



Unfixable

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Category: Young Adult

Description:

Total Pages (Source): 50

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Prologue

Why can't I just get over a breakup the traditional way?

Ice cream and a bitchin' new hairstyle. Taylor Swift on repeat until the tears dry up. Maybe a Ryan Gosling movie or two where, in between spoonfuls of chocolate-chip cookie dough, I whine, Why can't every guy be like him?

Oh no, not me. I'm more of a Sex Pistols girl and my hair has been through enough already. Years of drugstore-bought black dye and bangs chopped with orange-handled scissors has earned it a much-needed break. It would be so much easier if I could be angry, Johnny Rotten-style. Just put on a pair of studded, leather boots and kick over some trash cans, cursing the name of the dick who dared wrong me.

Unfortunately, I wasn't wronged. I was...an attempt at being righted. So no trash can kicking for me.

Here's how my road to breakup hell started. Senior year of high school. My sister and I said sayonara to our shit-tastic lives in Nashville and made tracks to Chicago. Evan and I were paired up for an assignment in photography class my first week in town. One that involved a lot of face time outside of the classroom. A daunting task to someone like me who, at the time, was about as sociable as a Sylvia Plath. I just wanted to get the assignment over with, exchanging as few words as possible.

Evan didn't allow it. Looking back, I know why I appealed to him. He saw me as broken. Someone who needed fixing. If I could travel back to that day, I would lay a hand on his lettermen-jacket-clad arm and tell him broken is where I live. I like it

here. I'm comfortable.

But Evan had a way of magnetizing people. Not in a creepy serial killer kind of way. No, he glowed from the inside, made you not want to disappoint him when he believed in you so strongly.

Who was I to let this perfect boy fail?

For a short while, I allowed him to breach my barbed-wire, electrified prison fence and swim across shark-infested waters to reach me. He even got me out of my Doc Martens and into a prom dress. A feat that amazes me to this day.

Yet even then, despite the safety and stability Evan provided, I'd heard the countdown clock ticking deep in the back of my head. How long could I act like a normal, functioning human being? How many dinners with Evan's freakishly perfect parents could I sit through before I impaled myself on a fork?

The answer was two years.

Evan saw something in me, and he tried desperately to nurture it. It was his way. Toward the end, though, I think he stopped loving me and started loving my potential. What I could be if I just stopped being so stubbornly damaged. If I could just ignore the ugliness I store inside of me, ready to jump out and scare me at any moment.

Ugliness never entirely goes away, though. Once certain images and difficult days you've lived through have been implanted in your mind, there's no way to evict them. My ugliness is particularly stubborn. It comes in the form of an addict mother who used our couch to entertain johns. A father whose name I've never learned. Eating most of my dinners as a child from tin cans or out of the neighbor's garbage can. My sister, Ginger, was the only reason the ugliness hadn't killed me.

It took Evan two years to realize he'd chosen a lemon. It hurt like hell, but I'd also embraced the change. It meant I could stop trying to be girlfriend material. A match for the golden child. I hurt a boy who genuinely loved me, and in the process, I proved to myself that I'm incapable of making another human being happy.

After I ended things with him, I needed to leave Chicago. Reminders of our two years together were everywhere I turned. Our favorite dumpling shop. The flea market he'd chased me through when I cut class to avoid him. His answer to that was to smother me in kindness and understanding, the likes of which I'd only experienced the few times my sister and I let our guards down. And never in such a huge, intoxicating dose.

The worst part of it is that I didn't just lose Evan. I lost myself. I forgot how to be comfortable in my own skin. I forgot what it meant to be comfortably broken.

I thought I was unfixable before.

Now, I'm plane-crash wreckage.

Chapter One

I manage to look like your average nineteen-year-old girl as I weave through passengers in Dublin Airport. Messenger bag slung over my shoulder, I let the unfamiliar accents roll over me. Looking at signs written in both the vowel-heavy Irish language and English. Ruddy-faced children in soccer jerseys greeting their relatives.

I entered Shutterclick Magazine's photojournalism contest knowing I'd win first prize—a one-month trip to Ireland. Among all the insecurities swimming around in my brain, the talent I possess for taking pictures is not one of them. I'm good at it. Hiding behind a camera comes naturally to me. Maybe it comes from years of

reading my mother's erratic temper, or learning to fend for myself at a young age. I've learned to predict people's expressions and moods. I can see them coming before they transform the subject's face. If you sit in one place long enough, especially in a taciturn city like Chicago, something strange is bound to happen. When those occurrences take place, I don't photograph them. I snap the people watching. That moment of honesty when they drop their veneer and react with shock or pity. I live for those moments. When someone doesn't have time to think or get their filter in place, there is purity in their reaction. Everything makes sense for that split second.

Now I need everything to make sense for me. It's not going to be an easy job, ditching this guilt, this whitewash of failure, but I'm determined to do it. I need to sort through the rubble and find Willa again. I've lost sight of what she was all about and frankly I'm mad as hell about it.

The contest sent me to Ireland to take photos for a small, upcoming feature. A spread wherein readers catch up with the contest winner post vacation and experience Ireland through my photographs. But I'm really here to get back to the place I was in pre-Evan. When I didn't give a f**k about everyone's expectations for me. Yes, I'm difficult. Yes, I'm a god-awful smart ass. Yes, the ugliness never goes away, but I'd at least found a way to stabilize it. I used to love those qualities in myself, and I don't want to be ashamed of my coping mechanisms anymore. I don't need anyone to fix me. As Simon and Garfunkel said, "I touch no one and no one touches me... I am a rock. I am an island."

Coincidentally, I'm also on an island. Far away from the painful memories of Nashville, the bittersweet bullshit of Chicago. I'm just me, here, in this place. I'm here to resuscitate Willa. To drag her lifeless corpse from the Chicago River and rid her lungs of the sludge she swallowed against her will. I'll bring her back to life. Nothing and no one is going to get in my way. The reasonable part of me knows I'm reeling from the blow of losing my first love.

The reasonable part of me can eat shit.

A musical voice sails out of an unseen intercom, announcing a flight boarding for London. I smile a little at the unfamiliarity that I'm suddenly craving and follow the signs for baggage claim. Ireland is a notoriously hospitable country, and I can already see that truth evident in passersby's smiles, their easy greetings. They aren't stilted or awkward in their friendliness. It's natural.

I allow a glimmer of excitement to trickle through my veins. Not quite enough to melt the cold feeling I've had since I broke up with Evan, but enough to allow for the possibility that this trip might be exactly what I need. It helps that nothing is familiar. The name of the inn where I'll be staying is tucked safely in my bag and as soon as I collect my suitcase, I plan on taking a cab directly there to get settled.

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So when I see my name, Willa Peet, scrawled in black marker on a sign, I do a double take. Is it just a coincidence? I quickly discard the notion. It's not a common name, and we're currently the only flight disembarking into this terminal. My gaze tracks upward from the sign to the owner...and I find myself staring into the most dramatic pair of blue eyes I've ever seen. Blue is an inadequate word to describe the color, really, when they are given an entirely unique dimension by the utter disdain lurking in them. Frankly, it's breathtaking, this individual's contempt. Not to mention, completely out of place in this frothy sea of tearful Hallmark-style reunions. I can feel my fingers sliding over my canvas bag, itching to take his picture, capture the contradiction he represents, but his mouth is moving now. Talking to me. A mouth, I realize dully, is a worthy companion of those storm-born eyes.

Beautiful.

He straightens from his post, where he'd been leaning casually against a pillar. Tall. Absurdly masculine. I would use the word strapping, but it's such a lame description, I'd have to take a lifelong vow of silence afterward. His mess of deep brown hair looks as though he wet his hand and swiped the thick wave back on the way out the door, rounding out his irreverence perfectly.

“Uh, yeah. Hello? Are you the contest winner?”

His Irish brogue is thick, punctuated by irritation. I pull my proverbial shit together and nod. “Yeah.”

“About bloody time. Did you stop to sign autographs?”

He doesn't wait for me to answer, but strides off in the direction of the baggage claim. I stare after him for a moment before a sympathetic look from an eavesdropper horrifies me into motion. When I catch up with him at the carousel, he's staring at me hard, but talking into his cell phone in a clipped tone.

"What do you mean there's no customers in the pub yet?" He listens for a moment, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Have you unlocked the front door?" His head falls back as if imploring the ceiling for patience. "Yes, I reckon that would explain the line of people outside. Go unlock it. And if Faith hasn't gotten her arse downstairs yet to wait tables, give her a bell."

Okay. I'm starting to catch up now. The Claymore Inn is where I'll be staying for the month. A quick Yelp search on the way to the airport told me there is a pub located on the ground level, run by the family that owns the inn. They must have sent one of the employees to pick me up. Excellent choice, folks. He's clearly the warm, fuzzy, welcoming type. As he launches another strained set of instructions into the phone, I can't help but watch him out of the corner of my eye, even as I wait for my suitcase on the rotating metal carousel. We've been given wide berth by my fellow passengers thanks to the utterly untouchable quality of my reluctant driver.

I glue my attention to the baggage claim when I realize how long I've been looking. What was that about? Why am I weighing the risk of taking out my camera and inciting him further? It's the anger. He's doing nothing to hide it. It resembles my own, only he doesn't seem to have any desire to restrain the emotion.

And I'm fascinated by that.

It's in that moment, waiting in travel-hell for my suitcase, coated in airplane grime, my mouth dry from too many roasted peanuts that I decide to stay far away from him. Whoever he is, we will not be friends or even the barest form of acquaintances. I don't want to be fascinated by him, and I don't want to spare another minute guessing

why he's so pissed off.

I spot my red and black-checkered suitcase coming toward me and ready myself to retrieve it. My hand curls under the stiff, leather handle and I pull, but the weight disappears. He is behind me lifting it effortlessly in one hand. He's finished his phone call and glaring at me again.

"I've got it," I inform him, my jaw tight.

"Oh, an independent American girl. How unusual."

"A stranger taking my bag against my will. How illegal."

His lips jump at one end as if a sense of humor might exist somewhere underneath all that hostility, but it's gone so quickly I know I imagined it. "Do you find, in America, that a lot of strangers hold up signs with your name printed on them?"

"Everywhere I go. I'm f**king famous, hence the autograph signing."

"Right." Rubbing a hand over his jaw, he considers me a moment as if seeing me for the first time. He hasn't shaved yet this morning and the hair darkening his chin makes him seem older than the early twenties I assume him to be. As he gives me a covert once-over, I know what he's seeing. While I might have shed the gothed-out top layer I rocked until age seventeen, I kept the nose ring and black is still my go-to color, clothing-wise. My hair, although half f**ked from sleeping on the flight, is back to its natural golden-brown color, finally free of the black dye I used to torture it with on a monthly basis. Did I just catch a spark of reluctant interest in his gaze?

Finished with his perusal, he asks, "Are you always this difficult?"

"Actually, I'm usually much worse." I yank my bag out of his grip, catching him off

guard. Without a glance backward, I wheel it toward the exit.

He catches up with me before I manage to make it through the automatic door. I swallow a gasp as he wrestles the bag from my hand. Before I can unleash the string of expletives hovering on my tongue, he leans in close. Defensively, I hold my breath so I won't smell his cologne. It's fresh and smoky at the same time.

Unacceptable.

"Listen, tough girl. Once I get you to the inn unharmed, my end of the bargain with the contest people is fulfilled. Until then, we're going to put up with each other. Otherwise I don't get paid. And I have a feeling I'll deserve every penny for putting up with you."

"I'm not getting into a moving vehicle with you."

He finds something about that extremely funny. "I assure you I can handle an automobile with better proficiency than most."

"I'm not worried about you. I'm worried about me tossing you out while it's still moving."

"I'd like to see you try. This suitcase is bigger than you."

"It's a good thing, too. I'll need somewhere to hide the body."

Someone passing behind us overhears my comment and laughs. His eyes narrow on me, obscuring some of their electric, snapping blue color. "I'll carry you if I have to, but you're getting in the car one way or another."

I've been avoiding making embarrassing scenes and pissing people off for two years.

I've been swallowing my pride and acting like a reasonable adult because I felt that was the kind of girlfriend Evan deserved. I wanted him to be proud of me and not sorry he'd taken a risk on my scrawny, emotionally stunted ass. I could be the bigger person and go with this asshole to the car. Ignore him long enough to reach the inn.

I could. But I won't. Because, well, f**k that.

Willa's pale body twitches to life on the banks of the Chicago River.

I smile, but keep it tight as if I'm forcing it. "What's your name?"

He's suspicious. The smile doesn't fool him. "Shane Claymore."

"Shane." It fits him perfectly, and his last name tells me he's not just an employee. His family owns the place I'll be staying in for an entire month. Damn. I won't be able to avoid him completely. "I need to use the restroom. It's urgent. And I need a certain feminine product in my suitcase. Do I need to explain further?"

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Surprisingly, he doesn't shrink into himself at the mention of the Scourge of Womankind. He crosses his arms and starts to protest, but his phone rings again in his pocket. With a muffled curse, he answers. "What is it, Orla? Have you set the place on fire now?"

I raise an eyebrow at him, and he waves me off with a flick of his hand, already beginning to pace. I'd been planning on sneaking out a different entrance, but he's just made it even easier. I owe you one, Orla. As soon as his back is turned, I wheel my suitcase out the front entrance and slip effortlessly into a cab.

Chapter Two

While I'm in the cab it begins to pour rain, then stops...and begins again in a matter of thirty minutes. I thought the weather in Chicago was volatile, but volatile doesn't begin to describe the Irish weather. One minute I'm squinting through the sunshine, the next clouds are darkening the sky, turning it to nighttime in the middle of the day.

We wind down narrow cobblestone streets, slick from the intermittent downpours and pull to a stop outside the Claymore Inn, located on Baggot Street. Slightly off the beaten path, away from the touristy end of town. The inn is a gray, stone building, four stories high. Windows are painted a crisp white, flower boxes containing cheerful pink flowers attached at their base. A trio of Irish flags, white, orange, and green wave from the roof. The bottom floor has a dark wooden facade, a dramatic break from the floors above. A green awning with gold lettering extends from the entrance to the curb where my cab sits idling, the driver waiting for me to pay.

But the wallet is frozen in my hand.

Underneath the awning, leaning against the outside of the pub, is Shane. Somehow he's beat the cab, and I have no idea how. We managed to avoid all traffic on the way. He's watching me with an expression I can't decipher. It's a mixture of relief and pure, undiluted pissed-off-ness. I want to study that expression later. So I do what comes naturally. I yank my camera out of my messenger bag and snap a quick picture. And I was wrong. He hadn't been pissed off before.

Now? Now, he's good and pissed.

I step out of the cab and thank the driver, who has lifted my suitcase from the trunk for me. Making sure to school my features carefully, I swagger toward Shane. A truly dope swagger is a little trick I picked up from Ginger over the years, although she probably wasn't even aware she'd passed it on. Your walk can mean everything. It lets whoever you're walking toward know just what the hell they're in for. Although my little vamoose at the airport has probably already tipped him off.

I suspect he's waiting for me to ask how he made it back so quickly. So I don't. "The weather in this country sucks ass," I remark instead on my way into the pub.

He catches the door and follows me inside. "That stubborn pride is going to get you into trouble, tough girl," he whispers gruffly in my ear.

Ignoring the shiver his voice sends down my spine, I wink at him. "Bring it on."

With a snort, he leaves me standing in the entrance and ducks beneath a hatch leading behind the bar, joining a redheaded girl who looks flat-out panicked at the amount of customers staring at her expectantly from the other side the bar. I can't hear her over the music and conversations crowding the room, but she appears to be rambling some sort of explanation to Shane. Clearly ignoring her, he takes a drink order and begins to pull pints of beer from a white handle.

Determinedly, I push Shane Claymore and his Hulk-sized attitude to the back of my mind and take in my surroundings. Claymore's is small, clearly ancient, but immaculate. And popular. Every polished, wooden table is full with customers digging into their food between sips from pint glasses.

I know what a tourist looks like. In Chicago, they're everywhere, slowing you down by crowding the sidewalks as they try to decipher oversize maps. I'm trying my best not to look like a tourist even though my suitcase might as well be a flashing neon sign that says outsider. Unlike the Temple Bar section of Dublin I read about on the flight, this is definitely where the locals come to eat lunch. Men dressed smartly in suits, female coworkers gossiping over their salads. At the bar, older gentlemen keep themselves company, watching horse races on overhead televisions. Regulars, Ginger would call them. A few of them send me curious glances that I return steadily.

Laughter, clinking silverware, chairs scraping, the bell dinging in the kitchen...all are unfamiliar sounds to me, but when combined, they are immediately welcoming. Instinctively, I know this isn't the type of establishment my sister worked in to support us from age sixteen. The ones that sent her home to our crumbling two-bedroom house on the wrong side of Nashville smelling like cigarette smoke and despair. There is an air of acceptance here, as if anyone walking through the door could seamlessly mesh right into the tapestry of color and sound.

My thoughts surprise me. My *modus operandi* is usually to find the negative aspect of something first and ask questions...never. But I don't have time to think on it for long, because a blinding, hundred-watt smile on female legs is jogging toward me. Jogging. My first instinct is to hold up a cross to ward her off, but I'm suddenly being hugged. When I say hugged, what I really mean is suffocated within an inch of my life. And if the hug-o-death doesn't manage to knock me on my ass, the abundance of Tommy Girl perfume assaulting my senses will finish the job. Just when I've finally recovered from shock enough to attempt self-extrication, the unknown hugger beats me to it.

“It’s the photographer herself, then. I’m Faith Claymore. I bet you’re starving after pissing off my brother. It tends to work up an appetite.” Her musical brogue leaves the words hanging in their air as she pulls me toward a booth. I just manage to grab hold of my suitcase before I’m dragged forward. “What do you fancy? There’s cod and chips on the specials menu. I’d go with that since it’s the freshest.”

“I’m not hungry.” Which isn’t entirely true. I could probably choke down a Clydesdale right now if pressed, but I need to get my bearings. I can’t do that with this girl chirping questions at me and Shane staring twin blue daggers at me from behind the bar. For someone who obviously doesn’t want me around, he’s damn sure keeping tabs. “Maybe later.”

“Am I scaring you?” She laughs and even I have to admit, the sound is sweet and clean. Nothing behind it but genuine amusement. “I just wasn’t expecting the contest winner to be a girl so close to my age. From Chicago, are you? Are you fascinating, Willa? I’ll just bet you’re fascinating.”

“Nope. Duller than dirt.”

“Ah, go on.” She laughs again, eyes sparkling. They’re a touch lighter than Shane’s, yet infinitely different because of the innocence behind them. There is nothing innocent about Shane. Faith is pretty in a way that hasn’t fully matured yet. Although, with her fair skin and dimples, she’ll likely be blessed with youthful looks forever. Or cursed, depending on who you’re talking to. “Will you at least have tea?”

“Not unless by tea, you mean coffee.”

“Coffee.” She sighs. “That’s so American. Do you walk around your town with a huge cup full of the stuff? I bet you look like a movie star.”

“Only if the movie is *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*.”

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She laughs, drawing attention in our direction.

“I think I’ll just head to my room, actually.”

“Of course. You must be knackered after your flight.” She takes hold of my arm again, and we enter a dim hallway at the back of the pub. It’s lined with three doors, two of them restrooms and one labeled employees only. At the other end is a narrow, rickety staircase. Faith stops us at the bottom and points at a plain wooden door visible from where we’re standing. “Now. Your room is right at the top of the stairs. I’d bring you up myself, but I’m in the middle of a shift and Shane’s already got his temper up. No reason to rile it any further.” She rubs a circle onto my back, and I try not to stiffen. “But no worries. I’ll be up later to give you the lay of the land.”

“Thanks,” I mumble, attempting a smile. Back in Chicago, I don’t have a lot of female friends. All right, none. When Evan would bring me around his childhood buddies, their girlfriends would include me, mostly out of curiosity than anything, but I could never quite get the conversational beats down. How to respond to a question without creating too much interest in my past in Nashville. The life I led before Ginger and I escaped to Chicago and she met—then married—the hot cop who lived across the hall. Keeping things light, making casual acquaintances, is a skill that tends to escape me. We were too busy surviving to learn skills like small talk.

“You’re welcome.” Faith smiles as if I’ve been acting completely normal this entire awkward introduction, and I wonder if maybe, just maybe, I didn’t do too badly this time around. “It’s lovely to meet you.” She starts to walk away but turns back and winks at me. “We’re going to be friends, Willa. There’s no help for you.”

...

I've showered off the layer of travel dust and thrown on faded jeans with a red thermal shirt. I've unpacked, if you can call dumping the contents of your suitcase into a drawer unpacking. My room is small and simply decorated. White lace everywhere. The curtains and bedspread are made of the stuff. Doilies spread carefully beneath clocks and a telephone. I'd never choose the decor for myself—I'm more of the year-round Christmas lights and murals type—but that's kind of why I like it. As if maybe I needed to step outside my usual space to see beyond it. I want to do more of that. Now, if possible. Giving myself time to think will only set me back when I want to move forward.

It's only early evening and looking out the window at Baggot Street, I'm desperate to get outside and immerse myself in anonymity. Dubliners walk past in groups, calling out to others across the street. Claymore's is one of many pubs on the street and smokers congregate outside them all, their laughter reaching me through the glass. Below me, the music in the pub has grown steadily louder since five o'clock, as if the Irish equivalent of happy hour has started. Being so far from anything familiar feels like an aphrodisiac. I want to see unusual sights, taste different air, be unrecognized. I shoot a quick text to Ginger and her husband, Derek, letting them know I've arrived in one piece. Simultaneously, I receive one back from each of them saying, "Stay that way."

God, I want to shake them to death I love them so much. Sometimes I think only having the ability to love a small number of people cranks up the intensity. I have no way of spreading it around, no one else to bestow it on, so it's highly concentrated and fierce. It's okay with Derek and Ginger, though, because they share my sickness. Derek, because he's a homicide cop. Ginger, because she grew up trying to protect me. Love few, love hard. That's us. My smile slips when Evan blasts through my conscious like a speeding train, honking and flashing his lights. This time it's accompanied by a wave of pity I refuse to wallow in. Digesting the pain, I throw my

messenger bag containing my Nikon, keys, and wallet over my shoulder and head out before I crawl under the white lace and forget why I came here.

When I reach the bottom of the stairs, I notice the door marked employees only is open slightly. This is where I should keep walking, but my annoying curiosity won't let me, because just inside the door, sitting on an antique desk, I see a family photograph. I've never been part of one. My mother couldn't even remember to feed me most of the time, so making arrangements to capture our likenesses would have been beyond her capabilities. While I've never understood the motivation to pose for such a picture—because, inevitably, you will hate your hairstyle within a year, but by then it's nailed to a f**king wall for everyone to gawk at—they've always drawn me in.

Paging Willa's shrink. Yes, the curiosity probably comes from wanting to understand something I've never had, but that doesn't make me any less curious. After casting one final glance at the pub entrance, I nudge the employees-only door open with one finger, as if the less I touch it, the less offensive an intrusion this will be. At first, my attention is captured by the smiling foursome, forever frozen in time, watching me invade their privacy. Faith and Shane, both a few years younger, stand front and center in the photo, smiling. The smile looks forced on Shane's part, but not Faith. She looks positively elated to be participating in family picture day. Behind them stands a man and woman, the man unsmiling with his chin raised proudly, the woman looking as though she'd just forgotten she left something baking in the oven.

I can't help but laugh in the dimness, wondering why in God's name they'd chosen this particular shot to display in a frame. They are either the least photogenic family in Ireland, or they'd been heinously ripped off by their photographer. My gaze lingers on Shane a moment before shiny objects in the corner of the room catch my attention.

Trophies, at least a dozen of them, are stuffed haphazardly inside a giant cardboard box, but I can see gold figures of cars mounted on their tops. Interest piqued, I skirt

past the desk and pull one out to inspect the inscription.

Second place: 2013 Formula 1 Malaysian Grand Prix, Shane Claymore. I pull another one out. Third place: 2013 Formula 1 Australian Grand Prix, Shane Claymore.

I can feel my eyebrows inching toward my hairline. Shane is a race-car driver? A successful one, apparently. It's the last thing I expect, and I'm not often surprised.

"Well, that explains how he got here so freaking fast," I mutter, then sift through the box to pull out a framed, black-and-white photograph. Shane is dressed in a white racing uniform, ball cap pulled down low over his forehead. He's sitting on the hood of a race car, all casual grace, a trophy propped on his thigh. Whoever took the picture must have said something funny, because his smile looks spontaneous. Definitely not forced, like in the family photo. I try not to study it too closely, but it's hard. His interesting lines, the depth lurking in his eyes. He is a photographer's dream.

Now that I've admitted he is good-looking, I resolve never to think about his looks again. I firmly place the picture back in the box and turn to leave, a dozen thoughts skittering around in my noggin.

What is a race car driver doing bartending in a pub?

I have this thought a split second before I hear footsteps coming down the hallway. Shit. I can't walk out because then someone will know for sure I was snooping. I turn in a circle and ram my hip into the desk. Goddammitouch. That's going to leave a mark. I cringe when I realize my only option is to wait by the door and hope they pass so I can slip out unnoticed.

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I already know this is wishful thinking. My luck is notoriously f**ked-up. So when the office door is yanked open and Shane walks in, I've got a cover story locked and loaded. Metal box under his arm, he freezes when he sees me, one dark brow quirking with an unspoken question.

“Wait a minute, this isn't the bathroom,” I say, scrutinizing the employees only sign.

I didn't say it was a good cover story.

Shane isn't buying it either. He flips on the light, and I see his attention flick over to the box of trophies, then back to me. I'm waging a hefty battle not to turn around to see if I left one of them at a noticeably different angle.

“Curious as well as stubborn, are you?”

Question answered. Pretense dropped. “All right, you caught me. I was lured in by the world's worst family photo. I was powerless against its creepy magnetism.”

When he moves into the office, his expression reminds me of a hunter who's just trapped his dinner. He comes so close, I swear he's going to kiss me. His face comes within inches of mine, his big body making the barest hint of contact. All the while, he keeps his blue eyes trained on me with intent. It's a ballsy move. It's unnerving. Challenging. As if catching me red-handed has given him permission to mess with me. I don't intimidate him at all. Not the way I intimidated—

Evan's image pops into my mind and at the last second, I flinch backward.

Shane's laugh is devoid of humor. "Not curious about everything, then?" He draws a set of keys out of his pocket and unlocks one of the desk drawers where he stows the metal box. After he shuts and locks it, he looks up at me again. "Brace yourself. This might come as a shock, but I'm glad I caught you. We should talk."

For the second time in as many minutes, I'm surprised. It must be some kind of record. My mind automatically begins calculating what he could possibly want to speak with me about. "Is this about me ditching you and taking a cab from the airport? I'm not going to rat you out to the contest organizers. You'll get your money."

"I received it this afternoon, or you'd be looking for a new place to stay."

"Heartwarming." Jesus. And I thought I was mean? "I thought Ireland was the land of one thousand welcomes."

"I'm knocking it down to nine-hundred ninety-nine."

I tilt my head. "Not quite as catchy."

He smirks. "I want to talk to you about Faith. Close the door. She's an accomplished eavesdropper, my sister."

With a shrug, I kick it closed and cross my arms. "Fire away, un-welcomer."

"Very well. We'll make this quick." He reaches down and adjusts one of the trophies nestled in the box. I watch something flicker behind his eyes, but it vanishes pronto. "Back off my sister. I know she doesn't make it easy, latching on the way she does, but the last thing she needs is a temporary friend."

My surprise meter must be malfunctioning today. It keeps dinging. "I didn't come

here to make friends,” I say without thinking.

That gives him pause. I can see him battling the urge to explore that statement, but like me, he decides against expressing even the barest form of interest. “Just the same, she’s relentless. Do your best to let her down gently. Although, I reckon tact isn’t something that comes easily to you.”

I laugh a little hysterically. “You’re calling me out on tact?”

Shane acknowledges my words with a sigh. “Look, Faith gets attached.” Another glance at the trophy box. “I won’t be here much longer. When I leave, it’ll be hard enough. I don’t need you making it worse.” He crosses his arms over his wide chest. “I realize you’ve only arrived, but I thought it best to get this conversation out of the way early.”

“Wow. Thanks for letting me unpack before unloading your family’s baggage onto me.”

“Excuse me?”

See, now he’s got me good and pissed. This is exactly what I’d been hoping to avoid. In the last month, I’ve experienced enough teen vampire-style angst to last a lifetime, and I’ve somehow already been dragged into this family’s drama. If there was a red reject button sitting on the desk, I’d slam my fist down on top of it. I have more than one reason to be annoyed and it all goes back to my stupid need to know more. “Where are you going anyway?”

He looks to be debating whether or not to confide in me, but in the end he shrugs. “Back to racing. As soon as I can get this place sold, I’m getting back on the circuit. Shouldn’t be long until I unload this place. There are several interested parties.”

I've only been here a couple of hours, and I'm already appalled at the idea of selling the inn. It screams family institution. When you've never felt comfortable or welcome in a single place in your life, and you find out someone is taking that very feeling for granted, it's impossible to understand. "Why did you come back in the first place?"

"My father died." He says it quickly, snapping the revelation like a whip, as if he'd anticipated the question. Had been asked it countless times. "So you see, this year alone Faith has suffered enough loss. Then you walk in here with your Clash T-shirt, dripping with sarcasm, and she sees an escape. Don't be that for her, or she'll wither when you leave."

"For someone who clearly dislikes me, you seem to have a high opinion of my ability to sweep your sister off her feet."

"Don't let it go to your head. You've already got enough confidence to fill the Atlantic."

"What's the Irish word for hypocrite?" He doesn't answer, obviously. I want that to be my parting shot—I adore a good parting shot—but there's still another piece of the puzzle I need to slide into place. "Won't she still have your mother when you leave?"

Shane laughs under his breath. "You'll meet Kitty soon enough."

That answer is far from satisfying, but if I pry any more, it'll look like I care. And I don't. "Well. If she's half as charming as you, I'm in for a treat."

He rounds the desk and comes toward me. I want to back away, but manage to stand my ground. Something about him puts me on the defensive. He keeps invading my personal space, and I don't like the way it makes me feel. Anxious...aware. Before he can take another step, I close the distance for him, bringing us toe to toe. I'm trying to

send a message, although I have no idea what it is. Stay away, maybe. So why am I moving closer?

His eyebrows dip a little, as if he's trying to read me, frustrated that he can't. "Do I have your agreement, Willa?"

I reach behind me and yank the door open with an impatient noise. "Relax, frosty. I told you I wasn't here to make friends and I meant it."

"What are you here for?"

I leave without answering. The only person I owe answers to now is myself.

Chapter Three

A few days passed and by slipping out of the inn early each morning, I've thankfully managed to avoid Shane and Faith. Kitty, not so much. Bright and early the morning after mine and Shane's laugh-a-minute chat, she knocked on my door while I was still wrapped in a towel, hair dripping wet. Briefly, I'd pictured Shane coming to kick me out, but a tinkling voice had called cheerfully through the wood. Definitely not Shane.

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Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 7:13 am

“Tea? Anyone in there for tea?”

I’d cracked the door open just enough to peek out. My first thought upon meeting Kitty Claymore was, holy f**k-balls, she’s bat-shit crazy. Her eyes were glassy and unfocused, but her smile reminded me of her daughter. Kitty was a walking, talking, age-progression drawing of Faith in forty years. Except eternal youth didn’t sit so well on Kitty. Time appeared to have taken its toll in other ways. As in, mentally. In her carefully arranged graying hair, she’d clipped some elaborate hairpiece that involved peacock feathers and blue robin eggs. Her dress hung off her, much too large for her thin frame, yet perfectly clean and ironed. Over it, she wore an apron with Claymore Inn embroidered over the breast.

She looked right through me and held up a silver teapot. “Piping hot, it is. You’ll want to blow on it a while.” She breezed into the room as if floating on air and flipped over the teacup sitting on my dresser. “There’s toast.”

I looked around confused. “W-where?”

She pulled a burned piece out of her apron pocket and laid it down with the utmost care beside the steaming cup of tea. Then she pointed at it, as if it had been there all along. “There.”

“Looks...great. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, love. How long have you been here? Have you met my husband yet? Don’t let him put you off the place.”

Kitty's question sent a tingle up my neck. Apparently my initial judgment of her wasn't far off, but I felt guilty for having such harsh thoughts when her condition appeared serious. I didn't know how to respond. "N-not yet," I mumbled.

"You will shortly, I'd say." She patted her hair. "And my Shane? You've run into him, have you?"

"Oh yes."

"Right." Suddenly, she looked lucid. Not to mention, highly amused at my abrupt answer. "Well, don't go planning the wedding just yet."

"Oh, I wouldn't worry about that. Unless the reception involves a cage match."

"Not a bother." She smoothed a hand over the bedspread. "Don't judge him too harshly, though. He's had a hard go of it, my son. Stuck in the mud with two crazy birds when he was born to go full speed ahead."

She looked up at me then and I'd watched clarity flee from her expression. "Well, I'll leave you to your tea. Mind your tongue, now. It's piping."

"Er...will do."

Every morning since, we've gone through the same routine. She knocks on my door at eight o'clock sharp, tea in hand as she floats around to each of the empty guest rooms and doles it out. Half the time, the tea is ice cold, not that I would drink it anyway. I'm a coffee person to the bone. But I get the feeling she's the one who cleans my room each afternoon, so I make sure to pour it down the sink so she won't know I leave it untouched.

It didn't take me long to fall in love with Dublin. I've purposely neglected to buy a

map, kind of wanting to get lost. The first few days, I walked aimlessly along the River Liffey, stopping when something or someone interested me, snapping photographs. Scoping out the most convenient one hour photo center to develop my film. One afternoon, I fell asleep near the lake in St. Stephen's Green, a lush park in the middle of the bustling city center. I woke when the sky opened up and soaked me to the skin. Thankfully, my camera was in its waterproof bag, or my beloved Nikon wouldn't have made it past that first week.

It took me three days to find Grafton Street, the main shopping area tourists flock to like hipsters to a vinyl record sale. At first the buzz of activity and crowds didn't appeal to me, but with so much to look at, I couldn't resist setting up camp on the sidewalk to observe. One particular street act had kept my attention longer than most. A well-hidden aspect of these buskers' performance was to pickpocket members of the crowd.

They were good. I never would have noticed, except I was in photographer mode, watching the crowd instead of the act. One member of the duo played a battered guitar, his thickly accented voice captivating the smiling onlookers trying to soak up the local flavor. While he sang Irish folk songs, his partner in crime walked through the crowd and took advantage of their inattention, pilfering wallets and dipping into purses as he went. I could tell they knew each other by the subtle eye contact they made between each song. The thief would raise his eyebrows or shrug depending on what he'd managed to pull in.

The guitar player chose a woman from the audience then, kissing her hand and twirling her in a circle. Her group of friends, including an indulgent husband, applauded and snapped pictures.

One of them was handily divested of their iPhone.

"Dance for me, wouldya, sweetheart? Folks, isn't she a picture?" More cheering.

More stealing. He plucked a few chords on his guitar. “Right. Now I can tell she’s got Irish blood in her. Would you like to know how I’d make such an assumption?” A chorus of yeses. The guitar player leaned toward the crowd as if imparting a great secret. “Her husband looks like he needs a bloody drink.”

Everyone laughs as I snap a picture of the pickpocket snaking his hand into a woman’s purse, removing a sparkly pink wallet. The crowd shifts, and I see the woman is holding the hand of a little girl. A frown mars my forehead and the shutter of my camera goes off. My sight is briefly obscured through the viewfinder as the shutter goes off, but as soon as it returns, I see the pickpocket looking directly at me. He signals the guitar player to wrap up the act with a quick slash of his hand across his throat. Casually, I hope, I replace my camera in my bag and stand to leave.

“Hold on, now. Just a moment.” It’s the guitar player.

Cursing my f**ked-up luck, I paste a bored expression on my face and turn. “Hmm?”

The pickpocket comes to stand at his shoulder, looking around furtively. Probably for cops. They’re both midtwenties, possibly even brothers, with scruffy, light brown hair. Guitar Player is attempting a beard that’s having a difficult time growing in evenly. Behind them, the crowd has dispersed as if it were never there.

“Mind if I see your camera, pet?”

“Why, so you can steal it?”

I expect them to react with affront or deny that I’d clearly caught their con in progress, instead they both laugh. Guitar Player begins to play the opening strains of “American Woman” on his broken-down instrument.

“No, I just want to make sure you got my good side,” the pickpocket answers

jovially.

My eyes narrow as I try to figure out their game. Apparently they're not at all worried about me alerting a police officer. Not that I was planning on it.

I have a soft spot for thieves, you see. My sister is one. Thieving is how we managed to escape the hell of Nashville and make a new life in Chicago. One night, Ginger came into the tiny bedroom we shared, clutching a bag containing fifty thousand dollars in cash, wide-eyed and shaking, but determined. Our mother had been transporting money for an unsavory character, but made a pit stop midtransit to get high and pass out on the couch. Some people would call what Ginger did "stealing." I call it ingenuity. We were in Chicago before the sun came up and when it did, we were living new lives. We were in control of our futures.

Still, soft spot for thieves notwithstanding, shouldn't these buskers be at least a touch concerned that I'll sound the alarm?

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Guitar Player reads my mind. “We’ll disappear before you have a chance, pet.”

“Please, stop calling me that. It’s dehumanizing.”

“Give us a name to use instead.”

“Beyoncé.” They exchange an amused glance. “Your turn.”

“Brian.”

“Patrick,” says the pickpocket. “Not half as glamorous, but they do the trick.”

Brian has moved onto the chorus of “American Woman,” his fingers flying over the neck of the guitar. “How long are you in town, Beyoncé? I’d hate for this to be good-bye.”

For some reason, these two are already starting to grow on me. I haven’t talked to anyone in days apart from loony-tunes Kitty, and the banter feels easy and free of expectation. I know it doesn’t speak well of me that I get along so well with a couple of cons, but what can I say? I’m more comfortable exchanging words with these two than I ever was with Evan’s friends. “Why? You have any suggestions?”

Patrick smiles. “We’ve a gig Friday nights in O’Kelly’s down on Sheriff Street, if you’re up for a pint and some real Irish music. None of this watered-down shite.”

I consider them for a minute, wondering if there’s any harm meeting two semistrangers as long as it’s in a public place. Derek would shit a live cow, but he’s

not here, and frankly, these two seem like the good time I need. I decide to case O’Kelly’s beforehand and leave if anything seems weird. “I’ll make you a deal. You guys let me return that pink wallet to its owner, and I’ll think about Friday.”

It’s comical how both of them deflate, shoulders hunching like two scolded children being told to share. In the end, Patrick hands it over. “You’re worse than our ma.”

My lips tug into a smile. “Thank you.”

“See you Friday then?”

I split a look between them. “As long as you realize I’m not interested in either of you sexually.”

“Fair enough.”

“Women rarely are.”

With a laugh, I leave them standing there and walk toward the mother, who is checking the ground for her missing wallet. “Hey,” I call out, holding up the wallet. “Did you drop this?”

...

Later that night, I walk into the Claymore Inn, surprised to find the pub mostly empty. A check of my watch tells me I’ve been out longer than I thought. On a weeknight at ten o’clock, it appears the good people of Dublin are resting up for work the next morning. Over the last few nights, I’ve managed to sneak past the bar without making eye contact with a swamped Shane. I don’t escape so easily tonight. He turns his head at my entrance, but he doesn’t move from his casual lean against the gleaming bar. An eager-looking man stands at the bar, watching as Shane writes

something down on a glossy magazine. When Shane hands it back to him, I realize he's just signed an autograph.

This is the first time it has occurred to me that he's actually...famous, in a way. I've seen the trophies, but until now his attitude has been taking up most of my attention. Why is it kind of appealing to me when he acts like he signs autographs several times a day?

He's layered a white, long-sleeved shirt under a black polo, the white material pushed halfway up his forearms. He nods absently at the man now thanking him, but he's watching me as he starts chewing on a red cocktail straw.

"I was starting to think you'd gone back to Chicago."

"You won't get rid of me that easily."

"More's the pity."

Knowing the few remaining customers could hear every word, I feel a stupid flush creep up my neck. I start to beeline for the back staircase, but something occurs to me. I'm running from him. Letting him intimidate me. If I do it once, it might become a habit, and I don't want to run anymore. Easing into a swagger, I pull out a bar stool and hop up into the sturdy leather seat. I have the distinct pleasure of watching his teeth clench down hard on the straw. I don't normally drink, but tonight I'm making an exception. I wait for him to ask me what I'm having, but he's already putting together some sort of concoction out of my line of sight. When he sets the Shirley Temple down in front of me with a smirk, I reel back my temper like a fisherman who just caught a great white.

Smile feeling as though it might crack, I fish through the ice for a cherry and pop it into my mouth. When his gaze drops to my lips, watching me chew, I know staying

in the bar was a mistake. I clear my throat, breaking the silence, bringing his shadowed blue eyes back up to mine. “Slow night. I guess not everyone values abrasiveness in their bartender.”

“I can play nice when I want to.”

“That remains to be seen.”

He leans forward on strong forearms. “Would you like to see for yourself, tough girl?”

I force myself not to jerk back, but it’s a damn struggle when his face comes within inches of mine. “I can’t think of anything less appealing.”

“Liar.”

That deep voice sends a ribbon of smoke curling in my belly. It alarms the ever-loving hell out of me. Is it because he’s so different than Evan that I’m being...drawn? Because he is, really. Entirely different than Evan. The anti-Evan. My ex-boyfriend had never challenged me like this or called me on my bullshit. He’d only ever tried to rid me of it. Like I must have known it would, the forced reminder of Evan sends me leaning back in my chair, as if he’s just walked into the room and found me inches from another man so soon.

Shane’s stare is unnerving. “You didn’t answer my question the other night. What are you doing here, Willa?” He looks over my head at some invisible spot before his attention locks back on me, more intense than before. “I’ve a hunch it’s a man you’re after running away from.”

“I don’t care if you have a hunch,” I scoff. “Your opinion means jack to me.”

He winks at me, the f**ker. “Now, if that were true, you wouldn’t mind telling me about him.”

“I never confirmed or denied I’m running away from a him. Or running at all, for that matter.”

“What’s his name?”

In the interest of buying myself some time, I take a long sip of the pink, fizzy drink. It’s actually really tasty. Why do we stop drinking Shirley Temples when we get older? They’re a goddamn delight is what they are.

I give a mental eye roll when I realize even my subconscious is trying to change the subject. Oh, what the hell. Maybe I’ll just give him something to get him off my back.

“Evan.” The name tastes like bitter failure in my mouth.

Why he seems disappointed, I can’t begin to fathom. “Bad breakup?”

“You could say that.”

He rubs the heel of his hand against his jaw, appearing to weigh his next question. “Why’d you go your separate ways in the end?”

I laugh loudly enough to draw the attention of a man half asleep in the corner stool. “You actually think I’m going to tell you that?” Another sip of pink stuff. “No way am I handing you that ammunition so you can use it against me at will.”

“That bad, huh?”

Shane's deadpan response infuriates me, mainly because it tells me that I've shown my hand. I'm not giving him an inch more. In fact, I decide to take a few back. Something has been bothering me ever since our conversation the night I arrived. His curt reply when I asked why he returned to Dublin. His defensive manner when revealing plans to sell the inn. Maybe I'll just take a stab in the dark and see if I hit something. After all, it's what he's doing by asking about Evan. "We're all running from something, though. You would know. Right, Shane?"

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Without waiting for a response, I slide off the stool and head toward the hallway, but not before I see the strain on his face. Oh, I've hit a nerve. A Bigfoot-sized one. His eyes flash with intent and suddenly he's lifting the bar's hatch and letting it slam back down while he pursues me. My heart begins to pound, echoing in my ears as I pick up my pace, my boots quickly carrying me down the hallway. It has become imperative that I get away from him.

Not because I'm scared of Shane. I'm scared of the fact that when I'm around him, the numbness I've felt since breaking up with Evan fades, at least for a little while. It doesn't matter that irritation pops up in its place. It's too much, too soon.

At the base of the stairs, he curves his hand around my elbow and he pulls me to an abrupt stop. When I face him, we're both breathing heavily. I don't know what's going on. It's simultaneously thrilling and daunting. Every rational part of me is screaming, begging for me to wrench free and leave him standing there. But I can't. I can't move when he's so close, looking at me like he doesn't know whether to shake me or kiss me. I don't know which is scarier. "What the hell did you mean by that?"

With a concerted effort, I think back, but I can't remember what I said to piss him off. As far as parting shots go, it must not have been that memorable. To me, anyway. He appears to remember it well enough to be blowing steam from his ears. "Maybe if you can't take a little criticism, you should stop dishing it out."

"You don't know a damn thing about me."

"That's exactly how I plan to keep it." As soon as the words leave my mouth, I remember what I'd said to kick the hornet's nest. "I don't care what you're running

from. So why don't you follow suit and stop asking me about—"

"Evan?"

Fucking ouch. Hearing his name spat like a curse, intending to hurt...well it works. Again, the guilt arrives on a shiny, silver platter, making me question what I'm doing standing in a darkened hallway with Shane and his too-big presence. I've done nothing wrong and yet if I strain to hear, I swear I can hear the gentle ticking of a countdown clock until I do. No. No, it'll never happen. It can't.

"Why didn't it work, Willa?" Shane all but whispers. "Did he try and tame you? Turn you into a nice girl?" His eyes are unkind, but there's something else lurking underneath the hostility. Something a little tortured. Is he attracted to me? If so, he must hate it. The worst part? I don't seem to be quite as immune as I want to be. Excitement is threatening to outweigh my urge to push him away and end whatever is happening.

When I make no move to leave, he backs me up against the hallway wall, bracing both of his hands on either side of my head. My heartbeat has graduated to a roar. This feeling of being dragged under is wholly unfamiliar, a realization that intensifies the guilt even more.

"Don't you dare," I manage breathily, when his gaze drops to my mouth. "I bite."

Damn him, he presses closer. "Maybe tonight I fancy being bitten."

Ignoring the unwanted thrill those growled words deliver, I search for a way out of this. His lips cannot, will not, be allowed to touch mine. Shane will drown me again when I've only just breached the surface. My skin feels paper-thin and he's a sharp object. "I still love him," I blurt out, refusing to examine the lack of conviction in my tone.

His gaze finds mine quickly, self-awareness creeping back in where none existed moments before. In the blink of an eye, his belligerence is back in place. “That has nothing to do with this. Don’t flatter yourself.”

He’s backing away from me, the action contradicting his words. Obviously there is a small part of Shane Claymore that won’t kiss a girl whose heart is elsewhere. Briefly, I wonder if I’m wrong, if maybe I’m an exception to the rule, then decide that line of thinking is pointless.

I’m not sure where the shame comes from, but it barrels in, suffocating me. Even the idea of kissing someone besides my ex-boyfriend feels like cheating. It’s made even worse by Shane talking about Evan like he did something wrong, when it was me all along. I was the unfixable one. Still am.

Trying to swallow my guilt and muster some pride at the same time, I look him straight in the eye as I back away on shaky legs toward the staircase. He looks like sin personified, standing in the shadows with chaotic eyes, hands clenching at his sides as if fighting the need to drag me back.

“Don’t ever touch me again.”

His only response is a muscle ticking in his jaw. I make it to my room and slide down the door before the tears start to fall.

Chapter Four

Friday night, I stand in front of the full-length mirror, not really seeing my reflection. After taking a quick shower to rid myself of another day of on-again, off-again rain, I’d pulled on skinny jeans and a T-shirt that says Bad Samaritan on it.

A friendly disclaimer, if you will.

Halfway through the process of pulling on my boots, though, I'm hit with another Evan flashback. Since arriving in Dublin, I've been having them with increasing frequency, almost as if the distance gave my subconscious enough space to try and figure out if my screw up could have been avoided. I also suspect Shane's presence has something to do with it, but I'm not willing to explore that worrying notion just yet. At the mere thought of Shane, I willingly dive headlong into the recurring flashback, just to escape him.

"Why do you keep running away from me?"

"Because you don't belong with me, Evan! Dammit. Look how different we are. And I'm not just talking about what's on the surface, even though those differences are more than enough. My past is ugly. Really, really ugly. You shouldn't be anywhere near me."

"Willa, whatever happened in your past, it made you this girl. This girl I want to know more than anything. You think I'm so great? Then give me enough credit to decide who I want to be around."

Affected by his words against my will, I considered him across the car. "I do give you credit. I do. But you'll change your mind."

"You're wrong." He grabbed his bag from the backseat, pulling out the envelope of photos I'd given him. The ones I'd taken at his basketball game two nights prior, focusing more on his brother in the stands who'd recently returned from a stint in Afghanistan with a heavy case of PTSD.

Embarrassed at having my rare kind gesture thrown in my face, I looked away. "Please don't make a big deal out of them."

"I won't change my mind about the girl who took these pictures because she wanted

to show me I made my brother happy, even if just for an hour. I won't change my mind about her."

A quick rapping knock on my door drags me out of the bittersweet memory. I shoot a glance at my reflection, horrified to see a tear rolling down my cheek. I swipe at it with a curse, then cross the room to open the door, completely forgetting to ask who is on the other side. It's Faith. When she sees I haven't left yet for the night, she smiles like I've just presented her with a giant oversize check à la Publisher's Clearing House.

"Willa. Sure, you look lovely, don't you?" She breezes past me, leaving perfumed optimism in her wake. "What are your plans for the evening, then?"

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I've decided to take the pickpocketing musicians, Patrick and Brian, up on their offer to see some live music down on Sheriff Street. While I've enjoyed the solitude of walking around a foreign city by myself, I haven't really talked to anyone in days. Unless you count Kitty, but she handily forgets who I am each morning. Not exactly meaningful conversation. Not that I'm looking for a heart-to-heart with a couple of thieves, but part of this experience involves getting outside my comfort zone. Getting back in touch with old Willa, while learning who she can be on her own. Since I would normally rather saw off my own arm with a rusty blade than go out with the sole intention of making new friends, this is a huge step, especially without the crutch of Evan's affable personality to help me.

Faith is watching me hopefully, and I know she's fishing for an invite to wherever I'm going, be it a pub or the Moon. My first reaction is to just ask her along. I've been here a little over a week, and I've witnessed the girl working herself ragged. Waiting tables, cleaning rooms, stepping behind the bar when Orla has to take a phone call. Yet her personality never dips below a rapturous-sunshine level. I don't know how she does it, and dammit, I kind of like her.

Still, I'm incredibly aware of Shane's warning to stay away from his sister. It's not that I don't want to anger him—I'm afraid of what comes with that anger. Him getting up close and personal. More of his irritation directed at me. More of mine directed at him. We both appear to be volatile people, and I don't want to find out what will happen if we get too close again. Just thinking about it gives me an uncomfortable feeling in my stomach.

On top of this very valid reason not to risk The Wrath of Shane, part of me wonders if he's right. If she and I become friends, will my returning to Chicago affect her

somehow? The thought leaves me feeling uncomfortably crummy. Hurting Faith would be like kicking a puppy. Like kicking...Evan.

I don't know if I can take on any more guilt without capsizing.

"I'm, uh..." Still trying to decide what to do about the situation, I sit down on the bed and shove my other foot into its boot. "Probably nothing. Just going to walk around, maybe catch some musi—"

"Oh, I love music. All kinds. Are you a line dancer? I Googled Nashville and it said right there on the computer that you all just love it. Did you know Colin Farrell used to teach Irish people how to line dance? I'm not making that up—I saw it on the telly. Can you imagine? Now he's famous." She sighs dreamily, and I think she's finished talking. I'm trying to decide which part of that to respond to, when she starts up again. "Did you bring a cowboy hat along? Can I try it on? I reckon if I wore it in the pub, I'd make quite a splash. What do you think about that idea?"

"What part?"

"The cowboy hat."

I shrug. "Fashion equals risk?"

Faith lets loose a bubbly laugh. "You're gas, Willa."

"Likewise." I rise from the bed, knowing I can't bring this girl out with me to hang with a couple of thieves, in a neighborhood I know nothing about. "Listen—"

"Sure! I'll get my coat." Her shoulders slump when she catches a glimpse of my expression. "Oh wait, you weren't going to invite me?"

Shit. Watching as uncertainty replaces the sweet, outgoing attitude from seconds before, I feel like an epic ass**le. At that moment, I want to kick Shane. I also need to understand why this girl who is only one year younger than me apparently never gets out. I know it isn't my business, but in that moment I don't care. It seems depressing and unfair. Despite the resolve I'd arrived in Dublin with, the determination to remain detached, I can't help wanting to fix this one little injustice. "It's chilly out, so wear layers. That's all I was going to say."

A squeal traps itself inside her throat, but she struggles to look serious. "Deadly. I'll just meet you 'round back, then."

I nod, then frown. "Wait, why around back and not in front?"

"To avoid Shane, of course," she calls over her shoulder, all businesslike now.

I'm pretty sure I've just been had.

...

Nighttime Dublin whizzes past as our black cab maneuvers in and out of traffic through slim gaps between taxis and pedestrians. We fly over the Liffey on one of the many bridges spanning its dark, calm length. Drove of people pass in front of the cab every time we stop at a red light, but as we get closer to our destination, those crowds begin to thin.

Before I can express my concern, Faith distracts me with her easy chatter. "You'll have met our ma by now, so. What did you think of her? She's off her trolley, isn't she?"

"Off her trolley?"

“Senile. Crazy. Gone ’round the bend.”

“Aha.” I shake my head. Faith is growing on me rather quickly, especially after that stunt she pulled back in my room. I’m keeping an eye on her now. “Maybe. But a lot can be overlooked when someone brings you toast in the morning.”

She smiles. “Who do you think makes the toast?”

“You?”

“Shane.” Her right leg starts to jiggle. “He doesn’t like her operating the toaster. Or anything with a plug attached.”

I don’t know why, but the fact that I’ve been eating toast prepared by Shane’s distinctly masculine hands makes me simultaneously mad and anxious. “Oh. How does he plan to stop her once he leaves?”

Faith shrugs. “I suppose I’ll just do it.” Her legs stop bouncing. “How did you know Shane was leaving us?”

Okay, I really need to stop letting my guard down around Faith. She’s a lot smarter and more observant than I’ve given her credit for. “I think Kitty mentioned it one morning in passing.” Sure, Willa. Pin it on the crazy lady. Class-y.

She watches me curiously for a moment. “She must have been having one of her good days. Most of the time she pretends Shane never left in the first place.”

For some reason, that makes my throat ache. “Maybe he’ll change his mind,” I say offhandedly, praying she’ll change the subject. I don’t want to know any more about this family than I already do. Every new piece of this dysfunctional jigsaw puzzle that slips into place adds to my curiosity.

“Not bloody likely,” Faith answers brightly. “He has a need. A need for speed.”

“Top Gun. Nice.”

“Top what?”

“Seriously?”

She stares back at me blankly.

“Never mind.”

Our cab pulls up in front of O’Kelly’s on Sheriff Street. Faith reaches for her wallet, presumably to pay the cab driver, but I reach over and stop her. I’ve heard the expression “dive bar” many times and have at least a passing idea of what they look like. That term is pitifully inadequate to describe this run-down excuse for a legal establishment. Watching two men pour out onto the sidewalk trading punches, I heave a laugh. “Oh, no. No. Keep driving, please.”

Faith gasps. “But we came all the way here. Surely we can have just one drink.”

“Not in there we can’t.”

She glances over my shoulder, her conviction wavering before my eyes. “It looks grand to me. You can’t blame the lads for working out their troubles amongst themselves. They even had the decency to go outside. That’s all you can reasonably hope for.”

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I'm positive I'm staring at her like she's crazy. "Look, we'll try this another night—"

"No." Faith suddenly looks desperate. "It has to be tonight. I can't spend another night cooped up at the inn, Willa. Please."

Dammit. This is what I avoid like the plague. In my limited experience, when you let someone in a little, they're never satisfied until you're bleeding in front of them on an altar, every single one of your layers peeled back for them to psychoanalyze. This is the first step in that process. Faith is wiggling her way under my skin, appealing to whatever tiny shred of empathy I have inside me. Next thing you know, she'll be pouring her heart out and acting wounded when I don't do the same.

When she sucks in a breath, I know she can see the thoughts on my face, so I turn my head, casting one more glance at O'Kelly's. The two men have finished beating the stuffing out of one another and are now...shaking hands? God, the Irish are confusing as hell.

"Faith, I—"

A car door slams, and I stare wide-eyed as Faith rounds the front of the cab, marching toward O'Kelly's with bring on the trouble written all over her. Both bloodied men notice and say something undoubtedly crude to her as she walks past them into the bar. Into the bar. Shit. I spring into motion, throwing a handful of Euro—which honestly looks like Monopoly money to me—at the cab driver and hustle my ass toward the entrance.

When I walk inside, the first thing I notice is the cigarette smoke. Smoking is banned

inside bars in this country, but this place clearly isn't following the rules. Red flag number one. Second red flag? The four men arguing over a table strewn with playing cards and cash. And enough whiskey to drown two sumo wrestlers. As if I'd walked in shouting through a bullhorn, every one of the men looks at me. I do my best to look bored as I scope the crowded bar to determine in which direction Faith took off.

"Bad Samaritan." One of them shouts over the loud music that has just started. His accent is so thick I can barely understand him. "Show me your tender mercies, and I'll follow you to the ends of the earth."

I pretend to choke on my own finger and keep walking. So many people crowd the bar, calling out drink orders, I wouldn't be able to see Faith unless she was standing right beside me. I take a moment to marvel over customers having casual conversations with the bartenders in the middle of this chaos, natural and easy, as if they are standing in their own living room. As I move closer to the back of the bar, the music increases in volume. It's the fast-paced fiddle, foot stomping, storytelling music I've heard coming up through my floorboards all week, but tonight it sounds different. There's urgency behind every word, passion being communicated through the collection of instruments. Patrons surrounding the performance area sing along at the top of their lungs, taking long pulls from their pints in between verses.

I push through the thick mass of people, searching for Faith. At this point, I'm starting to get nervous. It appears I've opened up a Pandora's Box of issues by giving Faith a taste of freedom, and she's clearly decided to take full advantage. A fleeting image of Shane's face when I tell him I lost his little sister propels me faster through the crowd. When I make it to the stage, I do a double take when I see Brian and Patrick are the musicians. Brian, sweating profusely under a newsboy cap, is so focused on his furious fiddle playing, he doesn't see me, but Patrick's eyebrows shoot up in shocked delight.

He waits until he reaches the end of a chorus before pointing me out on the crowd.

“Ladies and gentlemen, joining us all the way from the Unites States...Beyoncé!”

I’ve never seen so many people disappointed to see me. It’s a little demoralizing. Enough to make me wish, just for a second, that I look sexy shaking my ass. I don’t have too much time to think about it, though, because I’ve just spotted Faith. She’s talking to some dude who has handed her a drink. Alarm bells begin clanging in my head. I can hear Ginger’s drawl, reciting the lesson she’s repeated too many times to count. Willa, never, ever take a drink from anyone with a penis. He’ll only ever want two things. To sleep with you, or drug you and then sleep with you.

Ignoring Patrick’s request for me to join him on stage for an Irish rendition of “Crazy in Love,” I stomp toward Faith and pluck the drink from her hand before it can reach her mouth.

“Willa! I’ve been looking all over for you.”

“Nice try, slick. I’m on to you.”

Faith acts like she’s just been struck deaf, leaning toward me and squinting. Her companion puts a hand on my arm. “Get you a drink, love?”

“Here, take this one,” I say wearily, handing him Faith’s drink. I’m not getting her out of here unless I club her over the head and drag her. It’s there in the stubborn set of her chin. For the first time, I can see a resemblance between her and Shane. I squeeze between two girls to get to the bar and order two fresh drinks for us. When I turn around holding our beers, I stop short. Faith is dancing near the stage, looking as though she’s just gotten out of school for summer. And found out she’s won the lottery. Hands above her head, she twirls in a circle and sends me an exaggerated wink.

I can’t help it. I laugh.

It feels really f**king good to laugh.

Chapter Five

By my third drink, I'm battling the foreign urge to sing. Loudly. However, compared to the pace with which the people around me are drinking, I'm sober as Judge Judy. With Faith picking a new dancing companion every ten minutes, I'm staying sharp to keep an eye on her, but I'm starting to loosen up a little and have a good time. O'Kelly's, while definitely rough around the edges, is humming with energy and packed full of colorful characters. Sure, I may have been required to dodge another fistfight since arriving, but I'm starting to become fascinated by what starts the arguments. How once the fight ends, the participants go back to their pints like it never happened. A planned part of the evening.

As Faith dances to the final song of Brian and Patrick's set, I lean back against the bar and let the music beat through me. In the dimness of O'Kelly's, with a buzz singing in my veins, I feel calm. Thoughts of Evan have receded for the first time in weeks and while I know it's thanks in part to the beer, I decide not to give myself a hard time. For tonight, I'm not worried about nudging my alcoholic gene to life. A million miles away from my past, the warning I've always lived with in the back of my head doesn't seem quite so glaring.

Not that I've ever been worried about turning into my mother. Nothing, no amount of pain or disappointments in this lifetime, could turn me into Valerie Peet. But growing up in the same house with her, witnessing her behavior while under the influence, removed the appeal of getting drunk or stoned. At the odd high school parties I attended, people were always shocked when I rejected beer or the joint they were passing around.

It had slowly dawned on me that my clothing, the way I hid under piles of black, created the assumption that I was a user. Like Valerie. While I found that ignorant, I

still hesitated when it came time to redye my hair. My hand became a little less heavy when applying eyeliner.

I don't like being anyone's assumption.

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I snap back to the present when Brian and Patrick set their instruments down on the stage, bowing dramatically to the raucous applause. Flushed and goofy-smiled, Faith pats the dancing partner warmly on the shoulder and skips her way back to me. She looks so damn pleased with herself that I raise my beer in salute and she curtsies in response. I hand her my beer and she downs it in one swallow. When she comes up for air, we both laugh.

“Did you see me out there, Willa?”

“I did. You’re a regular Colin Farrell.”

Her tinkling laugh draws interested looks from the same male customers I’ve been warning away from me with dark looks all night. Faith isn’t nearly as intimidating. In her current bubbly, bright-eyed state, she’s effervescent. I shouldn’t feel proud, but I can’t help it. Someone plays a pop song on the jukebox, and Faith jumps up and down, obviously recognizing the song. I’ve never heard it.

Patrick and Brian approach us, and Patrick throws a wiry arm around my shoulders. I roll my eyes at the gesture, but my good mood lets him keep it there. “Brian, have you ever seen two more beautiful women grace the four walls of O’Kelly’s?”

“None beside our ma, Pat.” He smiles rather charmingly at Faith. “So, Beyoncé, are you going to tell us your friend’s name?”

“Gentleman, meet Celine Dion.”

“Celine, you dance like a dream,” Brian says without missing a beat. “I could barely

concentrate on my fiddle playing. It takes a certain kind of woman to distract me from my strings.”

Faith cocks a hip and bats her eyelashes. “And just what kind of woman is that?”

“The right kind, love.”

Oh boy. “Celine, this is Patrick. And Brian is the one not so subtly trying to pick you up.” I shake my head at the brothers’ pleased grins. They really didn’t have the ability to feel shame. “These guys have an interesting busking act on Grafton Street.”

“Do you?” Faith breathes. “I bet you meet loads of interesting people.”

“Loads,” Brian confirms, visibly delighted to have Faith’s full attention. “I’m willing to bet none of them are half as interesting as you, though.”

Faith turns red. “Ah, go away of that.”

I watch carefully as the bartender slides a round of drinks in front of Patrick. He hands one to each of us, then holds up his pint. It’s so full that foam washes down over his calloused hand, but he doesn’t seem to notice. “Here’s to the fine balance of the universe.”

My drink pauses halfway to my mouth. “Huh?”

“The balance of the universe,” Patrick explains with a wink. “No other way to explain us being kicked out of our flat this morning, then find ourselves sharing drinks with the two most beautiful women in Dublin that very same night.”

“To balance,” Brian toasts, then drains half his glass.

Right now, that absurd explanation is making complete sense to me. In fact, as I take a long sip of my drink, I wonder if that practical outlook isn't the answer to everything. Just look at me. I wouldn't be here shooting the shit with pickpockets if I hadn't gone through a draining break-up.

"To balance," I repeat to myself. "So what did you do to get kicked out?"

Brian laughs. "It was a long time coming, I'm afraid. But the final straw was last night. Patrick came home piss drunk, put on his headphones, and blasted his stereo as high as it would go."

"And what's wrong with that?" Faith asks curiously. "He was wearing his headphones after all, wasn't he?"

"I forgot to plug them into the stereo." Patrick takes a quick sip of his beer and sets it on the bar. "Nearly blasted the bloody building to the ground. Here's me, thinking all that racket is inside my headphones, when they can hear it ten roads away."

Brian leans in and interrupts Faith and my laughter. "Down the stairs comes our landlord in nothing but his jocks, pounding on the door to shut it off, but by that stage Patrick is passed out under the coffee table. And a cheese toastie burning on the stove." The brothers exchange a laugh of recollection. "You're lucky I came in when I did or they'd be digging your arse out of the rubble."

Patrick throws a hand over his heart. "Brother."

Brian shakes his head, but there's a sparkle in his eye. "You're a menace."

I open my mouth to ask where they're planning on staying, but I feel a shift in the bar's energy. It's swift and I appear to be the only one who feels it. The other three continue their conversation unfettered, but I rub my arms and search for the source of

disruption.

I see Shane. He's a head taller than most people in the bar and he's looking directly at me, prowling toward us in a manner that all at once offends me and renders me breathless. Who does he think he is, moving like that? Women turn as he passes, possibly feeling the same surge in energy I did. It irritates me even more when he doesn't pay them any notice, as if he's so used to female attention, it's a foregone conclusion.

As he comes closer, I notice his glacial gaze is locked on Patrick's arm, thrown innocently around my shoulder. Without thinking, I slip from beneath it.

Faith is chattering away beside me, her voice full of youthful enthusiasm I'm kind of beginning to envy. I've gone this far in giving her a night of freedom, so I decide to salvage it before Shane blows my efforts to hell.

"Brian, if you don't ask Faith to dance soon, she's going to spontaneously combust. Then you won't have a place to live, or a bar to drink in."

No sooner are the words out of my mouth than Brian shoves his drink into Patrick's hands and twirls a squealing Faith toward the dance floor. I throw a quick, "I'll be right back," at a curious Patrick and move to intercept Shane. We meet at the center of the bar, and I try to ignore the sighs of obvious disappointment from the women around me when they assume I'm his girlfriend. I almost laugh at how far off they are. His disdain for me is written all over his face. It's in every line of his hard body.

"Are you daft, girl?"

I have zero patience for questions like that. There really is no acceptable answer. My options are either No, I'm not daft, which will be unsatisfying for us both. Or Yes, in fact, I am daft, which will required a lot more explanation. "How did you find us?"

His jaw tightens when I don't address his question. "It hardly matters."

"Does to me."

Over my head, he watches Faith dance and I see a strange look enter his eye, before it vanishes. "You left the address on a note, stuck to your nightstand. I put two and two together."

My mind races with the implications of that. I can feel my neck getting hot, my temper beginning to make an appearance. "You went into my room?"

"I had no choice. Kitty saw you two leave together, and Faith won't answer her bloody phone." He shrugs his broad shoulders impatiently. "It's not as if I went through your underwear drawer."

"I'll never know for sure, will I?"

"If I wanted to see your underwear, there are more creative ways to accomplish it."

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If I still had a beer in my hand, it would now be sloshing down over his dark head. The comical image is not nearly enough to satisfy me. Not at all. I get right up in his face, swallowing my nerves when his eyes land on my mouth and darken imperceptibly. “If you seeing my underwear was the only thing preventing the destruction of planet Earth and the end of mankind as we know it, I would still have to think about it.”

Shane clucks his tongue. “That’s selfish, now, isn’t it?” He leans in close to speak right beside my ear. My hair shifts with each movement of his lips. “I’m not nearly as selfish. Not when it counts. Bear that in mind next time you’re deciding which panties to wear under those damnably tight jeans.”

Something heavy moves in my belly, twisting and expanding. I suck in a quick breath. Doing my best to ignore the uncomfortable sensation, I jerk back. “Did you come here just to comment on my choice in undergarments?”

“No,” Shane bites out. The sensuality in his eyes is gone, replaced by irritation once again. His moods shift so fast, even my own volatile temperament is having a hard time keeping up. He’s knocking me off balance and I resent him for it. Possibly because I’m usually the one doing the knocking. “I’m here because this hellhole is no place for my sister. Don’t let this go to your head, but I pegged you as smarter than to bring her somewhere like this. Somewhere that could send her out a different person than when she walked through the door.”

His barb hits the mark, because I know he’s right. Mostly. But it’ll be a cold day in hell before I give him an ounce of satisfaction. “Last time I checked she was old enough to make her own decisions.”

He shakes his head, a humorless smile on his face. “God, I saw this coming. You just couldn’t leave her alone, could you? You made it all of one week before blowing off my simple request.”

“Look, she begged to come with me. It’s no wonder, the way her entire life is devoted to the inn. One night isn’t going to bring on a Full Lohan.” I throw a glance over my shoulder to see a laughing Faith being spun by Brian, her feet completely off the floor. When I turn back around, Shane has already started moving toward the dance floor, obviously intending to retrieve his sister, mortifying her in the process. Can’t let it happen. Quickly, I put a hand on his chest to stop him, ignoring the electricity that shoots up my limb. “Don’t do this to her, please. Can you just give us five minutes? Wait for us outside.”

His snapping blue gaze drops to my hand, still pressed against his chest. “You told me never to touch you again. Does this mean we’re breaking that rule?”

I yank my hand back like it has been burned. “No, it doesn’t.”

His smirk is infuriating. “You’ve got five minutes.” Shane turns to push his way back through the crowd, then stops. When I notice he’s staring behind me, a quick look reveals Patrick watching us closely from the bar. The sudden tension in Shane’s shoulders tells me he sees a challenge and doesn’t appreciate it. Like me, though, turning down a challenge doesn’t appear to be in his nature. He returns his attention to me and his energy has changed from irritated back to sensual. Having it directed at me is more potent than any amount of alcohol. “One more thing, Willa.” His rough hand slides down my arm, a possessive gesture that sends a shiver coasting up my back. “If I can’t touch you, then neither can that f**ker.”

“He’s just a friend.” I say it fast and immediately want to melt into a puddle of self-disgust. I don’t owe him a damn explanation. He has a lot of nerve acting as though ordering me around is acceptable. It’s too late to take it back, however, so I can only

stand there and fume silently.

“I thought you weren’t here to make friends.”

“Allow me to clarify. I don’t want to be friends with you.”

“Feeling’s mutual.” For a moment, his gaze lingers on my mouth. “Five minutes.”

As Shane exits the pub, all I can do is stare at his retreating back, flexing beneath his gray Henley. I don’t know what the hell just happened, but I know I don’t like it. Since that day in the airport, there has been an undercurrent running between us. Every time we’re in the same room, it only feels stronger. By giving him an explanation moments ago, I’ve taken a big, ill-advised step toward accepting that there is an attraction between us and God forbid, that we could actually act upon it. Even more troubling, despite my annoyance over Shane behaving as though he has ownership of me, the thought of giving into those urges leaves me feeling...impatient. With him? My reaction? I don’t know.

Patrick’s voice intrudes on my troubling inner thoughts. “Everything all right, love?”

I paste on a smile and nod.

“Who was that?”

The bane of my existence. “Our ride. I’m afraid we have to call it a night.” We start walking toward the dance floor where Brian is now doing soft-shoe as Faith points and giggles. “Help me wrangle the dancing queen?”

Chapter Six

One day, a little over a year ago, Ginger locked her keys in her car. It was just about

sunset on an unusually gorgeous day in Chicago and instead of calling Derek to come pick her up, she decided to walk home. Unfortunately, with f**ked-up luck running in the family, her cell-phone battery died and she got lost. When she finally gave up on finding her way and called Derek from a payphone, he'd been ready to call in the National Guard. Seriously, I was there. He actually picked up the phone to make that call.

We'd immediately rushed out of the apartment to go pick Ginger up in a less-than-savory section of town, finding her in a Laundromat located beside an abandoned lot. The strained silence that reined in the car during the ride home was thick and impenetrable.

Exactly like the silence I'm experiencing now in the passenger's seat of Shane's car as Faith fumes in the backseat.

She didn't make a scene in front of Brian and Patrick, but as soon as she'd seen Shane's car idling at the curb, she became the poster child for angst. A glance in the rearview mirror tells me the back of Shane's head is still the recipient of her ferocious glare. If his rigid posture is any indication, he feels that look like an ice pick lodged in his skull.

I grab onto the dashboard as Shane snakes between two delivery trucks and takes a quick right turn. He only has one hand draped casually over the steering wheel and yet, he somehow handles this car with practiced ease. It's there in his eyes, the love of driving. I've seen him angry, and I've seen him turned on. This is a combination of those two emotions. Intensity snaps in the air around him, the rev of the engine corresponding to his body movements, as if he's one with the car. It's clear this is what he's passionate about. What he was meant to do with his life. I glance away, back out the window.

Finally, we pull up in front of the Claymore Inn. Shane puts the car in park and for a

second, no one moves. I unfasten my seat belt, intending to be the first one out, to give them time to hash out their private family issues. I don't want to be involved, even if a small part of me wants to stick around and defend Faith, but she beats me to it.

"I'm sick to death of being treated like a child." She snatches up her purse and throws open the back door. "You just had to come collect me like some sort of...unruly teenager."

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Thankfully, Shane doesn't point out the irony of that statement. If he had, I'm pretty sure twin laser beams would have shot from Faith's eyeballs to slice him in half. "Faith, if you wanted to go out, you could have talked to me. That part of town isn't suitable—"

"Jesus, do you hear yourself? You sound like Da."

Faith's sobbed statement shuts Shane down cold. His hands drop from the steering wheel to lay in his lap. His sister isn't finished, though. As I sit frozen in my seat, I listen to what I suspect is years of frustration pour out of her. It's stilted and unnatural coming from the normally happy-go-lucky Faith, but it's like she can't control it. While I understand what she's going through, I feel so horribly out of place sitting there, listening like an interloper. Once again I start to exit the car, just as Faith delivers the final blow.

"You left, Shane. You left because you couldn't live under his thumb. Well, take a good, long look in the mirror, because you're exactly like him. You are him."

She slams the door and runs into the inn. My hand drops from my door, and I slump back in my seat. Tension hums in the car, and I know where it's coming from. Shane is probably blaming this debacle on me. I'm woman enough to admit he might be half right. While this little scene was inevitable in my estimation, I urged it along by taking Faith out tonight.

There is also a shred of decency left inside me, apparently, because I feel bad on Shane's behalf. Just a little. Like Shane, my sister had the unfortunate luck to be born first, giving her a sense of responsibility for me. The same kind Shane feels for Faith.

It's not something either one of them can turn off. Some people are built to care about others more than themselves. I'm not declaring him right or making excuses for him, but in that moment, I can see he didn't just swoop into O'Kelly's tonight like an overprotective father purely to be an ass**le. There's something more complicated simmering under the surface.

"Don't look at me like that."

I jerk my attention away from him to look out the windshield once more, wondering what he's imagined on my face since he's not even looking directly at me. Of course, it's starting to rain again and droplets are obscuring my view of the street. On the spot, it turns the car into a closed-off void of which myself and Shane are the only residents. The feeling is only compounded by the darkness and lack of pedestrians on the usually busy street. There is no other sound apart from rain pattering on the roof, but both of our minds are clicking away. I can almost make it out over the steady downpour. "She didn't mean it."

He laughs without humor. "And what would you know about it, Willa? You don't know a damn thing about us." He's silent a moment. "No. She meant every word of it."

"I'm not getting involved," I mean to say inside my head, but it slips out. Why do these lapses in my verbal skills keep happening around him?

"People like you can't help getting involved."

I peer through the near darkness at him, genuinely curious. "People like me?"

Finally, he looks over at me, but his eyes have gone blank. "You think everything can be solved with your unique logic or a snappy comeback. This isn't one of your sappy Hollywood movies. Real life is more complicated than that."

“Real life.”

“Are you just planning on repeating everything I say?”

Annoyed, I grab my purse and begin to dig through it, looking for my room key. I’m not going to sit here much longer in his über-pissed-off presence. Besides, despite my declaration that I don’t want to get involved, I have the urge to check on Faith. “God, Shane, what are you so f**king angry about?”

“I could ask you the same question.”

The rain starts to fall harder, pelting the roof, making me hesitant to leave the car and get soaked. “Answer it for yourself, since you seem to have me figured out.”

He sighs, but there’s anticipation in it. As if he’s thrilled to have the chance to finally let me know what he thinks of me. “If a breakup has sent you four-thousand miles away just to recover, I’m guessing there hasn’t been a ton of adversity in your life.”

“Really.” I hold in the burst of laughter dying to escape. “What sent you away from here?”

His expression hardens. “We weren’t talking about me.”

“We are now.”

Shane considers me a moment. “Has anyone ever told you that you’re a righteous pain in the arse?”

I smile sweetly. “If I had a nickel...”

“Right.” He runs an impatient hand through his hair, and I try not to stare at the

muscle flexing in his arms, stretching the fabric of his shirt. “Suffice it to say my father and I never saw eye to eye. When Faith says I’m just like him, she means to say I’m a controlling bastard.”

The harshness in his voice cuts through me. There are more unresolved issues here than raindrops on the windshield. “I thought the Irish were superstitious people. You shouldn’t speak ill of the dead.”

“I only speak the truth.” He’s all restless energy now, shifting in his seat, adjusting mirrors. “So let me guess. Your parents are in full support of this ridiculous pilgrimage to discover yourself. Maybe one of them has a friend on the committee that named you the contest winner?” Blue eyes drill into mine. “What would you know about having your every move criticized? Being told to get back behind the bar where you belong? You wouldn’t understand a goddamn thing about it.”

“You’re right. I don’t get it.” My anger is whipping through my chest like a gale wind. Never, I’ve never talked about my past with anyone outside my sister, save Evan. But I want to put this f**ker in his place so badly now, that I can’t hold back. It all comes spilling from my lips, even though I know I’ll regret it the second I finish talking. “I understand nothing about having a controlling parent. I don’t know what it’s like to have a mom who brings you toast, even though it’s cold and rock hard. Or a father. Period.” I push my door open, no longer giving a damn about the rain. “I’ll see your overprotective daddy and raise you a prostitute mother with a nasty heroin habit. You cocky motherfucker.”

Slowly, he sits up straighter in the driver’s seat. “Wait—”

I slam the door on his stunned expression and stomp through the pooling water toward the inn. Through the wall of sound that is the torrential rain, I barely make out the sound of Shane’s driver-side door opening and closing. All I can focus on is getting inside, getting to my room, so I can scream into a pillow and try to forget I’ve

just been reduced to a petulant teenager. I hate that he's the only one who's ever done it to me. With Evan, I allowed every piece of information about my mother, my past, to be revealed at my own comfortable pace. He'd never pushed or pried, never shown me anything but...

Pity. Horrible, gooey, unwelcome pity. It hits me like a lightning rod, how much I'd resented Evan for that. From the beginning. Yet I'm only seeing it now. Awesome timing.

I'm just about to reach the entrance when Shane hooks an arm around my waist. I whirl around to push him away, but he pulls me back against his hard frame, walking us to the dark alley that runs alongside the inn.

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“Why?” He growls into my wet hair, bracing one hand on the brick wall, keeping his other thick forearm wrapped around my middle. “Why can’t you stay put? Every time it gets uncomfortable, I have to chase you down.”

The words are so familiar. Evan said something similar to me once. Why do you keep running from me? All the struggle goes out of me at the visceral reminder of what a coward I am. “What are you going to say next?” Sarcasm drips from my voice. “That you just want to get to know me? That I have nothing to be scared of?”

“No.” He nudges his fingers just below the waistband of my jeans and presses down hard on my belly. Oh God, in my current worked-up state, I don’t expect the bullet of pleasure that wings me in the gut. It catches me off guard and I moan, head falling back against his rain-dampened shoulder. “I’m not going to say that. It would be a load of bullshit.” He fits his lap against my bottom, his lips drag up the side of my neck, bringing rain with them. “Here’s what I want to say, girl. Having to chase you only makes me want to pin you down.”

Like a bomb has been waiting for the right opportunity to go off, heat explodes through me, sending shrapnel in every direction. Some inner demon stowed away deep inside me loves the fact that he didn’t run after me spouting apologies. Reassuring me that my secrets are safe with him. It loves the honesty, has quite possibly been craving it for a long time.

It has been ages since I’ve had sex. That has to be the main reason I’m considering turning around, wrapping my legs around his waist, and letting Shane hate-fuck me against this filthy brick wall. I like sex, even if I’ve only ever had it with one person. Instinctively, I know Shane wouldn’t give me the sweet intimacy I’m used to. No

tender looks or gentle kisses on my eyelids. He would be an entirely different experience, demanding and intense.

Shane's hand curls into a fist at my belly. "Take back your words. Tell me I can touch you." His breath shudders out, the sound almost lost in the pounding rain. "Take it back."

"No," I choke out, but my bottom presses back against him harder, contradicting my words. Shane groans and the sound liquefies my insides. It's hot and needy and male.

"I'll have you over him in five minutes flat, babe." Biting my ear lightly, he fingers the snap of my jeans. "Let me take him right out of your head."

I'm equally horrified and tempted. Tempted because, my God, I've never been so achingly hot or turned on in my life. I'm not even sure I knew what being turned on meant until right this moment, soaked to the skin in an alleyway while someone I'm supposed to dislike begs to have me. It's an unbelievable rush, knowing the frustratingly complicated Shane wants me enough to let his pride slip for the chance. It would be amazing between us. I don't need a crystal ball to tell me that. Even now, I'm battling the need to drag his hand down the front of my jeans, to the source of the throb he's created.

But the horrified half of me wins.

I'll admit it. I'm afraid. Afraid Shane is right. That letting go right now, letting this urge work itself out, might mean Evan slips a little further from my mind. Don't I owe him more than that? I wasted two years of his life, and now I'm going to tarnish his memory, which is still fresh, by letting a near stranger attempt to exorcise him from my brain? My body? I can't do it.

I try not to acknowledge the final reason I tear myself away from him. Shane would

change me. For the better or worse, I don't know. But I'm not ready to find out.

"Stop. You have to stop doing this."

"You say that like it's simple." His head drops to the crook of my neck. "God, why do I hate the idea of you having had a f**king boyfriend? I shouldn't give a shit. You're just passing through."

"I don't know." My voice is a strangled whisper. "Get over it."

A beat passes, and then he lets me go with a harsh curse. I can feel his gaze burning into my back as I jog on unsteady legs toward the inn, wanting to go back and throw myself into his arms every step of the way.

Chapter Seven

It's still dark outside Monday morning when Kitty knocks on my door. How do I know it's her? She's singing the American National Anthem. Maybe she's starting to remember me. Or at least that there is an American sleeping on the other side of the door. For some reason, that fact makes me smile through my tigerlike yawn. I try to reach out and turn the rattly glass knob without leaving the bed, but when I almost eat shit onto the floor, I give up and stand.

"Morning, Kitty."

"Is that what you're wearing?"

Glancing down at my flannel boxer shorts and Chicago Police Department T-shirt in sleepy confusion, I open my mouth to respond, but it snaps shut when she glides past me into the room. Today, she's wearing creased black slacks and a silk button-up blouse, two sizes too big. Her hair is being held up by a knitting needle and as she

walks past, I jerk back before I'm impaled by the sharp end. A brush with death already and I haven't even drank a cup of coffee yet. Never a dull moment in this country.

Since Friday night, I've been sticking to my routine of leaving before the pub opens and sneaking back in when it's too busy for Shane to take too much notice. The weekends mean bigger crowds in the pub, but it's Monday now and I'm not sure how much longer my luck is going to last. Even though we haven't spoken, I can feel his attention slide over me every time I walk past the bar, telling me my presence doesn't go unnoticed. The one time Shane and I made eye contact, I was surprised to find him looking less hostile and more thoughtful as he watched me slip through the pub. He had that face Derek gets when he's looking through a homicide case file. It's certainly not helping that I've been dreaming about blue eyes, rough hands, and a certain accent that makes everything sound like a good idea. Honestly, I never pegged myself for a girl who fawns over accented men, but I've started hearing my name in my head the way he pronounces it. Will-eh.

It's f**king annoying.

I've spent the last couple days strengthening my resolve. Thankfully, Faith has been busy waiting tables all weekend, so I haven't had to contend with her inviting herself along to more places with me. Not that her company wouldn't be welcome, but antagonizing Shane is at the bottom of my Bucket List. Yesterday, I'd gone to a one-woman show at the Abbey Theatre, having scored a last-minute matinee ticket. Afterward, I'd spent the afternoon people-watching at Trinity College, listening to the tour guides for free from my sprawled-out position on the grass while I waited for film to be developed at the One Hour Photo.

Today I'm planning on doing something for Ginger. Yesterday I overheard a group of tourists discussing the Heritage Center at Dalkey Castle, where they'd been heading to trace their Irish lineage. Since I could be 100 percent German for all I know about

my heritage, this could be a total waste of time. Ancestry wasn't something often discussed in the Peet household. Ginger and I aren't even certain if we have the same father, although it wouldn't make a damn bit of difference either way. She's my sister, plain and simple. But isn't it worth the trip to find out if maybe, just maybe, we can think of ourselves as something bigger than the unwanted offspring of Valerie Peet? I think so. A bus schedule sits on my bedside table and I'm planning on heading out to Dalkey as soon as I get dressed.

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Kitty raps on the glass overlooking the street. “Have you seen the owl outside your window?”

I follow her line of vision knowing I’ll see nothing. “There’s an owl?”

“Sure, maybe it was yesterday. I can’t keep track.” Kitty looks crestfallen, but a smile chases it away. She goes to my dresser, flips over the tea cup, and begins to pour tea. From the lack of steam, I know it’s ice cold. “Why do you never hang out down in the pub? We really have a lovely menu. Our cook, Martin, takes the bus in every morning from Howth with fresh fish. It’s gorgeous with chips, so it is.”

To be honest, I do want spend some time down in the pub. When I walk through the buzzing crowd at night, I’m always tempted to pull up a stool and watch everyone operate. The old men at the bar, left over from the day crowd, shaking their heads at the younger customers’ antics. Office workers whose ties and tongues get looser the later it gets. There always seems to be a bachelorette party/pub crawl of some sort taking place, putting a group of girls in feather boas and glitter lotion. It’s Shane. He’s the reason I don’t stay. Yet if I dig deep into my subconscious, I’d probably realize he’s also the main reason I want to stay. So go figure.

“I’ve heard good things about the cod.” I push my tangled hair back over my shoulder. “Some night I’m definitely going to stop in.”

“A fib if I ever heard one.”

“Yeah.” I laugh, still too groggy to make a convincing denial. Kitty sets the teapot down on the dresser and starts to make the bed. Guess I won’t be going back to sleep,

after all. With a shrug, I head to the bathroom and brush my teeth, wondering why she's decided to switch up the routine, almost as if she knows I'd planned on getting an early start today. My musings are interrupted when I hear a deeper voice coming from the bedroom. The last of my sleepiness shoots toward the ceiling and sticks like slime.

Shane is in my bedroom.

I freeze in place, hating myself for checking my reflection in the mirror. I'm currently somewhere in the neighborhood of Swamp Thing's ugly cousin. No way am I going out there. I shut off the running water in the sink to listen, trying to figure out why he is in my room.

"You took the wrong pot, Ma." His voice is gentler than usual as he sets something down with a thunk. "This one's just boiled. I'll trade you."

"You know, I thought something about it felt odd." The note of embarrassment in her voice makes me frown. "The temperature, like."

"The pots look the same, don't they? Easy mistake." A floorboard creaks. "Now when you start serving coffee to the guests, we'll know you've finally lost the plot."

In my horror, I drop my tooth brush, but the sound only interrupts Kitty's delighted laughter. Obviously, she is far from offended, but now I've given myself away as an eavesdropper. Honestly, the fact that I've become an eavesdropper in my own room is exasperating. Throwing one last disgusted glance at myself in the mirror, I swagger into the bedroom. As much as one can swagger in boxer shorts and bare feet.

Shane comes into view, his gaze running over my bare legs before snapping back up to search my face. There it is again, that thoughtful expression that makes me wonder what he's thinking when I shouldn't give a flying f**k. His hair is slightly more

rumpled than usual and he's wearing suspenders. Apart from firefighters, I don't think I've ever seen someone wear them in real life. They look so good and natural on him it's unnerving. Kitty is looking between me and Shane with a serene expression on her face, as though we've just finished discussing the weather. Do they even need to discuss the weather here? Rain. There, discussion over.

"Well." Kitty picks up both teapots, smiling cheerfully as she glides toward the door. "I'll leave you to it, then."

Shane makes no move to follow her. I raise a single eyebrow and point toward the door, but Kitty is already closing it behind her. All I can do is gape.

"What are you still doing here?" My breaths are shortening. This is far too intimate, both of us sleep-tangled, standing in the dim morning light with a bed so close. Without the armor of my jeans and boots in place, I feel far too exposed. I need him to leave. "You have to go."

"In a moment."

"God, your family lacks basic boundaries." I shift my feet on the cold floor. "Do you have tea parties at six in the morning with all your guests, or am I just that special?"

"Fair warning, girl. I'm having trouble contending with your smart mouth and those shorts at the same time."

My hands fly to the hem of my boxers, but I stop at the last second and cross my arms over my chest. I refuse to cover up my legs in my own room. "What do you want?"

"I should think that was obvious by now."

Me. He means me. I can tell by the way his voice has dropped, falling like a boulder

in the quiet room. I take a step backward, away from his intensity, even though there is a dark, untapped part of me that wants to venture closer.

“Please rid yourself of that nervous expression. Don’t you think I realize this is inappropriate, coming into your room like this? You never stand still long enough to give me another option.”

There is a thread of frustration in his voice that echoes in the pit of my stomach. “Say what you came to say. I have plans.”

“Of course you do.” He scrubs a hand over his stubbled jaw. “What you said Friday night in my car... I don’t like being wrong. Something tells me you understand that feeling well.”

I don’t respond, but he definitely has my attention now. He’s talking about my impulsively telling him about my mother. The threat of him coming any closer fades, some unnamed intuition telling me it wouldn’t be his style to catch me off guard with a reminder of something upsetting and then take advantage. Still, I’m far from relaxed. Relaxing around Shane simply isn’t a possibility. Especially not now when he looks like he’s just crawled out from between a pile of twisted sheets.

Shane clears his throat and nods toward my shirt. “Chicago Police Department. Do you know someone on the force, or did you get that as a souvenir for being arrested?”

The abrupt subject change throws me off. “That was it, huh? Your whole apology?” He simply leans against the doorjamb and raises an eyebrow. Apparently his implying he might have been wrong about me is all I’m going to get this fine morning. Although something tells me a brief, stilted explanation counts as groveling in Shane’s world. “My sister’s husband Derek. He’s a homicide lieutenant now, but he’s being promoted soon to captain.”

Remembering how I came by this T-shirt makes me smile. The first week Ginger and I lived in Chicago, our apartment flooded. Derek had come out into the hallway, taken one look at both of us in soaked nightclothes, and stomped back into his apartment to retrieve two department T-shirts, mainly because he didn't like the group of firemen ogling Ginger. His concern for me came secondary, but I didn't care. It was the first time someone besides Ginger had gone out of their way to make me comfortable. I'll keep this damn shirt until I die.

“He's important to you.” His statement jerks my attention back to the present. There it is again, that reflective expression on his face, as if he's trying to solve an algebra equation.

“And?”

“What else is important to you, Willa?”

My laughter is a little too unnatural. “Why do you care?”

“I told you, I don’t like being wrong.”

“That’s it?”

Shane stays silent, dragging white teeth over his full bottom lip. In his own way, he’s answering me, but I can’t fully interpret his meaning. He asked me what I consider important, though, and I have a hard time letting an opportunity pass to talk about my sister. It feels wrong to omit her importance in my life, and right now when I’m so far away and haven’t seen her in weeks, talking about Ginger makes her seem closer. It’s not because Shane makes me simultaneously want to let my guard down and reinforce it. It’s not.

“Ginger. My sister. She’s important to me,” I whisper, unsure why letting my guard down keeps winning the battle.

“I can see that.” He scrutinizes me a moment, as if debating whether to push for more. It confuses me. I don’t understand why he has taken a sudden fascination in my personal life when up until now he’s been so adamant about not giving a shit.

“If you think this little display of interest is going to get me into bed, you’re wrong.”

Shane laughs under his breath. “I’m not going to pretend I don’t want you beneath me.”

He says it without missing a beat, the confidence radiating from him heating me from across the room, as if we were standing in the Sahara instead of damp, chilly Ireland. I’m torn between affront and respect. He has a lot of goddamn nerve. But then, so do I. My hand presses shakily to my belly. Damn him, his honesty is appealing to me on some untapped level and he knows it. “I told you, it’s not going to happen.” It sounds less convincing every time I say it.

Shane nods. “Because you’re still in love with your Evan.”

“He’s not my Evan anymore.”

“Whose decision was that?”

“It’s complicated.”

He shrugs his wide shoulders, forcing a resigned sigh past my lips. There’s a part of me that needs to talk about it, I realize. As an added bonus, maybe if I explain the f**ked-up reasons for my breakup, he’ll realize how important it is to keep his distance from me, just in case failure is contagious.

“Mine,” I say. “I broke up with him. But only because he was too nice to cut me loose himself.” Saying the words out loud hurts, but I won’t lie. I feel an immediate lessening of pressure in my chest, just releasing what I’ve been holding inside. Giving it over to the universe.

“You dated a nice guy,” Shane muses with a too-tight smile.

“The nicest.” I swallow hard, refusing to look away. One of my resolutions in coming

here was to resuscitate the old Willa. She wouldn't have minded her flaws being visible. Those flaws were what kept people from getting too close. Look at them, my throat aches with the need to scream. "He got the bum deal."

"Explain that."

I search for the right words on the ceiling. Unsurprisingly, they're not there. I think back to the way Evan smuggled me into his circle of friends and put me on display. Look at her! Talk to her! Treat her like she's one of us! They tried, too. He'd promised to scale my Mount Everest of issues and swing me Tarzan-style down the other side, beaming like a hero. Evan rarely failed at anything, and it visibly frustrated him when I didn't seamlessly fit in. Captain of the basketball team and loved among his peers, he'd been determined to keep his streak alive with me. I'd watched him flounder from the sidelines, trying to understand why I couldn't leave my deep-seated childhood trauma locked away where it wouldn't offend or make anyone uncomfortable.

Unfortunately, uncomfortable is kind of my thing. I do uncomfortable like a squeaky, plastic couch cover. It's not intentional. But when you spend your childhood nights locked in your bedroom, hiding from your mother's johns while your sister tries to drown the animalistic grunts with loud country music and a pillow over your ears, Evan's kind of normal ceases to be a possibility.

Shane's stare drags me back to the here and now. "He belonged with someone more like Faith." When I hear myself say it, I realize the thought has been germinating for a while. Oddly, I don't feel an ounce of resentment over it. More like, wistfulness. Not a typical emotion for me at all, which is probably why I missed it. "He couldn't make me into a Faith. I didn't fit the mold. And I tried." I take a deep breath. "I did."

"No." Shane pushes off the wall and comes toward me. Every inch of my skin breaks out into goose bumps, but I'm rooted to the floor. His gaze is fixed so firmly on me,

for a fleeting second I wonder if it's a tangible thing, keeping me from moving an inch in either direction. He stops right in front of me. "You didn't try at all."

"Beg pardon?"

"If someone like you tries, you don't fail. Deep down you didn't really want to change."

His words are like a battering ram to the chest, emptying my lungs of oxygen. I can't swallow around the golf ball in my throat. I've been wondering where the whopping case of guilt came from, and I'm sickened by the realization this could be it. Was I only pretending to try the whole time? God, am I that selfish? "How f**king profound," I manage, feeling light-headed.

Shane reaches out with one rough hand and slips his fingers through my hair, cradling the back of my head. I want to flinch away, but seconds ago I felt untethered and now his touch is anchoring me. I can't help leaning back into his hand, letting my neck loosen. "No, I have a suspicion that you don't fit any mold but your own, Willa."

"Likewise."

A corner of his mouth quirks up, but he grows serious almost immediately. "You're leaving in a matter of weeks. It won't be long after before I sell this place and return to racing. If its commitment you're scared of, you've nothing to worry about here."

"Is this your way of asking for a fling?" My gaze drops to his lips as they move to hover over mine. I'm positively frozen, waiting to see what he'll do. "If so, I told you I'm not interested."

"Liar."

“This inn is sorely lacking in hospitality,” I respond lamely. “I’ve been accused of fibbing already this morning.”

“That should tell you something.” He wets his lips slowly, pupils dilating. My heartbeat is so deafening in my ears, I wonder if he can hear it. “It’s inevitable, Willa. We are inevitable. When you stop fooling yourself, come and find me.” Imperceptibly, his fingers tighten in my hair, just enough to straighten my spine with awareness. “In the meantime, no more talk of other men. That was an end to it.” When all I do is stare, buffering between indignation and awe at his balls of steel, he drags his lips across mine. My belly begins to ache, not in a bad way. In a hot, melting way that makes my thighs feel ticklish. “Nod if you understand me.”

After a long pause, I nod. I can’t believe it. I f**king nod.

Shane releases me and steps back, his every move appearing reluctant. I’m reluctant for him to let me go, too. That kiss is now something I want badly, at least in this moment where my walls are down. But I was right, he’s not going to take advantage of the situation. Between that and his kind treatment of Kitty, I’m starting to wonder if maybe I was wrong about Shane, too. He looks like he wants to say more, but instead he leaves me standing there and walks to the door.

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Before he closes the door behind him, he sticks his head back in. “I wouldn’t drink that cold tea if I were you. She’s been hiding the pot in her closet since last Tuesday.”

The door shuts on my laugh, echoed by his on the other side.

Chapter Eight

It’s dark when I make it back to the inn. I’m having a hard time keeping the smile off my face. Today might have started off on the disconcerting side, but it rallied as soon as I got to Dalkey Castle. By chance, I’d wandered into a live show where actors, dressed in authentic Medieval garb, pretend to be castle workers from the 1500s. I found it so clever and entertaining, I’d stayed for a second show. The illusion was shattered afterward when I saw the actors sharing a joint and talking on iPhones behind the theater, but hey, it was fun while it lasted.

After grabbing a quick lunch, I’d spent some time in the Heritage Center. I couldn’t wait to talk to Ginger and tell her what I found. As soon as I get to my room and kick these boots off my sore feet, I’m going to throw myself on the bed and give her a call. Since Chicago is six hours behind Dublin, she’ll still be working at Sneaky Peet’s, her furniture shop in Wicker Park, but maybe I can catch her in between customers.

Through the glass of the front door, I take a second to watch Shane as he serves a group of young female customers. He smiles absently as he slides them their change, probably not even realizing what a panty-soaker that mysterious half smile can be to the opposite sex, making it twice as effective. As soon as he turns his back, one of them pretends to swoon, the rest of the group pressing manicured hands to their chests as if he’s walked away with their still-beating hearts. I’m not annoyed by the

sight, at least I don't think so, but something is sparking in the base of my neck. Something that won't go away when I swallow. Never having been jealous a day in my life, at least not over a boy, I can't put a name to the feeling. But I'm positive I shouldn't be feeling it over Shane.

If its commitment you're scared of, you've nothing to worry about here.

As valiantly as I've tried to ignore Shane's proposition this morning, his words have been echoing in my head all damn day. At first, they'd nicked my feminine pride a little. Weren't boys supposed to at least bullshit you a little about wanting forever? Evan hadn't wasted a moment offering me the moon on a silver platter. One time when he'd met me after an afternoon of tailgating and watching football with his buddies, he'd drunkenly started naming our future children. Back then, it had scared the shit out of me. Yet in contrast to Shane's three-week exit strategy, or entrance strategy, depending on how you look at it, bestowing a moniker on nonexistent offspring is a comfort. It had merely been talk, while Shane's indecent proposal required a decision in the here and now. I thought I'd made the decision. No way, no how, was I letting him anywhere near me. The more I think about it, though, the more it appeals. A lot.

We are obviously attracted to one another. Neither one of us wants or is available for any kind of messy commitment. On the bus ride home, one thought had permeated my head with stark clarity. Is this my first grown-up, no-strings-attached fling, just waiting to happen? I've never been in this position before. It's entirely possible that this confusion and anger Shane provokes in me is...lust? Pure, undiluted, want-to-rip-his-clothes-off lust.

Maybe I've been so worried about my feelings getting wrapped up without someone else's so soon after Evan, I've placed too much importance on what Shane makes me feel. I'm starting to wonder if the best course of action isn't just to say yes to his proposition and get it over with. Scratch the itch. Once it's done, I can move on,

secure in the knowledge that I'm in control of my own destiny and not every man who crosses my path has the power to change me, or put some kind of hold on me.

Yes, I'm actually considering sleeping with Shane.

After all, what's the worst that could happen? I'm only going to think about it. No harm in kicking the idea around, right?

With my tentative resolve wedged firmly between my shoulders, I push open the door to the Claymore Inn. For a Monday night, there is a decent crowd. Most of the bar is full and half the tables are scattered with empty glasses as customers lean toward one another and talk too loudly, laughing even louder. A Stone Roses song is playing, blurring all the conversations into one. The smell of beer, cologne, and fried food is starting to become familiar and it hits me now, reminding me I never ate dinner.

I feel Shane's gaze warm me on the spot, like that instant where you step underneath the shower spray in the morning. It wakes me up and makes me aware of my body. This time, though, I don't avoid his stare, I meet it head-on. Elbow propped on the bar as he chews on a cocktail straw, he narrows his eyes a little when he registers my decision not to ignore him. He clearly expected me to breeze through the bar without acknowledging him as I've done the previous two nights, but I'm done acting scared.

Slowly, he nods at me. I nod back, and just like that, some type of silent communication has passed between us, although I have no idea what was said. I need a decoder ring with this freaking guy.

I'm halfway through the pub when my phone buzzes in my pocket. My step falters, and I frown. No one should be calling me on my cell phone. Since arriving, I've only been calling the States using a prepaid calling card to avoid any expensive fees. Basically I've only been using it to check the time. When I dig my phone out of my pocket and see that Derek is calling, my instincts start to tumble in my stomach, like a

dryer with tennis shoes inside.

“Derek?”

“Willa.” My worry plummets when I hear the astonished joy in his voice. It’s so uncharacteristic for him, I double-check to make sure it’s really the lieutenant calling. “I’m glad I caught you.”

“What is it? Is...is Ginger okay?”

“She’s wonderful. She’s... God, she’s perfect.” For a second, he doesn’t speak and I get the sense he’s actually choked up. “The baby came this morning.”

“What?” My heart shoots up into my throat. “Ginger wasn’t due for another month. I-is the baby okay?”

“She’s beautiful. Healthy.” A short pause. “We named her Dolly.”

Tears begin pouring unchecked down my cheeks. My sister and I have idolized Dolly Parton as far back as I can remember. We claim our passion for her is due to the music, but as I get older, I realize that’s only a fraction of it. Dolly grew up in one-room shack in our home state of Tennessee without a dollar to her name and went on to become a superstar. Although it remains unspoken between me and Ginger, I think we use Dolly as an example of what’s possible for us, no matter the circumstances we were born into.

“Ginger wanted to be the one to tell you the baby’s name, but she’s sleeping now. I don’t think she’ll be up for the call for hours. I thought you’d want to know right away.”

“I did. I do.” Shock, happiness...and an overwhelming sense of disappointment take

me over now that the initial relief has passed. Disappointment that I wasn't there for Ginger. Disappointment that I'm in another country licking my own wounds like a selfish brat when I should be with the only family I've ever known. This line of thinking is selfish in itself. I know this. But the bitterness won't stop. I take a deep breath, trying to focus on the fact that my niece was born healthy and Ginger came through it no worse for wear. "That's amazing, Derek. Congratulations. You're going to be a great father."

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It's like he didn't even hear me. "Willa, you should have seen your sister..." This time he doesn't try to hide the fact that he's choked up. "I thought I knew how strong she was. How incredible. I had no idea."

I swallow a sob. "She finds a way to remind you once in a while."

"I'll never forget again." His deep, shaky inhale crackles through the line. "I have to go now. The nurse needs me to fill out the birth certificate. Jesus, a birth certificate. It might be the only kind of paperwork that doesn't piss me off. You all right, kid?"

"I'm great. I'm so happy for you, Derek." I feel someone step behind me and lay a hand on my shoulder. Without turning around, I know it's Shane. Absently, I notice Orla has appeared behind the bar to replace him, possibly just returned from her break, and she's watching me with concern. Correction, everyone in the pub is watching me. When I feel tears rolling over my knuckles as they grip the phone, I swipe at my eyes with the sleeve of my hoodie. Hesitantly, Shane pulls me into his side and I go without protest. "Hey, listen. Try not to turn Dolly into a law-abiding citizen before I have a chance to corrupt her."

A rumbling laugh. "Don't even think about it. She's not leaving the house until she turns eighteen. And only then, after completing every self-defense class I can find."

I release a watery sigh. "Sh-should I come home? I can—"

Shane goes stiff beside me, but I'm in no place to ponder that reaction.

"I knew you'd say that. It's not necessary." A chair scrapes back four thousand miles

away. “You’ll be home soon enough. I’m off for a week and then Patti is coming over to help out while I’m at work.”

Patti, the ex-police dispatch operator who’d taken a shine to Ginger at a long-ago police gala, then quickly became an inevitability in our lives, sort of an adopted grandmother that asked too many uncomfortable questions. I hear someone call Derek’s name in the background. Not Ginger, probably the nurse.

“I have to go. You sure you’re okay?”

“Yeah. Will you have Ginger call me when she’s up?”

“Of course. Talk to you soon. Stay out of trouble.”

“Trouble finds me, you know that.”

“Bye, Willa.”

“Bye.”

In my hand, the line goes dead, but I continue to hold it to my ear, imagining Derek bustling around the hospital room while Ginger sleeps peacefully in the bed. I want be sitting in one of the hard, plastic chairs in that room so badly, it’s a physical ache yawning in my stomach. I want to hold my niece. I want to look down at her and see the proof that Ginger escaped our past and made a happy life. I want to know it’s possible for me, too. But I can’t. It’s out of my reach.

Finally, Shane takes the phone out of my hand, and it drops limply to my side. With an arm around my waist, he walks me through the noticeably quieter pub toward the back hallway. I think he is going to leave me at the bottom of the stairs leading up toward the rooms, but he pulls me into the dark office instead.

I'm thankful when he closes the door and doesn't turn on the overhead light. Fluorescent lighting and sniveling girl are an unattractive combination, even if that ambiance would probably help me pull it together quicker. In the pitch-black, however, nothing prevents the sob from shuddering higher in my chest and escaping through my parted mouth. Not even Shane's presence. I cringe when I hear it. It sounds like weakness. But he's pulling me against his chest and holding it in is no longer an option.

"All right, love."

That's all he says, yet somehow it's the perfect thing. In this case, however, the perfect thing makes me cry all the harder. I don't want to be comforted. I don't deserve it. "I was supposed to be there. First babies almost never come early. I Googled that shit."

"I need more to work with. Who had a baby?"

"Ginger." Just her name brings on a fresh wave of tears. "She wasn't due for another month. And I'm here in this rainy-ass country. When I should be there."

He begins rubbing circles on my back with his big hand. "It does rain a lot." For some reason, that startles a laugh out of me, but it's far too tempting to bury my face against his neck and keep crying. I haven't cried in a long time, not even over Evan, and I can't seem to stem the flow of emotion. "You couldn't have predicted it," Shane says quietly, almost to himself.

I wipe my eyes on Shane's hard shoulder and pull back shaking my head, even though he can't see me. "You don't understand. It's our job to predict what the other will do. We're both impulsive, and we can't communicate worth a damn. Predicting is our how we operate." My head falls back on my shoulders. "I couldn't even get this one thing right. The one time she actually needs me, and I'm missing in action. God,

I'm so f**king sick of not getting it right for people that matter. She was there for me through everything. She saved me."

He's silent a beat. "Saved you from what? Tell me, Willa."

I laugh bitterly, hating the sound but unable to stem it. "I can't."

"Bullshit. Give me something." He lays his rough cheek against mine, the gesture undermining his harsh words. Letting him stay there feels risky, yet oddly natural.

"Why do you want to know? Just so you can understand where your initial judgment of me went wrong?"

"I have a need to know. Beyond that, I don't have an explanation."

I take a deep breath and tell the first story that comes to mind. "Ginger bought me my camera when I was twelve. A Christmas present. She probably had to save the entire year to afford it. It's not the best one, but it's mine." I squeeze my eyes shut, unable to believe what I'm revealing, but Shane's heat combined with the dark is so inviting. "Ginger had to buy the same camera five times from a pawn shop in Nashville because our mother kept selling it to buy heroin."

Shane doesn't say anything, but his circling hand grows firmer on my back, massaging my suddenly tired muscles.

"Ginger never told me. Just kept buying the damn camera and leaving it in our room, under a pile of clothes or in the back of the closet we shared, teasing me about misplacing things. One night, she was working at the bar. Mom came home, high out of her mind, with two men I didn't recognize. They tore my room apart looking for that camera to pawn it again. But Ginger had taken it with her to work that night just in case my mother came home. So it wasn't there."

Shane's hand goes still on my back. My voice has gone hollow, almost unrecognizable. This could be my default voice for talking about Valerie. I wouldn't know, because I try to avoid talking about her whenever possible.

"Drugs did funny things to her mind. She wasn't thinking rationally, just knew she needed her fix. Otherwise she would have realized pawning your child wasn't possible. She did her best to convince the owner to hold me for just a few hours, kind of like collateral on a loan. Thankfully, the owner kept Ginger's number handy so he could call her whenever my mother came in to pawn the camera. My sister came and got me. We didn't see our mother for a while after that."

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Shane curses under his breath and pulls me closer, enveloping me in his contradictory scents of smoky and fresh. “Ah, love. I’m sorry.”

I nod, but he’s pressed so close it seems like I’m nuzzling him. “That’s just one time out of a thousand I owe her for. I don’t know anything about babies, but I was going to help. This was my chance to pay her back for saving me.”

Shane pushes my hair back from my face. “Willa, I understand guilt. More than you know,” he adds quietly, giving me the feeling that I’m not the only one hurting here. His voice sounds rusty, as if he hasn’t flexed his compassion muscle in a while, making it all the more meaningful. “I don’t know your sister, but I do know you’re not the type who needs rescuing. I reckon she’d say you rescued her, in return.”

“Huh...thanks,” I say on an exhale. Even if I don’t entirely believe him, I appreciate him saying so. From what I’ve learned about Shane, warmth and understanding don’t come easy to him. Being that he doesn’t especially like me, I’m sure saying the words were twice as difficult. When neither one of us speaks for a stretch of time, the darkness starts to feel closer. I become aware of every tingling point of my body that connects to his. My knees, my arm, my cheek are all warmer than the rest of my body. Our breaths sound like waves rushing between us, and the longer we go without speaking, the deeper those breaths become. Something he said before comes back to me, though, and I need to voice my curiosity. “Why are you guilty, Shane?”

Shane’s hand curls into a fist at the outside of my thigh. “Too many things, Willa.” His head turns just slightly, and I shiver when his lips brush my earlobe. “I’m not a nice guy. Not like—”

I kiss him. I don't know what compels me to do it. If it's the fear of hearing Evan's name right now, allowing his ghost to intrude on this oddly endearing moment in the pitch-dark. Or if it's just Shane and I've finally reached my limit on resisting him. As he sinks into the kiss with a groan and my head goes light, I know it's the latter. It's all Shane.

Just as I'm about to pull him closer to deepen the kiss, he breaks away. "I shouldn't kiss you when you've been crying."

"Yes, you should."

"Yes, I should."

His lips seal hard over mine, the force of it tipping my head back. We breathe shakily into one another's mouths at the initial contact. We've barely started and I can't draw air into my constricted lungs. I quickly decide air is overrated when his tongue nudges my mouth open and he starts to take. My sanity, logic, and reservations become indistinct as his fingers burrow in my hair and my mouth is mastered.

Shane Claymore kisses me like the world is ending. I've never experienced anything like it. He doesn't rest in one pattern, but keeps me guessing which part of me he'll explore next. The kiss is at once fast and slow. Determined and savoring. My thoughts bleed together until all I can do is melt against the body molding into mine, trapping me between it and the desk.

With an irritated groan, he takes one final, provocative pull of my mouth, then gives into the human weakness of oxygen requirement. We're dragging in air, the office suddenly stifling. I can't see his face so I have no way to judge what he's thinking. Then I feel the grip of his strong hands on my backside, yanking me to the edge of the desk. His hips wedge between my legs, hard, and I gasp at the unexpectedness of it. It's an aggressive move, but it doesn't scare me. No, instead it sends a thrill of heat

coursing through my system.

“When you walked in tonight, I could see it on your face. You’re thinking about it.”

“Thinking about what?” I run my hands up his muscular chest, licking my swollen lips. Why isn’t he still kissing me? Before I can voice my second question out loud, his body propels mine backward onto the desk, so my legs have no choice but to curl around his waist.

“This, babe.” Shane’s mouth skates up the side of my neck as his hips begin to roll suggestively against mine. The rhythmic movement causes the seam of my jeans to push and drag over a spot I’ve been sorely neglecting of late, and I moan. “This. Us. Me moving inside you. You’re thinking about it.”

“Jesus. I am now.”

Shane grabs both of my thighs and props them on his hips. “People like us, we keep too much inside already. We can’t bottle up everything, or we go crazy.” His mouth collides with mine, the kiss beginning almost lazily, but by the time we break for air again, we’re in a frenzy. “Come to me, soon, Willa. Knowing you’re asleep upstairs in that big bed alone is keeping me up at night. I want to be between your legs without these goddamn jeans in my way.”

“Yes. Okay,” I pant. “I’m th-thinking about it.”

With a low curse, he releases me. I slump back onto the desk, listening to his footsteps make their way toward the exit. As he opens the door, allowing dim light to intrude, I prop myself up on my elbows to watch him. He pauses and looks back at me, hair disheveled, mouth still damp from kissing me.

“Think faster, girl.”

Chapter Nine

“Ah, come on, Willa. Shane gave me the day off. Have you even looked out your window?” Bouncing up and down on one leg, Faith gestures dramatically toward the window of my room. “There’s enough sun that I might get burned. I haven’t been burned in ages.”

“Why would you want to get burned?”

She pinches her arm. “I have Irish skin. My options are white or red.”

“Ah.” I hide my smile and turn back to the mirror. Biting my lip, I glance at the laundry-day outfit I’ve thrown together. Emergency jeans that sit way too low on my hips, and a sleeveless fuchsia blouse I’d bought yesterday on a whim. Because I liked the color, not because I thought someone else might like me in the color, that’s for damn sure.

I tug down the sheer material of my top, but a sliver of my belly is still showing. Hiding in the Laundromat with my navel exposed is one thing, but spending an entire day in this outfit, so unlike my usual black T-shirt and jeans, is decidedly unappealing. Today was supposed to be about laundry and buying a gift for Dolly, which for some reason feels like a pressing errand even though I won’t meet her for weeks. Ginger still hasn’t called, making me twice as restless. I feel like I need to do something for the baby, to make up for my not being there.

Still, Faith’s reflection behind me in the mirror is so hopeful, and she’s already straightened her hair. I’m going soft, I realize glumly. “I might be able to swing a couple hours. What did you have in mind?”

“Just a bit of shopping,” she says it too quickly, like she’d already had the answer chambered long before entering my room. When I narrow my eyes at her

suspiciously, she spins toward the door. “Come on then, before the sun remembers what country it’s shining on.”

Bracing myself for whatever Faith is about to spring on me, I sling my messenger bag over my shoulder and follow her out. I catch the last of her white dress fluttering, then disappearing at the base of the stairs as I start to descend. “Slow down, crazy pants. If you break your neck, we’ll—” I come to a halt as I see Faith and Shane standing toe to toe in the hallway. Ever since their argument the night of our O’Kelly’s excursion, I’ve wondered if they’ve been talking to one another. Apparently not, if their body language is any indication. Faith has her arms crossed over her chest, chin up in the air. Shane simply looks weary.

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Until his eyes meet mine over the top of Faith's head, and his gaze sweeps me from head to toe. Any lingering weariness is quickly replaced with heat potent enough to make catching my breath necessary. I become even more aware of the skin showing at the waistband of my jeans as his attention lingers there for what feels like an eternity. While I want nothing more than to tug down the shirt, I'm distracted by the way he looks. The dark circles under his eyes tell me he's exhausted, but with shower-dampened hair and those suspenders outlining the curve of his strong chest, he looks touchable and dangerous at the same time. I have the sudden urge to pull back one of those suspenders and let it slap against his body, just to see his reaction.

With a start, I realize Faith is calling my name. The way she says it tells me it's not the first time. Ignoring Shane's knowing smirk, I croak, "'Sup?"

"I said, are you all set to go?"

"Lead the way."

"Actually," Shane hedges, when we move to pass him. Looking a touch uncertain, he runs a hand through his hair. "I need a moment with Willa in the office."

"For what?" Faith and I ask at the same time. A tiny bubble of panic floats through my chest. I can't be alone with Shane this morning, not when I haven't sorted through what I'm feeling, nor have I made a decision about...well...jumping each other's bones. With the way I'm feeling now, having him standing so close, I don't think I have the strength to be objective.

"Faith can come," I blurt. "Whatever you need to say...Faith can hear it, too."

It's a risky move. For all I know, Shane is going to call my bluff and remind me to continue thinking about his proposition. Right in front of his sister. When he eyes me closely for a moment, then shrugs, I release a pent-up breath. He nudges open the office door but doesn't meet my eyes as Faith sails past him. "After you."

Clutching the strap of my bag, I can't help inhaling as I walk past, wondering what kind of miracle soap he uses to smell like that. It's comforting and elusive all at the same time. What do I smell like to Shane? I don't wear perfume like Ginger or shower with body wash. Dove soap and regular, drug-store bought lotion is all I've used. Do I have a scent? Does it have an effect on him? With a shake of my head, I will myself to stop thinking these ridiculous thoughts and continue past into the office. This time the lights are on, but it doesn't stop me from remembering last night's heart-to-heart turned make-out session.

Prompted by Faith's long-suffering sigh, I shift in my boots. "What is it?"

Shane rounds the desk and hits a few keys on a laptop I've only just noticed. Around it, there are pieces of paper with scribbled notes on them and a half-empty mug of tea. He checks his watch, then runs an impatient hand through his hair. "Just...wait."

"Okay," I mumble, ignoring Faith's questioning looks in my direction. What would she think if she knew Shane and I shared a kiss on this very desk mere hours ago? Would she still want to spend the day with me? I'm trying to figure out the answer to that question when I hear it.

My sister's voice. Her familiar Tennessee drawl is coming from the laptop. "Earth to Wip. Come in, Wip."

Hearing my nickname, Wip, short for Willa Ingrid Peet, I squeak—yes squeak—before shooting to my feet and scrambling to the other side of the desk. And Ginger is there, on the screen, smiling back at me. She looks tired as hell, her long

chestnut hair in a haphazard bun, eyes sleep-blurred and puffy. On the flip side, she's never looked more beautiful in her life. She looks...peaceful. Weighed down with love.

"Hey."

"Hey, yourself."

I clear the choked feeling from my throat. "Would it have been so hard to keep the baby in until I got back?"

"You know us Peet women." Her eyes twinkle. "We have minds of our own."

My laughter is halting. "Truer words..."

Ginger looks somewhere just beyond the screen. "She must have gotten her punctuality from Derek. I've never been early for a damn thing in my life."

"Except maybe a hair appointment."

"A girl's got to have her priorities." Squinting, Ginger leans closer. "Are you wearing fuchsia? What happened to yakety yak, I only wear black?"

"Don't get excited. It's laundry day."

"It wouldn't have anything to do with—"

"No," I cut her off, shooting a nervous glance at Shane.

Only he's gone, along with Faith, leaving me alone in the room. His sudden absence causes a weird, hollow feeling to invade my stomach, just for a brief flash. It hits me

then that I wanted him to be standing there. But I can't think about it now, though. Not when I have a rare chance to see and talk to Ginger at the same time. I hear Derek's voice in the background, and then he hands Ginger my niece. I'm looking at my sister's child.

"Meet your niece, Dolly Tyler."

While I work to get my feelings under control, I press a fist to my mouth. "Hey, Dolly. That's a pretty big name to live up to." As if responding, she gurgles a little and we laugh.

Ginger is looking down at her daughter with so much pride, I'm kind of transfixed by it. It's a miracle, really. No one ever looked at us that way, yet here is proof we still have the capacity to love. "I don't know. This little lady might give even the Backwoods Barbie a run for her money."

"I wouldn't bet against her."

Ginger looks up at me and for a moment, it's like the miles between us don't exist. "Holy hell. I'm a mom, Wip."

"Yeah, you are. The best damn one she could have hoped for." Once upon a time, it would have been difficult, saying how I feel to Ginger. Since we moved to Chicago, though, I'm getting better at it. Well, with my sister, at least. "Jesus, look how beautiful she is. I thought babies were supposed to be ugly."

Ginger laughs and shakes her head, knowing me well enough to know I'm deflecting with an attempt at humor. And as usual, she lets it slide. "You should see what comes out of her."

"Can't believe I'm saying this, but I'm looking forward to it."

Derek sits down next to Ginger on the bed, looking at her as though she's just descended into the hospital room wearing wings, a heavenly chorus singing behind her. Their eyes meet and I watch as a silent communication passes between them. "Willa, we want you to be the godmother. I know it goes without saying, but well...we wanted it said."

It doesn't go without saying. The possibility of being a godmother had never crossed my mind. Caught off guard, I just stare at the screen.

Derek's laugh rumbles through the laptop speakers. "Is that a yes?"

"Y-yes. That's a yes." Shit, I'm crying again. Twice in less than twenty-four hours. Unacceptable. With some advance warning, I might have been able to accept my new status with something resembling dignity, but instead I'm a mess. With the backs of my hands, I swipe at my eyes. "You guys suck."

They know exactly what I mean, so they just smile and shake their heads.

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“Ginger, how did this happen?” I encompass the laptop with a wave.

“Derek got a call from the photography contest people last night. Someone from the Claymore Inn was trying to get in touch with us. We assumed it was you, but—”

“It was Shane Claymore.” Derek scrutinizes me closely, ever the cop and overprotective brother-in-law. “He asked if we had a laptop, which I did, since I’ve been working from the hospital. I downloaded the program he sent me...and here we are. So who is he?”

I sigh at the loaded question, just as the scribbled notes scattered around the desk catch my attention. Phone numbers and names I recognize from the photography contest. Derek’s cell phone number. Shane had done quite a lot of work to arrange this chance for me to see my sister, my niece. I remember the circles under his eyes and frown.

“I’m not sure who he is,” I say to myself, forgetting for the moment Derek and Ginger can hear me. My attention snaps back to them. “Listen, take care of my beautiful goddaughter. And Derek, make sure my sister gets some sleep,” I add, knowing beyond a shadow of a doubt he’ll follow through. “I miss you guys, dammit. I’ll call soon.”

Ginger is becoming distracted as the baby begins to fuss. Derek stands up at the side of the bed, holding a diaper and a glass of water, looking prepared for anything. “Bye, Wip. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

“Oh, that narrows it down,” I respond, but my sarcasm is lost on them. “Bye, guys.”

I close the laptop and take a deep breath. My chest feels heavy with a multitude of messy emotions. Gratitude, surprise, love...a touch of melancholy. I close my eyes to regain my bearings, but all I can see is Shane, the one who made the last five unexpected, amazing minutes of my life possible. To some people, a few phone calls wouldn't be a big deal. To me, it's huge.

I don't think anymore. I just get up and leave the office. It's obvious where I'm going, but I have no idea what I'm going to do when I get there.

As soon as I push through the hallway door and enter the pub, I see him standing behind the bar. I see no one else in the pub, and a quick glance tells me Faith is outside, waiting for me on the sidewalk in front of the inn. The sound of the swinging door alerts him to my presence and his back stiffens a little, but he doesn't turn, just continuing to clean the bar with a white cloth. Even though he doesn't acknowledge me, my steps don't falter, I don't pause on my way behind the bar.

When I'm a few yards away, Shane turns. "Look, don't make a big thing out of—" He cuts himself off when he glimpses my expression. Then he drops the rag and meets me halfway. I'm caught up in his arms a second later, legs wrapped snugly around his waist. Shane grips my bottom with one big hand and buries the other in my hair, searching my eyes. I'm not ready to let him see everything, so I pull his head down to mine. And kiss him for all I'm worth.

I angle my mouth across his, encouraged by his ragged groan. When his teeth rake over my lower lip, my thighs tighten around his hips, and I deepen the kiss further. For the first time, I'm kissing him without a single reservation, and the effect of that freedom is devastating. Blood pounds in my temples, aches form in places I didn't know could ache from a kiss. The hand on my bottom is urging me closer, causing my control to desert me.

Shane senses the shift in me, the end of my restraint. I can tell because he pulls back,

shhing against my lips. “As much as I’d love to take you on this bloody bar, Willa, this isn’t how I want you the first time.” He brushes his mouth across my cheek to my ear. “There’ll be a time for this. Soon. Feel me, love.” His hips rolls beneath mine. “That’s a promise.”

After a few breaths, I nod, forcing my thighs to loosen so my body can slide down his harder one. Shane steadies me with a firm hand on my shoulder, but nothing can stop what’s taking place inside of me. Swallowing hard, I meet his blue gaze. “What you did...thank you.”

“I need you to understand something.” He tips my chin up. “I didn’t do it so to encourage your decision one way or the other. I need that to be clear.”

“Okay,” I whisper, unable to question his sincerity when he’s looking at me with such intensity. “Why did you do it?”

He goes still, and then his hand slips from my face. “Maybe I know what it’s like. The guilt over not being there when someone needs you.”

More than anything, I want to question him further, but Faith raps on the window. Immediately, I step back, ducking my head. Not because I’m ashamed, but because it’s a moment taking place between us and I don’t want someone else to witness it.

“Whatever the reason you did it...” I shrug helplessly. “I won’t ever forget it. When I go home...forty years from now when you’ve forgotten me, I’ll remember. Okay? Thank you.”

I don’t wait for Shane’s response, but turn quickly and leave the pub before I give into the temptation to throw myself back into his arms.

Chapter Ten

“Are you shagging my brother, then?”

My first sip of orange juice gets stuck in my throat. Pedestrians veer around me as I choke and sputter like an ass**le on the sidewalk. It’s not a planned or convenient stall tactic, but at least my coughing fit gives me time to formulate a decent answer to Faith’s innocently posed question. There are two ways I could handle this, I figure. Tell her the truth, which is no and leave out the fact that shagging Shane is beginning to seem like an idea on par with the invention of Reese’s Peanut Butter Cups. Or I could put on my big girl panties and be completely honest.

“I’m thinking about it.”

Faith tilts her head and I can tell she’s now seeing me through a different lens. The girl-who-wants-to-shag-my-brother lens. I’ve had quite a bit of experience with something similar, since every man with a pair of eyes has wanted to sleep with my sister at some point. In the beginning, it was uncomfortable knowledge to have, but you learn to control the gagging after a while. In Faith’s case, I’m willing to bet she has encountered her fair share of girls looking to get the inside track on Shane. Since I know what that feels like, my first obstacle will be to make damn certain she knows I won’t be needling her for pointers on how to secure Shane’s undying love. I don’t want it.

“Listen, Faith—”

“You know, he’s leaving.”

I nod and sip my juice. “So am I.”

She stares at some point beyond my shoulder. “He always leaves.”

I don’t know how to respond to that. I’m afraid if I push, she’ll think I’m digging for

information. This casual-shagging business is difficult to navigate.

“So it’s just an affair?”

I swallow a laugh. “I don’t know if I’d call it an affair, since nothing’s happened. Also, we’re not actors in an old-timey movie.”

“What would you call it?”

“Temporary.”

Faith starts walking again and I move to catch up with her. When I feel a little surge of panic at the possibility she doesn’t want any more to do with me, I realize I’ve already come to consider Faith a friend. Dammit, she’s found a way to creep in, just like Shane told me she would. “Does this bother you, because if it does—”

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“It’s not the shagging that bothers me—”

“Let’s agree to drop that word.”

Faith frowns. “Fine. It’s not the fu—”

“And back to shagging.”

We reach the edge of Merrion Square Park and begin walking down a pathway leading us farther into the grassy field. Absently, I notice the park is way more packed than usual, but I chalk it up to the rare sunshine. Faith has gone quiet beside me, for once, so I focus on her. “What part of it does bother you?”

“It’s just that I like you so much, Willa.” Faith slows to a stop, shooting me a hesitant look. “Since I can remember, Shane has loved racing. It’s his life. Sometimes I think there’s no room for anything else.”

Without looking, I toss my empty juice carton in the garbage can. “I appreciate your concern, but I don’t need him to make room.”

“Do you have room, Willa?”

I swallow hard, unnerved by the question. “For what?”

She opens her mouth to answer, when I hear two familiar voices approaching behind me. Faith’s blooming smile confirms the newcomers’ identities, so I don’t even need to turn around to know it’s Patrick and Brian. “I thought we were going shopping,” I

stage-whisper to Faith.

“You owe me.” She’s barely paying any attention to me now. “After all, you’re shagging my brother.”

“Not yet,” I remind her tightly as Faith floats past me, turning just in time to see her throw her arms around Brian’s neck, nearly toppling him back onto the weathered guitar slung over his shoulder. And there certainly won’t be any shagging if Shane finds out I just escorted his little sister to a date with a pickpocket. There’ll be a lot of glaring, followed by some glowering.

When Brian and Faith show no signs of breaking their hug, Patrick rolls his eyes conspiratorially at me, but he has a giant grin plastered to his face. “Fancy meeting you two doves here.”

“You expect me to believe this is a coincidence?”

Brian tucks Faith into his side. “It’s no coincidence. Yous two are here to serve as our cheerleaders.”

Patrick laughs at my lost expression. “The Street Performer World Championship is on today in the park. Did you not wonder at all the people milling about?”

“I thought they were here for the sun,” I respond lamely, finally taking notice of the huge white tents just beyond the trees, the pumping strains of music and cheering in the distance. “Does this mean you’re performing?”

“And winning, hopefully,” Brian chimes in, smiling down at Faith. “Although you could say I’ve already won my prize.”

Patrick and I both groan. “You’re embarrassing the family name, brother,” he says.

It occurs to me then, that in order to arrange this little meeting, Brian would have needed Faith's phone number. Obviously their relationship had progressed further than I'd thought. I'll need to keep an eye on that, I think, before I remember I'll only be in Dublin for another two weeks. Ignoring the tug in my chest, I sigh. "Well. Since we're already here, I guess I can overlook the fact that I was lured away from my laundry under false pretenses and stick around for the show. I forgot my pom-poms, though."

"Throw in a few high kicks and all's forgiven," Patrick says, patting me on the shoulder.

Brian and Faith trudge off ahead of us, plastered to one another's side, and Patrick and I follow at a slower pace. I'm kind of surprised to find I'm not at all upset over being duped. As we get closer to the busker's stage where Brian and Patrick will perform, I'm actually kind of excited to watch the competition. I might even have a beer to celebrate this new, easygoing Willa I seem to be morphing into.

Patrick bumps me with his hip, and I stumble on the grass. "What was that?"

"Did I overhear that someone is shagging?"

"Jesus," I mutter, slapping a palm to my forehead.

"I know it's not me. Sad to report, I'm in the midst of a dry spell."

Laughter races up my throat. "Sorry to hear that."

"Not half as sorry as I am." He hikes up his guitar on his back. "So we know it's not me getting shagged. It sure as hell isn't Brian. We share a wall."

"Oh, you found another place to live?"

“Ah, she’s talented at changing the subject, she is,” he teases with a grin. “We’ve moved back in with our ma. It’s only temporary, mind you, until our offer on the yacht gets accepted.”

“Duly noted,” I say with mock seriousness.

“It should be any day. Really, our financials are above reproach.”

I press a dainty hand to my chest. “I’m sorry, did I look skeptical?”

“Permanently.”

“That’s entirely fair.”

“So unless I’ve completely misjudged our Faith, I’d say Willa is the one doing the shagging.” He ignores my eye roll, merely looking thoughtful. “Is it the bloke who came to fetch you that night in O’Kelly’s? I guess he’s easy enough on the eyes, if you go for the tall, physically fit type.”

“This is not open for discussion.”

“It’s him, then.” Patrick jogs to catch up with me when I begin to speed walk away from him. “All right, I’ll leave off about it. You can’t blame me for being jealous. He’s a lucky man.”

My gaze shoots to his, but he’s already muttering something to Brian. His brother says back something that sounds like an insult and they begin to wrestle in the grass, to the utter delight of Faith, whose skin has already begun to go pink in the sunlight. I’m happy, at least for now, the spotlight is off my nonrelationship with Shane. I haven’t even had enough time to think about it myself, let alone field uncomfortable and unwanted questions. Worse, when people talk about me and Shane in relation to

one another, it implies we're a couple, which we're not and never will be.

When I realize my fingers are pressed to my still slightly puffy lips, I shake myself and run to catch up with the others. For the next few hours, I'm not going to let my suddenly raging hormones stop me from having a good time.

Patrick and Brian check-in as participants and receive their entry paperwork. We buy a round of beers and sit on the grass toward the side of the performance area. For the next hour, we watch their stiff competition take the stage. Jugglers, contortionists and break dancers among them. Faith sits on Brian's lap and he teaches her a few chords on his guitar, praising her efforts even when it sounds like a cat being run over. My developing beer buzz, along with the sunshine makes the antics happening on the stage infinitely more funny. Soon I find myself heckling or cheering along with the rest of the crowd.

In between acts, I lay on my back and look up at the cloudless sky, wondering why my usual reservations have taken an extended vacation. Is it because no one in this country knows or expects a certain type of behavior from me that I feel so free to loosen up?

People like us, we keep too much inside already. We can't bottle up everything or we go crazy.

Shane's words from last night drop out of the sky and scatter across my prone figure. At the time, I thought his meaning had been purely physical, but now I wonder if there wasn't more to it. For so long, I've kept all my demons inside, just as he said. I'd released them one at a time to Evan in a way that wouldn't scare the hell out of him, but it hadn't freed me. Oddly, it had only made me feel more and more restrained. He'd encouraged me to open up, as if once I released the ugliness, it would turn to ash and I could start acting normal. But what is normal? And if there is such a thing as normal, is that what I want to be?

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My thoughts are interrupted when Brian and Patrick are called to the stage. I clap and cheer dutifully as they scramble to their feet, but I'm drowned out by Faith's two-finger mouth whistle that turns several heads on our direction.

"Oh, would you just look at him, Willa? He is such a ride."

"A souped-up Cadillac," I confirm, laughing into my beer. "Have you two set the wedding date yet?"

"Not yet." Her eyes twinkle at me, telling me she's in on the joke, but enjoying the idea nonetheless. "But I fancy a summer wedding. Somewhere exotic, like. You'll come, won't you?"

"Wouldn't miss it."

Patrick and Brian begin their song, this act already vastly different from their daily one on Grafton Street. Mainly, because no one is pickpocketing the audience. That I can see, anyway. Patrick plays a complicated, yet familiar, riff on the guitar, then Brian copies it even faster. It sounds like the opening of "Welcome to the Jungle" by Guns and Roses. Patrick challenges Brian with another riff and with a confident smirk, Brian plays it back with twice the flair. They're dueling with guitars, and the audience is completely eating it up, choosing sides and cheering for their favorite brother. When their time is almost up, Patrick plays the notes to "Crazy in Love" with a head nod in my direction, causing Faith and I to dissolve into laughter.

They don't win, but they do take third place, which comes with a fifty-dollar prize. They act as if they just won the Super Bowl.

Brian returns from the stage and throws an arm around Faith. “Come on. This fortune is already burning a hole in my pocket.”

“There’s beer to be bought, ladies. Join us?”

I’m actually shocked to see that evening is already beginning to fall. We’ve been sitting and watching the performances for hours and I’m kind of anxious to get Faith back to the inn. She told me she’d been given the day off, but I can easily see her neglecting to tell me she’s due back for the night shift in the pub. With the tension between her and Shane, she’d probably relish the chance to blow it off, leaving her brother high and dry. Yesterday, I probably wouldn’t have given a shit one way or the other, but I can’t help but feel I owe him one after this morning.

“Faith, I think we should head back.”

Her face falls. “Just one drink?”

I’ve only been in Dublin for two weeks, but I’ve learned enough to know that “just one drink,” roughly translates to stumbling in shit-faced at two in the morning. Hating to be the one to kill the mood, I begin to hedge, but Brian interrupts me.

“Why don’t we all head back to the Claymore Inn?” He nudges Faith’s chin. “I heard a rumor they serve the best cod and chips in town.”

Okay, I seriously need to get around to trying the damn fish, but then Brian’s suggestion registers. I can only imagine Shane’s reaction when Brian and his little sister walk in, glued together at the hip. He’ll blow a gasket. Based on Faith’s expression, I know she’s thinking along the same lines, but my relief is replaced with dread when I see the mischief cross her face. Clearly, she’s warming to the idea of pissing off her brother.

I barely stifle a groan. “I don’t—”

“Let’s go.” She avoids my eyes. “I know the owner, so I might even be able to negotiate us a good table.”

Chapter Eleven

The four of us walk into the Claymore Inn and stop dead in our tracks just inside the door. I can barely see into the pub, it’s so packed full of customers. Every last one of them appears to be drunk and sunburned, shouting along with the music blaring through the speakers. My gaze shoots to Faith, but she’s completely frozen, apart from her wringing hands in front of her. A young woman bumps into me muttering a preemptive, hiccupping apology, and I notice she’s wearing the same wristband we’re sporting, that got us into the Championship. It dawns on me then that all these people must have migrated from the park a short distance away, packing the pub on what should have been a quiet night.

Just then, the crowd parts slightly and I glimpse Shane behind the bar. He’s completely on his own fulfilling orders and utterly swamped. Not only that, he’s seen us walk in and he’s livid. At the end of the bar, Kitty stands wide-eyed, her look of helplessness identical to her daughter’s. Beside me, Faith starts to mutter, “shit, shit, shit,” under her breath.

“I don’t think you’ll be getting us that table, Faith,” Brian half shouts.

Without waiting to hear if she replies, I begin to skirt my way through the crowd. I don’t know what I plan on doing once I make it past the staggering bodies. I only know someone needs to help. I’m surprised when I hear Faith pipe up from behind me, voice laced with more steel than I’ve come to expect from her.

“I’m going to jump on waiting tables, yeah?” She nudges the small of my back with

her hand. “God only knows where Orla has gotten off to. Think you can manage to help Shane behind the bar till she turns up?”

I know nothing about bartending apart from what Ginger has reluctantly shared with me, so as not to encourage me to pursue the same profession. “Yeah, yeah. I got it,” I call over my shoulder as she disappears through the crowd in the direction of the kitchen. When I reach the end of the bar, I take a deep breath and walk behind it, already knowing Shane is going to reject my help. Too bad. He’s getting it. I’m actually grateful for the chance to repay him for this morning, for two reasons. One, I don’t like unpaid debts. They burrow under my skin like a splinter. Two, if anything ever happens between us, I don’t want him mistaking it for gratitude.

Kitty actually looks relieved to see me. “Oh thank God. That American is here.”

My answering smile disappears when Shane spots me.

“No.” That’s all he says.

Determined not to budge, I square my shoulders and look around. How hard can this be? I even feel a kick of excitement in my belly when someone assumes I’m an employee and shouts out an order for three pints of Guinness. Shane shakes his head at me in warning, but I ignore him. As I grab glasses off the shelf, I notice that Shane is only pouring them halfway full of the thick, black liquid and letting it settle before filling it the rest of the way. Feeling his blue eyes drilling into me, I stand next to him at the beer taps and start pouring.

“Let me guess, you’re mad?”

“What tipped you off?” He makes an impatient noise and reaches up to help me angle the glass I’m holding differently. Electrified pinpricks race down my arm when our hands brush. “I don’t need your help.”

“Beg to differ.” I set the first pint down and look up at him, sensing he wants to question me about Patrick and Brian. The curiosity is there in his eyes, but I refuse to give into the urge to explain. I keep having to remind myself I don’t owe him any explanations. Not about where I’ve been or with whom. His eyes narrow, telling me that resolve is written clearly on my face.

“We’ll see about that.” Briefly, his gaze drops to my exposed midriff, warming my skin as it lingers. “Pints are five Euro, bottles are four. I’m going to keep the register partially open so you can make change. Think you can manage that?”

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I flutter my eyelashes. “Gosh, I don’t know, can I?” Unbelievable. Two minutes behind a bar and I’ve already turned into my überflirtatious sister. If she knew I was behind a bar with my stomach showing, the way she used to do for money, she’d raise unholy hell. Forcing a serious expression onto my face, I nod. “I mean, yeah, I can manage.”

“Good.” He watches me a moment before turning to take another order.

In the beginning, Shane has to point out where certain bottled beers are located or switch places with me when customers order something more complicated than beer. But we quickly fall into a rhythm. It’s a totally new experience...and I like it. Being able to remain detached while still feeling involved in several different conversations at once. Some funny, some sad. Some of the discussions are even about Shane, whispers about his achievements on the circuit. Speculation about whether or not he’ll go back.

I find myself avoiding those conversations.

I’m dying to race upstairs and grab my camera, but I’m sure Shane would just love me photographing his customers when I’m supposed to be helping. I put the urge aside and focus on serving drinks. The music grows steadily louder, forcing me to strain to hear each order.

I’m leaning across the bar doing just that, when I feel Shane brush behind me. His hand squeezes my hip a little before moving on. I have to ask the customer to repeat himself. Twice. We make eye contact as I’m pouring Guinness, and I feel it everywhere. It’s like he’s trying to communicate something with his unsmiling stare,

and although I can't put a name to the message, my body seems to understand. It wants Shane. I can freely admit that at this point.

I start to feel a little breathless, and a lot anxious. It originates in my belly and spreads lower. In these jeans, I feel sexy, a rarity for me. Every time Shane and I pass each other behind the bar, we touch, and the eagerness sprouts wings. Sometimes it's just the backs of our hands sliding together, but it escalates quickly to my bottom slipping against his lap, his fingertips brushing across my collarbone. None of the customers are sober enough to pay us any attention. I'm still aware of their presence because I'm serving them drinks, but when I'm talking to them, I'm thinking of Shane and where he's standing in relation to me.

Finally, the crowd begins to thin slightly, and Patrick is able to struggle his way between two customers. I return his jaunty smile, knowing that I'm flushed head to toe. I pray that if he notices, he'll chalk it up to me exerting myself behind the bar. "Tell me, Willa. Is there anything you can't do?" he shouts over the noise, sending me a wink.

I nod at the guitar he's holding against his chest like a precious child. "I can't play guitar."

His eyebrows raise, voice dipping slightly. "You know, I'm an excellent teacher."

With a laugh, I start to respond, when I feel Shane move behind me. It feels like crackling energy racing over my skin. As if I'd been caught doing something wrong, I move back from Patrick...which puts my back hard against Shane's chest. I wait for him to move and he doesn't. Instead, he drags his fingers across my exposed stomach slowly. I don't even have to turn around to know he's staring at Patrick as he does it. It's written all over Patrick's face. This is Shane telling him to back off, that I'm somehow...his?

I should turn around and scratch his eyeballs out. Put him back in his place right in front of everyone, then light him on fire. This jealous, possessive, bullshit shouldn't be heating me up. It shouldn't make me want to turn my head and request he take me somewhere private, where he can move his hand lower. Higher. Where he can put them everywhere. I'm so distracted by these thoughts, that I barely notice when Patrick salutes me and disappears back into the crowd.

"We might have agreed there wouldn't be any commitments between us." His lips brush my ear. "But as long as we're both in Dublin, there will be no sharing."

I fight another surge of intense heat and focus on my irritation. "Don't talk about me like I'm a f**king ham sandwich. I decide—"

"When you wrapped your legs around me and stuck your tongue in my mouth this morning, you decided."

"If I'd known it would turn you into a caveman, I wouldn't have done it."

His chest vibrates against my back with a growl, but we're interrupted when a flustered Orla trips her way behind the bar. When she sees us standing so close, her eyebrows raise with interest, but she doesn't comment. "Sorry I'm late?" she says, her apology sounding more like a question.

Swallowing the rest of the retort I'd worked up for Shane, I push away from him. With a mumbled greeting in Orla's direction, I stomp out from behind the bar, intending to climb the stairs to my room. I need a way to relieve this pent-up sexual frustration. It's been building for days, weeks, and I feel ready to explode. Shane barks a command for Orla to cover the bar and I sense him following me. His words from that night in the alley come back to me in a rush, making me feel fevered. Having to chase you only makes me want to pin you down.

I want him to chase me. The realization hits me hard, knocking the breath out of my lungs. Before I can clear the bar, my hand is enfolded in Shane's larger one and I'm being pulled through a set of double doors behind the bar where I've never been. I don't even know why I make a halfhearted attempt to pull away, but I do. Maybe so I can tell myself later that I tried.

Excitement is humming in my veins, something dark and demanding pooling at the tops of my thighs. Shane's steps are purposeful, his back flexing beneath his shirt, as he leads me through another door. A stock room, I barely have time to acknowledge before he's slamming the door closed and pressing me forward over what looks like a waist-high refrigerator. The bent over position he's put me in is unexpected. I'd anticipated him pressing me up against the door to kiss me. The way he continues to keep me guessing, never doing what I expect, is a crazy turn-on. As if I need any more reasons to crave this guy. I resent him and want him at the same time.

His hips press against my bottom and my forehead drops forward on a soft moan. "I know you won't tell me you want me right now. Not with words. You're too damn stubborn." He leans over my body, so he's flush against my back. His voice is rough against my ear. "So tell me with your body. Give me more of what I got behind the bar when you couldn't stop swishing your ass all over me."

"That was your game. You started it." I cringe when I hear the halting quality to my immature words.

"Aye. I did start it." His mouth moves over my neck. "And I'm dying to finish it."

Jesus, was that a whimper that just came out of me? I reach down deep, making one last attempt to stay sane. "I thought you didn't want me in the bar for the first time."

"I meant it, too." He gives a quick thrust of his hips jarring me against the fridge. "I won't f**k you tonight, no matter how badly we both need it."

His harsh language triggers a long, torturous squeeze in my lower body. I've never been spoken to like that in a sexual context. I'm far from offended. It's gritty and honest...and I want more of it. A lot more. I'm kidding myself by thinking I could ever walk away from Shane and this need he's creating, so I give in and push my bottom up against him, savoring his groan. "What are you waiting for? Permission?"

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“Yes,” he groans, clutching my hips.

A breath rattles in my throat, and I jump without looking. “You have it.”

Calloused hands eagerly slip under my shirt. My bra is pushed aside before I have time to register which direction his touch is moving. Shane cups my naked br**sts and squeezes with just enough force to make my vision blur under the onslaught of sensation.

“Sexy girl,” he grates, molding them rhythmically. “Maddening girl.”

“You love it.” I don’t know this person anymore who sounds so sexually confident. This girl who not only responds to such challenging words, but responds in kind. Should it be thrilling me this much? I have no answers, only a desire to take it further. Let Shane take it further. My back arches as if I have no control over my own body’s movements anymore. Maybe I don’t.

“Careful, Willa.” He circles my ni**les with his thumbs. “I’m starting to like your smart mouth a little too much.”

I can hear my harsh breaths echoing in the small room, but I’m beyond caring. “And if I’m not careful?”

Shane’s raspy inhaled air joins mine. One big hand slides up my throat to cup my jaw. “I’ll find a better use for that mouth. Is that what you want to hear?”

A choked sob is my only answer. My position feels more provocative with each

passing minute. I'm pinned down by him, just as he's told me he wanted. His chest is anchoring me down, his erection pressing snugly against my bottom. I've never been taken like this, and I suddenly want it more than anything. I manage to slide my legs farther apart and move my hips in a slow circle.

Shane's thigh muscles bunch, his low curse burning in my ears. "What are you trying to tell me, babe? You want something between your legs?"

"Yes."

Shane releases my jaw, drawing his hand roughly down my body and ending at the snap of my jeans. "I've been going mad, thinking of you walking around like this all day. What happened to the bloody hoodie?"

"Laundry day."

Snap. "I didn't see you leave with any laundry." He draws down my zipper. "Does that mean I should expect you to be dressed like this again tomorrow?"

"I'll dress however I—" My words end on a moan when a single finger traces along my center, then pushes into me. Hard. My thighs squeeze together around his hand, holding him there. I don't think there's a way for the pressure to feel any more unbelievable, until he begins drawing his finger in and out. "Oh my God."

"Ah, babe, how long have you been like this?" He doesn't have to explain his question. I know what he's asking. I can feel how ready he found me. When I squirm a little in embarrassment, he kisses my neck with a hot, open mouth until I stop. "That night in the alley, I wanted to touch you here so bad. You wouldn't let me." He adds a second thick finger and my knees dip down, having gone weak. "You're letting me touch you now, aren't you, girl?"

“Yes.” The word falls out of my mouth so quickly, I’m a little alarmed. He’s touching my body, but this control he has over my heightened senses scares me. Frantically, I try and detach my mind from my body, try and experience what Shane is doing to me without losing myself to him. But I can’t. I can’t. His fingers slip from inside me and begin to circle the concentration of all the pent-up stress I have, thanks to him and his words. The way he’s been staring at me. I’m desperate to take some control back. I’ve given him too much.

I reach behind me and slide a hand in between our bodies. My fingers close around his erection where it presses against the fly of his trousers. His hissed curse brings what I suspect is a triumphant smile to my face. Shane’s breath falters, his fingers increasing their circular rhythm between my legs.

“How long have you been like this?” I throw his earlier question back at him, but it loses its effect when I gasp the last word.

“Since the airport. Since I turned around and saw you’d given me the slip.” His lips trace over my shoulder. “Did you think I wouldn’t catch you?”

As soon as the words leave his mouth, he stops touching me. I make an irritated sound, but it sticks in my throat when Shane begins yanking my jeans down my legs. My eyes flutter shut, and I imagine what he’s seeing. Me, bent over, naked except for boy shorts and boots. Hurriedly, I toe off the latter and step out of my jeans, seconds from swallowing my pride and begging for him to touch me again, when he whirls me around and pushes me backward onto the fridge. Now that I can see him, see his heavy-lidded eyes and the determined set of his chin, I feel a flash of nerves. Automatically, I try and close my legs, but he steps between them. Both of his hands coast up the insides of my thighs, and all the while he’s watching my face. When his thumbs meet at my center and begin a slow massage through the cotton, my head falls back on my shoulders and I cry out.

“I’d like you to admit something to me, now.” He uses his knuckle to nudge aside the material of my underwear and slip beneath. When it stops just short of where I need it, I hold my breath. “When I touched you behind the bar in front of that f**ker. You liked it. You liked having the decision taken out of your hands.”

“There was no decision.” My voice is hoarse. “I told you he’s just a friend.”

“Answer me, anyway.”

I squeeze my eyes closed. “Yes, I liked it.”

Shane sinks his knuckle inside me and twists it. I almost climax, barely managing to suppress a scream. He leans down and kisses my belly as he slips my panties down my legs. Has he changed his mind? Are we going to have sex?

“I’m going to use my mouth on you, Willa. Would you like that?”

His words catch me off guard, but I want to shout yes. Relief at this point could come in any form and I’d be grateful. Then I notice Shane’s labored breathing, the thick ridge of his arousal encased by his pants. The hands drawing my underwear down my thighs are shaking. “What about you?”

He pauses for a split second, eyes seeking mine. I suspect he’s reacting over the way I posed the question. The quiet, sincere concern in my voice. I’m reacting to it, too, on the inside. It sounded too much like I care about...him. Do I care? Shane breaks the spell first, hooking his hands beneath my knees and throwing them over his wide shoulders.

“This is for me.”

I’m unable to think about anything except his mouth as it moves over my flesh

hungrily. Oh sweet Jesus. While I'm not experienced by any stretch of the imagination, I know without a doubt that Shane knows what the f**k he's doing. He has me near the edge within seconds, his tongue and lips nipping, licking, and soothing in all the right places, pulling back when I get too close, then driving me back toward the peak. My fingers have somehow found their way into his hair and wound the thick strands tight in my fists.

"Shane...dammit, Shane, please."

As if granting me a wish, he pushes two fingers deep, rotating them without stopping the tight, quick strokes of his tongue. Finally, he lets me get past the beginning stages of my orgasm. He can't stop at this point, or I'll sock him in the jaw. I know he's reading my mind when he makes an encouraging sound and it vibrates through me.

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“Oh God. Shit, shit.”

I feel like I’m being turned inside out, my back arching in a way that suggests I missed my calling as a gymnast. Shane’s fingers are pressed hard inside me, applying just enough pressure to prolong the feeling sweeping through me. He doesn’t stop until I’ve sagged back onto the fridge, my legs still draped boneless over his shoulders. I should pull myself together, cover myself up, but the urgency is lost on me compared to what I just experienced. When I finally get the strength to pick up my head and look at him, he’s staring at me, an unreadable look in his eye.

“Fuck. I can’t wait to be inside you, girl.”

Just like that, my heart is beginning to pound again. The so recently satisfied parts of my body grow heavy under his appreciative gaze. I want Shane. I want to blow his f**king mind, just like he’s blown mine tonight. Slowly, I let my legs drop from his shoulders and sit up. Without a thought, my hand goes to his belt buckle, tracing it with a single finger. “What are you waiting for?”

He swoops down with a curse, mouth covering mine, our kiss beginning at one hundred miles an hour. While I yank the leather of his belt through the loops, his mouth devours mine, his fingers pinching my hardening ni**les. Oh God, I’ve never been this desperate. I need to feel him inside me. At this moment, it feels like a necessity.

“Shane?”

We both freeze at the sound of Faith’s singsong voice. I rack my muddled brain,

trying to remember if Shane locked the stock-room door when we walked in. Oh boy, I don't think so. I open my mouth to whisper the question, but he closes a hand over my mouth and shakes his head. When I see a touch of horror on his face, mixed with pain, I can't help laughing into his palm. His eyes widen a little bit, probably at me having the audacity to laugh when he has a king-size boner in his pants, but something shifts in his expression. And he laughs, too.

Something exhilarating and terrifying moves in the air between us, but I don't have time to wonder what it could be, because Faith speaks again. "Right. Well, Ma saw you two come back here. I can only assume you've finally shagged each other rotten."

Shane abruptly stops laughing.

"Another group has come in, and we need you back behind the bar, Shane, if you don't mind zipping it up for a spell."

The sound of rusty hinges reaches the stock room, telling us Faith has gone back out into the pub. For a long moment, Shane only stares at me. "Did she just say—"

"Yup."

He pushes a hand through his hair, leaving the side standing on end. "Jesus, living with family is going to be the death of me."

"Not racing cars?"

I don't know why I say it. Scratch that, I know exactly why. We just shared something, and I need to put things back on even footing. I'm leaving Dublin, and he's going back to racing. We are a diversion. I needed to remind myself of that fact out loud.

Laughing without cause, I jump off the fridge and begin replacing my clothes as quickly as possible. I assume Shane has left the room and I'm trying to ignore the twisting in my chest when I feel his fingers lift my chin.

He studies my face. "Maybe you'll be the death of me."

Shane doesn't wait for my response, but drops his hand to his side and walks out. I don't move for a long time.

Chapter Twelve

"I can't believe it. Dead, he is?" Kitty wails. "Who's going to make the cod and chips now?"

I'm halfway down the stairs the next day when Kitty's question reaches me, slowing me to a stop. I let my laundry plop down on the stair I'm standing on. It's eight o'clock in the morning, the latest I've slept since arriving in Dublin. A horrifying fact. I suspect the only reason I didn't wake up earlier is because Kitty didn't knock on my door with ice-cold tea and charred toast. Oddly, I kind of missed the damn wake-up call. Now it seems like there might be a reason besides Kitty's scatterbrain.

"We'll manage." It's Shane's deep voice, rolling up the stairs like smoke to reach me. Something hot and sticky invades my belly, in a way that demands I press a hand to the area above my zipper. Having no choice, I'm wearing the same jeans as yesterday, although I've tucked my Chicago PD sleep shirt into them so no skin is showing. I've thrown a jacket on over everything, even though it looks to be another day of great weather. Laundry must be done today, or I'll be forced to walk around Dublin naked.

"How can I manage when people keep keeling over and dying on me?" Kitty's voice has reached a hysterical pitch. I hear a chair scraping back and Faith speaking in a

calming tone, but it doesn't seem to be having much effect. "First your father, now Martin. He made such a lovely cod and chips, Martin did. It's an absolute shame. I'd hoped to have it for my lunch today."

Ah. The cook died. I guess I waited too long to try the cod after all. Not wanting to get in the middle of a family discussion, especially one involving the mourning of a friend, I turn with the intention of going back to my room, but my boot catches on the laundry bag, sending it hurtling down the stairs. It's louder than it should be thanks to the rickety railing and dead spots in the wood. I cringe when conversation ceases below me.

Just when I'd forgotten my luck is f**ked.

"The American must be up." Another chair scraping along the wooden floor. "You better let me be the one to tell her about our Martin."

"Her name is Willa, Ma," Faith says. "And she doesn't know Martin from a hole in the ground."

"She'll read about it in the papers, I suspect," Kitty continues as if Faith hadn't spoken. "Better to get it out of the way now."

I'm still frozen on the steps, as if they might forget about the falling laundry bag and go back to their conversation. Or chalk it up to another guest. With a frown, I eyeball the row of doors above me. I'm starting to wonder if I'm the only guest at the Claymore Inn.

"Willa," Shane calls. "We know you're there."

I heave a sigh and make my way down to the empty pub. Kitty is standing closest to me with her hands behind her back, chin raised toward the ceiling. She looks like a

military commander getting ready to address the troops. When I feel a tingle in my spine, my gaze immediately seeks out Shane, the tingle graduating to a full-body flush. Looking fresh from the shower, he's leaning back in a chair like a lazy tiger, one booted foot propped on his knee. We nod at each other. Faith snorts.

"Bad news, American," Kitty starts.

I wait, doing my best to look solemn.

Her brow furrows. "Damn, it's gone and slipped through the cracks."

Faith gets up from her sprawled position on the booth and lays a comforting hand on her mother's arm. "It's fine, Ma." She transfers her attention to me. "Martin, our cook, died."

"He was more than a cook, really. His cod and chips was a work of art." Kitty's frail hand presses to her breast. "Tell me how he died again, Shane."

Shane shifts in his chair, uncrossing his legs and leaning forward. When he speaks, he's addressing Kitty, but looking at me. The shadow passing over his face makes something hard stick in my throat. "In his sleep, Kitty. No pain."

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His final words sound offhanded, but they seem to clear most of the fear from Kitty's face, telling me he'd said them for a reason. Her body deflates a little. "Poor old Martin. A lovely man, he was. He even tried to kiss me once."

Faith nose wrinkles. "What?"

"It's not what you think. He didn't have his glasses on." She stares off into the distance, looking very dramatic. "He thought I was his wife, Lorraine, come to collect him. Still and all, it was quite a nice kiss." Her hands begin to rummage in her pockets. "Has someone called over to tell Lorraine her Martin is dead?"

"I suspect she has an inkling, since she woke up next to him," Shane deadpans.

Kitty pulls a piece of toast from her apron and offers it to me. When I shake my head, she starts to nibble on it. "Who's going to make the cod and chips, then? Martin always brought it in fresh from Beshoffs in Howth. Beautiful, it was."

"Not to worry," Faith assures her with a brisk nod. "I'll figure it out, Ma. There's a fish market not far from here—"

"No." Kitty shakes her head. "It has to be Beshoffs. Our customers expect a certain quality. We can't just change the fish. What will people say?"

"Beshoffs is twice the distance." Shane stands. "Neither one of us has time to take you. I have to set up the pub. It's still a wreck from last night."

"And if I'm going to run the kitchen today, I need to start prepping."

“I don’t need to be taken anywhere,” Kitty scoffs, but I notice her hand is shaking. When she begins to untie her apron, Shane and Faith exchange an uneasy glance. Something is happening under the surface here. More than the obvious. I can’t put a finger on what it might be, but two things are certain. One, Kitty can’t go out into the city by herself, using public transportation no less. Two, she’s determined as hell to go.

I look around at the pub, noting Shane is right. Bottle caps, dirty napkins, and—is that a blond hair extension?—litter the barroom floor. Empty glasses and bottles are stacked in bus trays on the bar. All the liquor bottles behind the bar are practically empty. They’ll have their work cut out for them to get the bar ready by eleven when the doors open.

This is when I should say, “sorry for your loss,” and beat feet to the Laundromat. By befriending Faith and helping out behind the bar last night, I’ve already become too much of a fixture with this family. Every time I glimpse a little more of their behind-the-scenes issues, my resolve to stay away slips a little more. My family issues might have been vastly different, but I still get them. Truth is, I like Kitty and I don’t want her to do something reckless. The stress on Faith’s face—and okay, Shane’s—makes my decision for me. I eye my bag of laundry wistfully. Apparently basic hygiene is taking a backseat to my conscience.

“I’ll take her,” I say. Shane’s eyebrows shoot up and I shrug. “I’ve been meaning to check out Howth anyway. I hear it’s a good picture spot.”

Kitty claps her hands together. “Grand.” Again, I get the feeling she’s putting on a brave face. It seems like the trip to Beshoffs has completely removed Martin’s death from her mind, given her something new to focus on.

“Are you sure?” Faith appears to be trying to communicate something to me with her eyes, but I’m not computing. What do these people want from me? It’s eight in the

morning, and this heap of bricks doesn't even have a coffeemaker. "You don't have to do this, Willa."

"I'm sure," I say slowly, trying my best to make light of the situation. Honestly, you'd think somebody had died. "It'll be my little apology to Martin for never trying his cod and chips." Wanting to escape Shane and Faith's scrutiny, I hook my arm through Kitty's. "Let's pilgrimage in Martin's memory, shall we?"

Her face falls. "Martin is dead?"

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Kitty reaches over and clutches my hand as the bus begins to move. My first reaction is to yank it away, because it feels so unnatural. But damn if she's not squeezing my fingers so tight, I couldn't extricate my hand if I tried. Her eyes are wide as silver dollars, staring straight out the front windshield of the double-decker bus. With her other hand, she worries rosary beads in her lap, lips moving in her second Hail Mary.

I'm not alarmed yet, but now that I've woken up a little, I'm starting to realize Faith had a good reason for giving me an out back at the pub. Kitty travels about as well as potato salad. She looks terrified. Saying a quick prayer she doesn't forget who I am or why we're on a bus, I rack my brain for something to distract her, but small talk isn't exactly my strong suit.

"My sister just had a baby."

Kitty looks at me blankly. "What?"

"As of a Monday morning, I'm an aunt." Trying to hold a casual conversation while holding a near stranger's hand is harder than it sounds. "Her name is Dolly."

“After Dolly Parton?”

I laugh in surprise, appreciating how she phrased the question. As if it were a reasonable assumption. “Yes. I need to buy a gift for her while I’m here. Any ideas?”

“Everyone needs a tea service.”

“She might be a little young for tea.”

“You’re never too young for tea.” I notice her fingers have slowed their furious rubbing of the rosary beads. “Shane and Faith both drank it straight from their bottles, they did. Of course, I had to let it cool first.”

“Sure.” Fleetinglly, I wonder if it’s the reason Kitty continues to serve cold tea. The bus takes a bumpy turn and she gasps, grasping my hand so hard, I bite my bottom lip. “Maybe I’ll try that—”

“Now my husband liked his tea scalding hot, with only a single drop of milk and no sugar. Piping hot.” Her words are very precise. “I could never figure out how he didn’t burn his tongue. He didn’t even blow on it. Sometimes I would just sit and watch him read the paper, sipping his tea. Made of ice. Just made of ice.”

She seems to have gone off to a faraway place, her eyes slightly glazed. Since her grip on my hand has loosened, I don’t say anything. I should change the subject, too, but I don’t do that either. As much as I try not to be, I’m interested in finding out more about Mr. Claymore. This man Faith accused Shane of becoming.

“He didn’t mean it,” she murmurs. “He never meant it.”

“Meant what?”

She jolts a little in her seat. “When he said he didn’t like my tea, he didn’t mean it.”

“Oh.”

“Or when he made my son leave.” Her fingers begin to work the rosary beads again. “He didn’t mean it. Deep down, he wanted him to stay. I truly believe that.”

I swallow hard, thinking of Shane’s face the night he argued with Faith. “I’m sure he did, too, Kitty.”

“No, he didn’t.”

“Okay.” I squeeze her hand, fighting the sudden urge to cry. “Okay.”

We don’t talk the rest of the way to Howth, but Kitty is noticeably less stressed. She’s actually kind of subdued, but after what she revealed about Shane and his father, I am, too. When we arrive in Howth and walk the short distance to Beshoffs, I’m surprised to find a small indoor market, selling not only food, but serving coffee. The smell makes me think I’ve died and gone to Chicago. Keeping a close eye on Kitty as she reads her handwritten list to the fishmonger, I order a large cup and doctor it with cream and sugar.

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The first sip is orgasmic. That gem of a thought leads me to memories of Shane and what happened in the stock room last night. Underneath my clothes, goose bumps raise along every inch of my skin. My cheeks feel burning hot. Clearly, my body is sending the signal that it wants more. Before last night, I'd been full of pent-up sexual tension, but somehow the releasing of it hasn't lessened this twisty hankering for Shane. If anything, it has only grown in intensity. I think of his hand sliding down the front of my underwear, him licking my belly before going lower, the size of him in my hand.

Shit. I'm starting to wish this coffee was ice water so I could dump it over my head. At this rate, it's only a matter of time before me and Shane have sex. Crazy, loud, sweaty, dirty...no-strings-attached sex. That's all it would be. Just two people scratching an itch. A really itchy itch. No entanglements.

My problem with those rules is they are doing little to comfort me. I don't know what that means, but it adds a layer of anxiety to the restless need for more. My coffee cup pauses halfway to my mouth when I realize I haven't thought of Evan once this entire morning. The realization washes over me, more effective than dousing myself in ice water. I came here to get over Evan, to resuscitate myself, but I never expected it to happen so soon. Is it Shane? Is he speeding along this whole unfamiliar process? If so, that's definitely not going to fly. I didn't come here to become consumed with another guy, even temporarily.

I've never performed this circus act of separating physical attraction from emotional connection. How do I know if I'm doing it right? In two weeks' time, when I board the plane back to Chicago, I can't be in worse shape than when I arrived. On top of losing Evan, I can't be confused over whatever feelings seem to be evolving for

Shane. I can't let it happen.

The trouble with that, of course, is that I want to rip Shane's pants off.

"All set, then," Kitty says, entering my line of vision. Excellent timing, since now I can do nothing but envision her son in his birthday suit. "I think I have everything we need."

I glance down and see Kitty is holding a giant bag of red apples. "What about the fish?"

"Fish?"

Over the Kitty's shoulder, the fishmonger catches my eye, holding up Kitty's order in his hand, wrapped in white wax paper, telling me she must have made the order and wandered off before it could be completed. Making sure to keep an eye on Kitty, I dig my wallet out of my messenger bag and pay the man. When I walk back over, she is watching me closely.

"Martin usually picks up the fish."

"He's sick today," I explain, certain whoever is listening and judging me will forgive that one tiny lie. Kitty holds out her hand and after a beat, I take it and walk back toward the bus.

"Did I ever tell you Martin kissed me once?"

"No," I lie again. It's a slippery slope. "How was it?"

"Lovely."

Chapter Thirteen

Kitty and I finally reach the Claymore Inn after she has counted each of her footsteps between the bus stop and the front door. Out loud. It's still only ten o'clock, so the bar hasn't opened, but I find it odd when Kitty has to knock to be let inside. The fact that one needs keys at all to be let inside during nonbusiness hours confirms my suspicion that I'm the only guest staying at the inn. It's a good thing I never pulled an all-nighter, or I would have been stuck outside in the rain, shit out of luck.

Still, Kitty lives here year-round. "Why don't you have keys?"

She starts to answer but Shane yanks open the door, cutting her off and making me jump. His hair is a disaster, pointing a hundred different directions. There is a wrinkle between his eyebrows that isn't normally there. He looks between me and Kitty like he can't quite believe we're standing there. Faith rushes up behind him and gives us the same look, before covering her mouth, barely smothering a delighted laugh. I glance over at Kitty to ask her what's going on with her offspring, but when I notice the tears pouring down her cheeks, I'm silenced.

"I did it." She claps her hands together, then throws herself into Shane's arms. Laughing through her tears, Faith tries to wrap them both in an embrace, but she ends up simply burying her face between their shoulders. "I bloody did it."

For a moment, Shane still appears stunned, but his body finally relaxes and he begins patting Kitty's back. "Well done, Kitty."

She pulls back suddenly, nearly toppling them all to the ground. In her hand, she holds up the bag of apples like a fisherman holds up a giant sea bass. "I got apples. I reckon I'll bake a pie. I don't know yet, since I've only started thinking about it."

Faith is still wiping tears from her cheeks. "I'll help you."

“Grand.” She giggles like a girl half her age. “That’s grand.”

I’ve been watching this scene play out with a mixture of awe and confusion. The magnitude of what is taking place and why might be lost on me, but the impact of their unexpected happiness is not. Faith’s eyes are luminous, cheeks flushed with excitement. Shane looks astonished, with a touch of pride struggling to get out. And Kitty, well...she looks like George Clooney just walked in and proposed. It’s a moment I wouldn’t even feel comfortable photographing, because it should just exist in this sliver of time, for this family, never to be shared by anyone. Including me. Beginning to feel like a major interloper, I put my head down and bypass them into the pub.

I’m halfway up the staircase when I hear footsteps behind me. “Willa.”

God, Shane never lets me have my damn exit. That should irritate me way more than it does. I don’t pause in my journey up the stairs. “I really have to do laundry.”

“Your laundry is almost done.”

“What?” I whirl around on the top step. “Tell me you didn’t do my laundry.”

“I don’t have a death wish,” he says. “Faith did it. We have machines in the cellar. You can use those next time, instead of finding a launderette.”

“Oh.” This is my chance to redraw the battle lines. I’m surprised to find how reluctant I am to do it, but I don’t have a choice. He’s taking up too much space in my head. “Thank you, but there won’t be a next time. I have enough clothes to last the next week and a half.”

At the blunt reminder that I’m leaving, something flickers in his expression before it disappears. “The offer is there nonetheless.”

I nod, then turn to keep walking. When my fingers close around my doorknob, his hand fits over mine to keep it from turning. I didn't even hear him move. His silent speed paired with the simple touch of our hands sends a wave of anticipation rolling in my belly. Determinedly, I fight it. I feel like a battle is being waged inside me, between my attraction to Shane and the scarier, unwanted feelings creeping in. It's no mystery that I will lose the physical battle, but I'm trying to win the overall war. Holding out as long as possible is my only hope. I'm afraid I won't be able to separate the two, so I'm hoping to limit the fallout. Damage control in reverse.

"Thank you. What you did for Kitty..."

Taking a deep breath, I school my features and turn to face him. God, he really is severely beautiful. Having all that quiet intensity up close and focused on me is daunting, but I'm also beginning to crave it. Trapped in his line of sight is quickly becoming my favorite place. Not good. "You got me in touch with my sister in the hospital. Consider us even."

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“You didn’t do it to repay a favor.”

He says it with such certainty, I know protesting won’t change his mind. “You think you know me so well?”

“I’m beginning to.” He crosses his arms over his chest. “Willa, Kitty hasn’t left the inn since my father passed away. This morning was her first time outside in six months.”

For a moment, all I can do is stare. “Six months?”

Shane nods. “Even when my father was alive, he didn’t like her going out much. Didn’t give her the chance.” His gaze holds mine. “I know you well enough to see you’re about to make light of it, being the one to bring her out. I won’t let you.”

“I wasn’t.” I totally was. “She was very brave. That’s what I was going to say.”

He tilts his head. “No incidents along the way?”

I shrug. “She may have tried to pay the bus driver in apples.”

“It might have been an accepted form of payment the last time she rode the bus.”

We share a quiet laugh. Oh sweet Jesus, he’s funny, too? Up until now, any humor directed at me has been sarcastic or insulting. His laugh is rich and deep, reminding me of the coffee I’d drank that morning at Beshoffs and where my orgasmic coffee thoughts had led. Shane’s shoulders flexing against the backs of my knees, his

stubble scraping my thighs. I feel my cheeks burning, my eyelids getting heavy. Shane notices and interprets what I can't see, can only feel. I know this by the barely audible groan in his throat.

He takes a step forward. With a massive case of reluctance, I back up against my door so hard, it shakes on its hinges. A single one of his eyebrows raises, but he doesn't stop moving closer. One of his warm hands rises to cup my cheek. "We're back to that, are we?"

I don't have an explanation. What can I possibly say? I think I'm starting to feel more than healthy lust when I'm around you. It's too soon after Evan. We're both leaving. Stop making me laugh, you dick. These are the scattershot thoughts pinging around in my brain, but I'm mostly thinking them to distract myself from Shane's descending lips. To remind myself why we're not about stolen kisses in the hallway and quiet laughs.

"Kitty told me about what happened with your father."

Shane goes eerily still. I watch as every ounce of heat evaporates from his blue gaze. The hand on my cheek drops to his side and I miss having it there immediately. Self-hatred is a living thing clawing at my throat. I wish I could take back the words. My self-preservation wasn't worth the haunted look I've put in his eyes. "What exactly did she tell you?"

"Nothing."

"Willa," he growls.

My heart is pounding so loud I'm surprised he can't hear it. "He kicked you out."

His attention is fixed on a spot above my head. "That's all?"

“There’s more?”

He laughs and the dark quality of it is so different from his earlier one, I wince. The Shane that followed me up the stairs to say thank you is gone. And I banished him. “Here’s what I’d like to know. What was your intention in bringing it up that way?”

I do my best not to betray anything on my face, but I see a glimmer of recognition on Shane’s nonetheless.

“If that’s what you do when someone gets too close, I can see why things didn’t work out with your ex-boyfriend.”

The oxygen is sucked from my lungs. I think I actually gasp for air, but I can’t hear over the rushing in my ears. He’s 100 percent right, of course. That’s why it hurts so bad. The nature of my doomed relationship with Evan is vastly different from what’s going on between me and Shane, but the principal is the same. I can’t let anyone in. I’m broken. So I do what any self-hating coward does when they’re on the ground getting kicked. I lash out.

My face is inches away from his. Neither one of us looks capable of backing down. “What are you more upset about? Me bringing up a touchy subject, or the fact that I’m not already on my knees returning the favor from last night? Is that what you were expecting?” I fling my arms out wide. “Sorry to disappoint.”

His jaw tightens. “I bet that works with everyone else. Spouting a bunch of bullshit to change the subject.” He grips my upper arms. “It won’t work with me.”

“There’s nothing to talk about.”

“We both know that’s a f**king lie.” He drags me up against him. “Last night you wanted me so bad you were shaking. What. Changed?”

“You.” The word explodes from my mouth. “I liked it better when you wanted me gone. At least I knew what to expect. At least I knew it wouldn’t matter when I left.”

“It matters now.” His voice is whip sharp, but the punishing grip on my arms is loosening. He’s searching my face for something and I have no idea what. “Is that what you’re saying to me?”

“No,” I whisper the lie, knowing full well what I’d just revealed. That I’m scared of getting too close when there’s an expiration date. That I’ve developed feelings for him. He’s too astute to have missed the significance. “It wouldn’t matter, anyway. I’m the girl who hurts people to keep them away. Congratulations, you just saw it live and in color.”

“You didn’t like bringing up my father. I could see that.” His thumb starts moving in soothing circles against my arm. “Same way I didn’t like bringing up your ex-boyfriend.”

I want nothing more than to lay my head down on Shane’s shoulder and let him tell me I’m not a world-class f**kup. He actually seems to believe what he’s saying. Too bad I don’t.

“You can’t fix me with a few magic words.”

“Willa.” He shakes his head. “There’s nothing to fix.”

When all I can do is stare, he plants a soft kiss on my forehead. Then he lets go of me and returns downstairs, leaving me watching him from the top of the landing.

Chapter Fourteen

The following day I avoid the Claymore Inn like the black plague. I’m dressed in my

freshly laundered jeans and out the front door before Kitty even knocks on my door to serve tea. Yesterday, I'd inadvertently let Shane know that this thing between us isn't quite as cut-and-dried as I'd planned. He'd hit me in my weak spot, bringing up Evan, and I'd been vulnerable afterward, or I never would have revealed such a weakness. Since I had, I wanted to put off any contact with Shane. Otherwise, I would see one of two expressions on his face.

Pity being the first one. It's likely that Shane has zero problem having a purely physical relationship with me. I'm actually kind of a jackpot for him. I'm geographically convenient, since we're currently living under the same roof. Plus, my imminent departure guarantees that he won't have to suffer through a where-is-this-relationship-headed talk. Cha-ching. I'd rather walk around Dublin in a chicken costume than have that talk, too, but after what I said yesterday, he knows my detachment is an act. His, however, is not. If I see an ounce of pity on his face because of that, I swear I'll expire of mortification.

The second option is far less likely. Shane might not pity me. He might feel the same way. This reaction is far more dangerous than option one, because I wouldn't be able to stay away. He would suck me in like a vacuum cleaner, and I wouldn't come up for oxygen until I have to pack for Chicago. A mere nine days from now. It would be emotional suicide.

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Honestly, I'm not even sure these feelings are genuine, or just an illusion I've created to get over Evan. It's possible I'm just fragile after our breakup and my fascination with Shane is a coping mechanism. I never thought I'd be the type of girl who could develop feelings for another guy so quickly. It's fickle. A trait I've never equated with myself.

With a heaved sigh, I lean against a wooden piling at the end of the pier I'm standing on. Since I didn't get much of a chance to take photographs yesterday while I was with Kitty, I'd come back to Howth this afternoon to remedy that.

Sitting on the north side of Dublin Bay, Howth overlooks a busy harbor, fishing and tourism boats passing each other through the narrow inlet. Students and families carry bags from Beshoffs full of fish and chips, plunking down on the pier to eat their late lunch. It's another unusually warm day, and I've been told by several store owners that I should count myself lucky to witness such a long stretch without rain. I lift my face up to the sun, enjoying the weight of my camera in my hand, trying to think of nothing else.

Instead, I see Shane, as if his image has been stitched on the back of my eyelids. His relief at seeing his mother yesterday, the sound of his laugh, the feel of his hands. This can't be a coping mechanism, because it's doing nothing to help me. I might be thinking of Evan less, but those gaps are being filled by Shane in an altogether different way. When I think of Evan, I think of purple flowers. Irises. He was the first boy to ever present me with flowers, and that moment is imprinted on my subconscious. I think of hand-holding and lying on a flannel blanket in the Millennium Park. Playing Frisbee. Eating Italian ices.

I think of trying too hard, of forcing a smile onto my face. I think of failure. Regret.

Pushing aside those troubling thoughts, I let myself think of Shane. On cue, my pulse trips over itself, then grows loud enough to hear over the waves lapping against the side of the pier. I try to picture him on a blanket in Millennium Park, except instead of playing Sudoku like Evan used to do, his hand is tracing lazy circles around my belly button. He's letting the Italian ice drip a little onto my skin, then licking it off slowly. He's looking at me like he knows exactly what I'm thinking, instead of giving me that look I used to dread. The one that's trying to puzzle me out.

Quickly, I raise my camera and discreetly snap an elderly couple watching their granddaughter toddling along the pier, holding her father's hand. They look fierce in their pride, as if they share a heart and mind. Turning before they can catch me watching them, I snap two fisherman that sound like they're arguing over a soccer match. At the end of their argument, however, they slap one another on the back and part ways with an, "I'll see ya 'round, mate."

Laughing softly, I sit down on the edge of the pier and let my feet dangle. It's dark before I know it, all the boats returning to the harbor for the night. Yet I'm no closer to a solution for my Shane problem, I'm out of film, and I'm starving. I stand and dust off the back of my jeans, wondering where I can go next to avoid the Claymore.

My cowardice floods me with self-disgust. Why am I avoiding the inn at all? Taking a deep breath, I think of how Ginger would handle this situation. She would saunter in there, Southern attitude in every single step, and wink at the guy giving her trouble. Then she'd continue on right up the stairs without a backward glance, secure in the knowledge that he'd be staring after her.

I store my camera inside my messenger bag and walk back toward the bus stop, with twice as much determination as when I'd disembarked in Howth.

...

When I walk in the Claymore, it's eerily silent. Shane isn't standing behind the bar, where he would typically be at this hour. Orla is tapping a pen against a pint glass, staring nervously at the back hallway door. The few customers scattered around the bar appear subdued, watching the televisions but not really seeing them. My first thought is, oh no, something happened to Kitty. It feels like someone is stepping on my throat at the possibility, but I manage to walk to the bar and casually ask Orla what's going on. I've never actually spoken to the perpetually late redhead, apart from an odd hello once in a while, but she answers me now without hesitation.

"Shane is in the office, talking to a man who walked straight in off the bleedin' street. Brought his solicitor and everything." She lowers her voice to a whisper. "They come to talk about buying the inn. They didn't even have an appointment. It's cheeky, if you ask me."

"Cheeky," I repeat softly. When I first walked into the Claymore with my suitcase, the thought of selling it was repellant. Now, it feels like a sacrilege. This is a home. A place to be proud of. It has character and memories. Good and bad, yes, but their memories. How could you walk away from something like this? On top of these rapid-fire thoughts, I'm keenly aware that this puts Shane one step closer to leaving Dublin. Back to racing and traveling around the world.

This is good. Knowing his time here has a specific deadline is good. It'll make it easier to get on the plane, knowing he's not standing behind the bar in the same place I left him, while I move farther and farther away.

Jesus, I'm turning into a really good liar.

"From New York, the bloke is. Not even Irish." She lays a hand on my arm. "Nothing against your lot, it's just that an American will ruin it straightaway. Put up a bunch of

flat-screens on the walls and show American football on them. They'll definitely want someone behind the bar with decent tits." She pokes the side of her right boob. "These sad, old dangles won't stand a chance."

"You...they're fine," I stammer. Honestly, this is our first conversation and we're already discussing her rack. "My bra is padded enough to double as a flotation device."

Orla's face clears of worry as she laughs. "Ah, I get it now. Why our Shane has the wee eye for ya."

"The wee what?"

"He's been jumpier than a bag of cats since you arrived. I doubt it's a coincidence."

"Maybe I give him indigestion?"

Orla leans forward on the bar, as if imparting a great secret. "Irish men are a complicated sort. That one more than most. Don't judge by what you see on the surface, or they'll knock you on your arse when you're not looking."

I stow that insight away for later examination. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Shoot."

"Why doesn't he fire you? You're never on time." When she bursts out laughing, I can't contain my own smile. "I know from experience he doesn't take anyone's shit, so why—"

"Does he continue to employ me?" Orla sighs. "My husband lost the use of his legs in a factory accident last year. It's been a difficult adjustment. When I'm late to work,

it's normally because I'm hauling him to physical therapy and back." She shrugs. "Or we've simply had a bad morning."

I'm staggered by this. Not only Shane's generosity toward Orla, which he's never uttered a word about, but it proves he cares about this pub and the people who work in it. He's not as indifferent about the Claymore Inn as he presents to the world.

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Orla is watching me process this, I realize. A customer walks into the bar, drawing Orla away, but before she goes to serve him, she taps a finger to her temple. “Irish men.”

Her words ringing in my head, I turn to leave, intending to take a hot shower and attempt sleep. Before I reach the door, Shane walks out with two men in suits. His blue eyes lock on me immediately, the somberness in them tugging at my heart. He opens his mouth to say something, to me, I think, when the kitchen door bursts open and Faith walks out. She’s holding a giant, silver ladle in her hand, her hair pulled back in a messy bun.

“Have you sold it, then?”

Behind me, the pub goes silent. It even sounds like the volume of the music has been turned down. Several chairs scrape back and without turning around, I know the regulars at the bar are watching with avid interest. Shane nods to a young, blond man holding a suitcase. “Faith, this is Joseph DeMatteo and his—”

“An Italian,” Orla shouts from the bar. “Running an Irish pub? Has the entire world gone mad?”

Shane pinches the bridge of his nose. “We’ve a week to decide if we want to accept the offer, Faith. We’ll discuss it later.”

“What’s to discuss? We all know what your decision is going to be.” She throws the ladle down on the ground with a clatter, remnants of soup splattering her shoes. “You hate it here. You always have. We might as well start packing, Ma and I.”

“Faith, this isn’t the place.”

“What is the place, if not here?” She swipes a hand over her eyes. “This is the only place I know.”

Both suited men shift in their loafers, clearly uncomfortable with the family drama playing out around them, although I sense a hint of satisfaction over Faith’s words. They obviously hadn’t been sure up until this point of Shane’s decision, something I find odd. I’d been so sure that the second an offer was made on the inn, he would be laughing his way out the front door.

Shane makes eye contact with me, and I know what he’s asking. He doesn’t even have to say it out loud. I give him a subtle nod, then walk over to Faith, putting an arm around her shoulders. “Why don’t we go upstairs? I’ll show you the pictures I took today.”

“Oh, that’s grand. You two are working together now.” She yanks herself away from me. “I’m not Kitty. I don’t need a babysitter. Piss off.”

Okay, after talking to her like a petulant child, I guess I deserve that. It was a move worthy of an inept boyfriend, the equivalent of telling a woman to, “Calm down.” Since I have only a passing knowledge of how to comfort someone, though, I cut myself a tiny bit of slack. I change tactics, hoping to appeal to the pride she takes in good service, the running of the pub. All the while, I’m battling the painful squeeze in my stomach over the tears brimming in her eyes. “You making a scene isn’t going to change anything, Faith,” I whisper. “It’s only going to give people something to talk about.”

She seems to snap back to herself, then, attention landing on what I suspect are rapt customers, observing the scene with interest. With a frustrated sob, she pushes off me and runs through the hallway door. Shane starts to follow her, but I put a hand on his

arm.

“I’ll go.”

His eyes are on Faith’s retreating back. “Thank you.”

I’ve never been inside Faith’s room, nor do I know which one it is, but I see a door slam just beyond the base of the stairs. I pause outside for a moment, take a deep breath, then push inside. Faith is lying facedown on the bed, face buried in a pillow. Surprisingly, she’s not crying. Her body is completely still. From a tightening in her shoulders, though, I know she’s aware that I’ve entered. It takes her a moment to sit up and face me.

“I hate him.”

My first inclination is to say, “No, you don’t,” but I stay silent. Faith doesn’t have the capacity to hate anyone, especially her brother. I know that, but telling a female how she feels, right on the heels of asking her to calm down, might get me stabbed with the letter opener I see on her bedside table.

“This place, it represents our da to him. That’s why he can’t stand it here. Can’t stand to remember what it was like.” She swipes a hand under her nose. “They couldn’t even be in the same room, the two of them. Then what happened six months ago—”

Quickly, I cut her off. “What was it like? With the two of them here?” It’s not that I don’t want to know what happened six months ago. I do. It’s that I sense it’s the piece of the puzzle I’ve been missing and I want Shane to be the one to tell me. What sense does that make?

Faith yanks the rubber band from her hair, letting her dark mane fall around her shoulders, a kink in the middle where the rubber band held it together all afternoon in

the kitchen. I notice the slump of her shoulders, the dark circles around her eyes and I'm slammed with guilt. All day I've been feeling sorry for myself when Faith is about to lose everything she has ever known. I'm a horrible friend. I don't even know how to be a friend.

"We couldn't do anything right. None of us." She blows out a breath. "But Shane got it worst of all, being the son. If I ever did something right, it came as a shock to my father. Shane's mistakes were unacceptable. When he was younger, he tried harder. Wanted to do better. He worked himself to the bone. It was never good enough. Nothing was ever good enough." A sob works its way free of her mouth. "I take it back. I don't hate my brother."

The image of a young man, eager to impress his father and failing, prevents a smile from forming on my face over Faith's confession. Instead of making me sad, it makes me livid. It makes me wonder where some parents, mine included, get off on being so shitty.

"Shane got older and the fighting started. He started driving to Kildare on his day off, working with a racing trainer. Took every bit of his pay to afford it." Faith shrugs. "My father demanded he quit. He threatened to kick Shane out so many times...one morning we woke up and he was just...gone."

"I'm sorry." I don't know what else to say. Part of me understands Shane's actions completely. He broke up with his family before they could break up with him. It's something I might do in the same situation. To save myself the pain from the final blow of being kicked out.

"God, part of me envies Shane," Faith continues. "He wanted to race. Always did. So he went out and bloody did it. I never had the guts to stand up to him. When I leave the inn, I still hear my da in the back of my head telling me to get back to work."

“But you do it anyway.” My voice feels rusty, so I clear my throat. “You’re the girl who conned me into going to O’Kelly’s. You brought me to see the street performers in the park. Those are the two best days I’ve ever had. You did that for me. I never would have done it on my own.” As I say the words, I realize they’re true.

She stares, wide-eyed. “Really?”

I suddenly feel the need to convince her how irrepressible her spirit is, even if she can’t see it for herself. It’s important to me that when I leave this room, she looks less defeated than when I arrived. It’s a lofty goal since my usual advice would be to rub some dirt on it. “Yeah, Faith. Really.” I fidget with the drawstring of my hoodie. “You’re the bravest of all. You’re the one who stuck. The one who busts her ass making this place run. And you do it with a smile on your face. I could never do that. I would have ran.”

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Her lower lip starts to tremble and I check the urge to back through the door. “Thank you, Willa.” She stands and in two steps, she’s thrown her arms around me. Slowly, I put my arms around her, too. “You’re wrong, though. You like to think you’d run, but you wouldn’t. You’re a sticker, same as me.”

I look at the ceiling to prevent the damnable moisture in my eyes from leaking out. I need to get out of here, so I can find something to take my mind off what she’s telling me. With one final, awkward pat of her back, I pull away. “All right, well...”

She laughs, and I feel a flash of triumph. I’ve managed to repair some of the damage and it’s way more rewarding than I would have expected. “Go on, Willa. You’re off the hook for tonight.”

“Good night, Faith.”

I turn and walk out of her bedroom into the darkness. Right into Shane.

Chapter Fifteen

Shane and I are standing toe to toe at the bottom of the staircase. For the life of me, I can’t read his expression. It’s like a mixture of grief and gratitude, so palpable I’m momentarily frozen. It clues me in that he overheard most of what his sister and I talked about, but I don’t want to take the time to analyze that just yet. After the scene with Faith, I’ve reached my emotional quota for the night. I give myself an internal shake and bypass him, heading up the stairs. I need to get to my room. Just need to breathe a little.

Of course, he follows me, our boots stomping on the hollow-sounding staircase. I don't know what's going to happen when we reach my room, but I know it's probably not a good idea having him there when I'm in such desperate need for an outlet. My nerve endings snap with each punctuated step behind me, everything I've been feeling all day bubbling to the surface, ready to spill over.

I flip the light switch and walk inside, not bothering to close the door. Shane walks in and does it for me. I drag my messenger bag over my head and drop it on the bed. My jacket comes next. I'm actually surprised when I don't feel Shane come up behind me right away. In fact, when I don't feel him, I realize how badly I need him to touch me. A moment ago, he looked as lost as me and I thought he'd been following me, hoping to block everything else out for a while.

Instead, I turn around and find him staring at the walls of my room, a stunned look on his face. With a frown, I follow his line of vision. Photographs everywhere. I forgot that I'd hung them last night, when I couldn't sleep. It's a habit of mine, hanging my pictures and falling asleep with strangers surrounding me, their expressive faces reminding me what's possible in the world. It's a comfort I'd been missing since arriving in Dublin, so I'd gone yesterday afternoon and gotten a few rolls of film developed. I'd been so anxious to leave this morning, I hadn't bothered taking them down.

As Shane circles the room, pausing to look at each shot, I struggle not to ask what he thinks. It's something I never have to ask. I'm usually secure in the knowledge that I take good photographs, but he's been silent so long I'm beginning to worry. He lingers at one picture longer than the others, featuring a young girl with a unicorn painted on her cheek, laughing in delight at the buskers she'd been watching perform on stage. It's one of my favorites, too. There's no reservation or self-awareness on her face, just pure joy. She's laughing like no one is watching, a feat I seriously envy.

I bury the panic when he comes across the picture of him. The one I took the first

afternoon we met, when he was leaning up against the inn as my cab arrived, looking like a thundercloud ready to storm. Somehow I know it will be among the shots I submit to Shutterclick Magazine to define my trip to Dublin. He has defined it, no matter how hard I fought against him. He's reshaped the whole experience from what it might have been.

Shane stares at the shot of himself a moment, then looks back at me. Since I don't think he's asking about the use of light and shadow, I only return his look. I took that photograph because I couldn't help it, the same way I can't help what's going on between us. In no way am I capable of voicing either thought.

"You photograph people," Shane finally says. I choose to ignore the hint of disappointment in his voice, the one telling me he wanted an explanation as to why his picture is hanging in front of my bed. "I don't know what I expected. Flowers...landscapes and the like, I suppose. Why people?"

No one has ever asked me that, so I take a moment to think about it. "Because of their expressions. When you find a subject that projects every emotion onto their face, not bothering to hide it... I don't know, it's like an honest moment. People tend to be so aware of themselves and others' perceptions that they control their face at all times. Paste on a bored expression kind of like a shield. But sometimes you find someone that doesn't. Children and old folks are the best subjects. And, as I've found out since arriving in Dublin, drunk people."

He glances at me over his shoulder. "Drunk people?"

"They wear their personal tragedies on their faces, just begging someone to ask them about it." I shrug. "I'm not comfortable asking, so I take pictures. Or mental ones, anyway, since I doubt your customers would appreciate flash photography when they're trying to tie one on."

“My customers?” He moves on to the next picture. “They would probably strike a pose for you. Not a shy one in the bunch.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to remind him they won’t be his customers much longer, to drive a wedge between us before I lose any chance of doing so, but I hold back. Having him in my room, taking his mind off the scene with his sister, feels right. There is a part of me that wants to soothe that expression I’d seen at the bottom of the stairs and it’s much stronger than the knee-jerk reaction to push him away. Infinitely stronger.

“When I was helping you that night behind the bar,” I start, watching his shoulders bunch, obviously remembering where that night had led. “I overheard one death threat, two breakups, and three marriage proposals. All from the same couple.”

Shane’s shoulders relax as laughter rolls through him. I shift on the bed when it reaches me. “You can’t accuse the Irish of being boring.”

“Orla said something similar earlier tonight.” When he turns with one eyebrow raised, I hasten to continue. “Did I ever tell you my sister Ginger was a bartender?”

“No.” He makes a sound in his throat. “That must be why you were halfway decent.”

“Well don’t bowl me over with compliments.”

“I compliment you all the time. You’re just not listening.” While I’m absorbing that, he rummages through a few black-and-white shots sitting on my dresser. “The photograph that won you the contest. Do you have it here?”

I nod once, bending down so I can drag my suitcase from beneath the bed. My neck feels hot, but I can’t tell if it’s from his interested gaze or my nerves over sharing this particular shot. I’d submitted it to the contest through the mail, not actually being

required to show it to anyone in person. The subject matter of the shot was controversial, to say the least. I have no idea how he will judge it. Or me.

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Hesitating the barest of moments, lest Shane notice my anxiety, I draw it out of the plastic portfolio and hand it to him. To keep myself busy while he looks it over, I thumb through the other photos, stopping on one of Derek and Ginger smiling at each other over their coffee mugs. It's a picture that always comforts me.

"Where was this taken?"

Bastard. I can interpret nothing from his tone. Placing the picture I'm holding carefully back into the case, I shift my attention to the one in Shane's hands. "One day last spring, I convinced Derek to take me on a ride-along. It was actually Take Your Daughter to Work Day but I didn't tell him that until after we got back to the station." I laugh to myself, thinking of his baleful expression when I told him. My brother-in-law really is way too easy to mess with. "The day started slow. Then we were called to a homicide in Chinatown. A man had killed his business partner over something trivial, then climbed onto the roof, threatening to jump." I point to the subject of the photograph. Not the main event, never the main event. "This is his wife, leaning out the window trying to talk him out of it."

I remember the day I'd taken the photograph. Derek had commanded that I remain in the car, but I hadn't been able to stop myself from climbing out of the passenger side. Since the man's wife had been speaking in Chinese, I couldn't understand a single word she said, yet she'd had such horrible desperation on her face, I'd somehow known. She'd cried and pled, refusing to listen to any officer intervention from below. Then, just as her husband appeared ready to leap to his death, she'd reached behind her and picked up a sleeping baby, holding him out the window for the man to see. She held the baby so securely, I'd never once considered she meant to do anything but use him as motivation for her husband to remain alive.

That's the picture I'd taken. A desperate woman holding her child out a high-rise window to convince her husband to come back inside. To choose them over the relief of death. The shutter had gone off before I'd registered a conscious thought. Just muscle memory and a need to capture that raw emotion on film. Miraculously, the man had gone back inside immediately after that, carefully inching his way off the ledge toward the window. If he'd jumped, I never would have submitted the photo to the contest. Even so, some people found it horrifying that I would take a picture of something terrible like that, but to me, it's just the opposite. Love can save people's lives. To me, that woman's expression, her words and actions, are goddamn beautiful.

"Did he jump?"

"No."

"I'm not sure what to say." Shane drops down on the bed beside me. "Except they probably should have sent you to a better inn."

My laugh is so unexpected, that for a fleeting second I'm unicorn girl. I don't have the time or the ability to shape the laugh. It just flows out of me, and it feels unbelievable. When Shane simply watches me, like he's finally figured me out, I force it to die down.

His thoughtful eyes are locked on mine, and I can't shake the certainty he knows exactly who he's looking at. I'm not some social experiment or a troubled girl with a smart-ass remark for everything when he looks at me. Even more, I don't feel like one. I want to lean forward and kiss him so bad, it's like a drumming need inside me, but I would dissolve. I'd dissolve under that look and his lips at the same time. His eyes soften in understanding, as if he can read that thought entering and leaving my head.

"Do you want to get out of here?" I ask.

“You read my mind.” He brushes a thumb over my bottom lip. “Grab that camera of yours and meet me out front. I’m going to take you somewhere.”

Chapter Sixteen

When Shane pulls up outside the Claymore Inn, he’s in a different car than the night he picked up Faith and I at O’Kelly’s. This one is candy-apple red, sleek, and low to the ground. A sports car. It’s also a convertible, but I suspect the retractable roof doesn’t get a lot of use in this rainy country. When he steps out of the driver’s side and rounds the car to open my door, I feel a wicked little hum kick up in my belly. In faded jeans and a bomber jacket, hair finger-mussed, he might as well be wearing a sign that says, I’m bad. But in a way that will make you feel really good. It does nothing to calm the category-five hormone storm taking place inside me when his gaze slides over my body like he’s planning on making a meal out of me at the earliest opportunity.

Feeling a little bit like I’m heading to my own funeral, I sink into the plush leather passenger seat, unable to keep myself from watching him through the windshield as he returns to the driver’s side. A moment later, we’re both enclosed in the car, the purr of the engine vibrating beneath us. It’s just after ten o’clock and the street is illuminated by streetlamps. Since the day’s warmth has lingered into the night, people stroll down Baggot Street, looking positively elated to be free of their jackets and umbrellas.

“Where have you been hiding this car?”

His hand slides over the steering wheel like a caress. “In a garage down the road. The attendant lets me store it there in exchange for a free pint now and again.” He throws the clutch into first gear and eases away from the curb. “Although I think he uses it to pick up girls by telling them he’s the owner.”

“And that works?”

He glances at my tightly crossed legs. “Worked on you.”

I should be annoyed or embarrassed by that arrogant statement. Or both. Instead, his confidence is ridiculously attractive to me. It’s drawing me closer, making me want him even more. Tonight alone, I’ve seen him surprised, regretful, grateful, and humorous. Now...now he is working his swagger. And shit, I like it way too much. The way he drives the car, capable hands working the gearshift like he’d been born inside of it, is sexy as all get-out. His thigh muscles shift each time he applies the break, the seat hugging his body like it had been customized for his muscular frame.

With a deep breath, I finally accept where this night is headed and admit I’m going there willingly. I’m done pretending I have the willpower to stay away from Shane. It’s a pointless waste of time, and I’ve never been a procrastinator. I just have to hope like hell when it comes time for me to get on the plane back to Chicago, I’ve got my damn head on straight. That after I satisfy this hunger inside me, I’m able to walk away and see this for what it is. A diversion. A passing attraction that might very well eviscerate my last relationship from my head, but one that can’t become a relationship in itself. As corny and old-fashioned as it sounds, we’re two ships passing in the night. Which makes my desire to know more about him rather inconvenient. What I should do is ask him to pull over so I can drag him into the backseat. But there it is again, that niggling curiosity that is far from satisfied, rearing its nosy little head.

“I overheard what Faith told you tonight,” Shane says, before I have a chance to ask.

“I thought as much,” I murmur, shifting my attention out the window.

“I also heard what you said back to her.” He waits until I’m looking at him. “Thank you for that.”

“Okay.” Uncomfortable with the gratitude softballs being lobbed in my direction tonight, I change the subject, wishing I was well-adjusted enough to simply say you’re welcome. “So, did you have this car before you left Ireland to race?”

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Shane slants a look at me, as if to determine my motivation for asking. Finally, he shakes his head. “I bought it at an auction with the money from my first win. I’d come home for Faith’s birthday.” He pushes the car into fifth gear. “It was an impulsive buy, but I thought...”

When he doesn’t continue, I prompt him, sensing he’s going to open up. “What did you think?” If he overheard what Faith told me, he already knows his rocky relationship with his father won’t be news to me.

“I thought if he could just see I’d been successful, that the time I’d spent away from the inn had paid off in some small way, it would change everything, but he wouldn’t even let me in the door.” He clears his throat. “I don’t drive it very often anymore.”

“You should,” I blurt, hating the defeat in his voice. “You should be proud of it even if he couldn’t manage it. Maybe buying the car was impulsive, but he should have seen it for what it was. Not a boast. An explanation...an apology. He should have known you better.”

Even though Shane isn’t looking at me, I can tell by his posture I’ve surprised him. I’ve kind of surprised myself at the close attention I’ve been paying without realizing it. When he doesn’t say anything for a long time, however, I’m starting to wonder if I was wrong. Or worse, I’ve overstepped my bounds.

“Look, I’m sorry. It wasn’t my place to say anything.” I pull my messenger bag higher against my chest. “I skipped Tact 101 in high school.”

A small smile playing around the edges of his mouth, he shakes his head. “How do

you manage to see the best in everyone, Willa, but only the worst in yourself?” His statement lingers between us, as if I could pluck it out of the air. When I realize my mouth is hanging open, I snap it shut. That’s not true. Is it? “What you said about my father, this car...you’re right, I think. I’ve just never thought of what happened in those terms.”

“I’m an outsider looking in, that’s all. It’s easier to see a situation clearly without messy emotions, like guilt, in the way.”

“I don’t know. A moment ago, you seemed pretty outraged on my behalf.” I stare resolutely out the window and Shane sighs. “You wouldn’t be, if you knew the whole story.”

“Do you want to tell it to me?” I ask softly.

Our eyes meet across the console. “I don’t know.”

Ignoring the stab of hurt, I nod. “Okay. I get that.”

“No, you don’t.” He turns onto the highway, slipping into the fast lane with expert ease. “I liked the way you looked at me when you defended me. Maybe a little too much. When you realize I’m not worth your outrage, I run the risk of never seeing that again.”

The pain remains, but it’s transferred to him now. “It can’t be that bad,” I whisper.

We drive in silence for a few minutes. I sit very still in the passenger side, afraid if I move, it will sway his decision to confide in me. I want to know what put that note of sadness in his voice and I think I’ll be crushed if he decides against telling me. When I got off the plane in Dublin, I didn’t want to get close enough to anyone to feel this emotionally invested. I came here to repair myself and my broken heart, not this

family. Just this one final thing, I tell myself. Just to put the curiosity to rest.

Shane's voice startles me, cutting through the darkness. "I was in Malaysia in March, getting ready for the second race of the Championship. Hadn't spoken to my father in months. But he called me. Just as I was suiting up for the qualifying round. I didn't even look at the caller ID, just answered, assuming it would be anyone but him." Shane isn't completely there with me in the car anymore, his voice sounding far-off. "He'd hadn't even let me past the front door of the inn last time I was in Dublin, so when he asked me to come home immediately, I didn't understand. I asked if Kitty and Faith were all right. He said yes, but I needed to come home and see to my legacy. It had to be that same day."

As he gets further into the story, a bad feeling settles on my shoulders, tingling in the back of my neck. Before I can analyze my actions or tell myself it's a bad idea, I settle my hand over his on the clutch. He looks at our touching hands a beat before continuing.

"When I think back to the phone call, I don't know how I missed it. He kept calling me by my name, which he never used to. Shane, it's important that you listen. Shane, your mother and sister need you. No mention of him. None." He steers the car off the highway and takes a turn, beginning the ascent of a semi-steep hill. "The next day, I placed in the top three. Not my first time, but it was a difficult track. I had a voicemail from Faith..."

He has to stop. The moment feels so fragile that any misplaced word or movement will shatter it like glass. I don't want to hear the rest. I'll die if I don't.

"I went out celebrating. Didn't even listen to the voicemail until the next day." His voice has turned bitter, full of self-hatred. "He died during the race. He was trying to tell me to come home. Must have known what was coming. It was so obvious, I just didn't want to f**king hear it."

My chest rises and falls rapidly, every breath I manage to draw into my lungs more painful than the last. I try to imagine the guilt that goes along with what he's telling me and I can't even fathom it. I feel that I can at least partially relate, because as awful as my nonrelationship is with my mother, if something similar had happened with Valerie...if she died after begging me to come home, I would still be swamped with self-loathing. I can only imagine the magnitude of Shane's. It's visible now, in every line of his body, the white-knuckled grip he has on the clutch.

"So? Am I still the type of person you would defend?" Finally, he looks at me and I want to wither under the haunted expression he hits me with. "Or are you wishing you'd never gotten into this car with me?"

I inhale slowly, ordering myself to think clearly. Maybe I wanted to avoid this position, but my curiosity has landed me here and now I get the sense that I'm needed. That my response is important. More than that, it's important to me that it leaves no room for doubt. "Yes, I'm defending you, Shane. I'm saying your father didn't make it clear enough. He was too stubborn to come right out and tell you what the hell he wanted to say. He didn't say, 'Shane, I love you, I'm sorry, I'm dying and want you to come home.' Instead, he left you with a lifetime of guilt. That's shitty. And you're making it shittier by imagining hints he probably never dropped."

"Why would I do that?"

"Because you're the one that's still alive." I realize I'm practically shouting and lower my voice. "Someone has to shoulder the guilt you both felt. It didn't die with him."

He stares at me hard for long, torturous seconds where I worry my honesty went too far. Then he leans back in his seat, staring out the front windshield. "I have to go back to racing. I have to win or it was all for nothing. I will have alienated him, my family, for nothing. Can you understand that?"

Better than I thought. “Yes,” I say, even though the word feels like it’s being scraped from my throat with a spoon. It’s a complicated and difficult goal, but that’s Shane. Complicated and difficult. People like us, he’d said to me the night we kissed in the office. We must be cut from the same cloth, because this quest he’s on is something I fully grasp. Maybe even something I would do in the same position.

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“Selling the inn will ensure Faith and Kitty don’t have to work anymore. That we can afford care for Kitty. I can help them far more that way than staying behind, slowly turning into my father.”

He pushes open his door before I have a chance to respond. I feel anchored to my seat by what he said, but when he pulls open my door, I force myself to climb out of the car. Shane takes my hand without asking for permission and leads me up a path. It’s dark, and I have no idea what remote location he’s brought me to, but I can smell moss and saltwater. I open my mouth a little, and I can even taste it on the drifting wind. Trees line either side of the path and I sense we’re getting closer to the water the more the wind picks up, rustling the leaves. It’s dark, but the moon is enough to see where we’re walking. Shane’s hand tightens around mine when we come upon uneven earth. I trust him, I realize. In this moment, after the way he opened himself up to me...I trust him.

I can feel the tension in his grip, left over from our conversation. Part of me wants to bring it up again, talk it to death. Talk until he stops feeling pain over something he couldn’t prevent, until no more words exist on the subject. It’s so unlike me. I’m the type to ignore a pebble in my boot until it gives me a blister. I’ve made ignoring problems an art form. Maybe it’s his own reluctance to talk about it that’s giving me the urge to create balance. Balance him.

“Where are w—” The words die in my throat when we reach the end of the path and I see Dublin Bay spread out below us. Boats bob on its calm surface, land surrounding it, lit up houses nestled into the hillside along the shore. Somehow the sky doesn’t seem as dark from here, more of a purplish-gray, reflecting the water below. We’re on top of a hill, which didn’t seem so large when climbing it in the car, but from

where I'm standing, it feels like we've scaled Everest. In the distance, I can see Howth Harbor, where I'd spent the day. This afternoon suddenly feels like a thousand years ago. So much has happened since I dangled my legs over the side of the dock.

It's so beautiful up here, I can't stand it. I couldn't capture this perfect feeling of isolation with my camera if I tried.

Mist. When I read about it in books, I always thought it was a myth. Something to set a tone or create a mood. But it's real, and it's curling around our ankles like a cat begging to be petted. It's not eerie, it's comforting. It's like a balm, enclosing us and taking away the ugliness we both carry around on our shoulders.

"Killiney Hill," Shane says softly, answering my unspoken question. His voice sends goose bumps coasting down my neck. I rock back on my heels and come up against his chest, closing my eyes when he folds his arms around my middle. After the difficult emotions dredged up on the car ride, it feels like a relief to be held. To focus on something else. The way it feels to touch each other.

This is how I can soothe him. Soothe myself in the process. I can't deny this overwhelming sense that we need one another tonight, right now on this hill. The beauty around me, the hurt evident in Shane's body, is crowding out every reservation and leaving only now. Now, right now, I can't stop myself from turning in his arms and sliding my hands up his chest. His eyes are closed, but when I slip a hand up his neck and into his hair, his lips part on a breath. I want to taste that sound on my tongue, so I do. Slowly, I kiss away the tension in his body, replacing it with awareness. Of me. Of what's about to happen.

Shane seems to lose some invisible battle, pulling me up against him and slanting his mouth over mine with a groan.

"Tonight, Willa."

I nod. “Tonight.”

Chapter Seventeen

My messenger bag hits the earth with a thud. Shane and I can't get close enough to each other. We're standing upright, but his rough hands are on my thighs, kneading my bottom, yanking me closer. Every part of me is buzzing and snapping. His mouth, hot and demanding, is the only thing getting me from one minute to the next. It's oxygen...gravity...it's everything. I can hear myself moaning and I don't give a care. Oh God, how have I made it this long? There's an incessant ache, and it's clawing at me, growing more intense with every stroke of his tongue. I want, I want, I want is all I can think as I return the kiss in equal measure.

My hands go to the edges of his jacket, and I push it off his shoulders, not caring where it lands. When I start unfastening his belt, Shane releases my mouth to watch me. His eyes are glazed, he's biting his lip hard and growling in his throat, as if the sight of my hands working his belt is a massive turn-on. That look of appreciation gives my hands a mind of their own and I abandon my task to stroke his erection through his jeans.

Shane covers my hand and helps me squeeze where he needs it. Once, twice, before drawing my hand away. “Enough. Enough teasing. You've had me like this too f**king long, girl.” Keeping his eyes locked on mine, he takes over the task of unbuckling his belt and unzipping his jeans. Then he takes my hand and slides it down the front of his boxer briefs, urging me with a choked command to wrap my hand around his hard flesh. “If you're going to torture me, do it right.”

My body is shuddering, every inch of me is burning up with the best kind of fever. It's a warm night, but it could be a blizzard, and I wouldn't feel a hint of cold. Shane's words heat me even more. And the way he's watching my stroking hand with worship in his eyes...it's making me feel restless. Desperate. I don't think I've ever

wanted anything more in my life. It's a startling thought but there's no room for doubt or alarm now. I'm beyond that.

"Shane, please."

"Please, what?" He bites my ear and tugs. "You want a little torture, too, love?"

I don't realize Shane has unfastened my jeans until he's pushing them down my hips. I nudge off my boots and kick my pants the rest of the way off with my feet, before I fuse my mouth to his again. The kiss is breathless, his warm hands are cupping my behind, urging me higher against him. My cotton underwear is the only thing between us now, and it's far too much. His hips give a quick, upward surge between my thighs and it short-circuits my brain.

"I'm going to put you on the ground, now, Willa." He clutches a fistful of my hair and whispers hotly against my ear. "Then I'm going to get between your thighs and f**k you. I told you this was inevitable, didn't I?"

"Yes."

"You know what else is inevitable?" He drags me down onto the soft grass and covers my body with his harder one. A strangled sound leaves me when I feel his thickness between my legs. "Tonight won't be the last time. If I have you once, I'm going to want you over and over. This doesn't end here. Not by a f**king long shot."

Christ, how can he expect me to focus on what he's asking when he's rocking into me, making me crazy? I feel empty, incomplete, without him inside me. It makes no sense since he's never been there. It's unexplainable.

Don't care. Need him now.

I reach down and slip my boy shorts down my legs, hooking a toe in the material to pull them the rest of the way. Then I wrap my legs around Shane's hips and drag his mouth to mine for the hottest, most pleading kiss I can muster. Whatever I have to do to tempt him to push himself inside me. It's the most vital necessity in my universe.

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With a ragged groan, he squeezes my hip hard, then shoves one of my thighs wide so he can work his hand between our bodies. When his fingers find my center, my back bows off the ground, a sob ripped from my throat. His mouth skates down my neck as he pumps two fingers in and out of me. I can't breathe or think beyond his fingers, his mouth, the humming in his throat. Shane pushes my shirt up, exposing my braless chest. My eyes pop open. I want to see myself completely naked out here. In the perfect, beautiful night. I want to see him against that backdrop, looking at me. The sight of Shane's cheeks hollowing as he draws on my ni**les makes me feel wild, reckless.

Like myself.

Something is coming back to life inside of me, starting in my limbs and traveling to my brain, making me light-headed. It's been coming for days. It just needed a catalyst to form. Shane. This place did it. Now did it.

I realize Shane has propped himself on an elbow and he's staring at me hard, all-out lust still coating his blue eyes, but there is awe there, too. In that moment, I'm positive he can feel what's happening inside of me. He's a part of it. Maybe the most important part.

I don't want to explore that troubling thought, though. I want to feel, not analyze. With a desperate sound, I push Shane onto his back and straddle his hips. His hands slide up my thighs, my belly, to cup my br**sts.

"There you are, babe." He breathes the words, watching me tug his pants down lower. "Make demands on me. Do what feels right."

His name ghosts past my lips on a shudder as I take him in my hand and bring him between my legs. At the last second, he clasps my hips in his hands to hold me still.

“Wait.” Shane reaches down to dig in his jeans pocket and produces a condom, using his teeth to rip it open. His hands are a blur in the darkness and I’m frantic. Frantic for him to hurry. There’s a dam inside of me that’s on the verge of bursting, and I need him to anchor me. His strained expression tells me he’s feeling it, too, which amps my need for him even higher.

When I finally sink down onto him, letting every hard inch of him fill me, we both suck in breaths. Oh God. The tight, unbelievable pressure causes the tide of heat to surge higher, higher, until I’m shaking with the effort to keep my last remaining barrier intact. Struggling to hold onto my composure. I know with a few quick movements of my hips, I could shoot into outer space, but I’ve got no choice but to bring him with me. It’s never been this way before. I’ve never had this stunning connection with someone.

I need him to feel everything at the same time I do.

“Help me, Willa. I’m dying.” Shane rolls his hips beneath me, and I cry out at the pleasure that streaks through me. His fingers interlock with mine and that simple touch is reassuring enough that I begin to move faster. “Don’t restrain yourself. I need to see you burn.”

It’s something I didn’t anticipate, this wildness that shifts within me, sends my hips twisting and bucking on top of him. The dam has now completely given way, there’s nothing left to stop the rush. I’m being battered by everything I’ve kept locked up inside of me for too long. I don’t know why it chose to come out this way, nor do I understand the timing.

My head is thrown back, eyes squeezed shut, but Shane’s harsh voice saying my

name brings me back. One look at his face nearly sends me over the edge. His powerful body flexes with each of my movements, holding me steady when I feel like I'm about to fly away. He's so achingly beautiful in that moment, the raw hunger on his face, with just a hint of concern for me. It's that last part that makes me choke on the air I'm trying to suck into my lungs. I'm feeling far too much. And he can see it, because for once I'm not hiding anything. He's seeing everything. It's a scary realization and yet, so freeing, that something loosens inside of me and pleasure blurs every thought from my head, except one. Shane. Attempting to stem the shaking of my thighs, I squeeze them tight around his body. He drives upward five quick times into my climaxing body, ripping a scream from my throat, doubling the intensity of what I'm experiencing.

"That's right, girl. Scream my f**king name. Only mine."

I plant my hands on his shoulders and work my hips in slow, grinding circles, attempting to capture the high as long as possible, but when I'm finished and I watch my distraction from reality start to slip away, my chest is racked by a sob. I want it back.

"Easy, now. Easy." My eyes crack open and I find Shane sitting up, mere inches from my face, his stiff erection still planted firmly inside me. "Look at me. I've got you, love."

"More." Having him this close, feeling his breath puffing out against my lips, his gorgeous eyes searching mine, is making me want him again. Immediately. I kiss him hard, gripping the strands of his hair between my fingers, tilting his head exactly where I want it. "More. Again."

When I land on my back in the grass, I throw my arms up over my head like I'm on a roller coaster. I want to feel my stomach bottom out, I want to give over control to whatever twist of fate landed me here. Shane takes a minute to drag his gaze over me

before dropping down to nip and bite at my sensitive belly. He drags my shirt up, licking over the peak of one breast, eyes locked on mine the whole time. He's a breath away, our noses graze together once...then he pushes back inside me with a forceful shove.

"More. Again." He repeats my words back to me, but there's no mockery in them. Just pure sex. "Insatiable little thing aren't you?"

"Apparently." I draw my legs up as high as they can go, locking them behind his neck. When he groans in the back of his throat, my pulse starts to hammer out of control. "Are you going to keep me waiting?"

"It would serve you right." He draws out, then thrusts back in, deeper than before. "You kept me waiting for weeks."

"You hated me."

His hands band around my wrists, pinning them above my head. "Never. Not for a second. God, I never had a f**king chance." I have no time to process his words, because every inch of his body is sliding over mine, muscle dragging across curves, his labored breathing in my ear. The feel of him inside me is incredible and as his pace increases with more and more urgency, we're both straining. Grabbing at one another's hair, the earth underneath us, anything we can get our hands on. It ends in hot, frenzied pounding and words that make no sense, but say exactly the right thing.

"Willa." He punches the ground as his release shakes through him. "Willa."

I hold him long after, staring up at the vast, starless sky, knowing I've just made an irreversible mistake. And counting the minutes until I get to make it again.

Chapter Eighteen

I wake up with mist rolling over me, early morning sunlight peeking through to pierce my eyelids. Cracking them open, I see Shane is sprawled beside me on the grass. I'm tucked under his arm, head resting on his shoulder. Part of me can't believe I fell asleep letting him hold me, but the rest of me never wants to move again. His solid form is warm and reassuring, but his fingers are tangled in my shirt, as if he'd fallen asleep thinking I might leave in the middle of the night and wanted to prevent it.

We hadn't agreed out loud to spend the night on Killiney Hill. I'd wanted to stay because I knew the second we got back into the car, the spell would be shattered. We'd have to stop thinking in terms of now, and remember tomorrow. Next week. Forever. I'm not sure why Shane wanted to stay, but I'm glad he did. Even if he only stayed for a chance at morning sex. Remembering last night, how often we'd turned to each other, my body begins to throb in sore and sensitive areas. Oh, if he wants morning sex, he's going to get it.

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I've gone and done it now. One week until I have to leave for Chicago and I've discovered multiple orgasms. Surely there's no turning back after that? If I close my eyes and focus on the insane physical response Shane seems capable of ringing from me, leaving seems easy enough. A week of stolen moments with a gorgeous guy, no commitment required. If I came here to get over a breakup, consider me a little closer every time Shane rolls me underneath him, those intense blue eyes watching my expression to see what I like. Good God.

Then I open my eyes and look at him. I see the tension furrowing between his brow, even in sleep. I feel the hand grabbing onto me like a lifeline. I hear his heartbeat under my ear and know every beat has a wealth of pain behind it. And I know leaving is going to be one of the hardest things I've ever done.

Carefully, I slip out from beneath Shane's arm, peeling his fingers off my shirt one by one. I actually have to wave away the mist to find my messenger bag. My camera didn't get a lot of use last night, but capturing this moment, this morning, is suddenly important to me. Even if I don't want to admit why. There's also a certainty in me that I'll avoid looking at these pictures for the rest of my life, if I even get them developed.

When I stand and I can actually see above the layer of mist, my breath hitches. Sunlight is just beginning to spread over the bay. If I listen really hard, I can hear the boats creaking as they sway on the water. People are moving on the docks in the distance, fishermen already awake and getting ready to start work. The sky looks massive, heavy, white clouds reflecting faintly on the surface of the gray water below.

I know landscapes aren't my strong suit, but I raise my camera and start shooting. All I can do is point and click, hoping even an ounce of the magnificence translates onto film. Most likely, it will be up to my memory to do it justice. After a few minutes, I lower the camera to my side and look back at Shane. He's still asleep, his hand reaching out beside him on the grass. With the mist moving over him, he looks like a dream. A fantasy I made up inside my head. Soon, that's all he'll be.

I war with myself for a second, then raise the camera and take the picture.

Shane's eyes open slowly and he starts a little, before focusing on me. I watch in fascination as he sits up and scrubs a hand over his messy hair. His face is covered in scruff and his shirt is on backward from being pulled on in the darkness when we were both exhausted. I imagine this is how he wakes up in bed each morning, among his sheets. I want to take that picture, too. Want to see him in every stage of his day.

I wonder what I look like to him. As if I spoke the thought out loud, Shane gains his feet and comes toward me slowly. He slides his calloused hands up into my hair, cupping the back of my head. While leaning down to kiss me sweetly, he takes the camera from my hand. Then with an indescribable look on his face, he steps back and takes my picture. Automatically, my hands come up to cup my elbows, and I avert my gaze. I've never been comfortable being on the other side of the lens.

Shane lowers the camera, his eyes narrowing on me. "Oh no, you don't get to act shy after last night. I won't allow it."

His sleep-roughened voice sends goose bumps trailing up my arms. It's not that I'm shy. Technically, it's more of a reluctance to see what other people see when they look at me. Not to mention, I suspect my guard is completely down right now. I'm not sure I want to have that captured in my own camera. "Yeah? How do you plan to stop me?"

He rolls my words around in his mouth. “Why don’t I remind you how you woke me up in the middle of the night?” His voice goes even smokier, gaze dropping to my lips. “How you wouldn’t stop, no matter how hard I begged. How I really didn’t want you to stop.”

If I were alone, I would close my eyes. I would cross my legs and squeeze. The way he’s looking at me, the memories his words are bringing back, are doing the impossible. They’re making me feel sexy and beautiful. Like I have nothing to hide. I’m aware of every part of my body. My hair doesn’t feel like a jumbled disaster, it feels like Shane’s fingers have just been in it and there is nothing hotter than that. I know my shyness is melting away when his lips edge up into a satisfied smile. Lips swollen from kissing me like he’d lose his mind if he stopped.

Just like last night, I feel something loosen inside me, something that’s been tied up in knots forever without me being consciously aware of it. I can’t do anything but embrace it. God, it’s a fantastic feeling. Without a second’s hesitation, I curl my fingers under the hem of my shirt and draw it over my head, leaving me topless. Very slowly, I walk toward Shane. At first, he can only watch me approach, his big chest shuddering in and out, heart in his eyes. Then he raises the camera and starts taking snaps of me. It’s the first time I can remember craving my picture being taken, because I know whatever he’s capturing is honest. Real. It’s me.

When I reach him, I take the camera and set it down carefully on the earth, without taking my eyes off him. His hands are curling at his sides, as if he wants to reach out and grab me, but he senses I own the moment. “Willa, you’re so bloody beautiful, I can’t stand it.”

Using his shoulders for balance, I hike my legs up around his waist. I’m dying to kiss him, but words are burning in my throat, dying to get out. “You made me feel that way.”

He cradles my face in his hand. “Let me do it again today?”

Kissing him is my answer.

...

We don’t talk on the way home, but it’s a companionable silence. Without actually saying the words, I think we’ve decided to live in the now. We’ve stopped trying to resist the pull, we’re not thinking beyond today. I’m grateful for it, this decision to be reckless. Because that’s exactly what it is. It’s floating down a sparkling river, enjoying the view, as you head toward a Niagara-sized plunge. I’m done battling with myself, though. I’ve done it for too long, and now all I want is to admit how good Shane makes me feel. He’s woken something up inside of me and I’m not ready to put it to bed just yet.

He parks the car in the garage and we walk back toward the Claymore, holding hands. Just as I’m thinking the connection isn’t enough, he drags me into his side and kisses the top of my head. We stare at each other for a moment. I sense he’s about to say something, but the door of the Claymore flies open and Kitty steps out onto the sidewalk. I start to pull away, as if we’ve been caught committing an illegal act, but Shane’s hold on my hand only tightens.

She claps a shaky hand over her mouth. “Thank goodness. I thought you’d been kidnapped right along with Faith.”

Shane stiffens against me. “Faith? What do you mean?”

Kitty gestures wildly. “She’s gone. I knocked on her door to ask if she’d help me with the tea service, but she didn’t answer. So I went in. Very tidy, her room. She takes after me in that way.”

With a curse, Shane plows a hand through his hair. I can see his face transform with worry and guilt, obviously remembering their fight from the night before. It's so palpable, I can't bear it. I rack my brain, trying to think of where Faith would have gone. The answer is so clear, I can actually feel relief swimming in my chest. "I know where she is."

Shane looks at me sharply.

“I mean, I think I know where she would have gone.”

“Where?”

“You’re not going to like it.”

He searches my face. “Ah God, not the street performer.” I bite my lip and Shane looks up at the sky, as if praying for patience. “I don’t suppose you know where he lives?”

The way he asks me, I know he’s mostly hoping I say no. “Brian and Patrick both live with their mother, but I have no idea where.” I rummage through my bag for my phone, feeling Shane’s sharp eyes on me. “I have Patrick’s number, though.”

Shane laughs without humor. “Patrick, is it? Well, I’ve been dying to kick his ass. I guess I’ll have to settle for his brother.”

“You can’t.” The hand holding my phone drops to my thigh. “You can’t go in there like you did at O’Kelly’s and drag Faith out. She’ll never forgive you.”

His jaw hardens, and I feel sick over our peaceful morning slipping away. I already miss the warm ease of it. “She can add it to the growing list of things she hates me for, because I’m going to get her. She’s my little sister.”

“She’s one year younger than me.”

He shifts on his feet. “Jesus, I could have done without hearing that.”

Shaking my head, I dial the phone. Kitty is still standing in the doorway of the inn, only now she’s feeding the toast from her apron to a group of gathering pigeons. Patrick answers on the fourth ring, his voice groggy. “They say it’s an ungodly hour, but that can’t be right since an angel is calling me. What’s the weather like in heaven today, sweetheart?”

One look at Shane’s face tells me he heard the gist of Patrick’s words. Hoping to spare Patrick’s life, I turn my back and walk a few yards away. “Oh, I’d bring an umbrella. There’s a storm brewing.”

“Thanks for the warning.” It sounds like he’s propping himself up in bed. “Does this have anything to do with the girlish giggling coming from my brother’s bedroom? Or is Brian just playing dress-up with Ma’s clothes again?”

Thank God I’d walked out of earshot. “I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear that. Mind texting me your address?”

“Ma!” he shouts, forcing me to yank the phone away from my ear. “Put the kettle on. Beyoncé is coming over for a visit.”

A smile plays around my mouth. “Don’t let her go to any trouble. I doubt we’ll be staying for a social visit.”

“We?”

“Mmm-hmm.”

“Shit.” He sighs. “Ah, Brian is due a good fight, anyway. It’s been days.”

Hiding my nerves over Patrick's final comment, I hang up the phone. I turn to Shane just as I receive the incoming text message with the address. His eyes are unreadable, but his posture makes it pretty obvious he didn't like me walking away to talk on the phone to another guy. Since I wouldn't like it either, though, I don't give him any shit for his needless jealousy.

"The address, Willa."

I push my phone into the back pocket of my jeans, ignoring the shiver that goes up my arm when he growls at me. "Give me a few minutes, and I'll come with you."

"We don't need a referee."

"You totally need a referee." I start toward the inn, noticing for the first time that Kitty has gone back inside. "But I'm not going for you, I'm going for Faith. When you drag her out of her boyfriend's house for doing something every other eighteen-year-old is doing, she's sure as shit not going to get into your car. She's done nothing wrong and she shouldn't have to take the bus by herself."

"Nothing wrong?" He's right behind me as we enter the Claymore, of course, our feet pounding on the floorboards of the pub. "Leaving without telling us where she's going? Worrying my mother sick?"

I don't say anything, just turn and look at him. He finally hears himself and his features cloud over. It's not what I meant to do. I didn't set out to make him realize he's getting angry with Faith for the same thing he did at her age. Leaving without a word, worrying his mother. But there it is. It's unavoidable. Wishing I could take back the last five minutes, I walk toward him with no idea what my intentions are when I reach him.

He turns before I get there, walking stiffly toward the office. "Meet me outside in ten

minutes.”

Staring after him, regret swimming in my gut, I’m starting to think I push people away whether it’s intentional or not.

Chapter Nineteen

I’ve brushed my teeth, ran a brush through my hair, and changed my clothes. In a replay of the night before, Shane is waiting outside for me with the red car. This time, he’s leaning against the passenger side, arms crossed, expression closed off. When he yanks the door open for me and jerks his chin to indicate I should climb in, I sigh and do as he asks. At the very least, I seem to be getting the hang of picking my battles.

He climbs into the driver’s side. “Address.”

I read it off the screen of my phone.

His head drops forward with a curse, telling me Brian and Patrick either live a good distance away, or it’s a bad section of Dublin. I’m betting on the latter. The drive only takes about ten minutes but the atmosphere in the car is so strained, it feels like an hour. Light-years away from the lightheartedness of this morning. I miss it. I miss not having to overthink, and now I’m playing Whack-A-Mole with my worries and insecurities. Did I overstep my bounds? Is he regretting last night, trying to figure out the quickest way to get rid of me?

Part of me is actually a little relieved to think these typical thoughts because they distract me from the big picture. In a week, I won’t be here to run interference between Shane and Faith. To witness this family’s tragedies and victories anymore. I’m just along for the ride.

We pull up in front of a row of connected houses, desperately in need of a paint job.

Children are kicking a soccer ball around in the street, using overturned garbage cans as goals. I'm sure to Shane, this looks like poverty. But I've seen what poverty looks like, I've lived it, and this isn't it. These people are making an effort. Their cars are clean, they have banners for their favorite sports team hanging in their windows. The kids are laughing, wearing warm jackets.

I follow Shane up the path to a red two-story house. When he knocks, I can hear the laughter inside cut off immediately. He notices it, too, and shakes his head. Without a thought, I reach over and take his hand. He looks at me in surprise, which makes me uncomfortable, so I stare at the door willing it to open. I feel a sudden, fierce need to be on his side here. I've said my piece, and I've ruined our morning. He's about to face a firing squad for being a caring brother and dammit, he shouldn't always have to be the bad guy. Hell, if I'd snuck out without telling Ginger where I was going, she and Derek would have kicked the f**king door down to drag me out of there. Maybe I think he's overreacting, but he badly needs an ally.

The door swings open and Faith is framed by the peeling, white-trimmed frame. She crosses her arms over her chest, and I notice she's wearing my Clash T-shirt. Probably not a good time to ask her about it, though, because she looks righteously pissed. "Listen to me well, brother. I'm not setting foot outside this house with you. I'm a grown woman who knows her own mind. Just because I'm your sister doesn't mean I don't have womanly desires. I need a boyfriend to get that sorted."

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“Jesus, Faith,” Shane and I say at the same time.

Brian appears behind Faith, laying a calming hand on her arm. “You know, my ma can hear you, love.”

Faith flushes a little, but doesn’t lose her head of steam by any means. “You might as well get in your silly car and drive back to the inn. At the moment, I’m not going anywhere with you. I’ll be in for my shift later, but I’m taking the bus.”

I raise an eyebrow at Shane. He smirks at me before addressing Brian, who for all intents and purposes is cowering behind Faith in the doorway. “Fine. But I’ll have a word with him before I leave.”

That gives everyone pause. Shane is planning on leaving Faith there? I try and get a read on him, but his face gives nothing away. Faith and Brian exchange a perplexed look.

“Whatever you have to say to my boyfriend, you can say in front of me.” Faith’s spine is so straight, I’m positive it will snap at any moment. Brian nods in agreement. Clearly Faith is wearing the pants in this relationship. “You’ll be gone soon, Shane. You won’t be around to chase me across Dublin every time I do something you don’t like. Say what you have to say. I’m old enough to make my own choices.”

His face shows no reaction to that, but his grip on my hand increases fractionally. He nods at Brian. “You’ve had two opportunities now to introduce yourself to me. Once at O’Kelly’s and the other night at the Claymore. If you’re going to date my sister, that’s the least you could do. Maybe even...come to the Claymore for dinner some

night. Meet Kitty.” He clears his throat, rolls his shoulders. “It’s just how it should be done.”

Brian gulps audibly. “Right. I’d love to.” He shifts on his feet. “Sorry, man. I didn’t think you’d want me around her.”

“I’m not thrilled about it.” When Faith narrows her eyes at Shane, he holds up a hand. “But I’d feel that way about anyone. She’s my sister. She deserves to have this done properly. Come to the Claymore.”

Without another word, Shane grips my hand tighter and leads me back toward the car. I cast a quick look over my shoulder to see Faith gaping after her brother, mouth hanging open. Inside, I feel the same way. How did I not see that coming? Orla’s words from the other night come back in startling clarity. Irish men are a complicated sort. They’ll knock you on your arse when you’re not looking.

“Shane!” Faith is running after us on the path. “Wait.”

I let go of his hand and step back just in time for Faith to throw herself into his arms. Over her shoulder, Shane’s startled eyes meet mine. Slowly, his arms band around her, and he holds her close, as if he can’t quite believe what’s happening. What he made happen. Unable to watch it for another second, or I’ll burst into tears and ruin the moment, I pull open the passenger side door.

“Beyoncé, are you not staying for tea?” I turn at the sound of Patrick’s voice to find him standing in the doorway, wearing an apron and holding a kettle. “I cleaned the mugs with soap and everything.”

I send an inquiring glance at Shane, who is already shaking his head at me. “I’ve made more than enough concessions for one morning, girl. Get in the car.”

Smiling to myself, I wave apologetically at Patrick and climb inside.

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When we reach the Claymore, we both seem to be in thoughtful moods. Shane appears a little thunderstruck over the scene with Faith, but every so often, I feel his gaze slide over me from across the car's console, heating me a little more each time. There's something different about the way he's looking at me now, but I can't figure out what. It's still ripe with attraction, but there's speculation now. If I wanted to drive myself crazy, I could analyze that look to death. I'm even feeling close enough to him to ask him straight up. But it's getting late in the morning, and I know Shane has to set up the bar for lunch. We walk inside to find Orla cutting up lemons, the delicious smell of soup filling the space, courtesy of the new cook, Samuel.

Kitty looks up from wiping down the tables. "Did you find your sister, then? Was it the gypsies that took her?"

"No, Kitty." Shane's mouth quirks at one end. "She'll be along now."

"Grand." She props her hands on her hips. "Do you smell that chowder? Samuel is an absolute phenom in the kitchen, he is. I say we're well rid of Martin."

Orla, Shane, and I try to keep our amusement hidden, but it explodes from all three of us at the same time, and we're laughing so hard that Kitty has no choice but to join in. It feels like the tension of the morning is pouring out of me, out of Shane. Our eyes meet and there is something indescribable in his that cuts off my laughter abruptly. With a smile at Kitty and Orla, I head toward the staircase at the back of the pub.

I hear Shane behind me. I'm beginning to expect him to follow me, actually. Something about that certainty is comforting now, instead of exasperating. Knowing he'll never let me leave a room without giving me something to think about until the

next time we're together. I start to climb the stairs, but change my mind, turning instead to meet him halfway at the center of the hall. As if it's the most natural thing in the world, he catches me up against him. His mouth is on mine, lips teasing mine open with a low groan. Immediately, my head is spinning and I can't remember why I'd been walking away in the first place. It's startling how quickly he can blur every thought in my head, narrow it down to just him.

I want more. Want to drag him up to my room and let him take me under again, the way he had only hours ago. When he drops his hands to my bottom and slips them into my back pockets, I make a whimpering sound into his mouth. Shane's tongue licks out along the seam of my lips, as if to savor the noise, but then he pulls back. I'm momentarily distracted by the layer of fog in his eyes, the new way he's looking at me. Then I see my phone in his hand.

He presses a few buttons on the screen and pulls up my contacts. I watch as he deletes Patrick's number from my phone, then hands it back to me.

"You delete the other one."

I know what he's talking about. Evan's phone number. He's asking me to delete it. It occurs to me then that we're standing in the exact spot where I told him I still loved Evan. Where he first tried to kiss me. Was it even true then, all those weeks ago? Had I ever loved Evan? What I'm feeling now, what transformed inside me last night, compared to what I'd thought of as my first love...it's like comparing a monsoon to a drizzling rain. One is something you can bear without an umbrella, a nonevent. The other can pick you up, shake you until you scream, and set you down somewhere else. Somewhere new that you don't recognize.

Shane is a monsoon.

That's the only description I can give it now. Weather patterns. I'm not willing to go

any further than that. Barely one day into this “letting go” phase with Shane and I’m already losing sight of reality. I know one thing for certain, though. I haven’t thought of Evan in days. There hasn’t been a speck of room for him. I could no sooner go back to the relationship I had with Evan than I could forget about Shane, which I instinctively know I never will. Evan has been wiped away so quickly, I wonder if he was ever there at all. If it was just my guilt, the bitter taste of failing someone I cared about, that I’ve been feeling all along.

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I'm quiet for a full minute, but Shane doesn't retreat. Oh no. He backs me up until I hit the wall and plants his hands on either side of my head. "Delete. Him."

His expression isn't unreadable now. He's baring himself to me, daring me not to accept him. It's anger, passion, and a touch of uncertainty. This is it, the honesty between us that has my fingers moving over the screen, deleting Evan from my phone. When I hit the button, I feel nothing. He was already gone from me.

Shane's eyes close briefly, before he leans in and drops a single kiss onto my lips. "Now you've gone and done it." I have no time to question that odd statement because he's walking back toward the pub. "I'm taking off after lunch. Will you be ready for me?"

Pleasure jabs me below the belt at the double meaning I know he intended. "Don't keep me waiting long."

"Insatiable little thing, aren't you?"

"We've already established that."

He winks at me and disappears through the swinging door, working his swagger again. I practically float up the stairs, not bothering to wipe the dopey expression off my face.

Chapter Twenty

"All right, now the first stage of learning how to drive a stick shift is to accept you

will stall the car your first few tries. Try not to get frustrated.”

I nod, letting my hand run over the gearshift. Shane is talking in his professional voice and it’s doing funny things to my stomach. “Just call me Zen.”

True to his word, he left the pub after lunch late this afternoon. I’d passed out for a few hours in my room, exhausted from last night and the chaotic emotions of the morning. When I woke, I’d started to pull on my jeans, then changed my mind, putting on the only dress I’d brought to Ireland with me. A soft blue, floral dress that I’d bought once when Ginger begged me to, insisting the color looked good on me. The tags were even still on it, since I’d never worn it. Since I’m sprinting outside of my comfort zone, though, I decided to go all out.

When I heard the knock on my door, I’d pulled it open knowing it was Shane. The appreciative look on his face told me he was debating backing me into the room and forgetting whatever plans he’d made. Instead, he’d dragged me from the room with a curse. Without telling me where we were going, he’d driven us out to Bull Island, to a beach called Dollymount Strand that ran the entire length of the narrow island. The wide shoreline was deserted this time of day, the sun just beginning to set over the water. At first, he’d only planned on showing me the island, walking along the beach, but when I’d admitted I didn’t know how to drive a manual transmission, he’d basically gone apoplectic.

Now, he hooks his hands under my arms and starts to drag me across the console. “Come on over here. I’ll show you the basics.”

A surprised laugh bursts past my lips at the unexpected move. “On your lap?”

“There’s no better place for you.”

He adjusts the steering wheel and driver’s seat so we both fit, choking on a laugh

when I elbow him in the ribs. When I finally settle into his lap, both of us gasp a little at how good it feels. The light material of my dress, the way it rides high on my legs doesn't go unnoticed by him. I can feel his swift response against my bottom. With willpower I didn't know I had, I swallow the desire to abandon the lesson altogether and simply beg him to unzip his jeans. Focus. Prove to yourself you're not a sex-depraved nitwit. "What if I drive us into the ocean?"

"I wouldn't let us get that far, babe."

His smoky voice, laced with just a hint of arrogance, makes me shiver. "All right, tell me the basics."

"The basics. Right." With one hand settled possessively on my hip, he uses his other to indicate the gearshift. "The hardest part is learning how to get the car into first gear. That's what we're going to focus on now." His thighs flex underneath me, and I bite my lip hard, attempting to control my breathing. "You have three pedals, instead of two like you're accustomed to."

I lean back to see under the steering wheel, bringing my back against his broad chest. "Three pedals. Check."

His hand drifts up my bare left thigh, teasing the hem of my dress. "This one goes on the clutch. The other one on the accelerator."

I do as he instructs me. "Done," I say, barely recognizing my own voice. It's almost impossible not to circle my bottom on his arousal. I want to tilt my head so he can attack my neck. I want him to slip a hand between my legs. But like me, he appears determined to take this as far as we can. We seem to have the same characteristic stubbornness.

"Okay, you're going to press down on the clutch with your left foot. Good. Now, put

the car into first gear.” I do it with a flick of my wrist. “Good girl. With your right foot, ease off the brake and press slowly down onto the accelerator. As you press down on the accelerator, slowly take pressure off the clutch until you feel the gears catch.”

Shit, this is way harder than I thought. I’ve only ever driven my sister’s rusting orange truck, which we lovingly referred to as The General. The hard part had been getting the bucket of bolts to start, but driving it had been relatively easy. This was a whole new ball game. Add the ridiculously hot man beneath me with a hard-on and this is a Fear Factor-style challenge. Taking a deep breath, I close my eyes and repeat what Shane said in my head. Ease off the clutch...slowly press the accelerator...feel the gear catch.

When I open my eyes, we’re moving down the beach.

“Agh!”

“Holy shit. She gets it her first time. I can’t believe it.” Shane is shaking with laughter beneath me, arm banding around my waist as a makeshift seat belt. Obviously, he hadn’t expected the vehicle to move anytime soon. “You’re a bloody natural.”

“What do I do now?” I practically shriek, eyes glued to the stretch of sand in front of me, ocean crashing to my left.

“You relax,” he breathes at my neck. His rough hand slides over mine on the clutch. “You’re going to switch to second gear now. Press down on the clutch as you shift, then switch back to the accelerator, just like the last time. Easy.”

He doesn’t have to instruct me the next time, as I push the car into third gear. We’re moving faster down the beach now. Shane rolls down the window so salty air begins

to whirl through the car, lifting the hair off my shoulders and blowing it around my face. Apart from last night, it's the most exhilarating moment of my life. I'm laughing, I realize. I'm laughing so hard that tears are streaming down my cheeks. Shane's arm is tight and reassuring around my belly, his chest rising and falling behind me, as if we're one person.

"Look at you, Willa." He speaks beside my ear. "This is what you were meant to do. You were meant to go fast. To let go. Same as me."

"Yes." It's only a whisper, but he hears it. I know by the kiss he plants on my shoulder. "Can I go faster?"

His chest rumbles against my back, but I can't tell if he's laughing or humming his approval. "Punch it, babe."

I move the car into fourth gear, then fifth. My hair is like a living thing inside the car, floating around us both, carried on the sea air. There is a rush in my ears. It sounds like the ocean, but I know it's something else. It's the same feeling of completion from last night, but now that I recognize it, I let it grow and drown everything else out.

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When I see the stretch of beach ending, I'm disappointed, but only for a fraction of second. As soon as the cars rolls to a stop, I'm being turned around on Shane's lap to face him. I have no time to catch my breath before his mouth is consuming mine. His hands are tangled in my hair, pulling me closer. Our expelled breaths bounce off the inside of the car, joining the rush in my ears to create a sound unique to me. To us.

Dying to get as close to him as possible, I spread my legs as far as the confined space will allow and begin to ride the ridge behind his fly. He moans into my mouth and grips my bottom, urging me to go faster. His hips start pumping upward between my thighs, driving my bottom into the steering wheel so hard, I hear a far-off beeping and know it's coming from our car.

"No, no. I need to get closer," Shane pants against my mouth, before nearly ripping off the driver's side door to get it open. He drags me from the car and pushes me back against the hard surface, partially heated by the purring engine. Running his teeth along the line of my neck, he slips his hand between my thighs to massage me through my underwear. "Are you wet enough, girl?"

"Are you kidding me?"

"Thank Christ." He takes a condom from his pocket, hurriedly freeing himself from his jeans to roll it on. All the while, he's watching with rapt interest as I drag my panties down my legs. When I start to pull the dress over my head, he stops me. "Leave it. I'm going to make you come in that dress. Then I'm going to f**king burn it."

Confused by his harshly spoken words, I start to question him, but he hikes me up

against the car, propping me there with his hips and drives into me hard. Our simultaneous groans are short-lived because he hooks his arms beneath my knees and yanks my legs higher, making me go light-headed at the pressure of him buried deep inside of me. He bites into my bottom lip and draws it back as he starts to thrust. It's a different, forceful side to Shane and this new, wild, living thing inside of me responds to it. I dig my fingernails into his shoulders, prop my heels on his ass, and beg for it with my body.

"Is this how it's going to be?" His breath hitches as I start to match his rhythm, meeting each shove of his hips with a twist of my own. He lets me participate for a moment, then pins me against the car with a growl. "Every goddam time is better than the last. How the hell am I supposed to walk away from that? From you?"

I can't answer that. Not only because I'm avoiding any thought of us parting ways, but because he's filling my body over and over, making it so I can't think beyond the oncoming release. It's gathering in my belly, and I welcome it by latching onto Shane's mouth, knowing his kiss will push me the rest of the way. It's the extra push he needs, too. As soon as my tongue licks into his mouth, I feel him start to shake. Or maybe that's me. I don't know...I can't tell anymore where I stop and he begins. I'm dragging him closer, he's plastered to my body, and still, still, he's too far away.

"Shane," I sob, my heart feeling paralyzed.

"I know. I know," he grates against me neck, biting the flesh there and finally sending me spiraling. "Let me have it all. No hiding from me. God, Willa."

The car no longer exists behind us, we're just clinging together as we free-fall. Holding one another as something that goes beyond physical response shudders through me and into him. My chest is squeezing so tightly that I'm gasping for air. I don't know if there's a name for what I'm feeling, but I know if he lets me go right now, in this moment, I absolutely will not survive it.

We stay that way for long moments, letting our bodies calm, even if there is no chance of calming our minds or thoughts. I'm wrapped around Shane who has gone so still, I'm starting to feel a little alarmed. Just as I start to ask him if he's all right, he slams a fist onto the roof of the car, then drops his head onto my shoulder.

"Dammit, Willa. I didn't see you coming."

He holds my hand on the ride home, but we don't say a word.

Chapter Twenty-One

Shane is working late tonight, thanks to a bachelor party and a thirty-person pub crawl that stopped crawling once it got to the Claymore. I waited in my room as long as I could, restlessly watching the sky darken, not sure if I should wait for him to get off or go out on my own. While the afternoon on Bull Island had started out incredible, it had left something unsaid hanging in the air between us. I don't like it, the not knowing. Not having everything on the table. My whole life, I've been the queen of avoidance, but secrets between Shane and I stretch and widen with every second that ticks past. Every time we're together it seems like we're interminably close, but when I can't see or touch him, he feels eons away.

Thundering laughter below my feet sends me striding across the room to snatch up my messenger bag. I just have to get out of there and think. No more pacing around in this white-lace room, trying to figure out me and Shane when the answer has been the same since the beginning.

I squeeze through bodies inside the pub, trying to keep my eyes on the door, but they unerringly stray to Shane behind the bar. Dim bar light spilling over his dark hair, he's nodding absently at the smiling girl who's shouting to him over the music, but he looks distracted. Like he's already picturing himself a thousand miles from the smell of alcohol, the sloppiness of the crowds. I think of him today, how his voice had

changed when he explained the mechanics of driving manually. He doesn't belong here, taking orders. He should be giving them. Behind a steering wheel, without a single thing to hold him back.

As if he can sense my specific thoughts in the midst of hundreds, his head snaps up and he's searching through the crowd. For me? Yes. Our eyes lock with one another's and the bottle of vodka he's pouring drops to the bar. He wants to come after me. I can see it. Not that it's unusual for me to go out this late, to explore Dublin at night. But I understand the look because things are different now, aren't they? We've turned into a couple, even though we weren't supposed to. Temporarily inseparable. Mustering a smile, I wave to him and keep walking, as if there should be no questions asked about my leaving this late, without him. Really, there shouldn't be. That's what I keep telling myself as his eyes burn a hole into my back.

As soon as I'm outside, I take a deep, gulping breath, feeling as though I've been underwater for the last two minutes. My feet start moving in the direction of the park, where I know there will still be a healthy crowd even at this time of night. I want to watch other people, witness their expressions and listen to their problems, so I don't have to think of my own. I need a distraction. I need my sister.

After walking another block, I sit down on a bench across from the Liffey and dig my phone out of my bag. Ginger answers on the second ring.

"Hey."

"Hey, yourself."

I close my eyes, the comfort of her voice wrapping me up like a flannel blanket.

"How's my niece? Is she cursing like a sailor yet?"

"Not an f-bomb to speak of. Truth be told, we're starting to get worried."

My mouth twitches. “Aw, you know us Peet girls. All in our own time.”

We’re silent for a moment, and I can hear someone singing softly in the background, presumably to Dolly. When I realize its Derek, my throat closes up. I miss them so much. I know if they were standing in front of me, they would read me like a book. They would know the right words to say, or at the very least, Ginger would feed me chicken pot pie. But they can’t fix this situation with Shane for me. I’m an adult now, I went into it with my eyes open, and I have to take the inevitable pain that comes along with it.

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“You going to tell me what’s wrong, or am I supposed to guess?”

Ginger’s astuteness surprises a laugh out of me. I thought I’d been doing a decent job of sounding normal. “What’s wrong, your crystal ball is in the shop?” She says nothing and I sigh. “It’s no one.” I cringe. “I mean, it’s nothing.”

“Uh-huh. Does this no one have a penis?”

“You kiss your baby with that mouth?”

“Hmm.”

I slouch back against the bench. “Yeah, no one has a penis.”

“Now that would be a crying shame.”

I don’t need a crystal ball to know we’re both smiling, but mine eventually fades. She’s just waiting on the other end for me to talk. Dammit, I love her for that. No pressure, just patience. She hasn’t brought up Evan, or the breakup I’d taken so hard. Hasn’t asked how I’m feeling or what I’ve learned on my trip. It makes me want to tell her everything. I suspect she knows that, too. She might be patient, but my sister is no dummy. “Ginger, that first week when you met Derek...could you have walked away?”

She chokes on a laugh. “You think he would have let me?”

Excellent point. “No. But if you absolutely had to, if you knew it was best for both of

you, could you have done it?"

"No."

I wasn't expecting her to answer so easily. "Why?"

Ginger hums in her throat, the way she does when she's thinking. "Love comes in many forms. It's not always sweet. Or comfortable. Sometimes it's selfish and consuming. Volatile." Derek's gentle singing in the background has stopped. "It makes choices for you. It demands you obey it, not taking no for an answer. And it's usually right. It knows you better than you know yourself." Ginger's voice has gone soft. It sounds like she's sitting right beside me on the bench. "It turns you inside out. Occasionally, it hurts, but in the best way imaginable. To remind you of how powerful it is. To keep you feeling alive." She pauses. "I could have tried to walk away, but the love would have just come with me. Above all, love is stubborn as hell."

"Shit. Good answer," I manage in the understatement of the year. "I was just asking for a friend, of course."

"Of course."

Shaking my head at myself, I search for something to change the subject. When I remember what I wanted to tell her, I slap my hand to my forehead. "Hey, get this. Our great-great-grandmother was a nun."

"Shut. Up."

"I can't believe I forgot to tell you." After gaining my feet, I start walking once more in the direction of the park. "I went to the Heritage Center the day you had the baby. We actually have an ancestor who saw fit to take a vow of celibacy. They gave me

documentation as proof of her virgin status.”

“Good thing, because I need to see it with my own two eyes.”

“You will.” My steps falter a little. “I’ll be home next week.”

“Dolly can’t wait to meet you.” She clears her throat. “I, uh, wouldn’t mind seeing your scrawny butt either.”

“Hey, I make up for my scrawniness in attitude.”

“Amen to that.” Ginger pauses a moment. “Listen. You know I don’t like to give advice, but seeing as I’m sleep-deprived and my tits are now a twenty-four-hour feeding station, I feel like I’ve earned the right to say my piece.”

I nod, as if she can see me. “Fair enough. Shoot.”

“I get the sense that maybe you’re in a difficult spot.” Slowly, she blows out a breath. “But there will be a moment, Wip. It’ll come when you’re not looking for it, but it will smack you upside your head. You’ll realize everything is bigger than you. Already planned out like a road map. It happened to me, and I shied away because I was scared. This moment, it can be the worst of your life, or the best. Just make it your best. Let it be your best. Okay?”

I can’t speak around the lump in my throat, so I just mumble an acknowledgment. Ginger seems satisfied with that, however.

“I love you, Wip. You call me or Derek if you need anything.”

“Love you, too,” I whisper, then hang up. I walk back toward my bench and sit down. It’s the middle of the night before I stand on stiff legs and walk back toward the inn.

...

I wake up the next morning to the liquid sound of Kitty pouring tea into my cup. Weird. She usually knocks. Too tired to question the anomaly, I bury my face into the feather pillow and attempt to reenter the dream I'd been having about giant, dancing coffee makers in top hats. When my bed dips and I feel a breeze against my bare legs, I frown. A solid form presses against my back, pulling me up against it. My eyes pop open, my lips part on a gasp. That ain't Kitty.

"Shane?"

"You were expecting another man to crawl into your bed?"

"Of course not. I keep a very strict schedule." I suck in a breath when he starts circling a finger around my belly button. My ni**les tighten, and I'm jolted into awareness of my skin. Every inch of it being cradled by the soft sheets, everywhere it presses against Shane's warm flesh, the juncture of my thighs.

"Where did you go last night?"

"For a walk." My eyelids flutter as he cups my br**sts. "Needed some air."

"Next time, I come with you."

I shake my head on the pillow. "How do you know there'll be a next t—"

Shane flips me over onto my back, mouth silencing mine in one swift, move. It's more than an urgency to kiss me, he didn't want me to finish what I was saying, even though it was true. There might not be another walk, another chance to take him with me. So that's how we're playing it? Avoidance? When his hips fit between the notch of my thighs and pushes forward, I decide I can live with that for now. As long as he

doesn't stop touching me, I can pretend just about anything.

Finally, he breaks the kiss, speaking gruffly near my ear. "Soft, warm girl. Will you let me bury myself inside you this morning?"

Those words make me moan a little, make me drop my hands to his ass and pull him closer. "You're naked in my bed. That's as far from a rejection as you can get."

"I want the words." His mouth traces a path down my naked chest. It reminds me I went to bed without clothes on. I must have expected to be woken this way. "Every time you say yes, it feels like a victory. Better than the rush of winning any race or having some trophy handed to me. Are you hearing me?"

"Yes," I manage breathily as he draws on my nipple hard.

He lifts his head to trap me in his gaze. "Are you?"

I'm not sure what I see in his eyes, but it makes my heart trip over itself, then pound so loud I can hear it. I'm terrified of that look, of the determination behind it. No. No, I thought we were avoiding. I curl a hand around his neck and try to draw him down for a kiss, but he resists.

"At least give me my victory, Willa. Tell me I can have you."

"I can do better than that." I'm thankful that he seems to be letting me off the hook for now. Whatever he was trying to communicate, it's obvious I'm not ready for it. There's guilt, too, that I'm leaving him hanging, even if I don't know what his change in attitude is all about. I don't know another way to make my denial up to him, so I push him onto his back. Giving him a moment to look over my naked body above him, I lean down and drag my tongue down his chest, his belly. I grip him in my hand, stroke until he chokes my name.

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Then I take him into my mouth. Remembering in vivid detail everything that drove him crazy the last time, I start slow, using gentle suction up and down his length until his fingers tighten painfully in my hair. Letting my fingernails dig into his inner thighs, just enough to make him growl, I increase the pace of my mouth.

“Use your hands...Christ...that’s how I like it. But you know that, don’t you? Know exactly how to make me go f**king crazy.”

I purr in my throat, sending vibrations up his flesh. Last time, this move is what sent him over the edge and today is no different. His muscles tighten everywhere we’re touching, his voice goes raw. Only this time, he holds back. Before I even sense him moving, he sits up and pulls my head away from his lap. He comes up on his knees and spins me around, putting me on my hands and knees in front of him. Calloused fingers trail down my spine and smooth over my bottom, sensitizing my skin even more, making me arch my back into his hands.

Across the room, I catch sight of us in the full-length mirror. Shane’s strong frame towering over mine, the exotic position, at least to me, is so provocative and trusting that arousal twists and turns inside me. He hasn’t noticed our reflection yet, so he’s not aware that I can see his face. The way he’s looking at me traps my next breath in my lungs. It’s as though he’s savoring the moment, cherishing the sight of me waiting for him. Then he sees me watching him in the mirror across the room and lust takes over, glazing his blue eyes. Keeping his gaze on me, he slides two fingers between my legs, applying pressure right where I’m dying for it. We both bite back at the sight of him touching me, of my body’s reaction.

After reaching into his discarded jeans for a condom and rolling it on, he grabs a

pillow from the bed, tossing it down in front of me. “Scream into this.”

Then he thrusts inside me, pushing deep and holding while my voice cracks on a scream, muffled by the soft material of the pillow. He grips my hips and starts to move and honest to God, the sight of his muscular body taking me this way, watching it happen in the mirror, is the one of the most liberating experiences of my life. I’m not embarrassed or shy or worried about what comes afterward. I’m just alive. Shane’s abdomen flexes with each twist of his hips. My flesh gives under the bruising grip of his fingers. We’re both biting our lips to keep quiet, but the bed is creaking underneath me.

“Do you like watching me f**k you, girl?”

“God, yes,” I answer without hesitation. “D-do you like it?”

His eyes squeeze shut when I start pushing back against him, meeting his drives, urging him to go faster. “Is that a...serious question?” One of his hands leaves my hip to massage me where our bodies meet. He laughs under his breath when I have to drop my face into the pillow to moan. “Babe, it has to be soon. I don’t want it to end, but...”

“It’s too much.”

“Yes.” His hips are moving in a blur now. “Fuck, yes.”

Watching him struggle to hold back for me, seeing his arm and neck muscles strain with the effort, sends me crashing into pleasure. I force myself to keep my eyes open so I can see him come apart...and it’s the hottest thing I’ve ever seen. He falls forward to press his chest against my back as he pushes deep and growls through his climax. His eyes never leave mine. I know he wants me to see it, what I do to him. What we do to each other.

A mess of emotions whirls in my chest, so intense I have to look away. Shane pulls me down onto the bed, tucking me against him before I can get up. He's holding me so tight, I have no choice but to relax little by little. I'm afraid he's going to give voice to what I sense hanging over us, so I'm relieved when he doesn't. I want to stay in the dark where it's easier and I don't have to say words that will leave me vulnerable.

"So my plan was to come in here, fix you a cup of tea, and make slow, passionate love to you."

I smile in response to the amusement in his voice.

"Of course, I also expected to find you in an oversized police department T-shirt."

"Oh, I'm shouldering the blame?"

"Exactly."

I yawn through a laugh, allowing myself to feel content for now. "You made two errors in judgment, I don't drink tea—"

"I've noticed," Shane says. "I'm convinced you've just never had anyone fix it for you properly. We're going to remedy that now."

Abruptly, he sits up. I roll over and snuggle into the sheets to watch him. He pulls on his pants and leaves them unbuttoned, then starts doctoring the cup of tea he'd poured earlier with milk and sugar. When I make a disgusted face, he narrows his eyes at me. I'm having a really difficult time not smiling like an idiot when there's a gorgeous guy making me a cup of tea with no shirt on, hair all mussed. He catches me eyeing his happy trail with speculation and smirks.

“Sit up. I’m about to banish the word coffee from your vocabulary.”

I prop myself against the pillow and take the offered cup. “Never going to happen. When I die, I want my ashes sprinkled over a Starbucks.”

“Drink.”

With an eye roll, I take a sip. And holy shit, it’s so good. He’s made it strong enough that I get a caffeine kick, but it’s smooth and...delicious. “Wow.”

He nods once, then begins crawling toward me on the bed, looking like a big, hungry jungle cat. “Now what was my second error in judgment?”

It takes me a moment to catch up. “You, uh...said you were going to make slow, passionate love to me.” My breath hitches when he takes the cup of tea from my hand and sets it on the bedside table, never once taking his attention off me. “But we never do anything slow.”

“Oh no?” He tugs the sheet down to reveal my br**sts. “You should know better by now than to challenge me. Now I have to prove you wrong.”

I gasp when his tongue traces a circle around my nipple. “In that case, I bet you can’t do that again.”

His laughter puffs out over my damp skin. “You’re a quick learner.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

True to his word, Brian comes to the Claymore for dinner the following night. He is shaved and wearing a navy-blue button-down shirt, of which he tugs at the collar every other minute. Faith, who lit up like a Christmas tree when he walked in, has

disappeared into the bathroom several times to change her hairstyle. Ponytail, messy bun, ponytail. While Shane finishes his shift behind the bar, Kitty bustles through the dining room, placing a vase with fresh-cut flowers on the table where Brian sits waiting, ripping up cocktail napkins. If he didn't flush straight to the tips of his hair every time Faith walks past, I would think he was here against his will. But it's obvious to anyone with a pair of eyes that he would wade through hot lava for her.

I suspect Shane sees it, too, from the resigned half smile he sends me when Brian plants a kiss on Faith's forehead. I'm sitting at the bar drinking a Shirley Temple, talking to Orla while she waits to take over for Shane. He and I haven't touched since this morning and there's an invisible tug between us now, drawing us together. From the way he's staring at me, I don't think I'm the only one that feels it. He passes by to grab a bottle of beer for a customer and lets his fingers trail over my knuckles. Just that simple touch calms and excites me all at once. I know it's not a good thing. I know I shouldn't continue to feed my addiction for Shane, but there is a voice in my head that keeps whispering, tomorrow, you'll start distancing yourself tomorrow...

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“Are you joining them for the dreaded meet-the-parents dinner?” Orla asks me now, jerking her chin toward the table. We laugh when we see Kitty is now placing a candelabra in the center, lighting each candle with careful concentration.

I open my mouth to answer, but Shane beats me to it. “Of course she is.” He looks at me a beat, then goes back to counting money in the register.

Orla salutes me with the cup of tea. “The man has spoken.”

I won’t pretend I don’t like Shane including me, as if it were a foregone conclusion. That’s how it feels, all of a sudden. Like we’re two people trying to squeeze out every last moment together and we’re beyond lying about it. To ourselves or other people. We don’t have any choice but to spend time together because if we tried, we’d just be miserable, wishing for the other person’s presence. I know how irresponsible this is. I know. And yet.

You’ll start distancing yourself tomorrow. Tomorrow is soon enough.

Orla gets up to take Shane’s place behind the bar. A moment later, I feel Shane’s hand on my shoulder, handily interrupting the chanting taking place in my head. He leans in and kisses the skin underneath my ear, then places another soft one on my mouth.

“I missed you today.”

“I missed you, too,” I admit, giving into the temptation to rub my palm against his stubbled chin. “I went to Starbucks this afternoon and ordered tea. You’ve ruined me.

I can never show my face in Chicago again.”

“My work here is done.” He leans into my hand. “What else did you get up to today?”

“Oh, you know. Things.” I start to fidget. “I might have...bought you something.”

“Me?” One corner of his mouth quirks up. Has he always been this freaking good-looking? His smile is making my brain do jazz hands. “What is it?”

“Really, I didn’t go out with the intention of buying you a gift.” Oh, God. What is wrong with me? I’m not fit to communicate with members of the general public. “I just saw it and thought, ‘Hey, that guy Shane might like this.’”

“Ah, Willa. You know how to make a man feel special.”

Before I lose my nerve, I pick up the bag that has been sitting at my feet. “It’s nothing. It’s the worst gift ever. Here.”

Shane shakes his head at me as he reaches into the bag. When he pulls out the leopard-print steering-wheel cover, with the words Drive it Like You Stole it printed in giant, red block letters, I want to dump my Shirley Temple over my head.

“I bought it for the red car,” I rush to explain. “I thought...I just hope you drive it more often.” When his gaze locks on me, I force myself not to look away. “You should drive it all the time. You should be proud of it. So, there.”

“So there,” he murmurs. “Thank you.”

I nod once, searching for a way to change the subject. “What’s the game plan for dinner? Are we playing good cop, bad cop on Brian? Or—”

His mouth cuts off my ramble. At first, it's just a tool to quiet me down, but then he sinks into it, tasting me with a slow lick of his tongue. He lifts his hands to cup the sides of my face, thumbs brushing over my cheekbones. "Spend the night in my room tonight."

"Yes," I whisper.

...

Halfway through dinner, Kitty has consumed one, count 'em, one, glass of wine and with each sip, has grown increasingly dramatic. Broad gestures and sweeping statements. It's actually a relief because it takes the focus off red-faced Brian and nervous-giggling Faith. Slowly but surely, everyone at the table relaxes and we start to enjoy Kitty's antics. Even if Shane cut her off after one glass.

The bar has grown steadily busier as we eat burgers, amazing burgers, actually. I'm kicking myself for waiting so long to try the food at the Claymore. Behind the bar, Orla is keeping up with the crowd, turning up the music and lowering the lights to encourage people to dance. Once again, I marvel at how comfortable I am here. The way the sounds, the hum of conversation settles around you, making you a part of it. With Shane sitting beside me on the wooden bench, I feel...safe. Happy.

"Brian, my dear lad. Stolen Faith's heart, have you?" Kitty sips from her empty wineglass, frowns down at it, then sips again. "I'll have to call over to your mum. We've much to discuss, she and I."

"Ma, that's not nec—"

"Does she watch crime shows? I'm trying to find things we have in common, you see. I want to walk in and hit her with something interesting. Straightaway, she should say, 'That woman is interesting. I'm glad my son has taken up with her

daughter.’”

Brian scratches the back of his neck. “She likes to cook. Or at least I think she does. She may just do it so Patrick and I don’t starve to death.”

At the mention of Patrick, Shane’s hand finds my thigh under the table, settling there possessively. I narrow my eyes, but he only gives me a level look. “Are you looking for your own place?” he asks Brian.

“Looking for a job first.” He flushes a little. “Our gigs at O’Kelly’s don’t pay much.”

“What about here?” Shane asks after a moment, surprising me. “Can you tend bar?”

“I’ve never done it,” he admits. “But I’m something of an expert at pouring a drink. Only, it’s usually for myself.”

Faith pats her hair nervously, imploring Shane with her eyes. “You could show him. Couldn’t you, Shane?”

I rest my hand on top of his, hoping he agrees for Faith’s sake. His fingers lace with mine automatically, and he tugs me closer on the bench.

“Sure. We’ll work something out.”

Faith breathes a laugh. “Grand.”

“Grand,” Brian echoes, looking like he’s just struck gold.

At this point, I am barely restraining the urge to launch myself at Shane and kiss him until he passes out from lack of oxygen. He is being so agreeable, such a good brother, even though I suspect he wants to lock Faith in her room and throw the key

into the Liffey. He might not be welcoming Brian to the family with a big, back-slapping hug, but he's making an effort. From Shane, an effort seems more meaningful than any false gesture of camaraderie.

"At one time, people called me the best dancer in Dublin." Kitty breaks the silence with that statement, daring us all with a look to contradict her. She gestures to a group of dancing students with her empty glass. "They wouldn't have known what hit them back then. One boy even called me superior. I could tell he meant it, too. Sometimes you can just tell."

She goes back to staring wistfully at the group of dancers, her feet tapping on the floor, as she hums along to the unfamiliar pop song. I don't know where I get the courage, maybe it's the three Shirley Temples buzzing through my system, but I lean across the table and tap her arm. "Kitty, do you want to dance?"

"More than anything."

I shrug one shoulder. "Let's see those moves."

Kitty seems to lose her courage with each step in the direction of the dance floor. After her speech, I'd kind of been counting on her to get this little dance party started, being that I don't usually dance in public. As in, you couldn't pay me. When she looks like she might bolt back to our table, I take her hands impulsively...and start doing the twist. She stares at me wide-eyed a moment, then begins to loosen up little by little. Her face transforms with an intense look of concentration, teeth biting her bottom lip so hard I think she's going to draw blood. One of the younger men dancing behind us gives her a thumbs-up and she giggles, sounding so much like Faith, I feel an uncomfortable welling in my chest.

“I told you I was superior, American.”

“I never doubted you, Kitty.”

“Hmm.”

Swallowing a laugh, I glance over at our table to find Shane watching me with a strange look in his eye. I’m positive I’m looking at him the same way, almost like a reflection. He looks like he’s actually coming to join us when Orla shouts his name behind the bar, holding up the phone to indicate he has a call. With a regretful look in my direction, he heads behind the bar and picks up the phone. For some reason, I keep watching him. There’s a prickling at the back of my neck that I’ve gotten regularly since childhood, a sense that I need to be on my toes. That my guard needs to be firmly in place. I try to ignore it, put my attention back on Kitty, but when Shane’s face slowly loses color, I know I was right. He looks up, gaze zeroing in on me through the crowd to where I’m dancing. He’s talking into the phone, jotting notes down onto a pad of paper.

A minute later, he hangs up and makes his way toward me slowly. I fight back the need to turn and run out the door. Something is coming and I don’t want to face it. When he reaches me, I realize I haven’t been dancing in long minutes. I’ve just been standing motionless amongst the group of swaying bodies.

“What’s up?” I manage.

He’s staring at me so hard, it’s a wonder I can stand under the weight of it. “That was my racing coach. Their driver was injured this morning during practice. They have an

alternate, but he has no experience on this particular track.”

I nod, as if I could even process that information. I need him to rip off the Band-Aid. To give me the bottom line. “Okay. What does that mean?”

“They need me for the Italian Grand Prix. Tomorrow afternoon.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

There’s a horrible feeling you get when you wake up on a Monday morning thinking it’s Saturday. Then you slowly remember, as you enter wakefulness, you have a whole week ahead of you instead of a lazy day off watching television and eating bagels. This moment, where Shane is telling me he’s leaving tomorrow, it’s that Monday morning feeling multiplied by a thousand. Only, I didn’t get my week. I didn’t have a chance to prepare myself before Monday morning blindsided me. I’m in the deep end with no time to make it back to the shallow side. And if I’m honest with myself, this feeling I have right now, the cantaloupe-sized crater in my stomach, tells me I was fooling myself if I thought I could have readied myself for this.

“Willa.”

Shane snaps me back into myself, his panicked voice telling me he’s been saying my name for a while. His handsome face is a mask of worry, instead of elated, the way it should be. This is his dream. He has a serious offer on the Claymore and his racing team needs him back behind the wheel. In a matter of days, his future has been sorted out for him. Yet he looks like his world just caved in. It hits me, then. It’s because of me. He doesn’t want to leave me. For a split second, I ponder if I could be selfish enough to keep him here. Make him stay and give me the week he promised. Maybe...more, even. If he stays, there’s nothing stopping me from extending my time here. We could have even longer. If he says no to the race, that is.

Disgusted, I push that idea over the side of a cliff. If I'm even partly the reason for the fear in his eyes, I will never forgive myself. And this will only be the beginning. There will be more races. More offers. I can't expect him to turn them down. This is what he's wanted his whole life.

Underneath all these valid reasons is the one that I've been trying to ignore. But it's there, circled and underlined with a black Sharpie. It's the ugly monster that has been hiding under my bed, finally crawling to join me among the sheets, suffocating me until there's nothing left.

I'll ruin him. I can't make another human being happy. I'm incapable of it. What I did to Evan, the way I wore him down until the spark left his eye when he looked at me. If I did that to Shane, if I changed a single thing about him for the worse, I would never recover. I could have handled a week. Even I can't screw up something that quickly. The thought of him altering his path—for me, a girl who can't commit to a brand of gum—it's terrifying.

“Willa, say something.”

“Sorry.” I force a smile onto my face. “That's great, right?”

He rocks back on his heels. “Great.”

“When do you leave?” I ask, then hold my breath.

“It would be early in the morning, but I haven't agreed to go yet,” he answers slowly. “I told them I'd call back after I thought about it.”

I try and look perplexed, even though my heart wants to jump out of my throat. “What is there to think about?”

“Is this really how you’re going to play it?”

Dammit. This is going to be even harder than I anticipated. Not only am I battling the selfish urge to throw myself into his arms and beg him to pick me, but Shane is far too astute. In a short space of time, he’s learned what makes me tick. He knows me. He’s disappointed in me already. It’s there in his eyes. He was hoping for more from me, a much-different response. Good. The sooner he realizes I’m not what he wants, the better.

When I don’t have an answer to his question, he takes my elbow. “Let’s go upstairs and talk in private. I’m not going to get a damn thing from you otherwise.”

No. I can’t be alone with him. I’ll crack. “I said, there is nothing to talk about. You’re being ridiculous. Let go of my arm.”

Shane’s jaw tightens as he considers me. He nods once, as if he’s come to a decision. Then I’m being thrown over his shoulder. For a second, all I can do is gape as the room turns upside down. Kitty doesn’t stop dancing, but waves at me as if her son carrying me from the room like a sack of flour is the most natural thing in the world. I marvel over that briefly. Are these people all f**king crazy? Oh, but then, I get pissed. He’s taking away my ability to avoid him, my feelings. That is unacceptable. I rely on avoidance. It’s all I have.

We’re halfway up the stairs before I find my voice. “When you put me down, I am going to claw your goddamn eyes out.”

“Good.” He pulls a key ring out of his pocket and unlocks my door, then kicks it open with his booted foot. “Anything will be an improvement from that bullshit you attempted to feed me downstairs.”

He hefts me off his shoulder and sets me on my feet with such little effort that my

outrage boils over. I shove against his chest with both hands. Hard. He leans into it, not backing away, but coming toward me. That look I saw in his eye at the airport, the breathtaking anger I'd first noticed, is there. Only this time, it's directed at me, and it's tempered with hope. Determination. I can't take it. It hurts. It feels like a fist to the gut.

"That's right, girl. Fight me. Show me you give a damn." He keeps walking, and I keep shoving, but he won't give me an inch. Finally, my back hits the wall and with a sob, I make one final attempt to push him away. He stands firm, trapping me between the wall and his body. I can feel the tears burning in my eyes, but I pretend they don't exist as I glare up at him.

"Why don't you tell me what the hell you want from me?" I shout up at him.

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 7:15 am

“What I want?” He’s shouting back and I love that about him, even as I hate him for forcing my hand. I love that he’s not treating me like I’m fragile. But I am. Where he is concerned, I’m made of glass. He doesn’t know that, though. I have that going for me. “I want one word from you, one word that tells me I’m not crazy. That I’m not imagining what it feels like when we’re standing in the same room together. God, the thought of getting on a plane without you, babe... I can’t breathe for thinking about it.”

My whole body is shaking. No, he doesn’t know what he’s saying. Right now, he might mean it, but it’s only a matter of time before he realizes I’m unfixable. I’m damaged goods. This is what’s best for both of us, he just can’t see it yet. I know what I have to do, but my heart wants to explode just contemplating it. Starting in my neck, I numb myself. I let it coat my insides and harden like a plaster cast. I watch his expression change as he watches me, like he sees it happening. He knows he’s lost. I want to fall into a heap on the floor in that moment.

“I don’t know what you thought this was, Shane.” Somehow, I look him right in the eye. “I’m not going to lie, I wouldn’t have minded another week to have fun. But that’s all this ever was. Fun and temporary.”

“No. I don’t accept that.” His lips meet mine, driving them apart for his tongue. It’s an angry kiss, a wild one, but there’s so much more behind it, a tiny sound leaves my throat. My hands fly to his shoulders and cling before I fall at his feet. Finally, he pulls away, both of us breathing heavily. “Does that feel temporary to you?”

No. The exact opposite. It feels like forever. Digging deep, I find the nail in the coffin and pound it home. “It’s not enough for me. I don’t feel whatever it is you feel.”

He's gone still. The fire he had behind his blue eyes when we walked into the room is gone. My numbness is starting to fade, and I'm seconds away from taking it all back. I'm incapable of seeing him look this helpless. Not Shane, the one who never gives me an inch, the one who carried me up the stairs over his shoulder mere minutes ago. Gathering my remaining resolve, I duck under his arm and walk toward the door. I need to get out of there. Need to get some air, or I'll never leave. I'll tell him anything he wants to hear and it will all be true.

"I'm sorry," I mumble over my shoulder, wanting to sob when I see he still hasn't moved. "I'm going to get some air. I'll, um...see you later."

That's a lie. I'm not coming back until he's gone.

...

I drift for hours around Dublin. In my haste to leave the Claymore, I'd left my messenger bag behind, along with my cell phone and wallet. Thankfully, I still had twenty-three Euro in my pocket leftover from that afternoon that lets me remain in an all-night coffeehouse for a bulk of the night, staring into nothingness. I wish like hell I had my camera, but it's stowed firmly in my bag, like always. If I had it, maybe I could distract myself, get lost in the emotions of others instead of my own.

Around me, groups of students and people looking to sober up after a night of drinking, converse quietly. A few customers read quietly in the dark corners, absorbed by the words on the page. What has them out alone this time of night? Are they escaping from someone as well?

Several times, the memory of Shane's broken expression comes back to me in such painful clarity, I'm forced into the bathroom where I cry silently in the stall, until someone comes in to use the toilet. They look at me curiously, but don't say anything. I think it goes unspoken if you're out alone at two in the morning, camped

out in a bathroom stall, chances are you aren't up for a chat. I lose track of the hours, until I wake to one of the baristas shaking my shoulder. When I leave the coffee shop, I have no other option but the closest park. Daylight is beginning to streak the sky, such a pretty blue that I resent it immediately. I want it to rain. I want it to flood the streets of Dublin and carry me away.

I watch two older men play chess for hours, half listening to their conversation, but mostly letting myself get lost in the static playing in my ears. Birds land on the bench beside me, at my feet, unafraid of me, probably assuming in their birdbrains that I'm a statue. It's exactly how I feel. Like I've been filled with cement, head to toe. There's nowhere for me to go hide and cry here, in the park, so every once in a while, I'm forced to wipe away tears as they leak out.

Finally, I get the nerve to ask someone what time it is. Ten thirty. Seriously? It feels like I left the Claymore in a daze a hundred years ago. It also feels like I've only been gone fifteen minutes. My brain is so fuzzy, it takes me another half hour to command myself to stand up from the bench and begin walking back toward the Claymore. Shane must be gone by now. Early in the morning, he'd said, a hundred years ago.

My plan is simple. Thinking straight for a long enough stretch to formulate it has been my biggest challenge, but now all I have to do is carry it out. I have to walk into the Claymore, grab my shit, and get to the airport. My flight back to Chicago isn't until next week, but I will switch it. I will sit on a hard, plastic chair at the airport and wait in a standby line for as long as I need to. Just as long as I'm not in Dublin when he returns from the race. If I see him again, I don't think I'll have the strength to leave again. As it is, I'm walking through the door of the Claymore right now, selfishly hoping he's standing behind the bar, strong and reassuring.

It's Orla, though, and based on the sympathetic way she's looking at me, I know he's gone. Without stopping to acknowledge her, I walk through the pub, waves rushing in my ears. I let him go. There's so much pain in my chest right now, I know beyond a

shadow of a doubt this will stay with me forever. Far, far longer than Evan ever would. It's not comparable.

Before I can enter the back hallway, Faith comes rushing out of the kitchen.

"There you are." She's wielding a spatula at me, but I don't have the wherewithal to move. "Where have you been hiding, then?"

"I don't know." It hurts to talk.

"You don't know?" With quick, jerky motions, she wipes her hands on her apron. "You have some bloody nerve, Willa. Running off like that. My brother has to race this afternoon and he spent the whole night looking for you. If you ask me, I think he was wasting his time."

Her sharp words are actually welcome. I need someone to tell me I f**ked-up. That I am a f**kup. It will justify what I did to carve myself out of Shane's life. "You're not telling me anything I don't know, Faith."

That pisses her off. As her face grows bright red, I marvel over how much she's changed since the day I arrived. Gone is the smiling innocent and in her place is a woman. I wonder how I missed that transition. "You know what, Willa? I was wrong about you. We all were. You walked in here full of so much confidence. I thought, God, I'd love to be her. For just one day." She points the spatula at me. "Look at you, now. Slinking out of here with your tail between your legs. You're a coward."

Okay, now I've heard enough. It's starting to break through my cement interior now. I just need to go through the motions and leave before I crack and crumble. Orla doesn't come to my defense and I can practically feel her silent judgment from behind the bar. I start to leave the room, but Faith's next words stop me.

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“He turned down the offer on the Claymore, you know.” I stop dead in my tracks. “He’s coming back. Today is his last race, and then he’s retiring.”

Slowly, I turn back. From her satisfied expression, I can tell my face reflects the shock she was hoping for. “Why? Why would he do that?”

Looking me over head to toe, she shrugs. “Good question.”

I’m halfway up the stairs before I realize my feet have started moving. I don’t know where the sudden urgency comes from, or what it’s directed toward. Only that I need to move fast. Get out of here. Get to the airport. I yank open the door to my room and fall to my knees, dragging my suitcase from under the bed. When I throw it onto the bed, intending to shovel clothes inside, something catches my eye. My camera is sitting on the bedside table, a glossy eight-by-ten picture trapped beneath it. My camera is always in my messenger bag. It shouldn’t be out of its case.

I rise to my feet, afraid to look, instinctively knowing Shane put it there for me to find. When I pick up the camera to fully reveal the shot, my breath traps inside my throat. It’s me. Taken the morning after we spent the night on Killiney Hill. I’ve just removed my shirt, and I’m walking toward Shane, the gray sky alive behind me. Oddly, he didn’t photograph me from the neck down, as I’d assumed he was doing. No. It’s a close-up of my face, as I look at him. He’d zoomed in to capture my expression, and I can see why.

It’s all over my face, in the damp welling of my eyes, the breathlessness he captured with the shot. It’s so obvious. I’m looking at the man I love.

He must have developed the roll of film last night, or stolen it days ago. I have no idea. I only know that I love him more for understanding me so perfectly. For knowing exactly how to show me what I couldn't admit verbally, in the language I speak.

Slowly, I turn the photograph over in my hand. When I see the word LIAR scrawled in what has to be Shane's handwriting, a watery laugh bubbles from my throat. I'm immediately flooded with relief that he knew I was full of shit. He didn't believe me for even a second.

If he was downstairs right now, I would run toward him and jump into his arms. Just like I did the morning he arranged the call with Ginger. The fact that I can't touch him and tell him out loud how I feel, causes me enough physical pain that I have to go back down onto my knees.

Because I love him so damn much. Oh God, it's so powerful it's a wonder I can contain it inside my body. This is that moment my sister warned me about. The moment I realize I'm not self-aware. Not even close. I know nothing about myself or what life is capable of throwing at me.

It hits me in a blinding rush. He's not here because he's in Italy, about to participate in a dangerous race after my disappearance kept him awake all night. And he's going to quit afterward. If he's quitting for me, I can't let it happen. I have to get to him before the race. Can't let him go out there with my parting words echoing in his head. If something happens to him...

I snatch up my messenger bag, double-checking to make sure I still have the emergency debit card Derek gave me, and run down the stairs at a breakneck pace. Faith is standing at the bottom of the stairs, arms crossed. "About time. There's a cab waiting outside."

“Where in Italy is the race?”

“Monza.” When I look at her blankly, she shakes her head. “Just get to Milan, then follow the crowd. They’ll take you to him.”

“Thanks,” I yell, already halfway out the door.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Holy shit. Faith wasn’t kidding. I get off the packed flight in Milan, and I can barely move through the airport. Racing fans are traveling in droves, some talking excitedly about the upcoming race in accented English. Others speaking in languages I don’t understand. Jogging through the terminal, I do a double take when I see Shane’s face on a television screen in the waiting area, above Italian words I can’t read. It gives me serious pause. This event is much larger, more important than I imagined. It makes me twice as determined to reach him before the race starts. It’s imperative that he goes into it with his head in the right place.

I pace impatiently as I wait in line for a taxi, bombarded by memories of the last three weeks, of me and Shane. Our first meeting at the airport, the rainy night in the alleyway, the morning in my bed. The way he’d gone still as death last night when I lied to him, about my feelings. I’m drowning in these memories, in the need to reach him. He can’t race without hearing me say the words that threaten to topple me. For the first time in my life, I’m not running away. I’m running toward. Am I scared? Hell yeah. But I’m twice as scared of never again feeling the way Shane makes me feel. Knowing I make him feel the same way only increases the feeling of desperation to find him. I won’t screw this up because he won’t let me. I’ve never been more confident of anything in my life.

The ride to the track takes a millennium, mostly because the town is overflowing with people, cars, vendors, and television news crews. People carrying flags from their

native countries. Groups of people chanting and cheering. For a girl who spends most of her life hiding in a dark room or avoiding crowds, frankly it's a little overwhelming. I'm in a strange country, I don't speak the language, and I'm running after someone who has the ability to smash my irreparable heart to pieces if he so chooses. I'm running on faith, here, that he won't. That I didn't ruin my chance with him last night. That he still wants me. Please, please, let him still want me. I can't go my whole life knowing I screwed this up. I need a chance to make this right.

With that thought ringing in my head, I toss a handful of Euro at the driver, throw open the door of the taxi, and start running. I can see the grandstands, hear the roar of the crowd, but when I reach the entrance, I realize I've come all this way without a ticket. Surely with this amount of people attending, this much fanfare, the race has been sold out for months. I stumble back from the crowded entrance, seriously contemplating taking a page from Patrick's book by sneakily divesting some unsuspecting race fan of their ticket, but I can't do it.

Frustrated, on the verge of screaming until my lungs give out, I search around wildly for another option. Can I sneak in? Probably not. Definitely not, I remedy, when I see the security guards holding assault rifles, blocking the gates. Then I remember the afternoon Derek took me and Ginger to a Cubs game. As we walked inside to get our seats, there had been men whispering to passersby. Need a ticket? Tickets? Scalpers. Do they have those in Italy?

I scan the teeming mass of people, looking for someone willing to sell me a ticket. When I see a man standing at the edge of the crowd in a ball cap pulled low over his eyes, I start walking toward him. He's not moving with the excited race fans. He's alone, but his mouth is moving as people pass. If he's a scalper, he's my only shot to get inside.

Closing my eyes and saying a quick prayer, I walk past him slowly.

“Il biglietto?”

I stop. “What?”

He sighs. “Ticket?”

I’m so overcome with relief that all I can do is nod. Then he tells me the price. “Are you a f**king crazy person?”

“People pay twice that. You don’t want it, someone else will.”

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“Jesus.” I run a hand through my hair, looking around to make sure no one is paying attention to us. I’m painfully aware that if I use Derek’s emergency debit card to purchase an illegal ticket, he will never let me hear the end of it. Screw it. Desperate times. “Can you wait while I run to an ATM?”

He shrugs. “Go.”

“I’ll be five minutes. Please, please, don’t sell it to anyone else.”

“Why so desperate, bambolina?”

“My boyfriend is racing.” I’m already backing away, searching for the closest ATM. “I have to get inside before it starts.”

“Oh, your boyfriend. Sure.”

I race around the corner, relived to find an ATM near the bathrooms. Two people are in line in front of me and my head starts to pound waiting for them. The cheers on the other side of the grandstands are getting louder and it’s all I can do not to scream at them to go faster. When I reach the front, I actually wince over the amount of money it dispenses at my request, but I resolve to deal with it later. I sprint back to the scalper, who is still asking people if they want the ticket. His eyebrows shoot up when I appear in front of him.

“Let’s see the ticket.”

He slides it out of his pocket, and I quickly scan it for the date, time, and location. It’s

in Italian, so I'm relying mostly on assumptions. God, please don't let it be fake. A loud roar kicks up behind me, forcing me to shove the wad of bills into his hand. "If I don't get it in, I will hunt you down like a dog. Do you understand me?"

"You remind me much of my ex-wife."

Finally, he hands me the ticket, and I'm off running again. The line at the entrance has died down, I'm assuming because the race is getting ready to start. An usher looks at my ticket and directs me to an area far from the starting line, so I ignore him and push through the packed bodies toward the front. I've come this far, and Shane is going to know I'm here, dammit. I don't care if every person I'm elbowing past is cursing at me, they'll get over it.

Against all odds, it seems, I make it to the front barrier. Men twice my size are pressed against it, though, and I can't see over them. Peering between their bodies, I see I'm still a short distance away from the starting line where several helmeted drivers are getting ready to climb into their cars. I don't see Shane. I would know him from the way he moved.

Someone lays a hand on my shoulder, making me jump. I glance over, and up, to find a giant of a man staring down at me. His smile is friendly and sympathetic, so much so that I'm suddenly battling tears. Failure is looming in front of me. After the effort I'd made, it doesn't seem possible. This stranger appears to read it on my face. I'm not surprised, since I don't have the strength to hold anything back at the moment.

"Would you like to watch the start of the race on my shoulders?" he asks me in thickly accented English. Okay, seriously. Am I wearing a sign that says I'm American?

Normally, that kind of forwardness from anyone would freak me out, but I'm plum out of options. I find myself nodding slowly and before I know it, this gigantic

stranger in a racing jacket is picking me up and tossing me on his back like a rag doll. It's the second time that it has happened in less than twenty-four hours, so it stings just a little. But I don't care, because I can see the track. I can see the group of drivers adjusting their gloves and helmets, some of them waving at the roaring crowd. An announcer's voice is barely audible among the whistling and shouting. Where is he? Where is—

I see him. He's standing beside a yellow car, nodding as someone in a white jumpsuit speaks to him. Out of the corner of my eye, I see a woman walk onto the track holding a black-and-white checkered flag. This is it. I'm out of time.

I close my eyes and yell, at the top of my lungs. Louder than I've ever yelled in my life. It actually makes my own ears ring. "Shane!"

Nothing. He doesn't even flinch. I don't stop, though. I try again and again, until my voice starts to go hoarse. Everyone around me is turning to stare curiously at the crazy girl screaming her head off, and I don't care. I keep going. Just when I'm beginning to admit it's hopeless, the giant below me starts to shout. Shane. His voice, added to mine, is twice as loud. To my utter shock, men and women in my immediate vicinity start shouting with us. Shane. Shane. Shane. Maybe they sense my desperation, maybe they're mocking me, but whatever it is has a better chance of working than my single voice.

Finally, finally, I see the voices reach him and he looks up. It's such an enormous relief that a huge sob breaks from my chest. I feel like I might melt off the giant's shoulders, but I force myself to start waving my arms frantically, begging him to look over and see me.

He does.

His body goes very still, except for the gloved hand reaching up to remove his

helmet. He pulls it off and his arm falls at his side, helmet hitting the ground. Face a mask of disbelief, his mouth moves in a way that tells me he's saying my name. Then he's jogging toward me. The man in the white jumpsuit tries to grab his arm, but Shane shrugs him off. His expression is making it hard for me to breathe and it's worth everything I'd gone through to get here. Fuck that, it's worth every hardship I'll ever face in my life again. It's love. It's beautiful.

“Willa.”

An announcement comes over the loudspeakers, then. First, in Italian, then in English. He stops, halfway between me and the starting line. Looking back over his shoulder, looking at me. The man in the white jumpsuit is shouting at him to get into the car. The people in my little cheering section are staring at me in a whole new light, whispering to one another.

“Who are you?” the giant asks me.

“I’m...he’s mine. We’re ours. I...we haven’t talked about it yet.”

“Now might be a bad time for a discussion. He’s about to get disqualified.”

I don’t have time to answer because Shane is closing the distance between us again. He’s picked me. Over the race. Over this entire city of fans who have come out to watch it happen. I want to sink down into that knowledge and live inside it forever, but I can’t yet. He has to fulfill his dream, and I’ll be damned if he’s going to give it up. If it’s his dream, it’s my dream, too.

Balancing precariously on the giant’s shoulders, I draw myself up resolutely, ignoring the grunt from below.

“Shane.” I point at the starting line. He’s close enough now that he can hear me, so he

stops and nods. “Get in that car. And smoke their asses.”

...

He actually wins the race. It's like something out of a movie. When he crosses the finish line, only a few seconds ahead of the next driver, I can't quite believe it. I'd seen his trophies so I knew he was capable of winning, but to see it happen live, feels like a far-off dream. Yesterday, he'd been pouring beer behind the bar, and today he's winning this massive sporting event. It's incredible. I'm so filled to bursting with pride and happiness, I have to cling to the fence to stay upright. Immediately, people stream onto the track, circling Shane and trying to hoist him onto their shoulders. Champagne bottles are being popped, spraying over the hood over the car. News cameras push through the celebration, trying to reach Shane. All I can do is stand on the sidelines smiling, watching it all play out. Celebrating for him on the inside.

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I start to back away from the fence, knowing he'll call me as soon as the world stops wanting a piece of him. And I'll be waiting. I'm not going anywhere.

“Willa!”

I hear his voice and jerk around, catching sight of him as he pushes through the adoring crowd around him. He's scanning the track, the grandstands, frantic gaze finally meeting mine. He starts running, dodging cameras and people asking for autographs. I press up against the fence and wait for him to reach me. Laughing and crying at the same time. I take in every detail of him. His sweaty hair, dark and twisted on his head from being kept inside his helmet. The way he looks in his racing suit, the way he's looking at me. As if I'm the only thing he can see even though an entire city now knows his name, or is currently throwing a party in his honor.

“Shane.”

“Willa.” He muscles past a few more cameras and reaches over the barrier to slide his hands under my arms, before dragging me over it and into his waiting arms. That quickly, being held against his chest, I can breathe again. He's strong and familiar and we fit together in a way that makes me wonder how I even envisioned us parting ways. It would have been like trying to separate a heart from a body, expecting that body to go on living. Impossible.

I want to hold on forever, but he's pulling away to shake me. His blue eyes are full of intensity and hope. I'm so thankful I didn't crush that part of him, my knees want to give out. “Tell me why you came. Tell me you're here because you love me as much as I love you.”

“I love you. I love you.”

His eyes squeeze shut and he crushes me back against his chest. “Thank God.”

“You did it,” I whisper in his ear. “You won.”

“Dammit, I just wanted to finish the race so I could make sure I didn’t imagine you standing there,” he rasps at my temple.

“I’m so sorry.” Tears are coursing down my cheeks, soaking into his racing suit. “I didn’t mean those horrible things I said. It all happened so fast. Took me a while to catch up.”

“It’s okay, love. Everything is going to be fine now.” He pushes my hair away from my face, eagerness transforming his expression. “We’ll figure this out together. If it means splitting time between Dublin and Chicago—”

“What about racing?”

Slowly, he shakes his head. “It’s not worth it, Willa. Not without you standing there when I win.”

“Exactly.” When he only stares, I push up on my toes and kiss his lips softly, pulse racing when he moans in response. “You’re not giving this up. I can take pictures anywhere. I’m coming with you.”

His hands clench in the material at the back of my shirt, but his face gives nothing away. “You would do that? Give it all up for me?”

“You’re not listening. I’d be giving everything up if I walked away from you.”

Shane's throat works with emotion. He starts to speak and stops, leaning down to mold his mouth to mine instead. We both groan in our throats at the contact, lips pressing and opening. Around us, flashbulbs go off and cameras roll. People shout questions in Italian and English. Ignoring them all, he lifts me off my feet, deepening the kiss for a moment before pulling away.

"You won't regret it a day in your life. I won't let you. Do you hear me?"

I press my forehead against his and nod. "Yes. I'm listening now."

"Good." He lays one more hard kiss on my lips, then sweeps me up into his arms. "Let's go home, then."

"Where's home?" I ask, laying my head on his shoulder.

"Wherever you are, girl."

Epilogue

Shane

I glance down at Willa as we climb the stairs to Ginger and Derek's Chicago apartment. It's Thanksgiving, a holiday I've never had cause to celebrate before, and the first time I'll officially meet her family. And the first time she'll meet her niece, Dolly. Willa thinks I'm nervous, I can tell by the way she keeps squeezing my hand comfortingly, smiling up at me, teeth showing and everything. If she does it one more time, I swear, I'm going to kiss the bloody breath out of her. She'll never even see it coming.

In reality, I'm not nervous at all. I'm damned relieved I've finally been given the chance to bring her home for a visit. Relieved I'll finally have the chance to look her

sister and brother-in-law in the eye and reassure them I've been looking after her properly. If she knew that was my intention, she'd probably swing right for my jaw.

Hell, now I'm smiling, too.

In the last three months since Willa showed up in Italy and turned my world from black and white to color, we've been all over the world together. Singapore, New Delhi, São Paulo. In between races and training, we've been in Dublin, making sure the pub survives in my absence. Our absence, really. It hasn't been the same since the day she walked in. I didn't want to see it at first. It was difficult to withstand all of her beauty when I'd never witnessed anything like it before. My first instinct had been to push it away. Pretend I didn't see.

A surge of panic finds my stomach, the way it always does when I imagine where I'd be if she'd never won that contest, never walked into my inn. Or if I'd managed to push her away before I saw underneath her fear to the courageous girl beneath. A man walking around without a heartbeat. Going through the motions. That's who I'd be.

Her hands tightens in mine again and she smiles up at me, with teeth and everything.

Right. That does it.

We reach the top of the landing, and I drag her up against me. "Are you trying to drive me mad, girl?"

Her lips part, and I have the urge to nip the bottom one, so I do, loving the way she gasps when I lick the spot to soothe it. "What gave you that idea?"

"You're smiling up at me like I'm some kind of hero for bringing you home. Dammit, Willa. I should have had you here months ago."

She slides her fingers into my hair and the world steadies itself again. “We’ve been busy. They understand. And you’re forgetting it’s just as much my decision as yours.”

“It’s my racing that’s kept you away. Racing, the pub—”

“I’ve loved every minute. Being with you, taking pictures. You know I have.” She settles her taut, little body against mine and we both sigh. “Every.” Kiss. “Single.” Jesus, tongue this time. “Minute.” I want her now, here. I always want her. But I know it will have to wait. She’s sacrificed everything for me, and now it’s my turn to step up. Her family is waiting for her. I don’t do well being away from her more than a day. I can only imagine what nearly four months was like for them.

Reluctantly, I set her away from me and take her hand. I can see excitement curling the corners of her mouth as she leads me to the door.

“Ready?” she asks and I nod, finding it difficult not to smile when she looks so happy. I’m going to bring her home more often. Every month until racing season starts again. If she can fit it into her school schedule, that is, which she’s registered to begin in the spring. In Dublin. To be with me. She’ll tell me I’m being ridiculous, planning the frequent trips, but I’m going to insist. It’s the least I can do since she’s given me a reason to wake up every morning. A reason to rush to bed every night. Good Lord, I really need to stop thinking of taking her to bed, or I’ll never make it through this meeting.

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Willa knocks on the door. Almost immediately, a man answers. I know it's Derek right away because he's not smiling. At least, he isn't at first. When his eyes find Willa, he can't seem to help it. I know the feeling too well. A woman joins him at the door who I assume is Ginger, a chestnut-haired baby propped on her hip. Ginger is gorgeous. Almost as gorgeous as Willa. And that's saying something.

"You're late," Ginger says, with a lift of her chin. "My chicken pot pies are getting cold."

Willa wrinkles her nose and groans. Dammit, my girl is adorable. "I just landed and you're already trying to kill me with your cooking?"

Ginger drags her inside. At the last minute, Willa latches onto my hand and pulls me in with her. "Now, that's just not fair. Look at Derek, he's healthy as a horse."

Derek isn't paying the women any attention, though. He's too busy trying to size me up. Willa has told me numerous stories about him. His unique personality, his protectiveness when it comes to her and Ginger. Now, I know they're all true. He's kind of a bad ass. Well, so am I. And it's my job to protect Willa now.

"Took you long enough," he says.

My first instinct is to tell him Willa and I make decisions for ourselves, but like I said, I understand. Being without her...it's not something I want to think about. "Won't happen again if I can help it."

His frown eases just a little. "These girls do things when they're good and ready,

don't they?"

"Amen to that." I reach out to shake his hand. He considers me a moment, before taking my offered hand. And gripping it hard enough to snap a weaker man's bones. "Shane."

"Derek." He lets go, crosses his arms, and watches his wife. I get the feeling he watches her most of the time and reckon I do the same with Willa. As far as I'm concerned, there's no better place to rest my eyes than on her.

We're distracted when the women fall silent. I glance over to find Willa enfolded in a hug from Ginger, both of their eyes closed as if absorbing strength. Dolly is silent between them, as if she can sense the importance of the moment.

"Bring her home more often," Derek says in a quiet voice, and I nod once.

After a moment, Ginger backs away with a watery smile and hands the baby to Willa. Immediately, the baby's hand gets tangled in her gorgeous hair and she laughs, long and hard. It makes everything inside me relax and tighten at the same time. Derek and Ginger exchange a look, then glance over at me.

At least, I think they do.

I'm looking at Willa.