



Her Outlaw Prisoner (Vanishing With the Rebel #1)

Author: Cassi Hart

Category: Action&Adventure

Description: Ellie

It's ironic that on my first day as a prison nurse, I feel safer than I have in years. At least at Oakdale Penitentiary I'm far away from my stalker stepbrother—and prison is the last place he would ever think to look for me.

But I didn't expect my first patient to be so...compelling. I know Ronan's dangerous, and I know I should stay away from him, but I just can't stop the immediate attraction I feel.

When I'm with him, he makes me feel like I'm in control. His ice-cold eyes might strike fear into the hearts of others, but they make me feel like I can trust him. And everything I learn about his violent past only makes me want him more.

Ronan

After five years on the inside, my escape plan is almost ready. I just need a little more time. But then the new nurse walks in and changes everything—I'd cause myself any amount of pain as long as she's the one to patch me up.

As she tends my wounds, I learn she's running from something, from someone. And when I think about whoever made her so afraid, for the first time in five years, I feel the urge to kill again.

Once I've tasted her, I know I can't let her go. Eleanor, keep your bags packed, because when I finally break out of here, I'm taking you with me.

Total Pages (Source): 11

Page 1

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:32 am

Ronan

The yard hums with the restless energy of men who've been caged too long.

Some pace like animals, while others cluster in groups, talking in low murmurs and exchanging whatever scraps of contraband they've managed to smuggle past the guards.

The air stinks of sweat, cigarettes, and desperation. Nothing new.

Just another day at Oakdale Penitentiary.

I lean back against the rough concrete wall, stretching my legs in front of me, keeping my posture loose, disinterested. But I'm watching. I'm always watching.

A shadow moves in my periphery.

"Ro," a voice mutters, low enough that only I can hear.

I shift my gaze just enough to acknowledge him. Benny. Small-time dealer, runs errands for whoever pays the most. Right now, that's me. He doesn't stop walking, just brushes past, and in that brief moment, I feel it—something small and crumpled pressed into my palm.

I wait a beat before glancing down, my fingers closing over the torn scrap of paper.

Then I push off the wall, making my way toward my usual corner—a rusted bench

beneath the half-broken camera that never quite catches this angle.

Five years at Oakdale, and I know every blind spot, every weakness in the system.

I unfold the note, scanning the familiar sprawling handwriting:

Things are moving. Complications, but we're on track. Few weeks, maybe. Stay ready—Theo.

Frustration tightens in my chest. I run a hand through my hair, gritting my teeth against the urge to punch the wall.

Few weeks. Maybe.

What the actual fuck?

I've been here too long. Five years of staring at the same cold walls, breathing the same recycled air, listening to the same men make the same fucking threats.

Five years of keeping my head down just enough to stay out of solitary, but never low enough to lose the power I wield here, the control I've fought for.

Five years of waiting for the right moment.

And now this motherfucker is telling me to wait longer. I pay a fucking fortune to keep him useful and now he says a few more weeks...?

I close my eyes, letting out a resigned sigh. There's no use getting worked up. If Theo says to wait, then there must be a good reason. The bastard is the best hustler on the street. And as long as he's paid, he'll do anything.

And I pay him too damn well.

I fold the paper, slip it under my tongue, let my saliva break it down before I swallow. No evidence. No mistakes.

The tension in my muscles coils tighter. I need to hit something, need to move, need—

Movement catches my eye.

A woman is walking across the yard, flanked by a correctional officer.

She doesn't belong here. It's obvious in the way she moves—cautious, unsure, like she knows she's out of place.

I scan her quickly. Light brown hair pulled into a loose ponytail, wide hazel eyes taking in everything around her, soft pink lips pressed together like she's trying not to react to what she's seeing.

A new nurse.

I guess the greedy fat-faced warden finally got around to hiring someone new, seeing as several inmates almost lost their lives to a tuberculosis outbreak due to lack of medical personnel. I lean forward, elbows on my knees, watching her.

She's small, delicate—too delicate for a place like this. Someone like her normally wouldn't last a day in here without protection. And yet, there's something about the way she holds herself. A quiet strength.

Interesting .

A slow smirk tugs at the corner of my mouth. I may not be able to control the timing of my escape, but this? This, I can control...

I glance across the yard, catching the gaze of one of the guys who owes me a favor. I give him a small nod.

He knows immediately what I want.

Time to cause some trouble.

Torres is a burly bodybuilder with more scars than anyone can count.

Definitely the right man for the job. He's not the brightest, but he knows better than to question me.

Within seconds, he's bumping into a hotheaded recruit from D-block, whispering something in his ear. Just like that, a fight breaks out.

Predictable.

The yard erupts as fists fly, bodies collide, and the guards rush in, barking orders. The correctional officer escorting the nurse hesitates, his attention flicking toward the commotion.

Good. That's all I need.

I move.

It takes no effort to step into the chaos, to make sure I'm just close enough when Torres swings too wide and his elbow smashes against my brow. Pain flares, warm and sharp, and blood instantly beads at my temple before sliding down my cheek.

Perfect. Nice job, Torres.

A whistle blows. Guards shove their way into the brawl, cracking batons against ribs and dragging inmates apart. I stagger back, wiping at the blood with the back of my hand, blinking like I'm dazed.

"Hey!" One of the guards—Jones—grabs my arm, eyes narrowing when he sees the cut. "Shit. You're bleeding."

I don't fight when he hauls me toward the clinic. That was the plan.

The gorgeous new nurse is still standing there, gripping the strap of her medical bag like it's the only thing keeping her grounded.

Up close, I realize she's even smaller than I thought, delicate but with something defiant in her stance, in the way she's holding herself still despite her skin going pale.

She looks up and our gazes clash. Something flares in her eyes, an awareness that sends thrills coursing through my veins. She bites her lip nervously but doesn't look away.

Interesting.

"Got your first patient for you," Jones tells her, shoving me forward. I could resist if I wanted to. I could plant my feet and make him "force" me. But I don't. I let him take me inside.

The clinic is small. Sterile. The sharp scent of antiseptic burns my nose. She moves quickly, setting up gauze and antiseptic pads on a tray.

She won't look at me.

That's fine.

I watch her instead.

She has soft, careful hands, but they tremble slightly as she dabs at the cut on my temple. I can feel the warmth of her fingers, the hesitant way she touches me, like she's afraid I might snap.

I won't. Not yet. Not at her.

"You're new," I murmur. My voice is rough from disuse, but it has the effect I want. She freezes for a fraction of a second before forcing herself to keep working.

"Yes," she says quietly.

"Your name is Eleanor," I continue, glancing at the name embroidered on her uniform.

Something flashes in her pretty hazel eyes, but before I can figure out what it is, she drops her gaze.

"Call me Ellie," she murmurs after a long stretch of silence.

"Why?"

She shrugs, but doesn't look at me. "Cause everyone calls me that."

"Eleanor suits you better."

She ducks her head as a flush rises to her cheeks.

“Nervous?” I ask, watching her face.

“No.”

Liar.

I chuckle, low and quiet. “You should be.”

That makes her pause again. Those hazel eyes flick up, meeting mine for the first time since I walked in here. Up close, they’re even more striking. Wide, expressive. Easy to read.

Right now, they’re filled with curiosity and a hint of anxiety.

I tilt my head slightly, watching her watch me.

“Eleanor,” I say, testing her name on my tongue.

She inhales sharply, her lips parting slightly, and I see the way her throat moves as she swallows. She doesn’t correct me, doesn’t tell me to call her something else.

Good.

For the first time in five years, something stirs in my chest, something unexpected. Excitement? Anticipation? I can’t tell, but whatever it is, one thing is for sure. The next few days, maybe weeks, in Oakdale are about to get interesting.

Seems like I’ll be at the infirmary quite a lot.

Eleanor doesn’t move for a long moment. Her fingers are still pressed lightly against my skin, the antiseptic pad hovering near the cut like she’s forgotten what she was

doing. She blinks once, twice, then finally looks away, clearing her throat.

“I’m Ronan,” I say when she doesn’t say anything. “Ronan Callahan.”

“You should hold still,” she murmurs, voice steadier than I expect. “Ronan,” she adds, and I can hear the hint of amusement in her voice.

I smirk. “Maybe you should hold on harder.”

That makes her press the gauze against my wound a little too firmly. A stinging sensation spreads across my temple, sharp and burning. I don’t even flinch. If anything, it makes me more interested. She has some fight in her, buried under all that sweetness.

“That stings,” I say after a beat, watching the way she moves, how she focuses too hard on her work, as if ignoring me will make me disappear.

“Maybe you should avoid getting into fights, then,” she replies. I can tell she’s barely holding back from rolling her eyes.

I chuckle, a soft, amused sound. “Who says I was fighting?”

She pauses to look at me, her lips pressed together like she’s thinking about what I just said. Like she’s really thinking about it.

“You weren’t fighting?” she asks finally, voice quieter, but there’s an edge of curiosity to it.

I let a smirk tug at my lips. She’s smart. Smarter than I expected.

I don’t answer. Just tilt my head slightly, letting the silence stretch between us. I want

to see how she reacts to it. If she fidgets...if she gets nervous...

She does. Her fingers tighten around the gauze, and her hazel eyes flick down to my lips before she catches herself and looks away.

Interesting.

She turns back to the tray beside her, grabbing a fresh piece of gauze. "Well, whatever happened, this will probably need stitches."

She's changing the subject. I let her. For now.

The only sound is the distant echo of voices outside, the occasional crackle of a radio from the guard stationed near the door. But all of that fades into the background. Right now, there's only her. Just the two of us in this small room.

She steps closer, reaching for a suture kit. I don't move, don't flinch, don't do a damn thing but watch.

She's so damn beautiful it feels almost surreal...

"You're quiet," she says, almost to herself.

"Mm."

She looks at me again. I can tell she's the kind of person who expects people to fill the silence, to make small talk, but I'm not one for small talk. I've never been...

Her throat moves as she swallows. She's trying so hard to seem unaffected, but I see everything. The way her breathing changes when I look at her. The way her fingers tremble slightly as she threads the needle.

She licks her lips.

I follow the motion.

Her cheeks turn a soft shade of pink, and she quickly refocuses on her work. I almost laugh. Almost.

Instead, I sit still as she leans in, one hand steadying my jaw while the other brings the needle to my skin. The sting is sharp, the pull of the thread tight as she closes the wound. I barely feel it. Pain is nothing new to me.

But the feeling of her hands? That's different.

It's been five years since anyone has touched me without fear. Five years since I've felt someone's hands on me without violence, pain, or some kind of cost.

She's careful. Gentle.

I don't like it.

I like it too much.

She exhales softly, finishing the last stitch before knotting the thread. "There," she says, sitting back slightly. "That should hold."

She looks at me, waiting for some kind of response. Maybe a thank-you.

She won't get one.

Instead, I tilt my head, studying her the way I study everyone. "Why are you here?"

A flicker of surprise crosses her face.

“I—” She hesitates, like she wasn’t expecting me to ask. “I work here.”

I give her a look. She knows that’s not what I meant.

She exhales, her gaze dropping for half a second before she squares her shoulders. “It was the first job that called me back.”

A lie. Or at least, not the full truth.

A girl like her doesn’t belong in a place like this. She’s soft. Too soft. She should be anywhere but here, treating men like me.

I lean forward slightly, just enough to make her inhale sharply. “Coming here might not have been a very smart choice, Eleanor.”

Her eyes widen, and for a second, I think she’s going to shrink back. But she doesn’t. Instead, she swallows and lifts her chin a fraction of an inch. “Maybe,” she admits. “But I’m here now.”

I grin. A slow, dangerous thing.

She’s braver than she looks.

Interesting.

Before she can say anything else, Jones opens the door and clears his throat. “You done, nurse?”

She blinks, like she just remembered where she is, who she’s with.

“Yes,” she says quickly, stepping back.

He motions for me to stand, and I do, towering over her as I push to my feet. I don’t miss the way her breath hitches as I pass by.

I stop just before I reach the door. Turn my head slightly.

“See you soon, Eleanor.”

She doesn’t respond, but I can feel her eyes on me as I walk out.

And for the first time in five years, I have something new to think about. Something exhilarating.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:32 am

Ellie

I knew working at a prison wouldn't be easy. I mean, it's home to all sorts of criminals, the most hardened men in the country. I was ready for surprises. But nothing could have prepared me for Ronan Callahan.

Even now, long after he walked out of the infirmary, I can still feel him...the weight of his gaze, the way his rough voice sent chills across my skin, the raw intensity in his eyes.

I should be scared.

Instead, my hands are shaking for an entirely different reason as I clean up the tray of supplies, my fingers brushing against the used gauze that holds traces of his blood. I take a slow breath, willing my heart to settle. It doesn't.

His eyes were the first thing I noticed. Icy blue, but not cold. More like fire trapped beneath ice...burning just beneath the surface. He barely spoke, but when he did, his words carried authority, like he's used to people listening.

And I did listen.

I listened to him, and I hung on every word like a fool.

See you soon, Eleanor.

Heat floods my cheeks at the memory. Nobody has called me Eleanor since my dad

passed away when I was little. Hearing Ronan call me that name triggered distant memories of when life used to be so much simpler. And happier...

But more than that, hearing him say my name makes me feel a sense of awareness that I've never felt before in my life. There's something about the way he says Eleanor ...like it holds some secret meaning that only he knows.

Heat pools between my legs as the sound of his voice echoes in my head. I swallow hard, pushing the memory away.

I should not be thinking about him like this.

He's an inmate. A convicted criminal. A man who probably has nothing to lose.

And yet...

I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to shake the strange, unwelcome pull inside me. It's just adrenaline. Just nerves from my first real encounter with an inmate. It doesn't mean anything. Right?

"You must be the new nurse?"

I jump, nearly knocking over the tray of supplies. I look up to see an older woman in a uniform similar to mine, standing in front of me with a small smile. She looks to be in her mid thirties, maybe late...

"Yes. Yes, I am," I say, clearing my throat awkwardly. "My name is Ellie."

She nods, her smile widening just a fraction. "Nice to meet you, Ellie. I'm Gina." She scans my face, her expression unreadable. "You okay?"

I nod quickly, forcing a smile. “Yeah. Just...just cleaning up.”

She eyes me like she doesn’t quite believe me, but she doesn’t push. “First day can be overwhelming. You’ll get used to it.”

I doubt that.

She leans against the counter, crossing her arms. “Who was your first patient?”

I hesitate. “A man named Ronan. Ronan Callahan.”

Her expression changes instantly, her posture stiffening as she exhales sharply. “Jesus. That’s a hell of an introduction to Oakdale.”

I glance at her, my curiosity flaring despite myself. “Do you know him?”

“Everyone knows Ronan,” Gina says, giving me a strange look. “He’s practically royalty around here. Feared, respected, untouchable. If there’s a king of Oakdale, it’s Ronan Callahan.”

A shiver travels down my spine at her words, though I’m not sure if it’s from fear or something else.

I shouldn’t ask. I shouldn’t...

But I do. “What’s he here for?”

Gina huffs out a laugh. “You don’t want to know.”

“I—I think I do...”

She studies me for a moment, then leans in slightly, lowering her voice. “Five years ago, his sister was murdered. Brutally. The guy responsible got off easy for lack of evidence or some bullshit technicality. So Ronan took justice into his own hands. Hunted him down and ended him.”

My stomach twists. “What?”

She nods. “The news called him the vigilante killer.”

I swallow hard, a strange mix of emotions swirling inside me. Horror. Sympathy. Understanding?

Gina sighs. “Look, he’s been a model prisoner, but don’t let that fool you. He’s dangerous, Ellie.”

Dangerous.

I should remember that.

I should be scared.

But all I can think about is the way he looked at me. Like he saw me. Like he really saw me. No one has ever looked at me like that. In my twenty-two years, no one has ever made me feel the things he did in just minutes of meeting him.

I try to shake off the conversation as I finish cleaning up, but Gina’s words echo in my mind.

He’s dangerous, Ellie.

It’s not just what Ronan did...it’s how she said it, the weight behind her words. The

warning in her tone. Like she knows something I don't...

Whatever the case, I'm here now. I don't have the luxury of second-guessing myself. I took this job to escape, to disappear into something new. Oakdale isn't ideal, but it's far from home. Far from him .

The last thing I need is to get tangled up with a man like Ronan Callahan. It doesn't matter that my body still feels wired from our brief encounter, or that I still want to see him again even after Gina's warning...

I need to steer clear of him.

Gina pats my shoulder, startling me from my thoughts. "If Callahan's taken an interest in you, be careful."

I nod, even though I'm not entirely sure I'll heed her warning. When it comes to Ronan, I have no control over how my body reacts to him.

By the time my shift ends, I'm exhausted, but my mind refuses to quiet down.

I had several other patients throughout the day, but I keep thinking about Ronan, replaying our interaction in my head, dissecting every second.

The way his voice curled around my name, the way he watched me like he was memorizing me.

I hate that I liked it.

I step outside into the cold evening air and pull my jacket tighter around me. The bus stop is just a short walk from the prison gates, but even as I move quickly, I can't shake the feeling of being watched. It's a familiar unease, one that makes my stomach

twist.

I glance over my shoulder. Nothing.

I exhale sharply and keep walking.

It's just paranoia. It has to be. I have lived half of my life looking over my shoulder, scared of whatever's lurking in the shadows. I moved to a different state, moved all the way to this small town, just to run away from that feeling.

There's no way he'll find me here.

I keep telling myself that, but I can't shake away the dread that clings to me like a second skin. By the time I reach my tiny apartment, I'm on edge. I double-check the locks, flick on all the lights, and try to convince myself that I'm safe.

I left my old life behind. And my stepbrother in it.

I take a long shower, letting the hot water ease the tension in my body, but even as I close my eyes, I see Ronan. I feel the way my pulse jumped when he said my name. The way his presence filled the room, swallowing the space between us.

It's reckless and stupid, but I want to see him again.

And the next morning, I get my wish. I arrive at the medical wing earlier than required, hoping to get lost in my new routine. Anything to keep my mind occupied.

But as soon as I step inside the clinic, my breath catches in my throat. Ronan is here. Waiting for me.

He's sitting on the exam table, a lazy smirk curving his lips, his hands resting on his

thighs like he owns the place.

“Good morning, Mr. Callahan,” I say, trying to keep my voice level. “How may I help you this morning?”

“Aren’t we way past last names, Eleanor?” he asks, his lips tilting upward in a smug smirk.

My cheeks flare up in embarrassment. “You’re my patient.”

“Call me Ronan.”

“How may I help you, Ronan?” I ask, suppressing the urge to laugh when he arches his brows playfully.

His smirk deepens. “I have a little...stomachache.”

I blink at him in confusion. He looks nothing like someone with a stomachache. I glance at the guard who escorted him in, noticing the looseness in his stance...the way he’s actively ignoring us. And it clicks.

“Did you fake a sickness just to be here?”

“What if I did?”

My heart skips with excitement, but I keep my expression neutral as I grab a pair of gloves and step closer. “Well, since you’re here, I might as well check.”

His smirk doesn’t fade as I press my fingers against his abdomen, feeling for any signs of real distress. His skin is warm beneath the thin fabric of his shirt, his muscles rigid beneath my touch. He watches me the whole time, his gaze burning intensely

into mine.

“Am I dying, doc?” he murmurs.

I roll my eyes, unable to hold back a burst of laughter. “I’m not a doctor. And you’re fine, Mr. Calla—Ronan.”

“But I don’t feel fine,” he counters with a nonchalant shrug. “I think you should examine me again.”

He’s dangerous, Eleanor.

Gina’s words flash in my head, unbidden. I should send him back to his cell...should tell him to leave...but instead, I linger.

Instead, I meet his gaze with a defeated sigh. “Why exactly are you here, Ronan?”

“To see you, Eleanor.”

There’s something so intimate about the way he says my name, the way he’s looking at me...

I should ignore it. I should stop whatever this is that’s budding between us, but a reckless part of me, the part that has always been stifled, caged by the terror of always being watched—wants to push.

Just a little.

So I tilt my head, pretending to study him. “You faked a stomachache just to see me...why?”

“Why not?” he counters, his lips spreading in a carefree smile that makes him look even more handsome.

“That’s kind of desperate, don’t you think?” I let my lips curve slightly, challenging him.

Something flashes in his blue eyes, but he doesn’t look offended. If anything, he just looks...intrigued.

“Desperate?” he repeats, like he’s tasting the word. “No. Just...determined.”

I arch a brow. “Determined for what?”

He leans in just slightly, enough that I can feel the heat rolling off him. “You tell me.”

My breath catches.

I should not be doing this. I should not be flirting with a convicted felon, especially one as dangerous as Ronan Callahan.

But there’s something between us...an undeniable pull that’s fast spinning out of control.

Something keeps drawing me to him. Maybe it’s the way he looks at me, like I’m something precious. Something beautiful.

Or maybe it’s the way he lets me push, lets me prod.

Like he’s giving me control.

And God, that's a new feeling.

My entire life has been dictated by the whims of others. My stepbrother's cruelty, the world that told me to keep my head down and be good. I've never felt like I had control over anything in my life, but right now, with him, I do.

Yes, Ronan is dangerous. The kind of man who could snap his fingers and make someone disappear. A man who is feared inside these walls. And yet, he's letting me play with him.

My pulse skips as I take a step closer, breaking the last bit of space between us. His nostrils flare slightly, but he doesn't move away.

"You know what?" I murmur, tilting my head, pretending to examine him. "Maybe I do need to examine you again."

His eyes darken. "Yes?"

"Yes." I place my fingers lightly against his wrist, right where his pulse beats strong and steady. "Your pulse seems normal."

He watches me, unmoving, as I trail my fingers up his forearm, slowly. His muscles twitch beneath my fingertips, his eyes burning with a fire that urges me on. I know I'm playing a dangerous game, but I can't seem to stop.

I press my palm lightly against his chest, over his racing heart. "Though...your heartbeat does seem a little...erratic." I bite my lip, trying to suppress a smile. "Are you under some kind of stress, Mr. Callahan?"

His jaw tightens. "Careful, Eleanor."

“Why?” I let my hand linger a second longer than necessary before I finally step back. “Afraid I’ll diagnose you with something embarrassing?”

His eyes burn into mine. “No. Afraid you’ll keep pushing until you get more than you’re ready for.”

A shiver rolls down my spine. I should back away now. But I’m enjoying this too much.

So I lift my chin, meeting his stare head-on. “Maybe I’m ready.”

Ronan exhales slowly, like he’s reining something in. For a second, neither of us move. The air between us becomes charged, crackling with tension. Then, in a move so subtle I almost miss it, he shifts so I’m standing between his legs, my thighs pressing against his erection.

My core clenches in response, heat pooling between my legs. I glance down to see him looking at me, waiting...

He’s waiting for me to decide.

The realization makes my breath hitch. No one has ever given me such power. I’ve spent my whole life under someone else’s thumb, feeling small and helpless. But Ronan makes me feel in control. Powerful.

Slowly, I step back, dragging out the moment just to watch the flicker of frustration in his gaze.

I like it.

I like knowing that I can get under his skin, that I can make a man like Ronan react.

His eyes stay locked on mine as I grab a notepad and scribble something down, my hand steady even though my whole body is shaking from having him so close.

“Looks like you’re fine,” I say breezily. “But next time you fake being sick, at least try to make it convincing.”

A low chuckle rumbles from his chest. “I’ll work on that,” he murmurs.

I press my lips together to stop my own smile from forming. “Goodbye, Ronan.”

“See you soon, Eleanor.”

Oh, those words...

I’m sure he’ll keep his promise. And so help me God, I look forward to it.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:32 am

Ronan

I'm restless.

It's been more than twenty-four hours since I last saw her, and I hate that I'm feeling like this. I've spent five years at Oakdale controlling every aspect of my existence. I don't crave things. I don't let myself want things. Wanting leads to weakness.

But Eleanor...she's under my skin.

Eleanor.

I say her name in my head too often. Feel her touch against my skin long after it's gone.

No one has ever made me feel like this. Not in the five years I've been locked up.

Not in the years before that. I don't get distracted.

The one time I did, I lost the most precious part of me.

Ever since, I swore never to let my guard down.

But with Eleanor, it's hard to keep my guard up. Everything about her—her soft smile, her daring warm hands, and those dazzling hazel eyes...

I need to see her again.

I roll my shoulders and glance over at Chase, my cellmate. He's perched on the lower bunk, sharpening a dull razor against the metal bed frame. He's been in and out of Oakdale long enough to know how things work.

"You busy?" I ask.

Chase doesn't stop sharpening. "Depends."

I smirk. "I need to get to the infirmary."

That makes him pause. He glances up at me, amusement dancing in his eyes. "Jesus, Ro. You've been at the infirmary every damn day since that new nurse showed up."

I don't respond. I just wait.

Chase grins. "You sweet on her or something?"

I don't move. Don't blink. Just let my silence do the talking.

His grin fades a little. He exhales and tosses the razor aside. "Fine, fine. What's the deal?"

"I need an injury. Minor. Enough to get me sent in, but nothing that'll slow me down."

He leans back, crossing his arms. "And what do I get for it?"

I already knew this part was coming.

"I'll double your cut next week."

His brows shoot up. “Double?”

“On the condition that you don’t ask any more questions,” I say, holding his gaze. “And not a word about this.”

He whistles low, shaking his head. “Shit. She must be something if you’re throwing around that kind of money.”

I don’t answer.

He studies me for a second, then shrugs. “Alright. Let’s get you to the infirmary.”

Things happen fast after that. Chase follows the plan, starting a fight in the rec yard.

Nothing major. He waits until we’re in the thick of the crowd, then throws a solid punch to my ribs, not enough to break anything, but enough to make it look real.

I let myself stumble, hissing through my teeth.

Officer Rodriguez steps in, shouting. “Break it up!”

Chase backs off immediately, hands raised, playing the part of an inmate who doesn’t want trouble.

I, on the other hand, clutch my ribs, breathing heavy.

Rodriguez eyes me. “You good?”

I shake my head. “Think something’s cracked.”

He sighs, already annoyed. He can probably tell I’m up to something, but he can’t

risk me being truly injured and him not doing anything. “Let’s get you to the infirmary.”

Perfect.

He puts his arm around my shoulder and I lean heavily against him, playing my part too well as he leads me to the clinic.

Once we’re at the door and away from the other guards, I slip him a folded bill, locking my eyes onto his.

He hesitates, then nods and steps outside, locking the door behind him.

Rodriguez respects the power I have here—he’ll make sure I’m undisturbed.

Eleanor is at the counter, back turned, organizing supplies. She doesn’t hear me at first. But then her body tenses up and she slowly turns around. For a fleeting second, I catch a glimpse of terror in her eyes.

“Oh, it’s you,” she murmurs with a smile that doesn’t quite reach her eyes.

She sounds... relieved . Why?

“Sounds like you were expecting someone else,” I say, keeping my tone light. “Miss me?”

She rolls her eyes. “What brings you here this time?”

“A punch to the guts.”

She chuckles, her beautiful eyes twinkling with genuine humor this time. “You sure

get into fights a lot.”

I shrug, settling onto the table. “Occupational hazard.”

She rolls her eyes again and steps closer, reaching out to examine my ribs. I can feel the hesitation in her hands. Like she knows she’s stepping into dangerous territory but can’t bring herself to stop. I don’t move. Don’t speak. Just let her touch me.

I know she likes that...likes to feel in control.

Her fingers press gently against my side, searching for damage. “You’re not broken,” she mutters. “Just bruised.”

I tilt my head, smiling into her eyes. “You sound disappointed.”

She huffs. “I don’t exactly enjoy seeing my patients hurt.”

I smirk, wrapping my hand around her waist to tug her closer. “I bet you enjoy treating me, though.”

She doesn’t say anything for a moment, but she doesn’t pull away. Her eyes meet mine, her hands lingering on my skin. “What exactly do you want from me, Ronan?”

Her question lingers between us, her gaze shy but steady. She’s testing me again. Pushing. Seeing if I’ll...snap? It’s almost like she wants me to snap.

I slide my hand up her waist, slowly, deliberately...the fabric of her scrubs soft beneath my palm.

“What do I want?” I murmur. Her breath hitches as I lean in, just enough for her to feel my warmth, for my breath to graze her skin. “I think you already know.”

Her fingers press into my ribs, not to check for bruising this time, but to hold me there. It's subtle, the way her hands tighten against me, but I notice.

She wants this. Even if she's fighting it.

She tilts her chin up, just a fraction, but it's enough. Enough for me to see the war waging in her hazel eyes. Enough for me to decide that I'm done waiting...

I move slowly, giving her time to stop me. But she doesn't. My lips brush against hers, softly at first. Just a whisper of a kiss. Just enough to taste her. She exhales sharply, like she's been holding her breath this whole time.

Again, she doesn't move away. She doesn't tell me to stop. Instead, her fingers tighten in my shirt, pulling me closer. I let her. I want her to.

She's been testing boundaries since the moment we met...pushing, teasing, seeing how much I'll allow. And the truth is, when it comes to her, I'll allow a lot more than I should, more than I ever would with anyone else...

I cup her jaw, tilting her face up. Her skin is warm, her pulse racing under my fingertips. "Last chance to stop me, baby," I murmur.

Her lips part, her breath shaky. But there's no hesitation in her eyes anymore. "Don't stop," she whispers.

I don't.

I kiss her deeply, like I've been waiting my whole damn life for this moment. She gasps into my mouth, her fingers curling into my shirt, holding on like she needs me to keep her grounded. I slide my hand down her back, pulling her flush against me, and fuck...she feels perfect.

Soft, warm, mine.

I let her take control at first, let her have me the way she needs to. She moves against me, lips searching, hands greedy, hungry.

But then something shifts.

Her nails dig into my chest, her tongue teasing against mine, and I lose the last shred of patience I have left.

I grip her hips and switch places with her, lifting her onto the exam table in one swift motion.

She gasps against my mouth, her thighs spreading to make room for me to stand between them.

I step in, pressing against her, swallowing the soft moan that escapes her lips. She likes this. Likes when I take charge, when I make her feel small and overwhelmed in the best fucking way. But she also likes the control—likes knowing she can push me, pull me, drive me crazy.

I let her pull my shirt, let her tug me closer, let her take what she needs from me.

Because I'll give her anything. Everything.

Her hands slide up my arms, gripping my shoulders, nails biting into my skin. I drag my lips from her mouth, down her jaw, then lower, tasting her. She trembles beneath me.

“Ronan,” she breathes.

My name, from her lips, is the most dangerously sexy sound in the world.

I smirk against her throat, dragging my teeth along her skin. “You like this, baby?”

She doesn’t answer with words. She just moves against me, desperate and reckless, her body telling me everything I need to know.

I groan, hands gripping her hips, pressing her harder against me. “Tell me, Eleanor.”

She shudders. “Yes,” she pants. “Yes, I like it.”

Those whispered words nearly undo me.

I pull back just enough to meet her gaze. Her pupils are blown wide, her lips swollen, her chest rising and falling in uneven breaths. She’s never looked more beautiful. And she’s all mine.

I slide my hand under her chin, forcing her to hold my gaze. “You want more?”

Her breath catches. But then, slowly, a small, shy smile curves her lips. “Yes.”

Fuck.

I grip the edge of the table, barely hanging on to my last shred of control. The way she’s looking at me, her eyes filled with a trusting innocence. It’s dangerous.

She leans in, her lips brushing against my ear. “I want you, Ronan. Please.”

Jesus Christ.

A deep, guttural sound rumbles from my chest. She’s playing with fire. And she

fucking knows it. I grab her hips, yanking her forward to the edge of the table until there's nothing between us but heat and fabric and need. Her breath hitches.

She knows she's in trouble now. I smirk against her jaw, my voice dark, low, and dangerous. "There's no going back now, baby."

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:32 am

Ellie

I shouldn't be doing this.

I should stop.

Ronan Callahan is no ordinary man. He's a dangerous man, an inmate with a terrifying past. A man with whom I have no future...

I really shouldn't be doing any of this.

But the moment Ronan's mouth crashes against mine, I forget common sense.

His lips are firm, demanding, sending a shock wave through my body that leaves me breathless.

My fingers curl into his shirt, pulling him closer, needing him closer.

Every inch of me is burning, my skin hypersensitive to every place he touches.

I've never done this before—never needed anyone like this before. Maybe it's because with Ronan, I don't feel small or weak. Maybe it's because this powerful man lets me touch him, tease him, take from him...

Maybe it's because for the first time in my life, I know what it feels like to be in control of something.

I tilt my head, deepening the kiss, pressing my body against him, and I feel his sharp inhale, like I've caught him off guard.

I affect him. As much as he affects me.

The realization sends exhilaration rushing through me and I grind my body against his.

A deep, guttural sound vibrates in his chest, and his hands tighten on my hips, pulling me closer, until there isn't a single space left between us.

I can feel him, his hardness...every solid inch of muscle and heat pressed against me, and it makes my stomach clench, my thighs tighten.

I should be nervous.

I've never been this close to a man before, never let someone touch me like this, never felt the weight of desire pressing down on me so hard I can barely breathe.

But I'm not scared. Not of him.

His fingers skim down my spine, slow and deliberate, like he's memorizing every dip, every curve. My breath stutters when he reaches the small of my back, his fingertips slipping just beneath the hem of my shirt. Just enough to tease. Just enough to make me want more.

He breaks the kiss first, but he doesn't go far, his forehead resting against mine. His breath is uneven, his fingers flexing against my skin like he's still holding himself back.

"You don't know what you're doing to me, Eleanor," he rasps.

I shiver. Because I do.

And I love it.

I tighten my grip on his shirt, letting my nails scrape against his chest, and the muscles beneath my fingers tense.

His eyes darken, the control in them slipping, and a thrill shoots through me.

I like this. The tension, the push and pull.

The way he's trying so damn hard to stay in control when I can tell he's this close to losing it.

I wonder what it'd be like to see him lose all that control he's holding on to so tightly.

I drag my fingers up his chest, letting my nails scratch against his throat, tracing the sharp edge of his jaw.

His eyes flicker shut for half a second, a vein fluttering dangerously on his neck.

I lean down to graze my lips over the vein.

Ronan grunts, a deep, tortured sound that seems to come from deep down in his chest.

His grip tightens on me, his fingers digging into my waist, and suddenly I'm the one who can't breathe.

"Do you really wanna do this, baby?" he asks, his voice dangerously low.

"Yes."

There's no denying this for me, this insane pull, this electrifying sensation of his body against mine. There's no denying the things he makes me feel.

His lips crash against mine again, but this time it's different—harder. Almost desperate.

I gasp against his mouth, my hands tangling in his hair, holding on because suddenly I feel like I'm falling, drowning in a strange sea of sensations.

His hands slide under my shirt, cupping my breasts through my lace bra.

I moan into his mouth, trembling as my nipples harden beneath his hands.

I arch into him, wanting more, needing him to keep going.

He must feel how desperate I am, because he groans against my lips, then drags his mouth down, over my jaw, down my throat.

I tilt my head back, giving him more access, my pulse hammering so hard I'm sure he can feel it.

His tongue flicks against my pulse, his teeth scraping, teasing.

I moan before I can stop myself, but then cut myself off, glancing toward the door nervously.

I feel his smirk against my skin. "That's it," he murmurs. "Let me hear you. I paid Rodriguez to give us a little undisturbed time. It's just you and me."

I should be embarrassed. Should be overwhelmed. But all I feel is an overwhelming heat, pooling from the area between my legs and spreading rapidly throughout my

body. He kneads my left breast hard, his thumb grazing my aching nipple.

“Say something, baby,” he murmurs raggedly, his breath hot against my skin. “Tell me to stop. Or tell me to keep going.”

Again, he’s giving me control. The realization floors me.

I don’t hesitate. “Don’t stop.”

I barely get the words out before his mouth is on mine again, hard. Possessive. He pushes my shirt higher, and I raise my hands so he can easily pull it off. He gently sets it aside, then removes my bra as well, his eyes feasting greedily on my body.

“Damn, Eleanor. You’re gorgeous.”

Heat flares up in my cheeks, my stomach tightening at the raw lust in his eyes.

I grab the hem of his shirt and pull. He lets me, watching me, waiting for me to make the move.

And when I finally tug the fabric over his head, when I see the ridges of his muscles, the scars and tattoos inked into his skin, my mouth goes dry.

He’s beautiful in a way that’s dangerous. In a way that ruins whatever naivety I have left in me. I let my fingers trace the scars along his ribs, the muscles flexing beneath my touch. His breath hitches, his eyes locked onto mine, and I feel my heart swell with emotions I can’t begin to define.

I lean in, pressing my lips against one of the scars, and his whole body goes tight.

Then, suddenly, he pushes me back against the cold exam table, climbing up over my

body and gazing down at me, his eyes roving my face with a savage need.

We're aligned, his body resting between my spread thighs, his erection pressing against my core through our pants. I raise my hips to grind against him.

"You have no idea what you do to me," he mutters roughly, leaning down to brush his lips against mine. "Eleanor..."

My name on his lips sounds like a desperate whisper, a song of salvation. I let out a soft sigh as another shiver racks my body. I want more. More of him. All of him. Maybe I can't take it. Maybe I'll regret it later. But in this moment, I want everything he's willing to give.

I wrap my arms around his neck, pulling him down, pressing my lips to his ear. "Stop holding back, Ronan," I whisper. "I want all of you."

A shudder spreads through his body, and I literally feel his control snap. His fingers dig into my hips as he yanks me against him, his lips crashing onto mine. This time, there's no hesitation, no gentleness—only raw, aching need.

I whimper against his mouth, and he growls, his hands sliding down my stomach to my pants. He breaks the kiss just long enough to pull my pants and underwear down my legs and toss them aside before his gaze drops to my exposed skin.

I'm completely bare before him, and the way he looks at me...God.

Like he's starving.

Like I'm the only thing he's ever wanted.

I feel my cheeks flush, but the heat in his eyes burns away my shyness.

He reaches out, running his fingers down my stomach in slow, reverent strokes. “You’re perfect,” he murmurs, almost like he doesn’t mean to say it out loud.

My heart skips.

I don’t feel perfect. I never have. But somehow, I believe him. He pushes me back onto the exam table, his weight settling over me again, pressing me down in the best way. My legs bracket his hips, and when he grinds against me, I gasp, my fingers digging into his skin.

“Fuck,” he groans. “You feel so good.”

I don’t even know what I’m doing, but my body does, moving on instinct, arching into him, chasing the intoxicating friction. Ronan lets out a low, wrecked curse, burying his face in my neck.

“God, I want to be inside of you so bad,” he growls, running his tongue over my earlobe. “You don’t mind that I don’t have protection, do you?”

“N-no,” I stutter, clearing my throat nervously. “I’ve never had to take birth control, but I could, um, get some pills on my way home or something.”

“It’s your first time doing this?” he asks, pausing to look at me.

I drop my gaze, feeling my cheeks burn with embarrassment. “Y-yes.”

He remains silent, his expression unreadable. “Damn, Eleanor,” he says after a long moment, his voice rough with emotion. “I don’t think I’m deserving of this honor.”

“Yes, you are,” I say, raising my hands to cup his face. “I want to share this part of myself with you. I’m sure.”

“Oh, Eleanor,” Ronan murmurs, lowering his mouth to mine in a fiercely possessive kiss, his strong arms pressing me closer to his body as his tongue sensuously slides against mine, exploring every inch of my mouth, branding me as his.

Then he pulls back to look at me, his eyes filled with a raw, consuming hunger.

“And just so you know, love...I wasn’t worried about getting you pregnant.

Damn, that doesn’t actually sound like a bad idea.

” He chuckles lightly, contradicting the intensity in his dreamy blue eyes.

“I was worried you might not trust my health status, given my situation, but I’ll give you my word—I’m clean. ”

I hold his gaze so he can feel the sincerity beneath my words. “I trust you, Ronan,” I say quietly.

His expression softens, and he reaches out to push stray strands of hair away from my face. “Oh, Eleanor...”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:32 am

My name falls from his lips like a question, as if to ask me again if I am sure, if I think he's worthy of my trust. I nod wordlessly.

Because it's true. I trust him like I've never trusted anyone in my life.

And no matter what happens after today, one thing is sure—I will never regret this moment with him.

Ronan kisses me again, slowly this time, deeply, until our breaths become one.

Then I feel him tug his pants down. Without breaking the kiss, he takes both of my hands in his, interlinking our fingers and raising our hands above our heads.

Then he shifts his weight above me until the tip of his cock is nestling against my entrance.

He breaks the kiss to lock his gaze on mine, his eyes communicating everything he can't put into words. Slowly, he pushes into me.

A sharp gasp escapes my lips, my body tensing at the painful intrusion. My fingers tighten around Ronan's as a shudder racks through me. It's too much—too big, too overwhelming, stretching me in ways I've never experienced.

He stills immediately, his breathing ragged. "Eleanor," he murmurs, pressing a soft kiss to my forehead. "Relax for me, baby. Breathe."

I try, but my body isn't listening. There's a burn, an ache that makes me want to pull

away, even as my heart begs me to stay. Ronan's grip on my hands tightens, grounding me.

"I'm not going anywhere," he says, his voice low, soothing. "Just feel me. Let me in."

His lips trail down my cheek, along my jaw, feathering kisses that make me shiver.

He moves slowly, freeing one of his hands to stroke along my thigh, then up to my waist, tracing soft circles over my skin.

The tenderness in his touch contrasts with the undeniable power of his body caging me in, surrounding me.

"You're so fucking beautiful," he whispers against my lips. "So fucking perfect. And you're taking me so well, baby."

I exhale shakily, and he takes that moment to push in another inch. I whimper, my nails digging into his forearms.

"Fuck," he grits out. His body is shaking with restraint, his muscles tight, his breathing heavy. "You're so goddamn tight, Eleanor. You're killing me."

His words send a shiver through me, not of fear, but of something else entirely. I like that I'm affecting him. That he's losing control because of me.

He kisses me again, slower this time, coaxing me into relaxation as he inches forward.

My body stretches around him, still aching but adjusting.

And when he finally seats himself fully inside me, he lets out a deep, guttural groan, his forehead pressing against mine.

I feel full, consumed. Like I belong to him in a way I've never belonged to anyone.

I exhale shakily. "Ronan..."

He lifts his head, eyes dark and molten. His gaze burns through me, setting my skin ablaze.

"I've got you," he murmurs, brushing his lips against mine. "Just tell me what you need, baby. Do you want me to stop?"

I shake my head. "No."

His jaw flexes. "Do you want me to move?"

I hesitate, then nod. "Please."

A sharp breath leaves him, like he's been waiting for permission. Then, slowly, he pulls out—only to slide back in, just as slow. A deep, toe-curling sensation ripples through me, making my stomach tighten. The discomfort lingers, but underneath it is something new—something pleasurable.

Ronan must feel my body's response because his lips curl into a gentle smile. "That's it, baby," he murmurs, rolling his hips again, this time a little deeper. "You feel that?"

I nod breathlessly, my fingers clutching at his shoulders. "Y-yeah."

He growls, nipping at my bottom lip before thrusting again—slow, deep.

My body trembles. The pain fades with each languid movement, replaced by something hotter, sharper, more intense.

Ronan watches me, his expression tightening. “You feel so fucking good around me.” His voice is thick with restraint. “Like you were made for me, Eleanor.”

His words hit something deep inside me, something untouched, unspoken. Because he’s right. This feels right. I arch beneath him, my hips rising to meet his, needing more. Needing him.

He curses under his breath, his grip on my waist tightening. “Fuck,” he groans, lowering his head to my neck, sucking at the sensitive skin there. “You’re gonna be the death of me, baby.”

I gasp, pleasure lancing through me as he moves faster, harder.

The friction, the heat, the way he fills me completely...

it’s too much and not enough all at once.

I cling to him, every nerve ending in my body sparking to life.

My legs tighten around his waist, anchoring him to me, silently begging him to keep going, to never stop.

And he doesn’t.

He moves like a man possessed, like he’s starving, like he’s wanted this for as long as I have. His thrusts become deeper, rougher, more demanding, hitting a spot inside me that makes me cry out.

Ronan groans at the sound, his pace faltering for a second before he slams into me again, right there.

“Oh, yeah!” I gasp, my vision going white for a moment.

His lips brush my ear, his voice gravel and sin. “That’s it, baby. Let me hear you.”

I whimper, completely lost in the way he’s making me feel. The pleasure coils tighter and tighter inside me, until I feel like I might snap apart.

“Ronan,” I breathe, digging my nails into his back. “I think...I think I’m gonna...”

His hips snap into mine, his breathing ragged. “Come for me, baby.”

I don’t even have time to process the command before the world shatters around me. My body spasms, my breath catches, and pleasure crashes through me like a tidal wave, raw and all-consuming. I cry out, clinging to Ronan as he drives me through it, never slowing, never letting go.

And then he’s right there with me.

His rhythm falters, his grip on me almost bruising, and with a deep, guttural groan, he buries himself inside me one last time, his body shuddering against mine.

For a long moment, neither of us move.

We just lie there, tangled together, breathing hard, hearts racing. Ronan buries his face in my hair, his chest heaving against mine. I feel his lips brush my temple, soft and lingering.

And my heart aches.

Because this isn't just sex. It's something more.

Something beyond either of us.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:32 am

Ronan

Eleanor is still curled against me, her breath warm on my chest, her delicate fingers resting lightly over my heart. I run my hand down her back, my fingers tracing slow, lazy circles against her skin.

I should feel satisfied. I just had her, all of her—but it only made things worse. Now that I’ve had a taste, I don’t think I’ll ever be able to let her go.

I wish I had all the time in the world to savor this moment, but I know a guard could walk in any minute now. I wish I didn’t have to go back to that damn cell.

Her eyelashes flutter against my skin as she shifts slightly, pressing closer, like she’s seeking warmth. I tighten my hold around her waist. “You okay?” I murmur.

She nods, her fingers absentmindedly tracing patterns over my chest. “Yeah.”

For a moment, neither of us speak. The silence should feel heavy, but it doesn’t. Then, before I can stop myself, I ask, “What happened to you, Eleanor?”

She stills, her body tensing slightly against mine. “What are you talking about?”

“I see the way you look over your shoulder,” I reply, keeping my tone gentle. “I see the terror in your eyes when you think no one is looking. I could look into it on my own, but I’d appreciate it if you talk to me about it.”

I feel her hesitation melt, in the way her body relaxes against mine. She exhales and

pulls back, just enough to meet my gaze, enough for me to see the vulnerability in her gorgeous hazel eyes.

“Well, I lost my dad to a car crash when I was seven,” she says, then sighs softly.

“Mom grieved for a long time. I was left alone a lot. When I turned seventeen, she married Pete. He was a decent guy, but he had a son who was two years older than me. My stepbrother, Daryl—he was... possessive .” She pulls away gently and sits up, reaching for her scrubs as if she’s just now remembered she’s naked.

She continues the story as she pulls on her clothes, and I slide back into my shirt as well.

“He watched me all the time, and messed with my head. He made me think I was delusional. He’d mess with my stuff, my room...

” She shudders, lost in the memory. “I couldn’t concentrate in school because I felt like he was always watching me, always lurking in the shadows.

I couldn’t date. I lost my friends because they thought I was crazy. ”

My fingers curl into fists as she speaks, rage building inside me like a slow-burning fire. She shouldn’t have had to live like that. Constantly afraid. Constantly looking over her shoulder.

I pull her close to me again, needing to feel her against me, wrapping my arms around her.

She leans her head against my chest and says, “Mom shielded me the best she could, but then she passed away from cancer when I was nineteen, and the house became hell for me. I went to college, and I thought I’d escaped Daryl, but that was wishful

thinking.

He was always watching, leaving reminders of himself in odd places at odd times. I always had to watch my back.”

That bastard...the way she talks about him, the ill-concealed terror in her eyes as she speaks about him...it makes my stomach turn. I force myself to keep my breathing even, to let her finish.

“I finally got my nursing degree,” she continues, her voice quieter now, as if she’s slipping back into those memories.

“I thought maybe I’d be free. But he showed up at my graduation.

Just standing in the crowd, watching. He didn’t say anything, didn’t try anything.

Just stood there. I knew then I could never really escape him. ”

She pauses, taking a deep breath. “So, I ran. Took the first job I could find, far away from him. I figured working in a prison would be the last place he’d expect me to be. And it’s worked. He hasn’t found me.”

Yet.

She doesn’t say the word, but it lingers in the air between us.

I pull back slightly and lift my hand, tilting her chin so she meets my eyes. “He’s never going to go near you again, Eleanor.”

She exhales shakily. “You don’t understand. He’s not normal, Ronan. He—he enjoys it. The mind games. The power trip. I know if he ever finds me, he won’t let me go

again.”

My jaw clenches. “He won’t find you.”

Her lips part slightly, but no words come out. I can tell she wants to believe me. I’ll make sure she does. That motherfucker has no idea he just put himself on my radar. I don’t let threats linger.

I lower my head, pressing a slow, lingering kiss to her lips. She sighs into my mouth, wrapping her arms around my neck, her body softening against mine again. I wish I could stand here holding her like this forever. But the sharp clang of the prison buzzer shatters the moment.

I sigh, pulling away. “I have to go.”

She nods, moving to clean up the exam table and arrange the supplies as if this was a normal visit to the infirmary. I watch her move, that possessive hunger still thrumming beneath my skin.

She’s mine.

I don’t know how the hell I’m supposed to walk out of here and pretend like I don’t feel this way. Before I leave, I catch her wrist, pulling her back into me for one last kiss. This one is softer, slower. A promise.

“I’ll see you soon,” I murmur against her lips.

She nods, her fingers tightening in my shirt for half a second before she lets me go.

I turn, just as the door bursts open. Rodriguez steps inside, his gaze flickering between us, suspicion and disappointment narrowing his beady little eyes. He

probably wanted to catch us in a more intimate moment, the asshole.

“Time’s up, Callahan.”

I smirk, wiping a hand over my mouth like I’m erasing any evidence of what just happened. But the truth is, there’s no erasing this.

Not from my skin. Not from my bones.

Not from my fucking soul.

I follow him out, but I don’t look back. Because I know if I do, I won’t leave.

Back in my cell, I sit on my cot, staring at the ceiling. My ribs ache from where Chase punched me earlier, but I barely feel it.

All I can think about is her.

The way she looked at me.

The way she trusted me.

I run a hand through my hair, exhaling sharply. I should be pushing her away. She’s too good for me. Too fucking pure.

And yet—

I want her.

More than I’ve ever wanted anything in my goddamn life.

My hands curl into fists as I think about her stepbrother. That fucking bastard. He thinks he owns her? Thinks he can keep her afraid, even from miles away?

No.

I won't fucking allow it.

And I don't care what I have to do—he will never touch her again.

It only takes me a few hours to make contact outside the wall and get a tail on Daryl.

And later that evening, I'm back in the medical wing.

With a “dizzy spell” this time. I had to pay the correctional officer a fortune—Johnson this time, and his silence doesn't come cheap—for this to fly, but it's not like I give a damn about the money.

I made enough money as a crypto investor before I got locked up. Money is the least of my problems.

As long as I get to see her again...

“You're really pushing your luck, you know that?” Eleanor says, giving me a mock-stern look as she takes my wrist, pretending to check my pulse. “Twice in one day?”

I grin, completely unapologetic. “What can I say? I'm a man in need of constant medical attention.”

She rolls her eyes, a pretty smile lighting up her face. “I see...”

I study her as she works, my gaze trailing over her delicate features. Her lips are still

slightly swollen from our last kiss.

I lean in. “And...I needed to ask you something. Would you ever consider running away?” I keep my voice light despite the anxiety coiling in my stomach. “With me, I mean.”

She stiffens slightly, her breath catching. “What?”

“You heard me.”

She exhales shakily, staring at me like she’s trying to figure out if I’m serious.

I am. I’ve toyed with the idea from the moment I made contact with her. I already have plans to leave this hell, and I can’t leave her behind, especially not after hearing about her bastard stepbrother.

“Baby, I know it’s sudden, and I don’t need you to answer me today. But I couldn’t let your shift end without letting you know where I stand. I wanna run away with you.”

She lets out a soft, nervous laugh. “And where exactly would we run?”

I slide a hand around her waist, pulling her flush against me. “Somewhere warm. Somewhere by the water.”

Her lips part, but she doesn’t move away.

“I could make it happen,” I murmur, brushing my nose along her jaw, breathing her in. “All you have to do is say the word.”

Her hands curl against my chest, gripping my shirt like she’s afraid to let go.

“You keep looking at me like that, baby,” I rasp, my mouth hovering just above hers, “and I’m gonna have to kiss you again.”

She swallows hard. “Then kiss me.”

Fuck.

I don’t need to be told twice.

I crash my lips against hers, devouring her. She melts into me, her fingers tangling in my hair as she presses closer, her soft little moan vibrating against my mouth.

That sound.

I need more.

I push her back against the exam table, lifting her onto it, sliding my hands under her scrubs, dragging my palms up her bare thighs. Her legs fall open, and I step between them, swallowing every desperate little sound she makes as I deepen the kiss.

“Ronan—” She gasps when I palm her heat through her panties.

I growl against her mouth, rubbing slow, teasing circles over the fabric, feeling how warm and wet she already is for me.

“Jesus, baby,” I rasp, sucking at the sensitive skin on her neck. “You gonna let me have you again?”

She nods frantically, gripping my shoulders.

I grin against her skin. “Use your words, sweetheart.”

She whimpers, pressing her hips into my hand. “Yes.”

My cock throbs at the raw desperation in her voice. I slip my fingers beneath the fabric, groaning when I feel her—hot, slick, and so fucking ready for me.

“Fuck, Eleanor,” I growl, nipping at her jaw. “You’re gonna be the fucking death of me.”

She gasps as I slide a finger inside her, and then another, her body clenching around me, her nails digging into my back. She trembles beneath me, her breath coming in sharp, desperate gasps as I work my fingers deeper.

She’s so fucking tight. So wet. So damn perfect.

Her hands fist my shirt, pulling me closer, like she needs something to ground her. Like she’s afraid of falling apart.

“Relax, baby,” I murmur, pressing my lips to her ear. “Let me make you feel good.”

She exhales shakily, her legs widening as I curl my fingers just right, pressing against that sweet spot deep inside her. Her whole body jerks, her back arching off the table.

There it is.

“Oh, Ronan...” She gasps my name like a prayer, her voice thick with need, with surrender.

Fuck, I’ll never get tired of hearing that.

My thumb finds her clit, rubbing slow, deliberate circles that make her legs shake. Her hands fly to my shoulders, nails digging in as she lets out a broken little moan.

“That’s it, baby,” I whisper, watching her come undone beneath me. “You feel that? You’re taking me so fucking well.”

She nods frantically, her breath coming in ragged pants, her hips rocking against my hand, chasing the pleasure.

She’s close. I can feel it in the way she tightens around my fingers, in the way her body trembles, coiling tighter and tighter like she’s about to snap.

“Let go for me, Eleanor,” I rasp, my lips dragging along her jaw. “Come for me, sweetheart.”

She whimpers, her fingers tangling in my hair, her body tensing desperately.

And then she shatters. A strangled cry leaves her lips as pleasure rips through her, her entire body trembling as waves of ecstasy crash over her.

I keep my fingers inside her, working her through it, swallowing every desperate little sound she makes as she falls apart in my arms.

Fucking beautiful.

When her body finally goes limp, I press a kiss to her temple, murmuring against her skin, “You okay, baby?”

She nods weakly, her breath still uneven, her cheeks flushed. She looks completely wrecked. Completely mine.

I smirk, brushing my lips over hers. “We don’t have time for more today, baby.” I smirk toward the door. “Officer Johnson doesn’t like me as much. But next time, I promise it’ll be my cock making you come.”

She shivers, her fingers tightening in my hair, dragging me into another kiss. And fuck if I don't want to take her right here, right now, correctional officers be damned.

But I'll wait. I'll be patient. Because I'm keeping her.

And when I finally take her again, it won't be rushed.

It'll be slow. Deep. Devastating.

It'll be everything.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:32 am

Ellie

I shove my ID badge into my locker and tug the scrubs over my head, the cool air brushing over my skin. It's been a long day but my body still hums with lingering heat from earlier. From him.

I press my lips together, my fingers brushing my neck where Ronan kissed me not even an hour ago. He left a hickey—the bruise of it is faint, but I can feel the imprint in my soul.

The locker room door creaks open, and I freeze, just for a second, before forcing myself to breathe.

I'm safe. Daryl can't find me here.

"Hey," Gina says, strolling in with her signature catlike grace. She gives me a once-over, her eyes narrowing slightly. "You heading out?"

"Yeah," I reply, keeping my tone casual as I stuff my scrubs into my locker. "Just finished logging charts."

Gina leans against the lockers, arms crossed, one brow arched in that all-knowing way of hers. "So...you and Callahan?"

My heart skips a beat, but I keep my eyes expression straight. "What about me and Callahan?"

She lets out a humorless scoff. “Don’t play coy, Ellie. There are rumors going around. What’s going on between you two?”

“He’s a patient, Gina,” I say with a nonchalant shrug even as heat rises up my neck.

Rumors already? It’s only been one day!

“Uh-huh. A patient, you say?” She arches her brow in disbelief. “You need to be careful. He’s dangerous. I warned you to stay away from him.”

I shut my locker—a little harder than I mean to. I take in a deep breath, turning to face her fully. “You don’t know him.”

“I know enough,” Gina says, her gaze steady. “He killed a man, Ellie.”

“And I work here because I have to,” I counter. “We all have pasts, Gina.”

She sighs. “I’m not judging, okay? I just...I like you, Ellie. I’d hate to see you get pulled under by someone who’s still drowning.”

I give her a tight smile and sling my bag over my shoulder. “I’ll be fine.”

She watches me for a long beat before nodding. “Just be careful, okay?”

“I always am,” I lie, then slip out the door before she can say anything else.

Outside, the air is cool, the kind that makes you wish you’d worn something thicker, but I hardly notice the chill as I walk toward the main road, my bag clenched tightly in my hand.

I can still hear Gina’s words echoing in my head.

He killed a man, Ellie.

Maybe she's right. Maybe I'm completely out of my mind for wanting someone like Ronan. But when I'm with him, I don't feel like I'm in danger.

I feel seen. Wanted. Safe.

Suddenly, a familiar unease crawls up my spine, that bone-deep feeling of being watched. I glance behind me, my heart beating faster than it should.

There's no one there.

I sight a taxi in the distance. Usually, I would walk the short distance to the bus stop and take the bus home.

Instead I flag down the taxi, glancing over my shoulder as it pulls up in front of me.

I quickly climb into the back seat, murmuring my address to the driver as I sink into the worn leather.

Still, I can't shake the overwhelming dread tightening my chest, threatening to cut off my air supply. My fingers curl tightly around the strap of my bag.

Daryl.

His name alone makes my stomach twist. It's been a long time since I last saw him, but I know how he operates. The silence is his weapon. The waiting. The game of shadows and ghosts.

I shift uncomfortably in the seat and turn my gaze to the window, the city lights blurring rapidly as we pass. Thinking about Ronan distracts my mind from the

thought of being followed, so I let my thoughts drift to him.

He asked me to leave with him. I thought it was a joke at first, but there was something serious in his eyes. Something raw and real.

Run away with me.

I mean, it's insane, right? He's a convicted felon. He's still got twenty—no, maybe fifteen if he behaves—more years on his sentence. How could we possibly have a future?

But then I remember the way he touched me. The way he held me like I was breakable and precious. And irrevocably his. The idea of running away together doesn't feel so impossible. It feels like hope.

A dangerous, foolish, beautiful kind of hope.

The taxi slows at a red light, and I let my head fall back against the seat, letting out a deep breath.

My life outside Ronan is a sham. Just shifts and silence and fear.

I go home to an apartment that doesn't feel like mine.

I avoid social media, never post pictures.

I watch my windows. I look over my shoulder.

What kind of life is that?

And then there's Ronan.

Ronan is rough. Dangerous. All sharp edges and darkness. But not with me...

With me, he's gentle. Intense. Attentive. Like I'm the only thing tethering him to this world.

I want him. I want everything he can give. Maybe more. But what does more even look like between us? Can there really be a next chapter between a prison nurse and the most feared inmate in the building?

The light turns green. The taxi moves on. But the questions won't stop chasing me.

When the taxi stops with a low grunt outside my apartment building, I hand the driver a crumpled bill before stepping out into the street. As I approach the narrow corridor that leads to my apartment entrance, I freeze.

There's someone at my door.

A tall figure, silhouetted in the dull glow, standing still. Too still. My heart slams into my rib cage, my breath catching painfully in my throat. I take a slow, measured step back.

Daryl.

No. No, please no.

The shadows part slightly as the figure shifts, and that's when I see him more clearly. Not Daryl. Pete.

My stepfather.

I blink, stunned, my voice tight with disbelief. "Pete?"

His hands are shoved deep in his jacket pockets, his expression a mix of nervous relief and something more. Something I can't decipher in the dim lighting of the corridor. "Hi, Ellie."

The sound of my name on his lips makes my stomach turn with a strange mix of comfort and resentment.

"What are you doing here?" I ask, voice sharper than I intended.

"I...I came for you." His smile is small. "Took a lot of digging, but I did."

I step closer, but not too close. "Why?"

"You just left," he says quietly. "No calls. No note. Not even a goodbye. You came all the way out here..." He gestures around helplessly. "To live in this kind of neighborhood. I didn't understand."

"Didn't understand?" I repeat with a scoff. "Pete, your son made my life hell. You didn't see that?"

He winces, looking away.

"Did you even try to stop him?" My voice cracks. "Did you ever ask yourself why I was always on edge? Why I never brought friends home? Why I couldn't sleep in my own bed without locking the door?"

"Ellie, I—" he starts, but I cut him off.

"No. You don't get to show up here and act like the concerned parent. Not when you stood there and let him watch me. Let him torment me. Gaslight me. You let it happen."

“I thought...he was just struggling,” Pete mutters. “After his mom died, he changed. I thought maybe he just needed time.”

“Struggling?” I laugh bitterly. “You mean he needed control. He needed someone to dominate and I was an easy target.”

He lifts his hands, voice shaking. “I didn’t know it was that bad. If I had known—”

“Would it have mattered?” I challenge. “Would you have believed me?”

Pete looks older than I remember. Lines around his eyes, shoulders stooped.

His voice is soft now, almost pleading. “I haven’t seen Daryl in over six months, Ellie.

I don’t know where he is. He just...vanished.

But I needed to see you. I needed to say I’m sorry.

And if you’ll let me...I want to become a better dad to you. Please, come back home.”

My chest aches, but I shake my head. “No, Pete. That place was never home. And I’m not that girl anymore.”

Silence stretches between us, thick and heavy. He nods slowly, understanding in his eyes.

“I wish I’d done better by you,” he says quietly.

“Me too.”

He lingers a second longer, like he wants to say more, but he doesn't. He turns and walks down the steps, disappearing into the night.

I stay rooted to the spot, my hands trembling.

If Pete found me...it's only a matter of time before Daryl does.

I unlock my door with shaky fingers and step inside. Lock it. Bolt it. Chain it.

It still doesn't feel like enough.

I press my back to the door, sliding down until I'm sitting on the floor. My head falls back with a dull thud.

Maybe it's time to leave again. Start over.

But what about Ronan?

I close my eyes. How far can I run...before I have to stop?

Page 8

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:32 am

Ronan

Another fake stomachache.

That's the best I could come up with this morning.

Not exactly my proudest con, but it works. Anything to get to her.

And I needed to see her today. I couldn't find an opening yesterday, not before her shift ended.

And if I get injured too often it'll start to be obvious.

But today...today Anderson is on guard duty.

And he owes me. He knows he has a sweet payout coming if he can give me some uninterrupted time with the nurse.

When he finally clears me through and I step into the medical wing, it's like the air shifts...lighter, easier. Or maybe that's just because Eleanor is here...

My eyes find her immediately, and as always, it hits me like a fucking punch to the chest.

She's gorgeous. But something's off.

She's trying to smile, going through the motions, clipboard in hand, brows furrowed

in faux concentration, but there's something in her eyes. Something tight and distant that I don't like.

"Back again?" she says when I sit on the table, her voice too sweet to be genuine. "You know there are rumors flying around, right?"

"Like I give a damn." I smirk. "As long as I get to see my favorite nurse, I don't mind being the object of attention."

That earns me a real smile, but it's fleeting. Her eyes drop back to her clipboard.

I lean in a little. "You okay?"

She hesitates. Just for a second. Then shrugs. "Yeah. Just tired."

Bullshit.

I know her too well now. This isn't fatigue. There's something else. Worry? Or maybe it's that innate terror that clings to her like a shadow...

But I don't push. As much as I want to know what's eating her up inside, I know the subject of her stepbrother is a difficult one. Talking about him will only hurt her.

Still, I have my suspicions.

Especially after the message I got last night. My guy on the outside says Daryl's been moving strangely. Showing up in places he shouldn't. Asking questions. Watching. And I've got a bad fucking feeling about it.

I glance at Eleanor again. Her hands are steady, but her jaw is tight.

“Where do you live in town?” I ask, casual as I can manage.

She nods. “Eastside. Why?”

I wince. “That area’s shit.”

She lifts a brow at me, challenging. “It’s what I can afford. Rent’s cheap.”

“There’s cheap and there’s dangerous,” I reply, lowering my voice. “That neighborhood’s the kind where people disappear and no one asks questions.”

“I’m still repaying my student loans,” she says with a tired sigh. “I don’t exactly have the luxury of choices.”

Something sharp twists in my gut. I hate that for her. I hate that she’s out there alone while I’m stuck behind these walls. I hate that she’s too fucking proud to ask for help.

“How much do you owe?” I ask.

Her head snaps up. “Excuse me?”

“Your loan.”

“It’s a lot of money, Ronan,” she says with a weak chuckle.

“How much?”

“Sixty thousand.”

“I’ll take care of it.”

She blinks, stunned. “What?”

“I’ll pay it off,” I say again. “Every damn cent.”

She lets out a disbelieving laugh. “H-how? You don’t...” She trails off, throwing her hands up in defeat. “I don’t even know how to respond to that.”

“How about you pay me back by finding a safer place to live?”

“But...how?” she asks, shaking her head slowly. “You’re in prison. How the hell do you even have money like that?”

I grin. “You don’t think I had a life before Oakdale?”

She clears her throat, a guilty blush spreading across her cheeks. “What did you do? Before...?”

“Crypto.”

She stares at me. “Cryptocurrency?”

“Yeah. Got in early, made some smart moves. Built an empire on the outside by the time I was twenty-five. Investments, trading...a few blockchain startups too.”

Eleanor just stares at me like she’s seeing me for the first time.

“That’s...impressive,” she admits.

“You sound surprised.”

“I am.”

I lean in, voice softening. “I wasn’t always this guy, you know. I had a life. A big one. I still do, in some ways.”

She chews her bottom lip, and I can tell she’s processing everything. Thinking. But I also see the way she pulls back. The way she’s trying to build a wall.

She lets out a heavy sigh, shaking her head. “I appreciate the offer, Ronan. Really. But I can’t let you do that.”

“Why not?”

“Because...it’s something I have to do myself. I need to be able to say I survived this part of my life on my own. Without anyone bailing me out.”

That hits me deep. I know about her deep need for control. I get it. But it still stings.

“So, no to the offer,” I say slowly. “How about I find you a new place, then? Safer neighborhood. Somewhere you don’t have to sleep with one eye open.”

She chuckles, rolling her eyes in that adorable way of hers. “You’re relentless.”

“I’m worried,” I reply with a soft sigh. “You live alone, Eleanor. And I can’t be out there to protect you.”

She looks up at me, her expression softening. “That’s not your responsibility.”

“Isn’t it?”

For a second, we just stare at each other. The tension between us pulls taut, thick with everything unsaid.

Then I lean in closer, close enough that her breath catches. “What do I have to do to get through to you, baby?”

Her lips part. “You’re already under my skin, Ronan. That’s the problem.”

I grin, slow and dangerous. “Then maybe I should stay there.”

She laughs, breathy and flustered. “You’re impossible.”

“You love it.”

She doesn’t deny it. Just rolls her eyes again, a fond smile tugging at her lips. She steps back, giving herself space from me like distance will make this easier. It won’t.

“You ever learned any self-defense?” I ask, watching her carefully.

She frowns. “Not really. I mean, there was a workshop in college once, but I barely remember anything.”

Figures. She’s got so much fire in her, but she’s not trained to protect it.

I slide off the table and close the distance between us, slow, deliberate. Her breath hitches, but she doesn’t move.

“Let me teach you.”

Her brows lift. “Now?”

“I don’t exactly have a packed schedule,” I say with a crooked grin. “We’ve got extra time today. Besides, you’re already here, and I can’t let you keep walking around unarmed in that neighborhood.”

She hesitates. “You think I’m in danger, don’t you?”

I think a lot of things. But I only nod. “I think knowing how to defend yourself can’t hurt.”

She sighs and pulls her hair up into a messy knot. “Fine. Teach me something.”

I step behind her, my chest brushing her back, and gently take her wrist in my hand. She stiffens slightly, then relaxes as I guide her arms into position.

“If someone grabs you from behind, what do you do?” I murmur, voice low against her ear.

“Um...” she starts, breathless already.

“You shift your weight, lower your center of gravity—like this.” I adjust her stance, hands lingering on her hips longer than strictly necessary. “Then you slam your elbow into their ribs. Hard.” I mimic the motion with her arm, slow and deliberate, her body pressed against mine.

She lets out a shaky laugh. “I feel like this is less about self-defense and more about getting me flustered.”

“Flustered is a side effect,” I say, letting my lips brush the curve of her neck, just once. “But the lesson’s real.”

She turns to face me, eyes wide, cheeks flushed. “You’re not playing fair.”

“I never claimed to.”

I grab her wrist again, pulling her closer, our chests nearly touching. “If I were your

attacker,” I whisper, “what would you do now?”

Her gaze flickers to my mouth. “Knee you in the balls?”

I laugh. “Tempting, but not sexy.”

“Who said self-defense was supposed to be sexy?” she challenges.

“It is. When you’re the one doing it.”

Her breath shudders out as I lean in, eyes locked on hers. My hand slides to her lower back, guiding her closer. She doesn’t resist. Her fingers curl in the front of my shirt.

“Lesson two,” I murmur, my mouth brushing hers. “Distraction.”

Then I kiss her.

It starts slow, just heat and tension, lips teasing. But it builds fast. Hungry. Needy. Like we’ve both been waiting too long, though it’s not even been forty-eight hours since we last kissed. Her hands slide up my chest, into my hair, and I groan as her body presses into mine.

I back her against the exam table, lifting her onto it without breaking the kiss. She gasps, and I take the opportunity to deepen it, tongues tangling, breath mingling. My fingers dig into her thighs, pulling her closer, until there’s nothing between us but the heavy throb of want.

She breaks away, just barely, her lips swollen and eyes glazed. “I thought this was a self-defense lesson,” she whispers breathlessly.

“It is.” I smirk, brushing a kiss against her jaw. “Lesson three—use your body as a

weapon.”

She arches against me, her breath hot in my ear. “I think I’m getting the hang of it.”

“Good,” I murmur, nipping her bottom lip. “Because if anyone touches you again—anyone—I want you to remember exactly how dangerous you can be.”

I kiss her again, slower this time, savoring her. My hands explore the curve of her waist, the line of her spine, like I’m trying to memorize every inch of her.

Her voice is barely a whisper. “Why do you care so much?”

I pull back just enough to look her in the eye.

“Baby, I’d burn this place to the ground for you.”

She doesn’t respond for a while, her eyes swirling with emotions that threaten to drown me. Not like I mind. I feel like I can relate to all of them. The past few days since I met her have been a conflict of emotions for me...things I’ve never felt before, never deemed myself capable of feeling.

“Kiss me...” Eleanor says, her voice a needy whisper.

I comply immediately, pressing her against the edge of the exam table.

Her legs come around my waist, her thighs encasing me in a tight grip.

I pull her closer, losing myself in the scent of her—clean skin, fruity shampoo, something warm and womanly.

I deepen the kiss, swallowing every breathless moan, every throaty whimper.

Fuck. I'll never get enough of her.

My hands slide under her shirt, tracing up her smooth stomach until I find the swell of her breasts, bare and warm and aching to be touched. She gasps into my mouth, her back arching, her nipples pebbling against my palms.

"You're not wearing a bra," I murmur, grinning like a bastard.

Her lips brush my jaw. "Didn't think I'd need one for a shift."

"You didn't," I growl, lifting her shirt and replacing my hands with my mouth. She moans as I drag my tongue over one perfect nipple, then the other, sucking just enough to hear her breath hitch.

I want her wild. I want her ruined. For me.

I yank the shirt over her head, watching her shiver under the cold air and my gaze. "You're so fucking beautiful," I whisper, trailing kisses down her stomach. "You don't even know."

Her fingers tangle in my hair, tugging me back up. "Ronan—"

"You want this?" I ask, even though I already know the answer.

She nods, breathless. "I want you."

That's all I need.

My hand slides down between us, and I pull her scrub pants and panties off in one motion. Her heat hits me like a punch, wet and ready and made for me.

“Goddamn,” I rasp, dragging a finger through her slick folds, watching her fall apart from just a touch. “You’re already soaked for me.”

Her head falls back with a soft whimper. “Stop teasing.”

I don’t stop. I can’t.

I circle her clit, slow at first, just to hear her beg. Her thighs tremble around me, hips grinding against my hand like she can’t stand to be denied.

When I slide one thick finger into her, her breath catches. When I add a second, her nails dig into my shoulders.

“Ronan,” she gasps. “Please.”

I silence her with my mouth, swallowing her cries as I fuck her with my fingers, curling them just right. She falls apart in my hands. Tight and hot and dripping.

I don’t give her time to recover. I undo my pants with one hand, freeing my cock and guiding it to her slick entrance. Her eyes flutter open just as I start to push in.

“You ready, baby?” I ask, every muscle in my body coiled with restraint.

“Yes please,” she breathes, wrapping her arms around my neck. “I want to feel you. Now.”

So I give it to her.

I slide in slow, groaning as her walls stretch around me, hot and tight and perfect. She gasps, her nails clawing into my back.

“Jesus, baby—fuck,” I grit out. “You’re so goddamn tight.”

She clings to me like she never wants to let go, and I start to move.

Deep, deliberate strokes that make her cry out with every thrust. The table creaks beneath us, her body rising to meet mine again and again, greedy for more.

We move like we’ve done this a thousand times.

Like we were built for it. Her moans grow louder, and I cover her mouth with mine, muffling the sound, grinding into her harder, deeper, until she’s trembling all over again.

She falls apart a second time, shattering around me with a cry I feel more than hear.

And I lose it.

I thrust into her harder, my own release barreling through me like a freight train. I bury myself to the hilt, my body shaking as I come, whispering her name over and over again like a prayer against her skin.

For a long moment, neither of us moves. We just breathe.

Then I pull her close, pressing my forehead to hers. “I love you, Eleanor. I fucking love you.”

Page 9

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:32 am

Eleanor

For the next two days, as I go through the motions of my job, unable to steal any more alone time with Ronan, his voice replays over and over in my head. And every night, I'm unable to sleep, remembering his whispered words to me.

I love you, Eleanor.

God.

I should've said it back. I should've opened my mouth and let it spill out like a damn flood. But I was stunned. Caught off guard. Paralyzed by how real it all felt.

I toss in bed, gripping the blanket tighter. I've never been in love before. Not really. What I felt for boys in college wasn't love. What I felt when I used to daydream about being kissed under the bleachers wasn't love.

This is different. Ronan is different.

And I love him.

It's terrifying. It's reckless. It's completely insane. But it's also true. The way I feel will never change. He has put a stamp on my soul. He has possessed me and I don't mind a bit. I'm his.

So I make a promise to myself as I lace up my shoes and get ready for another long day—I'm going to tell him.

Today.

No fear. No hesitation. I'll look into those icy, dangerous eyes of his and say it out loud. And then maybe, just maybe, the ache in my chest will stop gnawing at me. There might not be a future for us, but I'm content with the knowledge that we love each other. That's enough. It has to be.

I step out of my apartment, my bag slung over my shoulder, and head toward the bus stop. The early morning air is cold and damp, clinging to my skin like something alive. And then, halfway down the block, it hits me. That feeling. The one I know too well...

The creeping chill at the back of my neck. The pressure of being watched. Followed.

I keep walking. Steady steps. Eyes forward. But my skin is crawling, and my palms are already slick with sweat. I glance over my shoulder—casual, like I'm just checking the street.

No one.

I'm still not over the fact that Pete found me so easily, that's all.

The thought of my stepfather causes my chest to tighten painfully. I've realized that I never really knew him. He was just a shadow in a not-so-distant, not-so-happy past. I had so much going on that I never really got the opportunity to bond with him. After Mom got sick, it was a losing battle.

As much as Pete's visit the other day brought some kind of nostalgia, I can't imagine going back to that life, that house...

That's a place and time that I'd rather didn't exist.

I take a deep breath, forcing myself to relax. Maybe it's high time I stopped letting Daryl have so much power over me. What's the worst that could happen? I can't be scared of shadows for the rest of my life.

But maybe that resolution comes too soon. I hear his voice from the shadows. The familiar, chilling voice that's jerked me out of sleep countless times.

"Well, well. If it isn't my little sister."

My breath catches. My heart stops, picking up again at an impossibly fast pace.

No.

Daryl steps out from between two dumpsters like he owns the damn world. Same crooked smile. Same eyes that never held any warmth. His clothes are cleaner than I expected, but his soul's still filthy. I can see it in his empty gray eyes, so similar yet so different from Pete's.

"What do you want?" I ask, forcing myself to stay calm.

Breathe, Eleanor. Breathe.

His grin widens. "Heard you've been playing nurse with a prisoner. That true?"

I swallow hard, fists curling at my sides.

He knows about Ronan? How long has he been watching me?

"You've got some nerve coming out here—"

"Oh, I've got nerve?" he interrupts, chuckling drily. "You're the one spreading your

legs for a murderer.”

I flinch.

And I hate that I do.

“You don’t know anything about him,” I snap, glaring at him. “You never cared about anyone in your life, so I don’t expect you to understand.”

“He’s dangerous, Ellie.”

I laugh. “That’s rich coming from you, Daryl. What do you want from me?”

His jaw ticks, something sharp flashing in his eyes. “Come back home, Ellie.”

“No.”

“You don’t belong out here. You’re still mine to protect. Mine to discipline.”

“I was never yours,” I hiss. “And I’m not coming with you.”

He takes a step forward, and every nerve in my body screams at me to run. But I don’t. Not this time.

I lift my chin. “You don’t scare me anymore, Daryl. I’ve survived worse than you.”

That’s when it happens.

The flash of rage. His hand swings out and collides with my cheek. Pain explodes through my face, and I stumble back with a gasp, stars clouding my vision.

He lunges. I scream.

His hand clamps over my mouth.

Things get chaotic after that. I fight his grip. God, I fight. I scratch. I kick. But he's stronger, always has been, and this time...he's prepared.

Something cracks against my temple.

White light. Then darkness.

I don't know how long I'm out—minutes, maybe hours.

I wake to the smell of mildew and dust. I wince at the throbbing ache in my head. I try to massage my temples, but I realize my hands are bound.

What?

I try to sit up, but nausea rolls through me like a wave, and I collapse back onto the mattress.

No.

Wait...

The mattress...it feels familiar. I glance to the side, a soundless gasp escaping my lips as I confirm my fear. It's the same mattress, the same old floral sheets.

He brought me back here...this house I swore I'd never return to. The walls still have the same floral wallpaper that Mom handpicked with care. The air still carries that slightly musty, slightly nostalgic smell.

It's like stepping into a grave.

Memories slam into me hard and fast...

The nights I cried myself to sleep after Daryl played one of his cruel tricks or made another of my friends leave. The silence. The helplessness.

It's all here. And so is he.

The door creaks open, and Daryl steps inside, carrying a bottle of water and a smug little smirk.

"Welcome home, Ellie."

"Where's Pete?" I ask, looking around, hoping he'll come to save me. This one time.

Daryl scoffs. "The old man moved away after you refused to come back with him. I guess he couldn't deal with the consequences of his choice. This house probably reminds him of his failures as a father."

"Please..." I whimper in frustration. "I need to get to work. Just let me go."

"No."

I glare at him. "You can't get away with this."

He shrugs. "Maybe. But at least now, you're safe."

I let out a shrill laugh. "Safe? You kidnapped me."

"You weren't thinking straight," he continues, blatantly ignoring my words even as

his gaze meets mine. “That guy...he’s got you brainwashed.”

I let out a humorless scoff. “You don’t get to talk about brainwashing. You spent years making me believe I was worthless.”

His eyes narrow. “Watch your mouth.”

“Or what?” I taunt, keeping my fear out of my voice. “How much worse can you get?”

He steps closer, and I brace myself.

But he doesn’t hit me.

Not this time.

He just crouches beside the bed, his face inches from mine. “You think you’re strong now,” he whispers. “But you’re not. You never were. You’re still that scared little girl. And I’ll remind you of that if I have to.”

I stare at him, heart pounding.

I think of Ronan.

The way he looked at me like I was precious. The way he touched me like I mattered.

I’d burn this place to the ground for you.

He meant it.

And if he finds out I’m gone...he’ll come for me. I don’t know how, but something

tells me he will. I just need to hold on.

“I won’t stay here,” I say, voice low. “You’ll have to kill me first.”

Daryl chuckles darkly. “Don’t tempt me.”

Then he leaves, locking the door behind him.

And I’m alone again.

But I’m not that scared little girl anymore. Not really. I know what it feels like to be wanted. I know what it’s like to be loved.

So I lie there in that suffocating room, bruised and bound and burning with fury. But I don’t plan to go down without a fight.

It’s time to make use of those self-defense moves Ronan taught me.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:32 am

Ronan

Eleanor should be here by now.

I pace the narrow space of the prison infirmary, my eyes darting to the clock every few minutes like the damn thing's going to give me answers. She's never late. Not without a reason. And if there's one thing I've learned in this place—it's to trust my gut.

Something's wrong. Definitely.

I knew it the moment I walked into the infirmary and she wasn't here. Now, the morning rounds have ended and she still isn't here. My heart is slamming against my chest like a warning bell I can't silence.

I shove my hands into my pockets, trying to hold back the rage simmering just beneath my skin.

Five years in this hellhole. Five fucking years of pretending to play the game, biding my time, making deals in the dark.

I've stayed low, played by their rules, cleaned my slate with blood and silence.

And for what? So I could maybe walk out of here a decade earlier?

So I could salvage some version of a life?

None of that means shit anymore.

Not if Eleanor's in danger.

I've finally found the one good thing in this damn world after my sister's death, and I'm not about to lose her.

I pull the burner from beneath the loose tile in the back wall and dial a familiar number.

He picks up on the first ring.

"Boss?" Theo's voice is casual, but I can hear the edge beneath it. He's been waiting for this call.

"She's gone."

A beat of silence.

"Your girl?"

"Didn't show up today. She's never late. Something's off."

Another pause, then a rustle of movement on his end. "Alright. I'll pull her stepbrother's last known address and get my guys on a sweep."

I glance down at the thin bandage on my knuckles—the same one she wrapped around my hands with so much care on one of my trips to the infirmary. My heart constricts painfully as her smiling face flashes in my head.

I can't bear the thought of never seeing her again. I'd lose it for real this time...

“I don’t care about any complications. I’m ready now.”

Theo exhales. “It’s messy timing, but I can get cameras patched for the next thirty. If you’re doing this, you better move now.”

“I’m not leaving her out there alone.”

I hang up and slide the burner back into hiding.

Then I move.

The rest happens in a blur, exactly as I’ve planned for so long. Silent signals. A guard “distracted” at the gate. A hallway cleared at the exact right time. The side panel behind the laundry chute opens just long enough for me to slip through.

Theo is waiting behind the wheel of a matte-black Charger, the engine rumbling low like it’s just as pissed off as I am.

Theo’s face is tense, but he’s determined and alert.

I don’t say a word as I climb in. He tosses me a hoodie and some dark jeans.

I change in the back seat as he barrels down the road, cutting corners like we’ve got hell itself chasing us.

“She’s at the old house,” he says, eyes locked on the road. “Same one she grew up in. Bastard must’ve dragged her back there. It’s a two-hour drive.”

I clench my fists. This man is the reason Eleanor flinches at sudden movement. The reason she’s always looking over her shoulder. He’s a monster who made her believe she wasn’t worth fighting for.

And he's about to learn the hard way what happens to people who fuck with something that's mine.

We finally pull up to an old Victorian at the edge of the woods, its roof sagging like a tired sigh. The yard is dead, overgrown. Windows dark.

I'm out before the engine dies.

Theo steps out behind me, checking the piece holstered at his hip. "Want me inside?"

"Not yet. Keep the car running. Be ready."

He nods once, and I head for the side door.

It's unlocked.

Of course it is. The kind of man Daryl is? He doesn't think anyone's ever coming for her. Doesn't think anyone would burn the world down for her.

He's wrong.

I slip inside, keeping my footsteps slow and silent. The floorboards groan under my weight. Though homey, the house smells like mold and stale air, like a place that hasn't been lived in for a while.

Then I hear it.

Soft movement. A whimper.

I move toward the sound, my heart pounding hard in my chest. When I push open the door, I see her.

Eleanor.

She's tied to the bed, wrists red and raw, her hair a tangled mess around her face. There's a bruise on her temple, a cut on her lip. Her eyes are wild when they land on me.

"Ronan?" she breathes, barely above a whisper.

Something in me cracks wide open.

In two long strides, I'm at her side, yanking at the ropes with shaking hands. "It's me. I've got you, angel. I'm here."

She blinks hard, tears slipping down her cheeks. "He—he just came out of nowhere. And then he hit me and—and..."

"Shh." I cradle her cheek, pressing my forehead to hers. "You don't have to say anything, baby. We're leaving. Right fucking now."

I pull a blade from my boot and slice through the last tie. Just as I'm pulling her into my arms, I hear the creak of a floorboard behind me.

I turn.

Too late.

Daryl comes out of nowhere, swinging a metal pipe. It slams into my shoulder with a sickening thud, sending pain shooting through my arm.

I stumble but stay on my feet.

Motherfucker.

I launch at him with a roar, tackling him into the dresser. The whole thing collapses under our weight. We're a flurry of fists and fury. He punches wild, sloppy. I hit with the aim to break bones.

Hard.

His nose shatters under my knuckles. He screams. I don't stop.

He swings the pipe again, but I duck, grab his wrist, and twist until it snaps. He howls, crumpling to the floor.

I stand over him, chest heaving.

"You put your hands on her again," I growl, meeting his eyes, "and I'll make sure you never use them again."

He looks like he wants to keep fighting, but after a moment, he looks away, unable to hold my gaze. Satisfied that he's been sufficiently cowed, I punch his head into the floor until he loses consciousness. He won't be awake to follow us for a few hours at least.

I rush back to Eleanor, who's sitting on the floor, shaking. I kneel and cup her face.

"You okay?" I whisper.

She nods quickly, breath hitching. "I knew you'd come. I told myself...you'd find me."

"Always," I say, pulling her into my arms. "I'd rip down every wall in this world for

you.”

Her fingers grip my shirt tight. “I was so scared.”

“Not anymore.” I press my lips to her forehead. “You’re safe now. I’ve got you.”

I lift her into my arms and carry her out of that house like she’s the only thing that matters.

Because she is.

And I’m not losing her again.

She clings to me as I carry her through the overgrown yard, her fingers curled tightly into my shirt like she’s never letting go.

I hope she doesn’t.

I don’t say anything as we step into the woods where Theo is waiting by the Charger, engine rumbling low. He opens the back door without a word, eyes scanning Eleanor’s bruised face.

“She okay?” he asks.

“She will be,” I reply, settling her gently into the back seat. I climb in after her, wrapping my arms around her as Theo pulls off down the narrow road.

We’re quiet for a long moment, just the soft hum of the engine and Eleanor’s uneven breathing filling the space. She shifts in my arms, looks up at me with glassy eyes.

“Ronan...” Her voice is small, hoarse. “How did you get out? How did you find me?”

I brush a strand of hair from her face, my thumb tracing gently across her temple where the bruise is already starting to purple.

“I knew something was wrong when you didn’t show up this morning.

I could feel it in my bones. I’d already started laying the groundwork to break out...

but when you didn’t come, I didn’t care if the plan was ready or not.

I would’ve crawled through fire to get to you.”

Her lip trembles. “You broke out of prison for me?”

“I’d break out of hell for you.”

She stares at me, eyes wide, breath caught somewhere between a sob and a laugh.

“That’s...insane.”

“Yeah,” I murmur, a small smirk tugging at my mouth. “So is falling in love with your prison nurse.”

She laughs, a shaky, broken thing—but it’s the most beautiful sound I’ve ever heard.

I rest my forehead against hers. “I meant what I said. I love you. I’m not letting anything take you away from me again.”

“I love you too,” she whispers.

And that’s it. That’s the moment everything else falls away. The bruises, the blood, the past. All I see is her.

I pull away just enough to meet her gaze. “Run away with me, Eleanor.”

Her eyes widen. “Really?”

“I’m serious. I’ve got everything set up. Fake passports. New identities. Offshore accounts with enough money to last a lifetime. A house in a country where no one knows our names. No Daryl. No prisons. No more hiding.”

She blinks at me, lips parted, stunned into silence.

“I know it’s fast,” I say, my hand finding hers. “But this world...it’s not kind. Not to people like us. And I’m done waiting for the world to hand me a second chance. I want to take it. With you.”

She looks down at our joined hands, then back up at me. “You want me to disappear with you?”

“I want to build a life with you. One where you’re not afraid to leave your apartment. One where no one ever lays a hand on you again. I want to give you everything you’ve never had, baby. Safety. Peace. Freedom.”

Tears spill down her cheeks, silent and unrelenting. “You’d really do all that...for me?”

I grip her chin gently and tilt her face up toward mine. “I already did.”

She closes her eyes for a moment, breathing deep, then nods...slowly at first, then faster, an excited chuckle bursting from her lips. “Yes. Yes, I’ll go with you.”

Relief crashes through me, and I press a kiss to her forehead, then her temple, then her lips. She tastes like tears and courage.

“Thank you,” I whisper, caressing her cheeks. “You won’t regret it. I promise.”

Her hand cups the side of my neck. “Until you, I didn’t think I’d ever feel like this. Like I matter. Like someone actually sees me. I’ve never had this kind of connection with anyone, Ronan. I’ve never been loved like this.”

“And I’ve never loved like this.” My voice is raw, fierce. “You changed me, Eleanor. You gave me something to fight for. You gave me a reason.”

She leans into me, curling into my chest as we speed toward the edge of everything we’ve ever known.

And I hold her tighter, already planning our escape, already dreaming of the future we’re about to steal back from the world that tried to break us.

This time, we get to write our own ending.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:32 am

Hannah (Ellie)

One Year Later

The sun is lazy today.

A dark orange ball, spilling over the water like melted honey. Gentle waves float to the shore, the tide calm and slow, like everything else on this island.

Thailand feels like a dream I never want to wake up from.

I lie back against my towel, digging my toes into the warm, powdery sand, watching the silhouette of a man I love more than life itself walk out of the ocean like he owns it.

He's shirtless, board in one hand, black hair wet and long around his face, and the tattoos and scars on his chest—God, his chest—are glistening with water and sunshine.

My husband.

My Craig.

Even after twelve months together, it still feels a little surreal calling him that...

as does answering to the name Hannah. One year ago, hiding behind our new identities, we exchanged quiet vows in a tiny candlelit church on a hill, just days after

we arrived on the island.

Just us, two fake names, and two very real hearts.

To the rest of the world, Ronan died in a tragic boat accident. Drowned trying to escape from the law, or so the news said. Burned wreckage, no body recovered.

To them, he's gone.

To me, he's here.

More alive than he's ever been.

He drops the surfboard onto the sand and strolls toward me, wet hair dripping onto his tanned shoulders.

He looks different now. More...free. More at peace.

His body's changed too—more muscled, stronger.

His beard is fuller, the scruff wild around that sinful mouth of his.

If I didn't know better, I'd say he's some rogue surfer god sent here to torment me.

He crouches beside me, all smug, sexy grin. "You checking me out again, Mrs. Walker?"

I smirk, tilting my sunglasses down to look at him. "You make it impossible not to."

He leans in close, water droplets falling from his hair onto my chest. "I live to distract you."

“You succeed,” I breathe.

And then he kisses me.

Not a sweet peck. Not a casual, married-for-a-year kind of kiss.

No, this is the kind that curls my toes and makes the sand feel like it’s melting beneath me. His mouth moves over mine like he’s starving. His hand slides under the edge of my bikini, finding the dip of my waist, pulling me closer as he groans against my lips.

“Ronan,” I whisper between kisses, and then quickly correct myself. “Craig—”

His lips twitch. “You only call me that when you’re trying to behave.”

“Because someone has to,” I murmur, breathless. “Anyone could walk up on us.”

He shrugs and leans over me further, blocking the sun with his body. “That’s part of the thrill.”

I laugh against his mouth, but he swallows it with another kiss, this one deeper. Slower. His hands are bold, slipping beneath the thin fabric of my bikini top, palms warm from the sun as they explore what’s always been his.

“Someone really could see us,” I protest again, though my fingers are already threading through his hair.

“And I really don’t care.”

That’s the thing about Ronan—he makes you forget where the world ends and where he begins. One year of living in paradise with him, and I’ve learned to let go. Of fear. Of shame. Of the weight I used to carry in every breath.

We're no longer Ellie and Ronan.

We're Hannah and Craig Walker—two ordinary people who own a quiet little villa by the ocean. A normal couple.

The thought never fails to amuse me. Because we are anything but ordinary.

He kisses down my neck, nipping at the skin as he slides his hand lower, between us, and I gasp, biting my lip.

“Still shy?” he whispers, voice low and sinful.

“Still feral?” I shoot back, my voice wavering slightly.

He smirks, eyes dark with mischief. “Always. Especially when you're laid out like this, looking like my personal fantasy.”

I grip his arm, my heart racing under his touch. “We're literally in public, Craig.”

“In paradise,” he corrects, dragging his mouth along the line of my jaw. “And on a beach no one else comes to at this hour.”

“Doesn't make it legal.”

“Neither is what I did a year ago,” he murmurs, slipping his hand beneath the string at my hip, “but here we are.”

That shuts me up.

Because it's true. He risked it all for me. And I'd do the same for him. Over and over again.

I arch into him, the sand cool under my back, his body hot and relentless above mine.

“I love you,” I whisper.

His lips pause against my collarbone. He pulls back just enough to look at me, eyes soft, wild, and full of everything I’ve ever wanted.

“I love you more,” he says. “Forever.”

His mouth is on mine again before I can say another word, hungry, claiming, familiar in all the ways that make my skin burn and my heart ache. His fingers slide beneath the strap of my bikini bottom, tugging it down just enough to make me gasp.

“Ronan,” I breathe, but it comes out more like a moan. In moments like these, when we’re alone in our own world, our souls bare and vulnerable...I still call him that. Because despite everything that happened, I never want us to forget who we really are, the essence of our existence.

“Say it again,” he growls against my mouth, tongue sliding past my lips with slow precision.

“Ronan...”

“I’ll never get tired of hearing you say my name like that.”

My fingers tangle in his hair, tugging slightly as his hand cups the back of my thigh, guiding my leg around his waist. The friction between us is unbearable. Every part of me is on fire. I can feel him, hard and thick through his swim trunks, pressing into my center like he belongs there.

God, he does.

“No one’s around,” he murmurs against my neck, his voice deep, rough, thick with need. “I want to have you right here, baby. In the sun. On this beach. I need to feel you.”

“Someone might come,” I protest weakly, even as my hips rise to meet his.

“Let them.”

He tugs one triangle of my bikini top down and takes a pebbled nipple into his mouth, sucking until I cry out. My back arches off the towel, sand sticking to my skin as he devours me like a starving man.

His hand slides between my legs, fingers pushing aside the soaked scrap of fabric. He touches me with slow reverence, rubbing lazy circles that make my thighs tremble.

“So wet for me already,” he whispers. “You always are. You were made for me, weren’t you?”

I nod, biting my lip, my whole body trembling beneath him. “Yes.”

He slides one finger inside me, then two, curling them in just the right spot while his mouth trails hot kisses down my stomach. My hands clutch the towel, the sand, him—anything I can hold on to while he pulls me apart.

“I want you inside me,” I gasp. “Now.”

He doesn’t need to be told twice.

In a flurry of wet fabric and breathless laughter, he frees himself from his trunks, his thick length brushing against my thigh before he positions himself at my entrance. He pauses, just enough to look at me, really look, like I’m the sun and the sea and his salvation all at once.

“I love you,” he says again, softer this time.

“I love you more.”

Then he pushes into me, slow and deep, stretching me in a way that feels like home. I moan, the sound carried off by the waves. He starts to move, dragging out every thrust, every grind, like he wants to memorize how I feel around him. Like he’s never letting me go again.

My hands roam his back, his shoulders, his jaw. I kiss him like I’m drowning, and he fucks me like he’s the only one who can bring me back to life.

And maybe he is.

The heat builds fast, tight and demanding in my belly. His name tumbles from my lips in broken gasps, my body shaking as I get closer and closer.

“Come for me, Eleanor,” he pants against my ear. “Let me feel it. Give it to me.”

I break with a cry, my body tightening around him as waves crash in the distance, echoing my release. He groans, low and guttural, and follows me seconds later, burying himself deep as he spills inside me.

We stay tangled together for a moment, panting and slick with sweat, still connected. Still us.

When he finally collapses beside me, he pulls me into his arms, kissing my shoulder with a satisfied hum. “You’re everything.”

I smile, tracing circles on his chest. “We’re everything.”

The breeze cools my skin, but I’m warm...so warm in his arms. My head rests

against his chest, listening to the steady thrum of his heartbeat. Still strong. Still here.

His fingers lazily trace patterns on my bare back. He hums a low tune, something sweet and off-key, and I smile into his skin.

“Hey,” I say softly.

“Mmm?”

“I need to tell you something.”

He shifts so he can see me better, his gaze instantly alert. “You okay?”

I nod, but my throat tightens. I sit up slightly, my hand splayed over my belly. It’s flat for now, but not for long. “I didn’t want to tell you until I was sure. But I am now.”

His brows furrow. “Sure of what?”

I take a breath, smile, and let it spill. “I’m pregnant.”

He blinks. Once. Twice. His whole body goes still.

“Pregnant?” he echoes.

“Yes,” I whisper. “We’re going to have a baby.”

Suddenly, his whole face lights up with a smile that threatens to split his face. His hand flies to my stomach, covering mine, his eyes wide and glistening.

“Holy shit,” he breathes. “We’re having a baby.”

I nod, and he lets out a disbelieving laugh, filled with so much awe it cracks

something inside me.

He sits up, cups my face in both hands, and kisses me fiercely, yet so gently. “You’ve just made me the happiest man alive.”

Tears sting my eyes. “You’re not scared?”

“I’m terrified.” He grins. “But also excited as hell.”

His hand returns to my belly, thumb stroking softly like he’s already bonding with our baby. “They’re going to have your smile,” he murmurs. “And your fire. God, I hope they have your fire.”

“Or your stubbornness,” I tease, leaning into his palm.

“Either way,” he says, voice thick with emotion, “they’re going to be so loved. Protected. Safe.”

I nod, letting myself believe it...really believe it. “We made it.”

“We did,” he whispers. “And now we’ve got forever.”

He pulls me into his arms again, holding me like I’m the most precious thing in the world. And I guess...I am. To him. Just like he is to me.

Our life isn’t perfect.

But it’s ours.

And now, it’s about to get even better.

~The End