. He’s gone still beside me except for his fingers in my hair, tenderly threading through my tangled waves. My hand slides up his chest and I tip my face up to look at him. His brow is furrowed, and he’s not looking at me but out toward the water or the horizon.

“I’d like to stay like this forever,” I confess, my voice barely above a whisper. “But I know we can’t. It’s impossible. But don’t think for a minute that LA sunshine and smog is better than this because there’s nothing better than this, Mick. I want you to know that. I’m probably—probably gonna spend the rest of my life chasing after anything that reminds me of this even a little bit. Anything that feels like home.”

He doesn’t look at me, doesn’t meet my eyes. I’m out here on a limb, breathless, and I feel like I am dying. I need him to say something. I look at him expectantly. I start to feel panicky, my stomach clenching and sweat coming out on my palms. I bite my lips. I was brave, told him part of how I feel and now here I am. Left hanging. Nothing in his posture or his face or his actions suggest that what I said means anything at all to him. My throat gets tight with tears and it makes me mad.

I reach up for his face and put my hand on his cheek to make him look at me. It’s agony waiting to see what those icy eyes will show me. My lip trembles. He doesn’t meet my eyes. He lets his drop shut, turns into my palm and kisses it. The shiver of desire drowns out my fear and sadness. He’s intense and heat rises in chest to blot out the gnawing hollowness that threatens to take over.

He pulls me across his lap and moves his mouth down my neck, big hands sliding up the back of my shirt. Fingers in his dark hair, I try to get his lips on mine. Instead, he strips off my shirt right there in the open air, a cold breeze lifting goosebumps on my flesh. His lips fasten on my nipple and suck as I whimper and hold on to his shoulders, his hair. It's pure indulgence with that filthy, delicious mouth working me over. A sharp pleasurespike from my nipple down my belly like a tiny hook of ecstasy tugging at my clit already. I squirm on his lap and then his hand is there where I need it.

I rub myself back and forth in his palm as he presses and cups me there. I need him, but it feels like something is off. He's using his incredible skills as a lover to distract me from what I said and what he didn't say back to me. The knot of sadness in my chest holds my lust at bay and I make myself wriggle back from his mouth and hands.

"Stop," I say, and I grab my shirt, pull it back on. Shame stains my cheeks red and I scoot off of his lap.

He still hasn't said a word. He meets my eyes though. Looking wrecked. That's the only word for it. Like he's been destroyed.

"I said too much, I know. I caught feelings for you, and I probably should've kept it to myself, but I couldn't hold it in anymore. I just want you to know how much you mean to me. I won't say anything again."

He levels me a hot gaze that reminds me how fiery blue eyes can look. It cracks right through the icy fear that had closed around my chest. Everything in me melts under his eyes, and I hold my breath, wait for him to say something, anything.

Mickey runs his thumb across my lips. He sweeps my hair back and kisses my forehead right by where that bandage used to be, and I know he still thinks about it.

A thousand things to say well up inside me. I want to scream and cry that I'm heartbroken. I want to apologize for pressuring him to define the relationship. And I want to shout at him that he has no right to be everything I ever imagined he was when I had a teenage crush on him and more. That he should be selfish or rude or have bad table manners, something to make me regret him less when I have to go. Because it's obvious I have to go, given that he didn't ask me to stay.

"The business comes first with me. It always has," he finally says, and his voice is as grim as if it were in a vault six feet under. "Of course I want you. I'd be crazy not to, but I can't give you what you deserve—a guy who works a nine to five and comes home and forgets about it till nine the next morning. You can't have my full attention or a promise to stop being a workaholic. What I want is this, you and me at my place together. You get the best of me, but there's not much of it to give is what I'm saying. It's never gonna be enough."

"Being with you at all is enough," I choke out. "I'm almost ashamed to say it. But I'll take you in my life however I can get you. If you can only give me an hour, Mick, I'll take the hour. Because one hour with you is better than the other twenty-three with anyone else."

That's it—my dignity is a distant memory. I'm begging this guy for scraps and I'm not even sorry. Because it's the sad truth. I want his time, and I'll take as much of it as he can give me. Even if it's not much at all. It isn't easy facing how far gone I am on this man

"How long do I have?" he says finally.

"Till what? Until I get sick of waiting for you to say something and I call a Lyft?"

"Until you leave, back to California."

“I finished my first prep course. The exam, the first part, is scheduled already. I spoke to HR about taking the day off.”

“Whatever you need,” he says stiffly.

“Are you asking the same thing as my brother? How soon can I leave Boston? I didn’t think when I came home that everybody would be counting down till you see the back of me,” I say, trying not to reveal how hurt I am.

“For me it’s the opposite. How many days do I have left with you, that’s the question.”

“If I pass the first time which is no guarantee because lots of people have to take it more than once, some people do it in under a year. I mean, there’s people who work on it full time for like five months and get it all in that length of time. It has four sections, the test does.”

“So you’re ready for part one. Three more to go after you pass this one. You’re saying it could be a couple months or it could be longer, right?”

“Yeah.”

“What do you say to keeping this up till you go back? If you need more time to study or something, just say so, but I want to hang on to you as long as I can.”

It’s lukewarm and noncommittal but I take that deal happily. Being wanted temporarily is better than not being wanted at all as pathetic as that sounds even to my own ears.

“Okay, how about we set up a regular meeting in the crow’s nest, Wednesday nights?” I offer, trying to make it feel more like a game, filthy and fun, and less like

settling for crumbs.

“All right, what time on Wednesdays?”

“Nine. Right after they open.”

“I know you like it when there’s people playing on the main floor. That they’re on the other side of the glass,” he observes and I nod, not bothering to deny it. If all I can have of him is a few more months, I’ll give myself this to look forward to, a scheduled rendezvous.

I watch him take out his phone and put it in the calendar as a recurring appointment. I allow myself to smile even though it feels bittersweet, like I’ve lost something I knew I could never have anyway.

15

MICKEY

I can’t make her promises. I know what she wants from me. I can tell by the tremulous, wide-eyed gaze. But I won’t do it. She’ll be back in California in a couple of months and I’ll be stuck here picking up the pieces of my life if I hand it all over to her today. I want to, don’t get me wrong. But this woman can destroy me.

I’m already hooked on hearing her every thought. I stepped out of a meeting yesterday to call and ask if she wanted to grab supper at the brewery on Castle Island. Because I crave her voice and I needed the promise of that to look forward to. Desperation creeps in so quickly, the feeling that I absolutely won’t survive this when she leaves me.

When she puts me to the question and asks me to tell her the truth, I damn near get up

and walk away. There's no way I can tell her the truth. I have to keep up my walls as much as I can and treat this like the fling it has never been. It's all smoke and mirrors, armor that can't begin to protect me. After all these years alone and lonelier than I even realized, I have Katie.

But only for a few months, only for now, because the universe is cruel that way. There's no amount of acting casual and pretending I'm just here for a good time that's going to soften the blow for me. All I can do is act more detached than I feel and set her up with managed expectations knowing that this isn't some great romance.

This doesn't end happily. I've known it all along. It's why I fought the attraction for weeks. I'll take every Wednesday with her, every minute I can get. Otherwise, I've got to try and remember how it feels to act normal. Not to walk around with my heart on my sleeve for someone I can never have.

Does setting up a weekly schedule feel seedy like she's a mistress meeting me at a cheap motel by appointment? A little bit, not gonna lie. But I rationalize it was her idea and that's also the furthest thing from how I think of her. She's proof that I'm alive, a painful awakening after probably a decade or so of being all business and shutting down anything inefficient like loneliness or longing. I wouldn't say she's a breath of fresh air in my stale life. That's a cliché and too tame for what she is. Katie's an earthquake and a volcano, with maybe a little bit of hurricane thrown in.

As for her, I know damn well she'll be fine without me. She'll go back to LA and find a man inside of a week. A better man than me. One who doesn't carry concealed or spend seven figures every year on covering up shit that would result in about forty felony convictions for myself alone. Not to mention the guys who'd go down with me. She deserves a lot better than a career criminal practically old enough to be her dad.

Telling her how I feel is out of the question. Asking her to give up a life out in California to stay in Southie and tie herself to a garden variety crook is out of the question. And I can't lie to her. Of all the shit I've done and all the illegal and unethical shit I'll continue to do, lying to Mary Katharyn Donahue isn't going to be one of my sins. Everybody draws a line somewhere, I guess. I'll cheat and steal or pop some disloyal bastard in a back alley without even using a silencer. But I will never lie to Katie.

That leaves me with the one thing I can do. Show her what I won't let myself put into words. Right here. Right now.

She hasn't left. She's put about six inches of distance between us on the couch, an overpriced rattan thing with big cushions that the decorator ordered. She put her shirt back on a minute ago which was punishment enough. Now she's grabbed the blanket off the back of the couch and wrapped it around herself like she wants to hide. Or maybe she's cold. Either way I can take care of that in no time.

"Please," I say.

I've never begged for anything. Not even for my own life when I was nineteen and on the wrong side of a rival family. But I'll beg her for this. She makes me wait for it. I'm holding my breath and half convince myself that she's gonna tell me to fuck off. Then she turns toward me and holds out her arms, still with the blanket around her so when I embrace her, she's wrapping the blanket around me too.

I kiss her like I'll die without her because that's what it feels like. The immense relief I felt when she opened her arms, the sensation of everything shifting into place, a rightness and a loosening of some knot inside me when she's back in my arms. I want to take it slow but I won't be able to, not tonight. Not after the things she said to me. I want to devour her, make her so happy that she can't remember why she ever looked at another man. I want to ruin her because she sure as fuck ruined me in an elevator

weeks ago.

I do it again now, what I did then and brush the backs of my fingers down her neck from just below her ear all the way to her collarbone in one slow, featherlight stroke. I feel the rapid pulse against my fingers, see the heat in her eyes. She knows what I'm doing and my mouth hitches up on one side, smug as hell and for good reason. Loosely, tenderly, I wrap my hand around her throat and dip my head back down to rub my lips against hers. I kiss the corner of her mouth, "You like that," I whisper. She doesn't need to answer. It's obvious.

I nip at her lips, give her little teasing kisses until she surges up toward me and swings her leg across my lap. Everything in my body tightens with her on top of me. I'm so hard that I know I'm straining my zipper. Her small, soft hands comb my hair back from my face and I shiver at her light touch that's not enough but somehow too much for me to endure at the same time.

I grab her wrists and love the gasp I startle out of her. She stares down at me as I wrap an arm around her hips and pull her flush against my chest. I can't break the eye contact, the intense, breathless quality that ratchets up my desire for her. The silence is heavy and I can almost taste the scent of her arousal between us. I'm raw with need for her, my cock jerking in the confines of my jeans. I want to rip off her clothes, just the necessary ones right now. She feels how taut and rigid I am, how desperate for her, and shows me mercy.

Katie helps me get her pants off and settles back onto my lap bare from the waist down. My eyes are riveted to the pale swell of her mound and I know the sweet flush on her skin rises from that perfect soft heat between her thighs. I cup her with my bare hand because I need to feel her and I groan right out loud. She feels so perfect I want to sink into her and stay forever. This is why I can't afford to say word to her now. Because I'll say something I regret. Like stay here and marry me.

“What do you want?” she whispers, kissing my jaw, my neck, driving me insane.

“I want to fuck you with nothing between us and make you come so hard you forget your name,” I say without hesitation.

“Oh. Please do that,” she says with a shaky laugh.

First I track the backs of my fingers down her belly and pet her, fingering her tight folds. She rewards me with a gush that is proof of her arousal. I swallow hard, fighting the urge to eat her out right now. I’m too far gone right now to take the time. I just lift her by the hips and hear my own breath stutter when she reaches for my belt. In no time she frees my cock, the thick, rigid shaft spilling into her hands eagerly. I pump into her grip involuntarily and she wraps her fist around me. My head goes back with a groan and I catch her wrist to stop her.

“Naughty girl, you’re going to make me come too soon,” I manage in a voice that sounds more like panting for breath than speech.

“Oh, Mick! Please!” she says, releasing me from her hand and grabbing my shoulders to brace herself. She knows how I can’t hold myself back. I’m going to rut in this woman until I fill her with my seed. I want it dripping down her thighs.

With a fierce surge upward I notch the head of my shaft in her entrance and split her wide open with my thick cock. It’s paradise when she bears down so hard I almost black out before I’m fully seated in her. Once I am, I feel her spread around me and can see myself impale her. Katie rides me for a minute, circling her hips, lifting up and dipping back down to consume me. It’s the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen. Her milky pale flesh, plump and sweet, parts and yields as I thrust in to the hilt. Again and again I watch, mesmerized as we move together.

She can’t keep her eyes open and is too consumed with the relentless sensation. I

wrap my arm around her hips and jerk her forward, grinding her against me while I'm deep inside her. She rocks back and forth frantically while I anchor her there, my cock twitching within her. With a scream she comes all around me, her orgasm a wave of throbbing surges that grip my cock tightly.

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I pin her down onto the couch and while she's still coming, pounding into her, drilling deeper and faster. My entire body goes rigid, and the only thing I'm capable of is acting on the instinct to fuck her senseless. As the white-hot surge rips down my spine and bows my back I plunge in one final time and empty inside her. As I do, I grind against her clit again and press just above her mound. She thrashes beneath me and cries out with a sob. I feel her spasm, the liquid drenching my thighs even as I fill her.

Our bodies are coated with sweat, sticky and spent. I can never describe the scalding flash of pleasure that burned through me when I make her squirt. I know by her trembling, she is in disbelief that she's never had it happen before.

It feels like the greatest victory of my life.

"Oh Mick! I love—" she cries with abandon, the last word swallowed up by her screams. I can't help wondering if she was saying she loves this or she loves me.

I'd be lying if I said we don't go all night. The sky goes from black to the pearl gray before dawn but we can't stop. We sleep a few minutes and then wake already kissing, already reaching for each other. I finally get her downstairs and into my bed around four and make love to her there all over again.

I know by the time I settle her on my chest to catch a couple of hours' sleep that I've shown her every way I know how that I'll love her till my last breath.

KATE

He broke my heart. I know I should've walked out, never looked back. That's not how I'm made though. Mickey can't give me what I want—an authentic relationship where I don't have to sneak around but at the same time, he is the only man who can give me what I need.

A woman with some pride wouldn't have stayed over after he didn't say anything back to me, nothing substantial, nothing real. He likes spending time with me and likes going to bed with me. That's it. Which, if we were both in college that would be fine. But I'm pushing thirty and he's looking at forty from the wrong side. That means the expiration date for casual flings is long past.

That night I spent at his place, madly in love and half crazed with it—I thought if I really let go, if I showed him exactly how I felt about him, that he'd understand. That he'd finally get it and want to meet me halfway. Maybe he wouldn't declare his undying love for me but at least say he wants to be exclusive or that he wishes he could claim me and tell the world I'm his. That was my dream. That I was somehow so perfect for him that he couldn't help rising to the occasion and telling me he wants to go for it, all in, go public and tell the world we're together. That its more than just sneaking around and fucking on every surface in the crow's nest and his house. I'm not complaining about the fucking—it's five-star excellence, but it's not enough. Big talk from a woman who got rejected and still stayed over for five orgasms.

The next day, I don't hear from him at all which is unusual. I guess I have to get used to that. It's not Wednesday for a couple more days and we don't have a meeting scheduled for today. If I want to find him, I know when he'll be at the Pearl, but part of me is ashamed to chase him down like that. I had to have some scrap of dignity or self-worth left. I woke up in his arms feeling lit from within just from the remnants of all that pleasure we shared. But it came back to me in episodes, complimented by the things he didn't say and the time and silence I gave him in case it was just a need to

gather his thoughts.

No, he's a straight shooter, right? If he loves me, he'd have said so by now. We were adults, weren't we? It makes me want to get on the first bus out of Boston and ride till I see the Pacific Ocean again. It still wouldn't be far enough. The memory of him will follow me everywhere. The way I feel when he kisses me, the glory of triumph in his eyes when I reach for him again and again always wanting more. I got into this thinking I was strong, practical, that I could handle some casual hooking up with my teenage crush. I was just lying to myself and I didn't think about the consequences, the fact that I'm going to walk around the rest of my life haunted by the weeks I spent with Mickey O'Halloran.

I delve into my prep course review materials and force myself to block out any distractions. This is what I can control. Living my life, pursuing my goals, and getting the hell out of Southie. I have to stick to the plan because deviating from the plan and having an affair with my brother's best friend was dumb and self-destructive. My impulsive tip over the edge from desire into reckless abandon looks like some high-level self-sabotage or a pitiful cry for help when I think about it objectively. I wanted attention and connection. I felt bad about failing in LA. So the obvious answer was to move back home, get a job to save money for my CPA, and get distracted by the sexy, off-limits boss.

For a couple of days I keep a strict schedule of work, studying, and blaming myself for how miserable I am. When Wednesday comes around, I argue with myself all night, barely sleeping. He messages me once after three days, saying he'll see me in the crow's nest. I debate whether to go and treat it as a business meeting, communicating only the bare minimum of work-focused information and resist any attempts he might make to touch me or even speak on a personal level.

I abandon that idea because I know I'm not going to be able to resist him. I could cancel and say I'm busy. It might get me in trouble at my job by refusing a meeting

with the boss, a meeting that was my stupid idea. Or option three, the choice the craven part of me begs for. Go to the Pearl, lock the door, take my pleasure and let him have me for an hour. Then walk out until the next week like I've had enough to hold me. Like I don't feel my body scream for him every second of the day, like I don't miss him to my core and wish I could call him like six times a day to hear his voice and tell him whatever boring thing I'm doing in the office. Missing him, mostly.

An hour before the meeting, I change into a soft pink sundress that hugs my curves and has a flared skirt that reminds me of vintage dresses that girls wore to dances in the fifties. It's sweet looking and my reflection convinces me to leave my hair down. It's a little cold to wear the sundress but I'm doing it anyway. I put a jacket on and head out.

At the Pearl I freeze up for a moment, thinking I look like I'm in costume, neither buttoned up in work appropriate clothes nor wearing something chic and expensive like the gamblers at the roulette table on the main floor. I wonder why I wore this. Because you want him to see you in it. As a grown woman in her favorite dress. Not as an accountant or stripped down as a secret lover on his couch. For once in your life, you want him to look at you and take notice.

I ride the elevator, scan my thumbprint and swing open the door. For an instant I'm scared he won't be here. That I'll be stood up and sitting here in my sad pink dress like a wallflower past her expiration date. I'll wait ten minutes and leave, I decide.

But Mickey's here, and there's a tablecloth on the table we usually use for computers and paperwork. Dishes sit beneath silver domes and there are candles lit, a bouquet of pink stargazer lilies in a vase. He stands up and comes to take my hands, kissing my cheek.

"I was hoping you'd come. I thought I'd better make it worth your time," he says.

He's so handsome standing there, and he's ordered dinner and gotten my favorite flowers. I take off my jacket and hang it on the back of my chair. It feels formal and weird but I'm the one who wanted to set a weekly date to see him and presumably hook up. I sit down, smooth my dress and when he pours wine in my glass, I put my hand on his wrist.

"You didn't have to set up a lavish dinner," I say. I like that he did it, and it's romantic. I'm not sure why I object to it. Maybe it just feels feigned. This is something a lover would do for their other half. And by no means were we in anything that could be labeled as a real relationship, so why pretend to do things like we are?

"Look at you in that dress," he says. "I love your hair down. You never wear it like that."

Where is his swagger? I wonder. The most confident man I ever met is almost hesitating.

"Wearing it down looks right with this dress. I know it's old-fashioned looking but I love it," I say.

"I love it, too. I—" he goes to a drawer and takes something out, brings it to me. It's a velvet box. "Open it."

I feel my heart thump as I lift the lid. On a bed of creamy satin there's a stunning diamond necklace. It's delicate and gleams with a bluish fire under the candlelight. I touch the stones with my fingertips, a row of round diamonds with narrow baguette diamonds between them. I look up at him again, a question in my eyes.

"According to the jeweler it's a vintage midcentury riviére necklace," he says. He takes it from the case and places it at my throat, fastens it. I feel the coolness and

weight settle against my skin. It feels strange and awe-inspiring.

“My dress is from the fifties,” I tell him “So they go together. When did you—”

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“I got it a couple of weeks ago. I’ve been waiting for the right moment. I think this is the right moment. Do you like it?”

My fingers flutter to my neck and touch it. I nod. “It’s perfect. Thank you. But I can’t—I don’t need a diamond necklace. I’m here to save up for the test to do my CPA. I’m not a sugar baby or something.”

“I know,” he says. “I wanted to get it for you so I did. There are no strings attached. You can walk out of here with it now and say you don’t want to see me anymore.”

I’ve hurt his feelings. He is keeping it light, but I see how serious his eyes are and how tense his shoulders look.

“I don’t mean it wasn’t nice of you. You’re very generous. But I didn’t come here to get a fancy dinner and some gifts, Mick. I’m here to see you.”

“I know,” he says, “but I did this because I want to. You deserve to feel special and I want to make that happen. If I can only get Wednesday nights then they need to be great nights. This is just good planning,” he says.

Good business, is what I hear between the lines. He’s trying to keep me happy. Treat me like a mistress who gets dates and presents to mollify her so she doesn’t make demands. I touch the necklace again and decide that I’m not turning it down on principle. I’m keeping it.

Mick takes my hand, snatching it up from the table and kisses it. I don’t know what to think other than he’s very good at being the handsome, charming lover. I’m supposed

to play the pampered mistress, I guess. I let him hold my hand and kiss it, saying complimentary things about how beautiful I look. I'm scowling a little to myself. He's not acting like himself and I feel off-balance.

Is it because I chose this, to be his secret with the standing weekly date, and now I think I sold myself too cheaply? I gave up on anything real with him and settled for hiding in the shadows for as long as I'm in town. I gave up hope is what I did, and now I feel like this is something seedy.

It's like I'm outside my own body sort of floating above the scene instead of being present. He notices that I'm distracted and asks if I'm feeling okay.

"I guess I'm just tired. And this feels different to me, like it's not real life anymore."

"We've spent a lot of evenings in the crow's nest," he says. "Do you want to go somewhere else? My house?"

He's solicitous and considerate, but it feels fake. Like we're playing roles now. Or maybe we've been playing roles all along and I just now noticed it. I can't shake the weirdness, the sense that something's not right.

"No. I just want to know, why dinner? And jewelry? Why now?"

"You let me know that you thought you were catching feelings for me. I got to thinking maybe I led you on and let you think there was gonna be a big love story with a happy ending. But I don't ride off in the sunset, and I'm a Southie boy. I'm not gonna follow you to LA or give up the business. I won't turn out to be the good guy. It's only fair to let you know what I can give, and what I can't. This, I can do. I can have my secretary order dinner, and I can buy you something nice to let you know I like having you around. You decided on a night you want us to meet, and I can respect that. It doesn't mean I don't miss you the other days of the week, but that was

what you wanted after I laid my cards on the table. So this is where we are.”

He's so reasonable about it, and he seems patient and clear, like he's respecting my boundary or something. I want to knock the plates off the table and tell him I don't want this. I want things the way they were but better, with more of his time and attention, whole days spent together, weekends in bed, growing closer instead of putting our affair into a box and labeling it 'Wednesdays 8pm'. I've painted myself into a corner and don't know how to fix it.

I take a drink of my wine and shake my head. “Just forget I said anything.”

“Which time?” he challenges, which I don't expect.

I expect him to say okay and then go back to the wining and dining routine. But I see it now. This is Mickey when he's pissed at me. I almost smile to myself because now I get it. That's what felt off to me. Not just that I don't like the arrangement we made. I could sense him acting differently toward me and it was the way he covers frustration or anger—with charm.

“All of it. Especially when I said I had feelings for you. That's where I screwed up. I either scared you off or made you mad because this is what I get. Old wine and older diamonds.”

I reach up and unfasten the necklace, feel the weight drop off of me. “Here. I'm not that woman. Maybe your others wanted presents and stuff. I just wanted to know you and be with you. Maybe keep this for someone else.”

“There isn't anybody else,” he says, and his mouth is a hard line now. Good, I think, now we can both be mad.

“You'll find somebody soon enough. Look at you,” I say almost derisively. “You

look like a goddamn Versace ad.”

“I’m Irish, not Italian,” he says unnecessarily.

“You know what I mean. The jaw, the hair, the piercing eyes. Suit, expensive watch. The whole package. Your picture could sell a lot of cologne.”

“I’ll keep that in mind if I decide to branch out in my business,” he says. “I don’t get you Katie. You tell me this is what you want and now you’re mad. What gives?”

I shake my head. “It just feels like, okay so I say I love you and you don’t want to have that conversation but you also don’t want me to leave, so you get me some big dumb present so I can pretend that’s proof of your feelings that you don’t admit to or at least I have something expensive to hold onto instead of any kind of commitment. It’s a substitute for emotional availability.”

“What?” he says.

“You don’t love me but you felt bad enough about it that you got me a gift to try and smooth it over,” I simplify.

“When the hell did you ever say you love me?” He says and gets to his feet. He’s pulled on the front of his hair so it’s sticking up and looks less perfect. I’m meanly glad about that.

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“At your place. When I said you feel like home to me, and I’ll be chasing after anything that reminds me of this until I die.”

The other night he was silent for so long, I thought he’d turned to stone. Now he’s the opposite. He looks sort of frantic.

“For God’s sake, Mick, I told you an hour with you is better than—”

“Twenty-three with someone else. I know. How was I supposed to know that means you love me?”

“How could you not know it means that?” I burst out. “How can you be so smart in business and so fucking stupid in life? I’ve ruined myself over you, and I signed up for it, I know. This is my fault. I’m the idiot who said I’d take one hour, that I wanted you however much you can give me and it’s not a hell of a lot.”

“But I told you—” he starts.

“I know what you told me!” I interrupt. “And I know how stupid I am for wanting anything more than the pitifully little you’re willing or able to give. But I’m done now.”

I stand up and hold out the necklace to him. He doesn’t take it. Instead, he rounds the table and grabs me by the arms. “Do you think I’m going to let you walk away from me?” He almost growls.

“Yeah, I do. Because you’re too chicken shit to be with me for real. Why not just let

me go?"

"You owe me an hour. You said so, that an hour with me was better. I want my hour."

"Maybe you don't deserve an hour," I say defiantly.

"Maybe I don't, but I still want it."

"I can't go on like this, Mickey. I've saved up what I need for the prep courses and testing to get my license. I'm your temporary money man and that's all I can be. Until Benny Ragucci comes to take my place."

The ragged laugh he gives has no humor in it. "You think Benny's gonna replace you?"

"Is Wednesday night not in his job description?" I ask bitterly.

"There's nobody on the goddamn Earth that could take your place and if you don't know it by now then you're not as smart as you think you are. If this is it, just get out."

He shakes his head in disgust, turning his back on me. I say no more, dropping the necklace onto the table with a heavy, resounding clunk.

I take my leave and make it all the way home before I start crying as I unlock the door. Of course it's the one time Rory is at home. He's got a game on TV and he's scrolling on his phone.

"What the hell's wrong with you?" He asks.

“I’m fine,” I mutter and go to my room. He doesn’t get up and ask if I’m okay or if I want to talk. There’s no reason why he should. He’s never been the model big brother to me anyway. I pop in my earbuds and listen to an audiobook to take my mind off of things, but it doesn’t completely halt the tears running down my face.

17

MICKEY

I used to love my house. Even before the decorator got done fixing it up. The location’s good, the brewery down the street has great takeout, and most importantly I like the view. I loved the roof deck until Katie fucking ruined it. The house, the deck, the steam shower. All ruined.

Katie fucking left me. Walked out and didn’t look back. She still comes to work, does her job, and sits in our scheduled meetings with the most closed-off and all-business demeanor I’ve ever seen. Her face is shuttered and her eyes don’t have the expressions I know, nothing to give me a clue about what she’s thinking.

It’s quite possible she hates me. I refuse to broach any personal topic with her now. She made herself clear. I don’t have anything new to say on the subject, and going over the same tired reasons would only hurt more. I don’t text or call. I keep it as professional as she does and I fucking hate it.

It’s a desolate wasteland here, like Siberia or something. My nice house feels like it’s haunted now. Every day I run across something that guts me. Her hair tie in my bathroom. Her music on my Spotify. Her voice on my phone—that one’s my fault because I torture myself by listening to her voicemails from a few weeks ago.

I visit Benny at the swanky inpatient rehab. He’s in good spirits but he looks like he lost about thirty pounds and his skin looks ashy and pale. I hear that he’s making

good progress, but it'll be a few weeks before he's cleared to work. I make sure he knows he's irreplaceable but that he can retire with full pension and my gratitude if he wants to. Good old Benny at least resists this idea and says he'll be fit as a fiddle in no time, that he wouldn't know what to do with himself if he retired. He puts in another good word for his nephew and I act like I respect that suggestion.

Rory calls while I'm leaving rehab to tell me the bad news.

"You're gonna want to sit down."

"I'm in the car. I'm sitting down. Just tell me."

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“They found a kid outside the Oyster, in back by the dumpster.”

“Shit. What happened?”

“OD. So far all we know is he was sixteen, from Southie, and his girlfriend says he scores pills there all the time.”

“Jesus. Somebody’s dealing behind the Oyster and our security didn’t clock it? I want every team member in a meeting in half an hour.”

“I’m a step ahead of you, Mick. We’re gonna be waiting in the conference room when you get here. I’ve debriefed the guys and I’m gonna send you the info.”

“Thanks,” I tell him. Before I open the voice memo he sends me I know what it’ll say. Somebody isn’t dealing behind the Oyster. They’re dealing from the Oyster. An inside job. That’s why security isn’t seeing a bunch of shady exchanges on their rounds or the cameras. Because it’s one of mine, someone that knows the workings of the joint and how to capitalize on the location and avoid detection. I crack my knuckles in anticipation.

The room is full when I walk in, standing room only. The beefy bouncers are what you’d expect, but half my team is plainclothes, lots of them are women, average size, and dressed to appear unremarkable. The best kind of security to have is the kind that blends in. Right now, I wonder which ones of them know who’s behind this, and if the drug ring begins and ends with my own men. Or if the Oyster is just one location on their route.

I give them the lowdown to start with and inform them that I respect their loyalty to everyone in our ranks but that I am a far more dangerous enemy than a drug dealer and they would do well to provide Rory or myself with any information that leads to the uncovering of all members of the drug ring, and intel will be rewarded. I meet with Rory in my office afterward.

“What’s your read?” I ask.

“Castleton was shitting bricks in there. I want ten minutes with him in the basement.”

“You gonna try and talk to him?”

“Talk?” he scoffs. “Yeah. Talk.” His tone is sarcastic.

“If he knows something, find out. Don’t warn him. Just take him for a walk.”

“Will do. You okay? You been lookin’ tired the last week or so.”

“Thanks, bro. You look like shit, too,” I deadpan. I know why I look like hell but I’m not gonna tell him his baby sister walked out on me.

“Yeah, okay. I’ll let you know what Castleton says.”

“Thanks,” I say.

Then I do what I’ve been avoiding. I call Katie.

“There’s been an incident. We need to meet,” I say, my tone clipped and cool.

“When?”

“Twenty minutes. Crow’s nest.”

“Fine.”

She hangs up and I get a car to the Pearl. I’m waiting when she arrives all buttoned up and neatly pressed, that riot of hair tamed into a ponytail. It’s a physical blow to my chest to see her. She puts her laptop down and take a seat.

“Was there an incident?”

“Yeah,” I say. “Why would you think there wasn’t?”

“It’s Wednesday, Mick,” she says. The way she says my name undoes me. God, I miss her. The sick swoop in my gut of loneliness, the way I feel her say my name in my teeth, in my bones. Her eyes flick to mine and for an instant I see it like a mirror. She let her cover slip and I saw that she’s hurting too. It’s all I need. I take her hand. She shuts her eyes and I watch her throat work as she swallows hard, squeezes my hand. She rolls her lips under and her shoulders sag for an instant.

“It wasn’t to buy you off or make you shut up,” I say out of nowhere like my brain is hijacked. “The necklace was because I wanted to give you something nice, that you’d like. It had you written all over it. It’s in the drawer.”

“What?”

“You got a drawer at my house, in my dresser. I had it ready to surprise you that night, when you came home with me. When I thought you would come back home with me. There’s pajamas and—” I stop myself. My pride finally kicks in.

She blinks fast and looks away. She’s about to cry. I see it and I want to punch myself in the face for it. Nothing I said matters. It’s still the same crappy stalemate. I take the

hand she hasn't pulled away and I hold it in both of mine.

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“Come back to me, Kate,” I say in the lowest voice, it’s barely words at all, more like a growl.

She dips her head and kisses my knuckles. My whole body tightens like a fist at her gentle kiss. My chest feels fit to just open with whatever swells inside it. She looks up at me still silent and shakes her head. I know she can’t, that’s what she’s telling me. I have to make myself withdraw my hands from the table and release her.

I grit my teeth with the force of it. I’m disobeying every instinct when I let go of her. My whole body feels like a prison riot broke out when I let go of her hand. Like alarms go off and locks slam shut.

Katie goes to the bar cart and gets a water, drinking part of it before she returns to the table. I wait, not speaking. The least I can do is give her a minute to collect herself. I can’t begin to get myself under control beyond the tightly leashed, white-knuckle grip I have holding myself right at the edge.

“A kid OD’d behind the Oyster.”

“I heard, she says.

“I should’ve had you come to my office. I forgot where you were working,” I admit.

“I think of you here.”

“Don’t,” she says and her voice rises a little.

“Somebody inside is working with the drug ring or running it. I need you to

investigate and I don't mean our books. I want the security team checked out first because somebody's on the take at the very least. I want their personal bank records, transactions, any big purchases or new lines of credit."

"I'll have it for you by the end of the day tomorrow."

"I thought you'd object. It's unethical."

"Nothing new. I work for the Mob, Mick," she says dryly. "I didn't think you called me up here to the soundproof top security room because you wanted me to go to Mass and say a rosary for the kid."

"That's fair," I say.

"Anything else?" she asks.

"My secretary is gonna send you their HR info. The names, the accounts where we direct deposit. I've got Sal running credit reports now. There's about thirty people I want you to look into and that's just the start."

"Okay."

"Thanks. I went to see Benny this afternoon," I say.

"How's he doing?" Her tone is even and neutral, using as few words as she can like they cost her a thousand dollars each and she's on a budget.

"Says he's doing better. Looks like crap. They're saying another four or five weeks to clear him. That okay?"

"I guess. I said I'd stay on till he's back."

“If you can’t, I get it. Just say so. I’ll—”

“What? Promote the gallon bottle of hair gel?” She scoffs. “He can’t do this work. No fuckin’ way.”

I hear the trace of Southie creep back in her voice and it warms me. She doesn’t want to give up the job or the investigation into who’s running drugs. She’s got her teeth in this case like the bulldog I knew she was. I want to kiss her like a fever’s seized me.

“You need to go,” I say through gritted teeth.

“Why?” she says and I know she’s teasing me. That she knows.

“You fuckin’ know why,” I manage, and I sound pissed off at her. She cracks a smile but it’s joyless.

“I know why,” she says. “And I’m sorry.”

“So am I. You don’t know how goddamn sorry.” I grind the words out. When she stands, I get to my feet automatically.

“Thanks,” she says. “For looping me in so I can help. I’m sure you would’ve rather had Sal do it.”

“He’s not as good as you. I need the best. And if there’s one thing I know for sure, Katie, it’s that you’re the best I’ve ever had.”

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“I’ll get you the info as soon as I can,” she says curtly and I walk her to the door. I can’t help it. When I reach around her to put my hand on the knob, I lean in and kiss her cheek. I feel her gasp. I expect her to step back, self-protective and reproach me with her eyes. Instead, she lays her hand on my forearm for just a second and I’m suspended in time. It’s agony. Heaven and hell and no way to pick just one.

“You were right,” she says, barely audible. “I need to go.”

18

KATE

You got this.

The alert pings on my phone at five in the morning the day of my CPA exam. Mickey remembers the day and time, reaching out to send me one message that doesn’t say good luck but informs me of the faith he has in me. A warm flush that’s something like happiness flits through me before I push it down and get ready to go. Rory comes in from the gym.

“I have my test today,” I tell him.

“Good luck,” he says and heads to take a shower. So encouraging, as usual.

The test is a blur but I’m so focused on trying to recall everything I’ve studied and fold it into my responses. I’m done right before the four hours are up. I go home exhausted and wander around the house doing laundry and dishes, dumping some

bagged salad in a bowl and eat that with about half a bottle of dressing on it.

I can't think, and I want to talk about the exam because I'm so wired from the pressure and adrenaline of it. But the person I want to talk to is the same guy who quizzed me on the test prep while we sat on his roof deck with my bare feet in his lap. The memory feels like getting punched repeatedly so I make myself quit thinking about it.

Unable to relax, I go through more info on the Oyster employees starting with the lowest paid. By this time, I know who has a new seventy-five-inch smart TV and who has fertility problems. Every detail. I squirm a little about some of the private stuff, and I will be glad to work in the legal sector again when this is done, but I don't want anyone else cracking this case. Something makes me want to be the one to find the traitor and deliver the name to Mickey myself.

I have a couple suspects and I dig deeper on them, eventually falling asleep with my laptop. Mickey's out of office the following day, but I shoot him an email letting him know I've narrowed it down. He asks me to meet with him the next evening to go over my data. I'm so excited to see him that it's borderline embarrassing. I flat iron my hair so I can take it down for the meeting. It's reckless, and I own that about myself.

We get food sent up from the restaurant, and I lay out the red flags. I don't have a single definitive culprit yet, but I have six names, people close in age and neighborhood of residence who work the same or similar shifts and have all shown an increase in purchase transactions as well as increased credit card activity without carrying a balance in the last four or five months.

"This is good. How'd you think to look at their appliances and car repairs?"

"That's big stuff that people put off when they're paycheck to paycheck. Before I

sold my car after my bachelor's in LA, I had to wait three months to save up for the AC to get fixed.”

“You thought of everything. I’m gonna give the names to Rory tonight.”

“Okay. Is there anything—” I stop when I hear an alert on my phone. It’s the tone I’d set for the NASBA score release. I grab my phone and check the app.

I shoot to my feet, “Ninety-six! I got a ninety-six!” I crow, beaming.

“Of course you did. You knew that shit backward and forward. C’mere,” he rounds the table and I go to him, beaming.

Mickey grabs me in a bear hug, lifts me off my feet. “I’m so fuckin’ proud of you, Katie,” he says into my hair.

“Thank you,” I say, my throat tight and happy. “I couldn’t have done it without you. You gave me a job so I could afford it, you helped me study—”

“It was the least I could do.”

“I miss you,” I blurt out. “I miss you so much. I want to talk to you like fifty times a day.”

“I do as well,” he says roughly, and he looks away.

“I don’t know how I’m gonna do this,” I admit, stepping back from his embrace. I feel cold and bereft as soon as I’m out of his arms. “It sucks.”

“I’m sure it does,” he agrees. “But you’re gonna be in the twenty percent that pass all four the first try. I know it. You’re that smart.”

“I don’t mean how I’m gonna do the CPA, Mick,” I say, exasperated.

“I know what you meant,” he says and it sounds bitter. I step toward him before I stop myself and put my hand on his arm.

“Mick,” I say softly.

“Better not touch me unless you mean it,” he says gruffly.

“I mean it,” I blurt out.

He kisses me then. I don’t even get a chance to catch my breath before he’s on me, mouth rocking over mine and every dip and slide of his tongue feels so good it’s got to be a sin. I grab on to his shirt so hard I’m going to tear it any second now. I know I’m crying as we kiss, and he brushes tears off my face with his thumb without even breaking the contact. He combs his fingers through my hair and strokes my scalp and my neck. It’s a shock in the best way, how it electrifies my whole body.

“Let me take you out to celebrate,” he says against my cheek when he breaks the kiss. “If you don’t, I’ll have you right here.”

“Is that supposed to make me want to go have dinner? Because I’m not sure you wanna threaten me with a good time.”

He chuckles and I feel the rumble of it low in his chest because I’m pressed so tight right up against him.

“Katie, it’s your call. You wanna go out and celebrate?”

“Yeah, I do,” I admit. “I’m really excited and proud about this.”

“You should be. Let’s go.”

We take the elevator down to his car and a driver whisks us to a high-end restaurant I’ve only heard about because of the six-month waiting list. They take us right in and seat us at a private dining room in the back.

“I can’t believe we got in here,” I say, taking in the sumptuously decorated room in sleek black and white with purple accents. Candlelight and soft music seem to envelop us. “No menu?” I ask.

“We’re having the chef’s tasting menu,” he explains and tells me what it is. It sounds like it is going to be the fanciest food on the planet.

Over the first few courses, I tell him all about the CPA exam. He listens and then starts talking as fast as he can like he’s got pent up things to tell me. I grin and take it all in. I’ve missed his considerate listening and his unexpected enthusiasm over telling me something random he saw or read about.

By the time we’ve finished the fifth course, I shift in my seat a little uncomfortably.

“You okay?” he asks.

“I’m great,” I say. “This place is gorgeous.”

“Yeah,” he says. “But I’m ready to get out of here.”

“Me too,” I agree.

He gestures to the server and tells them we’re leaving. He pays with his phone and when the man objects and offers to wrap up the remaining two courses, Mick tells him that he can have them. “Sit down and have dessert or whatever,” he says. “Tell the manager it was my special request.”

As soon as we’re in the car, Mickey starts talking rapid-fire once more.

“I miss you, Katie. So much. I want you back,” he says. I gape at him, my mouth open. “In my life, in my house. Everything’s trash without you, and it took me a lot

less than three weeks to figure that out.”

“You’re serious?”

“I am. How do you feel about it?”

“I miss you too,” I tell him. “I’m miserable without you.”

“Come home with me. Spend the night,” he says. I nod.

“I have to go back and get my tablet.”

“In the crow’s nest? Nobody’s going in there except the cleaners tonight. Don’t worry about it,” he says.

“I really want to go get it now,” I tell him. “It’s important to me.”

“Okay,” he relents and directs the driver to stop at the Pearl.

I grab Mickey’s hand as we walk to the side entrance. I smile up at him, gleeful and excited to go back and reunite with him at his house, the real celebration of my exam score and us coming to our senses.

I’m still smiling when I see the man step out of the door and head toward us with a gun in his hand.

19

MICKEY

With one move I position Katie behind me, my body between her and the gun. My first thought is an exasperated Where the hell are my men? It registers an instant later that this is one of my men. I recognize him and the betrayal tastes as bad as I will make his death when this is over.

There are IT security officers watching the cameras. It won't take a full minute for them to deploy a proper guard detail to this door and finish it up. All I need to do is buy sixty seconds. I could take this bastard in thirty if I didn't have to worry about Katie. Because that's what locks me up. He could shoot her and then every nightmare I've had about her bleeding out in this parking lot comes true. There would not be enough vengeance in this world or the next.

"Are you the one, then?" I ask, affecting casualness.

He snorts. "Why would I be important? You don't even know my name, boss."

"I know you, Oscar. We hired you about two years ago at the Oyster as an assistant in sanitation and janitorial."

He shrugs. "That don't prove nothin'. So you're good with names. Nobody ever moved me up or promoted me to deal blackjack like I wanted. I was just stuck there."

"And that's your villain origin story? A janitorial assistant who didn't get a highly

competitive job dealing blackjack on his first try out of the gate?” I say. He’s insulted which is enough to keep him talking I hope.

Katie’s holding the back of my jacket with both hands. I feel the warm press of her forehead between my shoulder blades where she’s hiding her face and clutching me. I want to reach for her, comfort her, but I can’t so much as get a breath wrong.

Oscar’s wiry, early twenties, and I outweigh him by about fifty pounds. I can get the drop on him easily except his pupils are blown wide. He’s high as a damn kite and that makes him unpredictable.

“You overlooked me. I’m not worth your time so I made my own way. Proved I was too good for your crappy casino. I can make more in a week now than I did in a month at the Oyster.”

“Pushing oxy to teenagers?”

“I want what you owe me,” he spits. “Gimme your wallet.”

“You’re gonna try and mug me in the parking lot of my own casino,” I say. I don’t go for my wallet or anything else. I keep it casual, hands where he can see them.

“Like you got fuckin’ clean hands and never did nothin’ wrong? You’re a killer and everybody knows it.”

“Then what does that make you? Besides stupid enough to bring a Nerf gun to a firefight?”

Oscar glances at his thirty-six and it’s all the time I need. I pull my nine millimeter out and pop him in the shoulder. His gun clatters to the concrete and I knock him out in one punch. By the time the guards bust out of the door behind him all that’s left is

cleanup. I turn and pull Katie into my arms. She's crying and I shrug off my jacket to put around her, holstering my gun and scooping her up. I carry her to the car and tell Hank to get us out of here.

"Take me home," she sobs.

"We're going home," I croon, gathering her in my lap, kissing her hair. She shakes her head adamantly.

"I can't, Mick. I can't do it. Please. Just take me to my house. I thought I was gonna watch you die there in the parking lot—" she breaks off.

It's devastating to hear the terror in her voice, but the resignation is worse. She's not the first woman to say it and won't be the last. But she's the only one that's ever mattered to me.

All the way to her house, I hold her, stroke her hair, kiss her. First her temple and her cheek, her eyelids, then the corner of her mouth. Her tearstained lips cling to mine and I taste the salt. It feels like the end of the world to me. I want her to stay, to go home with me, but I know without another word that she's sure. She's done with me. Not because I'm a workaholic who won't commit to her, but because of who I am. Too dangerous and not worth the risk.

When she gets out at her house, I can see Rory's not home.

"Can I come in with you? I don't think you oughta be alone," I offer. She shakes her head. She knows nothing will stop this same as I do. "Let me call Rory to come home then."

"No, I'm okay on my own." she says, "Thanks for—dinner," she says and I want to apologize but I can't even say what for.

I get in the car and leave as soon as she gets inside. The chill that rockets through me feels final, like a curse I can't escape now. I go back to the Pearl to deal with the fallout, to find out what we know and who to question. There's no way in hell I'm going home tonight. When all hell breaks loose, I stand at the gates like the devil himself.

20

KATE

I wake up sick as I've ever been. I had half a glass of wine last night at the restaurant. I'm not hungover but it feels worse than that. I'm clammy and sick to my stomach. As soon as I reach for my phone to check the time, I know I'm going to puke. I stagger to the bathroom in time to vomit hard into the toilet. I think wistfully of the days when Mom would have been here, told me to rinse out my mouth and handed me a washcloth for my forehead before she tucked me in bed and fetched me a glass of ginger ale.

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I stumble back to bed, messaging HR to report I'm sick and can't make it to work today. I roll over in bed and berate myself for giving in to anxiety. It has to be that. I'm lightheaded and freaked out about last night and I puked. It's worse but not too far off from the anxiety attacks I had before I left LA when I realized I couldn't make rent anymore and I had to admit failure.

I squeeze my eyes shut and tried counting backward from one thousand by sixes which is just annoying enough to distract from the anxiety sometimes. Unfortunately, just when I'm getting to the seven hundreds, I feel another wave of nausea. I make it to the toilet where I grab a towel to cover up as I lay on the floor, teeth chattering, head swimming. I wake up a short bit later and manage to rinse out my mouth and crawl into bed. It's two in the afternoon and I just pull the covers up and lay there, miserable.

I'm sick off and on all day. I doze, I cry, I throw up some more, and mostly I feel like crap. Weak and dizzy and I gag every time I even think about last night's dinner. I take a bath very slowly and carefully. I sip some water and eat a cracker. When that stays down, I eat a few more and eventually manage to make a grilled cheese and eat it.

I go through my work emails on my phone but I don't have my laptop or tablet—they're in the crow's nest still. If I hadn't insisted on going back for them, we wouldn't have been in danger and I could've gone home with Mickey and spent the night in his arms.

Mistakes were made, that was for sure. I spend the rest of the evening starting my next prep course and taking abundant notes. My heart isn't in it but it's a decent

distraction. Around ten, I get a call from Mickey.

“Hello?”

“Are you okay?” He asks gruffly.

“Yeah,” I answer weakly.

“I heard you were sick. I got your tablet and all, thought I’d bring it by or I can have one of the guys deliver it.”

“No, that’s fine. That’s nice of you. Go on and bring it by,” I say.

“Okay. I’ll be there in like five minutes.”

I scramble out of bed and drag a brush through my hair. It doesn’t help much. I look like a pasty gray ghost or a dying Victorian child with big dark circles and clammy pale skin. I grab a robe to cover my pajamas and run down to the door. He’s about to ring the bell when I open it.

He’s so big that he fills the doorway and towers over me. It’s a physical sensation, how large he is, and my stomach swoops in response. He holds out my laptop and table alongside my notebook and file folders.

“I don’t really care if you do any work while you’re sick. I just wanted an excuse to drop by and check on you,” he says.

“I know,” I tell him, my voice too high and thready.

“You think it was the duck fat thing that made you sick?” He asks.

I'm about to answer when the mere thought of the duck fat makes me recoil, stomach heaving. I clap a hand over my mouth and dash for the kitchen sink where I throw up. I cough and choke, rinse my mouth right from the faucet. His hand on the small of my back startles me.

"I thought you left," I stammer.

"Why would I leave with you this sick?" He asks.

"I'm sorry, this is embarrassing. I don't know what's wrong with me."

"I thought maybe you were upset after last night, but I can see you're actually really sick."

"Check to see I'm not playing hooky?" I ask.

"Not unless I can stay and play hooky with you," he says in a low voice that's nearly a growl.

"You don't have to," I start.

"Would you feel better if I stayed a while?"

"Of course, I would but then we'd be right back where we started from. There's no way for us to be together. There's too many moving parts. Too many complications. The least of which being I'm Rory's baby sister."

"Let's get one thing straight right now, Mary Kathryn Donahue," he says and his face is angry all of a sudden. Not the dialed-up charm anger but the kind he lets me see.

I like it when he says my full name, I admit it. It gives me the shivers in a good way.

“You’re more than just Rory’s little sister. You are a strong, beautiful, fierce, independent woman who deserves the world.”

“Thank you,” I say, and I don’t qualify whether I’m thanking him for the compliment, thanking him for bringing my laptop, or for being the single brightest spot in my entire life. I’m afraid if I try to explain, I’ll just start crying. So I walk him to the door. I feel about a hundred years old, my steps heavy and plodding.

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“Goodbye, Katie,” he says. “This was—something special.” I nod, blink furiously.

“It really was. I’ll see you at work but only at work,” I tell him and shut the door.

I go back to my room and cry myself to sleep, hoping tomorrow will be a better day.

Except again, I wake up right at dawn, sick as can be. Maybe it’s a virus, I think, and I google what is going around near me. Apart from a respiratory virus, there isn’t much in the way of contagion currently. I give it another day to make sure I have no fever.

By the third day I drag myself to the walk-in clinic. I’m lightheaded, still puking multiple times a day and tired beyond description.

After what seems like ages I get called back, weighed, wondering how I gained three pounds while throwing up for the past few days and my vitals checked. I describe my symptoms and gloss over the contents of the tasting menu that doesn’t bear thinking of.

Another hour after that I’ve been swabbed for strep throat and flu, had my blood and pee tested, and filled out a depression questionnaire that I’m pretty sure I flunked. By the time a doctor comes in I just want to leave.

“Date of your last period?” the doctor asks after introducing himself.

“Uh—” I try to think but my brain is foggy. I take out my phone and check the calendar. It can’t be right. I didn’t have one last month? I scroll back to the previous

month and give the date.

“So about eight weeks ago? Right. How long have you had these symptoms?”

“Three days like I told the nurse,” I say.

“Best guess is that you’re around six weeks,” he pronounces.

“Six weeks till what?” I ask.

“You conceived around six weeks ago. Does that sound right?”

I stare at him like he started speaking Japanese to me. “You think I’m pregnant?”

“No, Miss Donahue, I know you’re pregnant. The results are in your digital chart. No strep, no flu, white count is fine, pregnancy test positive. Right here.” He sounds so pleased with himself.

I shake my head as if to clear it. He starts talking about vitamins, drinking plenty of water and setting up an appointment with my gynecologist.

“She’s in LA,” I say. “I’m just here for a short while”

“Getting back sooner is better than later in your condition. Obviously, you can travel into the sixth month, but you’ll be more comfortable if you don’t wait that long. And you’ll need monthly checkups with your OB.”

“Right,” I say flatly. “So can I leave?”

“Of course. Do you have any questions?”

“None that you can answer,” I say and I leave with pamphlets and samples of prenatal vitamins that I’m to start ASAP.

The ride home is icy numbness. I want my mom. I always miss her but this is the moment when losing her hurts all over again. At home I turn on the shower and stand under it until the water goes cold. I don’t know how to handle this.

The practical steps are obvious: make a new patient appointment with a gyno, take prenatal vitamins, get exercise and rest, drink lots of water. Make plans. It’s that last part I get stuck on. I have plans. Pass three more sections of the CPA exam, then apply for jobs in and around LA. Return to California where the weather’s nice and no one has ever pulled a gun on me in a parking lot or anywhere else. It’s a no brainer. Or it would be if I wasn’t in this situation. How did growing a child inside me fit in with all these plans?

I dry off and yank open the drawer with my birth control pills in it. I take them out, count them, and realize I missed a couple last month. I start googling whether taking birth control pills before I knew I was pregnant could have hurt the baby and if the half glass of wine I drank at that fancy restaurant is going to cause developmental problems. Reassured that as long as I don’t ingest any more alcohol or birth control it should be okay, I start down the rabbit hole of what to do when you find out your pregnant by your ‘ex-boyfriend’.

I find a Facebook group for single moms who had kids after a breakup. Most of them ‘co-parent’ and have some kind of schedule they follow where the baby is with mom part of the time and dad part of the time. My stomach drops at that thought. My baby, who is approximately the size of a lima bean right now and who I’ve only known about for a few hours, would be away from me for days at a time. That is if Mickey wants anything to do with this child. Tears spring to my eyes and I dash them away impatiently.

A new terror seizes me and I almost double over with the force of it. My baby will be in danger because of who their father is. Rory and I grew up on the outskirts of the Mob. Our dad was a fence, and he was midlevel, not big enough to be a target. Mickey on the other hand is the boss. There's no one more powerful. And while the scope of his network can protect him, it wasn't enough to stop a disgruntled janitor from finding him alone on a parking lot.

His reach, all his men and no one was there but him to protect himself and me. If Oscar had been faster, less talkative, sober, or if Mickey had hesitated then it could have ended up a lot worse. I can't count on luck to keep my baby out of harm's way.

Going to the clinic was supposed to put me on the road to recovery, not ruin. I feel worse than I did when I went. Overwhelmed doesn't even begin to cover it.

Telling Mickey the truth is the right thing to do. I know it in my bones. But I'm scared, and the fear screams at me to flee. Go to LA and don't look back. Ever.

21

MICKEY

Fury doesn't even begin to describe it. The way I want to burn through the ranks of my organization until I root out every coward who's paving the road to hell with coin they make pushing drugs on my streets. I don't pump millions into the schools and community centers and hospitals in Southie just to be undercut by moneygrubbing traitors who don't care what happens to the people in this town, to their own people. It sickens me.

We keep hitting dead ends. Whether it's the money trail or the questions we asked Oscar it never goes far. Maybe we find two or three other people involved but not the whole drug ring, not the suppliers or the top guy, the ambitious asshole bent on carving out a name and fortune on the backs and chalk outlines of our neighbors.

Part of the rage I feel is righteous indignation over what street drugs do to neighborhoods, especially disadvantaged ones. Another piece of my anger is the disgust I feel toward disloyal members of my own organization and their betrayal. The last and most volcanic part of this puzzle, the agent that causes the explosive reaction inside me, is the danger Katie was in. I could have lost her. First when that dipshit dealer threw a rock at us and again in the parking lot when Oscar pulled a gun. She would've been caught in the crossfire, an innocent bystander.

The coal of this fury smolders in my chest all the time and keeps me awake. If I'm not actively pushing for answers, interrogating suspects or dispatching lieutenants to search the homes and offices of anybody with a red flag, I'm in for it. The pictures

flip through my mind like a channel I can't change. It plays in a loop and there's no stopping it.

The grip of Katie's fingers on the back of my coat and how she hid her face. The way she was when I held her in the car afterward, wild with fear and grief. The way she'd been laughing with me just before that, the thousand-watt smile on her beautiful face while we talked about going back to my house. The twist of her fingers in my hair or her nails down my back when I was within her, when we were joined body and soul as much as any man and woman could ever be. That connection shook me to my core.

The truth is, I don't care what Rory knows or thinks. I don't care what my organization thinks of my relationship with Katie Donahue. What does concern me is the impact on her career. How she's worked so hard, finished two degrees and she's in the thick of CPA testing, and if word got out that she was sleeping with a man so famously on the wrong side of the law, she'd be labeled as corrupt. No legitimate firm would hire her because she'd be tainted and viewed to be untrustworthy by association. It would undermine all her achievements and tar her with the same brush as me.

Maybe I deserve it, but she doesn't. I have enough power and influence to tell everyone who doesn't approve of my affair with my top lieutenant's much younger sister to fuck off if they don't like it. She's more vulnerable to rumors, to attacks on her reputation.

The life I have to offer her was too much in the way of danger and instability and not enough commitment and peace. I grew up in this life and knew from the beginning it was the path carved out for me. I never resisted it or even considered walking away from it back when I still might have had that option. Once you're in the business you don't leave the business. Not unless you want to die an ugly anonymous death in witness protection. People leaving it behind and living a good life? That's Hollywood shit, a fairy tale and nothing more.

Every time I see her at work, she's pale and drawn with shadows beneath her eyes like she doesn't sleep. That vibrant personality and sparkling eyes are dulled. I wonder if she misses me the way I miss her. If the reason she looks wrung-out like a disaster victim is because she can't get over this. It's too much to hope that it could be true. She's young and resilient and probably has a new boyfriend who keeps her up all night wearing out that sweet body of hers. It makes me ill just to think of her with another man.

I told Katie that my work comes first, it's a way of life. I have casinos, the car dealership, the entire cargo import and transport network. Even with capable managers working for me, I have a lot on my plate. Rooting out everyone involved in a drug ring may not have been on my bingo card for the year but it's sure as hell my top priority now. I can't turn my back on this, on running the show and making sure my people are taken care of, just because I met a woman I like. Grown men don't quit their jobs to pursue a relationship or to make a girlfriend more comfortable.

I give myself this same lecture probably six times a day, just to bolster my resolve. She's going to work for me, avoid me personally and finish her licensing requirements. She'll quit when Benny's ready to return to work. As much as I want him to make a full recovery I'd be lying if I said I was eager for him to come back. Because the meetings and emails are all I have left, my link to Katie until she leaves for California.

When she goes, I won't see her again. If I do, it'll be by accident, through Rory. I wince as I imagine him calling me up and asking if I wanna come over and meet his new nephew because his sister and her family are in town for the holidays. In my mind I punch her husband in the face. Not because he treats her bad—she's not stupid. She'll pick a man worthy of her. I punch this imaginary motherfucker because he gets to do life with Katie and I don't. I'm so pissed about that it's almost hard to breathe sometimes.

A better man would be resigned to his fate, admit his business doesn't fit in with a family life in any real way and move on and wish her well. I'd do anything for Katie. Even let her go. I'm not gonna stop her from leaving Boston for good. I won't follow her to California and pressure her to come back to me. This isn't about controlling her or screwing up her plans.

I'll live with the ghost of her and the weeks we spent together. I'd rather have leftover traces of her and memories than anyone else. If it's depressing or sounds hopeless, it's just the truth of the matter. There's plenty I can do with my business and my life moving forward. It's just gonna feel hollow most of the time because she's gone. The only comfort will be knowing she's okay, somewhere out on the West Coast living her life, unharmed and safe from this place and the danger I bring with me. It's all I can give her after all.

Maybe I try to call her a few times. I even leave one voicemail. I hope you're feeling better. Call me. It's not about work, just—call me back. It sounded pathetic, even more so when days passed and I didn't get a call or a text in return. She turns up for meetings and keeps me updated on any findings she has about the investigation. There isn't much excuse for us to talk or for me to seek her out.

I want her back, but I get that it's over. There's not going to be a Hail Mary play where I can tell her I've taken care of all the danger. That once the drug ring is busted up there won't be any risk. That would be a lie, and I said all along, I won't deceive her. Not that she'd ever believe the danger was over to begin with. And it will never be over, not really.

Increasing security, bringing in a personal protection detail for her, for myself, at my house—there are measures I could take. But they won't bring her back to me. I've rehearsed that conversation enough to figure out how it would end. The same fuckin' way it ended the last time.

With Katie Donahue walking out of my life.

22

KATE

Mickey stops calling. It's for the best. I had to ignore the calls anyway. He texts if it's business. There's no room in my life for personal, not with him. I start doing yoga in the mornings. First, I open one eye, eat a saltine cracker and wait for my stomach to settle. If it goes okay, I get up and do yoga. If not, I get up and puke, then do yoga. I'm not sure where the rumor of a pregnancy glow came from but I look like the Corpse Bride no matter how much bronzer and blush I apply.

The second CPA exam date rolls around and even though I devote a ton of time to preparing, I get into the test and feel completely lost. Half the questions seem foreign to me, impossible to figure out. As I try to concentrate, I get more and more anxious and sweaty and shaky. Around the two hour mark I throw up.

I'm not sure if I panicked or if I really didn't know the answers. I beat myself up over it that night and then make myself go on with work and exercise and eating as healthy as I can make myself in the evenings when I'm mostly sad and nauseous.

Weeks of seeing Mickey at work hasn't made it easier. When he speaks to me directly, when he says my name, his voice still has that warmth that I remember and that I loved so much. It makes me want to cry every damn time. And what am I going to do? Say, hey, boss, could you stop saying my name because it makes me wanna bawl like a baby? And speaking of baby, I'm having yours and haven't told you.

When I get the failing score on my second test, I expect it but it still upsets me. I'm taking tiny nibbles of toast with peanut butter on it when Rory comes in unexpectedly and takes one look at me.

“Whoa, what’s wrong?” he asks.

I open my mouth to tell him I’m fine but it doesn’t work out that way. I start to speak and the tears I’ve been trying to hold at bay just pour out of me.

“I failed the test and I’m in love with Mickey, but I can’t be with him,” I blurt out.

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Rory freezes, stunned as if I'd announced that I shot everyone in the diner this morning because my eggs were cold.

"Mickey?" He says in what has to be disbelief. I'm sort of shocked he's not screaming at me and breaking stuff at the news.

"We were together for a little while," I manage through my sniffles.

"And you didn't tell me?"

"Do you tell me everything?" I snap. "Besides, you've barely spent more than ten minutes in a room with me in the three months I've been home!"

"He's fifteen years older than you for fuck's sake, Katie!" He thunders.

"Rory, calm down. We're both adults and it's past tense anyway. There's nothing for you to be mad about."

"Nothin' for me to be mad about my ass. My best friend messed around with my little sister,"

"Sit down and talk to me like a reasonable person, Rory. Please. I'm not a kid. I wanted to be with him."

"He swore to me when he gave you a job that he was gonna keep you out of the Pearl, out of the line of fire. So he's a fuckin' liar. The only thing in this city more dangerous than being Mickey O'Halloran's enemy is being the man himself. Some

asshole tried to shoot him outside the Pearl a few weeks ago.”

“I know. I was there,” I say and immediately regret it.

“You were there? I’m gonna kill him,” he says in disbelief.

“Please just sit down and don’t go chase Mickey down and start shit.”

Pleading with him doesn’t do any good. He’s gone and out of the driveway before I even finish my sentence. It doesn’t matter to him what I want or that I was happy with Mickey. It only matters that it offends him, that he doesn’t like it. I have to accept that we’re not going to have a super close sibling relationship. Maybe it’s the age thing or maybe it’s just the way we’re built.

Instead of studying I fall asleep on the couch watching a true crime show. I wake up in the middle of the night, sweating, my heart racing from a vivid dream. I rub my eyes, sit up and try not to think about it. That works about as well as you’d expect it to. For hours after I’m seized by the icy, doomed feeling from my nightmare, the horror of it, the crushing sadness.

I can’t get the image out of my mind. In my dream I’d been so happy. I was in a hurry to meet Mickey for dinner. I waited for him at the bar, sent him a teasing text that I was going to eat all the cheese dip if he kept me waiting. When he didn’t show up and didn’t answer his phone I started calling people to see if they knew where he was. I went to the Pearl but no one had seen him for hours. Frightened, impatient I could barely stand the slowness of the elevator as it climbed. I was shaking as I tried to scan in to the crow’s nest in hope he’d left a note or some clue. It took me three tries before I got the door unlocked.

I turned the lights on to illuminate the dim room and the rusty tang of blood hit my nose before the lights flickered on completely. I saw Mickey or what was left of him

slumped forward in his chair, part of his face and head gone, a horrifying, wrong shape that was bright with blood. I was screaming his name. I rushed to him, reached for his hand. It was limp and didn't respond to my touch. The table and the front of his clothes were soaked in blood, too much of it. His hand was still warm, but I knew he was gone. I screamed and cried with terrible force as if I'd never quit.

For hours after I wake up, it's a thought that won't leave me alone. It's all I can do to keep from messaging Mickey to check that he's okay. I don't actually believe it was a premonition or anything, but I want so much to hear his voice and be reassured that he's alive, unhurt, and not bleeding out at this very moment. I realize this is what my life would've been like if I tried to stay with him despite the danger I've seen with my own eyes. Constant terror, clutching my phone, always waiting for the call that he's been killed in cold blood. It would be a vicious cycle and no way to live.

That's ultimately why I don't call him. In spite of how much I crave the warmth of his voice when he says my name, the certainty of his well-being and safety that I'd get from calling, is not a solution. There's no way to stay safe in his line of work, and it would only be the most temporary of reassurances to call him now.

Instead, I turn on an audiobook and read about my baby's development as I near my second trimester. I rest my palm on my belly and take slow breaths, trying to think of happy things for the baby's sake. I know that my body is where this baby is growing and I don't want them to grow in an environment of nothing but sadness and fear. When I finally fall asleep again, I don't dream at all thankfully.

When I wake up, I grab my tablet and open a file. I scan it repeatedly and then double check my numbers. Somehow in my sleep, I unraveled it. I take a deep breath and message Mickey three words that will take down the drug ring.

It's the nephew.

I email him a quick paragraph explaining how I know Ragucci's nephew and, unfortunately, Jeremiah—are behind the drugs. I'll leave it to him to tell his chief forensic accountant that his heir apparent, the nephew Mickey never trusted, is the guilty party and no amount of loyalty to the uncle can save the man now.

Something about solving this puzzle and being able to give Mickey a confident answer with proof helps free me a little from the gloom I'm under. At least I've accomplished something on this job besides a broken heart.

23

MICKEY

Benny's getting out of rehab a week early. He's stronger every day and ready to come back to work. He lets me know he emails with Katie on a secure network to get up to speed on the current financials. He thanks me for the fruit basket I sent and for helping out his family. I tell him it's nothing, that it'll be good to have him back where he belongs.

What I don't say is if he never had a heart attack, I wouldn't have gotten to know Katie the way I did and would've missed out on the best part of my entire life. It isn't the kind of thing I can say out loud—thanks for not taking care of your cholesterol because your illness gave me the opportunity to have an affair with your interim replacement. I wonder what the hell's wrong with me for even thinking it.

Poor guy was brokenhearted to hear that not only was his nephew skimming money from me to the tune of six figures, but he was also dealing drugs out of my club. For his sake alone, I didn't kill the little fucker, but he was sent packing with strict instructions that I wouldn't be as merciful if I ever saw his face in Boston again.

I'm meeting with the head of my new protective detail when Rory busts into my

office.

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“I need a minute,” he says. I nod to Carlos and he excuses himself.

Rory’s jaw is tight and he’s bouncing on the balls of his feet like he used to when he was spoiling for a fight in high school. I lean against my desk and wait for him to come out with it.

“What the are you doing with my baby sister?” He says in a low, dangerous voice. “You promised you’d keep her out of the business, everything on the up-and-up, right? I guess that didn’t include keeping the business outta her.”

I roll my neck like I’m loosening up for this. Any second he’s gonna throw a punch. Rory’s less of a hothead than he used to be but this is family and everyone’s a little nuts when it comes to that.

“You wanna explain to me why you’re actin’ like she’s not a grown adult? She makes her own decisions. She chose to be with me and she’s the one that broke it off. I didn’t do anything to her and I’m sure as fuck not goin’ to tell you about what I did with her. Now if you wanna go out in the street I can kick your ass like old times. Otherwise, you need to grow up and stay in your fuckin’ lane.”

Rory rocks back on his heels. “Jesus Christ. You love her, too, don’t you?” He asks.

“What did you say?”

“You’re in love with her.”

“It doesn’t matter,” I tell him. “She doesn’t want to be with me.”

“Yeah, sure. That’s why she’s moping on the couch like a brokenhearted teenager.”

I don’t know what to do with the knot in my stomach that tightens when he says Katie’s brokenhearted and crying on the couch. I want to charge right out of here and go to her as fast as possible.

“Look, it freaked her out when Oscar pulled a gun on us. She got scared and told me it was over. It’s been weeks. I figured she was over it by now,” I say. I hate how my voice sounds at the end like I’m excited or emotional or something. I can’t conceal it.

The charge of urgency signs through me. I have to get to her. If she’s at home, I’ll go there now.

“Where is she?”

“The house. Why?” he says.

“Fuck off, Rory,” I say and move past him without a second glance.

The driver gets me there in record time. I take the porch steps two at a time and beat on the door. “It’s me, Katie,” I call to her, out of breath. My heart threatens to beat out of my chest in anticipation. I could’ve called or messaged but I want to do this in person, want to see her face. I’ll know, is what I’m thinking. If I look her in the eyes I’ll know if she’s still in love with me or not.

I hear footsteps approach and my heart lodges in my throat. Katie swings the door open, standing there in her pajamas looking miserable. Her face is blotchy and her eyes are puffy. It wrenches my heart a little seeing her vulnerable, in her pajamas and barefaced with evidence of her sorrow plain on her face.

I can’t resist reaching for her and cup her face in my hand. The softness of her cheek,

the silken hair that tickles the tips of my fingers rushes at me, the visceral zap of recognition is like a sense memory. I almost shut my eyes to let it sink in that I'm touching her after all these nights alone.

"What are you doing here?"

"We need to talk. Can I come in?"

"It's not a good idea," she falters, but she nuzzles her cheek in my palm, shuts her own eyes for a second and I see her brow furrow, the way she bites her bottom lip for an instant. She feels it still.

"Then come with me," I demand.

"I'm in my pajamas," she says as if that's an excuse.

"If that's your only objection, you can change if you want, but don't do it on my account," I tell her. "I don't want you out of my sight that long."

Katie blushes. I see the becoming color flood her cheeks and I feel the knot in my chest loosen again. She no longer looks miserably pale and hollow-eyed. She has a bit of her sparkle back.

"I'll just be a second," she says. She disappears into her room and a couple of minutes later emerges in jeans and sweatshirt with a bag over her shoulder. "I'm ready."

I want to wait until we have absolute privacy to talk with her, but that doesn't mean I'm wasting any time. In the back of the car, I lay my arm across the back of the seat and she scoots right up to my side.

“I’ve missed you so much.”

“I don’t think I’ve really been warm enough since we broke up,” she says softly. “It’s not even winter and I’ve been freezing.”

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“I was so worried when you didn’t come back to work, and I heard you were sick. Are you better now?”

“A little bit.”

She’s holding something back, but I don’t push her just yet. I can wait until we get to my place.

We ride through the evening traffic out to Castle Island. When we get out, I dismiss my driver. “I won’t be needing you again tonight. You can take off early.”

“Thank you, sir,” he says.

I tap the app on my phone and disable the upgraded alarm system. After I unlock the door and let us inside, I lean down and whisper in her ear, “Not to freak you out, but I’ve got six men outside the house now. There are two on me at all times plus the driver. You could say it woke me up when Oscar pulled that gun. I have a lot more to lose than I used to.”

“You have no idea,” she says, and I’m not sure what she means. “Will you sit down with me?”

Katie looks nervous again, and I reach for her hand. We sit down on the couch and she’s put a foot of space between us. She’s chewing her thumbnail and looks like she’s shaking all over.

“What’s wrong?” I ask her. “We just gotta talk it out. Don’t panic.”

“It’s not that. I’m not scared of figuring this out with you. I’m scared to tell you what’s going on.”

Narrowing my eyes, I look her over. “What’s going on that you have to be scared about?”

I see how she’s sitting, crisscrossed legs, facing me, keeping room between us, her elbows tucked in close and chewing her nails. She’s making herself smaller, protecting herself. I won’t have it.

“Just tell me.”

The longer she keeps quiet the more I worry.

“Kate, unfold yourself and come over here,” I say. I reach for her. She resists at first but then reaches back and takes my hand. I tug her toward me and put my arm around her. “There, that’s better. If you want me to go first, I will.”

“Okay,” she says. “Why did you bring me here?”

“To tell you that there’s nobody else for me. End of story.” I kiss the top of her head. “You’re it for me, baby.”

For some reason she squeezes her eyes shut and winces like she didn’t like what I said.

“What?” I press.

“Baby,” she says.

“You don’t want me to call you that?”

“It’s not that. It’s... I’m pregnant, Mick. When I was sick, I went to the clinic and I thought I’d have the flu or something. The pregnancy test they gave me was positive. I looked when I got home and I missed a couple pills in my last pack. I didn’t mean to forget. I guess with moving back and the new job, studying all the time and—and getting involved with you, I let it slip my mind. At the time when I really should’ve been extra careful about making sure I took them. Because we didn’t use anything else.”

I stare at her. She keeps talking and talking, but all I can hear is the first couple words she said. Katie’s pregnant.

“Wait, what?” I interrupt. “You’re pregnant?”

Katie pulls away from the shoulder where she was leaning and hiding her face from me. She takes a ragged breath, squares her shoulders and looks me right in the face. “I’m pregnant. It was an accident and I’m sorry. I should’ve been more careful. You don’t have to do anything as far as, like, being part of this. I take full responsibility. I get that this changes everything, that if you came to my door tonight thinking we can give it another try, then it’s a lot more complicated than you thought it would be. You’ll need time to think about it, I’m sure, and figure out what you want.”

“You. I want you. More than I want fuckin’ air to breath, Katie. Don’t doubt that for one second.”

She looks stunned for a second, and I watch what I said sink in. Her eyes are bright and a smile curves her mouth. I trail my fingertips up her neck and watch her shiver. I brush my lips over hers, light and teasing, and feel a surge of satisfaction when she cants toward me. Her lips cling to mine but I keep it soft and sensual as I rock my mouth over hers.

“Don’t say you’re sorry. We didn’t see this coming, but don’t sell me short thinking I

don't want to be with you or I don't want this baby. You know what you just told me? That you think you had to do this all by yourself. That cuts me up cause I want to be the man you know you can count on. I'm your man, Katie Donahue. For as long as you want me."

She throws her arms around my neck and hugs me tight. "You'll do this with me? Have this baby?"

"This baby and any other baby you want. I never been so honored in all my life as this makes me feel, you gotta know that. I'd do anything for you. I already got security around me, and I upgraded some systems, increased the protection officers and tightened restrictions on staff going in and out of the building during their shifts. I made changes that will keep us safer and that's before I knew about the baby. Let me prove it to you."

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“Let me get this straight. You’re sayin’ you want to be with me and raise our baby together.”

“More than anything,” I say, grinning and kissing her like I’ll never stop.

Because that’s my plan.

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KATE

I’ve seen pictures of the northern lights, how they light the sky with an indescribable wave of shimmering blue and green that take your breath away. That’s the feeling that cascades over me when Mickey reacts to my pregnancy with acceptance and love. Relief doesn’t begin to cover it. It’s a sense of rightness, being made whole and cherished that is the closest thing to real holiness I’ve experienced so far.

Nothing has prepared me for this. Because it’s pure joy and hope for the future and everything that has been missing in my life. I’ve been lonely and fearful, zipping wearily from one panic to the next.

He brings me to his house, consoling me when I’m so nervous I shake all over. He listens to me and instead of judging and being angry or trying to control everything, Mickey says he wants to be the one I can count on. He thinks about his actions and how he can be better for me, for us. I’m awestruck. At once I want to announce to everyone in the world that this is how a man should be, strong and considerate and loving—but part of me wants to keep it a secret for just us two. To keep the sacred

privacy of our togetherness so no one can try to ruin it.

From the outside it would look like I went after my rich boss or that he seduced a much younger employee. His best friend's fifteen-years-younger sister, in fact. None of that even touches the reality of what we share. I'm old enough to know exactly what I want and so is Mickey. He's led his family business to greater prosperity and security while bearing that burden all alone with no one close to him.

I spent years out in California in a city that never felt like home, trying to find myself or prove myself when I had no one to prove it to. And Rory, my distant older brother who in many ways is a lot closer to Mickey than he ever has been to me, lives his life on the edge, a top lieutenant in an illegal crime syndicate who bounces from one hot, temporary girlfriend to the next without much of a plan for the future.

I was sure I'd be happy once I achieved success in LA. I'd have money, a professional network who respected me, and I'd meet the right people and have real friends. Mickey was sure he'd never be happy, that his duty was to expand and sustain the business and the charitable fund and let that be his only legacy. None of us knew what was coming for us.

Now I know. And if I had any reason to expect such wonderful good luck, such a man who would truly see me and love me, I would never have spent so many years spinning my wheels over the next degree or the next internship. I could've come home to Boston and done things right. Although who's to say this wasn't the right way, the only way all this happiness would come to pass?

Pregnancy makes me a philosopher, that's what Mickey says. I say it's just the carb cravings talking. His acceptance, the way he welcomed me and our baby into his life so fully swept away my sadness and confusion. When I wake up in the morning, beside the man I love, I can't believe my good luck. I rest my hand on the curve of my belly and smile inwardly, radiating love and joy all the way down to my toes.

The first and most crucial thing Mickey assures me of is that he's increased security measures drastically. He has personal protective officers now, a combination of his own men and elite private contractors who are expert bodyguards of the type hired by oil executives and foreign diplomats. Their job is both to vigilantly keep him out of volatile or vulnerable situations and to be discreet.

No one should notice them unless they're needed. When I meet the team of protection pros that he hires to look out for me, I'm stunned at how many there are. I get to know them and value their watchfulness and skills. It only takes me a week or so to get used to having them around. To be honest, it's reassuring because, natural process or not, pregnancy really makes you feel vulnerable.

Once Mick knows about the baby, there's no stopping him. He has me moved into his house inside of twenty-four hours. We don't waste any time. If I'm not working on my prep course or in my office, I'm in his arms. I'm not sure if he even lets me out of his sight more than a few minutes for the first couple weeks. He's the one holding my hand when I have my first ultrasound, and the softness in his eyes when we hear the baby's heartbeat for the first time is something I'll never forget.

Benny comes back to work part time the next week. When Mick offers me the head forensics accountant position and says Ragucci would stay on and train me and help me out, I tell him thanks but no thanks. I loved the job, and loved being with Mickey, but I want to concentrate on my CPA and work in the legitimate sector.

When the baby's older, I want to open my own firm. That doesn't mean I don't hang out in the crow's nest a couple nights a week, with my feet propped up on the comfy couch where we first came together. Only now I'm looking through vision boards the decorator sent me so I can pick fabrics for the nursery. My plan for a yellow and white nursery eventually beat out Mickey's preference for a Red Sox theme.

Once Ragucci's back to working full time, I spend all my time studying for my CPA

and getting things ready for the baby. That means a lot of pregnancy yoga classes and afternoon naps. It also means that Mickey hired a personal chef to meal prep and stock our fridge for me so I have a choice of fresh, healthy meals and snacks at the ready anytime.

“What are you doing?” I ask him mischievously when I walk into the kitchen and find him standing with the refrigerator door open and a fork in his hand.

“Who knew that grain bowls were good?” he says. “Don’t worry, you got another one in here. I was curious.”

“Grab it for me, we’ll snack together,” I say, fighting back a giggle. “I mean, we can both enjoy my pregnancy food.”

“We could always turn on Karate Kid, start the baby early,” he offers.

“You know, I read that by this time in the pregnancy, the baby can hear our voices and classical music can make them smarter. Maybe they can get Jackie Chan flicks in the womb,” I tease.

“Might as well start them off right. Let this baby get a taste for the classics.”

We’re about to sit down to a movie when the doorbell rings. Our eyes meet. With the dialed-up security no one who isn’t a trusted friend would have made it this close to the house so I bring up the front door camera on my phone. My brother stands there, jaw set and looking every bit as aggravated as he’s been the last few weeks since I moved in with Mickey.

“Are you up for this?” Mick asks me.

“Let’s get it over with,” I say with resignation.

“If he upsets you at all, I’m throwing his ass out, old friends or not.”

“I’m good,” I tell him.

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Mickey answers the door. Rory clocks me on the couch, remote in hand. He glances at the TV.

“What are you watching? Pierce Brosnan? He was the best fuckin’ James Bond and then he went and made that stupid singing movie,” he says.

“This is what you came to talk about?” Mickey says, taking his place beside me on the couch. He’s making it clear with his closeness that he and I are in this together, and we’re a team. I’m grateful for it and squeeze his hand.

“I want to see how my sister’s settling in,” he counters.

“You got a phone,” I point out. “You can call.”

“I wanna see with my own eyes. You okay?”

“Yes,” I say. I want to say something sarcastic about how I’m obviously being held hostage and it’s nice of him to finally come looking for me—I’m that hurt by his behavior. Instead, I take a breath and ground myself in the fact that I am safe and loved, that Mick is with me and our baby is healthy. “Are you trying to say you missed me? Because it sounds like you’re making sure we’re not both so stupid that I took a bath with the hair dryer or something.”

“I’ve never thought you were stupid,” he says grudgingly. “You’re the smart one.”

“Always have been,” I say.

He sits down in a chair and kind of sags for a second.

“What’s going on Rory?”

He sighs before answering. “You and Mickey, you’re my family. If I stay pissed at you, I’m on my own.” He says this like it’s a huge revelation.

Taking a page out of Mickey’s playbook, I sit and wait and listen. Eventually it works.

“I guess what I’m sayin’ is I miss you and if you’re okay and everything’s on the up-and-up then I can try and get over how fuckin’ weird this is.”

“You’re... sorry,” Mickey supplies.

“Yeah, that too,” he says and then shrugs his shoulders like he’s shaking off a huge burden. “Wow, that was tough. I don’t go in for these big emotional scenes.”

I can’t help myself. I bark out a laugh and then clap a hand over my mouth. “Sorry,” I say. “I missed you too. But that was not an emotional scene. It was more like trying to pry words out of you at gunpoint.”

“What’s the difference?” he grumps at me like I’m taking the sweetness out of his hard-won triumph.

“Uh, emotional maturity probably,” I say.

Mickey squeezes my hand. I glance at him and he gives a slight shake of his head. He’s telling me that maybe I should let this go and quit being a hard-ass to my own brother who’s trying to choke out an apology for the first time in his life.

“Look, I was an only child. I don’t know how long brothers and sisters bitch at each other like this, so I’m gonna try to translate. Rory, you know you acted like a jerk and you want to smooth it over, right?” he nods grudgingly. “And Katie, you love your brother and you been sad about being in a fight with him, right?”

“Yes,” I say.

“For my part, Rory, you’re like a brother to me since we were kids. I don’t wanna be crossways with you if I can help it. So you gotta know that I love Katie more than anything, or I wouldn’t have done something off-limits like get involved with somebody that works for me and is also your little sister. But that’s not all she is. She’s remarkable and smart and brave. And we got something to tell you if we can get past this mess.”

“Okay, I’ll get over it,” he says. “How ‘bout you?”

“I love you and I want you in my life. It made me sick that you thought I did something to hurt you when I got with Mickey. I know you want what’s best for me, and you worry about me being safe around the business. But we grew up that way, and it’s gonna be fine,” I tell him. “Trust me. Trust both of us, okay?”

Rory comes over to the couch and kisses the top of my head. Then he sits down on the couch with us. “Whaddaya got to tell me now? Are you getting’ married already?”

I blink fast, thrown by that half-sarcastic suggestion. I don’t even look at either of them. A slow breath to steady myself and then I just brazen it out.

“We’re having a baby,” I say.

“Baby.” Rory says the word like he doesn’t know what it means. The dumbfounded

look on his face is not exactly the joy I'd hoped for at becoming an uncle, but there's nothing for it.

“That's right. There's a baby Donahue O'Halloran on the way,” Mickey says.

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“Please tell me you’re not naming it that,” he says wryly. Then he grins at me. I didn’t see that coming, the smile on my brother’s face.

“We haven’t picked out a name yet,” I say. “We don’t know if it’s a boy or a girl yet.”

“Well at least you’re not stuck on naming it Donahue either way,” he says. “I can’t believe it. My little sister’s having a baby.”

I look over at Mickey and smile, trying not to get teary-eyed. “I guess I have to learn not to underestimate the men in my life,” I say in what I hope is a lighthearted tone.

“Yeah, we’re not half bad, are we, Rory?” Mickey says fondly, never taking his eyes off me. “She thought you were gonna hit the roof over this.”

“I’m sorry you felt that way Katie. I’ve been a really shitty big brother, haven’t I? I promise to do better from now on.”

I hug my brother, so relieved he’s on board with my new little family. I could go ahead and be happy building this life even with his disapproval, but I’m happy I don’t have to.

“Rory’s a cute name. It can work for a boy or a girl. I mean, I think it’s a manly Irish name, but that kid on Gilmore Girls was named Rory,” he says.

“Oh my God, I forgot you used to watch that with Mom when I was little!” I laugh. “How did I not remember my big tough brother fussing over how she belonged with

Jess and not Lincoln.”

“Logan. That piece of shit’s name was Logan,” Rory grumbles and we all laugh. I relax against Mick’s shoulder and we talk and laugh like things will work out for all of us.

After Rory goes home, I’m pretty tired. I go to the kitchen for a glass of water and run into Mickey coming down the stairs. “I think I’m gonna shower and go to sleep early,” I tell him.

“Can you make it another fifteen minutes?” he asks.

“Sure, why?”

“Come up to the roof with me,” he says. There’s excitement in his eyes that I used to think were so cold. The smolder there is unmistakable, and even as tired as I am, I feel eager to go to our special place. I take his hand and let him lead me up the steps to the rooftop deck.

25

MICKEY

When I lead her out onto the deck, I keep my eyes on Katie’s face. I know what’s set up behind me. I planned it in meticulous detail. What I’m here for is her reaction. I watch her expression transform. She widens her eyes and I see the reflection of golden sparkles there. Her lips part in surprise as she steps clear of the stairs and stands on the deck taking it all in. With the help of an obliging florist and a couple of men from the decorator’s staff, I’ve installed a wooden pergola to give shade up here but mainly to act as a frame for the gleaming Edison bulbs strung around and across it.

Tall ivory pillar candles are grouped on the rattan coffee table near the sofa and on the bar cart. The bottles and ice bucket are displaced to a cabinet below because the cart holds candles, a bouquet of lilies and little glass jars of chocolate mousse. The candle flames flicker in the soft breeze off the water below. Another bunch of stargazer lilies, showy and bright pink streaked with white dazzle in a low vase on the table and sweeten the air. Sparkling cider chills in a silver bucket with crystal champagne flutes nearby.

“It’s so beautiful!” Katie says, her uncommonly pretty face radiant with wonder. “I love it!”

“That’s what I was going for,” I say. I settle her on the sofa and tuck the soft pink cashmere blanket around her shoulders in case she’s chilly.

“You’re spoiling me,” she says with a giggle.

“The hell I am,” I say amiably, “You deserve the world, Katie. This is just some lights and flowers. Don’t sell yourself short.”

I reach behind a throw pillow beside her and take out the velvet box and present it to her. She glances at me like she did before and opens it to find the necklace I gave her ages ago, the one she returned to me.

“It’s yours. And so am I,” I say. “If you’ll have us.”

“Where am I gonna wear a diamond necklace, Mick? The CPA test or yoga class?” she teases, but her fingertips play over the graduated diamonds and I can tell she likes it.

“You can always wear it by itself,” I say archly. “I may have to take it off eventually because your collarbone is too delicious to hide—” She blushes prettily and I take

advantage of the flush on her cheeks, press a soft kiss to her jaw beside her ear to feel her shiver.

“You know, if you want to get me in bed, you don’t have to go all this trouble,” she says, and it’s meant to be a joke but her voice is warm and husky. Her fingers grip my forearm and I feel the possession of that touch slice straight through me and make me go harder than the diamonds in that box. My breath catches and she smiles softly at my reaction to her touch. She has that power over me, and I know she likes it.

“I don’t just want you in my bed, Katie. May I?” I ask, feeling suddenly formal, shy knowing what’s to come. She nods and I slip the necklace from its case, breathe in the familiar sweet scent of her hair as she leans in for me to fasten the clasp. As I start to back away, she leans in and brushes her lips to mine, clinging and tender, her arms draping around my neck, leisurely and lush. I claim her mouth, deepen the kiss and press her closer, my hands greedy on her back. We kiss until I can force myself to break away, reluctant to let her go even for something as important as this.

I scoot off the edge of the sofa and kneel beside her. “Mary Kathryn Donahue, I love you more than I thought I could love anything or anyone. All I want is to be with you and make you happy for the rest of our lives. Will you marry me?” I asked. I reach in my pocket and take out the burgundy leather cube-shaped box with its scuffed edges and a slightly tarnished brass fastener. I offer it to her.

Katie’s hand goes to her throat and she touches the clasp on the old box reverently. She flips it open with care and the two halves of the lid fall open on their tiny hinges to reveal an old and lovely ring.

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“It was my great grandmother’s,” I tell her. “Her name was Mary Brigid O’Halloran, called Molly. My grandpa told me the story when I was a kid. Molly was a kitchen maid in a squire’s house in County Meath. The cook got sick, Molly took over and cooked for a dinner party after a hunt. Her skill got the attention of the widowed squire and he was smitten from the moment they spoke. They were married as soon as he could have this ring made—emerald to match her Irish eyes, my grandpa said.”

“So your great grandpa hooked up with his employees too,” she teases and a laugh breaks from me.

“I didn’t see that coming, but yeah. Guess it runs in the family.”

“It sounds like a great love story. Molly makes a good roast pheasant or meat pie or something and gets to marry the squire and be the lady of the house. Lives happily ever after.”

“Hardly,” I say. “He was thrown by his horse and broke his neck when she was pregnant with my grandpa. She was a widow before she even had the baby. She was left to manage the estate until his older son came of age. Then the son kicked her and his half-brother out of the house and she came to America.”

“Wow, that took an ugly turn. I’m surprised she didn’t have to sell the ring.”

“She did. My grandpa started working the docks when he was fourteen and got a hand in on some smuggling work. He used his first big payout to buy her ring back from the pawnbroker. Molly was remarried by then so she told him to keep it for his bride. We’ve passed it down ever since. Now I’d be honored if you’d wear it.”

“Promise you won’t get thrown by a horse or something before our baby comes,” she says and it doesn’t come out lightly.

“I’m not going anywhere, Katie. I want you to wear this ring, be my wife. If you don’t like it because of the way things turned out for Molly, I can get you a different ring.”

“No, I want this one. It’s beautiful and it has a story behind it.” She studies the ring, the big dark emerald flanked by narrow diamonds on a platinum band. I slip it on her finger and kiss her lips softly.

“Yes,” she says, “I want to be your wife.”

“Name the day and you’ll be Mrs. O’Halloran,” I promise.

“Tomorrow,” she says with a grin.

“You don’t want a wedding?”

“I want to be your wife and take your name. I don’t care about the rest.”

“Can you hold out till Saturday? I want you to have a dress, a cake, make an occasion out of it.”

“As long as you’re not stalling so you can try to book Jackie Chan to sing at the ceremony or something,” she says. I laugh and kiss her.

It’ll be a wedding to remember, I’ll make sure of it. In the meantime, I pour the sparkling cider and make a toast to us. Then I ask her to dance with me on our roof deck under the stars. Nothing could be more perfect than this moment.

KATE

As miserable as I was at the beginning of my pregnancy, the rest seems to fly by in a flurry of activity. I complete my CPA exams the week before the baby is due. By that time, I spend most of my time with my swollen feet propped up listening to audiobooks and trying to teach myself to crochet. I get this idea that I want to make a hat for the baby. It's easier said than done, and after about nine attempts, I decide that a blanket will be easier.

I'm surrounded by a tangle of soft yellow yarn working at my pitifully small start on a baby blanket when my water breaks. The security team bundles me and my bag into a car and I'm at the hospital in minutes. Mickey and Rory arrive hot on my heels and I've never seen the cool and unbothered king that is my husband so beside himself. He keeps going to the nurse's station asking when the doctor will check my progress and when I can get an epidural. He has a literal copy of my birth plan in his hand the whole time. I finally laugh and tell him to calm down before he gets kicked out of the maternity unit.

I'm excited and nervous, every contraction taking my breath away with its knot of shocking pain. I grip his hand and he kisses my head, breathes through it with me. I tell him I love him about a thousand times. When the doctor comes in, she tells me there's good news and bad news. "Good news is you're progressing naturally and the heartbeat sounds strong. Bad news is you don't have time for an epidural. It's time to push." The nurses help me put my legs in the stirrups and Mickey holds me up, supports me as I bear down.

In three pushes, our baby girl is here, screaming and red-faced and beautiful. I burst into tears as I fall back against the bed. They lay her on my chest and I kiss her dark damp curls. Mickey's big hand touches her back as lightly as a feather, so gently and

wonderstruck.

“Molly Pearl O’Halloran,” I say, “we’ve been waiting for you.” I meet my husband’s eyes and see his shining with tears.

“I love you,” he says to me, and I feel the swell of love in my heart as I cherish the weight of our seven-pound baby on my chest.

“I love you both,” I say.

“She’s perfect,” he says, touching her tiny fist with one finger. She opens her hand and grips his finger. I watch his face as he plummets into helpless adoration for our daughter. “She’s got a grip.”

“She’s strong like her daddy,” I say fondly.

“Strong like both of us,” he tells me and kisses my lips. It is the most perfect moment there’s ever been and I’m the luckiest woman.

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Five months later, Molly fusses in a lacy silk christening gown, trying to yank the bonnet off her head as her Uncle Rory holds her as cautiously as if she were a bomb. She's baptized, and when the water touches her forehead, she stops crying and blinks her big blue O'Halloran eyes in curiosity.

"You like the water, don't you, baby," Rory croons to her.

He is doting and enraptured with his niece. Once we could have visitors in the hospital, he charged in with flowers, balloons and a stuffed bunny the size of a five-year-old child. He kept trying to get me to 'rest' so he could hold her. He took about a hundred pictures with his phone, all of her just sleeping in the bassinet. Then there were the selfies.

"Please stop putting Snapchat filters on my baby," I laughed when he showed me the cartoon dog ears on her sleeping angel face.

"Send me that one," Mickey mumbled, because he couldn't stand for there to be a picture of his daughter that he didn't have.

In the days and months that followed, I think we changed her outfit four times a day because of all the gifts we had gotten. Dresses, hats, sleepers, tiny Nikes and little baby Ugg boots. Her Red Sox onesie and hat. It was like a tiny fashion show with photos. When she sleeps, which was most of the time, it's hard to make myself nap because I love to gaze her. The curve of her cheek and her perfect tiny fingernails and the whorl of dark hair on her head.

"I'm too happy to sleep," I tell Mickey. But then he curls up behind me and spoons

me, pulling me back against his chest and I nestle in as warmth and sleep drag me under. I'm pretty sure I'm the happiest anyone has ever been.

EPILOGUE

KATE - THREE YEARS LATER

Molly squeals as she runs along the sand in her polka dot, ruffled bathing suit. Mickey chases after her, pretends to be tired and shouts that she'll never beat him in a race. She screams with glee and turns around, flinging herself in her daddy's arms. He puts her on his shoulders and carries her out in the ocean. I snap a picture because I can't resist. My heart is so full of joy every day. This vacation is just what we needed, a time relax as a family.

Once Molly tires herself out running around on the beach, we carry her back to our bungalow for a nap. I wrap my arms around Mickey and kiss him. I'm ready for some time with my husband.

"While she's asleep let's take advantage of this hot tub," he says, indicating the huge spa on our veranda.

I smile at him and shake my head. "Sorry, you're just going to have to take me to bed."

"I'm not complaining, but why?"

"Because pregnant women aren't supposed to get in hot tubs," I say with a grin.

"Pregnant?" he says and picks me up and swings me around. "We're having another baby!"

I hold on to him, drunk on his joy and glad I waited to tell him until we were alone.

“Let’s celebrate,” I suggest.

“You want me to order some sparkling cider from room service? Anything you want, Katie.”

“I want you. Right now,” I tell him mischievously. And I don’t have to tell him twice.