



Stay, Swear.

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Category: Romance, Action, Suspense

Description: Kieran Byrne

Fighting... it's automatic at this point. Guard up, don't showboat, lethal strikes, clear my head and get out with minimal damages so my brothers are none the wiser. It's how I've handled my shit for so long at this point I don't know any other way. That is until the night my older brother appoints me as detail for my new sister-in-law and her best friend, Brittany. One night, that's it. Or at least, that was the plan. Brittany Mitchell is feisty, she runs head first into my life with guns blazing, catching my attention from the start. We have one night, but one night turns into more. How could it not when those steel eyes knock the wind out of me. But Brittany's got secrets, and I've got five brothers, a sister-in-law, a nephew, and an organization to protect. Can I protect them and still help her get the revenge she so desperately needs and deserves? Or will one have to fall so I can hold the rest up? I know one thing for sure, I'm going to stay no matter what. I swear.

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Prologue

Phoenix

Standing in the window of my bedroom, I look out over my backyard. It's nothing extravagant, but I know I'm going to miss it, just like I'm going to miss the rest of this house. Footsteps in the hall bring my attention over to my bedroom door. My Mom stands in the doorway, looking as solemn as I feel.

"Hey, my sweet Phoenix. Are you ready?" Her voice seems strained and pained.

"Is anyone really ready for something like this?" My heart breaks knowing I'm going to walk out of this house and never be the same person again.

"You are, you can do this, we have our codes memorized. We'll still talk, I promise. The main priority though, is what?"

"To make sure they can never find me, that I stay safe." I huff out.

We've gone over this for years, this plan has been in motion since court was over. They won't be in jail forever, and when they get out they can't find me. The first place they'll look is here, they'll stalk her to find me, so we've got to be proactive instead of reactive. It doesn't matter that we have so many years until they're even eligible for parole. I need to set up my own life somewhere else.

Carrie isn't my biological mom, but you can't tell us that. She stepped in on one of the scariest days of my life and never turned back. She sat with me through surgeries,

therapy sessions, and countless nightmares. My real mom died when I was six, at the hands of my biological father. The story is extensive, and for lack of better words, it fucking sucks.

She takes me by the shoulders and just stares into my eyes for a moment. Once we both start tearing up she pulls me into a hug. My mom gives the best hugs, she puts every ounce of love she has for you into them. I'm not typically a hugger, but with her I make an exception. She pulls back, teary eyed, and runs her hands over my hair. "You're going to do amazing things, sweet girl, and why is that?"

A smirk pulls at the corner of my lips, but I answer her, "because I'm worthy, I'm strong, and smart. I can do this."

"Yes, my sweet Phoenix, you can. Head held high, you've got this."

We hug one last time before we both make our way to the front door. With one last look back at my mom, I grab my duffle bags and leave the house that's been mine for the past four years. As I pull off my street, tears start to stream down my face, I'm going to miss her so much. However this is what's for the best. Ohio is so far from Arizona, they'll never find me there. Taking a deep breath I repeat my story one more time.

"My name is Brittany Mitchell. I'm eighteen and a freshman at Arizona State University. I'm from Phoenix. No siblings or Dad. One mom who still lives at home."

Kieran

Standing in the corner of this extremely old octagon in this run down warehouse, I'm finding myself second guessing my decision to take this fight. My opponent is a

squirrely motherfucker. James Hill stands about six foot four if I had to guess and about two hundred and thirty pounds of muscle. His basketball shorts are the only clothing on his body. I've got about two inches in height and twenty pounds of pure muscle on him. I'm also dressed similarly, the only difference being I wear a bright red mouth guard. That's because my brothers are ruthless, they'll never let me live it down if I'm walking around with missing teeth. He's unpredictable and known for fighting dirty, which says something when we're already fighting underground.

I'm the best in this circuit. That's not me being cocky, it's the truth. I've been fighting at The Pit since before my sixteenth birthday. I can't remember a single time before my Da and his enforcer started training me and my brothers. That being said, the video I watched just before walking out here is clouding my brain. My every thought around the images now burned into my retinas.

My best friend, Ryan, is in front of me bent down so we're eye to eye as I sit on this stool. He's calm as he uses a rag to wipe the blood off my brow, "Okay, Kie it's time to stop fucking around. Get in there and finish him. We'll grab your cash, then we can go find some good pussy for the night."

Ryan's smirking at me because he knows usually cash and women are the way to turn my mood around. That was before the video though. Now all I want is to take all this rage out on someone. James just happens to be the unlucky guy who decided to talk shit today.

Nodding to Ry, the bell rings to signal it's time for another round. Pushing up to my feet and clapping my hand on Ryan's shoulder, my feet carry my tired body to the middle of the octagon. Taking a second to shake my arms out and set my stance, James makes his way to the center as well. My hands come up to guard my face just in time for the bell to ring. We circle each other a few times before I swing out with lightning speed and pop him on the jaw. His head snaps around as my hands come back to protect my face instinctively. I'm able to tag him a few more times in the

body before deciding I'm done playing with him. I'm ready to get out of here.

Dropping my shoulder and shoving it into his stomach as I grab his legs and slam him into the floor. On the way down he throws a wild punch, aiming at nothing but making contact with the side of my head nonetheless. My vision blurs for a second as I get on his hips. Shaking the stars from my eyes, I force myself to focus. Raining my fists down all over his chest, head, arms, and face. All I can think about is that video, the images, the audio, the turning in my stomach that threatens to have me emptying its contents, again. Most importantly, how I can never allow my brothers to see it.

One moment I'm on James trying to get the K.O. The next thing I know Ryan has yanked me off of a bloody unconscious body. "Fucking quit it, Kieran. You got him. Stop!" My wild eyes snap to him as my erratic breathing tries to regulate. "He's down Kieran. Let's go." We hop out of the octagon and I'm finally able to look around at the crowd. Everyone is going insane chanting my name, no doubt because they just won a shit ton of money betting on me.

After collecting my winnings and throwing on my hoodie and sneakers we head through the crowd to find the exit. James' brother comes barreling towards me, I think his name is Troy, Trae, or Travis, maybe Trent? I don't know, but what I do know is that he's headed straight for me. Ry looks at me and raises a singular brow.

"I'll be fine, go grab the car so we can get out of here. I'm right behind you." He continues on as I wait for Trace to make his way fully to me. Stopping, I wait until he stops directly in front of me practically snarling at me.

"I don't know what the fuck you thought that was Byrne, but once a man is unconscious you fucking stop. My brother's been rushed to the hospital potentially with brain damage because of you."

Putting my hands out and trying not to snap on him I remind him, "Listen, I didn't set

this shit up. Your brother came to me, not the other way around. Talk to him about it when his bell stops ringing.”

“You think this is funny? Let’s see if your brother’s think it’s funny when they’re feeling what I am.”

Before I’m understanding what the fuck he’s saying I feel it. The white hot pain in my side from being stabbed. Looking down at my side, it’s all I can do to watch him rip the six inch blade out of my side then plunge it in between my ribs. He repeats the process twice more before I drop to the ground, the knife clattering beside me.

Tristan takes off into the crowd as everyone starts screaming and panicking. I’m freezing, my entire body is in a soul shattering pain. White dots dance in my vision and all I know for sure is that I’m going to die here. Spitting and coughing blood out of my mouth. I think I hear voices, and hands grabbing at me. There’s no way to be sure though, because my eyes won’t open and everything sounds like I’m underwater. The last thing I think as the blackness takes over is that I didn’t hide the video well enough. They’re going to find it, and I can’t protect them from this because I’m going to be as dead as our parents.

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Chapter One

Kieran

24 years old

Little Bear!”

I throw my hand over my nephew’s mouth as he tries his hardest to suppress his giggle. We’re hiding behind the couch in the living room. Waiting for our chance to make a run for home base. Something that should be simple enough, but when you’re six and a half feet tall you can only scrunch but so much. Bear doesn’t care though, as long as he gets to hide with me he’s content. He snuggles into my side looking up at me with the biggest hazel eyes. They’re a perfect mix of his parents’ eyes, which is wild because his Da, my brother, isn’t his biological Da. Rhett ‘Little Bear’ Byrne was adopted by my brother, Rowan Byrne, just a few short months ago. Which means along with a new Da he got fivenew Uncles. Uncles who take their roll so seriously that when we learned Rhett was deaf we all learned sign language, and that was before we’d even met him. How my big brother and his mom ended up together is an insane story, it’s not mine to tell. At the same time it ended with us having Rhett and Clara as Byrne’s which makes all of us more happy than we can express.

Recently Rhett had cochlear implant surgery and his processors are now on and programmed correctly. So when my younger brother, Mac, calls out again, “Littttttle Beeeearrrrr.” Rhett hears him clear as day and can’t contain his laughter a second

longer. He jumps up and takes off to home base, leaving me in the dust. Well that was rude. I jump up to chase after the little traitor when Rowan's voice booms from the front door, "Bear?" Rhett stops on a dime, turns, and sprints straight towards his Daddy.

I've been left in the dust. Bested by my big brother once again. That's fine though, I'm still the favorite Uncle. Rhett launches himself into Rowan's arms and Roe catches him midair, he'd never let him drop. Rowan looks at Mac and I, "My office in thirty? We have things to discuss." We both nod in understanding and head out to give him time to reconnect with his wife and son after a long day of being gone.

Mac heads up to his nerd room or security room if we're being politically correct. He's our tech guy and he's a genius. He's also my best friend. Now don't get me wrong, Ryan has been my ride or die since grade school. Mac though, he's been my best friend since the day he was born. My parents handed me this tiny baby at just three years old and there was no turning back.

We're all extremely close and do most everything together. But we unintentionally paired up at some point. The twins are obviously the closest, but then we have the bigs and the middles. We're all between six foot one, the twins, and six and a half feet, me. We also all have varying shades of green eyes and brown hair.

The twins, Flynn and Sullivan, who are newly eighteen, have the lightest hair at just barely darker than a dirty blonde, as well as the lightest eyes at more of a blue-green mixture. My two oldest brothers, Rowan and Declan, 'the bigs'. They are twenty eight and twenty six. Both of their hair is a light brown, but Rowan's eyes are more of a true green, as where Declan's are almost emerald. Then you have Mac and I, 'the middles'. Mac is twenty one, his hair is shaggy where the rest of ours is cut short on the sides and varying lengths on the top, his is a true medium brown. His eyes are the exact same color as Rowan's, but unlike Rowan who's the leader of our organization, Mac prefers to move in silence. We're a lot alike in that sense. The other four are

loud, and in your face while working. Mac and I prefer to get in, get the job done, and leave.

I guess that brings us to me. My hair is the darkest of all of ours at a deep chocolate, with flecks of reddish brown peppered in. My eyes are lighter than Rowan, Mac, and Declan's, but also darker than Sully and Flynn's. I make sure I'm portrayed as the mean, emotionless, and sometimes soulless enforcer while working. At home I'm the wild and rambunctious brother and uncle. Neither is who I actually am. However there's no room for having more than surface level feelings, or not feeling at all when you're the middle child of six boys. Especially when you solely have the job of keeping your family alive no matter the cost or who falls in the crossfire.

Our Da was the captain or head of the BOCG or the Irish mafia, but we can't say mafia in front of polite company so BOCG it is. Anyway, when he and Ma were brutally tortured and murdered by the Russians all of us stepped up. Well except the twins, they were still kids. Rowan became the new leader, Dec his second in command, Mac our tech guy, and me the enforcer. I get the answers we need and keep everyone, especially my brothers safe at any cost.

I'm basically their catch all, need dirty work done? Call Kieran. Need to neutralize a threat to the organization? Call Kieran. Have a security question? Call Kieran. Need top security for a meeting or event? You guessed it, call Kieran. He'll do it all without it even grazing his conscience. Little do they know, the things I do and secrets I keep to protect them at all costs, both physically as well as emotionally tear at my soul daily. They'll never carry the burdens I've had to, because it's my job to shield them.

Making my way up to the third floor where my bedroom is I grab my phone out of my pocket. Pulling up my texts I notice I've missed one from Ryan.

Ryan: Hey, we're on tonight. Eleven at The Pit.

Kieran: Got it. I'll be there at ten-thirty to scoop you.

Putting my phone away I fall backwards onto my California king sized bed and close my eyes. I swear I stopped fighting after what happened almost three years ago. Ryan and my brothers made sure of that. Then eight or so months ago my contact that runs The Pit hit me up saying chatter was going around that I'd never come back because I bitched out. My pride couldn't let that fly, so I called up Ryan and told him we're back in. He could either back me or I'd go solo. After he stopped fuming, he agreed we're in this together. We don't showboat and we're constantly vigilant when we're there.

The Hill brothers all but vanished after that night, honestly I have no idea if they fled and went into hiding, or if they're dead. Either is possible, if they're dead it was one hundred percent at the hands of my brothers. After the stabbing it was touch and go for me for days. When I finally woke up it was weeks later, I'd had multiple surgeries, as well as blood transfusions. It was bad and my brothers closed ranks the second Ryan called them. I've heard that it was a bad time to be a nurse or doctor on the unit. I've also been told that Mac refused to leave my side the whole time I was out. To the point that he sat outside of the OR doors during my surgeries. My brothers can't find out I'm fighting again, especially Mac.

It'll destroy them. I just use it to mentally work through my shit. At this point fighting is muscle memory, for the most part my body does it's thing while my mind works through my fucked up thoughts. I used to be able to quiet the noise and the images with training. The moment my feet stepped back into that run down octagon that wasn't enough anymore, so here we are.

Checking my phone and seeing I've still got twenty more minutes until I'm needed in Rowan's office I decide to shut my eyes for just a minute. I'm sleeping no more than two hours a night, and have been for a while. My plate is overloaded, but I have nowhere to delegate, so I'll continue to white knuckle through it. It can't be like this

forever. The constant state of exhaustion has finally caught up with me.

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My phone rings, startlingly me awake, scooping it up I answer it still half asleep with my eyes shut.

“Yeah?” A yawn escapes from deep in my chest.

“Well, sleeping beauty. Nice to hear you’re still alive.... Get your ass in my office now!”

Rowan’s no nonsense borderline pissed voice booms through the phone before he kills the call. Springing up while rubbing my eyes, my feet carry my still half awake body all the way down to Roe’s office. Mentally shaking myself to my normal awake and alert state, I stride into the room and take a seat beside Mac while Rowan sits behind his desk. I’m unsure if this is a work thing or a brother thing. Honestly, I’m not in a huge hurry to find out. Either way I’m going to have to pull another all nighter to make sure what he needs gets done, and that I’m on time for my fight.

“Thanks for joining us, Kie.” Rowan looks half amused, half annoyed. Looking around to make sure it’s just us in here first, I give him my fakest smile while holding my middle finger up at him.

“Excuse me for catching a twenty minute power nap, Boss. Won’t let it happen again.” His eyes flash with annoyance, he loathes when we call him boss outside of a formal setting.

“Don’t be a dick, Kieran Michael.” Now it’s my turn to be annoyed, he knows how much we all hate being middle named.

“Is this just an opportunity to get on my nerves, or do you actually need something?”
I know I’m being a dick, but I’m tired, stressed, and need to pick up Ryan in two hours. My tolerance for anyone’s bullshit is at an all time low.

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“Okay, well since Kieran’s clearly in a delightful mood this evening I’ll cut to the chase. Clara’s best friend Brittany is moving here, she left yesterday and will be here late tonight. They’ve decided they need a girls night out tomorrow night. As in no husbands allowed. Brittany isn’t married so really I’m just not allowed. My issue is there’s no way in hell I’m allowing them to go into the city without proper protection.” His eyes lock on mine and I’m well aware that I’ll be their detail tomorrow.

Clara’s ex before Rowan was an abusive asshole, her and Rhett barely made it out alive. How she lives here with all six of us up in her space making sure they’re safe, protected, and loved is beyond me. She’s the only woman living in a sea of Byrne men. Rowan loves her enough that he’d die if it meant she’d never be sad again. The rest of us love her like we love each other. She started dating Rowan and quickly realized she got him and five brothers who would protect her and Rhett to the ends of the earth. So if that means tomorrow night I’m club hopping with my sister and her best friend while they scream sing Miley and get white girl wasted, then so be it.

“I’m on it. I won’t let them leave my sight.”

Rowan nods to me then turns his attention to Mac. “So while I need Kie physically there, I need you virtually there.”

Mac nods as he answers, “I’m already on it. You know between the two of us they’ll be safe.”

“Perfect, be vigilant and get them home safe. Also answer my fucking calls and texts immediately. I’m not trying to piss my wife off, but I will come find her if either of

you goes quiet.”

I understand exactly what he’s talking about. Clara was kidnapped months ago, she’s safe and sound now, but it definitely left Rowan on edge and hesitant to let her and their son out of his sight.

“I’ve got them Roe. I’ll protect them with my life.”

“I know, I’m just stressed. She’s ready to go out again without me, and that’s a good thing. I’m just anxious I guess.”

Yeah, I get that. I’m anxious about it too. Not to mention that I’ve heard about this Brittany chick, but I’ve never met her. I’m not sure what kind of person she is or if she brings trouble. But it looks like I’ll be finding out in twenty-four hours. Checking my phone and seeing it’s about time to leave and go grab Ryan, I wrap up the conversation that we’re having and head out to go settle my fucked up brain.

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Chapter Two

Brittany

Standing in my best friend’s bathroom, I’m fixing my hair while she’s doing her makeup and laughing while we finish getting ready for girls night out. Clara and I have been best friends for years. Most specifically since we lived fifteen minutes away from each other and I helped her escape from her abusive prick of an ex. I got in late last night and crashed in Rhett’s room. I’ve missed my godson tremendously, so I’m taking any chance to suck up all the time with him I can get. We’ve swam, played with every toy he has, and had ‘adventures’ on the swing set. We napped, then he ditched me for his dad and some of his dads clones.

When I say clones I really mean clones. The four of them that I've seen so far all have the same face, only differing within inches of height, in shades of brown hair and green eyes. The only ones I haven't seen are the two middle ones. Everyone's been really nice, but Rowan says one of them is coming with us tonight to make sure we're safe. They try to talk in code a lot like I don't have access to google and haven't looked him up. I know who Rowan Byrne is and what he does. He's not losing points in my eyes as long as my best friend keeps that smile firmly in place and he's the reason for it.

Clara breaks me out of my inner thoughts, "Does this look okay? I know we're just going out for dinner and drinks, but I'm trying to make Rowan feral since he has to stay home."

Unable to stop myself I laugh loudly, "Yeah babe, you look like sex on legs. Honestly, you should probably be prepared for him to take you right back upstairs. I'm thinking I'll be going out solo tonight."

Giggling, she moves behind me and grabs the curler out of my hand fixing a spot I must have missed in the back, "Oh, you're hilarious. We're going out. You're looking stunning, and I'm going to enjoy watching you shut down every man in the bar."

We take one last look at ourselves in the mirror. Both our hair is curled, Clara's hair is brown where mine is a strawberry blonde, and her eyes are a dark brown, where mine are gray. However our makeup is also similar, both going for a more natural look. She's sporting a navy dress that hits just above her knees tight in all the right places with the neckline providing just enough cleavage that it'll drive Rowan crazy.

My dress is gold sequins, hitting my mid thigh. The plunging neckline making it less than decent but my boobs are taped in place, I don't have a husband to consider, and I wouldn't be opposed to finding a man to fuck me into a coma tonight. After slipping

on my four inch gold heels that bring me to every bit of six feet, I'm ready to go dance with my bestie.

Clara also slips her own heels on, before she throws a black trench coat at me. "Put this on, Rhett will be downstairs and we don't want him seeing his godmom dressed as a hooker."

Laughing I shrug the coat on and close it, "Fine, but I'm taking it off as soon as he goes upstairs. I didn't dress like this to cover myself up tonight. Come on, let's make your husband swallow his tongue."

We're not even halfway down the stairs when Rowan's sharp intake of breath filters up and I can't help but smile to myself. This man is so madly in love with her. I've never been as happy for someone as I am for them.

My hand comes up to smother my smile when the next thing we hear is Rowan's deep voice exclaim, "Absolutely not, Pretty Girl! Not without me there."

A deep belly laugh comes from the couch facing away from us in the living room. "Give it up, Roe. She's going out tonight without you, while you're here hanging out with Little Bear I'll be at the club watching your wife dance."

Two things hit me at once; one that the gravely sexy voice that just shot tingles through my entire body is one I've yet to hear, and two who the fuck does he think he is making comments like that about my bestie? Rowan doesn't even have a chance to respond before I'm flying down the rest of the stairs putting myself between Clara and whoever this man is.

"Who the fuck do you think you're talking about like that? You aren't watching her dance while her husband is here. We'll go out by ourselves before I let some slime ball gawk at us all evening."

The mystery man slowly stands up, and turns around. I'm quick to realize I should have kept my mouth shut when this mountain of a man with the prettiest green eyes I've ever seen gives me a once over. He has to stand at least six inches taller than me in my heels. His jeans fit him like they were specifically made for his long legs, strong thick thighs, and trim waist. His black t-shirt fits him like a second skin, the cuffs hugging his strong biceps, his thick forearms making my mouth water. This man is ripped, and sexy as hell.

I bring my eyes up to his face, his strong jawline peppered with a neatly trimmed close cut beard. His hair is cut short on the sides and just a little bit longer on top. He looks like he could be some sort of fighter, definitely fitting the role of security he'll play tonight. His sexy half grin has my eyes moving from his handsomely masculine face to his thick lips, then finally his breathtaking pale green eyes surrounded by thick long eyelashes.

Before he can say anything Clara clears her throat, "Um, Britt. It's fine, this is.."

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Mystery man holds his huge hand up to stop her, “No, let her continue. I’d love to find out what she thinks she can do to stop me from tagging along and ‘gawking’ at you guys all night.”

The nerve of this man, I don’t care how hot he is, he can fuck right off. “Oh you sweet, stupid man. Let me assure you, we can dodge you in a blink and you’ll never see it coming. You’re not going anywhere with us if you’re going to make crude comments at Clara. Frankly, the fact that Rowan hasn’t ripped out your jugular and shoved it up your ass has me second guessing my approval of him.”

The amusement dancing in his eyes disappears in an instant, replaced by barely contained anger. Rowan steps between us and puts his hands out in surrender facing me.

“Brittany, first off I’d never let anyone disrespect my wife. So if I thought he meant even a single word of the bullshit he just spewed he would be laid out unconscious on the floor right now. Second, let me introduce you to my little brother, Kieran.” My eyes widen in shock, oh shit. Kieran nods but says nothing to me. He looks at Rowan, sarcasm dripping from his words.

“I’ll be in the car, I’m assuming they can get themselves in the Tahoe without assistance.” Without waiting for a response he turns on his heels and stalks out of the door.

Gritting my teeth and turning to a smirking Clara, “You couldn’t have told me? Showed me a picture? Literally anything before we came down?”

Her and Rowan laugh in tandem for a solid minute before she wipes at her teary eyes, “I could have, but this was so much more fun. Kieran is such a sweet, lighthearted man, especially when it comes to Rhett and I. I’m not sure how you got him wound up so quickly. However if I was you I’d apologize and try to make it right with him.”

Rowan cuts in, “Seriously, he’s not a man you want to be on the bad side of, trust me.” Ugh, okay, maybe my temper got the best of me. I’m not above saying sorry when I’m wrong. Admitting fault to an insanely sexy man though? Yeah that’s going to be a tough pill to swallow.

After about ten minutes of Rowan trying to convince Clara to stay home and have their own ‘private party’ instead we finally make it out of the door and into the Tahoe. There’s a man I recognize as Killian who’s driving. Kieran sits in the passenger seat texting, he finally stops long enough to speak to Clara, “Where to, Mrs. Byrne?”

She rolls her eyes, “Seriously, we’re doing this tonight? She’s just protective, Kie. She didn’t know who you were.”

He nods but doesn’t turn around, “Yes ma’am. No problem, where to?”

She huffs and sits back, crossing her arms like a petulant child, “We’re going to The Byrne for dinner, then we’ll head over to Z13 for drinks after.”

Kieran shoots a, “Yes, Mrs. Byrne.” over his shoulder effectively cutting off the conversation. Okay, so I guess this night is going to be awkward.

Kieran

Standing with my back against the bar of this packed club, my eyes stay firm on the two women who have garnered the attention of most of the men in this bar at least once. Luckily, they haven't seen me intervene yet, so they're none the wiser. My eyes roam down Brittany's tall stunning body for the millionth time tonight. My hands itch to roam every inch of her skin, to touch, taste, and memorize every part of her. I'll admit I was extremely annoyed when she stepped to me at the house earlier and questioned my intentions with my sister-in-law. Now that I've had time to cool down I can respect the drive to protect her best friend. I wouldn't let anyone be disrespectful to Ryan either, and I'd cut a motherfuckers tongue out for daring to think about stepping to Mac. She didn't know it was only brotherly teasing so she gets a pass, this time. Not to mention the fire in hereyes turned me on but I tamper that down. She's Clara's best friend after all.

I'm sure Clara thinks I'm still pissed because I'm only referring to her in an official capacity, but that's how I'm expected to address her outside of the house. She's not my sweet sister-in-law right now. She's the Captain's wife, so she'll be treated as such. We've been here for a few hours at this point and Roe has texted me about a hundred times. I also have it on good authority that he's invaded Mac's room as well and is watching everything on Z13's security cameras. It's way past Bear's bedtime so he's bothering us because he doesn't have anything to distract him from knowing his wife is dancing in a club without him.

I'm pocketing my phone after responding to another text from Roe when I catch Clara's alarmed eyes scanning for me in the crowd. Before I even know what's going on, I'm moving to her. Scanning the area while stalking over to her. I spot a man holding on to Britt's hips while dancing with her. She's facing him so I'm unsure what they're talking about.

Clara grabs my arm and pulls me down so my ear is right by her lips, "Kieran, help

her. That man has come over here more than once and she's asked him to leave her alone. This time he grabbed her hips hard enough to make her flinch then spun her around."

Looking back over to Britt I'm instantly on edge as she tries to jerk away from the clearly drunk douche. He grabs her wrists and pulls her impossibly closer. I can hear her whimper of pain from here. Checking our surroundings looking for Killian, he's not even three feet behind us. "Killian, take Mrs. Byrne to the car. I'll grab her friend and we'll head home."

Killian murmurs out a, "Yes sir." before leading Clara out of the club. She looks back at me worried, so I mouth, 'I've got it. Don't worry.' as she's escorted to the Tahoe. With Clara out of the club and potential danger it's time to make my move. Moving behind Brittany while wrapping my arms around her waist, the man shifts his focus to me, he has to look up to meet my eyes.

"Sorry man, I've already got her. She's feisty, but you know a little fight always makes for the best nights."

My blood is boiling. My patience which is thin on the best days, is nonexistent right now, "Yeah, well I'd really hate to ruin your plans, man. But this is my girlfriend and if you don't take your fucking hands off of her in the next ten seconds every single bone in your hands will break before they're mysteriously amputated from your wrists."

She must recognize my voice because her body sags into mine. I'm holding up most of her weight, and every piece of me screams to get her out of here. The guy's hands fly off of her in a flash as he stutters out, "Oh.. I didn't know.. She..she didn't mention a boyfriend.."

Finding her voice again Brittany speaks up, "No, I didn't. But I did mention no and

stop multiple times didn't I?" I can feel the adrenaline pumping through my veins as it gets ready to knock this drunk bastard out.

Bending down my lips brush the side of her neck lightly then against her ear so she can hear me, "You okay? I'm more than willing to take him outside and teach him to keep his hands to himself."

Locking eyes with the douche she shakes her head then brings my left hand up to kiss my swollen and scarred knuckles from last night, "No, he isn't worth it. Let's go home."

"Saved by my girl being ready for me to take her home to worship her, bro. Let me catch you anywhere near her again and I'll make your worst nightmares look like the best dreams you've ever had, got me?"

He quickly nods, "Yeah, yeah you got it." He doesn't even fully finish his rushed sentence when he takes off through the crowd.

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Her body trembles against me. Refusing to second guess myself, I'm scooping her up into my arms before my brain catches up to my movements. She doesn't fight me like I anticipated. Actually her face turns into my shoulder, and she cuddles in for the journey to the car. I'm pretty sure she's borderline drunk, definitely very tipsy at the least. The cool night air hits us as we step outside. As soon as the first chill wracks her body a small whimper escapes her lips. Looking down it doesn't take long to realize she's crying. My lips meet the crown of her head while breathing her in and whispering reassuringly to her. She smells like a tropical island, coconut, and a hint of something entirely her.

Stopping half a parking lot away I finally ask, "Did he hurt you?"

She sniffles before answering, "He scared me more than anything. I'm okay, just ready to go back to your house and crash in the guest room."

"Oh yeah?" Trying to lighten the mood, I give her my most charming smile. "The guest room is across the hall from my room, I'll gladly show you the way."

Heat flashes in her eyes and her fingertips trail down my chest. "You look like you could show me a lot, Kieran. Maybe I can show you some things too."

My dick stirs to life in my jeans and I shoot up a prayer to whoever is listening that she isn't messing with me. "Well, let's get home and see if you're all talk, Brave Girl."

Her lips come up and nip at the underside of my jaw, "After you, Mystery Man."

I'm smirking at her and staring into her steel gray eyes when the back passenger door is flung open from inside as Clara's panicked voice kills the sexual tension in the air, "Oh my gosh, are you okay? Why is he carrying you? Are you hurt?"

Gently placing Brittany on her feet, my eyes roll on their own accord. Brittany plasters on a smile that I can instantly tell is fake, "I'm okay. It was crowded so he carried me out, and my hips are sore, but I'm fine. I just want to go back to your house and crash in your spare room." She moves into the back seat, while letting her fingertips graze my lower stomach inconspicuously. Doing my best to hide my smirk, I shut the door then slide in the passenger seat as Killian pulls out to get us home.

* * *

Opening the door for the girls, Clara barely sets her foot on the ground before Rowan rushes outside and throws her over his shoulder, "Rowan! Put me down, you big caveman."

He lets out a playful growl, "I'll show you caveman when I'm edging you until you cry for making me wait hours to peel this dress off with my teeth."

She lets out a squeal then a full belly laugh, "Wait! We need to make sure Brittany gets settled in the spare room."

Rowan turns his wild eyes on me, "Get her to the spare room, we'll be busy until Rhett wakes up, and I'm praying he wakes you up so I can sleep in with my wife."

Suppressing my laugh to the best of my ability, my headshakes at him, "Yeah, Boss. I got it." He takes off into the house with his wife and I've never been more thankful to live on a different floor than him.

Turning to Brittany my hand settles on her lower back, my pinky flirting with the

curve of her ass, “You ready, Brave Girl?”

She smiles, but looks a little unsure, “Yeah Mystery Man, show me the way.”

I lead her the whole way up to the third story where my room is on the right of the stairs and Mac’s is on the left. With spare rooms directly across each of our rooms. Our rooms are the size of apartments, it’s probably why we all still live here instead of moving out. Well that and there’s more than enough room for all of us plus a few kids, and we have an unhealthy codependency with each other.

It only takes us a few minutes to arrive at her door. “Well, this is you. I’m just across the hall. So just yell if you need something. If you’re lonely, I’m always down to snuggle, but be warned, I sleep naked.”

Confusion clouds her features, “I thought you had some things to show me?”

Shooting her a sad smile while shaking my head, “I would love nothing more than to press your sexy ass body up against this door and worship every inch of it. To take you into your room and fuck you on every surface in it.” My hands cup her face as gently as I can. “I’m a lot of things Brittany, but I’m not going to take advantage of a drunk girl. So if you find yourself awake after sleeping off the alcohol and want to come to my bed, the doors unlocked. You just have to come in but baby, you’re going to be sober when I fuck you until you pass out.”

She sighs and locks her gorgeous gray eyes onto mine, “Damn you for being a good guy, Kieran Byrne.”

Kissing her forehead I can’t help but laugh, “Oh, I’ll show you just how bad I can be. When you’re sober. Goodnight Brittany.”

“Goodnight Kieran.”

I wait until she's in her room before I turn and head into mine to try to sleep and pray that she makes her way into my bed tonight.

4

Chapter Four

Brittany

I shoot straight up in bed, panting like I just ran a marathon. My eyes search the room looking for him. It's empty, everything's fine, it was just a dream. Taking a few minutes to try to control my breathing my fingers come up to graze my neck. Not tender, I'm fine. Before I can second guess myself my feet hit the soft, plush carpet and start towards the sexy as sin man across the hall. It's stupid, but I just need to be held right now. He offered, I'm sober and I just need something to take away the memories of me as a child growing up in the seventh circle of hell.

I'm not even a full toe into his room when his gruff voice scares me half to death, "Get lonely, Brave Girl?"

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He's on his stomach, one arm under his head, the other stretched out across the bed. He flips over to his back, lifts his arm and his comforter for me to slide in. I'm no longer tired while watching his sleepy eyes slowly drag up and down my body. "Damn. I'm going to be a gentleman, but I need you to know that's the last thing I want to be. You're killing me right now, Brittany." Looking down at myself my face instantly heats.

I'm wearing an oversized shirt from an Eminem concert I went to forever ago, and that's it. Just a shirt. Kieran's eyes are heated, he looks like a man starved, with his eyes set on his first meal in weeks. Biting my bottom lip while taking in his broad, strong chest, my face begins to heat.

He shoots me a filthy grin, "Do you want to sleep, Britt? Or do you want to learn a thing or two?"

"Oh, I doubt there's anything you can teach me. You know what they say, all talk no action."

Moving over to him his hands shoot out and drag me into the bed with him. Before I'm able to process what's happening, I'm under him. He's smirking down at me, and both my wrists are in one of his hands pinned above my head. His lips meet my pulse point as he gently sucks on it. My head tilts back giving him more room to kiss, lick, suck, and nip at my neck and shoulder.

Letting out a quiet moan, I can feel his lips tip up in a smirk. "I'm going to show you just how much action back up my words."

He pulls his lips away, sits up slightly, and before my horny, fogged up brain can catch up to what's happening my wrists are bound to his headboard. Panic starts building in my chest, my eyes dart to his. He must be able to tell because his lips press to mine in a sweet soothing kiss.

“Just say the word and I stop. You're in control here, if at any point this doesn't feel good or you just don't want to, say it.”

Swallowing down the nerves, determination sets in my features, “Should we discuss a safe word?”

A tender smile breaks across his face, “Stop is the only safe word you'll need with me. I'll push the limits, but feeling like you aren't consenting when you are isn't a kink of mine.”

Exhaling all of my nerves I force a dirty smirk, “Well then, Mr. Byrne. It looks to me like you're once again talking a whole lot for someone who promises the moon and the stars.”

Kieran lets out a dark chuckle, “Oh I'll show you stars, baby.”

His hands start at my hips and gently push the fabric of my shirt up and over my head until they're tangled in the restraints. I'm completely laid out bare for him. Watching this man's eyes flare even in the dead of night might be my new addiction. His lips descend down my body, stopping at my left breast. He takes my nipple in his mouth, tugging, and biting, while using his fingers to torture the other. I can feel my thighs slicken with arousal. Every suck, bite, or twist of his fingers sending lightning straight to my core. Switching over to my right nipple while his fingers move to my left, he starts the process all over again. Quiet whimpers escape from my throat while all I can do is lay here at his mercy. If he doesn't stop he just may make me come like this. That'd be a first for me.

Honestly, I rarely if ever come unless I do it myself. I'm unsure if I'm broken or if they just don't care enough to make sure I finish. Kieran begins to move down my chest and stomach. Leaning up on one forearm while his free hand starts stroking up and down my upper thigh. His lips are busy assaulting my skin with bites then soothing it with kisses and licks to take away the sting. He's so close to where I want him, but so far away at the same time. I'm at the end of my rope, I need him. Half moaning half begging I let him know. "Kieran, please stop teasing me. I need you."

Looking up at me he shoots me a wicked grin, "Oh you need me? Where at? Right here?" His lips trail from one hip bone to the other, "Or maybe right here?" He licks and nips at the top of my thigh.

So close but so damn far away, "Kieran please. Touch me, lick me, fuck me, something, anything. Just please?"

He shuts his eyes, cutting me off from the pale green windows to his soul. I'm uncertain if he's trying to gain his composure or if I've irritated him. He doesn't leave me wondering for long. His eyes pop open and his big hands take my knees and push them up then to the sides. Opening me up completely to him, the cold air making me hiss.

"That's it, Brave Girl. Ask for what you want. Always." He moves between my legs, using his index finger to run up my core.

"Dammit baby, you're drenched. Is all this for me?" Letting out a moan, his finger reaches my clit and gently circles it.

"Yes. I want you so badly." I get one more smirk before he lowers his head and licks up the length of my slit.

My hips jolt off the bed, but Kieran isn't going to let that slide. Reaching up he

smacks the side of my thigh before wrapping his hands around my upper thighs to hold me in place. “You move, I stop. Don’t move, babe.”

His mouth descends on my clit, pulling it into his mouth while sucking, licking, and gently biting. He inserts two long fingers and curls them up stroking the inner walls of my pussy. His fingertips finding that secret spot, and he applies the slightest pressure while rubbing it. Between his fingers and his mouth I’m ready to explode.

“Kieran, I’m going to come. I’m right there.”

He growls into me and it sets me off. My hips start moving on their own accord, riding his face. Kieran gently bites down, and I’m thrown into oblivion. My entire body spasms as I scream out his name.

My heart beats out of my chest as my entire body relaxes and I float back down to earth. He smirks as he makes his way back up my body, his face soaked in my arousal.

“I’ve never seen anything as beautiful, or tasted anything as good in my entire twenty-four years.” His hips grind into my core. If his erection tells me anything, it’s that he isn’t lying. His lips crash onto mine as my feet come up to push down his boxers.

When he pulls back to help me I can’t help but smart, “I thought you slept naked?”

He grins, “I was trying to be a gentleman just in case you came to cuddle.”

Rolling my eyes I can’t help the laugh that bubbles, “Yeah, the restraints make you practically a Prince.”

My laugh dies on my lips turning into a moan, as he grips his thick, long, and hard

erection in his hand and runs the head up and down my slit. “Kieran.” I sound so breathy, but I couldn’t care less how desperate it comes out. I need him. Kieran seems to be done talking, heat flaring in his dangerous eyes. Closing my eyes I hear the unmistakable rip of the foil packet.

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Feeling his fingers tap on my thigh, my eyes shoot open, “Eyes on me. Don’t check out or I’m stopping.”

“Okay, I’m not. I’m right here.” He slowly but steadily pushes inside. Not stopping until I can feel him bottom out. He waits for me to adjust to the completely full feeling as well as the slight burn from his girth. “Kieran, move.”

My heels dig into his ass moving him along. It doesn’t take him any time to start moving. Slowly at first then finding our rhythm. His hands are everywhere, gripping my hips, pinching my nipples, smacking the side of my ass. I’m going insane not being able to touch his perfect, chiseled body.

Unable to take it anymore, “Let me touch you, please.”

He’s already shaking his head before I finish my sentence. “Not this time, let me worship you.” His fingers circle my clit as he changes angles slightly, and oh, ohhh. I’m done. “I’m going to come again.” Kieran keeps his same tempo, and I’m right on the edge.

He grips my hips and growls, “Don’t you dare, Britt. You don’t come until I say you can.”

What? How does that piss me off and turn me on even more at the exact same time.

“You like being bossed around? Yeah, I can tell by how tightly your pussy is gripping me. Show me how good you can be for me, Brave Girl.” I swear his words alone could send me straight to space. I’m trying so hard to hold off but my climax is so

close I can practically taste it.

“Kieran, please.”

His thrusts become erratic as his muscles strain above me. “Now, be a good girl and come on my cock. Come now.” I fall off the cliff into oblivion as the most intense orgasm washes over me. Stars dance in my eyes from the intensity, and I can faintly hear Kieran groan out my name. Once I float back down to earth and open my eyes, Kieran is holding himself up on his forearms above me. Sweat glistens on his forehead and chest from the moonlight shining through his otherwise pitch black room. His forehead leans down to meet mine.

“Fuck.”

Smirking, I let out a small laugh, “Yeah, I think we’ve covered that.”

Kieran gets up to take care of the condom and put on a pair of boxers. Once he’s done with that he cleans me up with a warm washcloth and climbs back in bed with me.

“So you want to tell me what actually brought you in here?”

“I just had a bad dream.”

“What about?”

He moves me so my head is on his chest and my leg is draped across his thigh. His arm wraps around me holding me close to him. “I don’t want to talk about it.” He doesn’t fight me on it like I thought he would. Just nods, and drops it.

“Sleep Britt. The bad dreams can’t get you here.”

“I just need a few seconds, then I’ll go back to my room.”

His hold tightens on me before he whispers, “Stay.”

“Are you sure? I can leave?”

“Stay.”

“Okay, I’ll stay.” Something sounds different in his voice but I can’t put my finger on it. Like he needs me to stay just as badly as I want to.

“Swear?”

I breathe him in, sandalwood, whiskey, and something uniquely him. I breathe out and let my body relax into him.

“Swear.”

His hand comes up to massage my scalp gently. As I let sleep take over his voice filters through my half asleep brain, “Thank you, Mo Stóirín.”

* * *

Waking up surrounded by the warmest blanket, I snuggle deeper into it. Something grips me tighter around the stomach and shoulders, and I’m pulled back against a warm hard chest. My eyes spring open and all the memories of last night come rushing back. Shit, I’ve got to get out of here. Before I can even move Kieran’s lips touch the shell of my ear and he presses his already hard dick into my back.

“Don’t panic and don’t leave. Just lie here with me a little longer, Mo Stóirín. It’s still early.”

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Sighing I relax back into his hold. “What’s that mean? What did you just call me?”

One of his hands comes up to massage my scalp. It feels so good I want him to follow me around doing it all day. “Huh? Oh, nothing.” He stiffens behind me just slightly before making himself relax back. That’s fine, I’ll drop it now. Then I’ll ask Rowan later. For now, I’ll take his snuggles before I have to sneak back into the guest room and we go back to practically strangers.

Waking up again a few hours later my arms stretch high above my head, my body tightens with the best kind of sore all over feeling. Thoughts of Kieran and I from last night race through my head. He’s huge all over, of course he is the man’s six and a half feet tall. With being that large you’d think he’d have zero finesse, that he’d be clunky and clumsy in his movements. You’d think, but you’d be wrong. Kieran Byrne used my body like I was the finest instrument and he’d spent his whole life honing his skills. Looking around my eyes adjust and finally my brain catches up. How did I end up back in my room?

Sitting up and looking around, my eyes catch on a folded piece of paper. Picking it up and unfolding it to read the simple message scrawled across.

Had work. Text me. -Kie

His number is written under the message. Punching his number in my phone quickly I decide to go explore and find Clara and Rhett. I’ll text him later.... Maybe.

Chapter Five

Kieran

Standing in the shower at our warehouse washing another man's blood and brain matter off of me, I pull in a shuddered breath. Everyone thinks I'm impenetrable, that I'm made of stone, and have no feelings. My brothers often call me a machine. They just think I'm able to turn it on when I leave the house and turn it off when walking through the door at the end of the day when I turn into the favorite Uncle of the coolest little boy out there. That's simply not true. Every act I perform to protect my brothers or the organization chips away at me.

I'll do anything to protect my brothers, new sister-in-law, and nephew. I carry my parents' death on my shoulders. When they died I'd just turned twenty-one, but that still falls on me. I'm the enforcer and the protector. It's my job to make sure everyone's safe and healthy. That night I failed, because of that I have to carry the guilt of their deaths. I failed them, and in return my brother's decided to make me the guy to keep them all alive and unharmed. Their safety and well being consumes my life. The only thing that's for me is fighting. Even that isn't really for me. That's because I'm fucked up. Last night though, that was solely for me.

Britt is gorgeous, her hair is blonde with just a hint of red in it as well, her eyes almost as gray as steel. She's got just enough sass to have my ears perk and my dick twitch. Don't even get me started on last night. That was the best sex of my life. I have certain.... preferences in the bedroom. Don't get me wrong, I'm not nearly as refined in my tastes as say Declan or Mac, but I do thrive on control. Brittany seemed nervous, almost scared last night at first, but she quickly gave me the control that I crave.

I've had her on my mind all day. I can't think of anything else aside from if she's thinking about me. Can she not get last night out of her head too? I've never wanted

to spend more than a night or two with a woman. The fiery woman who crawled into my bed, though? I'm finding myself hoping for any opportunity to get her back there with me. Only, I can't text her, because she hasn't texted me. Getting out of the shower and toweling off I check my phone hoping she's texted or called me... She hasn't.

Meeting Dec and Mac back at the SUV, we slide in and immediately start debriefing on Rod Anderson, the stupid fuck that I just tortured until he gave us the name of his little trafficking buddy. "Jordan Hudson." Declan's voice breaks the silence in the vehicle. "Mac, you know what we need." Mac hasn't looked up from his phone but he nods in agreement anyway. I'll bet my first born that he's already zeroing in on Hudson's address, social, parent's first names, and his first dog. He's just that good. It's dark outside which means I've spent all day cementing my spot in hell. I'm so fucking drained, and all I want to do is find my new sisters best friend, get shitty take out, and watch a god awful movie in my sweats before burying myself inside her.

Huh... that actually doesn't sound half bad. I mean it's not in the least bit practical. Brittany was a one night stand. She was someone for me to worship and hold for one night. She wants the good time Kieran that she saw the other night, maybe even the brute I turn into when I'm not around my nephew or sister-in-law. But the real me? The version of myself that I barely even let my brothers see? No, she's not interested in that. Honestly, I'm not even sure I'm interested in her like that. We've had one night of interactions where I had to act as security. That didn't give me nearly enough time to gather information and make a decision like that.

She's inhabited my head all day, and yeah I'm intrigued, but I'm not Rowan. I don't fall head over heels the second a pretty girl looks my way. That's definitely not me. I mean she better not give any other man her attention. I'll slit his throat if he touches her, but that's different. Maybe she'll be down to keep hooking up. That could work.

I'm in my own head when Mac hits the side of my leg pulling me back. "Yeah?"

He's looking at me like I have five heads, "Did you hear anything I just said?"

"No."

"Dude, how do you keep us safe every day? Your attention span is the size of a fly."

"Rude, just because I wasn't listening to you doesn't mean that I didn't clock that in the past four minutes Declan's checked his watch eight times. Which means he's late for something or someone. Your knee is slightly bouncing, that's your nervous tell by the way, which tells me that getting information from a human trafficker affected you more than you act like it did."

I could stop but just to drive my point home, I don't. "Also, Collin up there has adjusted his cuff link twenty-seven times since we've gotten in the car, and he sings every song under his breath. And Ian looks like his shoulders are going to snap if he tenses any more. Don't ever mistake my tuning out your blabbering for me being unaware. If you would have said something important I would have been listening."

Declan cuts in as soon as I take a breath, "Enough Kieran, we get the point. You guys get ready, we have to find Jordan tomorrow. We can't leave a single stone unturned. We need to meet Rowan in the office when we get home." Settling back in my seat my eyes shut and I try to relax for the rest of the ride.

* * *

"Women and kids?" Flynn clarifies, his face looking a little green after listening to my rundown of today's events.

"As young as four."

Rowan takes the crystal whiskey glass in his hand and throws it against the far wall causing the entire thing to shatter. His hands link as he sets them on the top of his head to breathe through what I just told him. He's a dad to a four year old first and foremost. Just like the rest of us are uncles to that very four year old.

"We got the name of his boss, but it's looking like that's going to be a long ladder to climb." Mac chimes in.

"So you can't do it? You're telling us you can't uncover this?" Declan roars, his voice echoing in the room.

Mac soars to his feet in the next second. "Is that what I fucking said? Did I say those exact words, Declan? Or maybe did I say it's a long list to work through? Don't put words in my mouth, and don't question my abilities when the goddamn government is foaming at the mouth to get me on their side because I'm that good!"

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And now it's time to break this up. Mac's the quietest of us all, but he's still a Byrne and once that fuse is lit, everyone's in trouble. We're all on edge right now. It's to be expected when we're talking about the scum of the earth and it hits so close to home. Pushing at Mac's back to guide him out the door I call over my shoulder, "Everyone do whatever you need to do to calm down, and we'll meet up in the morning. Just stay out of the gym."

Mac doesn't fight me as I guide him out of the room and up to our floor. Neither of us says a word until we're in his room. I push him into the center then make my way over to his dresser, pulling out shorts and throwing them at his face.

"Get changed, we're going to the gym."

"I don't need the gym. What I need is to go stab Declan in the hand."

"And that is exactly why we're going to hit shit until you're too tired to hurt him. I'd encourage you to go to the club, but I'm not sure whoever you get paired with would survive the night."

He grumbles something about not touching a sub while he's pissed but I'm not paying attention. "You have five minutes. I'm going to change then meet you there. We'll warm up, then spar. And if you mark up my beautiful face, I'm stopping and you can hit the bag." He cracks the faintest smile before heading into the bathroom to change.

A couple hours later Mac and I are laid out in the middle of the gym floor. Sweat pouring from our bodies as our lungs fight for a full breath. We lay in silence for

about twenty minutes before Mac finally whispers a single name.

“Riley.”

Yeah, I knew exactly where this was going the moment we figured out these assholes are in skin trading.

“M, we don’t know that this happened to her.” He sits up and draws his knees up before draping his arms over them locking one wrist in the other hand’s grasp. His head falls so low his chin hits his chest.

“We don’t know that it didn’t either.”

“I know, I’ve been thinking about her too. The hard truth is that we can’t save her. It’s been fifteen years, and we still know as much as we did when she disappeared.”

“Wow, thanks for the pep talk, you’re so good at them it’s no wonder I don’t go to anyone else.” Sitting up beside him and copying his position, I knock my shoulder into his.

“Shut up. What I mean is we can’t save her, but we can save them. Rowan and Dec are looking at this as if it was Rhett and Clara. They were so much older when Riley disappeared that they weren’t friends with her. But I swear to you Mac, she’s on a loop in my head too.”

“I know, I’m sorry for blowing up. It’s just been like taking sandpaper to sunburn for days. I couldn’t take it anymore.”

“I know the feeling. Come on, let’s go shower and crash. We’ll start fresh tomorrow.”

Mac nods his agreement and takes my hand when I offer it to him. Pulling him up I

lead us back upstairs where we separate to go to our own rooms. I'm opening my door when Mac's voice stops me.

"Hey K?"

I turn my head towards him and lift my chin for him to continue.

"Thanks."

"Anytime little brother. Night."

"Night."

6

Chapter Six

Brittany

It's been weeks since my hookup with Kieran and I never texted or called him. Not because I haven't thought about it a million times but because my brain just won't tell my fingers to pull up his contact and use it. The electricity between us is dangerous. The man looks like he promises nothing but heartbreak and good orgasms. I want the latter but can't afford the former. I've almost reached out to him more than once. He intrigued me enough to have me wanting to, but then my self preservation kicks in and I tamper that back down.

I got a new job as a personal assistant at a law firm a week and a half ago. I'm working twelve plus hour days, six days a week. I'm not complaining because honestly I need the money. My boss is pretty cool. Although he's a little too informal for my preference, but he's fine to work for. I've missed my partner in crime this

week. I didn't just get a new job. I've also moved into my apartment right down the street from my office. It was like it fell right in my lap.

I just got off from work an hour ago and made my way straight over to Clara's. I miss my best friend so much, and we needed a girls night in. That's how we've ended up lounging on the giant sectional at the Byrne house with Rhett between us.

"Auntie, where have you been?"

"What do you mean, silly. I've been at my apartment."

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“But why? Why don’t you just live here? My Uncles live here. You can too.” Oh, his sweet heart.

“Well, your Uncles lived here before you did. Your Daddy isn’t my brother so I can’t live here.” A look of pure frustration covers his handsome little face. He sits with his arms folded while Clara and I go back to snuggling him and watching the movie. After a few minutes he huffs and jumps off the couch. Clara and I look at each other in question but neither of us say a word as we watch his little four and a half year old self march straight over to the door to his Daddy’s office. He knocks on the door. It swings open a moment later and none other than the man who has been the center of all my ‘self care’ sessions since he bossed me around while wringing every ounce of pleasure from my body takes up the door frame. Kieran squats down to his level, a gentle smile taking over his too handsome face. “Hey, Bear. What’s up?”

Rhett is still staring him down with a look that he’ll use to run the world one day, I’m sure of it.

“Where’s Rowan?” I’m pretty sure every person in hearing distance jaw drops.

“Woah.” Gone is the smile on Kieran’s face. “Why are you calling your Da by his name? That’s not very nice, and I’m sure it’ll hurt his feelings.”

His tough guy exterior drops in an instant and his little bottom lip quivers right before he starts crying. Kieran is jerked back by none other than Rowan, causing him to fall back onto his perfect ass. Roe scoops Rhett up and hugs him to his chest, “Hey, shh it’s okay. What’s wrong?”

I've heard that Rowan's a force to be reckoned with outside of this house. But inside of it? He melts at a moments notice if Clara or Rhett even jut their lip out.

"I'm sorry, I didn't want to hurt your feelings. I just want Auntie to live with us."

Oh, my sweet boy. He was ready to go toe to toe with his Da for me.

"Who said Auntie can't live with us?"

Shit.

"She did, because she's not your brother."

Rowan's stone cold glare comes to me. "You made my son mad at me, Mitchell?"

Clara cuts in before I can say anything, "Down, boy. She was explaining why she doesn't live here. Actually, I'mso glad you're done with work for tonight. Rhett needs a bath and bedtime."

Rowan's eyes soften at his wife, he's so obsessed with her that it's unreal. "I'll do bedtime solo, but you have to come to bed tonight."

Clara stares him down for a solid minute before relenting, "Deal, but Britt's coming too. I'm not leaving her down here alone."

"Veto, I'm not sharing my bed with anyone but you and Rhett. She can have the guest room."

I toss my hand up, "Sheis right here, and I'll just go home later that's no big deal." Out of the corner of my eye I see Kieran stiffen at the suggestion.

“Auntie can sleep with me!” Rhett chimes in.

“Perfect, Little Bear, that’s a great idea.” Roe smirks because he knows he’s won this one.

“Okay, Rhett. You have to go to bed like a big boy or I won’t sleep in your room okay?”

“Okay!” He wiggles down out of his dad’s arms before taking his hand and leading him upstairs.

Like I said, he’s going to rule the world one day.

* * *

We’ve gossiped, drank wine, and watched three new scary movies. Now we’re leaning on each other while yawning and half asleep. I’m starting to nod off when I feel Rowan stand in front of the couch. He pushes the hair off Clara’s forehead then gently tilts me so I lay down on the couch. I’m in that half awake half asleep state when I hear Rowan.

“She’s so worn out. I don’t know what’s going on with her lately. I’m going to take her to bed, then I’ll come back and get Brittany.”

“I’ll take her. She’s going to Rhett’s room, right?” That was Kieran. I was going to offer to walk myself, but now I’m not saying a word. I’ve craved his touch since that night.

“Yeah, she’s supposed to, but Rhett’s already in our bed after a nightmare. You can put her in his room, or the spare room. Thanks.”

“Don’t worry about it. Get Clara to bed. They both look like they haven’t slept well in weeks.”

I feel fingertips brush my hair out of my face, the zap of electricity tells me exactly who just touched me. The next thing I know I’ve been scooped into strong arms and cradled against Kieran’s warm, strong chest. My head leaning on his shoulder, and the rhythmic sound of his heart almost pulling me completely under the blanket of sleep. We reach the top of the steps when he leans down and kisses the top of my head.

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“Hey, Brave Girl. I know you can hear me.” He whispers.

Unwilling to have a full conversation I respond, “hmm?”

“Rhett’s room or the spare?”

Snuggling deeper into his hold I all but whisper, “Spare.”

I can feel Kieran smile against my hair as he gives me one last kiss and makes his way to the spare room. He gently lays me down and covers me up. He presses his lips to my forehead one last time before turning on his heels to go to his own room. Being half asleep is the only excuse I have for what I do next. Before he can move too far away I reach out and grab his fingers with my own.

“Stay.”

Kie sucks in a sharp breath and without another word pushes his sweat pants off so he’s just in his black boxers and climbs into bed behind me. His strong arm wraps around my waist and pulls my back into his chest. My body instantly melts into his. The last time we did this I slept soundly for the first time in as long as I can remember.

“Go to sleep. The bad dreams can’t get you here.”

“Swear?”

This feels too intimate. Way too much for a man I’ve hooked up with once, but at the

same time his arms make me feel something that I'm not sure I've ever felt in my life. Protected. So I let Kie hold me as I drift off to sleep tangled up in his long limbs as I'm drifting to sleep I hear him whisper into the room.

“Swear.”

* * *

I wake up to an empty bed and instantly feel a sense of déjà vu. After getting up and throwing on a pair of black leggings and an old band tee, I decide to head downstairs. While making my way down to find Clara and Rhett my mind wanders to where Kieran went. Not like it matters, we just slept in the same bed. Finding Rhett snuggled up on the couch, I grab a blanket out of the ottoman and curl up with him. He leans his head onto my arm and it brushes his bare ear. My head whips around, looking for Clara or Rowan. He always keeps his processors with one of them if he isn't wearing them. My eyes catch on them sitting on the side table. What is happening this morning?

Scratching his head until he brings his tired miserable eyes to mine, my hands lift to talk to him, “Why are your processors off? Are you okay?”

He shakes his head, “My head hurts. Hearing break.”

Rhett was unable to hear anything until a few months ago. He takes hearing breaks but only after telling one or both of his parents and making sure his processors are safe with them. Poor baby also gets migraines from time to time like his mom. I've been around since the day he was born and the look he has in his eyes right now screams the beginning stages of a migraine.

Laying his head into my lap he closes his eyes and puts my hand gently on his head. We've done this enough over the years that I know exactly what he wants. My fingers

twirl around his curls, playing with his hair as easily as possible. It doesn't take long until he's asleep. Looking around it's empty down here. Come to think of it, there's typically a Byrne brother around Rhett constantly. This morning there's none to be found. Grabbing my phone I shoot Clara a text letting her know where I am and what's going on, making sure to assure her I've got it and he's fine.

About a half an hour later two sets of heavy footsteps run down the stairs.

"Bear?!" Rowan's frantic voice fills the space.

"Hey, he's right here. I've got him." My hand doesn't stop running through his curls for fear of waking him up. Rowan comes to a screeching stop in front of us.

"I'm so sorry, Clara's down with a migraine and Rhett has some sort of sickness going on. I left him asleep in bed with Clara to take a call and when I came back he was gone."

"What do you mean he has some sort of sickness?"

He gestures to him asleep in my lap like I'm an idiot. "He's asleep in your lap at eleven on a Sunday morning."

Giving him a small smile I let him in on what Clara must have not mentioned. "Rhett gets migraines too. He hasn't had one to my knowledge since you've been around, but he gets them all the same. He likes to sleep with his head in my lap and lets me play with his hair. We've been doing this for every migraine since it started when he was two. I've been called over from work, appointments, and late nights out. I'm not his mom or his dad but I'm Auntie, and to Rhett, Auntie is his go to migraine remedy."

"I didn't know about his migraines. Is there anything you need while you're with

him? Between him and Clara I'm feeling pretty useless. Are you sure I can't take him?"

He's so stiff and looks extremely stressed. I've never seen him like this before. Rowan's always so relaxed and chill when I'm around. It's also important to note that I've only ever been around when Clara and Rhett are as well and he's in family mode. I know who Rowan is and what he does, so I'm sure he's typically no nonsense. I've just never seen that side of him. "Yeah, I've got him. You take care of our girl. I've got our boy."

He forces a smile however his voice is commanding, "Okay, you have my number, so keep me updated. If he throws up or anything changes text or call me right away. Declan will stay down here with you."

No, absolutely not.

I give him my most dramatic 'what the fuck' face before spitting out, "You're joking right?"

The look on his face tells me he's very serious.

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“I don’t need a damn babysitter Rowan. Let’s not forget that before you entered the picture I was Rhett’s second parent in almost every aspect. You’re here now and I’m so happy you’re the husband and dad they need. You can be stressed all you want, but you will NOT treat me like I can’t be trusted. I got them out of that house of horrors. Don’t disrespect me by acting like I’m going to hurt them. Never forget I loved them first.” By the time I’m done I’m practically vibrating with rage. I won’t be treated like I’m a new person that they’re unsure of. They can suck my ass. The entire time my hand keeps its same rhythm in my sweet godson’s hair.

Declan lets out a low whistle, “Looks like you pissed off the wrong one Roe. I’ll do whatever you want me to. Just know if she starts planning your untimely demise I’m not stopping her.” Rowan glares at me, but I’m not easily intimidated anymore so I glare right back.

Finally he huffs out a breath of annoyance and drops his hands from his hips dramatically, “Fine. But give me your phone. I’m putting all our numbers in here just in case anything happens. I mean if he so much as looks like he’s going to cough I need you to text one of us.”

Tossing my unlocked phone to him I can’t help but roll my eyes. “Stop micromanaging me, Rowan. Put the numbers in and I’ll use them if I need to. But this isn’t my first rodeo. It’s just yours.”

He grumbles to himself as he puts the numbers in. Before he hands it back to me I hear Dec and Roe’s phones go off.

Shit.

“I texted us all in a group chat so we all have your number too. You’ll answer when we call or text.” He hands me my phone then quickly turns on his heels before stomping out of the room. “I’m going to take care of my wife. Declan will be in my office handling some things if you need him.”

As he disappears up the stairs I lift a brow and look to Declan who just shrugs and coughs to hide his laugh. “Impressive Ms. Mitchell, I’ll be down the hall if you need me.” Giving me a sharp nod he puts his hands in his pockets and leaves the living room. Leaning my head back against the back of the couch I let my eyes drift shut, as I attempt to process what the fuck that was all about.

* **

Waking up, the first thing I notice is that I’m lying on the couch instead of sitting up now. Rhett wiggled his way onto my chest and we’ve been covered with a big fluffy blanket. Blinking my eyes open they scan the living room. I startle in surprise when a set of medium green eyes lock onto mine. Shaggy hair lays wildly across his forehead. It’s so long that it’s almost in his eyes. Whispering out of habit more than anything, “Did you cover us up?”

He gives me a lazy smile that rivals his older brother’s. It’s the same one that’s been flooding my mind for weeks. “Yeah, you both looked cold. I was sent down here to check on you guys. I also took a picture. Mainly because I figured you’d appreciate it, but also to send proof of life.”

Shooting him a glare and giving the most unladylike huff of annoyance I can, “Tell Rowan I said he can jump off the roof. I’m not going to ‘prove’ myself to the new member of our dynamic. He stepped into my family unit, not the other way around.”

Mac’s eyes are huge by the time I’m done, his hands come up in surrender, “Woah, chill. Rowan didn’t send me. Kieran did.”

Okay. Now I'm confused.

"Kieran?"

"Yeah Kieran, care to explain why he's been so paranoid about me checking on you and if you need anything?"

I'm stunned. Has he been thinking about me too? Oh, come on Brittany, get it together. That man can, and probably does, have half the female population falling at his feet. We slept together once and snuggled twice. There's no way he's even given it another thought. He, like Rowan, probably just thinks I'm incompetent to look after my godson.

"Probably because you guys walk around here thinking anyone without the last name Byrne is going to sneak him into a storage container and run off to India with him." I'm going for obvious sarcasm, but I can tell by the fire in Mac's eyes he's not in the mood for my shit.

"Right, well just so we're clear, we would tear anyone who tried to take him from us limb from limb before feeding the remains to a pig and putting their teeth in acid so there was no trace left of them. We don't care if you were 'here first' or not. No one messes with what's ours."

Yeah, fuck that.

"Get the fuck away from me Byrne. Tell your brother I'm fine, and tell your oldest brother as soon as Rhett's better I'm leaving and I'll meet up with Rhett and Clara solo from now on. Thanks for letting me stay last night, but I got it. Messages are received loud and clear. I'll stay out of your way as much as possible, but in response I expect all six of you to leave me the fuck alone." Mac's eyes soften and if I didn't know better I'd swear his feelings are hurt.

“Britt–”

Cutting him off because I’m over these macho alpha-hole men, “I’m done with this conversation, Mac. Let me spend time with my sweet boy in peace.” His eyes are downcast and his shoulders slumped but he nods and walks away without another word. Grabbing my phone to mute all their numbers I find a couple of texts from Kieran and a missed voicemail from a number I don’t recognize. Muting the other brothers I decide to check Kieran’s texts first.

Kieran: So this wasn’t the way I expected to get your number but I’ll take it.

Kieran: How’s Bear feeling? I miss him.

Kieran: I can’t stop thinking about you.

Kieran: At least send me proof of life before I have to force Mac to go check on you. He gets cranky when I’m out on business and he can’t find me. You donotwant to deal with him right now.

Kieran: Okay, you leave me no choice, Brave Girl.

Shaking my head at his craziness I don’t respond and click on the voicemail bringing my phone up to my ear. A voice that makes my blood run cold slides through the receiver. “Ms. Mitchell, this is Officer McKinneon, I was the detective on your case. I just wanted to let you know that your father has been granted parole effective Friday. He is ordered to stay in the state of Ohio, and if you still reside in the state he has to stay one thousand feet away from you at all times. Failure to do so will result in a parole violation and he will be sent back to prison. If you have any questions feel free to call me back at this number. I’ll call with his parole officer’s information when it becomes available to me. Try to have a good rest of your Sunday Ms. Mitchell. I’ll talk to you soon.”

My trembling hand pulls the phone from my ear as I kill the call. Tears are streaming down my face. This can't be happening. He's supposed to have nine more years. I'm supposed to have nine more years. I'm going to get Rhett feeling better then I have to go. I need to figure things out and get out from under the thumb's of the Byrne men. Taking shaking breaths I work hard to calm my frayed nerves and appear fine. I can feel Rhett shifting in my arms which means he should be up soon. Hopefully sans migraine.

Chapter Seven

Kieran

We're all congregating in the garage where I'm tuning my 2023 Yamaha R1. My eyes keep flicking over to my phone. She hasn't texted me back. When I got home from collecting a few debts this morning and didn't see them on the couch I decided to come out here to mess with my bike for a little bit. It wasn't long until the other five found me out here and now we're all sitting around and talking about any and every thing. All of our phones go off twice at the same time. We all look at each other before grabbing them. Pulling up the first notification to come through it's a group text with the guard station at the top of the property.

G.S Matthews: A 2020 black Chevrolet Traverse just left the property. Vehicle was searched. Nothing of concern was found. Driver's name was Brittany Mitchell. Please note she is not expecting to return.

What the fuck? Where is she going? Where is Rhett? Hearing a chorus of curses as we all collectively rush to the other text, it's Brittany in a group chat with all six of us and her.

Brittany: I have left the property and have no intentions of returning. Feelings have been made clear today, and that's fine. It's your house and you guys deserve to be comfortable and fully trust who is in it. That being said, Rhett woke up and his migraine is gone. He's in bed with Clara. The after effects can take awhile to subside

but he should be fine in a few days. Clara, Rhett, and I will continue to meet up and see each other outside of the estate. You can run me off your property but try as you may, you cannot run me out of their lives. Thank you for letting me stay the night. -
Brittany

Brittany has removed herself from chat

My eyes wheel around to all of them. My entire body tightens as rage fills me. I have to keep a lid on it though. They don't know anything happened with us. They have no idea that she's been running through my mind since the moment my eyes met hers.

Trying my hardest to be casual and disinterested, "Who pissed her off?" Rowan and Mac both look everywhere but at me. Forcing a laugh that I don't feel I press, "Okay so Mac and Rowan. What'd you two do? Clara's going to lose her shit on you both."

Rowan huffs out an annoyed breath, "Okay, but she was trying to tell me stuff about Bear. Stuff I didn't know. Which pissed me off. She was there when I wasn't. I should have been there. I should have saved them, not her."

Declan rolls his eyes, "You're being a whiny bitch. You need to be thanking her. They'd still be with Preston, or dead if it wasn't for her. But could you do that? No, you practically pissed on Clara and Rhett to mark your territory like a mongrel dog. And if that wasn't enough you insinuated she needed to be watched if she was with Rhett alone."

My brows hit my hairline, "You what? Dude that's not fucking cool. That's Clara's best friend and you're making your life so much harder by fighting with her instead of embracing her as one of us. Good luck talking to Clara. I'll make sure there's nice flowers at your funeral."

He rolls his eyes, "Fuck off, she just got under my skin. I'll make it right later." He

looks over to Mac, “What’d you do?”

Mac refuses to look at any of us keeping his eyes on the ground, “I—um— I may have threatened her.”

“WHAT?!”all of us yell at the same time. My fingers itch to grab my knife and shove it into his shoulder. I’ll put him on the fucking butchers hook for this.

Woah, where did that come from?

Mac’s my brother and my best friend. Family over everything. So why is my urge to shoot his fucking kneecaps out so strong right now?

Rowan roars out what I’m thinking, “You did what now? Explain right fucking now, Mac. If Clara finds out about this I’ll skin you alive.”

Mac rolls his eyes and looks at me. Once he realizes I’m also glaring daggers at him he starts talking. “She made a comment about how we act like she’s going to sneak Rhett out of here and flee the country. So I just let her know what would happen if she ever did try to take him without our permission.”

“You threatened to kill her? Are you fucking stupid?”

I don’t realize I’m yelling as loud as I am until Clara busts through the door. “Are you talking about Britt? I’m sorry. That’s a stupid question. You guys aren’t talking about my best friend. There’s no way you’re talking about my best friend. Not the woman who cleaned my cuts and took care of my bruises during the time I got beat almost on a daily basis. The woman who has supported me and my son no matter what. I know I didn’t just hear MacQuillian say he threatened to murder the woman who helped me escape the seventh circle of Hell. Who has her own trauma that could rival the worst of a fucking true crime documentary.” She’s shouting so loud my ears

ring, my heart beats in my temples, and my hand comes up to massage it. But my brain catches on that last sentence. A bone deep need to know her better, to find out what happened, forms. Clara must catch the move because her voice comes out quieter when she speaks again.

“Sorry Kieran, I didn’t mean to be that loud. I’m just worried about her. She’s left, she won’t pick up her phone, and all I got was a text saying her feelings were hurt and something came up. She said she’ll reach out to me when she’s ready. We’ve never needed a break from each other before.” Her voice is unnaturally high like she’s panicking and about to cry. Before her sentence is complete Rowan has her in his arms and all of my brothers are avoiding looking at her, except me.

“She doesn’t need a break from you and Rhett. It’s from us. She loves you. She just needs a minute to process what Rowan and Mac said.”

Her eyes dart to Roe in a menacing glare. Well as menacing as she can muster up, “What did you say to her?”

He just shakes his head, “Well talk about it in a little while Pretty Girl, let’s go see if Bear is up to play.”

Rowan and Clara leave the garage, and I go back to ignoring everyone and focusing on what I’m doing. Once everyone catches my drift and leaves I grab my phone to shoot off a quick text to her.

Kieran: I just heard what happened. I’m sorry my brothers are idiots. Let me know you’re okay. You don’t have to talk to me if you don’t want to, but I need to know you’re okay.

Right as I set my phone down on the cement ground it pings, grabbing it up, a smile takes over my face. She responded.

Brittany: It's okay. I'm safe at home. Thank you for checking in on me, Mystery Man.

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Kieran: Any time, Brave Girl. Down to snuggle tonight? I'll come to you?

Brittany: It's too soon. I need to be alone. Just give me some time, and then you can text me.

Understanding what she means, and not wanting to push her I send her a black heart emoji and finally set my phone down to finish up with my bike.

* * *

It's been a few days since Britt left, and she's not answering my messages except to tell me she's alive and not ready. Rowan and Mac have both reached out to her but she hasn't responded. She's talking to Clara and face timing Rhett as far as I've been told, and everyone else has seemed to put the incident from a few days ago behind them. Well everyone but Clara, Dec, and I. My brain can't even compute why they acted like that, we were raised better and they know it. Da would have gone toe to toe with them about it if he was here.

Rhett found me working out about an hour ago, so now I'm in my nephews room playing superheroes. I'm powerless to those puppy eyes and that pout. It's how I stay the favorite, Rhett has me wrapped, he's not even sorry about it. It just is the way it is. We're setting up a new game, checking to make sure Gotham city is set up perfectly when his iPad starts ringing.

"Oh that's Auntie!" He jumps up and runs to answer the face time. "Hi, Auntie." He's smiling ear to ear when he answers.

Her voice fills the room, and my chest with contentment, “Hey, baby! What are you doing? I miss you so much”

“Playing with Uncle Kie. Look!”

He shoves the iPad in my face, giving me a front row view of her gorgeous face. Her Strawberry blonde hair is thrown up in a messy bun on top of her head, pieces falling out and framing her delicate face. Her eyes, as stunning as always, look tired. Deep dark bags sitting below them. Giving her a reassuring smile, I stop gawking at her, “Hey, Brave Girl.”

She gives me a small smile, “Mystery Man. You’re looking good.”

My lips tip up in a lazy smirk, “I’d look even better if the girl with the pretty gray eyes that I’ve been texting would give me some attention.”

She laughs loudly, “Yeah, I’m sure you’re real put out over there.” My face breaks into a genuine smile. Her spunk makes me even more desperate to talk to her.

“Maybe she’ll take pity on me, she’s really killing me over here. But enough about me. How have you been?” Bear moves over to my lap looking at Britt like she hung the moon.

Same kid, same.

“Everything’s been great over here, better now that I called to talk to my sweet boy, and got a little extra surprise.” She tosses me a playful wink.

“We’re full of surprises over here, aren’t we Rhett?” Because I’m tickling his sides his agreement is more of a screech. Sensing that our time is over because Bear is grabbing for the iPad, I cut this short much to my dismay. “Well I’ll let you talk to

Little Bear. He can't stop talking about how much he misses you."

"Yeah okay. Goodbye, Kieran." She seems disappointed, but that doesn't seem right, I must be projecting my own feelings here.

"Goodbye, Britt." Standing up I kiss the top of Rhett's head before ruffling his hair, waving to her on the iPad, and walking out. I'm going to be so fucking busy tomorrow. I've got things to prepare anyway. I'll just do them now with this conversation on repeat in my head.

* * *

Rolling up my sleeves my patience is wearing extremely thin. "Come on Joe, stop playing with me. You either have my money or you don't. Which one is it?"

Joe's in his mid thirties, has a nasty gambling habit, and owes my family almost a million dollars. He's had months to get it together but did he? No. I came to check on him and he was packing up his things to flee. So now he's strapped to his kitchen chair with a split lip and bruised ribs.

"Come on Kieran, you know I wouldn't run out on you. I just need a little longer." He tries to plead with me.

This time I actually laugh out loud. "Be serious, dude. I caught you trying to sneak out. The only question here is am I taking a finger or are you paying up?"

"You know I don't have a million to just give you." He practically whimpers in fear.

Pulling my bolt cutters out of my book bag my eyes look into his, "Of course you don't, because you either drank it, snorted it, or gambled it away. So I'm going to take your finger and you're going to get me my money in the next thirty-six hours."

Without giving him time to respond I close the tool around his ring finger and shut the cutters.

8

Chapter Eight

Brittany

Leaving work after fourteen hours, my entire body is exhausted. Honestly, I'm so mentally drained from this week and specifically today. I know it's next to impossible for them to find me at this point, but it isn't impossible. I'm a lot closer to Ohio now than I was when I lived in Arizona. All day I've felt myself in fight or flight. In that head space I spent my entire life in until two of my abusers were sentenced when I was fifteen. It feels like a hand has wrapped around my throat and is restricting my air way.

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Focusing on my breathing and putting one step in front of the other my feet carry me the half-mile to the doors of my apartment complex. Looking up and down the sidewalk, I swipe my access key and slide inside of the door pulling it locked before letting out a deep breath. I'm in a key protected building. I'm fine.

My phone dings as I force my lips into a small smile for my door man, Jeff. He's probably in his mid forties if I'm guessing. Tall, but not as tall as Kieran. Muscles, but not as strong as Kieran. Green eyes, but not as vibrant as Kieran's either. I'm annoying myself at this point. This man will not exit out of my brain no matter what I try.

Walking quickly past Jeff, my feet carry me to the elevator. Once I'm safely inside with the correct floor pressed my hand goes into my bag to grab my phone. I'm assuming it's Clara, we've been going back and forth about a girls night, an Auntie night, and some cookout she and Rowan are planning.

Rowan and Mac have reached out to me to apologize in the week since the incident happened. I'm just not in the right mindset at this point to even entertain their texts or reply. They said what they said, they meant it, and they hurt my feelings. I don't need their pity apology because my best friend and godson are pissed that I'm not coming over. To be completely honest, I wouldn't be able to go over there anyways. I have one day off a week and on the days I work, I don't even get off until eight, sometimes later.

Clara and Rhett have a new family, and I'm so happy for them. Seriously, I've seen the Hell they lived first hand before Roe and his brothers came barreling in all caring, sweet, and hot as sin. I'm so thankful for them. I just wish I wasn't getting pushed out

in the process.

Making my way to my apartment and unlocking the door my thoughts wander to the one Byrne brother that has my mind all twisted up. My bag goes on the table where it belongs as my head switches once again to David and Robert getting out today. Shaking my head the weight of the phone in my hand registers again just as it begins to ring. Why is Kieran calling me? He's never called, just texted me a couple times a day. I swipe to answer just before it goes to voicemail.

"Hello?" I'm well aware that my voice sounds skeptical, but I also know if something was wrong with my people Rowan would have called.

"Mo Stóirín." The smile in his voice radiates through the phone. "What are you doing?"

I huff out an exhausted sigh before replying, "Nothing, I just walked in the door from work. What's up?"

The playfulness of his tone dissipates in an instant, "What do you mean you just got off? It's eight at night? What time did you go in?"

I'm taken aback by the harsh tone he uses. "Uhh— I went in at six this morning, why?"

"Why are you working so much, Brittany?"

Who does he think he is questioning me like this? I'm pacing the floor while all the stress and anger from the week is hitting me at once. "It's none of your business how much I'm working or why, Kieran."

"Woah, hold on. I'm just saying, fourteen hours is a really long day, that's not a

typical shift. What's wrong? Are you okay?" His voice is soft, and concern laces it. I don't know what it is about someone genuinely asking you that, but I cry every time. It's like a key to unlock the floodgates I've kept locked up since last week.

Through gasps to catch my breath I'm able to choke out, "I'm sorry—It's— It's been a long week— I'll let you go."

I hear footsteps and a door slam before a car engine turns over, "Don't you dare hang up, Britt. I'm coming to you. It's okay, you're okay." Something in his voice that's calming but still authoritative brings me to my knees, literally.

I can't catch my breath, the hand is back, my hands are trembling, and Kieran sounds like he's a million miles away. Maybe I dropped the phone, I'm not even sure at this point. All I know is that flashbacks of my childhood start hitting me all at once. The cages, the men, the hands, the beatings, the cameras flashing, and the red button on the video cameras blinking. I'm deep in my memories when I feel hands grabbing my face. Is it real, or is it a memory? I'm not sure, until arms wrap around me from behind and hold me tight to a big strong body.

I'm fighting his grip before my brain catches up and begins to process the soothing voice in my ear, "Shhh, Brave Girl. It's okay. I've got you, you're okay. Just breathe Britt. Breathe with me." I slump back into his chest as soon as I realize it's Kieran. I'm too wound up to be embarrassed right now. "Good girl, just breathe with me." He takes a deep breath and I try to copy him, but mine come out more erratic than his. We exhale together, while one hand travels up and down my upper arm in a soothing motion. The other gently runs up and down the front of my throat almost like he's trying to remind me there's nothing constricting my airway.

Eventually my breathing turns to semi normal, but the sobs continue to wrack my body. He turns me in his lap pulling my body into his chest and my face into his neck. At this point I'm not even crying because this week has been so much, today's been

so emotionally draining, or I've worked myself to the bone. I'm crying because I feel so lonely and I'm so tired of it. I'm twenty four, almost twenty five, and all I have in this world is myself.

I don't even have Clara's dog Parker anymore. He's back home with her and Rhett. If something happened to metomorrow Clara and Rhett would be okay. They have the Byrne men. They're the only ones who'd even notice. Them and my mom, but she's been forced to live without me for six years at this point. Just phone calls two to three times a week.

I'm just so tired of being so fucking lonely all the time. No one even knows half of the struggles I have because I keep everyone at just the right distance from me. Far enough so all of the dark pieces of me don't eclipse their light, but close enough that they never even notice. Kieran holding me while I break down? That's too close. But that's a problem for the me of tomorrow. Today I'm going to let him hold all my broken pieces simply because I can't do it on my own right now. I know I'm scaring him off, but that's probably for the best.

Kieran waits patiently until my sobs stop and my eyes dry. I'm not sure how long we've been here but I know it's been awhile. Without a word he stands up with me still in his arms. Peeking up at him I find his vibrant eyes filled with concern and scouring my face for something. I'm assuming whatever it is he finds it, because he lets out a big sigh and kisses the corner of my lips, "Let's get you to bed." He carries me back to my bedroom and lays me down on the queen mattress. How he knew this was my room, I'm not sure, but I refuse to think too hard about it.

"I'm going to take off your clothes and get you dressed for bed, okay?"

"Kieran I'm fine, I can get myself dressed for bed."

His lips curve in what I can only describe as a concerned smile. "I know you can, but

I want to.” I’m much too drained to argue right now, so when he pulls off my heels one by one before rubbing my foot, I let him. He gently pulls off my tights and my black pencil skirt leaving me in a pair of blackpanties. Kieran tilts his head back and shuts his eyes tightly. He takes a few deep breaths before opening his eyes again and looking back to my bare legs. Shaking his head he takes off my blouse, then reaches behind his head fisting the back of his shirt before pulling it over his head and dressing me in it.

He smiles broadly at his job, “There. Perfect.” He moves the blanket out from under me, then covers me up. “Do you need anything?”

“No. Uh thank you for coming. I’m sorry you had to see that.”

Leaning down he presses his lips to my forehead, “No apology needed. You need to rest. I’m sure you’re drained.” Kieran turns to leave and panic grips me again. I can’t be alone right now. Before I chicken out my hand shoots out to grab his. He turns back to look at me with his brow raised.

“Please, stay.”

“I was just turning the light off, I’m not leaving you tonight, swear.”

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After turning off the light in my bedroom, toeing off his shoes and socks, and discarding his jeans he slides into the bed behind me. He pulls me over to him so my head is resting on his peck and my arm is draped over his torso. Taking his hand and pulling my leg over so I'm half straddling his strong thigh we settle in.

"Comfortable?" Kieran asks, bringing his hands up to massage my scalp. I let out a half groan, half moan as my body completely melts into his.

"I could lay here for at least a week."

His lips press to the top of my head, "Good, go to sleep, Brittany. I've got you."

* **

I woke up this morning to a note on the pillow beside me. Kieran let me know he had a 'work emergency' and he would text me later. That was before six this morning. It's now five in the evening and still no sign of him. I've contemplated texting him first, but have quickly pushed the thought away every time it comes up. He said he would text me not for me to text him. Trying and failing to not check my phone for the millionth time today, I decide I'm not waiting around for him anymore. I'm going out. I'm a strong independent woman. I donotneed to sit around on my only day off and wait for my phone to ring.

Kieran

I've been running around all over Jersey searching for Daniel Smith. Yes, that's his real name. Did my brother's send me on this goose chase after I came home with a mysterious black eye, and I told them it was from Ryan again?

Also, yes.

They don't believe me, but honestly I don't really care. They have no proof so they're forced to keep their theories between themselves.

Mac and Declan joined me about two hours ago once I had found his actual address. He wasn't there, and from the looks of it he was in a hurry to leave. So now the person who would bring us one step closer to Jordan Hudson is in the wind. We're all sitting in awkward silence, and I'm pretty sure our driver would rather die than sit in this car with us. Seriously, the tension is thick and out of all the Byrne's we're the threemost stubborn. No one's going to break first.

My phone vibrates against my leg bringing me back to earth. Pulling it out of my pocket right before it goes to voicemail I accept the call without checking who it is, "Byrne." Both of my brothers look at me in confusion. They're nosy by nature and I never answer my phone like this unless I don't know who's on the other end.

"Kieraannn."

My brow furrows in confusion. "Mo Stóirín?" Now my nosy brothers are really paying attention to me.

"What's that mean? Store-een. You said it the other night too."

Smirking into the phone because I can hear the buzz in her voice, "Where are you

Brittany? Let me come get you.”

“Nooo, no way. We were one night it’s done now.”

Hearing the slight slur in her words, I decide to push her and see what she’s willing to tell me. I’ve also got to be careful what I say, I do have listeners.

“Do you want it to only be that?”

She snort laughs into the phone, “It doesn’t matter, people like me don’t get to keep people like you. Not with all the light I shadow. Anyway, gotta go. It’s my turn for the bathroom.”

Panic zips through my veins, what is she talking about? Where is she? “Britt wait, where are you? Let me come get you.”

“You can’t. I don’t know much about your big bad job, Kieran BYRNE. But what I do know is you can’t come to Kneipe to get me. Gotta go Mystery Man, byeee.”

“No, Britt, don’t—” beep beep beep. Shit, she hung up.

Dec is the first to speak, “Want to tell us what the fuck that was?”

My finger comes up to my chin and taps it while I pretend to think, “Yeah, no. Thanks for asking though.” We’re pulling up to the house as I finish my sentence.

Jumping out of the car my eyes lock on Mac’s, “You didn’t hear shit, because there isn’t shit to hear. Keep it that way until I say otherwise.” Mac nods, and I catch Declan’s nod too. Sprinting to my car and jumping into the driver seat my eyes fly to my brothers who have barely made it out of the SUV. Waiting to make sure they’re safely out of the driveway before I make my way past them and into German

territory.

* * *

Pulling up to Kneipe I'm well aware that I have about ten minutes max to get in and out before the Germans are alerted that I'm here. Heading straight into the bar it takes me about three seconds for me to find her. Brittany is sitting at the bar talking to the bartender. Shit, It's Jakob Fischer. Not only did he use to be best friends with Declan, but his dad does business with us. No shot am I making it out of here unseen. Not that a six and a half foot man makes it many places without being seen in the first place. Shaking my head at my own thoughts I make my way to Britt, her laugh rings out over the crowd.

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“I’m sorry but no. I’m unfortunately one of those girls who likes a man but can’t have him.” Her head is leaning on her hand as she looks up at Jakob, deciding to see where this conversation is going, I stay back in the shadows.

“That’s too bad, is he taken?” He’s not hiding the way his eyes roam up and down her body, making me put in more effort than I’d like to make sure I stay where I am.

“I don’t think so. He’s my best friend’s brother-in-law.” I can’t help the grin that pulls at my lips.

She’s talking about me.

“It’ll complicate things, and I can’t block his light with my darkness like that. He acts like he’s darkness, storms, and shadows. But I know better, he’s light, sun, and hope.” Okay that’s enough of this. Moving in behind her my hands find her hips and my chin meets her shoulder.

“Hey Brave Girl, did you miss me?”

She stiffens and jumps in my arms before registering my voice and sinking back into my hold.

“Look who it is. Were your ears burning?”

My lips press against her temple before straightening up. “Something like that. You ready to get out of here?”

Jakob speaks up before Britt can answer me, “Byrne, what are you doing here?”

Putting my attention on him my eyes narrow, “Just picking up my sister-in-law’s friend. I’m not on business, just on mission ‘pick up the girl’.”

He stares me down for a few more seconds before nodding, “Just grab her and go.”

Of course Britt can’t help herself, “Hey, I wasn’t ready to leave yet. Let’s stay. Dance with me, Mystery Man.”

Damn, do I want to give her anything she’s ever asked of me. Unfortunately we have about two more minutes before my tires get slashed. “Let me take you home, please?” She huffs and pouts at me. The ridiculous move would typically annoy me, especially if anyone else did it. But on her? She looks so adorable. She tells Jakob goodbye as I take her hand and lead her out the bar and to my car.

* **

The ride to her apartment was quiet. That’s probably because she passed out about thirty seconds into our trip, but that’s neither here nor there. She also didn’t want to wake up. So here I am, half dead from the toll today has taken on my mind and body, while carrying the most gorgeous girl I’ve ever seen up to her apartment. She said she likes me. She didn’t know I could hear her and she told another man that she likes me. I can’t fight the smile that I’ve gotten every time I think about it. Using her keys to unlock her door, I let us in and lock it behind us.

Looking around the two bedroom apartment it’s decent. It’s not like Clara’s old apartment, which was sketchy at best, but it’s also a long way from my house. Shit, it’s even a little hike from my penthouse that I have across the city for when I just want to be alone. My eyes glance around the living room where I found her curled in on herself just last night. She was so broken, it broke what small heart I have.

Something tugged in my chest when she let me hold her together while she worked through whatever was going on. I want to know what that was about and I'm determined to find out.

After last night I think I actually like her. I'm not a hundred percent sure what it is or what it means. What I do know is that she stays on my mind, and when I'm not with her I want to be. I want to hang out with her constantly. These are the kinds of things we'll talk about tomorrow.

Making my way to her bedroom as quietly as I can, I get her comfortable in bed before removing her shoes.

She stirs and lets out a sleepy, "Kie, what are you doing?" Shooting her a full smile that I so rarely give out, I tuck her in.

"I'm just putting you to bed. We'll talk tomorrow, okay?"

She nods, still half asleep. "Yeah, okay. Tomorrow, swear?"

"Yeah, Brave Girl, I swear." I press my lips to her forehead before pulling back to look at her face.

After memorizing every feature on her perfect face I turn and whisper to her, "Sleep well, Brittany." Making sure to lock up when I leave, every part of me protests and tells me to go back to bed with her. Instead of giving into it. I head back to my car and shoot a text to the 'Byrne Bros' group chat. Mainly out of habit, we always check in on each other.

Kieran: On way home.

Rowan: From?

Flynn: Yeah Kie, where are you coming from?

Declan: *gif of little boy suspiciously looking around*

Sully: Spill it! What do you know??

Kieran: Nowhere and he knows nothing. I should have just text Rowan by himself.

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Rowan: Kieran. Where are you coming from?

Kieran: Gotta go. Driving. See you in the morning.

Mac: He picked Brittany up from a bar in German territory then took her home. He's been there long enough so I have questions, but not long enough that I think they fucked. But we aren't supposed to tell Clara, or you... oops.

Rowan: BRITTANY WHO???

Flynn: BE SO FUCKING FOR REAL RIGHT NOW!

Sully: OOOOHHHHH you're in troubleeeeeee

Kieran: You're dead to me D&M

Declan: Hey! I didn't say a single word.

Mac: Yeah, yeah. I hear you *eye roll emoji*

Kieran: *middle finger emojis*

Well, guess I'm not going home to sleep. Time to face the brothers...

10

Chapter Ten

Brittany

Waking up to my head pounding, my mouth dry, and my memories from last night rushing back is not how I wanted to start my day. The bar, the hot bartender, getting carried to bed, a forehead kiss, and the man with the kindest eyes and most charming smile. Seeing Kieran with his guard down does something to me. It makes me want to see that side of him all the time. My phone pings, and I reach over to grab it, immediately noticing I have two missed texts and a new voicemail. After Jax called at five this morning and told me he had court all day and didn't need me I went right back to sleep. Deciding to check the texts first my fingerprint unlocks the phone and I navigate to my texts. One from Clara, and one from Kieran.

Clara: Sleep over soon? I'm DROWNING in testosterone here.

Unable to stop myself, I laugh as I type out my reply.

Brittany: Ah, yes, all that sexy man testosterone at your house. Sounds torturous. Count me in, not this coming Saturday, but next? My only day off that week is Sunday. You can come here when I get off?

Clara: You're foul. Also sold, I'll come over as soon as you get off then we can spend the whole day together Sunday too.

Sending her the heart and thumbs up emoji I move over to Kieran's text.

Kieran: Good morning, Mo Stóirín. What are you doing?

Brittany: Just woke up, I'm off today.

Kieran: Hang out with me?

Brittany: Do people that do, well what you do, get days off?

I'm trying not to type out 'people who work for the mafia' Who knows who has his phone tapped. His response is instant.

Kieran: Believe it or not we do. Today happens to be mine. So what do you say?

Brittany: Can't I'm busy. Maybe some other time. Have a good day off, Kieran.

Shaking my head at myself for playing so hard to get, I don't check his response and decide to stay in bed and be hungover all day.

* **

I've been in bed all morning watching romance movies that make you cry, and snuggling deep into my blankets. It's about noon when a loud knock startles me. I jump up and stand in the doorway to my room. Scared of who may be on the other side, I don't make a sound.

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“Britt? It’s just me. Open the door, Brave Girl.” Without making the conscious effort my feet move to the door. My voice comes out small and sickly even to my own hungover ears.

“I’m okay. You can go.”

His voice sounds alert all of a sudden. I guess I sound worse than I thought.

“Britt, please. Open the door.”

Relenting I pull open the door. Kieran’s standing there with a bag of take out. He’s wearing gray sweatpants, a baggy black hoodie, sneakers, and a black eye that I’m assuming came from work. His eyes trail over me before he lets out my name on an exhale. “Britt.”

He walks into my apartment puts the bags down on my entry table and wraps me in his strong arms. My walls crumble and I surge up on my toes, pressing my lips to his soft pillowy ones. I’m extremely hungover but the nauseousness has subsided and he looks extremely sexy. I want him. So why not hook up? Kieran lifts me by the backs of my thighs so my legs come up wrapping around his trim waist. My arms wrap around his neck on instinct and I break away from his lips to start kissing and nipping at his neck. He groans as kicks the door shut before moving over to my couch and sitting. He adjusts me so that I’m in his lap facing him, my thighs straddling his hips.

“Mmm, so you are alive and okay? Wannatell me why you’ve decided to ignore me all morning?”

“Hungover, stayed in bed, and watched sad movies.” Using my nails I slide them under his hoodie and gently scratch his abs. Kieran’s head falls to the back of the couch, and his cock hardens underneath me.

Hello old friend, I’ve missed you.

“Hungover now?” He takes a big breath before slowly letting it out. “Britt, I can’t think with your hands on me like this.”

Slowly I lick up his neck before nipping right under his ear. “Don’t think, Kie. Just fuck me.”

Whatever little restraint this man was holding onto slips from his fingers as soon as the words leave my mouth. One second I’m straddling him on the couch and the next I’m upside down and he’s marching us into my room. And because I’m a glutton for pushing buttons, I reach down and smack his ass. A dark laugh rumbles from deep in his chest before he smacks the tops of my thighs so hard I jump and let out a half cry half moan feeling my thighs slick with arousal.

“So you’re feeling bratty today? Noted.” His hand rubs the sting he just left behind and I realize I may have ventured too close to the sun. I don’t realize that we’ve made it into my room before I’m soaring through the air and landing on my soft mattress with an unladylike ‘umph’. I don’t even have time to get my bearings before Kieran sheds his hoodie and stands at the foot of my bed. Wait, what is...

“Kie, what happened? That’s more than just a black eye.” His body is littered with bruises differing sizes and degrees of healing.

He waves me off, “My job is very... hands on. I’m fine. Now back to your request.”

Unable to help myself, I squirm under his intense gaze. He’s a man starved, and I’m

the person standing in the way of him, and his first meal in a week.

“Take your shorts off and spread your legs. Show me my pussy, Mo Stóirín.”

His voice is low, gruff, and the sexiest sound I’ve ever heard. I’m unable to deny him what he wants especially when I want him to touch me so badly. Slowly, oh so slowly, I remove my shorts. His eyes are locked on the apex of my thighs, his pupils blown, and almost unconsciously his tongue comes out to wet his bottom lip as he breathes out “perfection.”

Throwing my shorts to the other side of the room I spread my thighs, giving him an unrestricted view of what he wants. His hands ball into fists, almost like he’s holding himself back. I’m becoming addicted to the way his body reacts to mine. Using a single finger I run it up my slit, and the almost animalistic sound that rumbles out of his chest makes it one hundred percent worth whatever retaliation he’s going to use.

Kieran reaches over and grabs my wrist, before I can even process the action he slides my finger into his mouth and sucks my arousal off. His eyes locked on mine desire and something else shining in his beautiful orbs. He pops my finger out of his mouth and shoots me the filthiest grin I’ve ever seen.

“Fuck, you taste amazing. This is going to be just as torturous for both of us.”

I want to ask him what he’s talking about but before I can his hand comes down quickly, smacking me directly on my aching core. Yelping at the impact, I’m surprised at the moan that slips past my lips.

“Kieran.” Two of his fingers gently rub up and down my slit. Without warning they slide inside of me and my hips buck off the bed. Kieran smirks and strokes my inner walls, looking for that spot ins—

“There she is.” His fingertips stroke my g-spot with the perfect amount of precision and pressure. I almost forgot how perfectly he plays my body. His thumb works my clit in tight circles while his other fingers continue their delicious assault. He works my body like it was made solely for his use. I’m hanging on the precipice, so close to coming my entire body shakes. I’m a moaning incoherent mess. My inner walls begin to flutter. I know I’m stepping off the edge when suddenly Kieran pulls his fingers from inside of me only leaving his thumb to keep playing with my clit. I groan in frustration as he just chuckles at me.

“Kieran, please.”

“Fuck, you sound so perfect, begging me for my fingers, but you’re not allowed to come yet. This is what happens when you ignore me all day.”

I try as hard as I can not to whine, but my voice still comes out almost desperate.

“It was just the morning. Only a few hours, really.” He smacks my pussy and I half yelp half moan again. Fuck, why do I not hate that?

“That’s hours of worrying that you’re okay. So you’ll be good, and let me play until I’m ready to give you the most intense orgasm of your life, understand?”

The words slip from my lips without conscious effort, “Yes, sir.”

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He groans deep and low, “Don’t tease me like that, Britt.”

A smirk pulls at my lips, “Oh, is that one of your kinks, sir?”

“It hasn’t been until right now, but I think it may be.”

Deciding to be bold, I sit up and gently grip his hard cock in my hand through the barrier of his sweats, “Please, sir. I need you. Please fuck me.”

I’m not sure who or what moves first, it all happens in a blur of limbs, and bodies, but when my brain catches up I’m under him, he’s shucked his sweats, my hands are together above my head clasped in one of his much larger ones, and his other hand has me by the throat. He’s not hurting me or cutting off my airflow. He’s just making sure he has my full attention. I wiggle under him so turned on I can barely stand it. The cool air from the ceiling fan making everything more sensitive. I’m about to crawl out of my skin if he doesn’t do something soon.

“On edge, Brave Girl?”

“Kieran, please.”

He watches me for a moment searching my face for something that he must find because he removes his hands and grabs a condom. After he’s sheathed himself he lines up before smirking at me and slowly, and I do mean slowly pushes his way inside. Every nerve ending on my body is like a live wire, the stretch burns so deliciously that I realize I’m addicted to it. Kieran finally bottoms out and holds still waiting for me to adjust.

“Okay, Mo Stóirín this is how this is going to work. You are going to hold off until I tell you that you can come. Come before then and I don’t let you come for a week. Understood?”

I’m crazy, that’s the only explanation for my reply. “Who says we’re doing this again?”

A dark smirk pulls at his lips as he pulls back about halfway then pushes himself back in, both of us moan in sync. “Yeah, we’re doing this again.” He repeats the motion. “And again” another time, “and again.” This time he pulls all the way back before surging his hips forward and finding his pace. His hand finds its way to my throat again where he squeezes the sides gently.

“You gonna be a good girl for me, Brittany?”

He loosens his grip enough for me to respond, “Yes, sir.”

11

Chapter Eleven

Kieran

Yes, sir.” Fuck, I wasn’t lying when I said that that’s never been a big thing for me until now. When Brittany says it though? My whole body lights up, and I have to actively try to not come like a chump. Tightening my grip around her throat, just slightly, I pick up my pace. I’m also not lying when I tell her, “Dammit you have the most perfect pussy.” Her inner walls flutter causing me to groan then smirk.

“You like that Mo Stóirín? You like hearing how perfect this beautiful cunt is?”

“Kieran!” She half moans half screams, and because I love nothing more than to torture her, I up my pace and trail my fingers down her body. My fingers trail lightly over her already hard nipples before slowly working their way down until I’m teasing around exactly where she wants me but not touching it, not yet. Her hips buck as she lets out a huff of frustration. I slow my pace just as she clamps down on my dick. Laughing at her obvious annoyance.

“Not yet, Brave Girl. You left me worried for half the day.” I continue to bring her to the edge just to switch pace or remove my fingers from her clit. Once she’s a sweaty, moaning mess full of desperation I decide to take mercy on her. My fingers rub tight circles over her as I set the pace she’s been craving all along.

“Come for me. Show me how stunning you are when you shatter under me.” I tighten my grip on her throat just slightly, and that’s all it takes before her climax washes over her taking her under. I follow right behind her catching myself on my forearms as my orgasm racks my body.

Once I catch my breath and come back to earth I check Britt over noticing she’s teetering on unconscious. Shit. My hands rub her arms as I gently kiss all over her face, neck, and jaw while whispering for her to come back to me. Logically, I know her orgasm was just that intense and she needs a minute but I don’t like this. Her eyes flutter open and lock on mine.

“Welcome back, Brave Girl.”

“Holy shit, Kieran that was— I don’t even know.”

“Good ‘I don’t even know’ or bad?” I say through my smile. I know the answer, my ego just needs to hear it.

“Good, so fucking good.” She wraps her arms around me and shuts her eyes.

“Nap. I’m going to reheat our food, let Clara know you’re alive, then I’ll wake you up.”

She doesn’t protest, she just yawns and nods. I get up to take care of the condom but I can’t help myself. She’s fucking stunning.

“Hey, Britt?”

“Hmm?”

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“Stay naked, I’m waking you up with my head between your thighs. One hundred percent.” I don’t wait for a response, she’ll find out in about twenty or so minutes I’m dead serious.

* * *

One thing I’ll never be called is a liar, so sticking true to my word, I have reheated our food, texted my sister-in-law, and woke Britt up with an orgasm. Really none of that was a chore. Despite my complaining I really do like taking care of her and eating her pussy. Mainly taking care of her, I think. It’s a tough decision if I’m going to be honest.

We’ve eaten lunch, and now we’re snuggling together on the couch watching some chick movie. I’m just in my sweat pants because she has on my hoodie, which dwarfs her small frame. She’s lying half on top of me as I massage her scalp gently. I love her lying on me like this. At the same time she’s going to need to stop snuggling into me like that unless she’s ready to go another round. Deciding to pull my thoughts from her delicious body, my mind wanders to how much I actually do enjoy just being around her. When I’m not with her my head is consumed by her. She’s such a conundrum and the thing about me, I love solving things.

“Hey, Brave Girl?” My hand keeps playing with the strands of her hair.

“Yes, Mystery Man?” She doesn’t look away from the T.V.

“Do you want to go on a date with me?”

That gets her full attention. She adjusts her body so she's still laying on my chest, but leaning up on her elbows to look me in the eyes.

"Seriously? Like you aren't joking?"

That makes my brow furrow.

"Why would I be joking?"

"I'm just making sure, why would you want to go on a date with me?"

Oh, Britt. She has no idea how perfect she is.

"The truth?"

"Always."

"I haven't been able to stop thinking about you since the night I escorted you and Clara to the club. I'm constantly wondering where you are, what you're doing, and if I'm on your mind too. I'm not saying we're going to be in love and married next week. But I would like to take you out and get to know you a little better."

Looking into her eyes, I'm unable to decipher the emotions in them or what they mean. However I definitely think I see intrigue in there.

"Okay."

"Okay?"

"Yeah, okay we can go out on a date." I can feel the huge grin split my face.

“This Saturday?”

“Saturday.” She doesn’t even have the whole word out before I’m peppering kisses all over every inch of skin I can reach. The sound of her laughter quickly becoming my favorite sound in the world.

* **

Tuesday

Kieran: How’s your day been, Brave Girl?

Kieran: I changed my mind, let’s hang out tonight.

Brittany: My day was busy. You’re ridiculous. I saw you last night.

Kieran: Okay, BUT we fell asleep during the movie. I didn’t even get to wake you up sliding into your gorgeous pussy. I had it all planned out, but sleep and work ruined it.

Brittany: Okay so add dramatic to that running list of character traits.

Kieran: I’m one of the middles. It’s ingrained in me. Don’t change the subject though. Tonight?

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Brittany: I can't. I'm busy.

Kieran: Busy with what? Come onnn I need attention or I'll wither away.

Brittany: Goodbye, Kieran. You'll have all of my attention... on Saturday evening.

Wednesday

Kieran: Good morning, Mo Stóirín.

Brittany: Are you finally going to tell me what that means? Should I just google it now that I know how to spell it?

Kieran: *laughing emojis* You haven't looked it up yet?

Brittany: You have 3 minutes to tell me or I'm googling.

Kieran: Fine, it's an Irish phrase that roughly translates to "little darling."

Brittany: Oh.

Kieran: Don't make it weird. I like it, it suits you, Mo Stóirín.

Kieran: You're leaving me on read now?

Kieran: Britt...

Thursday

Brittany: Hey, sorry about yesterday. I got caught up at work.

Three hours later

Kieran: Hey, sorry I'm caught up too. Text you later?

Brittany: Yeah. That's fine.

Kieran: Have a good day, Brave Girl.

Brittany: You too, Mystery Man.

Friday

Brittany: Tomorrow, Mystery Man.

Kieran: Excuse me?? You're texting me first? Miss me, Mo Stóirín?

Brittany: I miss something...

Kieran: Don't you dare, I'll leave work right now and be at your job in twenty. Speaking of, where did you say that was, again?

Brittany: I didn't, nice try though. I wish, but I have a ton to do today. I do wish we didn't have to wait until tomorrow though.

Kieran: Brave Girl, we're adults.. We make the rules here. You just have to say the word and I'll be on my way tonight.

Kieran: Gotta go, Brave Girl. Call or text me later.

Brittany: Bye, Mystery man, I'll see you later.

Chapter Twelve

Brittany

I've never felt like this before and no I don't mean in love. Absolutely not. I mean I've never wanted to be in the presence of a man. Men make me wary. They have ulterior motives and they are inherently evil. I especially do not like men that are so much bigger than me but Kieran is proving that he may be the exception not the rule. He just makes me feel so comfortable. His presence calms me and his cock is huge.

What? A girl's allowed to appreciate all the aspects of her hook up buddy.

I think we're just hook up buddies? Do hookup buddies spend half the day snuggling and watching movies? Probably not, but it's fine. Like Kieran said; we make the rules here.

I'm pulled out of my daydreaming by Mr. Hall tapping on my desk. My eyes lift up to his to find an amused smirk on his handsome face, "Daydreaming on the job, Ms. Mitchell?"

"Busted. I'm sorry, Mr. Hall, what can I help you with?"

"Well first off you can call me Jackson or Jax like I've been asking you to since your first day."

Now it's my turn to smirk, "Besides that, Mr. Hall."

He lets out a loud belly laugh, “Okay, fine. I’ll try again tomorrow. I just wanted to check and see if you have my notes all ready for court Monday?”

“Yes, I have them right here.” I hand him the file folders, labeled, and notes in the exact order he’ll need them.

“Brittany, you save my life daily.”

“And I’ll continue to if you let me call you Mr. Hall.”

He thumbs through the folders, “Yeah, probably not, but I like your enthusiasm. Got any big plans since we’re off this weekend?”

“We’re off this weekend?” This is the first I’m hearing of it.

“Surprise.” Mr. Hall does ‘jazz hands’ and smiles at me.

Jackson Hall is a beautiful man in his own right. About six foot four inches, light brown hair, whiskey eyes, and freshly pressed suits. His jaw is squared with a constant five o’clock shadow. He’s extremely handsome. We’re friendly and he’s a really good boss to have. There’s no feelings there on either side. He’s not asking to be sleazy, he’s asking because he really is curious. We never have more than a day off a week, and that’s fine with me because I need the money. This sudden weekend off is not typical at all, but far be it from me to bite the hand that’s giving me an extra day off.

“Well I guess so. I’ve got a date tomorrow with a friend, besides that I’ll probably sleep until I can’t sleep anymore. What about you? Why are we off this weekend?”

“A date with a friend? Sounds dramatic. I will be doing things my employee shouldn’t know about. Especially when she’s practically a baby and we’re off because I say we

are. I think we need a weekend to reset we've been working nonstop. I'm tired, so I can only imagine you are too."

I can't help the scoff that comes out, "You're barely older than me."

He turns to head back to his office waving me off, "A win is a win, Mitchell. A win is a win."

* * *

The rest of the afternoon moves at a snail's pace. I've got everything done and ready to leave by seven. Which honestly is a step up from the eight I've been leaving at. Knocking on Jackson's door as I'm passing it I give him a wave and keep moving. I hear him get up first then his voice right behind that.

"Hey Britt, are you headed out?"

"Yeah, I've got it all ready to go. Anything I forgot just text me and I'll do it from home this weekend."

"Perfect, I'm heading out too. Let's walk together it's already getting dark."

We live in the same complex. I just have a two bedroom apartment, while he has the penthouse. It's on the tip of my tongue to tell him that it's fine and I'll see him Monday, but the thought that Robert's out there somewhere has me second guessing myself.

I'd be ignorant to think he's not going to come after me. I'm the reason he was locked up and the reason his alleged "one billion dollar" trafficking business was busted.

"Actually, that'd be perfect. You know how finicky the city can be at night."

He nods and moves to grab his things. “Yeah, it makes me nervous that you walk home alone when we pull these late nights. It’s not safe.”

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“I’m fine, I can fight if I need to.”

He shakes his head at me, something I can’t decipher flashes in his eyes.

“I’m sure you can Rousey, but it’d still make me feel better if you let me walk you.”

He leads us out of the office and home to the apartments. We talk about work and cases that are coming up quickly. When we make our way inside the lobby we say our goodbyes and part ways. He has an elevator that’s just for his apartment and I have to use the one for the commoners.

After making my way inside, taking my shoes off, tossing my purse on the kitchen island, and pouring a big glass of wine I get settled on my couch. Checking my phone I see that I have two missed calls from Rowan. Pressing his name and bringing the phone up to my ear I wait for him to pick up. I don’t have to wait long, he answers on the first ring.

“Brittany.”

“Rowan. Are my people okay?”

I can hear the fondness in his voice as he answers, “They’re fine. I just left them in the backyard, actually. I was calling to talk to you about the other week.”

My hackles instantly rise, “Okay.”

He takes a deep breath before slowly letting it out, “Listen, I was an asshole. It wasn’t

fair to be mean, or treat you poorly because I was insecure.”

“What do you have to be insecure about, Rowan? You’ve got them, they’re yours. You rescued them from a lifetime of hurt and destruction. Honestly, it’s the main reason I tolerate you.”

He scoffs, “Tolerate me? What have I done?”

I guess it’s only fair to be honest if he’s going to be up front. “You took them from me. I’m not sure what you know about me, Byrne, but I don’t have much family. I didn’t come from a place like yours, but I’ve had them. My sister and nephew by choice. Then you and your brothers, in all of your big, grumpy, gruff, and sex on legs glory. You guys decided to open your kind, secretly sweet hearts to a family who wasn’t yours to take. They were mine, but you took them anyway. Now I’m the sad family dog that was left in the rain. Just watching through the window outside trying to be happy that they’re happy. So yes, Rowan, I tolerate you.”

Rowan doesn’t answer for so long that I check to see if he hung up, he didn’t.

“I didn’t know you felt like that. Does Clara know? I’m really sorry. You’re not the dog in the rain, Britt. For one, we don’t leave Parker in the rain.” He lets the humor in his voice come through just briefly before he switches back to his typical all business tone.

“You’re just as much family to me as they are. They didn’t abandon you for me. They brought you with them. You’ve just been too stubborn to see that. I feel insecure because you knew them before me. You saved them Britt, not me. You know things I have no idea about. Important things like his migraines. What else did I miss out on because I didn’t get to them sooner?”

His voice sounds so vulnerable that it hurts my heart. He’s really grappling with this.

Before I can respond my phone beeps with an incoming call, checking I see it's Kieran. Well, that's weird. Letting it go to voicemail I focus on my conversation with Roe.

"You can't blame yourself for what Preston did to them. That's not your cross to bear. You've loved them and helped them heal from the moment you stepped in the picture. Yeah, you were mean to me and I didn't deserve that. At the same time, you don't deserve to beat yourself up about things that are out of your control."

"Thank you. Promise I didn't call to get a pep talk, but I can't say I didn't need it. I'm really sorry for going all Papa Bear on you. That wasn't fair of me and I should have dealt with my emotions better."

Deciding to accept his apology, he seems sincere, "I appreciate the apology, and am glad we can put this behind us. I miss your patio couch."

Rowan barks out a laugh, "What?"

"I said what I said. It's just so comfortable. My eyes close every time I snuggle into it, and you know what they say.. If you can't be rich, have rich friends."

"I can't say I've ever heard that phrase before now."

"Of course you haven't, you've always been the rich friend." I smile at our light hearted banter. I really do like Rowan, not to mention Clara's going to be so happy about us making up. My phone beeps, Kieran's trying me again. "Hey, Rowan, I've got another call coming in, but we're all good. Thanks for the call."

"Thank you for accepting my apology. I expect to see you over here soon?"

"You got it." We say our goodbyes and I click over to Kie right before the phone

goes to voicemail.

“Britt.” He says my name on a relieved exhale. “I was worried. Are you home?”

“Worried? About little ol me? I can handle myself, Byrne.”

“I’m sure you can, but that doesn’t stop me from worrying. How was work?”

“Work was work, another long day. But I have a rare weekend off so I can’t complain too much. How was your day at— er— just how was your day I guess?”

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His loud intoxicating laugh rings through the phone, “It was a full day. I’ve actually just got home and cleaned up not long ago.”

“Yeah, I just got in too.”

“It’s past seven? What do you mean you just got in?”

“I mean I was fortunate to get off work an hour early and I’m home now.”

“Speaking of your boss, where are you working? And why does she have you working fourteen hours a day? Is she Satan?”

Laughing at his true personality coming out, it’s an honor to not have gruff and stoic Kieran. I feel good that we’ve seemed to have moved past that. “We weren’t talking about my boss, actually. But since you asked so nicely, I’m a personal assistant at Philips and Grant law firm in the city. My boss isn’t Satan, he’s actually pretty nice. He just works long hours and I like the overtime pay. Because I know you’re about to ask, his name’s Jackson Hall.”

“He, huh? Keeping his pretty, young assistant to himself fourteen hours a day. I don’t like it.” Gone is his playful tone and in its place is his serious tone.

“Kieran Byrne! Are you jealous of my boss right now?”

He almost sounds like he’s pouting, “No. I’m not jealous of some old man.”

Okay, so definitely don’t correct him on my bosses age, got it. Jax is all of twenty-

six, and objectively speaking he's a really attractive man. However when your body only reacts to a certain Byrne brother, all other men are duds by default. "If you say so. I am really excited for our date tomorrow."

"Me too, is it okay if I pick you up at four?"

"Yeah that works." Before I lose my nerve because if I'm honest with myself I did miss being around him all week, I take a chance.

"Hey, Kieran?" My voice radiates the nervous energy I feel.

"Yes, Brittany?"

"Can you come over? Maybe stay the night?"

"I'll be there in five." The call disconnects before I can respond and I can't help the laugh that bubbles up inside of me. Deciding that I'm going to turn this day and weekend around, I turn on my heels and head into my room to find the perfect outfit before Kieran gets here.

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Chapter Thirteen

Kieran

Can you come over? Maybe stay the night. Hell, yeah I can. I adjust myself in my seat, half because of my dick, and half because I took a couple shots to the side at my fight last night. I've definitely tweaked my ribs, but that's not stopping me from going to my girl who doesn't know she's my girl yet. Shit, if this goes the way I think it is what do I tell her when she sees the bruises on my body? I could use the training

excuse, she'd be none the wiser. I could just keep my shirt on. Not really my typical style, but I can make it work.

With my plan cemented in place, I pull into the underground parking lot of her apartment complex. I make my way to her apartment without an issue. Taking a second I inhale a deep breath and shake out my arms, the nervous energy is real. Raising my arm to knock on her door it swings open before I can. My eyes scan from the top of her head to her toes and back.

I think I've forgotten how to speak.

Standing in front of me is the woman who stars in my every fantasy these days. Her strawberry blonde hair is in loose waves down her back, her stunning gray eyes pierce me to my soul. The silk robe that she's wearing is the identical shade of my eyes. Coincidence? Maybe, but not likely. Reaching my hand out to her I finger the belt of the robe. "You, Mo Stóirín, are the most divine woman that's ever walked this earth." She bats those captivating eyes at me. In this moment I know without a shadow of a doubt that I'd place myself in front of any and everything that brings her even an ounce of sadness, fear, worry, or anger. She's snatched my attention straight out of my brain without permission, and I think she might just never give it back. Honestly, I don't want it back. She can have it.

She grabs my belt buckle and pulls me into the apartment. I'll let her think she's leading the show for right now, but one thing she'll learn soon enough is I never give up control. I'll just give her the illusion of it. She pushes the door shut behind me then presses me up against it. Crashing those perfect lush lips to mine while working to unbuckle my belt. My hands grip her delicate hips, roughly pulling her into me.

Taking control of the kiss my tongue explores her mouth before sucking on her bottom lip. She unbuttons my jeans before I grab her hands. Spinning us until she's the one pressed to the door, I pin her arms above her head and press my lips to her

neck. My name, just a whisper on her lips. I continue my assault on her neck as she tries to protest. “Kieran, I wanted to-”

The words die on her lips while my hand drops from her wrists and pushes open the front of her robe. She’s completely naked under it, just as I suspected. I move my mouth to one of her breasts as my fingers tease the other. Her head falls back against the door as she lets out a low moan. Smirking into her skin I pop off her nipple long enough to tell her, “Mine.”

Before she can respond it’s back in my mouth. I’m sucking and biting until it’s peaked and taunt. Then I switch to the other repeating the process. Her hands are in my hair, the sensation of her tugging at the roots is enough to drive me clinically insane. Once I’m done I push her robe off her shoulders and take in my fill of her. Her body was sculpted straight from the heavens. Every inch of her, nothing but perfection. Dropping to my knees in front of her my eyes look up and connect with hers which are full of lust and longing.

Grabbing her thigh I lift it up, resting it over my shoulder, which opens her up completely for me. Her hands once again fly into my hair.

“Kieran.”

“Yeah, Brave Girl. Tell me who’s making you feel good.” I’m running my tongue up her core before making my way around her clit, avoiding giving her what she wants just yet.

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“Kieran. Please.” She grinds her drenched pussy onto my mouth.

“That’s it. Good girl.” Not wasting another second I give her exactly what she needs. Licking, sucking, and nipping at her clit while my fingers find her entrance.

Slowly, and I do mean painfully slow, I slide two fingers inside her and curl up searching for that spot that’ll make her see stars. Working her up until she’s right about to fall off the edge then slowly backing off. Just enough to frustrate her. I know I’m doing my job when her moans of pleasure turn into huffs of aggravation and groans of desperation. “Kie.” One word, a nickname. That’s all it takes.

I double my efforts until she’s falling into oblivion, refusing to stop until she comes back down trembling against the wall.

“Good fucking girl.” I growl against her pussy before standing up and immediately throwing her over my shoulder heading for her room. No fucking way I’m anywhere near done with her. I’m biting back a groan half from my ribs and half because I’m going to die if I don’t get inside her in the next fifteen seconds. We make our way into her room and I gently toss her onto her bed.

She lands with a gasp, “Kieran, I need more. Please, give me more.”

Smirking my filthiest smirk I reach up grabbing my shirt at the back of my neck and pulling it off while also making my way over to the bed. Once my shirt is gone and I’ve pushed down my pants and boxer briefs, I stalk towards her. Tossing a condom on the bed beside her while crawling over her body her eyes flare.

“I’ll give you what you need. But in order for that to work, you have to let me have control.” She takes me by surprise when she shoves me to the side and climbs on top of me. Gripping her hips it’s all I can do to watch as she opens the condom wrapper and rolls the rubber to my base.

“Britt-” I growl out in warning.

She gives the sexiest smirk accompanied with pure lust, “Please, Kie. Let me.”

Fuck, I’m done. Guess I’m topping from the bottom tonight. She lifts up and sinks as torturously slow as she can onto my aching cock. Once she’s completely seated and her head falls back on a long low moan, I use my grip on her hips to set a steady pace working us both up. Britt finally gets her bearings, presses her hands to my chest and sets her own pace. I’ll give her this for another few seconds.

A few seconds is really all she gets. When I feel her start to pulse, I flip us in a flash. Fucking her at a relentless rhythm.

Her eyes shut as she starts to pant out, “Kieran, oh god.”

I can’t help what I say next, I’m a cocky motherfucker. “Does it look like God’s anywhere in here? You say my name and my name only while I’m fucking this pretty pussy. Got that, Mitchell? Now look at me while you come on my cock.”

Her eyes spring open and lock on mine. She keeps her gaze on mine as we come together. My legs buckle forcing me to catch myself on my forearms or risk being one of those douche bags that fall onto their girl. Pressing gentle kisses all over her face, shoulder, and neck as she comes back down. All the while whispering to her how good she did and how proud of her I am.

We catch our breath as I gently pull out of her, we groan in sync. Getting up and

heading into the bathroom, I take care of the condom, wash my hands, and get a warm washcloth to clean her up with. My mind is reeling. That was the best sex of my life. More so that woman, definitely just put some sort of voodoo spell on me. She's laying on the bed when I come back. She's letting me clean her gently when she finally whispers, "Please come hold me."

She's still trembling and I'm sure the aftershock of such intense sex is causing her to shake. Tossing the washcloth into her laundry basket then climbing in bed behind her I pull her back to my front and finally answer her, "I'll do whatever you want me to. All you have to do is tell me. Go to sleep, you did amazing. I'm so proud of you, Brave Girl."

She preens under my praise. "You'll stay?"

"Swear."

Massaging her scalp gently, it doesn't take long for her to drift off. My thoughts wander to getting to know her better. Clara's comment from that day still rings through my head, making me too curious about what she's been through. I'm assuming whatever it is is why her eyes flash in terror for just a second every time I pin her down. She'll tell me when she's ready. I can be patient, and I don't think I'm going anywhere anytime soon.

* * *

Shaking my head I circle Daniel, he's next up on the ladder I have to climb to get to fucking Jordan. I have his blood splattered all over me and this damn room. It looks like I murdered him but I haven't. I more elaborate plans for him. Rowan's going to be pissed but I'll call the cleanup crew after. I'm already low on patience after having to leave Brittany this morning before getting to fuck her back to sleep. I need this day to be over so I can get ready and take my girl out tonight. Not my girl, my friend.

Who am I fucking trying to kid. My girl, I got it right the first time.

Pulling myself back to the present, I don't have time for this shit. Daniel's screams ring throughout the shitty apartment complex. No one's going to call for help. No one's that stupid. The plan was to take him to our warehouse that we have specifically for this, but he was fighting and my patience ran out.

Picking his discarded ear up off the floor I toss it at him. "We can keep going if you'd like? You want to know the cool part about my job? I can hone my skills to perfection and when I slip up and kill someone in the process? Oh well." Shrugging, I walk over to my 'toolbox' that I bring everywhere. Pulling out my favorite filet knife I turn it from side to side making my way back to him.

"This is my favorite knife. The way it separates the skin from the muscle is just, chefs kiss. Here let's give you a little demonstration. I'm a professional so it's fine." Taking the knife I carefully cut into his thigh, meticulously separating flesh from muscle. Unfortunately I barely get an inch separated before he screams out.

"Okay, Okay! Fucking stop, I'll tell you whatever you want to know."

They always break at this part, it's annoying. I mean I literally cut his ear off and nothing, but separate a little hypodermis, expose just a little muscle and they want to throw in the towel, pussies. Holding my hand out gesturing for him to continue. My face is a picture of stone and a hint of annoyance. Add that with the blood and I know I rival any horror movie. Britt likes horror movies...

Okay focus dickhead, we need this information.

Daniel takes a minute to catch his breath before he starts. "My boss was Alex Hayes, I'm telling you man, I've never even met Jordan. He was my bosses, bosses, bosses, boss. That's a big jump from me to him. I did what I was told. I took the shipments,

separated them by age and gender then got them into the right containers. I have no idea where each one went. That was above my pay grade.” He stops to take a few more breaths before bringing his head up and locking his eyes with mine.

“I left about six months ago, we got word that Jordan’s boss was getting out of prison soon. Word on the street is once he’s out anyone’s kids are on the table. Rumor has it he sold his employees kids. I have kids, I couldn’t risk it.”

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Wrath blinds me, “You have kids, but you willingly helped in selling kids as young asfour?” The volume of my voice could rival a very pissed off lion.

“Man, I know, but it’s different—”

I’m done, I don’t even let him finish his sentence before I’m slicing his neck with so much strength that his head is barely still attached when I’m done. I clean my tools off and get the hell out of dodge. I’ll call the clean up crew on my way home. Walking out of this run down shit hole I’m moving with a little pep in my step. I’ve got the name of the next monster, and I will take down this whole ring. I also have just enough time to get home, shower, and get to my girl on time. Ever since walking out of her apartment door this morning I’ve been itching to get back to her. She finally noticed the bruises on my body this morning, after telling her I train for work with my best friend and we go a little hard sometimes she seemed to believe me. We’ve exchanged a few texts throughout the day, but I’ve been swamped. I make it home in record time. Being as quiet as I can be I attempt to sneak into Roe’s office to use his en suite.

I’m not even a full foot in the door before I hear him, “Why the fuck have you walked in here covered in blood?”

Bowing my shoulders like a child being scolded, because essentially that’s what’s happening here. I look at the ground, “I’m sorry. I didn’t pass the warehouse on the way home. I figured I’d sneak in here and shower so Bear didn’t see me.”

“You can use the shower but first lock the door and give mea run down on what happened today.”

Doing what he asks, my ass meets the chair in front of his desk. Taking my time to go over every meeting I had today. When I'm finished Rowan nods, "Good work, Kie."

Standing up to make my escape to the shower he shoots his hand up halting my movements, "One more thing, where were you last night? Because my sources say you were at Mitchell's apartment. That can't be true though, because I remember specifically telling you not to fuck with my wife's best friend and make this awkward for us."

Before I can respond the door swings open and in walks the other four in our band of misfits. Tilting my head back and groaning in frustration at the ceiling to try to calm myself before they start in on me.

Declan of course is the first one, "Dude, you know the rules. No blood in the house. Clara's going to kill you."

"Not as much as when she finds out you spent the night at Britt's last night." Flynn snickers.

I'm not in the mood for this. Pushing up to my feet I run my hands through my hair. "Thank you so much for your concern, but I have shit to do tonight that I have to get ready for. I'm an adult, and so is Brittany. We can make our own choices. You guys can get off my ass or I can pack my shit up and leave. Doesn't make a difference to me either way. But what we aren't doing is treating me like an immature child when I'm the one who puts myself between you all and any danger that comes for you. You can't act like I'm trustworthy, and reliant enough to put my life on the line to make sure you keep yours daily, but not enough to be with Clara's best friend. You can get off my ass or I can move out. So you let me know what you decide. I'll be back tomorrow for the Rossi meeting ready to take a bullet for any of you if need be, like every other day. Until then my phone is off and I'm unavailable." I don't wait to hear their shit, like I said, I've got plans.

Chapter Fourteen

Brittany

Rushing around my apartment to finish getting ready, I'm crossing everything that he's a few minutes late. I took a power nap with a little too much power. So I've been running around like a mad woman looking for a dress that screams 'classy' but also 'bend me over the table and fuck me'. It's a delicate balance that I've perfected over the years. Running into the bathroom to fix my curls I decide to face time my other half to help me.

"Hel— why are you face timing me in your bra and thong Brittany? What if Rhett or Rowan were beside me?"

"Well then I guess they'd have gotten an eyeful. I need help." Her relaxed demeanor dissipates in an instant. "What's wrong? Hold on, let me go get Rowan." She jumps up from the hammock she was lounging in.

"Woah, no. Wait, I need help with what dress to wear for my date tonight."

Her eyes widen and her brows practically touch her hairline. "Oh, a date." A curious smile tips her mischievous lips. "A date with?"

I can't help the laugh that escapes, she's ridiculous. "A date with a man, an extremely sexy one."

"You want his dog to play with your cat?" We both fall apart into a fit of laughter. I told her something similar the night of her first date with Rowan.

“Stop. I need something that says take me seriously, but also call me your good little slut, ya know?”

She coughs out a surprised laugh, “No I don’t know because I’d murder Rowan in his sleep if he called me a slut.”

I wave her off, “Yeah yeah whatever, don’t kink shame me Mrs. ‘I like to have sex with my husband outside and see how close to getting caught we can get without actually getting caught.’ Get serious now, he’ll be here in like less than five minutes.”

Clara huffs out an annoyed, “You’re an asshole for bringing that up.” Letting her think for a minute she finally snaps her fingers then points at me, “The maroon dress, the one with the back!”

Oh she’s a genius. “Hold on.” I run out of the bathroom and to my closet where the dress sits in the back of the closet. I love it, but I’ve never worn it. We got it when we were out one night, but I’ve never had a reason to wear it.

Sliding it on, I check myself in my full length mirror before running back to the bathroom. “Okay, this? With the black strappy heels?”

Clara doesn’t say a word so my eyes wheel to my phone to see Clara, Rowan, and Declan staring back at me all speechless. “Clara! What the hell, I don’t want them all in my business. Just because I forgave your husband for being a prick doesn’t mean he needs to watch me get ready for my date. He’s almost here, Help me!”

Rowan lets out a low whistle as Declan chimes in, “Who’s the date with, Brittany?” His eyes are narrow and serious.

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“No one you know, Dec. Now, Clara.”

Clara’s bright smile finally breaks through, “Britt whoever this guy is, he’s going to forget how to breathe. And if he doesn’t you let me know and I’ll put a hit out on him. I’ve got connections.” She throws her thumb out towards her husband. He gently kisses her thumb that’s now in his face. Smiling at how happy she looks with her husband and new family. She truly deserves everything good in the world, and I’m so glad she has the chance to have it now. Even if he’s an overprotective caveman. At least he isn’t anything like her ex.

A knock on the door startles me, “Oh, that’s him, I’ve got to go.”

“Wait, Britt seriously, who is it? How are we supposed to know you’re safe?” The typically ‘tough as nails’ Rowan looks at me with a little concern flashing in his expression.

“A guy I met at work. I’ve got to go guys. I’ll be fine. I love you Clara, bye.” Rowan and Declan both curse under their breaths.

“I love you too Britt.”

Smiling, I disconnect the call and take one more look at myself before going to open the door for Kieran. My dress hits me mid-calf with a slit running up one side to my mid thigh, it’s tight without being too tight, the halter top has a tasteful amount of cleavage. But the back is completely open, stopping just below my dimples that sit on my lower back. The shoelace thin ribbon runs sparingly in criss crosses down my bare back. My black heels and gold earrings, necklace, and bracelet finish off the look.

Smiling, I open the door and take so much satisfaction in the way Kieran's jaw literally drops open. His eyes heat, and the smile melts off his face. A look between awe and torture taking over his face. His eyes roam over every inch of my body. Standing under his scrutiny has me rubbing my thighs together to ease the pressure growing between them.

He looks so handsome that it takes my breath away for a second. I've seen him in slacks and dress shirts for work before, but this is different. His charcoal gray dress pants wrap perfectly around his trim waist, long strong legs, and muscular thighs. His black button down shirt fitting him like a second skin showing off his strong and powerful arms.

Finally, he must remember he hasn't said a single word when he chokes out a quiet, "Perfection."

He steps into the apartment and takes my face in his hands. Taking a few seconds he just stares at me. "You are the most stunning woman I've ever laid eyes on." He presses his lips to mine in a gentle kiss.

Pulling away from him before we have a chance to get too heated I bring my thumb up and wipe the lipstick that's transferred onto his bottom lip. "So where are we going, Mystery Man?"

His infamous grin overtakes his face. "I can't wait to show you. Come on." I grab my coat and purse before letting him drag me out the door, "Lock the door, Mo Stóirín." Listening to him I make sure the locks are secure. He grabs my hand and pulls me into the empty elevator. Hitting the button for the garage, he doesn't even wait until the doors completely shut before he has me against the elevator wall and his tongue is in my mouth.

* * *

Butterflies have been going crazy in my belly, and my heart has been fluttering all evening. Kieran brought us up to the roof of his penthouse where he had an entire romantic dinner set up just for the two of us. Now that we've eaten and got through the surface level questions every couple goes through, Kieran leads me to the outdoor couch and we get comfortable. He pulls my legs into his lap and skillfully begins working the straps on my heels before digging his thumbs into the arch of my foot causing me to moan in relief. Desperate to know more about the man I've spent multiple nights in bed with, I decide to just ask.

"So, I've learned a lot of the basics. But tell me something no one else knows?" His fingers stop and he tilts his head at me thinking.

"Is this the cone of silence? Like are we at that point where what I say stays here or does it go back to Clara still?"

Well, now he has my full attention. Would I tell Clara if he asked me not to? I don't think so, I tell her everything, but something about Kieran makes me want to keep our conversations and whatever this is we're doing just to ourselves. "Yeah, I'd say we're at that point. As long as it goes both ways."

Kieran takes a second to contemplate that then nods, "I'm an underground fighter. My brothers don't know, just my best friend Ryan." Woah, I did not expect that. What do you even say to that?

"Oh, is that why you're covered in bruises? You lied to me?"

His head drops in what almost looks like shame, "Some of the reason, I don't know how much you know of my job, but taking hits is a multiple times a day occurrence for me. I did lie to you though. I wasn't sure if I wanted to tell you yet. I'm sorry."

Moving over until I'm in his lap, my hands cup his face and move until he's looking

at me, “It’s okay, I get it. I have parts of myself I keep hidden too.”

“I’ll answer any questions you have.” He moves me beside him again and starts rubbing my legs and feet.

“Well, obviously it isn’t safe. How much should I worry? How often do you do it?”

His thumbs dig into my heel massaging absentmindedly, “You shouldn’t worry. I’ve been doing this for years. I’ve never lost. I take hits, but I don’t lose. Usually about once or twice a week.”

I don’t even notice myself biting my bottom lip until he reaches over and gently tugs it from my teeth, “That doesn’t sound like I shouldn’t worry Kie.”

A huge smile takes over his face, “Kie, huh?”

My face heats but before I can answer he continues. “I like the way it sounds coming from you. Use it.”

Giving him a shy nod, I smile at him. “Okay... Can I go to one?”

His brow furrows, “To a fight?”

“No, to a circus. Yes! To a fight.” my laugh rings throughout the open area.

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“I don’t know about that. If you really want to I’ll figure it out, but you’d have to swear to stay glued to either mine or Ryan’s side the entire time.”

Holy shit, he’s going to let me go. “I promise. I just want to see that you’re okay.”

He nods before changing the subject. “So what about you? What’s your thing no one else knows?”

My heart plummets, does he know? No, there’s no way he does. Can I trust him enough to let him in? I’m not sure, so I decide to give him just part of my truth.

“My dad just got out of jail, yesterday actually.”

His hands stop rubbing my legs, “I’m sorry, can you repeat that?”

I roll my eyes at him, “You heard me, Kieran.”

He smiles at me, “Kie, you call me Kie now. Are you okay? Have you talked to him?”

It’s all I can do to just shake my head and keep the tears at bay, “No, um he’s not a good guy. He’ll stay on the other side of the country, and I’ll stay here. I haven’t even told Clara that. I just needed to say it out loud.” Leaning my head onto his shoulder the first tear escapes.

We sit in silence as he leans his head on mine and plays with my hair. He’s letting me work through it by myself, but also making sure I know I’m not alone if I want to talk

about it. After a while I must nod off on him because the next thing I know, I'm being lifted into his arms and carried. I start to stir when he lays me down. I'm barely able to process his words when he tells me, "Shh, Brave Girl. We're just getting in bed. Go back to sleep." The last thing I feel is his warm chest under my cheek and his strong arm wrapped around me.

15

Chapter Fifteen

Kieran

Today has been a day from hell. Declan called me at four thirty this morning telling me to meet him at the house. He needed me to accompany him and Roe to their many meetings today. It's been awkward at best all day. I've refused to talk about anything but work. Although they've tried to talk about last night. We've checked out warehouses, met with the heads of four different organizations, hit the gym to train for a little bit and paid my little friend with the missing finger a visit.

Wouldn't you know it? He suddenly had our money plus interest. Who would have thought? I've exchanged a few texts with Britt today. Enough to know she spent the day with Clara, and for her to know I had to leave extremely early. Was it a douche move to leave her in my bed to go to work? Probably, but I didn't have a choice in the matter. I made sure to send flowers to her apartment earlier, but haven't heard back from her since.

Our last task had us stumbling upon an auction, for women, completely by accident. Women beaten, starved, and kept in cages. Now we're trying to figure out who those women used to belong to, and deal with that. My family does some less than law abiding things, but we will never and have never hurt or sold women and children. We don't stand for that shit.

After getting all the women to an organization we work with that helps trafficked women and kids find refuge, I had to get to Brittany. I needed to see her, hold her, check her over and make sure she's okay. My hands needed to touch her. My eyes need to roam every inch of her to remind myself she is not and will never be one of those women. Standing in front of her door I obnoxiously knock until I hear her moving around.

As soon as she opens that door and my eyes latch onto her perfect gray ones my need to kiss her overtakes every other sense in my body. Pressing her against the now closed door and deepening our kiss my tongue takes survey of her mouth. We fight for dominance of the kiss, but when I grab her thigh and hook her leg around my hip she gasps and lets me take control. Eventually I pull away to catch my breath and let my forehead rests on hers.

"God, I've missed you today." My lips travel down her jaw and then her neck, nibbling, licking, and kissing every inch of skin that I can reach. Her fingers tangle in my hair holding my lips to her skin.

"Kie, what, what is this? What are we doing?" Her body shivers against me, and she lets out a whimper.

Talking against her skin because I need to touch, and I haven't had enough. "I just need you. I needed to see you, to touch you, and know without a shadow of a doubt that you're okay. You're here, safe and sound. I saw some rough shit today. Just needed a reminder that you're here." Gripping my hair in her hands she pulls my head back. Letting out a low growl because she interrupted me, my eyes flare in annoyance.

"Are you okay?" The annoyance melts away as her concerned tone almost brings me to my knees.

Cupping her face gently in my hands, my eyes lock on hers, “Yeah, baby. I’m fine. Sometimes I see some dark shit. When that happens I just need to be around some light. You are nothing if not pure light, Brittany.”

Her cheeks heat and she looks away, “Don’t inflate my ego, Kieran. I don’t appreciate having smoke blown up my ass. If you want a booty call just say that. I can assure you I’m ready and willing. Even without the flattery.”

What the fuck? I mean don’t get me wrong, I think I could fuck her every day for the rest of my life and never get tired of it. She’s addicting, but to assume that’s all I want from her? That’s insulting to say the least, for both of us. After what we shared last night?

Last night was such a good date. I opened up to her in a way that I never have to anyone else, and I thought she felt the same. Especially after she let me hold her while she purged all those emotions. I didn’t want to walk away from her, I couldn’t. It was like a visceral need to be there for her while she fell apart. I’ve never felt that before, like I didn’t have a choice in the matter. We didn’t even fuck last night. I didn’t even think about it because that’s not what she needed from me in that moment. Well, that’s a lie. I did think about it but I didn’t act on it. Again this evening, it was like a subconscious thing, like a pull to her. I can’t make sense of it. My head’s all tangled up. All I know is that this feels right, it feels like this is where I’m supposed to be.

“I didn’t come here to fuck, and do not call yourself that ever again. I’m just here to see you. If you’re not interested in that. I can make you come before I leave. Or I can just leave. You know what, I’ll just go. I just needed to see that you were okay, and you are. So uh- I’ll just head out now.” Giving her one last deep kiss before turning on my heels, I’m out the door before her brain can even catch up.

Deciding to take the steps I’m halfway down before I’m dialing Ryan. He answers on

the third ring, “Hey, you want to go to the club.”

Ryan chuckles, “The club, or the club.”

I swear my eyes roll all the way back in my head, “You know damn well what club.”

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“Yeah, meet me at my place in fifteen. Just spectating tonight, okay Kie?”

I know I’m full of shit before the words even come out of my mouth, “Yeah, just spectating.”

* * *

I’m walking into The Pit with Ryan matching me step for step when Justin the bouncer stops us. “Kieran, glad to see you looking better bro.”

Dapping him up I chuckle, “Let’s not forget who came out of that match with the dub.”

“Of course, I didn’t mean any disrespect.”

I let the playfulness shine through my typical stone cold expression to put him at ease, “None taken. We’re going to go find Ty.” Grabbing his shoulder as we pass.

Ryan rolls his eyes and mutters under his breath, “You are such a dick.”

Feigning shock, my hand goes to my chest, “Me? I didn’t even do anything.”

We both laugh and head inside, “Seriously, Kie we’re here to watch. Scout out your next guy. No more. No less.”

“Yes, Dad. I got it.” I changed out of my work clothes at Ryan’s so instead of the suit I was wearing at Brittany’s I’m in black basketball shorts and a dark gray hoodie. My

black hat with a gray 'UFC' logo is pulled low to hide my eyes, and my black cloud runner's cover my feet. Ryan's got on gray sweats, a plain black hoodie, and white forces on. Everyone here is dressed similarly, we're here to watch but we're always ready to go.

I've been here countless nights where my name wasn't on the card but I'm fighting before the night's over nonetheless. People are mouthy typically. Even more so when you're undefeated and they're just drunk enough or high enough on the adrenaline in the air to try me. Scanning the crowd, it doesn't take us long to find Ty. He's about six two if I had to guess, and in the sea of people ready to fight at any second or girls half dressed, he sticks out like a sore thumb. I think he was a frat bro once upon a time. If his outfit choices tell me anything it's that he'll go to his grave before he lets go of the khaki's, polos, or boat shoes. He's alright though, puts me on the card whenever I ask, and helps me keep a low profile when I'm avoiding it.

"Killer, it's been a while! How've you been? You want in tonight?" I hold back my annoyance at the stupid nickname.

A faux smile curves my lips, "Nah, we're just spectatorstonight. What's up? How's business?"

"It's a light night, not going to lie. Seeing you in the ring would make for a better night."

Taking a few seconds I pretend to think it over, "Alright, if you're going to twist my arm. Count me in."

Ryan yells out, "No!"

The same time Ty cheers, "Yes! Get ready, you're up after the next fight."

Ryan throws up his hands at me, “Dude what the fuck.”

“I’ve got shit to work through, it’s fine.”

Ryan and Ty start bickering like they so frequently do. Ryan never wants me to fight and Ty always wants me to. Tuning them out, my focus wanders back to scanning the crowd of spectators as well as the current match in the ring. I’m half listening to their conversation when a middle aged man, maybe late forties, catches my eye from across T

he Pit. I’m not sure why he’s caught my attention but that usually means my night is about to get bloody after all. He’s dressed like the rest of us, tattoos litter his body and his hair is buzzed. Keeping my eyes on him I ask, “Who’s that?”

Ty and Ryan follow my gaze. “Oh that’s some new guy. He just showed up for the first time today.” His dark eyes come up to mine, they look black from here. He gives me a nod of acknowledgment before he disappears into the crowd. Well that was weird. The urge to follow him and snap his neck is intense. My hands itch and fingers twitch just at the thought of moving towards him. Right as I’m about to move, Ryan claps my shoulder while throwing goodbyes over his shoulder to Ty. We make our way to the middle of the room where the octagon sits.

“That was weird right? That guy gave you a weird feeling?”

Ryan tilts his head and studies me for a minute. “No, I think he was just new. Don’t let your paranoia get the best of you. Maybe you’ve seen him in circles with your family before or something. It’s nothing.”

Turning our attention back to the ring I decide he’s right. No need to obsess over a feeling just because a stranger caught my eye.

We watch the match finish up, but when James Hill is announced for the next fight, my fight, we both look at each other slack jawed.

“There’s no fucking way?” I yell over the crowd roaring for him.

“What the actual fuck? Let’s get out of here.” The anger and tension rolling off of me is suffocating to my own lungs. “The last thing you need is to get in a fight tonight.”

Before I can respond Ryan is pushing me towards the exit. Making our way out I’m shoulder checked by some dickhead walking by. Whipping around to see who the fuck can’t watch where they’re going. My eyes fall on none other than James’ brother. Still his name escapes me, but I do know that no one has seen them in years. Now all of a sudden they’re fighting again? At the same place I’m fighting? Before either of us can react Ryan and Ty jump between us both pushing us in opposite directions. Ryan yells above everyone, “What the fuck Ty? Find yourself a new main fighter.” Ty yells something about this being a misunderstanding at our backs while Taylor or whatever his fucking name is screams about how he’s going to ‘finish the job’ next time. He’s a fucking idiot. He caught me off guard and distracted last time. I’ll torture him for weeks before ending him the next time he looks in my direction. Ryan directs me completely out of the rundown pit before it can escalate further. Which it would because after that shit with Britt tonight, I’m ready to kill.

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“What the fuck was that?” I yell half in shock.

“That was a poorly executed set up.” Ryan’s practically vibrating with rage. He catches my full attention nonetheless.

“You think Ty was trying to set me up?”

Getting into the car Ryan scoffs, “Why else would Ty ask if you wanted to fight tonight when he knew James was headlining?”

“I don’t know. Maybe I should take a break for a little while find a different spot, or just train for a little.”

Ryan’s nodding before I’m even done with my thought, “I think that’s the way to go. I can’t imagine going through that again. Your brothers were on another level. And not to get all sentimental on you, but I’m not ready to do this daily shit without you.”

Keeping my emotions in check I just reach over and push his head to the side playfully, “I am great aren’t I?”

Ryan barks out a laugh, “Yeah, and so humble too. Come on, let’s go back to my place. We have a bike to work on.”

He’s got that right, I’m going crazy not being back on two wheels. My bike has some mods we need to do, and I’ll try anything at this point to get Britt out of my head.

Chapter Sixteen

Brittany

Come on Brittany. It's been weeks and the cookout is for Rhett. You wouldn't disappoint him with your absence now would you?"

I glare at Clara through the phone, "Seriously? Have you always been this dramatic? It's been four days, and all I said was I didn't know if I had to work."

She smirks, "Don't make me play dirty here. You've been avoiding us and I want to know why. You've made up with Mac and Rowan. There's no excuse now."

My shoulders lift in a noncommittal shrug, "I've been busy. I'm trying to establish myself here and I have to work when they tell me to. Promise I'll talk to Mr. Hall about it."

She smiles in victory, "Perfect, so you'll be here. Now you can talk to your godson."

She goes looking for Rhett while my thoughts wander to the six and a half feet tall man who's probably currently in that house. I hurt his feelings the other day, I know I did. I've wanted to text him countless times since, but stop myself every time. Maybe it's better this way. Nothing good can come from a friendship or hooking up or whatever. There's undeniable chemistry between us. I don't even want to think of the feelings that surface every time I think about him, but I'm not in a spot to explore that. Even if I was, it couldn't be with him. That's so complicated, my best friend is married to his brother. At the same time he's upset and it's because of me, so I really need to text him after I talk to Rhett.

My favorite little face pops into the frame filling the screen with his dirty 'I've been playing outside' face and bright smile. His brown curls fall onto his forehead, and

most importantly his gorgeous hazel eyes shine with happiness.

“Auntie!” He screams so loud that I just know that the whole house can hear him.

“Little Bear! What are you doing? I miss you so much.” He takes the phone and runs off from his mom.

“Playing.” He takes me with him over to the play set his Dad and Uncles made him. Climbing up to the top he sets me up against a rail so he can sit and have free use of his hands. He signs as he talks most of the time and honestly probably always will. It doesn’t bother me and I prop up my phone at the kitchen table to do the same.

“Auntie, where have you been?” My sweet boy signs and asks at once.

Raising my hand to do the same, “I’ve been working. I miss you so much.”

“I miss you. Can I come over and have a sleepover?”

My heart cracks, I really have been slacking on my Auntieduties. “Of course, but I’ll have to talk to your parents about when, baby.”

He springs up to his feet, grabs the phone and takes me with him down the slide and across the yard. How I’m not getting motion sickness is beyond me. “Rhett what are you doing? Are you okay?”

He doesn’t answer as he dashes into the house and into a room I’ve never been in. I can hear deep voices that all stop abruptly as Rhett shoves the phone at someone’s chest. Next thing I know Rowan’s face fills the screen. He looks from Rhett to me, confusion written all over his face.

Finally settling his gaze on Rhett he asks, “What’s going on, Bear?”

I'm unable to see Rhett but I can hear him as clearly as if I was standing in the room with him, "I want a sleepover at Aunties."

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His eyes shoot to mine and I quickly fumble out, “He asked. I told him I had to talk to you and Clara first.”

Before Rowan can answer Rhett cuts in, “Yes, now you can talk. Daddy, please. Sleepover for me and Auntie?”

Rowan lets out a half groan. “Uh, when were you thinking?” He looks at me, and I can tell he’s not a ‘put on the spot’ kind of guy, he’s definitely unsure of what to do.

“Oh, whenever it works for you guys. I usually get home around eight every night, and I’m off Sundays. When you let me know a date I can take off or just get off earlier.”

His brow furrows before looking to Rhett and someone else, “Bear, go tell Mama I need to talk to her in a little bit. I’ll come find her after I hang up with Auntie.”

“Okay, bye Auntie, I love you.”

Smiling because those words from him are my favorite thing. “I love you baby. I’ll talk to you soon.” Rhett’s little feet run across the room before the sound of the door shutting behind him echoes in the office space.

Rowan brings his attention back to me, his green eyes almost menacing as they bore into mine, “Where are you working Brittany?”

Raising my eyebrow at him I make him wait a minute before answering. “Careful, Rowan, you sound like I answer to you and your goons.”

He huffs out an exasperated breath, “I’m insanely protective of my family, and that extends to you now too. So again, where are you working that requires you to walk home alone in the dark six days a week?”

He seems sincere, and me being upset that he’s demanding answers from me is going to stress Clara out. “Fine, I’m working as a personal assistant for a law firm. My boss works late most days and I need the hours anyway. He’s nice enough though, so I’m positive if I ask he’ll let me off whatever day works for you guys for Rhett to stay the night.”

“Six days a week? You’re walking home alone?”

Rolling my eyes at the voice coming from off camera, “Rowan, I know you aren’t having this conversation with me in front of your brothers.” And because I want to rub it in a little I add, “And no, my boss walks me home some of those days.”

He chuckles just as none other than the one man who makes me melt with just a simple smile snatches the phone.

Kieran’s face fills the screen. Oh, he’s pissed, “What do you mean your boss walks you home, Brave Girl?” I’ve never been one for pet names, but the way he calls me brave makes me want to be it so badly. My nerves settle just by his voice wrapping around me like a warm blanket in the middle of a cold rainy day. Even if he is pissed.

I am a brat at heart, so I poke at him a little more. “Hey, Mystery Man. I mean my boss is kind enough to walk me home most days when we get off. He lives in my building.”

I offer him my most ‘trouble making’ smile, and his eyes light up, just like they always do when we talk. He knows I’m probing for a reaction, just like I know he’s going to give me one. He looks like he hasn’t been sleeping well. Under his eyes are

dark, and his eyes look tired, maybe even haunted.

“Why are you letting a strange man walk you home?”

“He’s not strange, he’s my boss. And you know I can’t just give you that, Kieran. Tit for tat, what’s in it for me?” His face turns stony and his eyes bore into mine with intensity that would have most people running for the hills. Not me though, all this change does for me is make me sad that I’ve lost his warm smile, kind eyes, and relaxed demeanor. At the same time I can feel the heat pooling low in my belly. He’s so sexy when he’s pissed.

Kieran’s voice comes out sharp and no nonsense, “Seriously, I’m just trying to make sure you’re not going to get kidnapped by an asshole stalker serial killer. You’re trying to play games, and I’m not even on the black top.”

He’s right, I know he is, but I still don’t want to hear it. I’m not in the mood to argue, hang up, yell, or anything else fighting with him involves. Honestly, I owe him for hurting his feelings the other day.

“He walks me home on days we finish up at the same time because he’s nice and also tall and built. I’m not saying that to make you jealous, but to say if I’m walking with him no one will bother me. On the nights he’s still at work when I leave I walk alone. I’ve been through worse than a mile walk in the city at night. Trust me.”

Refusing to look him in the face because I don’t want to see that expression directed at me anymore I call out to Rowan. “Talk to Clara and let me know what day Rhett can spend the night, I’ll make anything work.”

He doesn’t respond but Kieran’s “Mo-” is cut off by me killing the call.

Taking my fingers, I rub my eyes, and the frustration away. My mind moves from

Kieran to my mom. She texted me yesterday to check in, but I miss her so much. It's more dangerous now than before to get together and that hurts. My brain's all jumbled up over a boy, and my mom can't even come meet him to tell me what to do. She definitely can't because he has no idea about her.

There's so many secrets between us still. I don't know when the proper time to tell him is or even if I want to. This is my story to tell. I don't have to tell him anything. If my mom drilled nothing else into my head, she did that. No one is owed my story. Kieran and I aren't even talking right now. My head is everywhere. I'm tired, hungry, and overly emotional. I need a shower and a night to myself. I'll make moves tomorrow.

* * *

I've showered, got dressed in my best sweats, ordered take out from my favorite mom and pop pizza spot, and snuggled up on the couch with a cozy blanket and some trashy reality show on T.V. This is exactly what I needed. Just some me time to process. Later, as I start to drift off my phone starts ringing, checking the I.D. my finger presses the ignore button.

Instantly the phone starts vibrating again, annoyed and half asleep I swipe to answer, "What."

"Hello to you too, grumpy. Where are you?" His voice slides through me like the most potent alcohol, making me buzz from head to toe.

“Home. Why?”

“Good, I’m coming over so we can talk.”

Taken aback by him being so direct, “Uh, okay. I was about to go to bed, but yeah sure just barge into my apartment.”

“Sounds perfect, I’m coming up the stairs. Don’t get up, I’ll let myself in.” He cuts the call.

Looking at my now black phone screen half in shock due to his audacity. I sit up against the side of my couch and watch the front door. Seconds pass before the door swings open and the most handsome, yet broken man is standing in front of me. His head is hanging low, his face and demeanor just appears to be defeated. Without a word he locks the door behind him, walks over, and toes off his shoes, laying down on my legs, he puts his head in my lap. My fingers tangle in his hair on instinct, combing his hair with them in a soothing rhythm. I don’t say anything. We left off on a bad foot, but something’s clearly wrong, so I’ll wait until he’s ready.

We lay in silence so long I’m starting to think he’s asleep until finally he speaks up, “Tomorrow’s the anniversary of my parent’s death.”

Out of all the things I’d have expected him to say this was not one of them. Deciding to let him get it all out, my hand keeps a steady movement while I bring my free hand up to rub up and down his arm.

“They were murdered by some people who didn’t like my Da or his businesses. They

took them, held them hostage, tortured them, and then took their lives. They made my Da watch my Ma be tortured and raped before they killed her. No one knows this part, not even my brothers, but they videoed the entire thing. I used to fight underground back then too.” His voice sounds dejected as he shakes his head. His hand comes to mine and holds it.

His movements are almost robotic as he continues. “The night the video of my parents murder was sent to me, I was scheduled to fight. I know I shouldn’t have watched it, but I did. It was an unlabeled tape and I needed to see what it was before I passed it along to Mac. The things I saw can never be unseen. That night I fought anyway. I needed to get all the aggression out of me that was building. I won, but I saw red and blacked out. They had to pull me off of him. I don’t have a lot of regrets but that’s one of them. I had no business being there that night.”

I can feel the tears streaming down my face. This man who never lets anyone see him break, who has kept this inside for three years chose me to share it with. He came to me when he needed a safe space. Fighting this feeling I’m now certain we both feel seems senseless.

Gently I move his head so he’s on his back looking straight up before leaning down and gently pressing my lips to his. “Thank you for telling me that. I’m so sorry you’ve carried that by yourself for so long. You don’t have to do that anymore though, Kie.”

He lets out a shaky breath and sits up to turn towards me, “Thanks. Something was pulling me to come to you tonight. I know we’re not on the same page, but—”

“No, we are Kie. I think we’re on the same page. I’m just scared of the chapter.”

“I think we’re both scared. I don’t know how to do this. I’m so used to keeping my life secret, and existing only for the safety of my brothers or my job. So I’m not sure

how to be with you, but I know I want nothing more than to be here with you every evening.”

That doesn’t scare me like it would have in the past, “I want that too.” His smile melts my heart as he pulls me into his arms, my legs straddling his lap, “So what does this mean?”

“I think it means you just became my girlfriend.” Before I can do much more than smile back at him his lips are on mine, a claim. I guess I’m Kieran Byrne’s girlfriend.

17

Chapter Seventeen

Kieran

It’s been about two weeks since Britt and I became official. We’ve stayed either at her house or my penthouse every night. I’ve avoided my brothers at all costs aside from business since that night in the office. They keep trying to talk about my ‘meltdown’ that night, which is annoying because it wasn’t a meltdown. I’m a grown ass man not a seven year old. But per usual I’m not allowed to have feelings without it being me throwing a fit. Fuck them. That’s why I refuse to engage in anything but work.

We’re at Ryan’s and I’m warming up to get ready to train for my fight tomorrow night. We talked to Ty after that night. Allegedly someone went around him to put James on the card once they saw my name. I don’t know how true that is, but I’ll give him the benefit of the doubt while I have no tangible proof that he’s lying. While I’m warming up, I’m watching Ryan and Britt talk and get to know each other out of the corner of my eye. They’re probably swapping stories to embarrass me but I don’t care as long as they get along.

Ryan's not just my best friend, he works for us too. It could be a messy situation but it isn't. Just like Roe's my boss when we're working. I'm Ryan's boss. If I make a decision he doesn't agree with, he shuts up and gets it done at work, then we fight it out down here after. It's a system that's worked for years so I won't be changing it anytime soon.

Eminem's 'Lose Yourself' blares through my headphones as I jump rope. Dancing to the song while continuing to jump on beat, I catch Britt watching me intently. I started doing this years ago when the mundane task of jumping rope was boring me to sleep. So I started adding little moves here and there. My timer goes off letting me know I can stop. Putting the rope away then popping my headphones off, I quickly grab my water and take a drink before nodding over to the space we have set up to spar. Not stopping to talk because I'm in the zone now, I make my way over to put on my sparring gloves. Without a word Ryan does the same. When we're both ready, we meet in the middle of the makeshift ring and set our stances.

We tap gloves then immediately start. The objectives are simple; I'm trying to make sure I'm ready for tomorrow night, and he's trying his hardest to embarrass me in front of the pretty girl. It's always been like this. Eighteen years of friendship will do that to you. I'm always trying to win and master everything and Ryan's taking nothing serious. I tag his cheek before pulling my punch, always pulling my punches. Full power is for show time only.

"Watch out Ry." I let out a playful laugh as he rolls his eyes, unable to stop the grin tugging at one side of his mouth. We continue to tease each other while dodging hits and kicks. Eventually after we end up on the ground, I get the tap. Ryan shoves me off of him calling me a 'punk bitch' under his breath.

Before I can suggest we start another round Brittany catches my attention. She's making her way over to me and all I can do is stand here with a goofy grin on my face. Her arms go around my neck as she stretches up on her tiptoes. I let her drag me

down to press her lips to mine. Instinctually, my hands grip her hips as I match her intensity and slip my tongue between her perfect lips. It takes every ounce of self control my body possesses to pull away from her, but I still tug on her bottom lip with my teeth as I go.

“What was that for?”

“I didn’t think I’d like watching you fight, but I think it may be my new favorite pastime. You looked good out there, Byrne. Really good.”

Now this is something I can work with. “Yeah? How about we go to the bathroom and you can show me how good.”

“I would, but we have to be at your house in an hour for this cookout, and we still have to take me to my car because we can’t show up together.”

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Irritation works its way up my spine. “Want to explain to me one more time why that is?”

She lets out an annoyed huff, “We’ve been over this at least fifteen times today. I don’t want to tell Clara and your brothers yet.”

“Because you’re embarrassed. Yeah, I got it.”

“Kieran, be serious for a minute. We both know that’s not true. Is that how you really feel?”

She cannot be serious right now. Is that how it feels? Howelse is it supposed to feel? I want to scream she’s mine from the rooftops, but she doesn’t even want to tell her best friend? I can’t tell her that though because I’m Kieran. I’m not allowed to have feelings like that. Nothing gets to me. I’m allowed to have two settings. The first is the obvious; stone cold mercenary and robotic security detail for the Boss and his successor. The second is the happy-go-lucky silly uncle and brother. Honestly I’m not even sure who I am anymore if not one of those two faces. So I do what I do best, paste on her favorite smirk, and brush off the pang in my chest.

“I know. I know. We’ll take this at your pace, that’s fine.” A weird look crosses her face but she just presses a quick kiss to my lips before turning to walk away. She looks breathtaking in her light blue dress. It’s flowy and hits right above her knees, and her reddish blonde hair is pulled up in a simple ponytail. She looks like every man’s girl-next-door fantasy. How we’re about to get through this cookout without sneaking off so I can get my hands on her is beyond me.

* * *

After dropping Britt off at her car and giving her a quick kiss I head to the penthouse to shower and change into casual clothes. It's not necessary, they've seen me in way worse, but it buys me time so Brittany and I don't show up right after each other. I make quick work in the shower, and towel off before heading into my closet to get dressed. I'm not working today so I grab a pair of well loved and broken in jeans and a long sleeve olive green Henley. The green is going to make my eyes shine, and I know it's going to have my girl drooling.

It's the end of winter here, but oddly enough it's not ballfreezing cold, we've actually had really good weather recently for early March. Because of this, I throw on my Alpinestar riding boots, and leather jacket. Making sure to grab my all black helmet as well as my book bag with black and gray sneakers inside, I head out to my baby. After making my way to the underground garage and finding my bike in the spot closest to the elevators, I throw my leg over the bike and take a minute to get comfortable on it again.

I haven't been able to ride much at all since the fall. Winter is bitter and unforgiving here. Rolling my shoulders to loosen up I can't help but smile. Taking my loops out of my helmet I place them in my ears to cancel out the wind noise while I ride. Next, I slide my helmet on and secure the chin strap. Finally, I turn her on. She purrs to life and adrenaline spikes through my veins. I'm definitely taking the long way there. Riding really is muscle memory for me at this point.

I rode dirt bikes growing up nonstop. The transition to a motorcycle when I was seventeen wasn't as jarring as people who have never rode before. My Ma hated this, she always told me my busy mind would either change the world or be my demise. Which one it'll be is still yet to be seen. Maneuvering my way out of the parking garage and off the busy streets of the city all my anxious energy melts away. I carry that energy constantly. The only time I'm able to shake it is when I ride, when I fight,

and surprisingly when I'm with Britt. Sucking up every second of a mind not riddled with anxiety, I take the back roads. I'll get there when I get there.

* **

Pulling up in front of my childhood home I kill the bike and take a minute to appreciate it. I can almost see us as kids wreaking havoc on every inch of these grounds. My parents were the most amazing people who ever lived. They raised us to be in the family business, but at the same time to be good men. Our moral compasses may be obscured a little, but they're there and we have hard lines when it comes to what we will and will not allow. Before I can continue into my nostalgia, my favorite little laugh meets my ears.

Quickly making work of changing my shoes out and taking off my leather gloves and helmet , I throw my book bag over my shoulder and make my way to the sound drawing me in. I open the side gate and yell out above everyone, "Ohhhh, Little Bearrrrr." Rhett Brady Byrne jumps off the swing he was just on and takes off at me like a shot. He launches himself into my arms almost knocking me back a step.

Rhett gives the absolute best hugs I've ever had. His arms all but strangle you as his little body pours every ounce of love he possesses into it. Wrapping my arms around his back I carry him, legs dangling and all, over to everyone else. The hardest part about not being here while fighting with my brothers is not seeing him. I've been a constant since he showed up nervous and unsure in my brother's hold with his mom all those months ago. He didn't like men back then. A fact that still holds true to this day unless your last name is Byrne or you're his guard Killian.

Setting him down on the patio and taking the hand he holds up to me, I nod to my brothers, kiss the top of my sister-in-law's head, and offer Brittany a weak smile.

"Mitchell."

“Byrne.” She nods stoically, and a sharp pain radiates through my chest. I fucking hate this.

Turning my attention back to what feels like the only person who wants me here, my fun uncle persona slides easily back into place.

“Uncle Kie, wanna come see my new car I built with Uncle Mac? It’s so- sun- suner power.”

“Really? Of course I want to see your suner power car.” Smiling at him I let him lead me over to his new car on the opposite end of the patio.

Mac calls out for him before we make it over there, “Bear?”

Rhett’s head whips back over to Mac, “Yes, sir?”

“Solar, buddy. Solar powered car.”

A serious expression takes over his little face, “Oh yes. Solar, Uncle Kie.”

Smiling at him as we continue to walk, “Solar, got it, Bear.”

Rhett and I play with his car for what seems like hours but really must only be about forty-five minutes. I’ve never felt uncomfortable at this house. Today, well today I want to run and go back to my penthouse. Britt’s acting so distant it makes my skin crawl and my brothers are acting like I don’t exist. Bear gets up and goes to make Killian play on the playground with him just as my phone vibrates.

I’m hoping it’s Ryan because I really need this fight tomorrow. Pulling it out I see a notification from none other than Brittany Mitchell. Looking up to find her standing and talking to the twins but her eyes are all for me. Damn this girl, even if I wanted to

I can't ignore her. It goes against my every instinct. Breaking eye contact I swipe the notification bringing it up for me to read.

Brittany: Meet me behind the pool house in five?

Kieran: What ever for, Miss Mitchell?

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Brittany: Please, sir.

Yeah, I'll do whatever she asks of me, actually.

Kieran: Guess we're about to find out how good you can be for me.

No one's paying attention to me, everyone's freezing me out so now is the perfect time to give them the slip. As casually as I can muster I make my way behind the pool house. My whole body feels jittery, adrenaline spiking before she's even in my grasp. She doesn't keep me waiting long though. Only a few minutes later she appears making her way to the secluded area behind the pool house, giving us a semblance of privacy. As soon as she's in arms reach my hand encases her throat, not tightly, I just like the visual that I hold the power here.

Turning her and pressing her into the back wall of the building I ground out. "You think it's cute to act like you have no idea who I am, Brittany?"

My voice comes out gravely and barely controlled. I'm pissed, and though it isn't all her fault, it is partially.

"I'm sorry. I don't like this either. You look so mad. Please, let me help."

I know it's a dick move, but so is hiding me from everyone and acting like I don't make her come until she passes out every night.

"On your knees."

Her eyes widen at the lack of emotion in my voice, but she's submissive by nature so she sinks to her knees without protest. Wrapping my fist into her ponytail I pull her head back so she's looking directly up at me. Her eyes are pure heat as her tongue comes out to wet her bottom lip.

"Take my cock out, and let me fuck your face."

Her body shivers at my commanding tone, but her hands come up and unbuckle my belt. She lets her nails scrape over my lower stomach as she unbuttons and unzips my jeans. Tugging them and my boxers down just enough for my cock to spring free, already ready for her. I need her mouth on me more than I need my next breath and she doesn't disappoint. Britt closes her lips over the head and sucks as she takes as much of me as she can before gagging and pulling back, her hand wrapping around my base. Wrapping my hand tighter in her hair, my eyes all but glaze over.

"If it's too much you tap my thigh twice in a row. Understood?"

She pulls back releasing my dick with an audible pop, "Yes, Sir."

Letting my eyes flutter closed for just a second I guide myself into her wet, hot mouth. She sucks me down until that reflex kicks in again and she tries to pull back, but this time I don't let her.

"Calm down, baby. Breathe through your nose and relax your throat." Her watery eyes lock onto mine and both arousal and fear swirl in them. She likes it, but she's also scared. I wait until her throat relaxes until I push farther in. Feeling her swallow me down has me ready to coat her throat with my release, but I pull back giving her the chance to breathe properly.

"You okay?"

Britt doesn't answer me, no instead she grips my hips and swallows my cock down again, my hips buck as I begin fucking her throat without abandon.

"That's perfect, you're such a good fucking slut. So fucking sexy choking on my cock."

She moans deep in her throat and that's it.

"I'm going to come, pull off." She doubles her efforts. "Britt, I'm serious"

Her teeth graze the underside of my cock and that's it. I shoot every ounce of my release down her throat, and because she's such a good fucking girl she swallows every last drop before pulling off of me and licking her lips. She stands as I fix my jeans, once I'm put back together I press her back against the back wall and cover my lips with hers. Tasting myself on her, I nip at her bottom lip while allowing myself to hold onto her and make out like horny teenagers for just a little longer before ripping my lips away from hers.

"I want you to think about this when you walk back out there before you start acting like you didn't just have my cock down your throat."

"Yes, Sir." She smirks and walks in front of me as we sneak our way back into the yard. That little minx knew exactly what she was doing, I thought I was pulling the strings back there, but she planned this whole thing. She knew I'd go absolutely feral if she got me alone. I'm lost in my head standing near the grill where my brothers are congregating. I'm not talking to them but they're talking around me, when Mac turns to me.

"Kieran, it's been weeks, please can we talk about this shit."

"Nothing to talk about Mac, everyone's feelings are well known by now. You're

entitled to feel them, but I'm not required to listen to them."

Rowan turns, shooting daggers at me, "Oh fuck off, Kieran. You're being a fucking bitch baby and upsetting my wife and kid in the process."

"You're right, I forgot my life has to revolve around your wife too, oh wait.... It doesn't."

Declan opens his mouth no doubt to light into me when I hear a commotion behind me, turning just in time to see Brittany run through the back door.

"Fuck!"

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I grab my helmet and chase after her. Of course she's already halfway down the driveway when I get to my bike, so I do the only logical thing I can think of. I follow her.

18

Chapter Eighteen

Brittany

I've been trying to lose Kieran for about two miles but he's insistent on putting his life at risk to keep up. I'm mad at him, but I don't want him dead so I slow down and head home knowing he's going to pull in right behind me. I'm buzzing with anger by the time I pull into my spot. Long gone is the cloud I was walking on after giving him head behind the pool house. Or the bliss I was feeling when I told Clara we're seeing each other. He let me believe that we were keeping this under wraps when really not only did he know everyone knew. He also was no longer speaking to his brothers if it didn't have anything to do with work. I reach for my car door handle but the door is swung open by none other than Mr. tall, dark, and dickish.

"What the fuck, Brittany?" Woah he first named me, again. "Were you just seeing how fast my bike can go? Because I promise it tops out at a higher speed than your car does."

"What the fuck is right, Kieran. I said I wanted to keep things quiet, so you just decided to leave out that your entire family knew already?" I'm screaming by the end of the sentence but I could give a shit less. He's just as pissed as I am if not more, his

body vibrating as he rips his helmet off his head.

“Excuse me for not offering that information up, I’ve been trying to fucking stay alive at work, build something real with you, and take down some of the biggest monsters on the coast. Forgive me for not correcting you and your need to hide me away like some toy you don’t want anyone to see you playing with.”

“That’s not true and you know it, and it looks like my reasons are valid after all. You’re not speaking to your brothers because of me. This is the exact thing I was worried about.”

“Yeah, that’s what you were worried about, my fucking brothers.” He’s cut off mid rant by his phone ringing. He pulls it out of his pocket and answers the call. I can’t hear what’s happening on the other side of the call, but I don’t need to. From Kieran’s side it’s clear as day. Especially when he says, “Yeah, that’s perfect, I’ll get Ryan and we’ll be at The Pit twenty minutes before my call time.”

He kills the call looking straight into my eyes, “I can’t do this right now. I have somewhere to be.”

“Kieran, if you leave right now to go fight, lose my number.”

He gives me a sad small smile and nods, “Have a good one, Brittany. I hope you’re not ashamed of the next man you decide to be with.”

His remark cuts deep just like he wanted it to. I’m not ashamed of him, nor have I ever been. Kieran’s life is somewhat in the public eye and I have a past. My own monsters are no doubt looking for me. Which if I had to guess, they have every intention of finishing what they started all those years ago. But he wouldn’t know that, because he didn’t care enough or stay long enough for us to have that conversation.

Kieran tosses his loops in and his helmet back on. Before I can stop him he's flying out of the parking garage. I could call Clara or one of his brothers, but I can't betray him like that. No matter how pissed off I am at him he trusted me with that information. There's also that little fact that they don't think I'm good enough for him. That's the only reason that they'd be so mad at each other. Clara must have told them what she knows of my past. I can't even be mad at her, that's her real family. At the same time, I'm so mad he didn't stay.

He swore.

* * *

Have you ever walked into a room and felt like everyone's eyes were instantly on you? That uncomfortable feeling of being watched and judged? Like you want to run to the bathroom and make sure your dress isn't tucked into your thong? Yeah, that's exactly what I feel like as I walk into this run down warehouse. Women dressed in practically nothing. Men in different varieties of athletic wear.

I found this place by asking my coworker, Simone, about it. She's a Jersey native and knew exactly what I was talking about. She works with the lawyer across the hall from Jax so we interact and see each other frequently. She asked if I wanted her to come with me, but I just promised her we'd go another time, and that I was meeting up with someone but his service cut out.

Now that I'm here I'm rethinking my plan. I'm only here to find Kieran, talk him into leaving, then go home. We can't be together but I don't want him to get hurt either. I'm slowly making my way around the room when the announcer fills the area, "And now, what we've all been waiting for. Kieeerannnn Byrrrrnnne." Shit.

Kieran comes out from where I'm guessing the dressing rooms are and holy shit. I've seen so many versions of him. But this version? Black and silver gym shorts, hands

wrapped, hair sweaty, his chest and abs on full display, and pumped with adrenaline. I'm pretty sure I just swallowed my tongue. Kieran makes his way to the middle of the ring and jumps around on the balls of his feet before moving to his corner and allowing Ryan to put some clear stuff on his brow. They're whispering about something I obviously can't hear but you can tell by their body language that whatever it is, they're bickering. I don't even realize that they've called Kieran's opponent to the ring until he's already in his corner too.

I try to push my way to the front when I smack right into a hard chest. Mumbling out a quick, "excuse me." I try to keep walking when I feel a hand wrap around my arm.

"Brittany?"

Double shit, there's no way. What are the odds? Reluctantly I bring my eyes up to the face I know for a fact belongs to that voice. Whiskey eyes lock onto mine. "Hey, Boss man?" Jackson stands in front of me in a baggy hoodie, basketball shorts, and sneakers with a black hat pulled low over his brow.

"Miss Mitchell, this is no place for someone like yourself." He takes in my jeans, baggy sweater, and messy bun. I know the second he gets to my red and puffy eyes because his chest puffs up.

"Have you been crying?"

Before I can answer I hear the unmistakable sound of flesh hitting flesh. The sound almost taking me back to the nightmare the first fourteen years of my life was. Turning my head to the ring I see Kieran standing there arms spread out not even trying to defend himself.

"What the fuck is he doing." Jackson and I whisper at the same time.

My eyes widen as Kieran's opponent swings his foot out and connects with Kieran's ribs causing him to stumble back. Everyone's screaming so I know he can't hear the terrified noise that escapes my throat, but at that exact moment his head snaps to where I am and his green eyes lock onto mine.

Something in his expression darkens as he starts fighting back. When they separate to take a break before the next round Kieran stalks over to Ryan throwing his hands out and yelling. Jax asks me something but I don't hear him because those green eyes lock on mine with barely contained rage. What looks like hurt is shining through them like a beacon calling me to him.

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Ryan throws his hands out yelling something else as he turns and walks away from Kieran and directly towards me. My eyes flint around the room looking for my escape when my feet start moving. It's not until a few steps in that I realize Jax is leading me.

"Is that why you've been crying? Britt, do you need help? I can get you far away from him, but we have to go now."

My feet stop on a dime as I look at him confused, "Yes. No. I mean—" Shaking my head I try again. "Yes, Kie is why I've been crying. No, I don't need help."

Jackson's scanning my face for any sign of my lying when Ryan's voice rings behind me.

"You heard her Hill, she doesn't need help. If I were you I'd take your hands off Kie's girl before he comes out of that ring. You remember what happened last time, right?" Ryan gently pulls me behind him, keeping one hand on my hip.

"Last time was a fluke, and we got the last laugh now didn't we? If I was you I'd get back to your boy, he must be losing his touch." He tilts his head towards Kieran who is currently too worried about what we're doing to dodge half of the hits, nevertheless throw any. Jax smiles at me with his usual warmth and kindness.

"See you in a few days, Mitchell. Use my number if you need me before then." Before waiting for my response he turns on his heels and disappears into the crowd. Ryan turns his menacing expression onto me.

“Want to explain to me how the fuck you know him? And why you’re here with him?”

“Nope.” I make sure to pop the P before pushing my way to the ring with Ryan on my heels. I’m pretty sure I hear him mumble “trouble” but I ignore him. This is all Kieran’s fault anyways. Ryan gently steers me to the corner where he was standing earlier.

Folding my arms and giving all the attitude I can muster I stand there and watch as Kieran finally decides to fight back. I can’t believe how graceful he looks bobbing and weaving. Even his punches look elegant while also powerful. I swear I blink and Kieran’s on the ground with his opponent underneath him. They flip a couple of times before Kieran has him in what looks like a headlock.

It isn’t five seconds later when the guy taps and Kieran’s hoisted off of him by the guy who’s acting as the ref. Kieran’s hand is raised in victory, and he turns his whole body my way. Lust, fire, happiness, and a little doubt shines in his eyes. My plan was to play hard to get for no other reason than my feelings are still hurt from earlier. I’ve spent all day crying because it was extremely apparent that I hurt his feelings, and no matter how hard I act hurting his feelings makes me really sad.

Kie on the other hand looks like a sex god walking around with his perfectly tan skin, even at the end of the winter. His eyes twinkle with something that makes my gut churn and his grin that typically has me melting at his feet has me second guessing myself. I mean he broke it off with me. What if he came here and had some pre-fight fun with some random girl. Maybe that smile isn’t really for me. No, I can’t handle that.

Turning on my heel to take off the way I came. Kieran’s hand, gentle but firm, wraps around my arm. He pulls me back around so I crash right into his sweaty, hard, pumped full of adrenaline bare chest. My breath is knocked straight from my lungs

on impact and my eyes lock onto his. He looks like he's teetering right on the edge of outrage and being extremely turned on.

"Not so fast, little darling. We have things to talk about." He brings his hand down my arm, twining our fingers together. His lips find my ear as he whispers, "I am sorry, Brittany. I have a lot of questions and we need to talk about it all, but I need you to know right now that I should have stayed and I'm so sorry."

"Stay? Swear?" My eyes mist over on their own accord.

"Yeah, baby. I'm staying. I swear." He presses his lips to mine while picking me up by the backs of my thighs. When he pulls away he's smiling. "I know we need to talk, but I've got a lot of adrenaline pumping in my veins..." He lets his sentence trail off and I laugh shaking my head at him.

"Take a ride on your bike then, Byrne. Because I'm closed for business until we talk this out."

He pouts for a second before conceding and heading into the dressing rooms, "Okay, that's fair."

19

Chapter Nineteen

Kieran

The feeling of majorly fucking up has haunted me since I left Britt earlier. After jumping on my bike pissed as hell, I went straight to Ryan's house, let myself into his basement, and let out my frustration that way before having to go to my fight. I didn't stay with her after I've been telling her I would for over a month. With that being

said, seeing her standing so close to James fucking Hill at The Pit. Talking to him while looking relaxed almost had me throwing the fight just to get out of the ring and over to her faster. The only reason I didn't is because Ryan went and got her instead. As I'm carrying her back into the locker room with those thoughts running through my head, I know I need to calm down before this conversation. Thank God I took my bike tonight. Sitting her on one of the benches lining the lockers we're the only ones in here. That is until Ryan bursts into the room behind us.

"What the fuck was that all about? From both of you? I need answers."

As expected Britt doesn't take that well. "You need nothing. You're cool and all but at this moment you're just my ex flings best friend."

Damn that stung, ex fling, we're rectifying that as soon as humanly possible.

"What was what about, specifically?" I love getting under his skin more than anything.

"Let's see, shall we? How about we start with you letting some wack ass wanna be, knock you around? Then that'll lead us right back over to this one who apparently knows James well enough to have his fucking number!"

My head whips around to Britt, "Wait, what?"

Brittany is glaring at Ryan with so much fury I'm surprised he hasn't caught fire yet. "That's a conversation for Kie and I after we work our current issues out. Once again, I don't owe you shit."

Forcing myself to take a deep calming breath I ease the tension and frustration that bubbles to the surface. "Okay, you two cut it the fuck out." four eyes filled with anger whip to me. "Please. Let me get changed. Then I'll meet you at your apartment." My

eyes stay locked on Britt's. "You drove right? If not, you can ride with me."

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“Yeah, I drove. I’ll see you later, Kieran.” She moves to pass me to leave when I grab her wrist and pull her back into me, crashing my lips to hers. She kisses me back for a moment but all too soon she pulls back from me.

“I’m right behind you. Wait for me and I’ll walk you to your car. Please.”

She gives me a small nod. “Yeah, okay.”

“Stay?”

“Swear.”

* * *

It took me no time to change into my riding gear. I forgot my fucking loops at Ryan’s place, but the ride to Britt’s isn’t impossibly long so I’ll live. After making sure she was safe in her car and pulling out, before even getting on my bike, I decide to take the back way to her house. My head needs to be clear, because for once fighting didn’t help me work through my thoughts. I’m just as jumbled as I was when I started.

By the time I pull into her parking garage my body’s loosened up, and the only thing clear to me right now is that I need to start talking. I can’t lose her. That much is apparent. I need to know how she knows James and I’m going to have to come clean about how I do. This isn’t going to be a fun conversation but it’s vital to our relationship continuing, and I’d do anything to make sure our relationship continues. No more leaving. I’m all in.

Those few hours where we weren't talking was enough to make me realize, I might not have to have her, but I want to, more than my next breath.

Knocking on her apartment door, I make myself comfortable leaning against the frame. I can hear her arguing with someone on the phone. What's that about? As she comes closer I can make out what she's saying. Right before she opens the door I hear, "I'm safe, he's not going to hurt me. Thank you for checking in on me I'll see you at work."

She must kill the call because when she swings it open the phone is not in her hands. She's in the same outfit she had on at the fight. Her beautiful hair thrown up in a messy bun and her eyes red rimmed. She's been crying and I know I did that. What a fucking jackass. I can't stop myself when I step into her space and lightly cup her face in my hands, right before I press my lips to hers.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." I'm repeating over and over like a mantra as I pepper kisses all over her cheeks, forehead, lips, chin, and neck. Kicking the door shut behind me, I lead her over to the couch, sitting on it and pulling her into my lap.

"So we have some things we need to talk about, huh?"

She gives me a sad, barely there smile. "Yeah, I guess we do."

"Why don't you go first. I promise I'll lay it all out, but I need to know how you know James Hill."

She looks genuinely confused. "I don't know anyone named James Hill, Kieran. You guys brought him up multiple times tonight, but I have no idea who that is."

What the Hell? I know I didn't make that up. No there's no way. Ryan went and got her. He would have known if it wasn't him. Deciding to approach this differently I

change up my question.

“Who were you talking to at the fight when Ryan came to get you? You were talking to someone, who is he?”

“Jax? He’s my boss, I told you about him, but his name isn’t James Hill, it’s Jackson Hall.”

You’ve got to be shitting me.

“Mo Stóirín, I have to tell you something about your boss, and I’ll understand if you don’t believe me. But I have video evidence as well as witnesses if that’s what you need.”

Her eyes widen, “You’re scaring me, Kie.”

My hands move up and down her upper arms as goosebumps cover them and she starts slightly trembling. “It’s okay. First, has he ever threatened you? Touched or cornered you?”

Her head’s shaking before my sentence is even done. “No, he’s nice, easy to work for. Particular but easy. He likes to make small talk, and hates that I refuse to call him anything but Mr. Hall to his face, not because he’s flirting. Just because he likes informality. Is he in your line of work? Am I in danger?”

Using my hand I gently slide it up to cup the side of her neck, my thumb rubbing gently on her cheek. “No, I don’t think he’s in my line of work. At the same time we have really bad blood. I don’t like that he has such unlimited access to you now that he knows you’re mine.”

“And am I? Yours, I mean. You made your wishes quite clear when you took off

earlier.” I swear a donkey kick straight to the solar plexus would have hurt less. I deserved that but still it hurts like a bitch to hear.

“I’m so sorry about that. I have a temper and sometimes I say stupid shit. I didn’t mean it, and I realized that as soon as I pulled out of the parking garage.” My eyes avoid hers. I really am ashamed of my words and actions earlier. It isn’t fair to her. She did nothing to catch my wrath.

This time it’s her hands to cup my neck and bring my eyes to hers, “We both said mean things. I look for any reason to run and you don’t like feeling brushed under the rug. I’m sorry too.”

Giving her an understanding smile I decide this is the last stupid fight we get into. “So we’re both sorry. We’ll understand each other better in the future and work through it. Because if I know nothing else in this world, Brittany Mitchell, I know that it’ll be a cold day in hell before I let you go.” I press my lips to hers in a silent declaration.

She pulls back at me and gives me a smile that I’m almost certain reboots my cold, dead heart.

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“I’m not letting you go either, Kie.” Pressing one more kiss to her temple I bring the conversation back around to James, I don’t want to, but she needs to know.

“So remember when I told you I’d been underground fighting for years?” She nods her head in affirmation.

“Well that wasn’t a lie. I have been fighting for years but I had to take a few off, and only got back into it about eight or so months ago. The fight, the one the night of the tape? I may have glossed over the seriousness of that. I was fighting your boss that night. We’ve only ever known him by James. I don’t know if that’s his alias underground or what. Regardless, I blacked out and they had to pull me off of him. He was cocky going in the only way to get to the top is to beat the best, and in the most humble way, I am the best.” Her eyes watch me intently, listening to every word I say.

“So him being a loudmouth paired with the video, it didn’t bode well for him. He was taken to the hospital after our fight. Ryan and I were trying to leave, we weren’t there to gloat, we collected the purse then headed for the door. We were almost there when James’ brother, Tucker. Hell maybe it’s Tanner? I can’t remember. Anyway, he came at me. I told Ryan to grab the car and I waited for Tobias to make his way over. We exchanged words, I don’t even remember what we said anymore, but next thing I knew he had a knife and was jabbing it in my side, he stabbed me a total of four times.”

“I woke up in the hospital surrounded by five pissed off brothers who had no idea I was fighting that night before Ryan called them. I almost died, it was touch and go for awhile, and Mac wouldn’t leave my side. To the point where he’d sit outside of

the OR doors when I'd go back for surgeries. I quit after that. For two years I channeled every ounce of energy I had into work, and working out. It was working fine, until my connection at The Pit hit me up asking me to come back. But you know, I realized something while fighting tonight. It didn't help me work through my issue like it has in the past. I think I'm done. Seriously this time. My head is always clear when we're together. I don't think I need to fight anymore."

Feeling filleted wide open for this girl I wait on a bated breath for her response. Tears run down her eyes. She gently brushes my hair off my brow looking straight into my soul.

"I'm so sorry that happened to you, but I'm so glad you're okay, and that you've decided you don't need to fight anymore. Honestly, I'm not sure my nerves could handle it after hearing all of that."

"I'm done, I swear."

"Speaking of being done. Can you and your brothers be done fighting too? Kieran they love you so much and you love them. You shouldn't waste precious time fighting like this. You're missing out on time with Rhett, and trust me, I know from experience you can't get that time back."

She was separated from Clara and Rhett for nine plus months while they were in hiding from Clara's ex. Only communicating via phone and face time. That's the same boat I'm in now, it sucks.

"Okay, fine. I'll talk to them. But I'm not letting them walk all over our relationship. They can be respectful, or I'm walking away."

"Deal." She gently presses her lips to mine, it isn't seductive, full of wanting, or lust. It's comfort and reassurance that I'm here and not going anywhere. That I'm safe and

for the most part unharmed. She pulls away and settles so her ear is resting just over my heart. She listens to my heartbeat as I play with her hair while trying to figure out what the fuck she just did to unlock this floodgate I've hid away for three years. Hell for my entire life. It's like something altered my entire genetic makeup tonight. She's it. I finally understand why my oldest brother worships the ground my sister-in-law walks on. Why he's made us swear we'll always choose her life over his. There is no me without her, I've been a shell of a man all this time, and she's just breathed life into me.

20

Chapter Twenty

Brittany

Kieran opened up completely to me last night. He laid it all out there without being backed into a corner. He almost died at the hands of my boss's brother. What the hell? I don't blame him for his actions last night. He was livid I was near Jax and knowing what I know now, rightfully so. It makes sense now as where last night I didn't understand. I've got to tell him soon. He's told me everything and I'm still holding him at an arm's length.

Kieran and I snuggled on the couch for a long while before he took me to bed and slowly worshiped every inch of my body. When I woke up this morning he had my back tucked tight into his front. His entire body wrapped around me. Not a single breath of space separating us. I've been awake and laying here just soaking in his warmth for about twenty or so minutes when my phone rings throughout the room. Grabbing it up quickly and answering before checking my voice comes out a half whisper trying not to wake him up.

"Hello?"

“It’s been awhile.” I feel like ice water has been dumped on top of me. My entire body locks up. No, how’d he get my number? I can feel myself trembling as Robert continues. “I see you’ve found yourself in the bed of one of the wealthiest men in Jersey. You always were the best whore we ever had.” Suddenly my phone is ripped out of my hand as Kieran brings it to his ear.

“Who is this?” He demands in a voice I’ve never heard him use before, like he may reach through the phone and rip my sperm donor’s head from his body. Kieran pulls the phone from his ear and kills the call before dropping the phone on the bed and turning his attention to me. “Mo Stóirín? Hey, are you okay? Who was that?”

I can feel tears rapidly falling down my cheeks but I don’t even attempt to wipe them away. Kieran looks like he’s genuinely in pain as he watches helplessly unsure of what to do. After a few moments he pulls me into his arms and practically begs me to tell him how to help. He can’t help me though, no one can. But there is someone who knows how this feels, kind of. Picking my phone up off the bed, I click the contact I’m looking for and bring the phone to ear.

“Hey, what are you doing to—”

Before Clara can finish her sentence I’m rushing out, “He found me. Clara, he just called me.”

She curses under her breath, “Are you sure? Britt, he’s locked up. You’re safe.”

“He’s out. He got out weeks ago.”

“I’m sending someone to come pick you up. You’ll be safe here. We just have to lock down until we find him.”

I’m already shaking my head, “No.No I can’t do that. I just needed to call you. I

know you know how I'm feeling."

"Okay, we'll do this your way for now but I'm coming over and you're calling out tomorrow. I'll be there in fifteen. I love you."

"Love you, too."

We hang up and I look up to find Kieran just staring at me. No doubt he's pieced the conversation together enough to know this has to do with Robert getting out of jail. If I thought he looked like he was barely holding on before, that's child's play compared to what I see in his demeanor and face now.

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“Clara will be here in fifteen.”

“Yeah, I heard. Want to tell me what all of that was about?” I know I should, he completely laid everything on the line for me last night but I don’t think I can have this entire conversation before Clara gets here.

“We don’t have time. Can we talk about it tonight? It’s my turn to tell you everything.”

His fingers comb through my hair while he thinks on it for a beat. “Yeah Brave Girl, that’s fine. Are you safe? Are you going to be okay here with Clara for the day? I want to give you guys the space you need but I can’t leave you unprotected either. I mean, Killian will probably be here, but still.”

Giving him the most genuine smile I can muster, I nod. “I think I’m okay. We’ll talk about it all tonight. Clara will be with me and you know she’s coming with more than Killian.”

“Yeah, I know.” He pulls me tighter into him and lays his head on the top of mine.

“What are you doing?”

“Just let me hold you until she gets here. Then I’ll go talk to my brothers. You were right we shouldn’t be fighting.” Instead of telling him I’m fine, and throwing my walls up, I snuggle in and let this giant of a man comfort me.

* * *

“We’ll be fine, Kie. There’s three men on the door plus two more outside running surveillance. We aren’t leaving the apartment, and you’re hovering. I promise we’ll talk about it all later.”

Clara got here over thirty minutes ago, but Kieran has been lingering that entire time. I’m not completely sure if he’s avoiding talking to his brothers or he just doesn’t want to leave me that badly. Realistically, I’m sure it’s a little of both. He brought me into the shower with him before Clara got here, washed and conditioned my hair for me, then dried me off and handed me a pair of his boxers and one of his hoodies. I’m definitely that kind of comfortable that can only come from wearing your man’s clothes. She got here about the time I threw my wet strands up in a messy bun, and because she’s my spirit animal she showed up in none other than Roe’s clothes and a messy bun too. We really are two sides of the same coin.

“Okay, okay fine. I know when I’m not wanted.” Teasing shines in his expression just before he leans over the back of the couch where Clara and I sit and presses his mock pout lips to mine.

Laughing, I push his face away about the time he starts getting carried away, “Go, I’ll see you later Mystery Man.”

He presses his lips to my forehead one more time before heading for the door, “My phones on loud, set it off BraveGirl. Don’t make me miss you too much.”

Clara fake gags as he winks at me and walks out the door. “Is that what Rowan and I look like? Because I owe you so many apologies if so.”

“Oh, you and Roe are about a hundred times worse than that. That was Kieran not wanting to go talk to his brothers. Rowan all but straps you to a chair to get you to stay in the house with him.”

“Oh perfect, speaking of being tied up. Please tell me he’s as talented as his brother and you aren’t having boring vanilla sex. I can’t root for that, Britt. On principle alone I’ll have to help you leave him. That would make things messy in my marriage but I’ll do it for you.”

I can’t help but laugh at her, I’m usually the dramatic one, but one of my favorite things about us is that we can switch it up when the other person needs it.

“You’re dramatic today. He’s talented. I don’t know about Roe because of obvious reasons. I do know that compared to what you tell me I’d guess they’re pretty well matched in that department.”

“Oh you’re fucked then. Britt, I don’t think another man could even make my pupils dilate anymore. That man is a god. And if Kie’s the same way? Well it looks like we’re in this together.”

I give that real thought, I don’t think I’ve even thought about another man since my first night with Kieran. Our one night stand really spiraled out of control. We’re both explosive, passionate, sarcastic, and consuming. That’s just our personalities but somehow it just works. We really do just fit, damn... I may just be fucked, both literally and figuratively. I guess we’re in this together.

The mood turns somber as Clara pulls me out of my thoughts with the uncertain tone of her voice. It’s one I haven’t heard in a long time. “Hey, Britt?”

“Yeah, Clara?”

“You’re not going to take off, right? Not without telling me first?”

My heart breaks. I’ve thought about it but honestly if he’s found me here he can find me anywhere. At least here I have Clara’s support, and no doubt after tonight I’ll

have Kieran's too.

"I'm not going to take off."

"Promise?"

"Swear."

"Good, then we'll sit here and feel our feelings for five minutes, then we boss the fuck up and handle our business." I nod and lean my head on her as I let all the fear and anxiety out. She's right, five minutes, then we boss up and figure this out.

Chapter Twenty-One

Kieran

The moment I get into my black Escalade, my body aches, physically aches, to go back to her. The five guards are not doing much to ease my anxiety. I mean our head of security turned on us less than a year ago. Killian, Ian, and Collin are on the door, and even if I've been skeptical about everyone since Nolan turned on us they're the ones I trust the most. Honestly, I think I may steal Ian and Collin for Britt depending on what she tells me tonight. Leo and Alec are running surveillance, they're included in the handful of men I've never had to doubt. I also know they're routinely on Rhett and Clara too. Rowan will have to be fine sharing, because I've just made my mind up.

I don't know who was on the other end of the phone this morning or what they even said, but that terror? The way her body froze up? That was enough to make me want to go on a spree with my favorite knife. I don't give a fuck about my brothers being mad at me right now. I care about who petrified her like that. Who the fuck is looking for her? She said he found her. Was she in a situation like Clara? An abusive ex she had to escape or something? I have so many questions and not a single answer. However, she asked me to fix things with my brothers so that's what I'm going to do.

She is right, I do need to have a conversation with Mac at the very least. He's my best friend and I've ignored him for weeks. Practically threw him to the side for Britt. That's not exactly true but that's how he's seeing it, I'm sure. Then there's Rowan, he'll demand a conversation, and because he's my boss that's exactly what he'll get. Because he'll demand it in an official capacity, Dec will be there too. Might as well

just include the twins and have a ‘Byrne brothers come to Jesus’ moment.

They’re going to have to get over the ‘her and I’ thing. It’s been weeks, whatever their problem is they’ll get over it or this will be the new normal and our parents will continue to roll over in their graves. I’m itching to get back to her. Is this how Roe feels? This sucks. Like my heart is in a separate location from my body just walking around. How do I function like that?

Pulling up to the estate the guards open the gates for me and I roll right through them. I texted Rowan when I was leaving so no doubt they’re all waiting in the office for me. Parking my SUV and pocketing my keys, I make my way into the house. It’s eerily quiet, especially for mid-day. Walking through the living room I see all five of my brothers lounging around the room. Okay, so I guess this isn’t an office meeting. Looking around, Rhett is nowhere to be found. All of my brothers are looking at me by this point so I just ask.

“Where’s Bear?”

“In his bedroom playing with the new lego set we got him last night.” Rowan answers with narrowed eyes, “Do we need to move this to the office, or is everyone going to be cool? I’m going to be honest, my wife is across town, so she isn’t here to stop us from going outside or to the gym if that’s what needs to happen.”

I toss my hands up. Truthfully, I’m hurting from yesterday so I have no intentions of throwing down today. “I’m cool.”

All of my brothers mumble their agreement as I walk to one of the empty chairs and sit back in it, tilting my head up to the sky and taking a deep breath before letting it out with my eyes closed. Our downstairs is a giant open plan. It’s basically one big room, the only doors that separate spaces down here are Rowan’s office, the bathrooms, and front and back doors. We can easily see if Little Bear appears at the

top of the stairs, at least me, Mac, and Sully can. Flynn, Roe, and Dec are on the couch which faces away from the stairs and towards the giant T.V. on the wall.

Opening my eyes back up and getting comfortable I wait for someone else to start the conversation. It's a punk move, I know it and so do they, but I don't know where to start and honestly I'm not sorry for popping off. They're the ones who inserted themselves in mine and Brittany's business. No one did that to Rowan. We all loved Clara from the get go and just warned Rowan from a safety aspect. He was all in and we wanted that for him. Why do I not deserve the same support?

"Okay, well if no one else is jumping, I'll start. I'm sorry, Kieran. I didn't say anything that day in the office but maybe that makes me the biggest part of the problem. You needed just one of us to have your back. Hell, there's six of us, and half of us sat idly while the others ripped into you. That's bullshit, and I didn't know how to bring it up when we've seen each other since then."

Flynn's looking at my shoes by the time he's done. He looks so much younger than his eighteen years. He looks like the little boy who would sneak into the gym with me and beg me to teach him all I knew about defending himself instead of the most scouted hockey player in the country that he is. He's always been the big emotions kid between us all, I expected him to go first. He thrives on structure and everything ebbing and flowing in their natural order. He needs his foundation solid because everything outside of the six of us changes so rapidly. He's a grown man now, but at the same time he's not and right now he needs my reassurance that I'm not here to make things worse.

"It's fine, Flynn. I don't blame you for staying quiet at that moment. That was a lot to walk into. At the same time, yeah, being the outcast sucks. Knowing everyone was so down for Rowan and Clara from the second he brought her up just to turn around and be met with push back and being iced out over Britt was a punch in the gut." I'm cut off by Declan trying to defend his actions.

“Okay, in my defense I did warn Rowan about Clara.”

“And the second he pushed back, you backed off. I push back and everyone’s actively avoiding me at a cookout.”

Rowan puts his hand up and like the leader he is, everyone turns their attention to him. It’s just something about him, he commands a room with a single look.

“First and foremost, you’re right. All of you were so supportive with Clara and Bear, and I appreciate that more than you could ever know. My only issue with you and Britt is how it’ll affect the rest of us.” I start to cut him off to remind him he didn’t give a single, solitary fuck about how bringing a girl and kid into our home would affect the rest of us but he continues.

“I have been informed that by trying to do the right thing, I’ve been the catalyst in this weird dynamic we now have going on. I overstepped, Kie. You’re an adult and so is she. This is clearly more than a random hookup. I’m sorry for the past few weeks.”

“That was hard, wasn’t it?” I fight the grin threatening to break through my stoic expression.

“Tasted disgusting, but it’s the truth and I have to set aside my pride and apologize sometimes. Especially when I hurt my brother enough that he doesn’t come home or talk to us for weeks on end.”

I shrug, feigning nonchalant, “It was obviously better if I didn’t. Thanks for the apology. I just wanted you to think better of me than to just hook up then discard my sister-in-law’s best friend. Just so the air is completely cleared, it’s probably important that you know Britt thinks we aren’t talking because you guys think she isn’t good enough for me. That’s why she stormed out yesterday.”

Five voices mumble curses all at the same time, but it's Sully who speaks, "Is she okay? You told her that's not true right?"

Flynn might be the one with the big emotions, but Sully would rather jump into an ocean with cement shoes before knowing a girl is uncomfortable because of him. He's not big on his own feelings, except when concern for the opposite sex arises. I think it's because his best friend is a girl and he's been in love with her since the moment he saw her. If they think Britt and I were trouble because her best friend is married to my brother I'd hate to see how they'll all react when Elle and Sully finally get together. The entire East Coast might explode.

"Yeah, I told her, but when you guys act like we both have a contagious disease she's not going to believe me but so much."

"You moving back in? Gonna take my calls and answer my texts again?" Leave it to Mac to jump right down to it.

"Yeah, I'll start staying here again but I'm not sure how often. That depends on Britt, her apartment and the penthouse is closer to her job. And yeah, I'll start taking your calls and texts again. I'm sorry too, to all of you. You guys hit me where it hurt and I lashed out then retreated."

Mac isn't done though, "So we're laying it all out on the line?"

My brow furrows, "Yes... So if you have more to say, say it."

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“You’re sure? If I have more to say I just need to say it? In front of everybody?”

He’s annoying me now. It’s the only reason I snap at him. “Yes, MacQuillian spit it out.”

“How much longer are you going to keep the fighting from us? I know about the tape too, Kie.”

Fucking fuck.

“I’m not talking about that.”

It falls on deaf ears though because the living room erupts and everyone starts yelling to be heard over each other at the same time. I know I told him to just say it, but he was setting me up and he knows it. Also, how does he know about the tape? More importantly, how long has he known about it? Rowan yells above everyone else to shut up. They listen flawlessly, and quiet down. Wonder if he can teach me that trick, actually? Judging by the way he’s about to incinerate me with his eyes, that’s probably not going to happen.

“Let’s start with what does Mac mean, the fighting?”

Shit, well here goes nothing, “I started fighting again, about eight or so months ago. My head’s fucked up, way more so than you guys even think. I needed an outlet to figure my shit out. For a long time after the stabbing I did that by training, then training wasn’t enough. I got back into it and it calmed my racing mind. Until it didn’t. Last night was my last fight, the octagon isn’t where my mind calms down

anymore, it seems only Britt can do that now.”

“So you’re done this time? Seriously, done. Because I can’t handle you in the hospital fighting for your life again. I get you were the one fighting, but we were the ones watching you struggle to survive day in and day out. That shit is not easy.” Declan pipes up. The others nod along with him.

“If you aren’t done this time, Kieran, you’re fired. Effective immediately.” Rowan drops the bomb that has all of us stunned in silence.

After a few moments I get my bearings back, “I said I was done didn’t I? No need to threaten my place in this family even more so than it already has been.”

“Well maybe if you ever thought of anyone other than yourself I wouldn’t have to take such drastic measures. Have you thought about that?”

Oh, fuck him. “If I ever thought of anyone besides myself? So am I only thinking of myself when I run your security? When I personally make sure Sully and Flynn are at school? What about the times Mac’s been so low over losing Riley that I’ve had to stay with him so he didn’t end his own life? Was I only thinking of myself then Rowan? What about when Declan needed my help getting Natasha the fuck out of town before everything popped off with her dad? Oh, no it must have been the time I sat in front of a woman’s house I didn’t know for hours on end to make sure the little boy inside was safe.” I need to stop, but I can’t. It’s like word vomit at this point, the poison that I need to release from my veins so I can heal, finally.

“Enough!” Rowan roars, but I’m not done.

“No, that’s not right either. It’s definitely the fact that almost three years ago I received a blank tape in the mail and decided to watch it before handing it over to Mac to evaluate. Only to find that tape was a recording of the torture and brutal

murder our parents endured. It's gotta be that I hid that tape and never told you guys so that you didn't have to live with the images of our Mother being violated while our Father had to watch. Just moments before they were both killed, burned into your retinas." Surging up to my feet I rake my fingers in my hair, "But yes, Rowan. Tell me all about how I'm so selfish." I start pacing the room with the intensity of a caged animal.

No one says anything, not until Mac walks up to me and grabs my arms pulling me into a hug before pulling back and whispering, "I'm sorry. They needed to know."

He's right, we can't build on lies and I know that. Airing your shit out sucks though.

It's pretty awkward after my outburst.

That is until Roe grabs me by the back of the neck and pulls me close, "I'm sorry, I'm so fucking sorry that you've been carrying that alone. I'm so sorry I was a dick."

Taking a moment to compose myself I nod into his shoulder, "It's okay. It isn't your fault. I should have spoken up."

Really I should have spoken up, there's six of us, we've always shouldered life's storms together. That's how we always make it through. Six Byrne brothers against anything else? Well, I know who I'm placing my bets on.

* * *

Walking into Britt's apartment a few hours later, the sound of my two favorite girls giggling smacks me. Unable to stop the grin at their contagious laughter my feet carry me to Britt's room to find them. Clara came into my life like a hurricane when she and my brother got together. She's the sister we've never had. Honestly, most of the time I like her more than Rowan. The need to follow her around and make sure she's

safe is almost unbearable at times. Considering the protectiveness we all have for her I'm surprised she and Rhett can move around the house without us hovering.

Leaning against the door frame to the room I cross my arms and just watch them. Brittany looks so happy compared to this morning. I don't know what Clara said or did but I'm so thankful for whatever it was. Before I can get my fill of her carefree laugh Rowan stomps his way into the apartment. He stops beside me and drawing both sets of eyes to him.

"Ready to go, Pretty Girl?"

Clara studies him for a moment before smarting, "Why? What's in it for me if I go?"

Rowan struts into the room, picks Clara up, and tosses her over his shoulder. An act he would not have been able to do just months ago. "You, me, hammock, and that new toy you just bought."

Clara's face flames red the same time I make a fake gagging noise, "Rowan!"

He swats her ass as he heads for the door, "Bye little brother. Glad we're all friends again. Be in the office at eight thirty tomorrow morning."

"Got it, Boss." I shut the door behind him, lock it, and head back into the bedroom where Britt's still laying.

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Walking into the room and sitting on the bed beside her, my hand finds hers, threading our fingers together. My thumb strokes the side of hers as I take in the much more lively woman than the one I left here earlier. “How was your time with Clara?”

She watches my thumb intensely, “It was good. We have a lot to talk about. I haven’t been honest with you.”

My heart drops out of my ass and all the way down to the ground floor. What does she mean?

“You can’t just say that then be quiet. What exactly does that mean?”

“It means I have something I need to tell you, and you aren’t going to take it well. But I need you to promise me that you’ll listen to me until I’m done. And that you won’t leave me alone after. I’m serious, Kie. This is shit that the only people who know outside of what happened are lawyers, police, and partially Clara. I need to know that this is safe with you, that I can trust you to not run back to your brothers. You have to stay.”

“I’ll stay, swear. But I’m going to be honest with you, you’re scaring me, I need you to rip the band-aid off. Also what does ‘partially Clara’ even mean?”

“It means that she doesn’t know everything that you’re about to.” She pats the spot beside her so I move to mirror her position, sitting at the head of her bed while leaning back onto the headboard. I want to pull her in my lap but don’t for fear that she’ll reject the comfort. I steel my nerves and turn my head to look into her perfect eyes.

“Okay, I’m ready.”

22

Chapter Twenty-Two

Brittany

He says he’s ready, but I don’t know if anyone can be ready for what I’m going to tell him. I need to, especially if Robert has really found me. That means that he knows about Kieran, and he never has taken well to someone touching his ‘toys’. Taking a deep breath, I force myself to lock onto the pale green eyes of the man who’s stolen my heart. Even if I haven’t told him so yet. I take his hand so I can play with his fingers while I lay it all out for him.

“I was born and raised in Ohio, Columbus to be specific. My mom was the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen. She was tall, had long auburn hair, and the most breathtaking steel eyes. She was kind, thoughtful, and for the time I had her, she instilled strong beliefs and morals into me. To be kind and clever, how to know when to cause a scene and when to fade into the background, and to be polite as well as powerful. I had her for six years before Robert broke into our house while we were having a movie night. That night my innocence was robbed from me. That night I watched my father brutally murder my mother. They weren’t together. I’m not actually sure if they ever were.”

“That night was the first night in what became the longest eight years of my life. After stabbing her to death, he grabbed me, threw me over his shoulder, and hauled me out of my house before throwing me in his car. He got behind the wheel then smiled back at me ‘you’re going to be the key to solving all my problems.’” My entire body trembles as I let my mind go back to that place. But because he needs to know what he’s gotten himself into, I push on. My mind is no longer here with Kie but back

in the hell that was my childhood.

“He took me to a house, I guess it was his. I was never allowed at his house, so I’m not too sure. He put me into a room that was decorated for me. At least that’s what I thought at the time. He gave me a bath and laid out brand new pajamas for me. After I was ready for bed he tucked me in and told me that tomorrow was the end of this nightmare. He was full of shit, it was just the beginning. The next morning my dad sold me into his best friend’s trafficking ring. I was kept in one of those dog crate things in a warehouse with so many other women and kids. Days turned into years and I learned quickly to disassociate and just get through it. So many men, touching, taking pictures, the red blinking light of a video camera. You think you know the worst of the worst until your own dad sells you into a sex ring, and becomes one of your abusers.

I’ll spare you the details but you get the point. I was there until I was fourteen. By that point I’d been traded and sold multiple times. At the last place I was kept it was a shed with two seedy bedrooms in the back corners. They had moved me into a room that night, but the walls were paper thin and I could hear everything. Some boy found us and started unlocking the cage doors, but no one moved. Someone told him they weren’t going, but if anyone was going to chance it, it was me. A few minutes later my door unlocked and with a promise to make sure they were rescued, I left. Over the years different women taught me things, one of the women taught me to write and read. I wasn’t profound by any means, but I knew enough to have kept a notebook full of names, dates, identifying features, and when I could, partial addresses.

That night I took that old tattered composition book and ran. I had nothing but the notebook, a way too big hoodie, and too big boots I had taken from the room. I made it out of where we were kept and I ran. I spent all night in the woods running and hiding. When I finally made it to a town I went straight into the police station. The lady at the front desk noticed me immediately. I must have looked pretty bad because she screamed for the chief and others to come out.”

“Everyone came running at once and scared me. I threw my notebook at them and moved to the corner of the room to try to hide. I’m not sure how long I stayed cowered in that corner until a female cop walked in and sat beside me. She didn’t even say anything. She just sat on the dirty police station floor with me and when the medics came to take me to a hospital, she went with me. She ended up becoming my foster mom.

Carrie was a younger single woman who had no men in the home. She took in this broken kid, put me in intense therapy, and showed me how to be a strong, bad ass woman. Robert and his fucked up friends didn’t break me. I’m not a victim of what I went through, I’m a survivor of it. I don’t remember the name my mother gave me. I was a number for so long I thought I didn’t have one, of course Carrie wouldn’t hear of that. So she started calling me Phoenix, or Nix, because just like a phoenix I rose from the ashes of my old life and came out stronger. We legally changed my name not long after she saved me. I testified against Robert and the man he originally sold me to and she held my hand through it all. They were sentenced to eighteen years. On my eighteenth birthday, I had to leave so they couldn’t track me down. I left my mom in Ohio, went to Arizona, and made an entire new life, story, and even name for myself. I met Clara as Brittany, and well you know the rest. I got a call not long ago that Robert and his best friend, David were getting out on ‘good behavior’. They shouldn’t have been able to find me, hell they shouldn’t have been able to get out at all. I called Carrie earlier, she said she hasn’t seen or heard anything about them leaving the state. But that was Robert this morning. He’s coming for me, Kieran. I bested him last time and there’s no way he’ll let that happen again.”

I realize that at some point during the recount of my childhood, Kieran pulled me in his lap. He’s wrapped his arms around me while peppering kisses all along the side of my head. Refusing to look at him after laying down all my darkest secrets for him, I stare at his fingers which are linked around my waist. His thumb is lightly rubbing back and forth on my shirt, his hands are trembling. Did I make him mad? I probably shouldn’t have told him all of this. He finally speaks after what seems like hours but

was realistically a few minutes of silence.

“Brittany, look at me. Please.” The barely contained rage is evident in his voice, but there’s something else too. Pain, maybe? It’s enough to have me looking up at him with tears still streaming down my face.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have unloaded all that on you. I didn’t mean to make you mad.”

Kieran furrows his brow, “What are you talking about? I’m not mad at you, Mo Stóirín. The men who hurt you? Yeah, they’re going to die a painful death after I torture them until I’m content they feel what you felt for all those years, tenfold. But you? No, I’m so proud of you for getting yourself out of that. You’re incredible.”

Kieran’s words light a fire in my soul. He’s right, they do deserve to pay. I deserve to sleep at night without the nightmares, and Kieran deserves a woman who is whole, and not just piece of who she could be. Locking my eyes onto his gorgeous pale green ones, and seeing him hold back the tears threatening to fall I make the decision that I just hope he gets on board with.

“You’re right, I want in.”

His face lights up just before he pulls it back and schools his features, “Brittany, I need you to be very specific with what you’re asking, we aren’t in a position where we have room to misunderstand each other.”

“They took a six year old, murdered her mother in front of her, then sold her into a sex trafficking ring for eight years, Kieran. Every single one of them taking part in the abuse, rape, starvation, and torture I endured for all that time. I want to help you find them, capture them, then kill them. You can help me or I can do it alone. But I’m owed this revenge, I survived, but not without scars mentally and physically. I will be

the last thing they see as they take their dying breath knowing they were hunted, tortured, and eventually murdered, by the same girl they once tried to shatter.”

I’m not sure Kie could look more impressed if he tried, “Okay, we do this together. Agreed? No rogue missions. We’ll start recon after you get home from work tomorrow. Tonight, I want to hold you, and spend time with you. You’re the strongest woman I’ve ever met, and we’re going to do this together. Outside of these walls, we’re bad ass assassins, but inside them? You’re just Britt, and I’m just Kie.”

Reaching up I brush his hair off his forehead, “Deal, on one condition.”

“Anything.” He doesn’t even hesitate.

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“Inside these walls you’re just Kie, and I’m just Phoenix. I trust you wholeheartedly. You can call me Phoenix or Nix.”

His eyes flare as the words I’ve been wanting to say pass his lips, “Thank you for trusting me. I love you, Phoenix.”

My lips capture his before he even fully gets my name out. It’s slow and sweet, such a stark contrast to the fiery, intense way we typically kiss. He matches my paces, taking it slow and tracing my mouth with his tongue. When we finally pull away to catch our breath I don’t keep him waiting any longer, I can’t, “I love you too, Kieran.”

The sweetest smile I’ve ever seen breaks out over his face, “You love me back, like for real?”

I tilt my head in confusion before smiling back at him, “Of course I love you, Kie. You’re the most lovable man I’ve ever known. Are you kidding? Loving you is the easiest thing I’ve ever done.”

He presses his lips to mine quickly, “If we’re going to lay it all on the line tonight, I think it’s important you know I’ve never really felt lovable. I mean I know my parents and brothers love me, but that’s because they have to, and I make sure to show them what they expect of me. I’m an unfeeling machine at work. The comic relief brother and the overly involved Uncle at home. Okay, that last one’s actually me. But, the point is I’ve never been allowed to have strong feelings, interests, or convictions outside of what everyone expects. I’m not trying to make this into a thing, I just wanted you to know.”

Oh, this sweet man, he doesn't want me to baby him, or tell him that there's no way he is right. At the same time I'm so mad at his family for making him doubt himself.

"Tell me an interest you have that you don't feel like you're allowed to."

Kieran lights up like a kid on Christmas, "I really like to play the piano. Flynn used to play too, I taught him how. He stopped when he started high school, but when I can't sleep I go into our living room when everyone's asleep and play. I'll get lost in the music and be there for hours. My brothers think it's Flynn. We don't bother correcting them."

"Why wouldn't you correct them?"

"I'm the enforcer for the Irish Mob, babe, playing the piano for hours on end in the middle of the night isn't exactly in my wheelhouse."

"I think it's all in your wheelhouse. You have many talents Mystery Man, don't dull yourself down because you think that's what people expect of you." Heat flashes in his eyes, and next thing I know I'm on my back and he's hovering over me.

"I do have many talents. Any in particular you're fond of seeing?"

"Well, there is that really talented thing you do with your--"

Before I can finish my sentence Kieran is all over me, kissing my lips, hands roaming all over me. This feels different, this feels more intimate than any other time together. Kieran's lips attack my neck, shoulder, and jaw. My hands travel up his torso, bringing his hoodie with me until he sheds it. I wince at the sight of his battered body, my inner voice having to remind me, 'he's fine. He said he wasn't fighting anymore. He isn't actually hurt.' Shaking the thoughts out of my head, I bring my focus solely back to him, when we finally break apart, he moves us so I'm half laying on him.

Rubbing my back in soothing circles, he doesn't stop until I'm drifting off with an 'I love you.' barely above a whisper.

23

Chapter Twenty-Three

Kieran

The blinding rage ever since Phoenix told me about her past last night has been stuffed back to the deepest corner of my brain. She didn't need to hulk out Kieran last night. She needed Kie, the man who loves her no matter her past. I'm the man who's going to hand her the match and stand guard, pride in my eyes, as she sets flames to the world for scorning her as deeply as it has. I always knew she was brave. It's why I've called her 'Brave Girl' since the beginning, but even I couldn't have guessed just how courageous she was. How much she'd survived. My entire being will always be in awe of her.

After making sure she got to work safely, even if I do hate that she's working for James, or Jackson, or whatever name he's going by now, I head straight to the estate. She swore to call me if he does or says anything out of line and I can't hold in the blinding rage anymore. My feet just need to make it to the gym so I'm free to explode in peace. I've never wished to not run into my sister-in-law before, but today I know I'm too angry to even speak to her. She didn't do anything wrong, she just knows, besides Nix she's the only person I can talk to about it, but I'm not in the mood for talking. I'm in the mood to throw and hit shit. Making my way into the house, I send up a prayer that no one is between me and the gym.

Of course I'm not that lucky. Roe and Clara stand in the foyer arguing as soon as I walk in. I don't know or care what about, but if I have to hazard a guess, I'll assume it's because we got shot at the other day. I brush right through the middle of them

keeping my head down and moving towards the heavy bags, jump rope, and lifting equipment screaming my name.

“Kieran?” Clara’s soft motherly tone nearly undoes me, but I can’t stop, I just have to make it to the gym.

“Kieran.” Rowan’s no nonsense voice calls at my back as I keep moving. I shake my head, almost there.

I hear Roe curse low under his breath before Clara tells him to go and his footsteps trail behind me. My hand wraps around the door to exactly where I need to be. My feet practically catapult my body inside. Rowan comes in behind me, but that doesn’t stop me from getting to the heavy bag. Not even bothering to wrap my hands, I grab my shirt at the nape of my neck and yank it off. Unable to hold it together one second longer my fists rain down on the heavy bag.

I can feel Roe staring at me, but he’s not in my peripheral vision. My mind blanks out as I take out every single ounce of anger, frustration, hurt, and fear on the bag. Someone let’s out a pained roar. It sounds like a wounded animal. It takes me a few seconds to realize I’m hearing my own agonized shouts.

I’m not sure how long I’ve been beating the shit out of this bag when my ass meets the mats that were just a second ago under my feet. My knees draw up and my arms wrap around them. Then like the absolute punk that I know I am, I bury my head in my arms and cry. I’m not a crier, but knowing I’m either in this room myself or at most with just my brothers, I cry. I cry for the girl who had to watch her mom die, the girl who was absolutely brutalized by her own father and his sick friends. The Brave Girl who decided to run that day, and the girl who rose from the ashes and refused to be a victim. I’d never let her see me like this over her, she’d be pissed I was crying for her. However right now my mind can work through it all, then pull myself together and do what I promised her we’d do. Get her the justice she deserves.

Taking deep breaths to calm myself after purging what I needed to, I feel a brother on each side of me pressing their shoulders into mine as a show of silent support. Someone's hand goes to the back of my neck and gently squeezes. Peeking up to the owner of said hand, I find my big brother's emerald eyes staring at me.

Declan gives me a sad smile before asking, "Want to talk about it?"

I can't betray Phoenix like that but at the same time I need to talk about it to some degree.

"Remember when we found out about Clara? What she went through?" Dec nods at me in response. Before I can say anything though I feel a nudge on my other side. Looking over I find Roe watching me with apprehension.

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He breaks his stare and looks to Dec, “Think what happened to Clara, then multiply it by about a thousand, take out the ex fiancée and replace it with biological father, and you’re still not thinking extreme enough.”

My gaze whips to him, “You know? What the fuck, Roe!? And then you don’t even have the respect to keep it to yourself? You blab to others?”

Rowan glares at me, “I didn’t ‘blab to others.’ as you so eloquently put it. All I did was give Dec surface level information. His imagination takes over the rest. I’m not the enemy here, Kie.” He places his hand on the back of my head ruffling my hair like he’s always done.

“She told me everything last night, even stuff Clara doesn’t know. Then I told her I love her. She said it back and now I’m here working through my shit while she’s safe at work. I just needed to get it out somehow, I’m good now.”

Declan tightens his grip on the back of my neck slightly, “You aren’t. Kieran, I haven’t seen you cry since you were about ten.”

Shrugging his hand off me I stand up then reach my hand for his, “Yeah, I know, there’s a reason for that.”

Rowan cuts in standing while I pull Dec up, “What reason is that?”

They’ve already seen me lose it, might as well keep going at this point.

“Well, big brother, it’s simple really. I’m not allowed to. My profession and the

standards I'm held to don't allow me to beat the shit out of a heavy weight bag then sit on the ground and cry because the girl I'm in love with was hurt so badly that she'll never fully recover from what they did to her."

Declan tilts his head, "The standard you're held to outside of this house, you mean?"

I shake my head at him, "No, I mean the standard I'm held to across the board. What kind of head security or enforcer would I be if I couldn't keep my emotions in check on the job? You think holding all of this back for years and years is easy? I get scared, worried, and things weigh on my conscience just like they do yours. At home I'm the 'rolls off his back' brother, I make a joke out of everything, not a care in the world. You think that's what's happening inside my head? I worry about and deal with things that would never be a blip on your radar. It's not an easy feat keeping you guys safe and alive. I keep the organization free of danger, if I fail someone dies. I don't have time to be anything other than what people expect of me." I'm yelling by the time I'm done. Rowan suddenly grabs the back of my neck and pulls me into a hug. This isn't a 'bro hug'. No, this is an embrace that only siblings can give you. Like when you're at the edge of a cliff dangling one foot over and they're the only ones who can snatch you back to solid ground.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry we made you feel like you couldn't just be Kieran when we weren't at work." His embrace is so tight I want to tell him I can't breathe but I don't dare.

"It's partially my fault too. You can't fix what I don't tell you is broken."

Breaking apart he grasps my shoulder, both of us looking at Declan, "I'm sorry as well, I'll be more vigilant. You can always come to me and talk. I definitely understand the pressure." His nose scrunches up and a look of uncomfortability and what looks almost like disgust crosses his face.

“But also, I’m not going to hug you. I’ll support you without the hug, if it’s all the same.”

Unable to help it I break out in laughter. Declan is the least affectionate out of all of us.

“Yeah, Dec. I got you.”

* * *

I roll my shoulders, easing the stress and tension built up there. My arms are sore after my stint in the home gym. So I’m shaking them out a little bit as I pursue my tools sitting on my table while also waiting for Nix to pick up the phone. I have Alex Hayes hanging from my favorite hook, he’s passed out, pussy. I’m waiting for him to come to and in the meantime I just need to hear her voice. The phone connects as my hand automatically reaches for my favorite fillet knife, freshly sharpened and glinting in the overhead light.

“Hey, Mo Stóirín.” My lips curve into a smile just hearing her bustling around her office.

“Hey Mystery Man. What are you doing?” Her voice wraps around me calming all my fears and anxieties while allowing myself to move firmly into the unfeeling killer I need to be right now.

“Not a lot, just about to start a meeting. How’s work going?” I turn back to Alex and push him with the toe of my shoe.

Unlike my brothers I don’t like conducting business like this in suits, they’re restrictive, and expensive. It’s such a waste of money to burn them after every man I encourage for information. It’s because of that, I’m not as annoyed when blood gets

on my shoes, they're just Forces after all. Nor will I be annoyed when all sorts of bodily fluids end up on my sweats and t-shirt. After this I'll shower, burn the clothes and shoes I'm wearing, then walk out of the warehouse in the same three piece suit I was dressed in when I got here. It's the perfect formula, really.

"It's okay. Jackson is avoiding me like the plague but really what do you expect?"

"Is he being a prick?"

She laughs at the rasp in my voice. "No Kie. He's just licking his wounds. He'll adjust in the next few days and go back to the pain in the ass boss I know and secretly enjoy."

"You enjoy Hill now, Brave Girl?" I'm just playing with her, but also I'm a jealous prick, so I hope she tells me what I want to hear.

"I enjoy you... And me... That look you give me when you're horny... And when your-" Before she can finish her sentence Alex groans as he begins to wake up. "What was that, Kieran?"

Now it's my turn to groan but in frustration instead of pain, "Just finish the sentence. Please babe, I have to go but I'm begging you to finish your train of thought." I'm practically drooling for her answer, but she likes to torture me so of course she doesn't.

"Have a good meeting, Kie."

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I huff in annoyance as she laughs at my expense, the line goes quiet but before she can hang up I call out, “Brittany.”

“I’m here.”

“I love you. I’ll pick you up from work, okay? Do not leave without me. I have our project set up at the penthouse, okay? Stay, swear?”

“Stay. Swear. I love you, Kie.” She disconnects the call before I can answer and I toss it on the table.

Turning back to our guest of honor, I fall easily into my job. It weighs on me a lot of times. The kill, the means in which I obtain the information I need, all of it. However, with this specific string of people? My conscious is clear. My guilt is nowhere to be found. With traffickers, especially when looking at all things considered, I’ll do my job with ease and a pep in my step. Fuck these guys.

“Alex, Alex, Alex. I know you’ve heard of your guys going missing. I know the whispers about me are out there, surely you knew it was only a matter of time.”

“Fuck you, Irish scum.” He has the audacity to spit at me. I’m too far from him for it to land, but still, the insult is there.

“Uh, okay...” I look at him with disgust. “Anyways... I know you have a boss, they all do. I just need you to tell me who he is. That’s it Alex, my boy. Just one simple name. You give him up, I’ll make it quick. If you don’t, you’re going to learn just how tame the rumors and whispers about me really are. I promise you, you aren’t

built to handle what I'm going to dish out.”

“I don't know shit.” Alex fights his restraints and I let him wear himself down for a little while.

“Yeah, they never do at first, I'm so over the predictability. I had higher hopes for you, Hayes. Oh well, I gave you every chance.” Walking behind him I cut his shirt off with one quick swipe of my blade. It cuts his skin too, not that I'm worried about that, I didn't research and practice how to skin someone alive for as long as I have to care about a few shallow cuts. “Okay, Hayes. Let's see how long you last.” I take the blade in my hand and get to work, he better not take too long, I've got to go get my girl from work.

24

Chapter Twenty-Four

Phoenix

Jackson has stayed buried in his office all day. I'm over him ignoring me. I didn't do anything wrong so I'm not going to be treated like I did. After working up the nerve, my feet carry me all the way to his office and my fist knocks on the door. The glass is frosted over for a semblance of privacy in the otherwise see through office. A gruff, “Come in.” is shouted from the other side of the door. Wasting no more time I push into his office, shut the door, and sit in one of the visitor seats on the opposite side of the desk from him.

“Okay Mr. Hall, come out with it. Whatever reason you've been avoiding me, spill it.”

His eyebrows raise at my no nonsense tone, “I'm sorry?”

I have to fight pretty hard not to roll my eyes, “Come on, you’ve avoided me all day. You answer my questions with no more than a grunt like a caveman. This can’t be because of Kieran.”

“It’s one hundred percent because of Kieran. I don’t know what he told you, but I can almost guarantee it isn’t the truth. Did you know he almost killed me? I was in a coma, Brittany. That’s not a man you want to be with. He’s unhinged on his best days. I mean do you even know what his family is? What he does for a job?”

Pushing up to my feet, I place my palms firmly on the top of his desk staring down at him with rage, “Yes, I do know who he is and what his occupation entails. I know all about his family seeing as my best friend is married to his oldest brother. Did you know your brother almost killed him? He almost bled out. I know about the fight, I know about his healing, what’s happened since and even what happened before. Looks like you both have more in common than you think.”

Pure malice is on full display as Jackson looks me in the eye and delivers the blow I never expected, “I think it’s best if you take paid time off this week. We’ll reconvene next Monday and decide your future at Philips and Grant.”

My jaw drops before I school my features, “If that’s what you feel is best. Have a great week, Jackson.”

I’m about to close my door when I hear him say, “You as well, Ms. Mitchell.”

I am not going to cry. I’m stronger than some insecure man making me take a week off because his ego is bruised. I make my way to my desk, pack up my things, double checking that I have everything, then with my head held high, I walk out of the office. My phone is to my ear before the elevator doors shut.

The phone clicks and I rush out, “Mom.”

“Hey, Nix. What’s wrong?” Her voice sounds strange, but I just brush it off as she’s distracted.

“My new boss just made me take a week off because the guy I’ve been seeing beat him up years ago.” Okay, that’s an extremely oversimplified version of what happened but she doesn’t need the details.

She chuckles, “Oh, Nix. Only you would find yourself in a predicament like that.”

“It’s not funny, they’re just men having a pissing contest.” I groan, shutting my eyes.

“Over you my sweet Phoenix. And why are they all up in arms about you?”

“I’m too old to do this.”

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I can practically see the smile tugging at her lips when she responds, “You’re never too old for this, come on.”

I let out a playful sigh while walking out the elevator as soon as the doors open, “Because I’m worthy, I’m strong, and smart. I’m Phoenix Walker, I rise from the ashes of the flames they tried to burn me alive with.”

I’m not paying attention to where I’m going and practically run straight into Kieran’s solid chest. He grabs my forearms gently to stop me at the last second, that stupidly sexy smirk firmly in place. Carrie is in my ear still telling me about how beautiful and perfect I am.

“Hey, Mom. I gotta go okay?”

“What’s the phrase, Nix?” Concern and mild panic lacing her voice.

“Grandpa will call at seven, got it.” I can hear her lungs emptying of the breath she was holding.

“Okay, call me later. Tell Kieran I say hi. I love you, Nix.”

“I love you too, Mom.” I hang up the phone, taking a moment to study Kieran’s confused face before pushing up on my toes and giving him a quick kiss.

He pulls back in slight confusion, “What Grandpa? Why do you look upset? And this isn’t where I asked you to wait for me.”

“Take me home, Kie. I’ll tell you everything when we’re there.”

* * *

The ride home is silent. I can tell he wants to ask more about the conversation he overheard, but he doesn’t. He just holds my hand, pulling it in his lap to rest on his thigh and gently rubs my finger with his thumb. Pulling into the parking garage of his penthouse, Kieran parks before checking his surroundings and opening my door for me. He leads me into the elevator, silently waits for it to arrive then leads me off.

“Kie-” Abruptly I shut my mouth as he holds up a hand to me then presses a finger to his lips. He pulls out a box from a spot under his coffee table, turns it on, and waits for the light to flash before he sighs.

“Okay, you can say whatever you want, no one’s tracking us.”

“Uh, is that something I should normally worry about, because I’ve gotta say, I talk about a lot of stuff on my phone, and in my apartment.”

“No. I’m just being careful now that we know he’s out there, and has your number. I’m calling a meeting here tonight that I want you to be a part of. My brothers will be here and so will Ryan. I know you’re going to be pissed, but I’m also assigning you a detail.”

Has he lost his mind? That’s not happening. “Kieran, I love you, but you’re not assigning me guards. I don’t need them. I’m fine.”

He runs his hands through his hair in frustration, “Please, I know you’re brave and strong. I get it, it’s why I call you Brave Girl, but please let me do this. You probably don’t need them, and I’m probably being dramatic, but I’d rather be over prepared. I’m going to put Ryan on you. You know him already, and he’s my best friend. I trust

him fully, he'll switch out with Collin and Ian. You'll meet them tonight as well. I can't work how I need to if I'm freaking out about you here. The only way to solve that is if I know you're covered when I'm not around."

Every part of me screams to argue back with him, to tell him to shove it and that I don't need any help. Except my stupid heart kind of melts at what he says. He's nervous and I want to settle his fears. So instead of continuing to fight with him, I move in front of him, leaning my head onto his chest. His hands instinctively wrap around me and his lips press into the top of my head, "Fine, but seriously, I'm not going to need much for this week seeing as Jackson and I got into it and he volunteered me to take the week off and we'll meet next Monday to discuss my future at the firm."

Kieran's muscles stiffen as I talk, "I'm sorry, he what now?"

"It's fine, his ego is just bruised, and now I have all this free time to do recon."

He forces a smile that looks a complete contrast to the lazy smirk he usually gives me. He's trying to drop it for me, or he just wants me to think that. I'm not sure which one it is, yet.

"You're right, his ego's probably just in the way." He kisses my cheek then turns and heads into the office, whistling. Kieran Byrne is whistling and it's unnerving.

"Kie— Kieran, why does that sound like you're going to do something stupid?"

I follow him into the office just in time to catch that mischievous grin he loves to give.

"Me? I'm offended. I would never." The fake indignation in his voice ringing loud, telling me all I need to know. He's going to say something to Jackson.

I give him my most stern expression, “Kieran I’m serious, let me handle it.”

A look of annoyance immediately takes over his face, “Fine, I’ll let him be a pansy bitch and act completely unfair to you, whatever you say, Mo Stóirín.”

Trying not to laugh at his theatrics I press my lips to the underside of his jaw, “Thank you, Kie.”

He lets the tension out of his posture with a deep breath before turning back to his desk.

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“Okay, we have a few hours to spare, let’s start with the notebook and work our way through it.”

* * *

We’ve been combing over the notebook for hours when the elevator chimes signaling someone has arrived. Kieran’s trying to decode my terrible handwriting from the early days, while I’m trying to piece together things from my own memory as well as the preteen years written out in front of me. A knock sounds on the door frame causing my eyes to lift up and catch Declan walk in. It surprises me just how much Kie and his brothers look alike. Seriously, a couple of inches, as well as hair and eye shades really are the only thing that separates them.

I gather up everything we’ve been working on while Kieran and Declan greet each other. It’s not that I’m hiding it from the others. I’m actually pretty sure I’ll have to tell them tonight. I just want to be the one to tell them, not my red tattered old spiral band that caught their eye. Once everything is put away I turn my attention to Declan. He’s a prickly one, he has the same charisma as the others, he’s easy to talk to and be around, but there’s something else there. Hurt recognizes hurt, every single time. However, I don’t make a habit out of making other people’s business mine. Unless it’s Kieran, or the men we’re now hunting down.

Declan nods at me, his hands placed firmly in his pockets, as he rocks back on his heels, “Hey, Britt.”

I nod at him in response, “Declan.”

Kieran lets out a low whistle from behind me. “Why did it just drop fifteen degrees in here?”

Before I can tell him I have no idea what he’s talking about Ryan struts through the room like he owns it, giving Kie a handshake-hug thing, then immediately wrapping me up in a bear hug and spinning me around.

“Hey, Brave Girl.” My eyes go wide at the use of the nickname only Kie uses, and if the growl from behind me tells me anything it’s that Kieran isn’t a fan either.

“Ryan.” Kieran barks out in warning.

Ryan chuckles, clearly getting the reaction he wanted from Kieran. “What? You mean to tell me I’m not allowed to acknowledge how brave she is after the last time I saw her?”

Declan chimes in, intrigue lacing his words, “When’s the last time you saw her, Ry?”

His eyes pop wide, but he recovers quickly, “The other day? Just because she doesn’t like the lot of you, doesn’t mean she doesn’t like me.”

Of course at that moment four more brown hair, green eyed men strut through the door. I’ll just go die of embarrassment now. One of the twins must have caught what Ryan said because he’s not even fully in the room and he’s already inserting himself into the conversation.

“Who doesn’t like us, and why? I’ll have you know I’ve been on my best behavior recently.”

Mac pops him upside the head as he passes, “That would be because you’re in season and closing in on a playoff spot, and not because you all of a sudden have a burning

desire to be a good person.”

They all file in giving both Kieran and I a nod of acknowledgment. Two other men I don't know make their way into the office too, and I'm all of a sudden thankful that this office alone is the size of my apartment. Kie takes my hand and guides me behind his desk, motioning me to sit in the comfortable overstuffed chair. He moves to the back of his chair and rests his forearms on top of it. The symbolism of him handing me the reins and standing behind me for backup should I need it is enough to knock me off my feet, if I was standing. His brothers take note of this too. Most of them fighting grins.

“So I'm going to let Brittany take over, but before she does I want to point out that whatever is said in this room has to stay in this room. No going back to wives, girlfriends, friends, or bed buddies. I love every single one of you, but I'd slit your throat without even a moment of hesitation if you so much as disagreed with her nail color. You can't even fathom what I'll do if you break her trust. She doesn't have to tell you shit, how little or much she decides is completely up to her but we're in the cone of silence, is that understood?”

Everyone nods except Rowan, who narrows his eyes at his brother. “You'd threaten the Captain so nonchalantly?”

“Oh, brother. I'm devoted and dedicated to this life but don't ask questions if the answer will offend you.”

Rowan nods slowly at Kieran's response and turns to me along with everyone else.

“Okay, well I guess we should start with the most pressing matter here. My name is not Brittany Mitchell. My name is Phoenix Walker. And my dad and his friends trafficked me from the age of six, until I escaped at fourteen.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

Kieran

I've been watching Phoenix... Is it safe to call her Phoenix in front of them now? That's a question I'm going to have to ask when they leave. Regardless, I've been watching her run this entire room, making plans, and executing them flawlessly for hours. My brothers have sat and listened attentively, asking questions occasionally, and gathering all the intel she's willing to give. She hasn't given them more than an eighth of what happened to her, just what she has to for them to understand. I look around and find every man in this room slack jawed and hanging on to every word she says.

"So that brings me to now. I want revenge, I need revenge. I'm going to do this with or without the backing of the BOCG. The extra help and resources would make this easier, but trust me I'm used to the universe sending difficult to my door. I can do this by myself if you decide to not get involved."

Her head is held high, her shoulders back, and a look of determination sits firmly on her face. My cock twitches behind the zipper of my charcoal dress pants. She looks undeniably sexy when she's commanding a room of made men. My thoughts start wandering to getting everyone out of here as quickly as possible so I can prop her up on the edge of this desk, spread her perfect thighs, and eat her pussy until she's begging me to stop. I'm snapped out of my delectable thoughts by Mac's voice filtering in.

"So say we refuse, what's your plan for tracking these guys down? You'll need an extremely talented IT guy for some of this stuff."

Her smirk tells me she's about to piss Mac off and I'm here for it.

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“Not guy, girl. I have an incredibly talented IT girl ready and waiting for me to give her the word. She was rescued when the police raided the shed I was kept in. We stayed in touch and she wants this as badly as I do. The only reason I’m bringing this to you is because I know Kie’s going to involve himself no matter what.”

“We’re in, your girl can work with Mac. I’m assuming she isn’t local so they’ll have to hook up from ET addresses or whatever other nerd stuff they do.” Rowan’s statement brooks no room for argument.

Mac can’t help but roll his eyes, “IP addresses, you fucking brussel sprout, but I don’t need that. I think I know who you’re talking about. Is it Lee? We’ve been dancing around each other on assignments for years.”

“Yeah, how’d you know?”

“I didn’t get as good as I am by being stupid.” He winks at her, causing her to glare back at him.

“Okay, with all of that settled, I have one more thing to discuss with you guys before you gotta get out of my house. Britt and I have plans.”

“Are we calling filthy sex ‘plans’ now?” Sully laughs, but Dec’s swat to the back of the head has him looking sheepish.

“Sully, don’t be salty because I’m having filthy sex with this goddess and you’re still following Elle around like a lost puppy.”

He glares at me and flicks me off, but otherwise doesn't say anything else. "So, with everything you now know it should be no surprise to you that I want a detail on her. Roe, you have Kill and Alec, I want Ryan as my main guy, for obvious reasons. I also want Collin and Ian to switch off as his partner. Don't underestimate these men trying to get to her. They ran and successfully operated a trafficking ring full of women and children for years. The only reason they were shut down is sitting right before your eyes, and I'll be damned if she's left unprotected for even a second."

Ryan nods along with what I'm saying before turning his attention to Rowan.

"I request to be pulled off all my other assignments effective immediately, Boss. I can't leave my best friend's girl unprotected, and we all know we can't afford to have Kie do it himself. If I don't he will."

Rowan nods at Ry, "Request granted. I want a group chat with all Byrne men, Ryan, Collin, and Ian. If the wind so much as whips her hair I want it in the group chat. We have one for Clara too so this should shock no one. We take the details of the women we love very seriously."

Clapping my hands together before Phoenix has a chance to jump in and derail this whole thing I exclaim, "Okay, now that all that's settled, get out." It's abrupt and most people would find it rude but I'm one of six boys, we don't really do subtle, especially when we're dealing with each other. We all exchange goodbyes. Before Ryan leaves we make plans for him to be here around seven tomorrow morning so I can head off to work. It's only about ten minutes before everyone's gone and I turn to Nix seeing the heat and lust in her eyes that I'm sure matches my own.

"Office, now. I want you naked and on that desk in the next forty-five seconds." She bites her bottom lip, trying to figure out if she's going to be a brat or listen. Ultimately, she turns and runs back to the office. Slowly I loosen my light blue tie, unbutton my shirt cuffs and roll them up my forearms. Deciding to give her a few

more seconds, I unbutton my charcoal vest and peel it off, laying it neatly across the back of the couch. Hearing her shuffle onto my desk my blood sings with electricity. I'm not a man of infinite patience and it has just ran out. The closer I move to the open office door, the quicker my stride tries to become. Once at the doorway to the office I force myself to stop and just admire what I'm seeing. Her back is to me as she's perched on the edge of the desk. She's completely bare and her strawberry blonde hair cascades down her back in soft natural waves. Phoenix's hands are resting on the desk on either side of her. Her thighs are parted, and she looks like every man's most sinful fantasy. Pulling my tie silently from around my neck, I walk up behind her as quietly as possible and slip it over her eyes. Her body turns rigid instantly.

"It's just me, baby. Breathe, it's just you and me in here. Do you trust me?"

"With my life." She rushes out in between practically panting. She's scared but she's also turned on.

"What's your word?"

"Stop."

"Such a good fucking girl." She preens under my praise, as I lightly trail my fingertips over her back, and shoulders, before moving in front of her and ducking my head to take an already hard nipple into my mouth and suck.

Her head falls back on a moan as her fingers instinctually thread through my hair pulling me closer. Using my hand I tweak and roll her other nipple between my fingers before switching off. She starts begging me to give her more. How could I ever deny her? Removing her hands from my head, I plant them firmly on the edge of the desk, her fingers curling around the edge. Pulling out my office chair, I sit and get comfortable.

“You will not move your hands. If you do, I will punish you. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.” She practically moans.

A growl bubbles its way up from deep in my chest as my cock gets impossibly harder in my slacks. Dipping my head, I kiss across her lower belly, over every scar and angry line that litters her lower belly and thighs before spreading them farther apart to look at my favorite place to be. Her pussy is drenched with her arousal and I just need a minute to take it in. She starts wiggling on the desk, growing impatient by my lack of action. Taking that as my cue, I run the tip of my tongue up her core before circling her sensitive clit when I get to the top.

“Fuck, you taste like heaven and the greatest gift this Earth has ever received.” I practically groan into her while continuing my slow, tortuous pace.

“Kie, please. I need more, please.” She’s begging as she grows impatient, which is exactly where I want her. So I keep testing her restraint, licking and kissing everywhere except exactly where she wants me. My tongue making sure to circle around her clit without actually touching it.

“You’re so stunning when you beg for me, Mo Stóirín.” Figuring she’s worked enough, I latch onto her and suck. A guttural moan rips from her throat as her head flies back and her back bows. Deciding she needs more, I thrust two fingers inside of her and curl up to stroke her walls and find that spot that has her seeing stars. I have her right on the edge, mere seconds from falling into straight euphoria when I feel her fingers gripping the strands of hair at the top of my head. As abruptly as I gave her what she needed, I stop. Completely moving myself far enough away that she can no longer feel my body heat.

“Kieran, what the fuck?” She pulls the tie up and off her eyes, before growling in desperation and frustration, making me chuckle darkly.

“Tsk, tsk, tsk, Brave Girl. The rule was, you move your hands, I punish you.” I can see the wheels turning in her head before she brings uncertain eyes back to me.

“I didn’t mean to.” She pulls her bottom lip between her teeth and worries it which makes me feel uneasy.

“We’ll take it easy this time, okay?”

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She nods before steeling her spine, “Yes, sir.”

Fuck, I’m going to come in my pants like an amateur. Taking my hand I press back on her shoulder until she’s laying flat on the desk. Her legs spread, chest heaving. My eyes take in the perfect human before me, taking my fill before reaching over her and pulling my tie back over her eyes.

“You count, okay? We’ll do five, if you stop counting, we start over again. Do you understand.”

“Yes, sir.” She practically preens. I can see the arousal dripping from her center, begging me to sink my cock deep inside until she doesn’t know her own name. Soon, so very soon.

I trail my fingertips over the tops of her thighs, her lower stomach, and the top of her pussy, just enough to get her to relax before I deliver the first smack. Nix gasps for breath before letting out a quiet moan, “One.”

She listens so beautifully that I can’t help the huge smile overtaking my face, “Good job, Nix.”

I deliver the next three smacks to her pussy in rapid succession, only pausing long enough for her to moan out the number. Using my fingertips I tease her for a few minutes, easing the ache I’m leaving behind and playing with her clit to build her back up in the process. It takes almost no time before she’s back to teetering on the edge. Her hands are tightly grabbing onto the edge of the desk when I give her the final smack. Her back bows and a half scream, half moan rips from her lips as she

comes from the pleasure and pain. “Kieran! Five! Five, Kie, five!”

I don’t give her the time to finish her first orgasm before I’m pulling out my aching cock and sliding it into the hilt, setting a punishing pace, and using my fingers to make her orgasm roll into another, then another after that. My thrusts become erratic as I chase my own high, coming deep inside her with her name on my lips, her real name.

I move us off the desk and into my leather office chair. Still buried inside of her as her head rests in the crook of my neck, I hold her tight to me. I’m about to pull out, certain she’s fallen asleep, when her soft voice travels from my ears to my chest cracking my heart wide open.

“I like the way my name sounds coming from you.”

* * *

I need a break from the warehouse. Every day is like a revolving door of the scum of the Earth. So, for a change of scenery I’m walking into the office of our good buddy, James. His temporary assistant said she needed to check first but I assured her I was always welcome. Pushing the door open a little more forcefully than I need to, the metal handle bounces off of the glass wall.

“Hey, dick head. Heard you’re giving my girl a hard time.”

The look of shock morphs into annoyance but not before I catch the fear he’s trying to hide.

“Kieran, I have security. You aren’t supposed to be here.”

“Well, you see... I wouldn’t have to be if you didn’t try to fuck my future wife over.”

His body turns rigid, and his eyes snap back to mine, “Excuse me? As of yesterday she didn’t have a ring on her finger, so I’m pretty sure she isn’t your ‘future wife’. She has a name asshole, use it.”

Interesting... He likes her. I mean it’s hard not to, she’s amazing; mind, body, and soul. There’s something about his posture though. It doesn’t look like he’s romantically jealous, that’s interesting. Has he just grown attached to her as his assistant? Maybe. Maybe just a friend looking out for another friend? I’m not certain yet, but I do know I will figure it out.

“Just because my ring isn’t on her finger yet doesn’t mean it won’t be there eventually. She’s mine, James. Now and forever, that woman is mine.” Making sure to hold his gaze a little longer, and curling my lip in a show of disgust for him. “Now back to the topic at hand.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Kieran. I’m not fucking anyone over, I just want her to be sure this is what she wants. I’m not taking choices from her, she’s a big girl and we can talk about it as two adults on Monday. Until then she’s on paid leave for the week. Last I checked, it wasn’t called anything besides looking out for her while she clears her head.”

He has me there, and it pisses me off. “Might be called, ‘having a thing for another man’s girl.’ Good thing I’m secure in my relationship, huh Hill?”

“It’s definitely called ‘you’re an idiot’. Now if you’re done, I have work to do that doesn’t include sitting here talking to you. I’ll see Britt on Monday and if I have it my way, I’ll see you in hell, Byrne.” He says it like it tastes terrible in his mouth, but he’s forgetting that’ll be her last name eventually too. I don’t know what his deal with Nix is but maybe Mac will.

I’ve just pulled out of the parking garage when my helmet starts ringing, or more

accurately, my phone, but it rings throughout the Bluetooth inside of my helmet. Answering it without checking my phone, I make my way to the warehouse, I've got a new toy to play with and my fingers are itching to break it in.

“Hello?”

“Oh, perfect, you answered. So, where is my best friend?”

The blood in my veins turns to ice at my sister-in-law's words, “I'm sorry?”

“Yeah, I'm at her apartment right now, but she isn't here? I was going to see if she wanted to grab lunch while Rhett was playing at Liv's for a little.” My breath comes back to my lungs as I realize she's just at the wrong place and my Brave Girl is still at my apartment, safe and sound.

“She's at my penthouse. Who brought you over there? Let me talk to them.”

She huffs in annoyance and I hear the phone change hands before Killian's deep voice fills my helmet, “Sir.”

“Hey, Britt is at the penthouse today.”

“Yes, sir. What’s the password?”

“Pretzels. Ryan will buzz you right up at the elevator.”

“Yes, Sir. We’ll be right over.” He kills the call before I can respond, which is fine with me, I have work to do.

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Chapter Twenty-Six

Phoenix

It took me two hours to get Clara to leave. That sounds harsh and I swear I don’t mean it like that. However, Lee has been blowing up my phone the entire time. She’s tracking down the man who had us before we escaped. When I went to the police with all the information I had it was only enough to identify my father and David without reasonable doubt. The man with the unlocked door was never found. He was the one who let the boy on his property that saved me, but he was also the one who tortured and assaulted me just hours before. One would assume that I’d grant him a small mercy for his mistake, but they’d be wrong. He’ll pay just like the rest of them.

Answering the phone as the elevators shut with Clara inside I give her a smile and a wave while answering, “I know. I know, I’m sorry.”

“Sorry?” Lee screeches through the phone, “You’re sorry? I just watched you on Richie Rich’s cameras having gossip and caviar time with his sister-in-law while I

have real updates here.” She’s always dramatic and that’s saying something coming from me. She’s usually more subtle about it but when she wants attention she demands it.

“Okay drama. I wasn’t having ‘gossip and caviar’ I was having greasy burgers with my best friend who happens to be married to my boyfriend’s brother. She just left though, so I’m all yours. What do you have?”

“Everything. Have you even met me? His name’s Jerry Harris, forty eight, two kids, both boys. Wife of twenty-eight years, Jessica. From what I can tell his kids and wife know nothing. Both sons are completely off grid as of six years ago. I think it’s safe to assume they changed names and now lay low.”

“Where’s Harris now?”

“In his luxurious home just outside of the city limits in Corey Heights. He’s off work today but when he isn’t he works at some accounting firm in the city.”

“Okay. Any news about the others?” I’ve made my way into the office and have started pacing.

“Yeah. I’ve got a list. I’m slowly starting to mess with them on a technological level, but Nix, make sure you make it hurt when you get them. Also while I have you. This guy I’m working with, Quill? He’s good.”

Remembering that’s Mac’s name he uses when working I agree with her, “He’s really good. I wouldn’t hook you up with a dud.”

I can practically hear her eyes rolling as she responds in a monotone voice, “Didn’t hook us up. I’ve known who he is for years. We just are on opposite sides of assignments sometimes.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It’s better if you don’t know. I’m emailing you now. Love ya, Nix.”

“Love you, Lee.”

The line goes dead and I’m left pacing while visions of revenge consume my thoughts. They deserve it, they deserve to hurt like Lee and I did, like countless other girls did at their hands. Kids, teenagers, women. If you were a female you weren’t safe with them. I’m not completely ignorant to the fact that this ring was just one of many.

Kieran’s completely open with me about his job so I know he’s hunting down the leader of a separate ring now. As long as scum walks this earth there will be a new ring looking to take the spot of the one that was taken down. I’m realistic to the fact that we can’t take them all down. At the same time, Kie can make sure they aren’t in his territory while I make sure that every woman or child affected by Robert and his men can sleep a little easier at night.

Moving to the desktop I sit in the exact spot Kieran sat last night when he ate my pussy with such precision I couldn’t even remember what year it was by the end of it. The way he punished me and forced every last ounce of pleasure from me. It makes my lower belly tingle with flashbacks. I can’t think about anything but his gorgeous eyes locked on mine, his mischievous grin, and his skilled hands and cock from later in the night. The ding of the elevator pulls me from my thoughts. Confusion clouds my mind as none other than Flynn Byrne strolls out of the open doors and straight towards me. A look I can’t decipher on his face. Ryan’s following close behind which makes my hackles rise.

“Hey Flynn, what’s going on?” I can hear the indecision in my own voice but he’s making me nervous for some reason.

“Hey, so I need you to come with us.” His hand instinctively goes to the back of his neck.

“I’m going to need more information than that before I get out of this seat.” I glare at him. He’s being twitchy. “Actually, where’s Kieran?”

“At our house. I’m serious. We don’t have time for this shit, Brittany. Come on.”

My eyes widen as I look over at Ryan for clarification.

“Nix, I promise you that I personally talked to Kie. Our instructions were clear.”

Grabbing my phone I pull up Kieran’s number and press it. He picks up on the second ring.

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“Hey, Brave Girl. Are you on the way?” He’s trying to sound calm but I can hear the undertone of panic.

“Kie, what’s going on?”

“Nix, I promise I’ll tell you everything. Just please go with Flynn and Ryan. They’ll bring you straight to me and we’ll stay here, okay? Bring your laptop and notebooks.”

“Swear?” I just need to hear him say it. It’s become our little comfort thing since the first time we said it.

“Straight to me. Then you stay. Swear. Come to me, Nix.”

* * *

Walking into the house Kieran grew up in, I try to look at it from a little boy’s perspective. What was his favorite gameto play in the living room? Where was his favorite hide and seek spot? Where was his Ma when he came to her for a good snuggle? Where did the boys tell each other their secrets? The times I’ve been here in the past it never crossed my mind but today that’s all I can think about. Will Rhett have similar experiences? Siblings, cousins, or maybe both? Will their dads raise them as tight knit as they all are?

I’m jolted out of my thoughts as a little curly haired tornado makes a dive at my legs.

“Auntie!”

Scooping my favorite boy up I kiss all over his face, “Rhett!”

I catch my favorite green eyes watching us from a few steps back. The sweetest smile is playing on his delicious lips. He mouths a silent, ‘I love you, Nix.’ and my heart metaphorically melts into a puddle on the floor in front of me. I didn’t expect to like the way he says my real name as much as I do. It rolls off his tongue with so much love and passion. Like Phoenix is the sun, moon and stars in his world instead of a broken, abused girl who rose from the ashes.

Rhett wiggles to be put down and I instantly comply. He hasn’t taken three steps before I’m swept up in all six and a half feet of Kieran Byrne. He buries his face in my hair and takes a deep breath, inhaling my scent, before groaning on the exhale.

“Mmm, I’ve missed you today, Phoenix.” He’s half whispering. No one else could have heard him if they were around but I did, and that’s the important part.

“I missed you too, Kie.” I reply, squeezing him a little tighter than needed just to show him how much.

He steps back too soon, in my opinion, and takes my hand and my bag before leading me to the office. Once inside, I note that it’s empty. This is Rowan’s space. I know that much. Aside from us, a couch, four chairs, a desk, and pictures of his siblings, son, and wife we’re alone.

“Where’s Rowan? Actually, where’s everyone? I don’t even know where Rhett went after I put him down.”

Kieran silently shuts the door behind us before answering, “They’re all out back, they decided to give us a minute of true privacy.”

“Privacy?” I can’t help but laugh, “Kie we aren’t fucking in your brother’s office.”

Kieran doesn't laugh though, he moves to sit on the couch before pulling me into his lap and playing with the ends of my hair.

"Baby, I have to tell you something. We found a small piece of card stock on the island at your apartment this morning. Your name was on the front of it and on the back it said—" His voice cuts off which irritates me. It's irrational but I'm too scared to care.

"It said what, Kieran?"

"Come out, come out, wherever you are." My entire body locks up instantly and I'm thrown back into that place.

Phoenix

Age Nine

Huddled in a corner of the back closet, I can hear him yelling for me. "Twenty-Seven get out here now!" I'm pretty small for my age, at least I think so. Other nine year olds come through here and I'm smaller than all of them. A seven year old came in the other day, we're about the same size. She's been crying a lot. She'll realize soon that crying does nothing but get you hurt more.

She seems nice, though, she says she has a Daddy who's very important, so maybe she'll be our ticket out of here. At night she's been crying out for some boy. Matt, I think. She says he's her best friend and he and his brothers will come find her. Their Daddy is very important too. I don't think so and even if they do find her, they'll leave me. I don't have anyone looking for me. My Daddy is one of the men hurting us all. I'm going to get out of here one day, but it won't be because some boy and his brothers came to save me. I'll save myself because my Mama taught me that all I need is me.

I managed to get out of my crate long enough ago that I found this hiding spot. David is getting more and more mad as he keeps yelling for me. I used to have a name. Before I came here I had a name, but now I'm just Twenty-Seven. My name hasn't been used in so long I don't even remember it. I do know my Mama gave it to me. She made sure I knew it was a strong name for a strong girl who would do great things. Great things are coming, I can tell, I've just gotta get out of here first.

Before choosing this place I made sure there was a window in this room, I just have to wait David out. "Come on, Twenty-Seven. You know this is going to be so much worse if you stay hidden." My whole body trembles at the sound of his voice coming closer. I'm under a pile of clothes, there's no way he sees me. It's the best spot in the whole house.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are." As soon as the words are out of David's mouth he rips the clothes from on top of me and smiles with his yellow teeth and bad breath. "Twenty-Seven, what are we going to do with you?" He grabs my hair at the root and drags me back to the room with all the cages, throwing me down so everyone can see. "I'm going to show you all what happens when you try to run." Tears fall from my eyes as they lock on to Thirty-Three's. As the pain overtakes my body, right before passing out it hits me. Not Matt, Mac. Her best friend coming to save her is Mac, and her name used to be...

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Kieran

Phoenix's body is locked tight, her eyes are unfocused, and she's not responding to my voice. In a panic I called Mac to come in here. He has more experience with stuff like this. Mac comes rushing into the room and slides over to me. He kneels down in front of her and takes in her rigid posture and dissociative state.

"So I think we can rule out her being in subspace..." He smirks up at me but I'm so close to full on panicking I don't even grin.

"Mac seriously, help her."

"Okay, okay. First off, you don't move." He turns his attention to Nix and in the most gentle and soothing voice I've ever heard him use he tells her, "Hey, Phoenix? It's Mac, you're having a panic attack or a flashback. You're in Rowan's office with Me and Kieran. You're safe, it's just a memory. Slow, calm, deep breaths. You're in Kieran's lap. Can you feel him?"

After a few painfully long seconds she nods her head. Her eyes are still focused on the blank wall in front of her.

"Good. That's good, honey. Can you let out a deep breath and relax back into him? His arms are around you. You won't fall." Slowly she begins to relax back into me. Blinking her eyes a few times, she looks at me before saying the only thing she could have said to render both Mac and I speechless.

“Riley.”

Mac and I lock eyes instantly. It feels like all the air has just been sucked out of the room.

“What did you just say?” Mac chokes out while barely hanging onto his composure.

“Does the name Riley mean anything to you both? But specifically to you, Mac.”

Mac’s face drains of all color. He actually has me worried he’s going to pass out.

“Where did you go, Mo Stóirín? What was that?” My hands comb through her beautiful locks as I patiently wait for her answer.

“When I was nine I tried to escape. There was a new girl. She was my size but only seven. She would tell me her best friend and his brothers were coming to save her. She said her Dad and their Dad were extremely important. His name was Mac. Her name when I knew her was Thirty-Three. She was stubborn though and told everyone she wasn’t Thirty-Three she was Riley.” Mac’s face crumples as she speaks, his entire demeanor defeated. He picks a paperweight up from the coffee table and throws it across the room as hard as he can causing a frame on the wall to shatter.

“FUCK!” He storms out of the room. I want to go after him, he’s my best friend and he needs me. But she needs me more and she’s my priority now.

“Riley was a girl who Mac was in love with when we were little. Her Da and mine had been friends since high school. Her dad is the Don of the five families, she’s Elle’s sister. She was walking to our house one day after school when she never showed up. She disappeared, and we were never able to find her. Mac beats himself up about it every day. I used to be right there with him when we were younger, but I can now recognize that we were kids. We couldn’t have done anything to prevent this

from happening. We've always been in Jersey though Nix. How the hell did they take her here but she ended up in Ohio?" The realization that the ring she took down was so much bigger than we thought hits me.

"I don't know, Kie. But my owners. They were top dogs. They had people working under them. Their reach is probably way farther than we realize." My stomach churns in the worst way when she says owners. I'm going to make sure we disassemble every last one of these fuckers, limb from limb.

"Those words, the message, what do they mean?"

"David, my fathers best friend, used to say them when I would try to run and he'd catch me. Right before he'd grab me he'd always say it. It's a message, they're here, and they're coming for me."

* **

I've got Nix settled down. She called Carrie, let me hold her until she was feeling more herself, and now we're looking for Mac before we go outside to hang out with the others. Tonight, after I make sure she's asleep, I'll meet with my brothers and fill them in. Knocking on his nerd room door I wait a few seconds before pushing it open. He's typing away on his keyboard. Several monitors flashing with codes and different things at lightning speed. I don't know what any of it means but if I had to take a wild guess, they're all searching for Riley.

Nix stands in the doorway silently while I make my way behind him and clamp my hand firmly on his shoulder.

"Mac, come on brother, let's go outside. We can pick this back up later."

His eyes dart up to mine, "I can't stop, she's waiting for me, Kieran. She's waiting

for me to save her.”

“Mac, we were kids back then and now we have no leads. She was still there when Nix was there but she was sold not long after. When she was traded back a few months later, Riley was gone.”

His eyes turn watery as he takes a shuttered breath, “She was waiting on me. She needed me to save her and I couldn’t.”

Grabbing him by the back of the neck I lead him to a standing position before pulling him into the tightest hug I can manage.

“We were kids Mac, seven and nine. Even Roe and Dec were only twelve and fifteen. I’m so sorry, and I’ll do whatever I can to make sure you have closure. But we have to put this behind us for the time being. There are women and kids being hurt right now and we need to save them. After that Mac, I swear I won’t stop until we find answers.”

His tears soak my shoulder as he nods, “Promise we’ll find her, K? She deserves to come home and be put to rest properly.” Him accepting what’s almost certainly what we’ll find breaks me.

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“Yeah, M. We’ll bring her home. Until then, I think it’s time you take a trip with me to the warehouse in the morning.” He nods as he pulls back from me and wipes his eyes quickly. He takes a few deep breaths to get himself together.

“Okay. Well we better get out there. You know it’s spring break so all the assholes are here.”

I can’t help but laugh, because he’s right. The twins best friends are here, they always are when they’re on breaks from school. Rowan, Declan, and Mac hate it, but I don’t mind it. They all come from families like ours, but I don’t think any of them will follow in our footsteps. They’re the lucky ones. They’ll get out and do great things.

Taking Nix’s hand, Mac and I lead her to the back yard. It’s everyone’s favorite part of the house. Our yard is huge, fenced in, and ever since Rhett Brady walked into our lives it’s become every kid’s dream backyard. Everything from a play set, to a trampoline, to a zip line. There’s even a tree house in the back of the yard for him. We have an Olympic sized pool, and a pool house with four bedrooms. Our patio is decked out in furniture, grills, a sound system, and string lights. We even have a projector for nice days when we want to watch movies outside.

As we walk outside now it’s overrun with tall lanky teenagers getting their energy out by playing games with Little Bear.

“Who are all those kids?” Nix half whispers to Mac and I, making us both chuckle.

“The biggest pains in the ass who ever existed.” Macmumbles back to her.

“He’s just grumpy. Those are the twins best friends, they’ve been up each other’s asses since the first day of preschool.” I point over to the guy standing beside Flynn, he’s about the same height as him, but his skin is a perfect olive tone, his hair light brown, and his eyes whiskey colored.

“That’s X, or Xavier. His dad works under.. her Dad. They’re with the Italians.” I point to Elle, Sully’s future wife, even if they don’t know it yet. She’s a spitfire, about five-nine, dark brown hair, and deep green eyes. “That’s Elle, she’s the girl Sully’s been in love with since he was old enough to talk. Her dad is the head of the five families. So basically, Rowan for that organization. She’s also the only girl in their friend group which means she keeps them all in line.”

Her voice comes out in a hushed tone. It’s only meant for me, “That’s Riley’s sister?”

I nod in affirmation, then give her a few seconds to process looking at the girl who’s always had the same features as Riley.

Eventually, Nix points to the guy next to Sully, he’s also the same height as the twins, his dark blonde hair and deep blue eyes give him a ‘boy next door’ look, even though I know better than that. He’s the most mischievous of them all, “That’s Knox. His dad does work here for the Juggemaffian. He was born here, and I don’t think he’s ever stepped foot in Sweden. His dad tries to keep his mom, him, and his siblings as far away from the life as he can. The guy next to him is Dom, his dad is a one percenter. He heads up one of the biggest gangs in America.” Motioning over to the tallest of the boys. His hair cut short, his eyes as deep brown as his skin. His smile is full of mischief and his laugh fills the backyard.

I point to the last guy to round out their group, also the same height as the other boys, his skin is darker than X’s, but lighter than Dom’s, his hair almost black, and his eyes dark brown. “And that’s Zach, his dad is the drug lord for the cartel. He’s the quietest of them all. He follows along with everything they do, but he never comes up with

the ideas. They're all sports kids, but not the same ones, and they all go to each other's games. If more than one has a game or competition, they split up so everyone has someone there."

"What sports do they play?"

"Well, Flynn plays hockey. Sullivan runs track. Xavier plays soccer. Elle is a gymnast. Knox plays baseball. Dom plays lacrosse, and Zach plays football. I call them the lucky ones. They're not directly in the life. They have a chance to escape, go pro, settle down, have families, and all live on the same street."

A soft smile pulls at Nix's lips, "That sounds so nice. I'd love to live next door to my best friends and have our own little street." The wheels in my head start turning. I can give her that.

"So, who's your favorite?"

"Nix, you can't just ask a guy a question like that." I shoot back with mock offense before grinning and answering.

"Dom."

She laughs and serotonin fills my brain.

"Why him?"

I shrug nonchalantly, "He's the funniest, but also the most respectful. He'll get them in trouble but not real trouble. Like when they were eight and egged Elle's house because her dad wouldn't let her come play. He was behind that but he was also just sticking it to 'the man'. I can appreciate that."

She smiles at me while shaking her head, “Of course you can.”

We’re snapped out of our little conversation as Clara comes over and drags Nix away from me before I can respond to her.

“Girl time, Kie. Go away. Hang out with your brothers.” They don’t go far, just to the other side of the patio but it’s enough to make my chest ache a little. Honestly, three steps out of my reach is enough to make my chest ache. I watch her while also making my way over to Roe, Dec, and Mac.

“She won’t disappear out of thin air, Kieran. You can take your eyes off of her.” Declan’s smile slides off his face as soon as the rest of our murderous glances lock on him. He throws his hands up in surrender, “Okay, fine. Poor joke, I got it.”

“I can’t wait for some girl to come around and knock you straight on your ass.” Rowan grumbles, his eyes only for Clara. Normally they’d be bouncing between Clara and Rhett, but Rhett’s favorite Uncle is standing right here so obviously he has taken his spot right next to me.

“Daddy, what about Uncle Mac? He doesn’t have him a girlfriend?” Rhett so helpfully throws my little brother under the bus.

Deciding to take this one I squat down so I’m on his level, “You’re right he doesn’t, and one day he’ll find a girl to love like your Da loves your Ma or like I love your Auntie. But Uncle Mac had the breath knocked out of him by a girl when he was your age. He knows how Da and I feel, because he’s felt it too.” Rhett’s face is a mask of seriousness as he thinks on that then looks at Mac.

“Uncle Mac, I think I’ve had the breath knocked out of me too. Callie in my class is so pretty and she smells nice.” He grabs Mac’s hand, “Let’s go talk about it.”

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Mac barely conceals his laughter as he follows behind our nephew who is wise beyond his years.

Standing back to my full height we watch as Little Bear leads him over to the trampoline to talk about girls. The three of us are laughing at the moment but I know Mac's loving this. Talking about Riley in this light may be exactly what he needs. My eyes shift back over to Nix, who's blatantly checking me out. Letting a full smile overtake my face I watch her back and just wait. Eventually her eyes make their way to my face. She realizes she's been caught and the prettiest blush creeps up her neck and cheeks. Fuck, I love when her skin turns that shade of red. I mouth 'I love you.' to her and watch as her face flushes before mouthing it back.

"Earth to Kie. Can we stop eye fucking our girl for one second."

I reluctantly pull my eyes from the only woman I see in a room of thousands to focus on my second oldest brother, "We weren't doing anything and she isn't doing anything. What do you want?"

"I asked what happened earlier? With the note. What's the deal?"

I note that Rowan is also paying extra attention to me now, "I'm not talking about any of that right now. Meeting in the office after Rhett's in bed. Until then, watch Mac. I hate to say this but be easy with him. He's going through it right now."

"Riley? I figured all this would hit him pretty close." Declan finally drops the 'I don't care' facade and a look of worry takes its place. He's always had a soft spot for Mac.

“What do you think he needs from us?” Rowan chimes in, the concern bleeding through his tone. Mac was really Rowan’s first “kid” when our parents died. Mac was barely eighteen. He hadn’t even hit his graduation day yet. Roe was left with Mac and the twins overnight. Not that Dec and I didn’t and don’t need him. We lean on him as if he was Da, but he didn’t have to get us through the second half of our senior year, or become our legal guardian. His relationship with the younger three is different than it is with Declan and I. We went through our parents’ deaths together. He parented Mac, Flynn, and Sully through it.

“I think he just needs to be heard. Riley hit us all, I’m not saying she didn’t, but you and Dec were older than us. Even if it wasn’t this way, it felt like it wasn’t as big of a hit to you two. That girl flipped his little five year old heart inside out and then some sick bastard ripped her out of his life.”

“Is that what you think? That Riley didn’t affect us the same way she affected you guys? Kie, Rowan and I have been looking for her for sixteen years. Every single day. We know Mac is still looking too, and we know you ask every person who makes his way into the warehouse about her but so do we. Our connections are looking for her constantly. She was more than the girl Mac was best friends with for us. She was our first ‘sister’. That means something. We don’t just give up on family. Rossi hasn’t given up on her either. I’m sorry that that’s how he feels, but it pisses me off that he thinks he’s the only one who gives a fuck.” Declan moves his hand to the back of his neck and subtly pulls on the short strands of his hair.

“It’ll all come out tonight. We have things to discuss. Just be prepared because he’s going to blow up. Don’t fight back with him, let him feel it.” Rowan and Declan nod in agreement and I go back to watching my Brave Girl. She’s so relaxed right now, she almost looks carefree. I’ll do whatever I have to to make sure she stays that way.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

MacQuillian

Standing in the doorway of my nephews room while he's fast asleep, I can't help the small smile that tugs at the corner of my lips. He's so innocent and perfect. Listening to him tell me about the little girl with the curly brown hair in his Kindergarten class was the highlight of my week. Kieran boldly states that he's Rhett's favorite Uncle, but I'm the one he comes to when everyone else's crazy gets too much. Which is ironic because I'm also who Kie comes to when the noise gets too loud. Kieran is who everyone goes to for protection and when they want comic relief. But I'm who they come to when they need to sit in the silence. When they need someone who's steady and unchanging.

I don't mind it. Kieran struggles with people not seeing the deeper levels of him, and I can see that, a lot of pressure is put on him constantly but that doesn't mean I feel the same way. I like being the quiet one who stays to himself most of the time. I'm dependable, and they know exactly what they're getting when they get me. I don't like getting my hands dirty nor do I enjoy yelling to be heard over my brothers. I like silently striking. One could argue that that alone makes me the most dangerous. It's really easy for me to lull people into a false sense of security. My Da used to say it was my superpower.

"Everyone has superpowers, MacQuillian. Rowan's are his love for his family and the way he commands respect without being arrogant. Declan's are his unwavering loyalty, as well as his desire to help everyone. Kieran's are his protective streak and his brute strength. But you? Oh you, my boy, are steady as a surgeon's hands. You are not easily shaken and you listen when others are too busy responding. Your intelligence and calm spirit may just be the most powerful of all."

My Da got me without me ever having to explain my thought process or why I was

the way I was, he just knew. He had five fiery sons, then there was me. I was always just like Ma. I think her steady demeanor is what drew my Da to her in the first place. I think that's why he understood me as easily as he did. I wish I could talk to him now. To ask him if I'm being a bleeding heart by still searching for Riley or if it's just my desire to be her steady stream when she makes it out of this nightmare.

I'm not stupid by any means, I know logically she probably isn't alive anymore, but something deep within my soul tells me she is. I would have felt it if she wasn't here. I know it sounds dumb and we were only seven when she was taken, but the connection she and I had is one that they write books about. When boy meets girl, they become best friends, fall in love and live happily ever after with two point five kids, apicket fence, and a dog. We could have had that, we would have had that, if Brittany's- sorry Phoenix's- dad and his fucked up army of scum hadn't have taken her.

My phone buzzes in the pocket of my jeans, reminding me I have a meeting to get to with my brothers. I shut Little Bear's bedroom door and make my way down the stairs to the office. All eyes look my way, making me realize I am the last one to walk in. Muttering a sorry I take my seat beside Flynn and get comfortable. I don't talk in these meetings. I analyze, I listen, and I make a plan, or list for myself to do as soon as I walk out of here. I'm just the behind the scenes dude. Any physical violence is reserved for the heavy bag or one of my brothers as we spar in the gym downstairs. Occasionally for our enemies, but that's such a rarity it isn't even worth noting. Speaking of the gym, I'm definitely going down there after this to work out my fucked up head.

"Thanks for joining us, Mac. We know you're so busy with other shit." I move to push Sullivan off the edge of the couch, but Rowan beats me to it, silencing the room with a single look.

"Shut up Sully, if I'm not mistaken you barely squeaked in on time after taking an

exceptionally long time taking Elena home.” His face flushes red as he crosses his arms, effectively pouting.

“Anyways, Kieran. What’s going on with Britt? The truth this time, the whole truth. I know she skimmed the surface with most of us, but I want the truth.” Kieran looks to me and I just nod, it’s going to come out eventually and I’d rather him say it before I have to.

I know all about Phoenix, and I do mean all, not just what she told us yesterday. I know everything. I know everything about everyone who interacts with my family. Just like I know what happened to Elle almost a year ago that caused Sully, Flynn, and the other guys to practically put her in a bubble. I know it all, but that doesn’t make any of it my story to tell. Rowan needed to hear about Clara’s abusive ex from her. Kieran needed to hear about Brittany/Phoenix’s nightmare childhood from her. And one day, Sullivan will hear all about what actually happened to Elle, you guessed it, from her.

Now what happened to her dad’s soldier who went missing, and was never found? Well that’s a secret I’ll take to the grave. I don’t like getting my hands dirty that doesn’t mean I won’t. What I won’t do is take a woman’s power from her, ever. Especially when some entitled little boy, posing as a man, strips it from her.

“So as you all know by now, Phoenix was trafficked by her sperm donor from the age of seven until the age of fourteen when she escaped. She was fostered by one of the officers who found her, and Nix eventually testified against Robert and his goon. They were released not long ago and have since claimed to have found her. Her apartment was broken into last night and a note was left. It was from one of the men who had her held captive.” He takes a shuddering breath before continuing. It’s hard to hear, but I can’t imagine how hard it is for him to replay when he’s talking about the woman he’s in love with. He’s a strong motherfucker.

“She went into this flashback thing when she was telling me about it. Mac ended up in the room with us and we were able to get her calmed down. During it she remembered another girl. She said they called her Thirty-Three. But the girl was insistent that her Da and her best friend, as well as her best friend’s family were coming to save her. Her best friend’s name was Mac.... her name was Riley.”

I have to physically lean forward to breathe. I knew what he was going to say, obviously. I was there, but still it knocks the wind out of me and I can feel my eyes prickle with tears. I failed her, I wasn’t her constant, I couldn’t save her. Now she’s God knows where, and just like that day fourteen years ago, I’m just as helpless. I’m going to find her if it’s the last thing I do. She deserves a man who will stop at nothing to bring her home. No matter if that’s to place her in my arms for the rest of my days or to lay her to rest so that hopefully some part of her soul knows she was so deeply loved.

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Phoenix

My sweet, sweet boy climbed in bed with me hours ago. His Uncle Kie isn't back from whatever he's doing with his brothers yet. But that just means I don't have to share these snuggles with the big oaf yet. I've tried to close my eyes, tried letting Rhett's soft snores lull me into the sleep that my body is begging for, but it just doesn't come. I know I'm safe here, Kieran wouldn't have left me alone if I wasn't, but I still don't feel it.

Knowing my privacy was violated once again makes my stomach churn and my eyes water. I don't want to worry my mom but I haven't gotten this far by not sending up our signals. Pulling my phone out I shoot her a text. We talk in code a lot. It's what makes us both feel safest.

Nix: How was the park today?(Are you able to talk?)

Mom: Empty, it made for a nice walk. How was the meeting? Did you close the deal?(I'm alone, are you okay? Are you safe?)

Nix: It was tough. I think I did but only time will tell.(I don't know. I think I am, but I'm scared.)

My mom and I have sent varying versions of these texts since I got my first phone at fourteen. When you piss off as many powerful men as I did you can never be too careful. My phone rings in my hand just seconds later.

"Mom..." My voice cracks as the word leaves my lips.

“Oh, baby. What’s wrong?”

I know the lines are secured on my end because Kieran had Mac do it earlier, and I know hers are because she’s never played about my safety and Lee had hers secured forever ago. She checks it twice a week to make sure no one has gotten in so I know I’m safe to tell her the truth.

“They found me. David broke into my apartment and left me a note. I don’t know what to do.”

“Phoenix, listen to me. where are you right now? I’m coming to you.”

“I’m at Kieran’s, I’m in bed with Rhett. I’m safe right now but I don’t feel safe, mom. I feel like he’s behind the closet door or in the shower. He’s going to grab me. He said ‘come out, come out, wherever you are.’ I’m right in his grasp.”

“Phoenix, breathe with me. In.....Out...” She takes deep breaths with me until my heart rate begins to calm down. “Okay, let’s think about this with a clear mind. Do you really feel or believe that David or one of the others are in that house?”

I know before she finishes the question that I don’t. Kieran would never let that happen. “No, I don’t. I guess I just feel violated. He was in my space. I could have easily been there.”

“I know you’re going to hate this suggestion, but have you thought about getting a security detail? Just until we track them down and put them back behind bars for violating parole.”

“You’re going to be shocked but I actually already have a detail, plus Kieran.” Her laugh rings through the line making my heart feel a little lighter.

“I should have known. Nix, I know all about Kieran Byrne, just because I’m an Ohio cop doesn’t mean we haven’t heard about the Byrne men.”

“If you know about him, why aren’t you freaking out about it?”

“Because, my darling, out of all the things we’ve heard about the Byrne men, and we’ve heard a lot, they aren’t really on the up and up. We’ve never heard anything about them in the women and children world with the exception of how they’re on the hunt for one specific person and they’ve been looking for her for fourteen years. These aren’t men who hurt women and children, and I think you know that by the little boy you’re holding in your arms right now.”

“I do. I’m sure they have their faults, scratch that, I know they have their faults. Hurting women and children isn’t one of them.”

“No baby, it isn’t.” The line goes quiet for a long minute until I work up the nerve to ask what I want to.

“Will you stay on the phone with me until Kieran comes up? He’s talking to his brothers about all of this.”

“Sleep, sweet girl. You’re safe.”

I talk to my mom for a little while longer until I think I fall asleep. I must have because the next thing I know a warm strong body slides in bed behind me. As his arm wraps around me so does the feeling of safety that I’ve been missing. Before I let sleep take me I whisper the same word that one of us says every night.

“Stay?”

Kieran’s face is buried in my hair when I hear his sleepy, gravely voice reply in the

same way we always do.

“Swear.”

* * *

The next few days have flown by in a tangle of research, orgasms, making plans, spending time with his family, and now this. I’m standing in Kieran’s closet; pulling on a black three quarter zip, my hair is pulled up in a high and sleek bun, matching black leggings covering my legs, and my black combat boots finishing off the look. I look like a bad ass, ready to take down the scum of the Earth. Which is truly ironic considering that I’m about to do exactly that.

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Walking out of the closet I look around the room, there's no Kie to be found. It's extremely early. Where could he have gone at three-thirty in the morning? Deciding to go look for him, my feet carry me to the room I assume he's found himself in. My ears perk as his voice filters through the open doorway and into the hallway. Sneaking up to the door frame, I peer in on the sweetest sight I've probably ever seen before.

Kieran in his all black attire sits in the glider that's positioned in the corner of Rhett's room. He has Rhett in his arms with his little head buried into the crook of Kie's neck, gently rocking him. But what has tears springing to my eyes is that Kie's softly singing to him. Rhett's body goes slack before my eyes as Kie sings about loving someone so big that he'll spend the rest of his life explaining what can't be put into words. Kie's eyes lift to mine and a grin takes over his face as he continues his song.

Once he's finished, he gently lays Rhett back down and silently makes his way out of the room pulling the door shut with a quiet click. "Hey, Brave Girl. Enjoy the concert?" He's teasing me, it's apparent by the huge smile taking over his face.

"His processors were out, why were you singing to him?" I ask with no judgment in my voice, just curiosity.

"He can feel the vibrations in my chest and throat. He likes it, so a lot of times he comes to find me in the middle of the night if he wakes up and I sing him back to sleep. Always that song." His expression changes into one of adoration as he speaks of his and Bear's special time together.

"I never took you as a country music guy." I playfully tease.

“I’m not. Rhett heard it somewhere and would sing it constantly. It got stuck in my head and somehow became our thing.” He presses a kiss to my head before asking, “You ready?”

I shrug, “As ready as I’ll ever be, if nothing else I feel pretty badass.”

His eyes slowly rake over my body before a filthy grin takes over his face, “On second thought, we don’t need to do this. Let’s stay here. I mean it’s early, and I’d just love to go back to bed.” His greedy hands grab my hips and pull me flush to his hard body. Laughing, I push his hands away.

“If we go now we’ll make it back in just enough time for me to suck your dick before we have to meet with Lee.”

Kieran gives me a no nonsense nod, his eyes fill with determination, “Deal.” He smacks my ass and calls over his shoulder, “Get that fine ass moving, baby. We’re on a time crunch.”

We’re not, he’s just ridiculous. I watch him walk down the hall looking so effortlessly sexy in his black sweatpants and hoodie which are accompanied by all black shoes. Deciding I’m as ready as I’ll ever be to come face to face with one of my nightmares I follow behind him to an all black Escalade. He helps me inside and buckles my seat belt before shutting the door and rounding the front to get in the driver’s seat. Before he pulls off he takes my hand in his. A subtle reminder that he’s staying and I’m not in danger with him.

The ride over is fairly quiet as I stay lost in my own head. Pulling up to the abandoned warehouse in a run down area of town I scan the tree lines surrounding it. I can’t see anything, but the sun hasn’t risen yet either. Kieran gets out, scans his surroundings, then comes over to my door and opens it, helping me out before wrapping his hand around my waist anchoring me to his side.

“You okay, Brave Girl? You don’t have to do this.”

“I do. And I can with you here with me.” He presses his lips to my temple in a show of silent support as we make our way inside.

The warehouse is huge, bare, and dingy with a cement floor. It’s chilly and the lighting is dim to say the least. But the five large men who stand in a circle in the middle of the room stand out like a lighthouse in a storm. I know without seeing their faces that it’s Kieran’s brothers. I didn’t know that they were coming nor did I expect them to be here.

“What’s going on?” I ask with a hint of skepticism as we approach them. Rowan, ever the leader, is the one who speaks up first.

“You think we’d let you go through this alone, Nix?”

“Well, kind of, I didn’t know I was ‘inner circle’ yet.”

He chuckles and kisses the top of my head, “You’ve been inner circle since the day you told Clara to give me a chance. You’re sister status because my brother loves you.”

Kieran tips his head to the side drawing my eyes in the direction of the back corner of the warehouse where one of the men who owned me is hanging from a butcher’s hook. His feet barely touch the storm drain under him. He looks like he’s already been pretty beaten. Stripped down to only a pair of boxers I notice bruises littering his face and body. He’s still alive but he’s unconscious. Mac moves to the spot beside me as I come to a stop just ten or so feet away from Jerry. He was the cruelest of the men who owned me, don’t get me wrong, none of them were nice, but he is a person who would make Lucifer look like a saint.

“You ask him whatever you need to. Whatever you want to for closure. If you want to end him, you can. If you don’t, I’ll gladly do it for you.” Mac gives me a reassuring squeeze before backing up so that the only Byrne brother that surrounds me is Kie.

His front pressed against my back, he dips his head so that he’s able to speak into my ear, “This show is yours there’s no expectations or judgments here. You do whatever you need to for closure.”

Walking over to the wooden work bench I take note of all the tools laid out in front of me. Tools that in any other situation look like they’d belong in a garage. Torches, wrenches, pliers, and cable cutters. The only thing standing out from the fray is a black case, laying open. Knives are neatly laid across the soft cloth lining the inside. These knives look like they belong in a Michelin star kitchen. A smaller blade catches my eye, as the light hits it just right, causing a glint that draws me in like a moth to a flame. I grab it without hesitation and make my way back in front of Jerry. I hear the boys stifle a chuckle behind me, causing me to jerk my head over to them.

“Care to explain what’s funny about this situation, Declan?” I ask, staring down the second oldest Byrne.

“Yeah, that’s just every Byrne’s favorite knife. It’s funny you picked it up because it’s what we all grab first. Guess you really are one of us, huh?”

The smirk that tipped the corner of my lips disappears as quickly as it showed up when I notice dark evil eyes staring at me from my peripheral vision. Jerry stares me down like I’m familiar to him but he can’t place me. After a few minutes recognition covers his features and he laughs loud, making me flinch.

“Oh, this is good.” I steel my spine. I’m not his property anymore, he can’t hurt me, but his next words still throw me back to the fourteen year old that I was when he knew me. In the commanding voice he always used, the one I was forced to obey he

grinds out, “Twenty-Seven, drop the knife, now.”

The knife clatters to the floor less than a second later, my eyes meet the floor, and my head bows low. Before I can process what I’ve done Kieran is back, his hands secured on my hips and his voice in my ear, “You’re not there anymore. He can’t hurt you. He can’t get out of those restraints, and even if he could you have an army of Byrne men behind you. You, my Brave Girl, are the most powerful person in this warehouse. Everyone here follows your commands or deals with the fallout.”

The handle of the knife presses into my palm and I look up to see Rowan giving me a reassuring smile, “You’ve got this, little sister.” Looking back, I see the other four men giving me smiles and nods of encouragement but it’s Mac who speaks up.

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“You say the word and I’ll take over, but you won’t need to, you’ve got this.”

With a renewed sense of confidence, my hand grips around the handle of the knife, as Roe steps back. Kieran drops his hands and before I can stop myself my heart rate spikes with panic, and I rush out the one word I know will keep him right here with me, “Stay.” His hands are back on my hips and his chest pressed to my back in an instant, “Swear, Mo Stóirín.”

Turning my attention back to Jerry who’s watching this all unfold like he’s watching the world’s most entertaining telenovela, I try this again. “Hello, Jerry.”

“Twenty-Seven, you dare to disobey me?” He clicks his tongue in a disapproving way. “You always were the one who had to be broken before you’d listen.”

My hands shake slightly but Kieran’s strong grip on my hips settles me, I’m protected and he’s staying. “I see you’ve missed the memo, Jerry. I’m not surprised, you were the most stupid out of all the men. I’m no longer Twenty-Seven. I’m not the broken child you hurt for years on end with your sick friends. See, I’m the one who brought you all to your knees. Robert and David spent nine years in prison because of me, and make no mistake, I will find them and send them straight to the seventh circle of hell by the end of this. Until I can get my hands on them I’ll just have to practice my skills on you.” I shrug and move towards him, the guys mimic my movements. Kieran stays plastered to my back as the others take steps to stay the same distance behind me as I move. Jerry starts thrashing around on his butcher’s hook screaming and hurling every insult my way.

I turn to the twins who are practically vibrating with rage and waiting for the

command from me. “Can you guys hold him still?”

Both boys nod and move to Jerry’s sides, holding him as still as possible. “What now, Boss lady?”

“Just hold him still while I work.” A calmness takes over me, from the top of my head to the tips of my toes. Letting out a deep breath I take the knife and start on my work. Carving across his chest deep enough for the tip of the knife to scrape against his breast bone as I work my concentration is solely on my task. Jerry passes out fairly quickly, but I don’t care, my hand keeps working the knife. Once I’m done I stand back and admire my handiwork, “Wake him up, please.”

Flynn smacks the side of his face while Sully sing-songs, “Wakey, wakey, Jerry-boy. We have a surprise for you.” Jerry’s eyes open and a snarl rips from his chest. Too bad for him, I don’t care.

“I just thought you’d like to see the present I made for you. And I wanted to tell you, when the others meet you in hell, just know I sent every last one of you there, motherfucker.”

His eyes widen and I notice the tremble taking over his body. As he looks at himself in the mirror that Mac just handed me.

“One last thing, my name isn’t Twenty-Seven you sick bastard, it’s Phoenix.”

My hand swipes out and slices his neck from ear to ear in the next second. Blood sprays everywhere, but I just stand there watching him bleed out until all his life is drained from his eyes. A smile tugs at my lips. I’m sure I look like a serial killer, but I guess that makes sense seeing as by the end of this I will be one. Pulling my foot up, with all my might I kick him straight in the chest where three letters are carved. ‘Nix.’

Chapter Thirty

Kieran

I'm pretty sure I need to see a shrink, because the sight of my girl getting her revenge, and carving her name into another mans chest has my dick so fucking hard that I have to tuck it into my waist band as discreetly as possible. Fuck, that was sexy. Nix drops the knife and turns to me. Her eyes holding barely contained rage and devastation.

“Kieran.”

Oh shit, I know that tone. Taking her hand in mine I quickly lead her through the warehouse to the little office and into the attached bathroom. I know my brothers will handle Jerry and right now I need to handle my girl.

Flipping on the taps to hot, I grab a trash bag from under the sink. Sliding my hands under her shirt and sweatshirt I gently slip it off her body and lay it in the trash bag. Then I pull down her leggings before guiding her to sit on the closed toilet seat. She's silent and lost in her head as I remove her shoes, socks, and leggings. Leaving her in just her bra and panties. I make quick work of removing all of my clothes before guiding her to a standing position and take off the remainder of the barrier between us.

She shivers and looks at me, “I killed him, Kie.” Her eyes shine with barely contained tears.

“It's okay, baby. Come on.”

Taking her hand I lead her into the shower. The hot water drenches us instantly, washing Jerry's blood off and down the drain. After I make sure she's clear of any blood I wrap her up in my arms. As soon as she's pulled tight against me the floodgates open. What can only be described as an Earth shattering, pain filled scream leaves her body and her knees give out. I drop us to the floor of the shower and hold her until her sobs subside and her breathing begins to even out.

"I'm just so thankful for you guys. I've never had men on my side before, especially not ones like you and your brothers. I don't feel bad for what I did, I feel no remorse, I saved countless little kids from enduring what I had to do today."

"Why are you crying then, Mo Stóirín?" I thought the shock of what she had done had started to wear off but it seems like this is something else.

"Little me deserved so much better. I needed someone to rescue me, to tell me none of this was my fault and that it'll all be okay. No one ever saved me. I had to save myself. I just slayed my own dragon and conquered part of my real life nightmare. I couldn't have done that without you and your brothers encouraging me to take back my power, reminding me it was okay, and that I'm supported. All that pain, all the torture and abuse I lived through, that little girl finally got her revenge today. A part of me healed a little bit as I sliced his neck. I know that sounds fucked but it's true. You and your brothers helped me get that. Thank you, Kie."

I gather her in my arms again and kiss the top of her head, "You don't need to thank any of us."

After giving her a few more minutes to work through her feelings she stands and guides me up too. She's not standing for more than a handful of seconds before she kneels in front of me again. This is really shitty timing, I know that, she knows that, but my cock hasn't gotten the memo. It springs to life with a mind of its own as soon as she looks up at me through her dark lashes, steel gray clashes with my pale green

eyes. Taking her hair in my hand I hold her back about six inches from my tip.

“We don’t need to do this, Nix. I don’t want you to think this is something I expect from you. You’ve been through a lot today already, we can go home and have a movie day if you want.”

“Kieran, I love you. Shut up and let me suck your dick.”

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Before the last word has completely left her lips, her tongue dashes out and licks my tip before sealing her mouth around the head and sucking. She slowly works more of me in her mouth until I'm at the back of her throat and she's swallowing me down. It's not slow, elegant, or pretty; it's quick, intense, and rough. It doesn't take long before my head falls back to the tiled wall and I come with her name on my lips and a guttural moan ripped from deep in my chest. Fuck, I'm going to marry this goddess one day.

* **

It's been a few days since our morning at the warehouse. We were supposed to have a meeting with her tech girl that evening but Nix rescheduled it. We've spent the past two days lounging around the house, countless movies watched, and orgasms had. That was until now. I woke up about an hour ago and came down stairs in search of food and my nephew. I found both, but my girl still hasn't made it down here. It's Sunday, and she has a meeting with James/Jax first thing in the morning, so maybe she's soaking up sleep this morning, but something tells me that's not it. I'm so lost in thought that I don't even notice Clara has sat beside me on the patio couch, just a few feet separating us. She's settled in here well, but some things take more than almost a year to get past, sitting too close to any man that isn't Rowan is one of those things.

"Hey, Mama Bear." I make sure my tone is light and I use the nickname we all call her to keep her at ease.

"Hey, Kie. Where's Britt?" She still hasn't told Clara the full story or her real name. I don't know if she ever will. That's up to her and I'm not going to push her one way

or another.

“I think she’s in bed, I haven’t seen her this morning.”

“What’s today’s date?”

I swear I almost get whiplash at the abrupt change in conversation but I still answer her, “It’s the ninth, why?”

She nods like she just solved some equation in her head, “She’ll probably be in that bed all day.”

Panic turns my blood to ice, “Why? Is she sick? Shit, I’ve got to go check on her. Where’s that thermometer glock thing you guys use on Bear?”

“Kieran, breathe. She’s on her period. She starts either theeighth or ninth every month like clockwork. She has them really bad, so don’t freak out if she stays in bed with a heating pad all day. Just make sure she’s taking Motrin and drinking water.”

The panic doesn’t ease from the grip it has on me, “She needs medicine? She’s in pain?”

Clara takes her hand and slowly puts it on my forearm, “Hey, calm down. She gets them just like this every month so you’re going to have to get used to this. Heating pad, Motrin, water, and whatever she wants to watch on TV. Maybe a hot bath or shower later in the day if she’s up to it. If she gets too pale, come get me.”

“Pale? Why? What does that mean?”

“It means you come get me. Now go take care of our girl or I’ll take over and do it for you.”

“No, I’ve got it.” Getting up I lean down and kiss the top of her head.

After stopping by the kitchen to grab a bottle of water and a bottle of Motrin, I make my way to our room. Our room, that sounds good. Pushing open the door quietly I find her wrapped in about five blankets, laying curled up on her side. She has one of my hoodies on, and I only know that because I can see the hood popping out of the covers. “Oh, Mo Stóirín.” I say softly as I take off my shirt and climb into bed behind her. She groans in what I’m assuming is a mixture of pain and me disturbing her peace.

“Kie? I don’t feel so good.”

“I know, Brave Girl. Clara told me. I brought some medicine and a water for you. Can you take them for me?”

She tucks herself deeper into the bed, if that’s even possible, “No, it’s fine, it’ll go away soon. I just need to lay here a little longer.”

“Babe, we can lay here all day for all I care but you really need to take these.”

She peeks one eye open at me and eyes the bottle, “Is that a brand new bottle?” I check it and make sure before giving her a single nod.

“Fine, but it has to stay in here with us after it’s opened. You never know if someone will swap the pills.” I don’t take offense to her comment. She’s got trust issues outside of us, and I get that.

“Okay, deal. Here.” I hand her four pills and watch her take them. Then I kiss her forehead and go in search of my heating pad. It doesn’t take long to find, it’s always under the sink in my bathroom if I’m not using it. After getting her settled with it, I climb in bed with her one more time and let her settle into the crook of my arm. She

falls back to sleep pretty quickly but it isn't a restful sleep, she's wincing in pain and moving around the whole time.

A couple of hours later, Phoenix shoots up seemingly out of nowhere and runs to the bathroom. I hear her before I'm even able to get up and get to her. I rush to her side just in time to see her skin turn as white as the walls and her body completely give out. My arms catch her right before her head bounces off the toilet seat. My heart snaps in two as I hold the love of my life's completely limp body in my arms. Pulling out my phone with shaky hands, I call Roe and as soon as he answers yell for him and Clara to get up here. Clara busts through the bathroom door with Rowan hot on her heels at the same time Nix's eyes flutter open.

"Kie, what's wrong?" She reaches up and traces under my eyes, where I'm sure all the pain, panic, and agony is shining. I don't answer her, I can't. Turning my attention to Clara and Roe instead.

"What's wrong with her?"

Clara leans over me so her face is right above Nix's, "Hello, Darling. You did the thing."

Nix's eyes shoot wide, "Shut up."

"No really. You probably should have warned him passing out on your first day is normal for you."

“Normal??” I half shout.

That shit’s normal?

“Calm down, Mystery Man. It’s fine. I’ll stay in bed and it shouldn’t happen again.”

“Shouldn’t? So it could happen again?” I can feel my hands starting to get clammy, I don’t like this at all.

Nix’s hand comes up and gently strokes down the side of my face, “Hey, I’m okay. I’m going to get up and go back to bed now, okay?”

Before she can make a move, I stand with her cradled in my arms. I move her back to the bed and get her comfortable. Rowan’s hand grips my shoulder at the same time Clara slides into my bed and cuddles up to her best friend. They look like they do this all the time, which I guess they do. Their friendship is so pure, not thriving on arguments, talking bad about other people, or drama. They’re just two girls who thrive on spending time together, watching their shows, and being in each other’s orbit. It’s truly beautiful to watch.

Rowan nods to the door and we make our way out the room, giving the girls their time for a minute. Leaning back against the wall adjacent to my door my head falls back to the wall and my eyes close willing my heart rate to slow. After a few minutes I open them again and look into the deep green of my big brother’s eyes.

“You okay, Kie?”

“That was terrifying. I thought— it was just scary. Like when you got shot but a thousand times worse.”

He nods in understanding, “Yeah, I get that. That’s how I feel every time she gets a migraine. It’s hard, they need us to be strong, but we just want to crack under the weight of it.”

“Exactly. I thought love was supposed to be all fun and roses. That’s how Da made it look.”

Rowan lets out a loud laugh, “Yeah, he made fatherhood look easy too, but the other day Rhett got mad at me and told me I wasn’t his best friend anymore. I almost broke standing in the middle of the living room.”

I sigh and run my hands through my hair, “He never got the chance to give us all the secrets.”

“Honestly, I don’t think he had any. I think he led with love and let everything else fall into place. That’s the legacy he left behind. That’s the shoes we have to fill. We just have to love, little brother. Come on, let’s give the girls their time, I need a sparring partner anyways.”

A real smile pulls at my lips as I agree with my brother and follow him down to the gym. He’s right, there’s no handbook for this shit. Protect Nix without smothering her, because she needs a partner, not a dictator. Make sure she gets her power back, because she’s strong enough to do it on her own, but I love her enough to want a front row seat. Swear to stay, and see to it that I do, because I want to, and because she deserves someone to weather all the storms with. Lead with love, and the rest will follow.

Chapter Thirty-One

Phoenix

As soon as the boys walk out of the room Clara springs up, and moves so she's facing me criss-cross applesauce style, "You're not going to believe this. My entire day is ruined. I've developed a complex."

It clicks what she's talking about, my eyes widen as I force myself to sit up and lean against the headboard. This is a conversation we can't have laying down, "No, you're lying."

"BRITTANY, she didn't tell me again today!" She throws her hands up in aggravation.

I match her intensity because this is just what we do, "She can't do that!"

"You can't tell me you love me one day, then never say it again. I have abandonment issues." She says with mock disdain.

One of Rhett's preschool teachers accidentally told Clara she loves her when she was getting Rhett out of the car for school the other day. It's now the running joke between us, especially since this teacher has acted super awkward since and avoids talking to her now.

"Does she want to be sent your therapy bill? You're so lovable, I can't believe she's going to act like she didn't say it at all. You can't just tell someone you love them then never say it again, that's so rude."

"Thank you!" Clara tosses her hands up. "See you get me. Rowan looks at me like I'm actively having a psych break every time I bring this up to him, but just love me,

dammit.”

We both break character and fall back into the bed with the most unladylike cackles. The silly bits we have drive Rowan up a wall. Half the time he can't tell if we're serious or not, but we love them so they stay. We've settled back into the bed when Clara sighs then says what's on her mind.

“So, want to talk about what happened yesterday?”

I hate that I'm lying to her. She's going to be pissed when she finds out, but I guess there's not a better time than the present to come clean.

“Uh, so I might have something to tell you.”

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She gestures for me to continue, “The floor is yours.”

“My name isn’t Brittany, it’s Phoenix. We changed it when I left home. After everything that happened with David and Robert we had to make sure they couldn’t find me. Obviously that didn’t work because they in fact found me already. I’m so sorry I didn’t tell you the truth. I was so scared even uttering it would jinx it and they’d find me.”

Clara’s face is impassive as she responds with just one sentence, “Why are you sorry?”

Completely confused, I answer, “What?”

“You were keeping yourself safe the best way you knew how. I don’t care what your name is as long as you don’t get a personality transplant. I know who my best friend is, I know who my son’s godmom is. A name is a name, Phoenix. I don’t care about that stuff.” The tears flow freely down my cheeks, she’s so understanding. I don’t deserve her but I’m so thankful that she deemed me worthy, because her love and loyalty is unmatched.

“Okay, now that that’s settled. Who do we think is going to make it to the altar this time?”

We settle back into our typical conversations and my heart feels a little less heavy. Settling back into the bed and getting comfortable, we both turn our attention back to our show. We have to find out how this season ends. Our new bits that we’ll use to drive Roe crazy depends on it.

* * *

I wake up hours later to an empty bed. She left me, that whore. I bet it was Rowan, he's so needy. Deciding to go look for Kieran, I get up, go to the bathroom, then make my way out of the bedroom. Searching around the third floor I come to a room on the opposite side from what I know is Mac's room, I knock quietly.

Mac's deep voice cuts through the wooden door, "Open."

I push the door open as quietly as possible. This room is insane. There's so many monitors. One big desk that covers half of the wall space and holds at least eight monitors, most of them doing different things at one time. Mac sits with his back to me. He has a forest green hoodie on, and a black baseball hat sitting on top of his head. He doesn't look behind him as I enter.

"Hey, you can sit down if you want. What's up?" His eyes never leave the monitors as his fingers continue to fly over the keys. Sitting on the love seat at the far wall, not far from where his desk starts, I curl up and lean my head on the arm of it. It's almost calming watching him work, hearing the tap tap of the keys.

"I came looking for Kie but you look lonely so maybe I'll just hang out here with you. I mean if that's okay?" I'm suddenly unsure of myself. Mac tosses a reassuring smile my way before focusing back on his work.

"Yeah, I don't care. It may bore you but if you're looking for calm and mainly quiet, this is the place for you."

I let him work in silence for a while, pulling at the dark gray cable knit blanket on the back of the couch and draping it over myself. Mac has that same calming sense that Kieran has, like he wouldn't let anything happen to me or any other woman. But where Kieran also makes my body alight with electricity, Mac just makes me feel

safe. He's attractive, you'd have to be blind not to see that all of the Byrne brothers could scorch the Earth with one singular smolder. He's not my Byrne though. I think this is what it feels like to have a brother, I can't be too sure since I'm an only child, but I think so.

"Brittany, Phoenix, whatever I'm supposed to call you, I can hear your brain going a million miles an hour, it's distracting. What's wrong?"

"First off, rude. Call me whatever you want. I actually just told Clara. So everyone in this house can call me what they want, I'll respond. Second, is this what it feels like to have siblings? I've never had them, but I feel safe with you guys when Kie isn't with me, which seems like maybe it is."

"You sure about the name thing?" He asks with a hint of something I can't place.

"Yeah, I don't care." Is he just going to disregard everything else I said?

"Okay, Pigeon. The closest thing I've had to a sister is Clara, and yeah this feels like that. Ask her what it's like having us as brothers, especially the twins. You're going to have a constant headache but I like to think we're worth it."

I think my brain short circuited, "Pigeon?"

He gives me a mischievous smirk, "Should have specified that name thing, huh?"

Yeah, this definitely has to be what it feels like to have brothers. "Oh, fuck off, Mac. If you call me Pigeon I'm calling you Quail."

He shrugs in indifference, just as the door swings open and every other Byrne man files in the room all looking various degrees of shocked that I'm in here. All except Kie who just sits beside me and pulls my legs into his lap. "Hey, Mo Stóirín.

Whatcha doing in here?”

“I was looking for you but then it was just so quiet in here.”

Kieran gives me a knowing smile as he chuckles, “Yeah, Mac’s space will do that to you, I get sucked into here too.”

“Oh, hey, boys guess what? Brittany slash Phoenix here has given us free reign to call her whatever we want to... I picked Pigeon.” All the boys burst out laughing and agree I am now Pigeon to all of them. I cut my eyes at Kie before he can say anything, “If you call me anything but, Phoenix, Nix, Brave Girl, or Mo Stóirín I’ll cut your balls off in your sleep.”

He sobers and gives me one firm nod, “Yes ma’am.”

I smile at him, “Want to go work? My mind won’t stop spinning.”

Mac cuts in, “You don’t need to. I’ve got our next guy in my cross hairs right now, guy named Eric?”

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I feel the color draining from my face, “Eric is Robert’s other best friend. If you’ve found him, you’re hovering right over Robert and David too.”

All six sets of green eyes lock onto me, Kieran’s the one who speaks up but he’s not talking to me, he’s talking to Mac, “Last name? An Eric is my next target too?”

Mac and I answer him at the same time, “Stone.”

Kieran brings one hand to the back of his neck and squeezes, “How the hell is that possible? That’s my guy too. Did he break off when they were caught to start his own thing?”

The realization hits me like a bullet to the chest.

“Oh, my God. They never stopped.”

* * *

I’m exhausted, grumpy, and my uterus is trying to fight its way out of my body. In short, I don’t have time for this bullshit today. Too bad for me, I’m walking to my office to have a meeting with my boss. I’m not apologizing. I have nothing to apologize for. He’s a big baby who can’t handle that he lost an underground fight, that he shouldn’t have been a part of anyway. Ryan stays about five or so steps behind me, Collin about five or so ahead.

This is really the first time I’ve been with them alone and these are not the same men who joke around at the house with Kieran and his brothers. They’re stoic, with

their ‘don’t talk to me’ expressions, and all black suits. You can tell they take this job as seriously as they would if they were protecting Kieran himself. Collin reaches the door to my building first and holds it open for me.

“Thank you, Collin.”

“Ms. Mitchell.” is his only response.

He takes up his spot in front of me again as we make our way through the large lobby. The walls are glass, the ceilings are impossibly high, and everyone bustles around trying to get to meetings or their offices. It doesn’t take but a minute to step inside the elevator and make our way up to my floor. The doors open and Simone lifts her head up from her desk in front of Mr. Phillips office. Her eyes widen as she takes in the two men flanking me, both easily six foot four or so, both incredibly handsome in their own right. I give her a small wave as we move past her and to Mr. Hall’s office door.

Before I can knock Ryan leans down and whispers, “Who is that? Is she single?”

I try to stifle my laugh and mock glare at him, “Excuse me, you’re working Mr. Murphy. Focus, we can gossip about how single Simone is later.” He straightens and gives me a singular nod. Gone is the playful Ryan that was there just a second ago and back is the down to business man who has been trusted to protect me. I knock on the door and a moment later a gruff, “come in” filters through the space.

Collin pushes the door open and moves directly in front of me. After the room is checked to his contentment he moves behind me, allowing me to enter WHILE both men flank my sides. Jackson looks thrown off but doesn’t comment until he notes Ryan on my left.

“He can wait outside.” He practically snarls.

“No can do Jamie-boy. I’m on assignment. If I go Ms.Mitchell has to go too.”

His eyes snap to mine, “Assignment? You in danger Brittany?”

“That’s not your business, Mr. Hall. I’m here to discuss my future, or lack thereof at this firm.” With calculated steps I move to the chair in front of his desk and sit crossing one leg over the other while straightening my spine and lifting my chin. I can feel my detail move to stand on each side of the chair.

“Listen, Britt. I know you’re still pissed,I get it, but I don’t thinkyou do. The Pit isn’t safe. You were there alone, crying, and anything could have happened. I overreacted but I really was just worried. You have to be safe.”

He’s confusing me. I thought he was mad I was with Kieran, but his voice is laced with so much concern and he sounds like he’s trying to talk in code. His eyes widen to the size of saucers a second before the door to the office slams open and chaos breaks out everywhere.

32

Chapter Thirty-Two

Kieran

Phoenix left about an hour ago to go meet up with James. Ry sent me a confirmation text about fifteen or so minutes ago that they made it there and were about to go into the office. I haven’t heard anything more, so I’m assuming that everything’s going well. While I wait I’m doing what any other self respecting enforcer for the mob would do... I’m playing Mario Kart with my youngest brother, while my other brothers look on, waiting for their turn. Every time one of us knocks the other off the track the room fills with genuine laughs and good natured ribbing. My phone rings

and I pause the game as I see Ryan's name flash across my phone. I hold up a hand to my brothers, silencing their collective groans of protest.

"Talk to me Ry."

Hairs on the back of my neck stand on end as my muscles lock up at the voice on the other side.

"Kieran Byrne, I hear you've been looking for me. I also hear you've got my daughter. I want that little whore delivered to me. If you want your buddy here returned alive, you'll get me what's mine."

Before I can respond I hear Ryan yell in the background, "It's okay Kieran. I'm okay, don't do anything. I love you, brother."

"You have twenty-four hours Byrne, don't make me kill your best friend." With that parting blow he hangs up. I'm doubled over trying to force air into my lungs. Ryan. Nix. Wait Nix?

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I shoot up into a sitting position almost headbutting Mac who is right in my face trying to get me to talk, to breathe, to do something. He sounds underwater, this might be shock, the edges of my vision begin to darken when a strong hand hits me across the back, startling me. Instincts take over as I gasp in a big breath of air, and everything begins coming back into focus.

“That’s it Kie, just breathe. You don’t have to talk right now, just breathe.” Mac coaches me through what must be a panic attack. But he doesn’t understand. I have to talk. Nix is missing.

“Nix. Missing.” I choke out, it’s all I’m able to get out before I’m fighting for my next breath again, the hand around my neck squeezing until I’m sure it’ll kill me. I catch movement out of the corner of my eye before a phone is pressed against my ear. I strain to hear and after a few seconds I’m able to register her voice. Phoenix.

“Kie, please come get me. I’m so scared. Kie please.” It’s like hearing her despair dripping through her voice has me snapping out of whatever panic I was feeling.

“Nix? Baby, where are you? I’m coming, I just need to know where you are.”

“I’m in the back stairwell of the building, at the very top, inside the trash can by the door. Hurry, I don’t know where they are or if they’re still there.”

“I’m coming, Brave Girl. Stay there, stay silent. Wait until I physically lift you out of there to utter another word. I’ll be there as quickly as I can. I’m so proud of you for getting out of there. Fuck, I’m coming. I love you so fucking much, Phoenix. Don’t move. Stay, Swear?”

“I love you too, Kieran. Stay, Swear.” She cuts the call and I’m darting to the garage in the next second, throwing commands at my brothers who are running behind me. I’ve never been happier about Rhett being in preschool than I am now. When they enrolled him a few weeks ago I was pissed, now I’m relieved.

“Her dad took Ryan, I don’t know where. He wants Nix. I don’t know how they got her out and hidden. I don’t know how her dad got in undetected. I don’t know where Collin is. But I know where she is, we get her then we find him. I’ve buried enough people, I’m not burying my best friend too.”

I slide sneakers on before jumping on my R1, shoving the helmet onto my head, barely taking the time to strap it on, and fly out of the garage. The door opening somehow in the time it took me to start my bike and put the helmet on. I know my brothers are somewhere behind me as I weave in and out of traffic, I hear the rumble of another bike coming up beside me, glancing to the side, Declan’s burnt orange CBR1000 catches my eye for a fraction of a second. I should have known. He’s the only one who can keep up with me right now.

We bring the bikes to a stop right in front of the building. I switch it off and take off like a shot, not even bothering to take my helmet off. There’s thirty-two stories in this building, there’s no shot I’m running up those steps. It would waste time and I’d burn out before getting to the top. Thankfully there’s an open elevator. Declan’s caught up to me and we both slide into the elevator before erratically pressing the shut button, and the thirty-two.

“Okay, Kie. Keep your head on a swivel this could be a trap. I know you need to get to her, but do it safely, please.”

As the elevator ascends I take a second to take in his worried expression. He’s right. I need to keep my wits about me. “I will. I’m getting my girl, then we’re getting Ryan back.” He nods in acknowledgment as the elevator dings and we rush out the barely

opened doors. We take a quick sweep of the floor, making sure it's just us here. By the time we finish my other brothers are piling out of another elevator. I leave them there to discuss whatever they're going to try to discuss and run to the stairwell. I know Mac's on my heels without having to even turn around. Of course he is, he's my steady, and we don't know how we're going to find her.

By the time I make it to the top of the stairs my body's vibrating with fear, anger, and other emotions I don't even have the bandwidth to explain. I throw the top of the trashcan off and my heart shudders to a stop when steel gray clashes with my gaze, but it's not her eyes this time. Before I can even register that she's aiming a gun at me, or that she hasn't registered that it's me yet I grab her under her arms and lift her straight out of that nasty ass hiding spot.

I hear the gun clatter to the ground as her arms wrap tightly around my neck and her legs find their home wrapped around my hips. Her face burrows into the crook of my neck and she lets out the most terrified, heart shattering cry. Phoenix is strong, she's the strongest person that I know, but right now? Planted safely in my arms, she falls apart. I hold her and kiss every part of her that I can reach while whispering reassuring praise to her.

We stand there for a few minutes before I hear footsteps on the stairs and without putting her down I draw my gun from my waistband and aim it at the curve of the stairwell, ready to fire at the first person I see.

"Kieran, stop." Rowan's strong, commanding voice comes from just beyond the bend. "It's just us. There's no one else here. We have Jackson in custody and being transported for you. Collin's dead, we just want to, no we need to see that Pigeon is okay." The use of her less than stellar nickname draws a half snort half laugh from Nix.

"Okay." That one word, that's all they needed to hear. I holster my gun before my

remaining four brothers make their way to us and she's snatched out of my arms into Declan's, he hugs her and tells her how glad he is she's okay before she switches hands again. She makes it through all five of them before coming straight back over to me and climbing me like a tree. You won't find me complaining. I don't think I'll ever let her out of my arms again.

"Come on, Mo Stóirín let's get you home, then we can all go to the office and you can tell us what happened."

* * *

We've gotten home safely, Clara's been brought into the fold, and we're all getting settled into the office. Nix waits until everyone settles and stops talking before she begins.

"So, we were in Jackson's office, he was being extremely cryptic about me being safe, and how The Pit isn't. He said I put myself in danger there. I don't know, it was really weird. We hadn't even gotten to talk about work yet when another lawyer, Tyson maybe? I can't remember his name, but he burst in the room and said that they were here.

I now know they are Robert, Eric, and David. Ryan and Collin led me to the stairwell to hide, but the elevator began to open as we were walking through the door, so Ryan pushed me in, handed me Collins gun, then told me to go hide and wait for you guys. I heard a few shots as I ran up the stairs but I couldn't stop. I found the trashcan and got inside. I called you and after we hung up I heard them on the steps. They looked for a little while for me, before giving up and leaving. I'm so sorry, I should have made them come with me."

I rub her back in soothing circles, trying to comfort her, "No, you did exactly what you should have."

“If you all would have gone they would have found you, then we would be looking for you too.” Sully so helpfully adds.

“I’m helping you guys get Ryan back. You can argue with each other, but so help me I will be there and I will take them out myself.” Determination sets into her eyes, and I know, she’ll be helping one way or another.

33

Chapter Thirty-Three

Phoenix

We pull up to the warehouse where just days ago I made my first kill. As we pull up tonight I don’t feel that same nervous feeling. No, I’m feeling dread and sadness. I know exactly what went down with Kieran and Jackson. Which mean I know this isn’t going to be a happy reunion at all. The name of the game this evening is reminding Kieran that if it wasn’t for him and the other lawyer I wouldn’t have gotten out of the office alive. Of course because no Byrne goes alone right now, Dec is with us while everyone else is back at the house.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 9:14 am

Just before we get to the door of the building my feet turn and my hand shoots up to stop the two giant men flanking me. Both Kie and Dec stop in their tracks, each raising a singular eyebrow in question.

“Before we go in here I have a request. I need you guys to let me lead. I have questions that need answered. After I get my answers you’re free to do whatever you need to do.”

Declan groans like a child being told to go to bed. “Come on, Pigeon. I’ve been waiting for this. Can we at least get his brother’s name while we let you ask your questions?”

I mull that over for a second before deciding, “Agreed.”

In true Byrne fashion he extends his hand, to shake on our agreement. With that settled, my attention turns to the man who holds my entire soul in his hands. I’m not stupid. I know he won’t deny me what I want. He only does that behind closed doors in a controlled environment.

“You deserve to have your questions answered, I’ll never take that from you.”

Pushing up on my toes, my lips skim the underside of his jaw, “Thank you, Mystery Man.”

“Anything for you, brave Girl.” He takes my hand and leads me through the door.

The warehouse looks much the same as it did the other day. The only noticeable

difference to me is instead of Jackson hanging from a butcher's hook, he's strapped to a chair. He's in the exact same spot Jerry was, the chair sitting perfectly over the covered drain in the floor. His head is bowed forward like he's sleeping or unconscious. My eyes scan his body, his arms and legs are strapped to the arms and legs of the chair, held in place by a mixture of tape and rope. Whoever secured him also tied him at the waist to the chair.

At the sound of our boots on the cement floors his head springs up and a genuine smile takes over his face. Kieran and Declan make weird dude grunts beside me in displeasure but I smile back. I've liked having Jackson as a boss, he isn't unkind, he's a little nosy with what's going on in my personallife, but it's not creepy.

"Brittany, thank you. Please tell your guard dogs to back off."

Both men tense beside me, but it's Kieran who decides to growl like a dog before muttering, "Woof, you little bitch." just loud enough for everyone to hear him, causing me to shoot him a glare, and catch a mischievous grin on his addictive lips.

Turning back to Jackson I nod, "Yeah, no problem, but I have questions that need to be answered first." His face drains of all color and simultaneously my stomach turns uneasily.

"I'll answer any questions you have."

The nervous energy festering inside of me comes out in the form of pacing in front of him. Taking a deep breath I force out the question I've got to ask.

"Did you tell Robert, Eric, and David that I was coming in this morning?"

He looks shocked that I'd even ask him that, "No, Brittany, I would never tell them anything."

“But they asked?” Declan bites out from a few feet behind me. This is why Declan came with us. He can see through the fog.

Jackson nods but his eyes are for me, “They’ve been asking me about you since you started working for me.”

“How did they know she was here? How do you know about them? Who are you? The truth this time.”

He gives us a solemn nod, “I’ll tell you everything. No more secrets.”

Jake Harris

Age Sixteen

This is bullshit. I have to go to his house again. The only reason I’m not completely throwing myself out of this vehicle is because Tripp promised to come too. He just turned eighteen and doesn’t have to go to our sperm donor’s one overnight a month anymore, but I’m not that lucky yet. We both know that he’s into some sketchy shit, and no matter how many times we call CPS they won’t listen. They stop by, check that the place is livable, then peel out.

Our mom hates this shit. She works three jobs to make ends meet, Tripp just dropped out to work full time at a steel mill nearby and neither of them will let me drop out to help. Every time I bring it up they shoot it down with the same argument, ‘You’re going to be the one to get out of this town. You’re going to be a hot shot lawyer, move to New York, and make something of yourself. You can’t do that if you drop out.’

Tripp’s beat up old pickup truck pulls off onto the long, shitty driveway of our father’s house.

“You ready? It won’t be too much longer and you never have to come back.”

I nod, but I know better, I’ll be here nineteen more times after tonight before I’m free of this shit. We both get out of the truck and shut the shitty doors with a little extra strength before heading to his front door.

I’m only court ordered to be here from seven thirty Friday night, to seven thirty Saturday morning, and you won’t catch me here a second longer. Walking up to his shitty pale yellow rancher, I notice he still hasn’t fixed the shutters that are practically hanging off the house. The screen door is broken and swings freely in the wind from a particularly brutal night between us a few months ago.

Before we can make our way up the dry rotted steps to the front door it swings open with so much force it bounces off the wall. Our father stands in the doorway looking at us in surprise.

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“Fuck, it’s the fourteenth isn’t it?” He doesn’t wait for a response before he continues on. “It’s fine, whatever, you have to learn someday. Come on kid. Thanks for dropping him off, Tripp.”

Tripp steps in front of me shielding me from our father, “Not a chance old man, I’m staying.”

He shrugs and walks by us to his old Ford F-150, it’s just as beat up as my brother’s Chevrolet S10. “Suit yourself, get in the truck.”

Our eyes clash, a silent discussion on what to do, we never leave the house. He gets drunk, tries to pry into our lives and more often than not it ends in blows. It won’t for long though, Tripp and I have started exchanging cleaning a local MMA gym in exchange for free classes. His days are coming. We hesitantly make our way to the truck and climb in the back, neither of us wanting to sit next to him. He glares at us from the rear view mirror, “Phones. Now.” We begrudgingly hand them over.

This also isn’t new. He takes them when we get here and we get them back when his alarm goes off at seven twenty. It’s his power move so our mom can’t get in touch with us. It’s also how he ensures we don’t leave once we’re here. Yeah, he’s a grade A prick. We head down back roads that I know nothing about, in silence, twisting and turning, taking so many turns that I confuse myself and could never get back on my own. I’m assuming he’s doing that on purpose to throw us.

About fifteen minutes later he pulls into what looks like an old ranch. There’s two barns, a horse stable, a few sheds, and a big ranch house. It isn’t outstanding by any means, but it looks a whole lot better than both our shitty houses combined. He parks

the car behind three other vehicles before turning back to us.

“It’s about time you two become men, and learn to take over your old man’s business one day.”

“You work on a ranch?” I ask, confused, because I have no idea what the piece of shit does. He just barks a laugh at me and gets out of the truck.

Tripp grabs my shoulder before I can move out of the truck. “Do not leave my side, do you hear me, Jake? I’ve heard whispers of what he might be into. If it’s even half of what I’ve heard this is going to be the roughest twelve hours of our lives.”

My hands begin to tremble as I nod in agreement. We exit the truck and follow my father back to one of the sheds, three men are standing around the front of it. All various heights and weights, but all equally as slimy looking.

“What do we have here? Did no one tell me it’s bring-your-kid-to-work day?” The tallest of the men says, which doesn’t say much as I’m six one and tower over him. The other men laugh, as my dad snipes back.

“Says the man who’s kid is here everyday, huh?” The man’s nostrils flare in annoyance but he doesn’t say anything else. “This is Tripp and Jake. They’re here tonight to learn. They’ll observe and maybe dip their toes in. We’ll see how the night goes.”

The men just nod before giving us a tour of what seems to be just a normal working farm. There’s livestock, farm equipment, and the inside of the house is big... old, but not in bad condition. The taller man, who I’ve learned is named Robert smiles over at me, “So what do you think? Maybe you want to dip your toes?”

I’m thrown by what he means because it’s not like anything groundbreaking is

happening, at the same time I don't want to be rude so I just nod, "Yeah man, seems cool." A condescending laugh slips past his lips.

"Good. Come on, I've got something else to show you." I look behind me for Tripp, but he's talking to one of the other men, Eric, I think.

"Hey Tripp." I call to let him know what's going on. He ends his conversation with Eric immediately and makes his way over to us. "Uh, Robert wanted to show me something else really quick."

"Great, I'll come with." He says with no room for argument in his tone. Robert just nods, lets the other men know where we're going, and we all end up making our way to the back shed. I figure that's where they hoard their drugs or something. Shit I'm not getting into, but when Robert opens the door to the shed I almost vomit.

There are rows and rows of women and children in cages, some multiple people to one cage. There's a door on either side of the far back wall. Tripp gags as I just watch in horror. "What is this?" I barely choke out, turning behind me looking for my dad. Jerry's eyes lock on me with that same evil smirk he gets right before he tries to put me through a wall.

"This, my son, is the family business. We make more money than you'll ever see in a lifetime and we get first dibs on whoever we want. Those two doors in the back lead into two rooms. We have two whores in them for you both now. If you're ready. You don't have to." That's all I hear before I bend over and throw up right in front of my feet. That's rich, if we want to, where the fuck is their choice in the matter? I'm going to get them out of here tonight, or I'm going to die trying.

Phoenix

Present Day

Jax has tears running down his face. He takes a minute to catch his breath and calm down enough to finish the story. I'm shaking so hard my teeth are chattering. Kieran and Declan are coiled tight, like deadly vipers ready to strike. Kieran grabs my hips and pulls my back tight to his front. Declan lays his hand on my shoulder, a show of silent support. Noticing that he's ready to continue, my body turns rigid as I get ready to hear what I'm sure is another tragedy of Robert and his fucked up friends selling their own children.

"That night, Tripp and I decided we were going to wait until everyone passed out, and we were going to free everyone. It didn't take long for them to get plastered and start dropping like flies, succumbing to the insane amounts of alcohol in their systems. We snuck back down to the shed and started opening cages but no one would move. I didn't know it then but apparently this was a mind game they liked to play, trick them into thinking they were free then punish them when they tried to leave.

One girl, they called her Thirty-Three, told me if I was serious, to go open the back door. Twenty-seven was in there, and she'd never miss an opportunity to run. So, Tripp and I unlocked the door, and waited in the shadows. Sure enough, less than three minutes later, a too-small-to-be-her-age teenager came bolting out of the room. She looked around at the eyes staring at her and swore she'd be back for everyone. Then she was gone."

I bend over, put my hands on my knees, and dragging in ragged breaths as I process what he's telling me. Kieran rubs my back in comfort as Dec flexes his hand on my shoulder. My escape, that was him. How? How did he end up here? Does he know it's me? He picks up before I can ask.

"We waited out by the shed for about twenty minutes before heading back to the house. We were almost there when Jerry popped up out of nowhere. He had watched the whole thing go down. Said the only reason he wasn't going after you was because

he wasn't dying in those woods. He took us back to the shed and grabbed one of the girls. It was the girl who told us to let the one in the room out. She couldn't have been older than twelve or so. He took her with us and we went back to his place.

When we got there he took us to the woods line behind his house and shot the little girl, execution style. He beat both of us for what we'd done and told us we could never tell anyone what we saw because we'd be accessories to his crimes. The next morning we were on the way to the police station when we heard on the news that they found the little girl we set free, rescued the others there, and had arrested her captives.

There was nothing we could do for Thirty-Three, she was already gone. So we decided to not say anything. I went off to college on a scholarship before going to law school and now my position at Philip and Grant. Jerry popped up here almost a year ago, they got everyone there that night, except for him. He just needed to remind me to keep my mouth shut. It wasn't necessary, I wasn't talking. Tripp saw Robert and David on the security cameras today, and that's why he came barging in. We aren't stupid Brittany, that strawberry blonde hair, and those steel eyes are hard to duplicate. We've just been trying to keep you safe. It's why I freaked out last weekend. Robert and David had been seen there a few weeks ago, I just didn't want them running into you. It scared me and I lashed out. I'm sorry."

Tears stream freely down my face as the only question I can think of replays over and over in my mind. "He killed Thirty-Three, you're sure?"

"I'm sure. I'm so sorry. I can tell you where she's buried if that'll help you grieve." I can't even listen to whatever else he says because all I hear is that we're going to have to tell everyone at Kieran's house that Riley's really gone.

34

Chapter Thirty-Four

MacQuillian

This is stupid, this entire idea is idiotic. I love Ryan as much as the rest of us, but at the same time our family is still intact. All nine of us are in this fortress, safe, loved, protected, and in one piece. Call me fucked up all you want, but our soldiers know what they're signing up for when they sign up. That rule doesn't change because we've known Ryan our whole lives. Kellum just betrayed Roe less than a year ago, but yes, please, let's put it all on the line to save someone who may also be turning on us. This could all be a big elaborate ploy to get Kieran and Pigeon.

But I've been out voted and now everyone's pissed I even suggested it. I throw on my forest green hoodie, slip my feet into my all black vans, and head out to meet everyone. Robert called about twenty minutes ago to tell us where to meet. We all pile into the SUV's just as my phone pings. I know before I even open it that it's Lee, Pigeon's tech connect.

Lee: Be safe, Quill. You've been a worthy opponent all these years, it'd suck if you died.

I can't help the smile that takes over my face. She and I have been on the opposite side of the same assignments for a few years, but working with her instead of against her now has been a nice change of pace. She's brilliant and she just gets me.

Mac: It would suck, wouldn't it? I'm pretty great.

Lee: Woah, how your big head is fitting in that SUV right now is beyond me.

Mac: You following me, Lee?

Lee: I'm making sure my coworker lives to clock in tomorrow. Don't be late, Quill.

Mac: Seven on the dot, I'll be there Lee.

The vehicle slows down and the awkward silence that's been looming over all of us since Kieran, Declan, and Pigeon got home last night settles in. They were tight lipped about what happened at the warehouse. Only revealing that they let James go and that he was the one who saved Pigeon all those years ago. I guess I can stop hating him so much. His brother can still meet me in the warehouse, but we'll let James be, for now.

We don't have time to go into this shit at odds so I hit my comms on the side of my ear queuing up every single person on this mission, "Focus boys, in and out, nice and easy. Pigeon stays out of sight and out of harm's way. Be flawless and we'll be home before Clara can finish that Marsala she promised us." Acknowledgment from everyone rings in my ear. Kieran normally makes the calls in these situations, but it falls on me now since he's too close. Also, I'm the one who could build this entire warehouse inside and out, while blindfolded from how much I've studied it.

We exit the vehicles and immediately move into formations. Every square inch of this warehouse is covered with our men. Kieran and Pigeon take the back entrance, the twins the left side entrance, Roe and Dec the front, and Ian and I have the right side. At my signal we all move. Infiltrating from all sides at once. I kick in the door and move in, my eyes focused on everything at once. It feels like my muscles are moving of their own volition as my gun fires in rapid succession taking out three men within

seconds. Screams and shouts permeate the air as well as the smell of gunpowder.

We move in closer to the center of the room where everyone has stopped and has their guns dropped to the side, eyes wide. I'm not doing that shit though. I've got my men, my brothers, and my new sister to get home safely. Coming into view I see what has everyone at a standstill. Two middle aged men, probably in their late fifties are standing in the middle of the room. The taller one, Robert, has Ryan held in front of him like a human shield with the barrel of his pistol pressed to his temple.

That doesn't stop me though I continue to move forward with my gun drawn. That is until Kieran's pained voice rings in my ear.

"Mac, stop."

The torture in his voice is enough to pull my attention to him, where he's standing beside me. Phoenix is standing behind him, gripping onto the back of his shirt. It's then I notice the other man's victim. A woman in her mid to late thirties, curly blonde hair, and bright blue eyes. She looks to be about five foot seven or so with a medium build. I'm confused who this is and why we're stopping until I take a second look at her. Fuck, that's Pigeon's adopted mom.

"Let them go, Robert." Pigeon's voice rings out strong, not even a hint of a tremor in it.

He scoffs at her, "I'll let them go when you come back, Twenty-Seven. We have a score to settle. I know that you know what happened to Thirty-Three. After we settle up, I'll make sure your grave is right beside hers."

"Over my dead fucking body." Kieran roars.

I can't focus on that though, because all I can think about is that he said Thirty-Three.

That's Riley. 'I'll make sure your grave is right beside hers.' Her grave? She has a grave. People who have graves aren't still living. My Riley, she was waiting for me and I failed her, I wasn't quick enough. What the fuck did I do?

I hear a pained whimper fill the space, it isn't until a few seconds later that I realize I'm the one making it. This man that I don't even know just told me that the reason I've fought my demons and came out on the other side is gone. My heart is dead and buried with her. I use every ounce of my being to pull it together, because my brother's heart is still here, and about to put herself in danger to save his best friend and her mom.

"You let them go and I'll come with you. No tricks, no funny business. Just let Ryan and my mom go."

"No the fuck you won't, Mo Stóirín! You're not going with him." Kieran's voice almost breaks me. It cracks at the end like he's barely holding it together. She moves in front of him and looks him in the eyes before bringing her hand up to cup his cheek.

"This is my fight, you're supposed to let me fight it, remember?" I can see the tears flowing from her eyes from here.

What's surprising is the tears flowing from my brother's eyes as well. Kieran and I have been practically inseparable since he climbed into my crib with me the night I came home from the hospital. I've seen him cry like this less than a handful of times and never out in the open like this. He's breaking in front of our eyes and every atom that makes up my existence screams to go comfort him. But I can't help him through this. As much as I want to, I can't. That's her job now. So instead I'm forced to stand here and watch the greatest man I've ever known break.

"Stay, please stay." Kieran practically begs her.

“I can’t, Mystery man. Not this time.” She presses up on her toes and kisses his lips quickly. “I love you Kieran Michael.” Before he can make a move to grab her she darts out of his reach. He won’t make any sudden movements out of fear that someone will shoot her.

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She moves to the middle point from us to them and puts her hands out. “I’m halfway there, Robert. Let them go.”

Robert and David move in sync with Ryan and Carrie, who are protesting and begging Phoenix to turn back, to save herself. But if you know anything about Pigeon, you know that’s not her style. Once they’re within arms length distance of her they push their hostages in our direction. Robert goes to make a move for Phoenix, the same time David brings the butt of his gun down on the side of Phoenix’s head. That’s the catalyst that has everything happening at once.

Phoenix shakes her head, and pulls a gun out from her waistband. Where the fuck did she get that, and how the fuck is she still standing right now? She aims and fires, shooting Robert right in between the eyes. At the same time David aims and takes a shot, but I don’t see where it hits. In the next second I fire off a shot, and David drops to the ground with a gaping hole in his chest. Because I’m not one to leave things to chance, I approach him slowly, kicking the gun as far away from him as possible. Then like the true cold and calculated made man I am, I double tap him, right between the eyes. Never take my preference of staying behind a computer for my lack of skills in action. I was trained just as hard as my brothers, by the same man.

A scream so piercing it causes me to have to holster my gun and cover my ears, has me turning around, to see something that will haunt me for the rest of my life. Kieran’s laying on the ground, blood seeping from his chest. Phoenix is kneeling beside him, her hands covered in his blood, while yelling for him to answer her and just repeating over and over again, “You have to stay, you swore!”

Chapter Thirty-Five

Kieran

I'm cold, shit. I have that same feeling I did when I laid on the floor of The Pit that night I was stabbed. Blinking my eyes open I look around. Where am I? What is this? I'm laying in my room but it looks different, everything is just a little off. The door to my room flies open and in walks my Ma. I have to be dreaming, right? There's no way the five foot three, auburn hair, bright green eyed woman standing and staring at me in shock is my Ma.

She looks just as shocked as I do when she turns and yells over her shoulder, "Aidan? You need to get in here." Turning her attention back to me she chokes out, "Kie?"

The same time I force out, "Ma?" I jump out of the bed and run over to her scooping her up in my arms. I'm not cold anymore.

We stand there embracing each other until the voice of myDa rumbles through the room, "A leanbh, what are you doing? You can't be here."

Untangling myself from my Ma, I turn to my Da who pulls me into a tight hug. After a moment he pulls back, confusion and hurt laced in his expression, "You can't be here yet, my boy. You have to go back."

"What are you talking about? I can't go anywhere? I don't know how to? I want to stay with you guys."

My Ma smiles fondly at me, "Oh baby, you've grown so much. You have a sweet nephew, more to come, a soon to be wife, and eventually your own kids to get back to. You have the sweetest heart, you always have. You have to go love them the way Da and I would if we could." I start to tell her that I don't have any of that except a

nephew but Da cuts in before I have the chance.

“You have that girl, Nix. You have to go back to her, she needs you a leanbh. We’ve seen you. You love her like Rowan does Clara, like I do your Ma. Go back to her son.”

“How? You keep saying to go back but aren’t saying how.”

“You know how, Kieran. Leave and go to her.” He grips the back of my neck and pulls me into his embrace again.

“What if I want to stay here with you guys?” My heart is torn, I’ve missed my parents so much, I can’t leave them again. At least I don’t think I can.

“We will never make you leave, this is your choice. We just want you to consider who you’re leaving behind to stay here with us.”

This is an impossible decision, and I don’t want to make the wrong one. Maybe I’ll just stay here a little longer, I’m not ready to be cold again.

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Chapter Thirty-Six

Phoenix

The empty waiting room that the staff brought us to is freezing. Seats that are too hard line the walls, leaving the middle of the room completely bare. The three older Byrne brother’s have congregated along the back wall. Heads drawn down and low whispers exchanged between them. I’m too far away to hear what they’re saying and honestly I don’t care to know. My back is to the wall closest to the door, my mom on

my left, and Clara on my right. One of Kieran's hoodies dwarfs my body, and I sit with my legs drawn up and my head resting on my knees. My head is killing me, the lights hurt them, and I just want Kieran.

Rowan keeps looking over here. I'm sure it's at Clara who's holding a sweet sleeping Rhett. We haven't been here long, but we know it's going to be a long night. I know I'm in shock, the dead feeling in my heart tells me as much. My mom rubs my back as we sit here like she used to when I first came to live with her and would have nightmares. God, how I wish this was a nightmare. Rowan's head comes up again, this time his eyes lock with mine, making my stomach drop.

They're talking about me, I'm sure about how all of this is my fault. What am I even doing? This is my fault, that's his family. They don't want me here. I should leave, but even as I think it I can't force myself out of this chair. I just need to know he's okay, I need to know he's alive, then I'll leave. Taking the hood of Kie's sweatshirt, I pull it over my head and cry silently into my arms that are resting on my knees.

I'm not sure how long I stay like that, but eventually I feel warm calloused hands take mine and pull gently on them, looking up I'm caught off guard by medium green eyes, and shaggy hair. Allowing him to pull me into a standing position he wraps me up in his arms. They feel safe, not Kieran level safe, but safe enough to lose my composure. My hands fist Mac's shirt as my knees buckle causing him to have to tighten his grip on me to keep me from crumbling to the floor. Feeling his tears begin to soak the top of my head, we just stand here and cry into each other. The only noise in the empty room is our sniffles and ragged breaths.

We've finally stopped falling apart enough for Declan to force Mac and I in a hospital chair made for two people. My head leans on his shoulder as I find the strength to murmur what I've been scared to voice.

"I'm so sorry." It's just loud enough for the three older boys to hear me.

Dec grips the back of my neck in a reassuring squeeze, “Sorry for what Pigeon? This isn’t your fault.”

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I scoff, he can't be serious, "Declan, I literally brought all this to your front door. I should have just stayed in Arizona."

"If you want to get technical, I brought this to our front door. I'm the one who brought Clara and Rhett here, which brought you, and I'll be damned if I'm apologizing for that. This was no one's fault aside from David and Robert's, who are both dead and in hell, thanks to you and Mac. You did good today, kid. When he makes it through this, he's going to be so proud of you." Rowan runs his hand through my hair so gently like I've seen him do to Rhett, like I'm his child too.

I flinch at the contact, the same time Roe's fingertips brush the golf ball sized knot under my hair. "Is this from David?" He growls out with barely contained rage.

"It's fine, it's not a big deal."

Declan's fingers inspect the area as soon as Rowan steps away with a gentleness that I've never witnessed him use on someone who isn't Clara or Rhett. "Nix, you really need to let a doctor look at that, that's not good."

"What are you? A doctor now instead of a made man?" He recoils at my harsh voice, and I recoil because the sound of my own voice fucking hurts. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have lashed out like that."

"No you're right. I'm not a doctor but I know a lot about this stuff. I've studied every medical book I can get my hands on since I was about ten. I know what I'm talking about here."

“Okay, fine. Someone can check me out, after I’ve seen Kieran. Deal?”

He nods and shakes my hand, sealing our deal, “Fine.” What he doesn’t realize is that they can check me out from whatever room Kie is in. I’m not leaving his side.

The twins are huddled together on the far wall by themselves. Those poor boys are barely men and they’ve already witnessed so much destruction. They’re going to get out, just like Kieran said, they’re going to do amazing things, far away from here. The lucky ones. Just as I think it, the door to the waiting room slams open and the rest of their crew fills in creating a bubble around them, like a physical barrier making sure nothing can get through to them.

“Kieran said they’re all going to get out of here. They aren’t destined for this life, they’re made for greater things.” I say watching the little village huddle around trying to figure out how to fix this.

Declan smiles fondly, “They get on our last nerves. Mine, Rowans, and Mac’s, but they don’t bother Kie. He’s always rooted for them to get out and never turn back. I think they may do it. Between them all they’ve seen so much loss and hurt.”

Mac nods in agreement, “They’ll do it, together. Just like we do. Only we chose to stay.”

Rowan nods in agreement before going over to his wife and taking their son out of her arms. He’s got a stone wall up but he isn’t fooling me, that’s his kid in that OR right now. Kieran’s my entire heart and soul, but he’s Rowan’s life. Just like the rest of them, Clara, and Rhett. He can’t wrap his arms around Kieran right now, so instead he cradles my godson to his chest and buries his face in Rhett’s hair to give himself a moment.

* * *

The swinging open of the waiting room door pulls me out of my meditative state. Everyone thought I'd fallen asleep but that's not possible, not until I have my eyes on Kie. I've just not wanted to talk to anyone. My eyes spring open as a doctor who looks utterly exhausted in dark blue scrubs walks in the room. He takes his scrub cap off and runs his hands through his light brown hair.

"The family of Kieran Byrne?" I shoot to my feet and move to stand by Rowan, everyone else at our backs. It's probably a bitch move but I don't care right now. No one says a word about it.

"That's us, Doc." Rowan answers, and the faintest bit of fear seeps through his voice.

"Mr. Byrne arrived with a GSW to the chest. We immediately took him to the OR, the bullet missed his right atrium by about a centimeter. We were able to remove the bullet, but we did have to revive Mr. Byrne on the table multiple times. For now we have him on the ventilator until his body is strong enough to work on his own. I can bring you up to the floor he'll be on, but please be advised only two people are allowed back at a time to limit the risk of germs and infection getting to him while he heals."

"Of course, thank you doctor." We all follow the doctor up to the ICU and into a new waiting room.

"Who am I bringing back?" The doctor looks around the large number of people we have.

"I'm going, and so is she." Rowan speaks up pointing to himself and then to me. I look around at everyone looking for anger or disapproval but find none. So my head nods on its own volition. I follow Rowan and the doctor through the doors of the unit and to the outside of his room. We stop at the door and the doctor turns back to us.

“Take a moment to prepare yourself, this isn’t an easy thing to see.” We both nod before the doctor leads us into the large hospital room. In the middle of the room is a bed, as I look in it my breath is knocked out of my lungs. My strong, protective man is lying there, with tubes, IVs and wires coming out of all different directions. His face is completely relaxed as if he’s sleeping, but my brain, as well as the tube in his mouth, and his nose tells me that’s not the case.

“Fuck. Fuck!” Rowan turns abruptly towards the door, his hands fisting his hair as he pulls. “Goddammit, Kieran.” He takes a few deep, albeit choppy breaths before his watery eyes come to mine.

“I’m so sorry, Pigeon. So sorry you have to see him like this. I’m sorry I couldn’t protect him from this.”

On instinct my arms wrap around Rowan. It’s awkward and Rowan is as stiff as a board, but I don’t care, he needs this. “Don’t apologize. It’s not your fault. Remember we just went over this earlier. You didn’t hold the gun or pull the trigger. You’re allowed to be upset Roe. He’s just as much your son as he was your parents’.”

He nods in acknowledgment before putting that mask firmly back into place. He moves around the bed to a chair that’s in the back corner of the room and moves it right beside his bed, before gesturing for me to sit. Not needing to be told twice I move to the chair and grasp his large hand in my much smaller one. Roe leans down, placing a kiss on the crown of my head before moving to the other side of the bed. I lay my head down on the hospital mattress, and for the first time since he was shot I allow my eyes to close and sleep to take me.

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It’s been days since that night, five to be exact. Kieran’s still asleep, but they’re taking his tube out today. I haven’t left this spot, besides to go to the bathroom, since

we got here. Roe must have paid someone off because everyone's allowed in here now. Even Rhett, who isn't supposed to be allowed in here for another thirteen years.

The doctor came in that morning to check me out, informing me that I did in fact have a concussion. They tried to move me to a room for observation but I refused to move from this spot, so the nurse comes in and checks on Kieran and myself at the same time. Everyone's in here right now and it feels like so much. I respect their need to be here but they have each other and I have him. Well that isn't entirely true. I have Clara and Rhett, but right now all I want is Kieran.

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The doctor comes in to check on him and when he steps away from him he smiles at all of us.

“His oxygen level and lung function is looking really good. I think we take the breathing tube out.”

“When?” Rowan asks before the doctor has finished talking.

“Right now, actually. We need everyone to clear out. Phoenix, you can stay and it’ll only take a few minutes.”

Rowan eyes me skeptically before mouthing, ‘Want someone to stay with you?’

I shake my head in response. I’m okay by myself, and I’ll be even better when my best friend wakes up.

The whole process only takes a few minutes, and next thing I know I’m back at his side, my hand grasping his, and my head laying against his hip. I hear everyone filter back in but I don’t open my eyes until I hear the doctor come in and tellus the removal went perfectly.

“What do we do now?” I ask him in a quiet voice, partially because of my head, and partially because I’m scared of the answer.

“Now we wait.”

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Rowan

This has been the longest five days of my life. We've been at the hospital around the clock. If I'm not going home to put Rhett to bed, or to take a shower I'm here. Except for that day I went to take care of Eric Stone, but we don't need to talk about yet another body that cemented my spot in hell. Nix hasn't moved from the spot I put her in on the first night. How she's still pushing through is beyond me. The poor girl probably doesn't even remember what fresh air smells like anymore.

My heart aches and my mind reels constantly. Nix was right the other night, that is my kid. My heart feels like it's being shattered every moment I stand in this room. Watching his broken and helpless body. They all are my kids, I mean technically they aren't. They're my brothers, but they're my kids too. I've been holding my actual son a lot tighter the past five days. He's too young to understand what's going on, but he still hugs me back tight and tells me he hopes Uncle Kie is okay.

I'm so glad I have Clara or I'd be a broken mess on the floor by now. Having someone to lean on during this stuff is so important. Especially when she's where my whole world starts and stops. I never thought I'd be a man who has to lean on his wife for support instead of handling it on his own. But if married life has taught me nothing else, it's taught me that she is the one person that I need support from.

Speaking of, Clara stands from her place on the chair she was sitting in and makes her way over to me. My arms wrap tightly around her as my face comes down to the crook of her neck and I inhale deeply. Pulling her scent into the deepest depths of my lungs, I slowly let it out, "Hey Pretty Girl."

"Let's go grab a coffee?" This is her way of telling me she thinks I need a break. It's hard to see your little brother laying there knowing you can't do anything but wait for

him.

“Yeah, okay.” I straighten up to my full height before taking Clara’s hand and addressing the room, “Hey, Clara and I are going to go grab a coffee. Anyone want anything?” Everyone but Mac shakes their head, he just lifts up a coffee cup in signal that he’s good. Even if he is the farthest thing from it. My eyes go to Dec, “Do you want us to take him?” He has Little Bear in his lap playing some game on his tablet.

“No he’s fine, go take a minute, brother.”

I nod at him, then turning out of the room I lead Clara down to the coffee cart, then to a little two person table to the side of the area. After making sure she’s settled in her seat, I move to mine. She takes my hand and rubs the back of it with her thumb.

“How are you holding up today, Papa Bear?” She gives me a small smile, it’s just what I need as my heart warms for her, only ever her and our son.

“He’s going to wake up today. He’ll be okay, then we can go home and get back to normal.”

“Yeah, Roe, he’s going to wake up. How are the others holding up?”

“The twins have each other, their friends, and their sports to work through it. They seem to be the most adjusted to the situation, honestly.” Taking her hand in mine I begin to use my thumb to rub her hand instead of the other way around. “Declan’s worried about Nix. He’s terrified, but he processes by taking care of the people around him, he’s always been like that.” I smile fondly, thinking about my little brother. Before realizing I’m going to have to tell her about Mac next.

“I think Mac is drinking to cope. He’s reeked of alcohol ever since that night. Now it could be what we heard about Riley, it could be Kie, or it could be both. Regardless,

I'm worried about him. I brought it up yesterday but was just met with anger and a 'how else am I supposed to deal with this?' before shoving past me and stalking off. No doubt to go get drunk."

"He doesn't seem to be stumbling over himself, or being boisterous?"

"No I agree, it's like he's just keeping himself to the point where the thoughts don't consume him. I don't know what to do, Pretty Girl. We all drink and it's not a big deal. But no one else is relying on it to solve our issues."

"I know. I don't know what to do either."

"I think after Kie gets home, I'll talk to him about it again. He's not hurting anyone right now, he rides home with one of us if he even leaves. I'll let him deal with it his way for now, so I can focus on Kie."

Finishing our coffee, we stand to head back to the room. Clara turns to face me before stepping up on her toes, and pressing her lips to mine. My hands anchor to her hips in a firm yet gentle grip, before kissing her back. "He'll be okay, babe. They all will and do you know how I know that?"

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Pressing my lips to hers one more time before answering, my brain begins to calm, “How’s that?”

“Because they have the fiercest, most protective, and loving Papa Bear of all time. We’re all so lucky to have you and we’ll figure this all out together. You don’t do these things alone anymore, remember? It’s you and me. We’ll keep everyone else safe and loved.”

God I love this woman, just one conversation and two chaste kisses, and I’m already ready to put my mask firmly back in place and go handle business. But we can’t do that yet, we’re missing one thing before we can leave from this spot. “Safe, Promise?”

“Yeah, Roe. Safe, Promise.”

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Chapter Thirty-Eight

Kieran

Did I wreck my bike? Did we get ambushed? Why do I feel like I’ve been in a head on collision? Everything feels foggy and heavy. I can hear noises but they sound underwater. I’m fighting to get back to the surface of consciousness, but it feels like something’s pulling me back under. I almost succumb to it when I hear a voice that I could pick out of every other voice in the world, because I’ve been hearing it for twenty-one years. I can’t make out what Mac is saying but the panic radiating

through the cadence of his voice tells me he's freaked out and needs me. Forcing myself to wake up despite the almost unbearable pain radiating through my chest, I blink my eyes open. No one's realized yet. I see my brothers all standing around talking in hushed voices while Clara's sitting on a chair near them with Rhett in her lap. Someone is sleeping in a chair beside me, their head laying on top of my open palm. No, not someone, that's Nix. It comes to me in barely there whispers. Her abusers, Ryan, her mom, my brothers. What the hell happened? It takes so much energy to stay awake, I just want to go back to bed, just for a little longer. As I'm about to do just that, Rhett's soft voice floats through the room.

"Uncle Kie? Are you awake? You're not going to go back to sleep, right?"

Well, that just broke my heart. I force myself to talk quietly past my extremely sore throat, "No, Bear. I'm awake."

Every head in that room besides Nix's snaps to me, before everyone starts talking at once, my eyes stay on her sleeping form as I let out a "Shh." Everyone stops immediately.

"My head kills, and don't you dare wake her up. She looks exhausted."

Mac's the first to speak up, "She hasn't left your side since you were shot. She has a concussion and she's been in that seat for five days."

"Concussion?" I whisper-yell. "What are you talking about?"

Everyone looks at Rowan, who approaches the bed like he's walking towards a wounded animal.

"Kie, what do you remember about what happened?"

What I want to say is ‘I don’t fucking know, why don’t you just tell me.’ but I don’t because he doesn’t deserve my wrath just because I’m in pain.

“I don’t know. Tell me what’s going on.”

My heart rate spikes on the monitor, the incessant beeping making my head hurt worse. I really have no idea what happened to her and that freaks me out more than anything.

“We went to get Ryan back from Nix’s sperm donor and his friend. They had her mom captive too. The friend pistolwhipped Nix, before he shot you in the chest. The bullet missed your heart by a centimeter. A centimeter, Kie.” The fear radiates through my big brother’s voice.

“I’m okay, but is she? Has anyone checked her out? Does she need a head scan?” The beeping gets closer together again.

“She was the first one back with Rowan once you were out of surgery, I’ve seen her leave that chair only a handful of times to go to the bathroom. She has a nasty concussion, Kie. Seriously, she should be in her own bed instead of in the chair beside yours.” Mac answers, a small bite to his voice, but I ignore it.

My Brave Girl stirs beside me. Gently pulling my hand from under her head and massaging her scalp I can feel the knot on the side of her head, and make a mental note to avoid it at all costs, and to insist she has a scan.

“Hey, Brave Girl.”

Her eyes spring open to meet mine, “Kie...” She blinks quickly as if making sure she’s actually awake. I was out for five days, not fifty. Why is everyone being so extra? I’ll be up and moving as soon as they pull these I.V’s. Taking a survey of my

girl I notice that she has a deep bruise on her right temple.

“Can we have a moment alone?” I turn to my brothers, four of which nod and head for the door, but Mac stands there, his arms crossed, glaring. Everyone leaves with a promise to come back soon, except him.

“I’m not leaving.”

“Yes, you are. You can sit right outside the door if you need to but I need to talk to her in private.”

He huffs out an annoyed breath before turning on his heels and leaving the room. I turn my attention back to her. I’ll sort things out with him later but she takes priority.

“Come here, Mo Stóirín.” She climbs into bed and snuggles into my right side. My left having all sorts of leads and IV’s hooked up.

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“I thought I lost you. Kieran, I’ve been terrified for days thinking I was going to have to go through the rest of this life without you. I can’t do that. I can do a lot of things alone. I can fight my own battles, and take care of myself. I can do those things, but if you aren’t on this Earth, I can’t. I’m so in love with you I don’t think I’d survive without you. I was so scared.” Her voice breaks on the last word.

“It’s okay. I’m right here, you’re right here, we’re fine, and I am so proud of you. You slayed your monsters on your own. Not everyone could do that, but you did. I love you so much Phoenix. I came back for you, baby.”

“What do you mean you came back?”

“I was with my Da and Ma. I talked to them, hugged them. I wanted to stay with them, but I couldn’t. I couldn’t leave you. I had to come back. I swore to stay.” I can feel her tears soaking my side as her tears stream down her face.

“I’m so sorry I scared you. I’m wearing Kevlar at every job from now on, I promise.”

She lets out a watery laugh, “I think your brothers will make you even if you don’t want to. I was so scared, but so were they. You guys are a unit, Kie. They can’t make it without you, just like you guys couldn’t function correctly when you weren’t talking to each other. Mac hasn’t left here either, Dec only leaves for work, Rowan to take Rhett to and from school, and bedtime. The twins leave long enough to go to school and practices, then they’re back. Eventhe lucky onesare camped out in the waiting room. They don’t come back, they just want to be here for support. You are so insanely loved,babe.”

“I may be insanely loved, and I’m thankful for that. But all I need is to be loved by you.”

She smiles at me before snuggling in tight. My chest begins to ache, and I could assume it’s probably the cut down my sternum, but I know better than that, it’s because she’s been hurting for five days and I couldn’t make it go away or help her. My brothers had to take care of her while I couldn’t, and that makes my chest ache most of all.

It doesn’t take long for Nix’s breathing to even out. The dark bags under her eyes speak for themselves. Mac and Dec quietly make their way back into my room.

“The twins had practice, and Roe went to take Clara and Bear home. Ry’s in the waiting room, waiting for the okay from you. He hasn’t left either, he followed us here and has been waiting for someone to tell him how to help. He wouldn’t come back here until you woke up.” Dec says as he and Mac lean against the wall.

“Why? He’s just as much my brother as you guys are?”

“He doesn’t do well in hospitals, you know that.” Mac reminds me before continuing, “Did you know about Riley?” His voice is so small, so broken, like when I was hurt last time.

“Yeah, little brother. James told us the night before. We were going to sit everyone down when we got home that night. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay. I want to find her. Bring her back here so Theo and Elle can put her to rest properly, with her mother.”

“That’s a great idea. As soon as I’m cleared to go home we’ll do that, okay?” He locks eyes with mine, his blood shot. I’m sure he’s been a wreck since he found out.

“Okay, and Pigeon too, she was her friend too.”

“I think we’ll all go, Mac. We all loved her.” Declan chimes in.

* * *

It took us hours to convince Nix to go home, shower, eat something that wasn’t out of a machine, and take a minute to herself. She kissed me before she walked out and I promised to not even go to sleep until she got back. I’m so tired, though, so I’m kicking my own ass for that one. I’ve just set my phone down from replying to Rowan when Ryan slowly walks through the door.

“Hey, man.” He’s looking everywhere but at me as he talks.

“Ryan, I’m right here. It’s just me laying in a bed, ignore the rest, brother.” Motioning to the chair beside me, my eyes trail him as he walks around and sits back in the shitty recliner.

“Kieran, what the fuck, man?” He lets out an unamused laugh.

“I know. How the fuck did they get you?” I ask, thinking back to the day he was taken.

“I was unarmed and they blew Collin’s head off right beside me. I didn’t have much of a choice.” He looks away.

“Where was your piece? What the fuck, Ry?”

“I gave it to Nix. I went to grab Collin’s but it was just quicker to grab my own. Keep your girl safe, no matter the cost. I knew what I was getting into when you asked me to be her lead guard. So I did what I had to do. I kept her safe. I did my job.”

His response blows my mind, to have a best friend as loyal as Ryan is unheard of. Especially in this world. It's not easy to find a friend who'd voluntarily lay his own life down for you and your family. Ryan blows out a long breath before looking over to me, then shaking his head with a small chuckle.

“So you're getting out of here and we're going back to The Pit, right?”

Now it's my turn to laugh, “Yeah, I'll get right on that.”

Just like that we ease right back into our normal. Ryan stays with me until Nix comes back. By that time my eyes are barely open. She walks in and places a chaste kiss on my lips before saying our goodbyes to Ryan and her climbing into the bed beside me. They've told us to get her out of the bed all day, but we've had to sleep apart for five days, and I'll be damned if I let it be six. Right as we start drifting off she grasps my hand in hers, which makes my eyes fly to hers.

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“What’s wrong, Mo Stóirín?”

“Are you sure you’re awake now? Are you sure you’ll stay?”

A smile tugs at my lips, because Phoenix Walker is strong, she’s capable, and she’s a badass in every aspect of the term but she has a soft spot. I’m the luckiest man in existence to be able to say it’s me. Leaning over gingerly I press my lips to her head.

“Yeah, Brave girl. I’ll stay, swear.”

Epilogue

Phoenix

Standing at the window of mine and Kieran’s bedroom at his brother’s house, my eyes seek out the man that carries my entire heart and soul in his hands. Kieran’s standing with his back to the window, looking impeccable as always, in a charcoal three piece suit. His brother’s face toward the window, all matching, and when Flynn catches me in the window he smirks. I give him a small wave before turning back around and heading back to the middle of the room where my mom and Clara wait for me.

It’s mine and Kieran’s wedding day and I think I’m going to be sick from nerves. I’m not nervous to marry him, no I’m nervous to walk down that aisle by myself. I could have asked my mom, but it didn’t feel right seeing as my biological mom has to watch from heaven today. I run my hands down my ivory lace dress. It fits like a glove from my chest to my hips where it flares out slightly, flowing in a beautiful sea

of fabric around my feet. The straps are thin and more for show than anything else.

“Oh Phoenix, my love. You look absolutely stunning.” She hugs me tightly, careful not to get makeup on my dress.

“I can’t believe we went from best friends to sister-in-law’s in just a year.” Clara wipes under her eyes.

Kieran asked me to marry him about a month after his accident. He took me to the rooftop of the penthouse, where our friendship moved into something more, and told me this is where he knew I was the one. That was ten months ago, and now we’re about to make this thing legal with the help of Ryan who’s ordained apparently and only our closest friends and family. If it was up to him we would have gone to the justice of the peace, but I wanted to have a day for us, even if it was a small one.

With one last look in the mirror and one last I love you from my mom and Clara, they make their way outside. Clara to my side of the altar, and my mom to the front row to watch her Nix rise from the ashes one last time. My hands twist nervously as I make my way downstairs and to the sliding door that leads into the backyard.

The entire backyard has been transformed from a kids dreamland to a simple yet elegant wedding venue. A tent to the side for a reception, chairs in multiple rows, making an aisle for me to walk down. An archway with simple greenery wrapped around it, and the Byrne boys standing beside Kie, who turns around as the music changes. Tears instantly pool in those gorgeous eyes as I follow suit, I begin to walk towards him when a hand gently grabs my arm and wraps it around whoever it is. Looking up confused I’m shocked to find Mac standing beside me. I was so focused on Kieran that I didn’t even notice Mac walking down the aisle to me.

“Come on, Pigeon. Let’s not keep him waiting, he’s impatient.”

“What are you doing? You’re supposed to be up there?”

Mac lets out a low chuckle, “You didn’t really think we’d let you walk down the aisle alone, did you?” And with that Kieran’s brother walks me to him. To my future and to my forever. Because through it all we stayed, and we’ll continue to stay until we’re too old. Even then we’ll die in each other’s arms because that’s what happens when you swear to stay, forever.

Kieran

Nothing feels better in this entire world than spinning my new bride around the dance floor at our wedding reception. I hold Nix close as Sam Smith sings of falling in love, and staying. Her head is resting on my chest, just above my heart. The same heart that almost stopped beating a year ago. Since that day I’ve worn Kevlar to every single job, no matter what. I can’t do much about a head shot, but I can make sure my organs stay safe so I can get home to my Brave Girl every evening.

We moved into the penthouse right around the time we got engaged, and we’ve been there ever since. She loves it, and it really isn’t that much farther to work for her. She’s still Jackson’s assistant, and if she has it her way it’ll stay that way for the foreseeable future. He and I still aren’t on the best terms, but we tolerate each other, and I can appreciate what he and Trick, or whatever the fuck his name is, did for her.

Phoenix, my brothers, and I went on a hunt for Riley’s body. We spent a week out there, surveying every piece of dirt, but in the end, that was acres of heavily wooded area and we came up empty. Mac still is struggling, he said she isn’t at peace yet and he won’t stop searching until he can bring her home to rest, where she belongs. So after our honeymoon we’ll be headed back out there, for the fifth time this year. He’s right and we’re getting closer, I can feel it. But today he’s plastered an almost genuine smile on his face, and he smells like he’s at least partially sober, which is better than any other day over the past year.

The song changes, and I move her off the dance floor as our audience claps for us. “Hey, Mystery Man?”

I can't help but smile at the nickname, "Yeah, Mo Stóirín?"

"Thank you for staying."

"I'll stay until my last breath. I swear."

Tilting her head up to look me in the eyes, those steel orbs knock the breath out of my lungs just like they do every single time. I press my lips to hers, and allow myself to get lost in her for a few seconds.

She's just fully melted into my embrace when a loud, "What the fuck." echoes throughout the backyard. Pulling away, I move Nix behind me to shield her from whatever danger is approaching. As I survey the area, I see everyone turning towards the brown haired woman approaching. Oh fuck no. Who is she and why is she headed for us? She looks vaguely familiar but I can't exactly place why. Her deep green eyes lock on mine and she gives me a polite smile and nod.

"Kieran, congratulations."

Her voice has Nix peering around me before squealing and running to the woman.

"Lee!"

She embraces the woman, but there's still something there. They pull apart, both smiling. Before Phoenix can make a formal introduction to me Theo Rossi's voice permeates through the space.

"Principessa?"

The woman's head jerks to the sound of the voice, but it's Mac who speaks next.

"Riley?"

The End...

For now...