

SHE STOLE MY HEART LIKE A
LITTLE THIEF AND NOW
SHE'LL PAY THE PRICE.

Trish

BRITTANÉE NICOLE

IRISH

BRITTANÉE NICOLE

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CONTENTS

[Content Warning](#)

[Playlist](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

Chapter 31

Chapter 32

Chapter 33

Chapter 34

Chapter 35

Chapter 36

Chapter 37

Chapter 38

Chapter 39

Chapter 40

Chapter 41

Chapter 42

Chapter 43

Chapter 44

Chapter 45

Chapter 46

Chapter 47

Chapter 48

Chapter 49

Epilogue

Acknowledgments

Also by Brittanée Nicole

CONTENT WARNING

This book contains content that may be disturbing including domestic abuse, sexual and physical assault, child abuse, and violence.

PLAYLIST

- 1 Daylight by David Kushner
- 2 Broadripple is Burning by Margot & The Nuclear So and So's
- 3 Unlike Me by Kate Havnevik
- 4 Green Eyes by Joseph
- 5 Rome by Dermot Kennedy
- 6 Unlike Me by Kate Havenik
- 7 Rescue by Lauren Daigle
- 8 Favorite Place to Go by Layup
- 9 Better Days by Dermot Kennedy
- 10 Rest of Our Lives by The Light of the Heat
- 11 Paint by The Paper Kites
- 12 Green Eyes by Coldplay
- 13 Rose Tattoo by Dropkick Murphy
- 14 Stubborn Love by The Lumineers
- 15 Simply the Best by Billianne
- 16 Quietly Yours by Birdy
- 17 Coming Up for Air by Signals in Smoke
- 18 We're Going Home by Vance Joy
- 19 Look After You by The Fray

- 20 All the Debts I Owe by Camp
- 21 Coastline by Hollow Coves
- 22 Emmylou by Vance Joy
- 23 Those Eyes by New West
- 24 I'm Yours by Isabel LaRosa
- 25 Boulevard of Broken Dreams by Green Day
- 26 Don't Fade by Vance Joy
- 27 Two by Sleeping at Last
- 28 Everything Little Thing She Does Is Magic by Sleeping at Last
- 29 Until I found You by Stephen Sanchez
- 30 Perfectly Broken by Banners
- 31 I loved you Then (and I love you still) by Woodlock
- 32 Turning Page by Sleeping at Last
- 33 I Remember Everything by Zach Bryan and Kacey Musgraves
- 34 Fast Car by Luke Combs
- 35 Til Forever Falls by Ashe, FINNEAS
- 36 I'm With You by Vance Joy
- 37 Vampire by Olivia Rodrigo
- 38 In Your Love by Tyler Childers
- 39 Never Say Never by The Fray
- 40 You & I by One Direction
- 41 What Was I Made For by Billie Eilish
- 42 The Cave by Mumford & Sons
- 43 Can't Take My Eyes Off Of You by Frankie Vallie



DEDICATION

To Jenni,

If not for you, this book would be two people sitting in a cabin, staring at one another.

You are one of the strongest women I know. You see the mess of life and find the humor in it. You push and push, even when you're exhausted. You give voice to Ellie's words. If you were in my position, you'd do it too, because you do what you have to for the ones you love.

I'd give you Frank, but I know you want Beckett, so instead, Ellie is yours. I'm starting to believe that friends can be soulmates too, and that's all because of you and our little crew.

Love you.

PROLOGUE

TEN YEARS AGO

“You’re on her list,” Bennett says, jumping straight to the point.

I slide into traffic and immediately check my rear-view mirror. Old habits die hard. Even though I’ve been back from the Middle East for a year, my instinct to search for roadside bombs or snipers is ingrained.

“I have nothing to do with them,” I mutter. Fucking mafia wars my brother started when he took over for my father after he was killed.

“Doesn’t matter,” he says, his voice ringing out through the Bluetooth setup in my new SUV. “I’ve got good intel. You’re on her list.”

The Feds have been trying to get me to infiltrate my family’s organization to help them take down all the Boston families.

There was a time when the Mobs and Mafia controlled Boston.

But the rules have changed. The Italians and the Irish are at war, fighting over the underground gambling rings, the unions. Anything, really. You name it, and they’re fighting over it.

But someone on the Italian side is cleaning up the streets. All the rumors point to it being a woman, though I’m not convinced she’s the brains behind the operation. The Feds aren’t mourning the men lost. And regardless of whether

they're from my old neighborhood, I won't lose sleep over their deaths. But the FBI is trying to use this woman to drag me into the fray.

My name, though, doesn't belong anywhere near the names of those who are dying. I'm not part of the family business, and I sure as shit have never hurt women or children like those men have.

"I gotta go," I bark as I pull up in front of the offices that house *Jolie*, the fashion magazine where my best friend's older sister, Cat, works.

"Take the offer," he replies. "It's the only way we can keep you safe."

I laugh. "I don't need you to keep me safe. If the Taliban and Al-Qaeda didn't get me, I'm not worried about some little Italian girl." I click off the phone and force a smile, then step out of my SUV to greet Catherine James.

Bantering with Cat comes easier to me than just about anything else has since I returned from my final deployment. Until recently, her brother, Cash, has been in Nashville, and in his absence, she and I have become close. But since their grandfather's stroke, Cash has been in Boston, taking over the family business. And for some ridiculous reason, I let him talk me into working for him. So these days, I officially drive him and run his security.

Inside the James Whiskey building with Cat, an Italian girl strikes, taking me by surprise.

When she looks at me, I practically stop breathing. If I didn't know any better, I'd think my heart stops too.

Her green eyes do the most damage. I'd know them anywhere. I'm rendered almost speechless at the sight of her here. At the sight of her at all.

It's been over a decade since I last saw Elena Romano, my childhood friend and the wife of the don of the Italian Mafia.

She stumbles forward, her eyes wide and locked on me, and without thinking, I reach for her. For the first time in over fifteen years, I touch Ellie. Just as it always did, my body

sparks when we make contact, a warmth traveling through me from a graze alone.

Her lips fall open in surprise. “Thank you,” she murmurs, her words soft and quick. But then her attention shifts to Cat, and she blinks quickly, grimacing as if she’s in pain, before shaking off my hand and rushing out the door.

I spin, and for a split second, I consider rushing after her. I want to ask her about her life. Fuck. I just want to spend two more seconds with her. But before I can make up my mind, she disappears from view.

“You know her?” Cat asks.

I don’t want to be annoyed by the interruption, but I can’t help but wish Cat wasn’t here. That I could have bumped into Ellie when I was alone.

“Her eyes,” I whisper, the words coming out almost broken. I rub at my chest to ease the ache just thinking about her causes. “She reminded me of someone I used to know.”

“Oh, like your telenovelas,” Cat teases. “Is this the start of a long-lost love affair?”

Clearing my throat, I straighten and push Cat toward the elevator. “No long-lost loves for me.”



I DON’T HEAR from Bennett again for another month.

“Bella Morte struck again.”

Beautiful Death.

I bite back a chuckle. “You calling to offer your condolences or to rub it in my face? Either way, it’s unnecessary. I never liked Dino anyway.”

I’ve already heard about the mobster’s brutal death. Couldn’t have happened to a better guy.

“I’m calling because we need you on the inside. Your brother is only making this war worse. You’re the only one they’ll accept in his place.”

“Asking me to take out my brother is going a step too far.” I may not like the bastard, but I won’t kill him for them.

For most of my life, the James brothers have been more like brothers to me than my own. When I was twelve, my grandfather saw what I was capable of. He pulled me from the streets and sent me to boarding school, where I met Cash James.

It was the best and worst thing to ever happen to me.

The only good thing in my life before I met the James Family was Ellie. I still have no idea why she was in Cash’s building a month ago.

After our run-in, my best friend’s issues distracted me from the emotions that hit me in the solar plexus when she walked by. About that time, Cash became obsessed with Grace Kensington, the matchmaker hired to find him a wife, who he’s inconveniently fallen in love with, thus allowing me to put Elena Romano out of my mind.

“Maybe she’ll do us all a favor and take him out,” Bennett mutters.

“Now we’re rooting for serial killers? Man, the FBI is a strange organization,” I grumble.

“What?” Cash stands in the boxing ring across the room. “Did you say serial killer?” He studies me like he knows any response I give him will be a lie. I never answer his questions about my family. Or my time in the military.

I’m better at keeping secrets than the man on the other end of the phone, and this fucker is paid to do it. I shake my head and hang up without saying goodbye. Bennett and I served together, so he’s used to my attitude.

Then I climb into the ring with my best friend, shake off the conversation, and focus on doing what I love most. Boxing.



“NEVER THOUGHT the day would come when your number would accompany an incoming call,” Bennett rambles as he answers on the first ring.

“With how quickly you answered, I figured you thought I was your favorite mistress calling to offer a blow job at midnight.” Though the words are lighthearted, nothing about this conversation will be easy. If things go the way I think they will, the life I know is going to evaporate in an instant.

“My favorite whore, for sure. So tell me, are you finally ready to sell your body to the good ole USA?”

“Depends. I need some intel,” I mutter, scanning the dance floor. A couple of hours ago, my best friend married the love of his life. It should be a happy day. For Cash, the day has gone off without a hitch, and I’ll do all I can to keep it that way. But Cat and her husband are in trouble, and I can’t look the other way. Not when my brother is the one causing it.

I always suspected my brother Evan was responsible for my father’s death—not that I’ve lost any sleep over it—and recently, that was confirmed. I also discovered that he had help. Jay Hanson, Cat’s husband, helped my brother take him out. In turn, Jay was able to protect Cat.

My father was scum. So is my brother. And it appears that heading up the Irish Mob isn’t enough. He wants more. Selfish bastard.

I care too much about my best friend’s family—the people who have loved me and treated me as one of them for almost twenty years—to allow them to suffer because of the sad excuse for the one I was born into. Cat and Jay—and their daughter—have finally gotten their damn happy ending after years apart. I can’t allow my brother to hurt them.

Hours later, when I'm battling it out with my brother on the floor of Jay's hidden cabin in the woods, it becomes clear. It's him or me. He's got his hands around my neck, squeezing tightly. Fuck. This might just be it—

A deafening shot rings out, and Evan's head snaps back as a bullet hits his forehead, dead center.

He collapses on top of me, knocking any remaining air from my lungs. The loss of pressure around my neck and the absolute disbelief that I'm still breathing send shudders racking through me.

"You okay?" Jay hollers from across the room. His words are hard to make out over the ringing in my ears.

I grunt and push my brother's body off me. "Yeah, good shot. You okay?"

When he doesn't reply immediately, I heft myself up onto my elbows and suck in a deep breath. My stomach drops when I catch sight of him sprawled out on the hardwood floor. His face is ghostly, and a pool of blood is spreading beneath his leg.

"Oh God," Cat cries, her eyes going wide at the growing puddle of blood they're both lying in. I don't think any of it is Cat's, but I can't be sure. "Fuck, Jay. I'll call an ambulance."

"No!" I shout, heaving myself off the floor. Snagging a shirt from the bed, I dart to them and drop to my knees beside Jay. With one quick tug, I rip the seam of his pants to get to the wound.

"I liked those," Jay grumbles, a little woozy.

I force a smirk, trying to keep them both calm. "You can afford another pair."

Chills rack Jay's body, and his teeth chatter. We don't have much time.

Beside me, Cat sobs harder. "He's getting cold. We need to call an ambulance."

I move his leg one way and then the other, inspecting the wound. "Thank fuck. It's a clean shot. We just need to get the

bleeding to stop, and then you need to get him to the hospital.”

“Why can’t we call an ambulance?” she pleads while I wrap the shirt around his thigh to make a tourniquet.

“Remind me to buy you a car,” Jay grits out.

With a grin, I tie the tourniquet tight and tease the billionaire. “I look good in red.”

He grunts through the pain etched all over his face and takes a few deep breaths. “You got it.”

“Let’s get you into the car,” I say, squeezing his shoulder. “Don’t die while your wife’s driving, okay? She can’t handle that.”

“She can handle anything,” Jay retorts, his voice getting weaker.

At that comment, she sobs louder and presses her face into the crook of his neck. “Why can’t we call an ambulance?”

“Three bodies, baby. Frank needs to take care of the bodies,” Jay whispers to her.

My brother didn’t come alone, and while I took care of the two men who tried to attack us on our way to hide out here, my brother did take us by surprise. I leave the two of them inside while I hustle to Jay’s car, which is still up the road. When I’m alone, I slip my phone out of my pocket and dial Bennett for the second time in as many hours.

“I’m in,” I mutter.

“The explosives have already been set. You did good. We’ve been monitoring it all. Just get them in the car, and we’ll take care of the rest.”

I nod as if he can see me, and then I realize he probably can. Damn bastards have been watching the entire time, even as my brother came close to choking the life from me.

If not for Jay, I’d be a dead man right now. I owe him my life.

“Make it look like the explosion killed him,” I say quickly. “They can’t find a body.”

Bennett laughs into the phone. “This isn’t our first rodeo, McCabe.”

Pressing my free hand to my temple, I grit my teeth. If the men who work for my brother find out that Jay Hanson killed him, they’ll take him out. Along with every person he loves. I refuse to allow anything to happen to them, so this is how it has to be. And the FBI better fucking do it flawlessly.

When I finally get Jay into the car and say goodbye to Cat, I run back toward the house, resigning myself to what’s about to happen. I’m about to break the heart of every person who’s ever cared about me.

Following Bennett’s instructions to a T, I rush through the front door. I only have thirty seconds to get out the back window, where I hurtle myself to the ground and watch as the cabin I just escaped, where my brother still lies, explodes.

With smoke in my eyes, I say goodbye to the man I used to be. Frank McCabe is dead, and my new life as the head of the Irish Mob is about to begin.

1

FRANK

“I don’t know how you watch this shite,” Seamus grumbles beside me. He’s wearing a bored expression, ready to get down to business.

I arch a brow, barely sparing him a glance. “It’s entertaining. And stop with the fake Irish.”

My nephew Shane, who’s lounging on the other couch, tries but fails to hold in his chuckle. Even though he’s twenty-six, I try to keep him out of these meetings. I’ve tried to shield him from this life for the last ten years. Since his father died and I took over as the head of the Boston faction of the Irish Mob. But some things can’t be avoided. Especially since I’m hiding out in the woods, and, you know, because the rest of Boston thinks I’m a ghost.

“What the hell is even happening? He worked so hard to get her to fall in love with him, then he just disappears for years? Who does that? And she was pregnant? Where’s the daughter? We haven’t seen her yet. I don’t buy it. Gotta be a setup.”

With a huff, I tune him out and focus on the telenovela. Amarylis is finally getting her happy ending. She belongs with Eduardo, not her brother’s best friend.

“Hello? Are you going to answer my questions?” Seamus whines.

The episode closes with Eduardo telling Amarylis he’s her new boss. Fucking addicting shit always ends on a cliffhanger.

I snag the remote from the arm of the couch and press the power button.

“Follow me,” I grumble, hauling myself up. Even that simple movement reminds me of my age. How the fuck am I already forty? And what the hell do I have to show for my life?

We leave Shane sitting in the living room staring at a computer screen. He’s what I have to show for my life. Having Shane with me dulls the ache I feel over leaving my entire life behind, at least a little. When I spot my best friend Cash in the news, his beautiful family by his side, it’s Shane that reminds me why I have to keep going. Even if I wanted to come out from the underground—even if I could convince the government to release me from this agreement—I couldn’t do it. It would put Shane at risk, as well as the family I walked away from to save.

As I ascend the steps, I take in my cage. Living on an eight-acre luxury estate on a private island off the coast of Maine would be a dream for most. And it wasn’t terrible for the first few months. But as Shane points out, being trapped here takes the whole *vacation* feel out of this vacation home.

The sixteen bedrooms and sprawling lawn are idyllic for a weekend getaway. The cold ocean that surrounds the island is an excellent barrier to keep our enemies out. This “cabin” in Maine is the last place anyone would expect to find a mob boss, but just as it keeps others out, it keeps me in. And I have no doubt that’s why the FBI put me here.

To the outside world, I’m “Irish,” the estate’s grumpy caretaker who moved here when Shane was still in high school so that we could get a fresh start after his father died. Very few people know my true identity. And fewer know the truth.

It’s a lonely existence. Only made bearable by my obsession with uncovering the identity of the person who has been slowly killing off members of the families. The murders started years ago. At first, officials had little interest in them. To them, one less mobster off the streets was a blessing. The reason they finally decided to pursue the killer was because

they believed they could use it to rope me into taking this position. Because of Evan's death, they got what they wanted. And once they had me under their thumb, they stopped caring. But I haven't.

It's not just the identities of those being targeted. It's how the murders occur.

I open the door to my office, and Seamus shuffles in behind me. Before sitting, I stand at the window and scan the grounds. Mature evergreens act as a barrier between us and the world around us year-round. I've got a better chance of running into a moose than a person, though I'm always on guard.

When I've convinced myself that there's nothing to see outside, I settle behind my desk, fold one leg over the opposite knee, and finally give Seamus my attention.

"The Italians are getting greedy again," he begins.

I listen without interrupting, taking in all the information. For the time being, I have no choice but to continue on with my role as mob boss.

Seamus gives me updates about the movements of the Italians. They've been trying to take over the underground gambling market, which we've always held a greater stake in. Until recently, there was enough room for both families. But the newly opened casino in Boston has become a major threat to our businesses. The opulent building, the lights, the sounds, and the unique experience are beyond what either family can offer.

Personally, I could give two shits about any of it, but it's how my men make a living.

Money has never interested me. The only green that's ever mattered to me has nothing to do with wealth. It's the exact hue of a set of eyes that still haunts my dreams. The little girl with emerald irises who became the woman I could never have. The one I obsess over far too often.

When Seamus has finished his rundown, I give him directions and send him on his way. Then, knowing Shane is

still entertained on his computer, I shuffle down the hall so I can study my obsession.

The room beside my office is locked down tight, just as it always is. Inside, I flick on the lights and take in the woman who haunts me.

Pictures from her most recent kill are taped up beside the lone picture of her walking into the Beacon Hill Hotel. They didn't get her face. They never do. The image is of her back. Caught as she strode inside wearing knee-high Louboutin boots and a black coat cinched tight around her waist. Her hair is pulled back in a low ponytail, and if I were a betting man like those who spend so much time patronizing our underground casinos, I'd bet her eyes are hidden behind a pair of big black sunglasses.

"Your days are numbered," I mutter into the space. I'm just not sure if I'm referring to hers or mine.

Shoulders slumped in exhaustion, I slide my boots off, and with a heavy sigh, I rub the bottom of my right foot. “You did good today,” my husband murmurs, his lips pressed against my forehead. It takes every ounce of restraint not to physically shudder at his touch. His smell alone puts my nervous system on alert. If I’m not careful, my body will betray me and let him know just how much I hate him.

It’s happened before, and it never ends well. He gets off on my hatred. Whether it’s through bruising my body or owning it.

I’d prefer to avoid either, so I swallow my pride and paint a smile across my face. “Thank you.”

“Your next job,” he says, holding a picture of the target in front of me.

My heart lurches, and my answer is breathy and quick. “No.”

I don’t even look at the picture. It doesn’t matter who it is. I can’t keep doing this. At some point, he’s got to stop holding this over my head. And if he doesn’t, then what kind of life is this anyway?

But the idea of my boys growing up without me here to shield them from this monster is enough to have me backpedaling. It’s too late, though. Before I can recant my response, his hand is in my hair. He yanks it so hard my head is tilted toward him, my neck craned and pinching as he slides his tongue across his lips. Leaning in close, his mouth beside

my ear, his hot breath reminding me of the hell I reside in, he says, “It wasn’t a request.” With that, he tightens his grip and pulls at my scalp.

Miraculously, I hold back my yelp and force myself to inhale deeply through my nose. It’s a tactic I’ve perfected over the years. One that allows me to remain stoic despite the way my scalp stings and my neck already aches. The pain of others is his ultimate joy, and I refuse to brighten his awful existence in any way.

“You’ll take care of him, or your sister will be Antonio’s wife,” he murmurs, his lips brushing the shell of my ear.

This is how it all started. Wouldn’t it be poetic for it to end that way too? But for our sons’ benefit I steel my resolve and reply, “Yes, sir,” my voice unwavering.

I can feel the sinister smirk split his face. Then he licks me, his tongue gliding along my cheek slowly. Unable to show my disgust, I simply stay put, praying it will be over quickly.

A knock on the door and the deep bellow of one of my husband’s minions calling for him is my saving grace. But not before he yanks my hair one more time, pulling it even tighter than before. He tosses me onto the bed and leers down at me. The expression he sees on my face has him laughing.

“Fucking robotic cunt,” he growls before turning and stalking to the door. Even after he’s gone, slamming the door so hard the artwork on the wall rattles, I don’t move. I survey the ceiling, counting the seconds. And even then, I don’t get off the bed until his car starts in the driveway. Blowing out the breath I’ve been holding, I slide off our bed and shuffle to the bathroom so I can wash off the stench of his mouth on my skin.

Scrubbing my face doesn’t remove the reminder of him, though. Or the reminder of what I’ll have to do. Or what I’ve become.

A serial killer.

I don’t know if any murder is justified, but I’ll never feel guilty about my first kill. Each one since has been to save my

sister, then my sons. If it was just about me, I'd give up. I'd let him kill me. Hell, I'd kill myself.

But the two little boys who run into my room only moments after I'm cleaned up, their excitement palpable, have me steeling my resolve to keep moving forward.

"How'd it go?" my sister asks as she follows behind them. She's frowning, her face full of concern.

Pushing my mouth into a smile, I look down at my sons. "Perfect. What do you guys want to do for dinner?"

"Pizza!" they shout at the same time.

Alesia laughs and runs her hands over Lorenzo's head. He grins up at her, his brown eyes melting like hot fudge on an ice cream sundae. He looks so much like his father, his namesake, but he hasn't yet turned into the cold man his father is.

Then again, Lorenzo Sr. wasn't always like this. A fact that keeps me up at night, hoping we can one day escape this life. Escape my son's destiny as the head of this awful family.

Leo grabs me by the waist and begs. "Please, Mawmy!" That word instantly takes away a little of my fear. At four, he has an impressive vocabulary, but a handful of his words still come out just a little wrong. His innocence, despite this life we're trapped in, leaves me slightly breathless.

They could ask me for the moon, and I'd find a way to lasso it for them.

"Pizza it is." Arms outstretched, I pick Leo up and hold him close. He's small for his age, and I don't mind one bit. It won't be long before he's too big for me to hold like this. With his legs wrapped around my waist and his arms looped around my neck, he squeezes me tight. I may not have the love of a husband, but the people in this room make every bruise worth it.

Lorenzo hoots in excitement and runs out of the room. I've barely made it into the hall when Leo is itching to get down to follow him. I give him a kiss and inhale his sweet boy scent, then drop him to the floor so he can chase his brother.

My sister grabs me by the elbow before I can follow. I inadvertently flinch, just like I do when anyone touches me without warning.

She sucks in a breath. “Sorry.”

I shake my head, embarrassed. I shouldn’t scare so easily. And definitely not when I’m standing in the doorway of my own bedroom with my sister.

But this is my life.

Instantly, I erect the stony mask I hide behind. I’ll never let my sister see the scars—the invisible ones or the ones hiding in places she can’t see—Lorenzo has inflicted on me.

“You can’t keep doing this,” she mutters.

I let out a sardonic laugh. “You want to marry Antonio?”

She pulls back, her eyes wide and her mouth dropping open in horror. “What?”

I chuff. “That’s his latest threat. I don’t take care of him,” I motion toward the photo on the bed, “you marry Antonio. What would you have me do?”

She swallows thickly, scrutinizing me. I’d look horrified at the suggestion of being promised to a deranged mobster too. Though it’s not as sickening as being handed to a man just like him at eighteen. His sweaty, meaty fingers digging into flesh as he whispers, “I think I’d like to taste you before I agree to this marriage.”

To wonder if survival is really possible in a life like that. And then just as he slides his hands lower—

“Elena.” Alesia says my name as if it’s not the first time.

“Sorry.”

“Stop apologizing. If not for you—” She ducks her chin and squeezes me into her side as emotion steals her words.

I drop my head to her shoulder and heave a deep breath. In my pocket, my phone vibrates. I pull the device out, not recognizing the number. Normally, that alone would keep me from answering, but after today, my brain hasn’t quite come

back online. I slide the green button to the side and murmur a greeting.

“May I please speak to Mrs. Elena Romano?”

“This is she.”

Beside me, Alesia watches me silently, her brow furrowed in question.

I shrug and listen as the man on the other end of the line speaks. “Excellent. I’m Mr. Peters. First, I want to give my condolences. Mr. Rivera was a wonderful man. News of his death must have been so difficult.”

My stomach dips at the word *death*, but confusion quickly takes over. “Who?”

“Massimo Rivera. Your uncle,” he chides.

I’ve never heard of a Massimo Rivera, but I’ve been married to a mobster for two decades. I know better than to let my confusion show. “Thank you. What can I do for you?”

He clears his throat. “Yes, let’s get to it. You and your sister are his only living heirs, so naturally, you’ve inherited his estate.”

I don’t know a Massimo Rivera, thus his death is of little consequence to me. But Alesia and I have inherited his estate? That news has an almost giddy smile forming on my lips, and my heart feels lighter than it has in years. “Oh, of course. What do we need to do?” I put the phone on speaker so my sister can listen in.

She eyes me uncertainly. But when Mr. Peters speaks, we both turn to the phone again. “There is a house.” He coughs. “I suppose most would call it a mansion. I’m sure you’ve been there.”

I shrug at my sister and murmur, “Oh yes, the mansion.”

Alesia mouths, “What the hell?”

I shake my head and put my finger to my lips, shushing her.

“His directive was quite clear. The home is yours, but you cannot dispose of it until certain stipulations are met.”

“Dispose of it?” Alesia inquires.

I nearly jump out of my skin, afraid the man will question the second voice, but he goes on as if he didn't notice the change.

“Yes, the real estate is quite valuable, but Mr. Rivera's instructions were clear. You must spend the summer there before making any decision about selling.”

I lick my lips as an idea forms in my head. Tingles course through me at the possibility. I have been numb for so long, but suddenly, something that feels an awful lot like hope blossoms.

Except I don't have an Uncle Massimo. At least as far as I know. Neither of my parents have a brother by that name, or at least they never mentioned one before they died. Thus is life in the Mob.

I'd be sad about it if I had ever known my father or if my mother had ever been worth knowing.

“What do you need from us?” I ask, keeping my calm facade in place.

My sister is practically breathing down my neck, ready to jump through the phone, itching to ask question after question. I have to grip her hand and squeeze to keep her from speaking.

“I've left an envelope in your mailbox. In it, you'll find a key, along with directions to the home. The *cabin*, as your uncle so teasingly called it. In order to fulfill the requirements, you should arrive no later than this Sunday. And you must stay until the weekend before Labor Day. Then, should you wish to sell, I can draw up the paperwork and transfer the proceeds to you.”

I hustle toward the stairs in a panic. If one of Lorenzo's guards saw this man leaving the envelope in our mailbox, it's too late for the plan just starting to take shape in my mind. “Do you need any other information from me?” I ask. This

scenario is ludicrous, but I'm desperate to escape. Maybe this could be exactly what I've been begging for.

Hope is a dangerous thing for someone like me. It offers false promises. Tempts a person into forgoing reasonable concerns, encourages them to dive headfirst into murky water. Because the potential for treasure in the mud is just too high. Anything's better than standing on the dock where the monster lurks, ready to devour its prey.

I take the stairs slowly to avoid alerting the guards to my excitement.

My husband called me a robotic cunt for a reason. The mask I wear hides all emotion, except when I'm alone with my children or my sister. For them, I soften. For them, I allow my shield to drop and I soak up the moments of normalcy. The problem for a monster like me, though, is that those moments alone, when emotions are set free, also allow the horrors of this life to surface. Having to balance two lives, two personas, is exhausting and frightening. Because, as their mother, I'm human, and I'm horrified by what I do when their bedroom doors shut at night.

"Where are you going?" Alesia hisses as she trails me, grabbing my arm before I make it out the white double doors that lead to where salvation has been promised.

I nod toward the kitchen. "Go order the pizza and entertain the boys. I'll see if there is any truth to this."

Squeezing my arm, she holds me in place. "What if it's a setup? What if Lorenzo is testing you? He'd do something like this, you know? See if you would run away if given the chance. He's a sick bastard like that," she whispers.

A person doesn't insult a man in his house and not at least try to do it quietly.

The guard sitting nearby looks up from his phone and leers at us, but he quickly goes back to the screen. Most would assume it's comforting to have guards stationed in and around my house. But they aren't here to protect me. No one has ever protected me. I take lives, and I protect lives. Those are my

two tasks in life. And right now, there's a faint glimmer of hope that the next steps I take will result in protecting my own life. I have enough blood on my hands.

"Elena," my sister says again. Her voice is more urgent, drawing the attention of the man in the corner.

"Pizza," I reply, silently begging her to let me take this risk. It feels like life or death. I live my life dancing on the blade of a knife. One wrong move, and it's over. I've hit my breaking point. I can't keep living like this. My sons cannot become their father.

Finally, Alesia gives me a small nod, then pads toward the kitchen. When she's out of sight and the man in the corner is absorbed in his phone again, I head for the door. I'm almost to the mailbox when I get caught.

“**W**here you going?” Lorenzo’s second-in-command grunts as he hurries my way. His gait pulls to his left because his stomach is too heavy to be carried by his short legs.

A shudder runs through me at my husband’s threat. I believe him when he says he’ll marry my sister off to this disgusting human.

No. I won’t allow it. I don’t care what’s in the mailbox. If it’s a setup, we’ll deal with it. Anything is better than being trapped in the cycle I’ve lived in for the last two decades.

I’m a trained killer. I don’t need a weapon to dispose of this worthless human. He’s finally made his way to me, huffing out breaths and wiping sweat from his forehead as he watches me with one brow raised. One swift slam of my fist into his windpipe and he’d be down. Then our size difference would no longer matter. But that would likely draw the attention of neighbors or the men inside.

The key to winning the game I’ve been playing for most of my life is not taking the first available chance. Plan. See every outcome before making a move. Recklessness and stupidity are what cause people to die or get caught.

So I put my mask back on and point to the mailbox. “Just grabbing the mail. Lorenzo isn’t home.”

My attitude toward Antonio is nothing new. It’s not a secret that I don’t like my husband’s associates. Hell, it’s not a secret that I don’t like my husband. I’m not the dutiful wife who attends dinners with him and his friends. He has his

mistress for that type of thing, and it suits me just fine. The less time I have to spend below my husband while he grunts over me, the better. Let Marissa deal with that. God bless that woman. Maybe he'll marry her when I disappear.

Who are you kidding? You're taking his sons. He's going to scour the earth until he finds you. Then it will be you or him.

I know the score. But I'm ready to go all-in and bet on myself. Running will give me time to plan. Time to plot just how my husband will take his last breath. His death won't be the end of my mission, though. The entire organization needs to be dismantled. Otherwise, what I've gone through will happen to someone else. Her life will be traded for money, or a better shipping route, or a gambling ring. Women aren't human beings. We aren't revered or cherished. We're commodities in organized crime.

No, cutting off one leg of the dragon isn't enough. I have to strike so hard they feel every slash. Strike deep enough that the heart of the organization bleeds out. Only then will women in this neighborhood be able to choose their own paths.

You think pretty highly of yourself. The taunting voice in my head sounds an awful lot like my uncle. He was the first man to let me down in a long line of them.

But when I think of him, another man comes to mind. The one who used to make me laugh when all I wanted to do was cry. The one who'd spend afternoons in my nona's kitchen watching telenovelas with me because he knew I loved them. Who wouldn't love an entire genre about men cherishing women? Loving women. Even with all the drama, the men on screen were so madly in love.

Love. What a foreign concept. The only love I've ever known is for my sister and my sons.

Not that I'm complaining. My boys are all I need.

"You going to invite me inside for dinner?" Antonio's question brings me back to the present. Away from the green eyes that haunt me when I think about my past. It's better that way. The present is where I need to stay. My focus must

remain on what I have to do to get out of this reality, away from this life. On how to get my sister away from her certain future as this man's wife.

I shrug. "Nah, we both know I don't want to."

He laughs bitterly. "And you wonder why he brings Marissa around instead of you."

I roll my eyes and take half a second to imagine knocking him out, tying him to a chair, and lighting the room on fire. He'd wake up groggy and unable to escape, then slowly burn to death. I know someone else who died that way. Didn't shed a tear for him. It makes me almost giddy thinking of Antonio meeting the same fate. It's actually probably too kind. I bite back a smile. If I'm lucky, this is the last time I'll ever have to see this man.

And if we do cross paths again? I'll relish slicing him into tiny pieces.

Either way, I'm not the type to put up a front, and I certainly won't start today. I grab the mail and stride back into the house and over the white marble floor of the foyer. Once I'm out of sight of the asshole in the corner, I rush into the closest bathroom so I can read through the document.

Everything the man promised is in this letter.

None of it makes sense.

It really could be a test or a setup.

But the echo of my husband's threats in my mind, the memory of the smiles on my boys' faces as they ran into my room tonight, and the lasting smell that lingers from being within feet of Antonio push me to take the risk. Pressing the letter to my chest, I pull in a deep breath and close my eyes. Then I do the one thing that centers me. I remember the lesson my best friend taught me so many years ago.

"When it gets to be too much, just close your eyes and remember this: you are the strongest person I've ever met. You can do this. One day, I'm going to take you away from all of this."

His promise to take me away was as empty as every promise a man has ever made to me. But he was right about one thing; I am strong. And tonight, I'll use that strength to get the hell out of here.

At that moment, clarity and a sense of urgency take over. Gratitude for that friend warms me. If only I'd looked down earlier when my husband showed me the photo of my next mark. If I had, I would have seen the face that has haunted me for years.

After Seamus leaves, Shane and I have a quiet dinner. It happens every time Seamus visits. Shane asks about his father. I tell him I don't want to talk about it. He begs me to bring him into the business. I say no.

He has no idea I'm a double agent. That my goal is to dismantle the organization he admires. And he doesn't get why I won't put him to work fixing our current business problems. Shane is a math genius. He belongs in school. He deserves the carefree life of an average twentysomething.

One day, when this is all over—after I've captured Bella Morte; after I've dismantled the organization from the inside and weakened the other families and helped the government place those they need at the top—Shane and I will get new identities, and then I'll tell him the truth. Or a version of it, at least. Fuck, I hope he'll forgive me.

We'll settle somewhere unassuming. Probably somewhere in the middle of the country. I laugh at the image of myself in cowboy boots that materializes in my mind. The moment turns bittersweet at the echo of Cat's laugh that accompanies it. She loved teasing Cash about the cowboy hats and boots he wore when he lived in Nashville. The guy was just as comfortable in a two-thousand-dollar suit as he was in jeans and boots.

Not me. I've never been comfortable in a suit.

Cowboy boots likely wouldn't suit me either.

Jeans, a worn Henley, and my black work boots make up my go-to uniform. Hoping to settle my erratic thoughts, I run

my hands against the scruff on my head. My natural red hair is all but a memory. Just one more way to distance myself from who I used to be.

The moonlight casts the bar in a faint glow, making me chuckle. “Don’t mind if I do,” I whisper to no one at all.

That’s probably the hardest part of all of this. Doing it all alone. But that was my life long before I went underground. Even when Cash and I were tight, my life was heading toward loneliness. He had his wife, Grace, and his daughter, Hope. Cat had Jay and their daughter, Chloe.

Everyone had *their* person. The only person I’ve ever considered mine, ever wanted to be mine, was never mine at all.

Electric green eyes that wore pain more than I could bear to see, hair the color of raven wings—a stark contrast to her porcelain skin—and the lone beauty mark that sat right above her lip.

Even at twelve, I was smart enough to recognize rare beauty. At eighteen, I came back for her, but I was too late.

I sigh heavily as I pour a glass of Angel’s whiskey. My best friend almost lost the woman he loved too. But he was smart enough to fix things while he had the chance. He made something of himself. Now and then, I see glimpses of his life, and I’m so fucking proud of who he is. I just wish I could call him. Spend an hour chatting with him here. Side by side on the deck, watching the stars reflect off the ocean waters.

It’s lonely talking to myself. And I can’t tell Shane about any of it. I don’t know what I’ll tell him when it’s all said and done, but he can never know about that life. He can never put together the pieces. If he ever knew that Cash’s brother-in-law put a bullet in his father’s head and that I covered it up, he’d never forgive me. And then the cycle of revenge would start all over again.

So instead, I walk out to the deck. The cool June air is biting, because it’s Maine and we’re on the ocean and it’s just

fucking cold right now. Shaking off the chill, I settle in one of the Adirondack chairs with my whiskey and talk to the sky.

No one else is around to listen.

The sounds of gravel crunching and a car engine have me rocking forward in my seat and spilling my whiskey in my lap. “Fuck,” I mutter. I must have fallen asleep. A glance at the outdoor clock on the side of the house tells me it’s almost three a.m. Who the fuck would be coming down the road in the middle of the night?

To those who don’t know of its location—hell, its fucking existence—the house is impossible to find. The narrow dirt roads are practically impossible to travel at night because it’s so dark. I barely drive them after the sun goes down, and I know them by heart. Whoever is here either knows where they’re going or has skills I don’t take lightly. Either way, I stride to the closet where I keep the guns, then peer out from behind the curtains to assess the danger.

To say I’m shocked by the view in front of me is putting it mildly. What is *she* doing here now?

I t's nearly three a.m. when I navigate down the dark road. A turtle could probably beat me in a race right now. For as hard as my heart pounds, I am the epitome of calm on the outside as I watch for Moose or trees. The only light comes from our car, and according to GPS, I'm dangerously close to driving into the ocean. So I continue my slow journey, making sure I don't plunge us all to our deaths. I didn't kill three men, steal a car, pack up my kids and what little I could grab in a rush, and then drive four hours to the middle of nowhere so we could die in the cold ocean waters of Maine.

"This is not how it ends," I mutter to myself.

"What?" Alesia says, stirring from her sleep. Sweet, innocent Alesia. I try my best to hide all the ugly from her. I sent her up to bed with the boys and took care of the guards. She witnessed none of it. I'm not sure she could stomach watching what I do.

Or how I do it. That's the bigger problem.

With zero emotion. No empathy. Taking a man's last breath is as easy as making breakfast for my boys. I just *do* it. There's no other option. It's me or them. *My kids* or them. I'll burn the world down before I'll allow my boys to be hurt.

Same goes for Alesia.

"We're almost here," I say.

"Where is here?" she rasps, likely wondering like I am where the hell this mysterious house is. We're surrounded by

nothing but trees and darkness.

But as I make one last turn, a large, dark house comes into view. My stomach swoops in excitement. Finally.

This is a big moment. A fresh start. I have no idea what to expect, but my body's buzzing, telling me that whatever it is, it'll be life-changing. My boys will have a real shot. My sister will too. Maybe she can go to school eventually. Get a job, meet a man, live a normal life. Or maybe she won't want a man at all. The choice will be hers, and that's the point. It makes everything I've done up to this point worth it.

We pull down the dirt path, and my sister sucks in a sharp breath. "Holy shit!"

Holy shit is right. The headlights bathe the home in front of us in a bright light. Even in the shadows, the magnificence of this "cabin" on the ocean is blatant. There's a circular driveway and a porch with a few rocking chairs that move a little eerily in the breeze. The light on the porch is illuminated, but aside from that, the home is dark. And huge.

"Stay in the car. I'll go make sure it's safe," I instruct my sister. I study her, motioning to my purse. "There's a Glock in there. Don't use it unless you need to, okay?"

Her eyes widen and she sucks in a breath. "I don't know how you live like this."

"It's how you'd be living if I didn't do what I have to. Now stop feeling sorry for me and keep an eye on the boys while I check out the house. Lock the doors."

Alesia wraps a hand around my wrist and tugs. "I don't pity you. I'm in awe of you. I know we don't talk about it, but —"

I hold up my hand. "One day we can have a sappy chat. Actually"—I shake my head and chuckle—"if this is our fresh start, then let's call the slate clean. You don't owe me, and you don't need to be in awe of me. I'm your sister. They're my kids. If you had been dealt my hand, you'd have done the same things. This is what we have to do to survive."

She nods, but questions swim in her eyes as she searches my face. I don't give her the opportunity to ask before slipping out and closing the driver's side door. Quickly, I pat my lower back, double-checking that my second Glock is still in place, then move silently toward the house with the key from the envelope gripped tightly between my fingers.

As I stick the key in the lock, the door swings open with so much force that I'm jolted forward and fall straight to the wooden floor. I throw my hands out and catch myself so that I don't bust my teeth. In an instant, I'm pushing my body up and jumping back on my feet again, swinging a leg out in the process to take down my attacker.

"Shit," a man growls. He catches my leg before I can knock him down and spins me so that my back is flat against his chest. He holds me tight, keeping my arms pinned to my sides, in a lock I can't break out of. Breathing deeply, I close my eyes and work through the ways I can get free. Every outcome fully considered, I go for a simple but effective maneuver. With my right foot, I stomp down hard. Only he slides his own foot out of the way, and my heel hits the floor with a painful thump. "Dammit, Ellie. Stay still."

The nickname is like a shot to my windpipe, stealing my breath and leaving me dizzy. Only one person has ever called me Ellie, but he's dead.

"Can I let you go, Ellie? Or are you going to try to kill me again?" His tone is almost teasing. I haven't heard his voice in decades. It's different. Deeper. Fitting, likely, for the man he's become, but it's still laced with hints of the boy I once knew.

"Irish?" I croak. How is this possible?

He turns me, though he doesn't release my arms, as if he doesn't quite trust that I won't hurt him. That's smart. He shouldn't trust me. No one should. I don't even trust myself, and I certainly don't trust him.

He's dead.

"You're a ghost," I whisper. What the fuck? This can't be real. Maybe we plunged off the cliff and into the ocean back

there and I'm finally meeting Frank again.

God, I'm delusional. As if Frank would be the first person to greet me in the afterlife. A man like Frank would be in heaven. I most certainly am going to hell.

Chuckling softly, he studies me, as if he too can't believe that we're standing face to face. "Not a ghost."

Even in the dark, the warmth in his green eyes is easy to see. His shoulders are broad, and his strong chin is covered in a light scruff that I think is still his signature red. Slight wrinkles appear around his eyes as he smiles at me.

And he's tall. God, I don't remember him being this tall. And holy shit, he's ripped. His ribbed long-sleeve shirt is doing a poor job of hiding the muscles underneath.

Fuck, I thought he was dead. It takes every ounce of strength I have not to fall apart. To keep breathing. Part of me wants to throw up, and the other part wants to throw my arms around him and never let go.

I hate him for leaving me and never coming back. He found his place among the spirits; he could have hidden me too.

And parts of me, each damaged already, crack further. Until the jagged edges puncture my lungs and scrape against my heart. Because I was devastated when he died. Broken beyond repair. The depression I fell into when I heard the news was all-consuming. Ironic, since before that day, we hadn't talked in years. I ran into him one time, in a high-rise in Boston. I swore he recognized me. Stupidly, I hoped that he would come back and save me. That I wouldn't have to live as Lorenzo's slave any longer. Doing his bidding, killing for sport—*his* sport, not mine.

That little hope, as minuscule as it was, was all that I had to cling to.

When he died, all my hopes of ever getting away from that life died too.

"Now that we've reacquainted ourselves, mind telling me why you're here?" His voice breaks through the anguish

threatening to swamp me.

Shit. We've got a problem. *A big problem.* Since the moment that phone call came in, I was concerned that this was a setup. Now it seems more likely than ever.

Frank's family ran the Irish Mob for decades, but ten years ago, he and his brother, who was the head of their faction at the time, allegedly died in a fiery explosion. The identity of the new head of the Mob has never been made public. Only his number two. It's why the man running the show is called the Irish Ghost.

He's folklore. Murmured conversation between my husband and his associates. Operating as a ghost. Making decisions and delegating just like any mob boss, but all communication is filtered through his second-in-command. And here Frank is, hiding out. Convenient. The world believes he's dead, allowing him to work from behind a proverbial curtain.

The head of the Irish Mob is living in the house I supposedly inherited? Impossible. Unless there are motives surrounding this situation. Ones I'll have to work out later.

For now, with my boys and Alesia in the car, I have to go along with it. "What are you doing here?" I lift my chin, conveying far more assuredness than I feel.

He sighs as he lets me go, and for a moment, I calculate how quickly I could kill him. But considering that he was once a friend, I decide to let him live. At least for a few more hours.

"I'm the caretaker of the house." He stuffs his hands in his pockets and nods at me. "Now you go."

Caretaker? Yeah, okay, and I'm the Easter Bunny. "I own the place. So I suppose I'm here to let you know your services are no longer needed. I can take it from here."

He laughs, but the sound quickly fades as he watches me, like he's looking for signs that I'm joking. His smile falls and his brows knit together. "What are you talking about?"

With a straight *don't fuck with me* face, I reply. "Your previous employer was my uncle. He died and left me this

house.”

He shakes his head. “Massimo died?” Sadness and shock flicker in his eyes as he studies me closely, as if waiting for me to break.

I didn’t know the man, though. All I know is that he left me this huge house, thus providing me with an escape.

Or this is all a setup. That’s still a very likely possibility. Massimo is a fake uncle, and Frank is an incredibly good liar who’s going to kill me in my sleep.

The odds aren’t great either way.

“Um, yes. Sorry for your loss.” I clear my throat. “But like I said, I’ve got it from here.”

Frank huffs out a breath and runs a hand against the scruff on his head. “Can you give me a fucking minute?” He paces to the far side of the entryway, and I glance at the car to make sure my family is safe. Alesia is staring at me through the window, her eyes wide. I hold up my hand to let her know to stay put.

“Listen,” I start, “it’s the middle of the night. I’m not an asshole. You don’t have to leave tonight.”

“I’m not leaving,” he grits out, stalking over to me.

I shrug. “Eventually you are, because I’m firing you.”

A deep growl emanates from his throat. “We haven’t seen one another in years, and the first thing you do is fire me?”

Now that he’s close again, I have to tilt my chin to make eye contact. “Yes.”

“Unbelievable,” he grits out, shaking his head.

“I’m sure you’ll find somewhere else to hide out.”

He groans. “Has anyone told you that your people skills need a little work?”

More times than I can count. Especially men. And then I kill them. But whatever.

“No. My kids are in the car, though, so we’re going to have to put a pin in this discussion until tomorrow.”

“Kids?” He goes rigid, and his eyes snap to mine. Of course he’s surprised by that news. The man has been dead for the last decade. He obviously hasn’t been keeping tabs on me.

Unless he’s the head of the Mob, and then he very much has been.

Being the wife of the head of the families in Boston makes me a prime target. If he’s still involved in this life, then he knows precisely who I am, where I live, and all about my kids. Probably down to their birthdays.

He can’t be the head of the Mob, though. He’s Frank.

But what do I know about this man and what he’s become in the last thirty years? We haven’t spent time together since we were children. Hell, back then, even Lorenzo was a good person. Or so I thought.

And so was I.

My, how times have changed.

I turn away from him and stalk to the car, aware that he’ll follow me. “Yes, I have two sons. Lorenzo and Leo. And you probably don’t remember my sister, Alesia.” I point to her as she steps out of the car.

“Everything okay?” she asks quietly, shutting the door so as not to wake the boys. Her eyes are wary as she scrutinizes our latest problem.

Frank keeps his distance but peers into the car. I clear my throat to get his attention. Instinct has me itching to stab him in the neck for so much as looking at my children. But at the same time, my stupid fucking heart wants to cheer at his proximity. The hint of whiskey and maybe fire settles over me as he steps closer. “You took your sons out in the middle of the night? Why?”

I answer Alesia first, though I don’t break eye contact with the ghost before me. “Everything is fine. This is Frank. He’s the caretaker of the house,” I explain. When he glares at me, I

add, “And I’m sure you don’t remember him because you were just a baby, but he’s from the neighborhood.”

Frank crosses his arms over his chest and turns his attention to my sister. The single bulb on the porch doesn’t illuminate much, but unless I’m imagining things—let’s face it, that’s a distinct possibility right now—his eyes brighten as he looks at her.

An irrational wave of jealousy hits me. Dammit.

Alesia is perfection even at three a.m. She didn’t kill three men before we left the house, then drive four hours in the dark. After a night like tonight, I think I look pretty fucking good.

Since when do you care about your appearance? And why do you care about how Frank is looking at Alesia?

“You were just a baby the last time I saw you.”

Alesia smiles. “The whoopsie,” she says with a shrug.

He laughs softly and ducks his chin, rubbing the back of his neck. “Let’s get you guys inside. We can figure things out in the morning. There are two bedrooms in the basement, along with a bathroom and a kitchen. Ellie, why don’t you and your boys take those rooms? Alesia, you can stay upstairs. All the rooms but mine and my nephew’s are open. You can have your pick.”

Alesia’s head whips in my direction. It’s the nickname. No one calls me that. I’m the cold one. The one living behind thick, fortified walls. Any hint of warmth I had died long ago. Ellie hasn’t existed in years. She laughed freely and spent afternoons eating snacks in the kitchen with Frank or sneaking out to the candy store with any change she could scrounge up. She’d scheme to determine the best way to spend that money to get the most candy. Tootsie Rolls were the key. Ten for a dollar? It was like winning the lottery. To this day, I can’t have one without thinking of Frank.

Blinking out of my daze, I look from my sister to Frank. They’re both watching me like they’ve been waiting for my

reply. “Alesia will stay with the boys downstairs. I’ll take a room upstairs. Doesn’t matter which one.”

His brow lifts in challenge. “You don’t want to stay near your children?” The way he says it, with true confusion and a bit of suspicion, makes my hackles rise. He knows nothing about me anymore. Everything I’ve ever done is to protect my children and my sister. I won’t feel guilty about that.

Being near my children at night is dangerous. My nightmares often become far too real, and I never want them to hear the screams.

“Alesia is a nervous sleeper,” I explain. “She likes cuddling the boys.”

She shrugs. “It’s true.”

Frank looks between my sister and me, his eyes flicking back and forth.

I wait with bated breath for an inquisition, but blessedly, his only response is a nod of acceptance.

“Can I help you carry anything in?”

I want to say no, and my instinct is to do just that. But if I do, that will only raise more suspicion. “If you wouldn’t mind grabbing our bags, we can get the boys.”

When he rounds the car, he stops at the bumper and watches me, waiting.

What the fuck now?

“Can you pop the trunk?” he says, his tone exasperated.

Oh, right. *That.*

Keys in hand, I examine them. I have no idea how the trunk works. Is there a button on the fob? Or does he have to insert the key?

One of the many problems that comes along with stealing a car.

Alesia grabs the keys from me and shuffles around the passenger side of the car. A muted *thunk* indicates that she’s

figured it out.

I breathe out a sigh of relief. It's a small thing, and one I easily could have figured out, but letting someone else take over lessens the load pressing down on my shoulders.

I duck into the back seat and unbuckle Lorenzo, leaving my smaller son to my sister. While Alesia is taller than me, which isn't much of a feat since I'm barely above five feet, the life I've lived requires an inordinate amount of strength.

To withstand the years of abuse, I've had no choice but to be strong.

Lorenzo snuggles into my shoulder, making a tiny noise, but his eyes remain closed, and his breathing remains deep and steady.

Suitcases in tow, Frank pauses beside me and shakes his head. "Incredible."

I stare at him silently, waiting for an explanation.

"He's your size," he says, scanning me and the boy in my arms, his face open, like he's in awe. "You're a mom with a kid who's as big as you are."

"And you've been dead for ten years. Look at us. Full of surprises."

Alesia sucks in a breath as she catches the tail end of our conversation. Shit. I'll have to fill her in later. Lorenzo is dead weight in my arms, and I've already gotten my workout in today. Moving bodies takes a lot out of a woman.

We follow Frank inside, and he drops the suitcases at the top of a set of stairs that leads to what must be the basement. "Not sure which are yours. Want me to carry him down?"

I shake my head, a little taken aback. When was the last time someone other than Alesia offered to help me? "I got him. Lead the way."

I point to the red suitcase. The one where I stashed the cash I've been hiding for years. "That one's mine. The rest go downstairs." I'll grab my clothes once everyone is sleeping. And I'll scope out the house then too. I rarely sleep anyway.

And I still don't trust him. No way am I closing my eyes until I figure out precisely *who* he is and why he's here.

Frank wasn't lying about one thing. The basement apartment is perfectly equipped for a family. Hell, it's bigger than the house I grew up in. Dead Frank is living life better than the rest of us.

The living room is equipped with a foosball table, a big-screen television, and two cozy checkered couches. Apparently, my uncle's tastes hadn't changed since the seventies.

Frank leads us into a bedroom with two bunk beds. The small window in the corner is covered with a cream-colored shade, and a tall dresser is situated on the wall across from the beds.

With one hand, I pull back the bedding on the bottom bunk. I deposit Lorenzo on the mattress and then take Leo from Alesia's arms. With a quick kiss to his head, I tuck him in beside his brother. The full-size bed is spacious enough for both of them, and keeping them together and easily accessible eases my apprehension just a little. Alesia will take the bed in the other room, and I can lie on the top bunk if necessary.

"Do you need anything else?" Frank asks, considering me. He watches my every move like I'm the ghost. Like he can't quite believe I've appeared. Or that I'm a mom maybe.

His story is far more interesting than mine, and I intend to get to the bottom of it, but not at four a.m.

Like the apparition he is, he disappears quickly. A duck of his head, and he's gone. Alesia drags me out of the room and toward the couch in the living space before I have a chance to collect my thoughts.

"What the hell was that?" she hisses, darting a glance at the stairs. Like me, she's probably wondering if he can walk through walls like a real ghost.

On second thought, since she's not an insane person with trust issues, she's probably just worried he's listening to us.

As he should be. I'm likely the most dangerous person he's come into contact with in years.

And he's definitely the most dangerous I've come in contact with. Though that distinction has nothing to do with his skills and everything to do with *him*.

Frank McCabe was once my undoing. He was the man I thought would save me. Back before I learned that only I could save myself. Forgetting that would be the most dangerous thing of all.

I yawn, ready to move on from this conversation.

My sister rolls her eyes. "We both know you're a bat. You aren't going to sleep, so don't even pretend you're too tired to get into this. Freaking explain yourself."

"There's nothing to explain," I protest.

Not buying it, she cocks a brow and settles in next to me. "How well did you know one another?"

"He spent afternoons at Nona's with me. We were friends." I shrug like it's no big deal, but there is nothing about Frank that isn't a big deal. Warning lights haven't stopped flashing in my mind since the moment he said my name. The phone call, the inheritance, his presence here? It's all too convenient.

"Why is he here? And why did you say he's supposed to be dead?" Alesia's mind is spinning, and I'm too tired to lie.

"Because he died in an explosion years ago. That's what the world believes, at least." I roll my neck. God, I'm spiraling too. "And here he is. The caretaker of the house we inherited. From a great uncle we never knew existed. I don't buy the idea that it's a coincidence. I'm more inclined to believe it's a setup and he's the head of the Irish Mob."

Her eyes bug out. "What?"

I sigh, letting my shoulders slump. "Will you stop it? I've got this covered."

"How, Elena? How do you have this covered?"

“We’ll either send him packing or I’ll kill him. Not a big deal. It’s just a temporary speed bump.”

Alesia chokes out a gasp and grabs my wrist. She looks like she’s about to have a coronary. “He was your childhood friend, and now he’s possibly the head of the Mob? And your solution is to kill him like it’s just another item to cross off your to-do list?”

Humming, I tilt my head one way, then the other. “Yeah, probably.”

“M om!” Leo’s screech wakes me from my stupor.

Wincing at the bite of pain in my stiff neck, I take in my surroundings, trying to place them.

“Did you *see* this place?”

I roll my shoulders and open my eyes fully, smiling at my son, who is quite literally beaming. While Lorenzo is the spitting image of his father—*unfortunately*, though I’d never hold it against him—Leo is all me. From the wide green eyes to the beauty mark above his lip. And like me, he’s tiny. In the Mafia, he’d likely have to learn how to be valuable in ways that don’t require physical strength. It’s just one of the many reasons we needed out.

Lorenzo is standing stock-still by the door, his focus locked on the ocean. He’s always been quieter than his brother, though he’ll surely have a lot to say about our abrupt departure and his dad’s whereabouts.

I don’t take kidnapping lightly. I’ve absolutely crossed a line or two.

But what’s a little thing like kidnapping when you’re a serial killer? Child’s play.

With any luck, my husband hasn’t realized we’re gone yet. The men who would normally report to him can’t really talk right now, and in all likelihood, Marissa probably whined until she convinced him to stay over.

As if she ever needs to beg. I'd gift wrap him, complete with a bow, and throw in a couple million if she'd keep him. Unfortunately, my husband won't leave willingly. Our story was only ever going to end one way: with one of us dead.

In reality, I've done us all a favor. He's been spared, and our kids won't have to mourn his death. Because, let's be honest, he's always been the one who needs to go. The man doesn't even trust me enough to sleep in the same bedroom. Can't imagine why.

"Cans we goes down to beach?" Leo begs, tearing me from my sardonic thoughts.

"Let me grab a cup of coffee, and then we can explore." I run my hands through his silky black hair, my heart warming at his answering giggles.

"*Mawmy*, I'm not a dog."

As if on cue, the front door swings open and Frank walks in with two dogs underfoot. Basset hounds, if I had to guess.

At the same time, my sister appears at the top of the basement steps wearing a tiny pair of shorts that expose her long, tan legs. Her dark hair is a curly mess that only makes her look prettier. "Aw, hi, babies!"

Frank's attention snaps to her as she sinks to the ground to greet the dogs.

I don't drop to my knees for anyone, let alone two drooly dogs. And I definitely don't use the word *aw*. Sometimes it's hard to believe we're related.

Frank smiles and ruffles one of the dogs' heads like I was just patting Leo. Beside me, the boy in question pops up, ready to join in on the dog love fest. I grab his arm before he can get too far from me. "We have no idea if the dogs are nice. You don't just run up; they could bite."

Frank's green eyes find mine, almost like he's reprimanding me. Telling me to relax. As if he has any clue what my life has been like. We don't know each other. Not anymore. "They don't bite," he says to Leo, kneeling next to the dog with his hand out.

The dog licks him aggressively, panting and whining as he does.

Leo whips his head toward me and pleads, “Please, mom.”

And because he’s one of three people who I’ll do absolutely anything for, I take him by the hand and guide him over to Frank. Lowering myself to the ground while keeping Leo behind me, I suck in a breath and allow the dog to sniff me. There’s no way I’m letting my son near the animals until I’ve thoroughly assessed the situation. It takes everything in me to hold myself still and not shake.

I don’t like to be touched. It takes a good deal of focus to psych myself up enough to allow it. Leo giggles so innocently even I can’t fight a smile when the dog’s warm breath tickles my skin and he laps at my hand.

“Mawmy, his tongue is *sooo* long.”

“That’s Jones,” Frank says to my son.

On instinct, I suck in my breath, immediately hoping the dog is enough of a distraction to keep everyone from noticing. But I’m not that lucky.

A moment later, Frank looks up at me as he introduces the other dog. “And that’s Daisy.”

In the blink of an eye, I’m hurtled back thirty years.

“I wish I could get a dog,” I whisper as Selena walks away, her new puppy bouncing beside her.

“Oh yeah? What kind?” Frank asks as he bumps his shoulder against mine. I push back, pulling a grin from him. I love that look on his face. It makes me feel safe. Happy. When I’m with Frank, everything’s better. And he doesn’t have a clue how much our afternoons together mean to me. My mom kicks me out of the house for a couple of hours most days, and I’m not allowed to return until dinner time. That’s when my father’s brother comes over. Uncle Tony never wants to play with us kids. Just he and Mommy play. He smells funny, so I really don’t want to stay around when he comes over anyway. Too much cologne, I think.

“You know the dog from that movie we watched, the one who was friends with the fox?”

Frank smiles. “The Fox and the Hound?”

“Yeah. I think I’d like a dog like that. Their droopy faces are so cute. They’re smart dogs, right? They could protect me if—”

Frank comes to a halt, his sharp gaze zeroing in on me. Whoops.

“Protect you from what?”

“Look, the ice cream truck. I think I have enough to get us both a cone. Run!” I take off before he can question me further.

Later, as we’re sitting on the curb, ice cream dripping down our hands, Frank nudges me with his leg. “I think you’re right about the hound. I’d like one too.”

I brighten. “Yeah?”

“Yeah, how about, when we’re grown up, we each get one? The dogs and I will protect you, Ellie. You know that, right? I’ll always protect you.” Even at twelve, he knows what I need protection from, even if he doesn’t say it out loud. And I believe he’ll keep his promise to keep me safe.

I nod, my throat tight as I search for the words to tell him how much he means to me. How much I value our time together.

“What would you name your dog?” he asks, changing the topic, no doubt sparing me once again. He’s always taking care of me.

“Daisy,” I whisper. For a moment, I allow myself to pretend I’m the type of girl who can have a dog and name it Daisy. That I don’t need to be strong. That I can be a little girl for just a little while. “What about you?”

“Jones,” he says with a big smile on his face.

“Jones?” I ask with a laugh.

“Yeah, Jones is the kind of name someone who gets stuff done has. He’d protect us, and Daisy would cuddle you.”

I bite my lip as I lean my head against his shoulder. “Daisy and Jones.”

“And us, Ellie,” he says, draping an arm over my shoulders and squeezing me.

“Daisy and Jones,” I murmur, then I bite down on my lip to keep myself from saying anything further.

Frank runs a hand over Daisy’s head. In return, the dog looks at him like he hung the moon. Truth be told, I just might be wearing the same damn expression.

With his attention on me, I can almost hear the promise he made so long ago. *“And us, Ellie.”*

Except he doesn’t speak it aloud. He’s probably not even thinking it. Why he used those names is beyond me. I’m shocked he remembers them since he clearly doesn’t remember the words he spoke. The ones I held in my heart. The promise I waited for him to make good on. Long ago, I finally let it go and resigned myself to the fact that he’d forgotten about me.

I stand quickly, brushing off the dog hair that’s already accumulated on my black leggings, and clear my throat. “I’ll grab coffee, then we can go for a walk, ’kay Leo?”

He nods, though his sole focus is the dogs. And it’ll likely stay that way for a while.

I realize as I’m pouring coffee that I never introduced Frank to my kids. Leo didn’t notice, but Lorenzo still stands beside the door, watching us all with a wary frown. He’s already lost the innocence Leo still carries, and it breaks my heart. With coffee in hand, I head in his direction, then nod toward the door. He follows me silently, because, though he looks just like his father, he takes after me in so many ways. He doesn’t need words to communicate. Always watching, always taking in the world around him. He’s my smart, quiet one.

He will be a great man one day if I have anything to say about it. One who doesn't prey on the weak. One who uses his overactive brain for good. As long as he's surrounded by the right kind of influence. He certainly has no shot if the only role models he has are Lorenzo and me.

My thoughts return to Frank. Did he vanish in order to escape the life he was born into? Or did he disappear because he's the Irish Ghost?

Is he a good man or a bad man?

Is life ever that black and white?

If it is, then there's no doubt I'm a bad woman. It doesn't matter how I justify what I've done. If I can only be categorized as good or bad, then I'm most certainly bad.

"Mom," Lorenzo says softly as we lean against the railing side by side.

In front of us, the ocean peeks out between a row of mature trees. Off to one side is a hill that I can imagine would be fun for the boys to roll down, and between the house and the tree line is a lawn bigger than any they've ever seen. The largest yards in Boston are the size of postage stamps. There are very few trees, and places to run and play are nearly nonexistent. But here, God, the fresh air and open field are the most beautiful gift.

And Jones and Daisy to protect you, my mind whispers.

How is it that two drooly basset hounds can settle me in a way I haven't felt in years?

It's not the basset hounds, woman. It's the man with the basset hounds.

It's *the* dream. The one I've rarely allowed myself to remember. The one that hurts to even think about because, until last night, *Frank was dead*.

"What are we doing here?" Lorenzo asks.

"Vacation," I reply, plastering on a smile. "How amazing is this place?"

Pressing his lips together and wearing a confused expression, he scans my face. I don't normally plaster on smiles. I probably look constipated. Or psychotic.

“Dad meeting us here?”

I put them in the car after they'd fallen asleep. They woke up here. I'm lucky they sleep so well.

Dammit. I hate lying to my kids, but there are some truths that an eight-year-old should never have to face. Hell, there are truths I'd rather not face at almost forty.

“We'll see. He's busy. But with school out for the summer, I thought this would be a fun place to explore.”

With a long sigh, Lorenzo puts his arms on the railing and rests his chin on them, taking in the ocean view.

I've definitely got my work cut out for me with this one.

“Who wants to go into town to get breakfast?” Alesia steps out onto the porch, pulling her arms around her to ward off the cool morning air. It may be summer, but Maine takes no prisoners, even in late June. The water is probably cold enough to send a person into hypothermia.

Leo follows her, and both dogs trail behind. “Mr. Iwish says he takes me to the boathouse if you says is okay. Say is okay, Mawmy!” he begs.

Behind him, Frank leans against the door, his hands in his pockets. The pockets of his *gray sweatpants*. Yeah, tell me how that's fair. He looks like a fucking model wearing sweatpants, and my sister looks like Leonardo DiCaprio's latest fling, and all they've done is get out of bed.

I rub at my eyes, hoping that he'll get uglier if I swipe the sleep from them, but nope, he's still just as stupidly hot. His eyes flicker with something that could be confused with heat as he waits for me to come out of my stupor and answer my child.

“We really do need to get supplies from town,” I reply.

With a tilt of his head, Frank motions toward the kitchen. “It's fully stocked. Shane's never not hungry, so the fridge is

packed. Help yourself.”

I shake my head. “That’s not necessary. I have to call the lawyers and figure out this mess. Don’t want the boys getting too comfortable until we know what’s going on. And who’s Shane again?”

Frank pushes himself off the door and saunters closer. With each step he takes, I sink a little more inside myself. Protecting my heart from reaching out and grabbing him. I blame the dogs. They’re making me feel a certain way.

When he’s within arm’s reach, I instinctively step back, quickly finding myself trapped between him and the railing. Not only is my heart hiding from this man, but my body knows to steer clear of him too.

“Shane is my nephew. And I already called the lawyers. Everything you said checked out.”

“Of course it did. You think I’m stalking you?” I huff out. Shit. Honestly, if I had known he was alive, I probably would have done just that. I’d have found him and begged him to keep me hidden too. But finding him like this? It pisses me off. *He didn’t come for me. I was brought to him.*

Or he’s the psychopath Irish Ghost and he’s going to use you to lure your husband here so he can kill him.

Though that wouldn’t be a terrible turn of events.

Stop. No matter what, Frank and I are not endgame. Whether he’s good or bad, I don’t deserve the love of anyone. My boys are more than I deserve and have to be my entire focus.

When he reaches for me, I flinch, unprepared. With his brows knit together, he holds his hands up and takes a step back. “I’m sorry. I’ll take you into town. Or you can leave the boys here with me while you go get what you need.”

Stop being nice to me, I want to cry, stop pitying me. That’s the only reason he’s being kind. He doesn’t truly care about me. If he cared—

I stop myself from going down that path again. I'm not a woe-is-me kind of woman. I won't live in the past. I don't *need* Frank to save me. I can save myself.

And until I figure out who he really is, I don't have any intention of leaving my children alone with him.

"Alesia will stay with the boys. But if you could show me where the store is, I'd be grateful," I say, formulating a plan in my head.

To say I was surprised that Ellie agreed to go into town with me was an understatement. Seeing her as a mom has completely thrown me for a loop. Hell, being in her vicinity for the first time in over twenty-five years—fuck, it’s hard.

For a couple of seconds, *mere seconds*, I see a glimmer of my old best friend inside that tiny, angry body. She has every right to be angry, every right to be untrusting, but I won’t lie and say it doesn’t sting.

Through the years, I’ve lost every single person that mattered to me, outside Shane, so having her back here feels good. Makes me almost feel like myself again. Like the kid who used to smile. Who lived for afternoons with his best friend. Her grandmother even gave me the nickname Irish.

But as quickly as that nostalgia surfaces, the Ellie I know is gone again. Replaced by this cold, unfeeling person I don’t recognize.

I take the stairs two at a time and knock on Shane’s door twice, but I don’t wait for a response from him before I walk in.

“What the hell?” he growls as I open the curtains, casting the room he keeps dark in sunlight.

That’s exactly how I feel about Ellie’s arrival. Like she’s shining a light on the shadow I’ve been living in for so long.

She’s a mom. She’s lived this entire life, and I’ve been here, lurking. Not living. The worst part is that I dragged

Shane into this with me. The kid doesn't even have a job to escape to. No friends. No wonder he sleeps all day and then talks to God knows who on the computer late into the night. What's there to look forward to?

And for once, I'm tired of hiding in the shadows.

"We've got guests," I tell him.

Shane throws an arm across his face. "Why is Seamus back already? He was just here," he grumbles.

"It's a woman," I say, infusing my voice with a calculated lightness. He and Alesia are almost the same age. She'll definitely have his blood pumping. If he so much as looks in Ellie's direction, I might have his head, though. Don't care that he's the only family I have left. "And kids," I add. "I'm running their mom into town, so I need you to hang out with them downstairs. Maybe put on a movie or something."

What do kids do? Hell if I know. Shane was sixteen when I got custody of him. And I use the term *custody* lightly. It'd be more accurate to say I made him disappear along with me. It's funny how the government defines kidnapping. They're okay with it when they want something done. And kidnapping is a line they *will* cross.

"Seriously?" he grumbles. "Who the fuck are they?"

"Don't say fuck."

Still in a prone position on his bed, he laughs, but it comes out scratchy. "Oh, this'll be good. Fuck is like your favorite word. How are you *not* going to say it?"

"Contrary to popular belief, prior to moving to the middle of nowhere, I moved about in society like a normal human being and could refrain from cursing all day. Dealing with your grouchy ass is what makes me so cursey."

"Cursey?" he says as he slides out of bed.

I avert my gaze because he's not wearing a shirt and his boxers are a bit too revealing.

"Put on some clothes. I'll see you downstairs," I grumble.

“You never answered my question,” he shouts as I open his door. “Who is she?”

Good fucking question. And one I don't quite have the answer to yet.

After Alesia went to bed, and when the rest of the house was deadly silent, I spent hours searching every room but those that were occupied or locked. Though, if Frank is the Irish Ghost, this place is probably loaded with cameras, so he probably already knows about my little expedition. Even if he's not the head of the Mob, it's unlikely a house this lavish isn't equipped with all kinds of surveillance equipment.

But it was worth the risk of getting caught. I'd rather have to explain that I don't trust him than let my guard down in a place that may not be safe.

My old friend would understand that. This new guy? I don't know. I'm still processing the implications of discovering him alive. For now, he's a complete mindfuck.

Unsurprisingly, my investigation led to absolutely nothing. The only thing I found mildly interesting was the single locked door upstairs. It wasn't just secured like any old interior door might be. It was locked in such a way that even I couldn't pick it.

That's some Sherlock Holmes shit, and I'm going to need some time to figure it out.

As soon as Frank disappears upstairs, I get my sister's attention and nod toward the kitchen. She gives one more longing look to the two dogs that are fucking with my equilibrium and then walks toward me.

"How you feeling today, killer?" Alesia says the second we step foot in the kitchen. She's far more relaxed than she

was last night. Like she thinks I was kidding about killing Frank. God, she's naïve.

Shushing her, I grab her by the arm and drag her to the far side of the room. Ducking my head, I whisper, "When I'm gone, I need you to go upstairs to the third room on the right. See if it's still locked."

With her brow furrowed and her lips parted, Alesia takes half a step back and examines me. She probably thinks I'm insane. "Okay, so we end up on this remote island with your childhood friend—a man you thought was dead, by the way. Who might be the head of the Irish Mob," she hisses, "and you want me to break into his locked room?"

I tilt my head and sigh. "You are so dramatic. Did I say break in? I said, see if it's locked. *That's it.*"

With a roll of her eyes, she huffs out a breath. "Isn't it enough that I watch the kids?"

I will not kill my sister today. I will not kill my sister today.

"Fuck, my uncle didn't mention there were two of you" comes from across the room, making Alesia jump. *Amateur.*

I suck in a harsh breath when green eyes the same color as Frank's meet mine. This man is the spitting image of his uncle twenty years ago. He has darker hair, which is the biggest difference. Frank's hair is cut so close it's almost shaved. But he's built the same. Bulky and broad, with a strong chin and a fucking smolder that would make weaker women quake.

"Holy shit," I mutter.

Frank saunters into the kitchen and smacks the back of his nephew's head. "Told you to watch your mouth."

"She cursed too," he says, pointing at me.

"I can't get over how much he looks like you," I say, my focus locked on Frank.

He snorts. "Lucky bastard, right?"

That gets a huff of a laugh from me. "You ready to go?"

“She’s not even going to say hi to me?” the nephew says, grinning at Alesia.

She takes a step forward and holds out her hand to introduce herself. The move has his gaze dipping to her bare legs.

“Go get dressed before we leave,” I tell her.

She sighs. “Okay, *Mom*.”

The nephew chuckles, and both Frank and I glare at him.

“Wow, she’s as much fun as you are,” the nephew says. He holds out his hand to me. “I’m Shane. The younger, *better-looking* Irishman.”

I snort. “You are not a man. And I’m most definitely not interested. Nor is my sister. Remember those two things and watch your mouth around my kids, and your windpipe will remain intact for another day.”

In my periphery, Frank’s lips quirk up as if he wants to laugh. His nephew, on the other hand? His jaw goes slack, and confusion swims in his eyes. In other words, he looks at me like I’m insane.

Spoiler alert, I am.

“She’s joking,” Frank says to a traumatized Shane.

I stroll out of the kitchen to find my boys, but over my shoulder I call out, “No, I’m not.”



THE RIDE into town is a bumpy one. The ruts in the dirt road and the trees jutting out randomly cause Frank to jerk the car every which way. His movements are practiced, like he’s used to this ride. And maybe he is. How long has he lived up here? Has he been here since he disappeared all those years ago?

God, what a lonely existence that would be.

Though it probably isn't any lonelier than living alongside people but in complete silence because talking only leads to pain. No more isolating than hiding bruises, hiding reactions. Just plain hiding. In plain sight.

Not only is it lonely, but it's exhausting.

Despite how isolated I've been, despite how many hypothetical conversations I've had with Frank in my head, despite the tears I've cried for him since the day he supposedly died, I don't start this unavoidable conversation by asking about him. No, I do what I do best and lash out.

"How long do you need to get yourself and the mini shit-stirrer packed up and moved out? A day? Two?"

"I'm not leaving," he replies, his focus never leaving the road.

"You're not staying."

He keeps both hands on the wheel, still expertly navigating the rougher terrain. "You need someone to maintain this property. It's huge and unfamiliar. Those things can be dangerous."

I shift in my seat and arch a brow in his direction.

He still doesn't look at me, but, as if he can feel my glare, he retorts, "Don't tell me you can take care of yourself."

"I can."

"Yes. In the city, I'm sure you can. But not here."

I chuckle. "The birds and the bees don't scare me. And before you bring up the bears, yeah, they don't either."

"I'd worry about the fisher. Nasty little fuckers, especially with kids."

"Not worried about them either," I huff, mentally adding *google fisher* to my to-do list. I don't even know if the thing lives on land or in the ice-cold water. What the fuck is a fisher?

Frank gives me a side-eye. "What about the winter? It gets so cold you can't spend more than a few minutes outside most

days. The snow will cover every inch of the property, and there are no plow trucks to clear the driveway or the roads close to the house. How will you get to the store? It's a small community. What about the men in this town who will find out quickly that you're here by yourself, that your pretty sister, who clearly doesn't have enough sense to take care of herself, waltzes around the house half-clothed?" He arches a brow as he looks me in the eye for the first time since we left the house. "That doesn't scare you either?"

I'm silent.

"How about that husband of yours? We both know he'll be coming for you. Scared of him?"

Fury rushes through my body like a forest fire burns after a hit of fresh oxygen. "Why the hell do you care?"

He grunts. "I'm not leaving."

I fold my arms and look out the window, taking in the small town as it comes into view. Almost instantly, the sight of the calm water of the ocean meandering through the little canals cools the fire racing through my veins. A single-lane bridge connects the island the house sits on to the rest of the town. As we travel over it, I scan the area, taking in and memorizing everything I see.

An old woman in a green fishing cap meanders over the bridge, her frail hands gripping the railing as she takes one slow step after another. A trio of men stands with fishing poles, one with an orange shirt so bright it could probably be seen from outer space. Every one of them wears a big smile as they chat while they wait for the fish to bite. I roll down the window just in time to hear one of them call out to a lobsterman setting his traps on his boat not far off the shore. The vessel seems far too tiny to be safe riding these cold ocean waters.

"Hey, Murph, catch us some good ones!"

"Yellow," Frank murmurs beside me.

I almost jump right into the old game. Though I don't respond, I search out the color, finding the little boy with the

yellow shirt. He's holding tight to his mother's hand as they head down the sidewalk in front of us.

When I don't take my turn, he throws out another color. "Black."

I narrow my eyes and take in the kaleidoscope of colors surrounding us, but I can't pinpoint what he's spotted.

After several long seconds, he lets out an obnoxious laugh. "The color of your soul."

"Asshole," I mutter.

"Was just checking to see if you were still in there somewhere," he teases.

Am I? I don't really know. Yes, I recognize the game we used to play. Sitting on the sidewalk in the old neighborhood, watching life go by around us, wishing for an escape from the horrors I'd face when Frank would go home and I'd be left with my mother and my uncle.

The game took concentration, thus giving me a reprieve from my reality, even if only for a little while. Frank always saw the most obscure things. The green Nike design on the shoe of a man walking by, the golden glint of the sun in someone's eye, the brackish bruise on my thigh.

He was always observant, always a step ahead. This little game is a good reminder for me. He still is. I need to be careful. I can't underestimate him. Because if I had to bet, he's out to get me.

Ignoring that notion for now, I focus on the town. Buildings line each side of the road. Faded denim blues and brick reds. A stencil on a window advertising saltwater taffy. Another boasts the best lobster roll in Maine, a third touts their blueberry beer.

I must make a face, because Frank snorts. "You gotta try it; it's delicious."

"I don't drink," I snap.

He clears his throat and nods. "They have blueberry soda too. Maybe the boys would want to try some."

Mind your business. Those words sit on the tip of my tongue, but I tamp them down before they come flying out. So far, he seems to be trying. So instead, I nod.

He pulls up in front of a brick building and points to the bridge. “I can wait over there if you’d prefer to go in yourself.”

Relief washes over me at the offer, and I let my shoulders sag. For a moment, it felt as if he was watching my every move. Having a few minutes to walk around alone, to acclimate to my surroundings without having to worry about what Frank is thinking or mask my thoughts and emotions, will give me the breathing room I so desperately need.

I haven’t been truly alone in years. Sure, I never had company at home in Boston, but Lorenzo’s guards clocked my every move. Groceries were delivered, cars were serviced—not that I was allowed to drive.

I was caged, living in a gilded cell, with only my boys and my sister for company.

The fresh air hits my lungs, and I gulp it down greedily. This is the first moment of freedom I’ve had in decades.

Without a backward glance at me, Frank heads toward the fishermen. He greets them with a smile and leans against the railing, easily diving into conversation.

He fits in here. They know him. Another tidbit I save for later. A fact to consider, to turn over in my brain, as I try to figure out who precisely Frank McCabe has become.

A bell chimes as I open the door to the store and a woman wearing a blue smock over jeans and a white long-sleeve shirt looks up with a smile.

“Welcome to Betty’s. Can I help you find something?”

I don’t trust people who are immediately kind. Who smile so easily. Taking in a breath, I remind myself that there are people in this world who live their lives without calculating every move. The woman is just being friendly. She has a business to run. She has no idea she’s offering pleasantries to a serial killer.

“Hi, I think I’ll just look around. Thank you.”

With a nod, she goes back to stocking jars on the shelf. I grab a cart from the corral beside the door and wander the first aisle. It’s a tiny store, but it’s well stocked, and I have no trouble finding all we need. During my inspection of the house, I noted that the bathrooms were already stocked with toiletries. And Frank was right when he said the fridge was full, but I don’t feel comfortable eating his food.

Besides, Leo has a gluten allergy, so snacks for him are a must. No more Amazon shipments for us. I don’t have a credit card, and even if I did, I couldn’t use it without alerting Lorenzo to our location. I grabbed enough cash from the safe to get us through a few weeks, but I’ll probably need to find a job until we can sell the house and find a more permanent place to disappear.

I squint into the sun as I exit the shop, bags in hand—cotton style because we’re in Maine, where apparently plastic doesn’t exist—and before I can search for Frank, he materializes in front of me.

“Can I grab those for you?” His lips are pressed into a line, and his eyes are uncertain, like he expects me to say no. He’s guarded, so he probably gets it. Even if he didn’t want to at first. Like he finally understands that I’m not interested in faking nice with him.

But after taking out Lorenzo’s guards and fleeing in the middle of the night, I’m exhausted. The bags are heavy, and I want to explore the town we’re temporarily residing in, so I hand them off to him.

His lips quirk up slightly in the corners as he takes them. “There’s a farmers’ market up ahead if you want to check that out,” he offers.

My body pitches forward, ready to dart that way without my permission. I’ve never been to a farmers’ market, and I itch to participate in such a normal activity. Something that people in small towns do. People who don’t have traumatic pasts. But I don’t instantly take off. Instead, I find myself

stopping by the car and waiting for Frank to put the bags away so he can walk with me.

“Hey, Irish,” a man calls from across the street. Frank holds his hand out, as if he’s blocking me from oncoming traffic, and then we step off the curb and head in his direction.

“Pete, how’s the lawn mower working?” he asks, shaking the man’s hand.

Pete smiles good-naturedly. “Great, thanks to you. And who do we have here?” He peers in my direction, wearing a placid expression.

Frank’s palm settles against my back oh so gently as he replies. “This is Ellie. She’s an old friend.”

“Doesn’t look that old to me.” Pete gives me a once-over and says something I don’t catch. It’s hard to follow the conversation with Frank’s hand on me. We haven’t come into physical contact since we scuffled when I arrived, and the warmth of his hand is so shockingly comforting it leaves me breathless. I didn’t see the move coming, yet I didn’t wince when he touched me. My body has apparently decided he’s not a threat, even if my mind is not on board with that assessment.

Frank narrows his eyes at the man’s perusal and pulls me in. *That* touch does set my skin on fire. This close, I can smell him. Cedar and fresh cut grass—with a hint of whiskey, maybe?—seeps from his pores. His pulse flutters in his wrist as he flexes his arm against my midriff. The calluses of his fingers dig into my side, and I practically moan at that simple touch.

It’s possessive and protective. It says one word that couldn’t be further from the truth: *mine*.

“Well.” The man clears his throat, obviously sensing the tension that’s settled around us. Seconds ago, Frank was calm and friendly, but now, the broodiness and torment emanating from him make it clear it’s time for him to move on. “It was nice meeting you, Ellie. Welcome to Bristol, Maine.”

I force a smile, hoping I’m better at hiding my true feelings than the man whose grip hasn’t loosened on my hip.

“Nice to meet you too.”

Then, without another word, Frank steers me forward. I push away a little, but he only pulls me closer. “Told you it’s dangerous for beautiful women here,” he murmurs, his lips dusting against my ear and sending shivers through my body.

Beautiful.

Frank thinks I’m beautiful.

God, when was the last time someone called me beautiful?

“Look at my beautiful whore of a wife. Saved you, Elena. Now open your mouth before I claw it open.”

Lorenzo’s cold words jolt me out of my stupor, and I push off Frank. Needing air and to put some space between us, I point at a booth selling jars of homemade jam and plaster on a fake smile to hide the panic attack that threatens to engulf me in public. “Alesia loves jam. We should get some.”

Frank’s loud sigh hits me right behind my breastbone. It sounds like he cares. And for a moment, it felt like he did. But no one has cared about me in years. The last time I was foolish enough to believe someone did, he disappeared without a trace.

One of the Wright Brothers strums on his guitar while the other croons about women being the death of him. I'm never quite sure which one is which unless I look them in the eye. Harrison has a lazy eye that creeps me the fuck out. The entire town is wandering the farmers' market today. I have no doubt Ellie will be the talk at Ruth's when the sun goes down. It's the local bar. As in the *only one*.

It's only open from late spring until about January. No one goes out after eight p.m. in the winter. It's too dark, too cold, and too fucking dangerous to traverse these roads after drinks.

I press closer to Ellie as she picks up one jar of jam after another, ignoring me completely. Going slow with her made sense. Like a deer, I figured she needed me to wait patiently and give her time to come around.

Turns out she's not a fucking deer. I haven't figured out what she is, but I think I know what she needs. Someone to snuggle her. Someone who will squeeze her tight and show her they won't let go. Only then will she release all that stress she's been carrying and relax.

She's mesmerizing. Even in her black tights and baggy olive-colored shirt. Her straight black hair is pulled back in a low ponytail. Her damn beauty mark is like a beacon, begging me to kiss the spot above her lips, and then every single inch of her body.

"Hey, Irish," Hazel says from behind the stand. Not noticing a person immediately is so unlike me. I'm always

aware of my surroundings. But apparently, when Ellie is near, she's all I see.

“Hey, Haze. How are sales today? Looks like a good turnout.”

Ellie pretends to ignore us, picking up one jar after another. They don't have labels. There's nothing to read. Hazel only makes one flavor: blueberry. Ingredients aren't included because it's her family recipe. There's simply a red ribbon wrapped around each jar, so there is no reason for Ellie to study them so closely. But I don't call her out on it. Not yet, at least.

Hazel leans forward, making sure her tits are on display. “Sales are good. You around later? Haven't seen you or Shane in a few weeks. I'd be happy to cook dinner for you.”

Ellie's eyes dart to Hazel's chest and then narrow as she homes in on her face. If looks could kill, Hazel would be at the bottom of the Atlantic right now.

Making it clear to everyone, including the jealous vixen by my side, that I'm unavailable, I take the jar of jam from her and hand it to Hazel. “Thanks, but I'm having dinner with Ellie tonight.” I side-eye her and smirk. “Want any other jars, baby?”

I have to hold back my laugh at the way Ellie bares her teeth in a feigned smile. “No, *babe*. One is enough.”

Hazel scrutinizes her, then turns that look on me, so I pull Ellie close and kiss her forehead. I'm being an asshole. Hazel and I have definitely been more than acquaintances over the years. But I can't summon the energy to care about her feelings right now. The only person who matters is the woman who's burning up beneath my fingertips. “Whatever you want.”

Once Hazel has collected our money, we head away from her tent.

“What the hell was that?” Ellie hisses once we're out of earshot.

Unable to stop myself, I chuckle. “Come on. You did me a solid there.”

“You’ve slept with her,” she says, venom tingeing her tone.

One brow cocked, I look down at her and grin. This is an interesting turn of events. Jealous Ellie is even hotter than normal Ellie. “You care?”

“No, of course not,” she says, looking away from me.

“Sure ’bout that?”

“Just don’t do it with my kids in the house. Take her up on it, head on over to her place tonight. Better yet, *stay there*. That would solve both our problems.”

Shit. That backfired. With a resigned sigh, I slow my pace. “I’ll wait for you at the car. Take your time shopping.”

FRANK

Ellie has gotten really good at ignoring me while simultaneously attending to the every need of her children. In the afternoons, she naps while Alesia watches the kids. Is she not sleeping at night? I'm beginning to suspect that's the case. If I had to guess, she spends her nights trying to figure me out. Or keeping one eye open. From what I've seen so far, she doesn't trust easily.

Her fears are absolutely warranted. She hasn't had an easy life. I just wish she'd let me in. But even I can't protect her from her demons.

We haven't discussed how we're going to handle our situation again. Maybe she'll sell the place, or maybe she'll stay and really kick Shane and me out. Either way, I do what I can for her boys, but only when she's napping. Lord knows she won't let me near them when she's awake.

"You boys ready for some fun?" I say, jogging down the basement steps. The boys are stationed in front of the TV in their little apartment like they are most afternoons. Ellie disappeared upstairs for her afternoon nap about a half hour ago. That means we have at least two hours. She's normally down for three. I'm not sure how she subsists on that kind of sleep, but I can't solve all her problems right now. I can, however, take the boys out to enjoy the fresh air.

Lorenzo eyes me skeptically, his dark eyes narrowing just like his mother's do when I piss her off. Which is basically any time I breathe. I almost chuckle at the thought, but Leo is

already running at me with a big smile on his face. He reminds me so damn much of Ellie when she was a kid. Those big green eyes, the willingness to try anything, *the hope*.

He's almost hard to look at. The reminder of who she used to be hits like a punch to the gut every time.

"What are we doing? What are we doing?" Leo asks as he tugs on my pant leg.

I lift him up so we're eye to eye. "Have you ever ridden a bike?"

That gets Lorenzo's attention. His eyes almost sparkle for an instant, but just as quickly, he settles back against the couch. "Mom won't let us go anywhere."

Fortunately, I have backup. Alesia smiles from the other end of the couch. "Good thing she's taking a nap and left me in charge."

We've bonded during the hours her sister sleeps. More than likely, her sister has given her orders to watch everything I do, but either way, it gives me a reason to spend time with the boys.

"We don't have bikes, I wish," Leo whines, his lower lip sticking out.

I jostle him a little so he's looking at me. "Good thing there is a garage full of them, then, huh?"

Lorenzo shrugs as if it's no big deal, but he slides off the couch and hurries to put on his shoes. He's a cool customer, but it's a dead giveaway that he's interested. I don't call him on it, though. He reminds me of his father in a lot of ways. While the mafia boss has been heartless for a long time, he hasn't always been that way. And I can't help but hope that this guy doesn't turn out to be anything like him.

"Come on, Leo," Alesia says, sliding off the couch as well and pointing to her back, "let's go for a ride."

Cheering, he lets go of my leg and launches himself onto his aunt's back. She stumbles forward a bit with a laugh, her curls bouncing. Once she's righted herself, she adjusts his

arms so he's not strangling her and shuffles over, silently waiting for me to lead.

It's the perfect summer day. The temperature is in the high seventies when the sun is out, and I swear the trees are greener and the ocean is a lighter blue. The entire setting is far too tranquil for the restlessness that's tormenting all of us. We climb the dirt path littered with rocks. They help us maneuver the steep grade as we trudge toward the boathouse, where the bikes are stored. When we get to the top, Lorenzo stops and looks out at the ocean. From here, the entire cove is on display, creating the most incredible panoramic view. With a tap on his shoulder, I direct his attention to the two seals lying on the floating dock.

"Cool," he whispers quietly.

"You know what seals mean?" I ask him, crouching down with my hands on my thighs so I'm at his level.

He shakes his head, face so open to learning it makes my chest ache.

"Sharks."

"Sharks!" Leo screeches. He bounces and kicks his legs, nearly knocking Alesia down with his abrupt movements.

I grab for her and right her as she laughs. "Kid! Sharks don't come on land. Even city boys like you should know that."

Lorenzo looks back at me, his lips pressed together and his eyes swimming with concern. "You go swimming in there every day."

Shit. He's been paying attention. I do swim out there. Have to find a way to feel alive.

I chuckle. "Don't get any ideas. Your mom would kill me before the shark has a chance."

Alesia giggles. "She's definitely scarier."

Ain't that the fucking truth. Especially when it comes to protecting her family. But fuck if I don't respect the hell out of her for it.

Predators deserve respect. And plenty of distance. Watching from afar is much more effective. Learn the routines, set a careful trap. It's the only way to survive clever hunters like sharks.

“So who's ready to ride a bike?”

“**W**hat do you mean we can’t sell the house?”

“You do not have the power to sell. The home has been granted to you through a trust. The trust will pay the expenses, and you may live there, but the trust is the true owner. The decision to sell would be up to the trustee,” the lawyer explains.

“You told me—”

“I misspoke” is his response.

Hating when men cut me off, I glare at the cordless phone I snuck up into my room. “Who is the trustee? I want to speak to her.”

He chuckles. “*He* is unlikely to sell. He loves the property.”

Of course the trustee is a man. Maybe I could kill him? “If something were to happen to him, who becomes the trustee?”

“He’s young. I don’t think you have to worry about that.”

Right. Because I’m worried about the death of a man who evidently controls my future. Clearly, this lawyer doesn’t know me. I need to sell this property so we can disappear. The longer we stay in one place, the more likely it is their father will find us.

Though this Podunk town is a fantastic place to hide. Even if he did discover that we’re in Maine, finding us would be difficult. This property is not on a map, and it isn’t

discoverable using GPS, hence the reason we almost catapulted into the ocean. It's like it's a secret space made just for us.

Maybe it is the safest spot for a while.

"But what will I do for money?" I say aloud.

"The trust pays for upkeep and utilities, but unfortunately, there isn't a stipend for anything else."

Great. So I'll need a job in order to pay for food and necessities. Should be a piece of cake. Because my skills of quietly murdering people and leaving zero clues will look great on a résumé.

Thank God I have the cash I took from the safe. Although I have no idea how long that will last if this house doesn't sell. I should have searched for a buyer who specializes in moving stolen cars rather than ditching the one we used in the woods a couple of miles away. Told Frank it was a rental and I had to return it. Maybe that wasn't the smartest idea...

I scan the property from my spot beside the window. It's becoming a prison of my own making, but what choice do I have? Open air, ocean views, and green grass or Lorenzo, a casket with my name on it, and my boys being raised to become monsters like their father?

The choice is obvious.

And don't forget the Irishman who makes your heart rate spike.

Maybe I should choose the casket.

As if my thoughts have summoned him, the ridiculously good-looking man appears on the lawn in front of me. He's sitting on a bike at the top of the steep hill between the house and the ocean. After a quick look back, he puts one foot on a pedal and pushes off, racing down the steep green hill.

My heart nearly stops when my sons appear at the top of the same hill, sitting on bikes and wearing helmets. Behind them, Alesia is standing with her hands on her hips and wearing a smile so wide I can see it from here.

She wouldn't let them—

Before I can finish my thought, both boys go over the edge and straight down the hill. Without hanging up, I drop the phone and run down the steps, taking them three at a time. I practically tumble when I hit the bottom, but course correct and rush through the living room and straight to the double doors that lead to the deck. Catching myself using the banister, I hold my breath and scan the yard, looking for my boys.

My heart beats wildly as their laughter floats on the warm air. Finally, they come into focus. When they do, Frank is giving them fist bumps.

“Great job! You went faster than me, little man.”

Tears prick my eyes and my heart beats erratically. I feel unhinged, but my boys look so happy and carefree.

I slink down behind the railing, my breaths heavy, trying to control my reaction. The dogs appear, and Daisy licks at my face, likely enjoying my tears.

I shouldn't be upset that my boys can suddenly ride bikes. What mother would be? But as their mother, I should have been with them when they did it for the first time. I shouldn't be hiding, plotting murders, and taking naps while my kids play. Why? Because sleeping at night is a surefire way to guarantee nightmares. Darkness permeates so much of my life already. I shouldn't let it control my daylight too.

I need to do better.

The boys *need* me to be better.

Three calming breaths, one more silent pep talk, and I'm on my feet, smile in place.

“Mom!” Leo shouts when he spots me.

“Look at you guys,” I say, my tone as friendly as I can muster and my gaze remaining on my sons. If I look at Alesia or Frank, I may growl.

“Frank taught us how to ride a bike,” Leo exclaims.

Lorenzo is quieter, likely sensing my unease. He has an uncanny knack for that. God, if only he could be as carefree as he was moments ago when he was smiling with Frank. Before I showed up and instantly brought his mood down. He shouldn't have to worry about his mother's feelings, her worries, or her deranged thoughts.

Maybe they'd be better off with parents like Alesia and Frank.

"You did a great job. Although a hill like that was a bit much for a first try, no?" I manage to hold back the snark, even as I home in on the green eyes that could so easily be my undoing if I allowed them.

Frank doesn't cower. No, he sits on the bike, chin lifted and his gaze determined. "Want to come for a spin with us? There are more bikes in the garage."

"Really? Pretty convenient that there is such a variety of bikes on the property. Even ones just right for the boys. And with training wheels on that one too," I poke, pointing at Leo's bike.

Frank shrugs. "Must have been kids here at some point. Or maybe your uncle was proactive. Wanted your boys to have a good summer. Wanted them to smile."

I bite my lip and tell my heart to knock off the pitter patter. Because what he's saying is that he wants my boys to have a good summer. He wants them to smile.

I'm no fool. These bikes are new, and Frank is the one who bought them.

He got them out of the house. He's trying.

I just wish I knew why.

“**W**hat were you thinking?” I rage at my sister as the boys soak in the bath.

We spent hours outside. Frank swept the rocks as flat as he could along the driveway before taking Leo and Lorenzo up and down it until they felt comfortable enough to ride down themselves. The smile on my serious eight-year-old’s face should calm me, but Alesia should have thought more about the repercussions of letting the boys do something so dangerous. Maybe I’ve done her a disservice by protecting her all her life, because the girl has no street smarts.

Frank is a ghost. *He died*. Yet he’s here, and he’s working hard to get us to trust him. That’s concerning. She should be worried. She should fucking think.

But I swear all she’s focused on is how dreamy he is.

I get it. God, do I get it. If I wasn’t so hardened, and maybe if I was a little more unsuspecting, I’d fall for his charms too. But she can’t.

I can’t watch that.

It was bad enough witnessing the way that blonde flirted with him last week. Watching the way he stared at her, the familiarity between them, nearly had me losing my cool. It made me want to let my guard down. Made me want to feel, for just one moment, what it would be like to have that hot gaze on me. To have those calloused fingers touch more than my hip. To feel those lips press against mine.

Would he be a gentle kisser? He was always gentle with me when we were kids. Now, though? The fire in his eyes and the hardness of his jaw allude to anything but gentleness.

He's hard. Strong. Brutal in the way he looks at me like he knows exactly what I'm thinking. What I want, and even worse, what I *need*.

Like he's confident that if he got close enough, he'd have me in his bed and writhing beneath him without any effort.

And he'd probably be right.

Sex has never been mine to give. It's always been taken from me. From the beginning, it's been brutal in a way that even Frank is not. I've dreaded it. I've found ways to avoid, and when I can't, I've retreated to my memories.

"BE READY IN FIFTEEN MINUTES."

I stick my finger in the cord and twist it until it's wrapped so tight it's cutting off the circulation in my finger. My nona tsks at me as she places a pitcher of fresh iced tea she brewed overnight night on the table.

Chunks of oranges bob at the surface, making my mouth water. "Ready for what?" I ask into the phone, holding it between my ear and my shoulder as I pour tea into a cup.

"We're going to the beach," Frank says, so excited I can practically hear him bouncing.

The screen door to the kitchen flies open and ricochets off the side of the house as my uncle walks in. My nona shakes her head subtly and eyes the phone.

I whisper, "Be there soon. Don't come here," and then I hang up.

My mother isn't home, which means I'm on the menu if I don't disappear quickly. But Nona and I have a plan. We don't talk about how evil he is, but she always gets me out of the house. Because recently, he's started looking at me differently. Not just as the nuisance he's always considered me. At twelve, I'm not sure what to make of the gleam in his eyes as they

roam over my legs and up to where the hem of my nightgown rests just above my knees.

“Go on now. You’re late for dance,” my nona says, shooing me out of the kitchen.

With a silent nod, I rush out and up the stairs. Once I’m shut inside my bedroom, I grab a suit, finding only a two-piece I have yet to wear, and pull on shorts and a T-shirt, then I slip my sneakers on so I can run straight to Frank’s house.

We never spend time at his house, because, while my house is sometimes dangerous, his always is. But today, I don’t have a choice. Last time my uncle found Frank here, he took his belt off, and I wore the marks across my upper thighs for two weeks. Too high for anyone to spot but painful as a mother.

My feet hit the metal fire escape with a clang as I shimmy out the window. Then I drop the steps and climb down. I only look back once to make sure no one is watching me leave.

My nona comes out the back door with her purse and keys, hollering, “Off to take Elena to dance.” She winks as she pulls away, likely heading to her ladies’ poker game. When I grow up, I want to be her. Protective, kind, and fun. Those are the things I’ll always remember. That and her telenovelas.

Frank is waiting outside his three-story walk-up when I jog up the sidewalk. He’s sitting on a white cooler with a red top, and he’s wearing green swim trunks. A black tank covers his chest.

In the last year, Frank has started working out, and all of a sudden, he has muscles. Real muscles. And he’s gotten taller. He keeps growing while I stay the same. He’s at least a foot taller than me now.

When I reach him, he slides his glasses down his nose and sizes me up. “Did you roll right outta bed?” he teases.

I look down and wince when I realize I threw on another pajama shirt.

And it isn’t even the worn T-shirt kind. No, it’s pink and polyester and says Sleep Tight in purple lettering.

God, he must think I'm a baby.

He smiles sweetly, though, as he hefts the cooler with one hand and grabs his stereo in the other.

"Want me to carry that?" I ask, pointing to the black boombox.

He smirks. "Nah, but can you grab a CD out of my backpack so we can listen to music on the way?"

I make quick work of unzipping the green JanSport he has strapped to his back. Naturally, I pull out a Green Day CD because it's his current favorite. When I slip it in and hit Play, Frank full-on smiles. "That's my girl." Then he nods toward the road like he didn't just make my heart pitter patter double-time.

"I don't know why you're so upset," Alesia huffs, interrupting my trip down memory lane. She drops onto the couch and folds her legs into her chest. Her brown eyes study me. "If I didn't know better, I'd think you have a thing for him."

I let out a sarcastic laugh. "Are you insane?"

She sighs and picks at her nails. "Must be, because the Elena I know doesn't get worked up. She doesn't show emotion at all. So imagine my surprise when you're all hot and bothered by a man you claim means nothing to you."

I grab her hand to stop her from destroying her cuticles. "Of course I'm bothered by him. We're stuck here with him until I can figure out a way to sell this house. And I just found out that we don't get to make the decision. Some trustee does. We've only got enough money to get us through the summer. After that, what are we supposed to do? This entire area is going to shut down for the winter, and then we'll really be trapped here with a damn ghost and his nephew who sleeps all day and plays on the computer all night."

Alesia arches a brow. "Sounds like someone else I know."

"I'm not sleeping," I hiss. "When you're watching the boys in the afternoon, I'm getting things done. And the only

time Frank ever leaves this house is when he thinks I'm asleep."

Her eyes bulge. "No wonder you're so freaking stressed. Are you getting any sleep at all?"

It's an excellent question, but she won't like the answer. Because no, I'm not. If I fall asleep, it's for a couple of hours about the time daylight finally breaks. But I've been doing this for years. My body is used to it.

"I'm fine," I assure her. "Listen, I need you to do something for me. After dinner, I'm going to distract Frank. When I do, I need you to take a picture of the lock on that door that won't open."

"Why can't *I* distract Frank?" she suggests.

I have to fight the urge to claw her eyes out at that question. "Because he doesn't trust me. But he'll think nothing of you disappearing upstairs."

Closing her eyes, she sighs. She knows I'm right, and I swear it almost hurts me when she realizes it's true. Before I can get too caught up in that downward spiral, though, Leo is shouting from the bathroom that he's done. For now, it's time for me to be a mom again.



DESPITE THE OPULENCE of the exterior, the inside of the house is cozy and worn. Wood panels and bookcases stuffed with old books cover every wall. The lighting is dim once the sun sets, setting the perfect mood for cuddling on the couch with a book, though my focus never leaves Frank and my boys.

The dogs are sprawled out by my feet. Jones is closer to the crackling fire, while Daisy stares at me like she'd be happy if she did nothing else but this for the rest of her life. Angling forward, I rub her head and murmur, "You're such a good girl, aren't you?" in a voice I've never heard before. I'd be

embarrassed if anyone else could hear me, but the kids are chatting loudly at the long dining room table where they're devouring ice cream sundaes Frank insisted were a summer ritual.

I'd grumble about the boys' sugar intake so late in the evening, but since we all know Alesia is the one who monitors them overnight, my complaints would only add to my grouchy reputation, and every once in a while, it's nice to not be the grinch.

Alesia disappeared twenty minutes ago. As I suspected, Frank didn't bat an eye in her direction, so he didn't notice that she went upstairs instead of down. He was too focused on listening to Leo's step-by-step instructions for his ice cream sundae. Naturally, Frank took in every detail and made it precisely as directed.

What was more impressive, though, was how he got Lorenzo to smile. The ridiculous man used the whipped cream to give himself a beard, then let the dogs lick him clean.

I had to cover my mouth to keep from laughing. Sometimes I forget how he let me down. At moments like that, I want nothing more than to sink back into our friendship. Because I used to smile at Frank just like my sons do. And maybe, despite myself, I still do. But only when no one is looking.

"You boys want to play a game?" Frank calls from the kitchen, where he's washing out the ice cream bowls. Shane disappeared as soon as Frank took his bowl, grumbling about some chat he had to get back to.

Even though Frank is slowly wearing Lorenzo down, my son wears a skeptical frown. "Like what?" He's ready to scoff, regardless of Frank's answer.

Leo's favorite games are Chutes and Ladders and Trouble, but when we play, Lorenzo typically chooses to brood beside us rather than partake in *baby games*, as his father likes to call them.

I should have killed that asshole years ago. He's totally fucked up my son.

Frank saunters over, his demeanor just as indifferent as Lorenzo's. When he reaches the bookshelf behind the dining table, he opens a small drawer and pulls out a pack of cards and spins the box in his hands, shooting Lorenzo a challenging look. "Poker?"

Leo frowns, his face crumpling. "But I don't know how to play poker, I wish."

I have to press my lips together to hold back a laugh.

Lorenzo shrugs. "Yeah, same." But his attention is securely fixed on Frank.

The man drags the chair from the head of the table against the hard floor and spins it, then straddles it. Cocky grin in place, he turns to me like he knows precisely how good he fucking looks and says, "You gonna help me teach your boys, El?"

With a deep inhale, I press my eyes closed and close the book I'm obviously not reading. I'm not worried about marking my page because I haven't made it past the first sentence, even if I've been sitting here for over an hour. At my feet, Daisy raises her head, already alert and wondering what I'll do next.

For years, guards have watched my every move. One would think constantly garnering the attention of a dog would make me nervous, but it just makes me smile. When I brush absently against her soft fur, she laps at my hand, leaving a sheen of saliva, and then she gnaws on it gently.

"Mom doesn't know how to play poker," Lorenzo says matter-of-factly, like Frank is an idiot. His father would be proud.

"Your mom may have forgotten a few things, but I'm here to remind her." Frank's gravelly voice has so much innuendo in it I find myself squeezing my legs together.

"I remember." My voice comes out almost strained.

Warm green eyes meet mine. “Everything?”

The fire crackles, sending sparks, as I reply. “Everything.”

His lip twitches, and he waves at the chair beside him. “Then let’s show them how it’s done.”

As soon as I stand, both dogs scramble to their feet. Jones’s nails scratch at the hardwood as he slips in his haste to follow me.

Frank chuckles. “It’s like they know they were born for you.”

I stumble at his comment, but Jones is beside me, steadying me, just like Frank promised me he would be all those years ago.

What the actual hell? If I didn’t know better, I’d believe he planned this all along. Bought a cabin in the woods worth millions, trained a duo of dogs just like the pair we spoke about years ago, then summoned me here. The question, though, in this insane scenario, is whether he did it all because he wants me or because he’s been hunting me.

But why would he hunt me? If he *is* the Irish Ghost, taking out Lorenzo would be the goal. Though I suppose kidnapping us would give him an excuse to get close to my husband.

God, why am I always so suspicious? Why can’t I shut my damn brain off?

So far, he’s proven to be nothing more than a man making the best out of a shitty situation. A situation I need to better understand. A man I need to befriend. If I can get him to trust me, then maybe I’ll understand why he faked his own death.

“You guys playing poker?” Alesia asks, shuffling into the living room.

Frank turns in his seat at the sound of her voice, and I feel the loss of his attention immediately.

He smirks. “You play?”

Her responding laugh makes me want to gouge her eyes out. “Not even a little.”

“What do you say, El? Should we show them how it’s done?” Frank says, his tone flirtier than any other he’s used since we arrived.

I swear the sound pulses in my core, making me want to beg for his lips to whisper those very words against my skin.

Fuck, I need fresh air.

Frank’s eyes dance with mischief like he can read my mind as he taps the seat beside him. “C’mere, El. Don’t make me beg.”

“Yeah, Mawmy, don’t make us beg,” Leo mimics.

My heart skitters again at my little boy’s words.

It’d be so easy to settle in with Frank on one side and Leo on the other. To teach my sons how to play a game that Frank and I played as kids. To forget that I’m running away from a very real problem—one that will likely come knocking on this door if we don’t figure out a way to sell this house soon.

Behind Frank, Alesia shakes her head, mouthing, “Didn’t work.”

So another night without access to that room. Another secret still under lock and key. God, I’m tired. For years, I’ve had to scheme and plan and consider every angle of every aspect of my life.

Leo looks up at me, his smile wide and his eyes bright, and I find myself giving in, desperate for even a moment to relax. “Hand me the deck, Irish. Let’s see if you’re still as good as I remember.”

FRANK

Ellie's green eyes are almost electric in the glow of the firelight. While her movements suggest she's comfortable and in control while she flips the cards like her nona taught us, her eyes give away her every emotion. Pain like I've never seen flashes randomly as she probably relives one horror or another—experiences she'll probably never open up about. Then there are moments of want, of a need so great I think we both may drown in it. In those moments, her emotions match mine perfectly. My need for Ellie is so bone deep it hurts.

No one has ever consumed me the way she does. It started when we were kids, and the obsession never dwindled. At times, it manifested as a need to protect her. Other times, it was a need to possess her. To make her smile. To own her heart. To change the past.

At times, all I wanted to do was change her. Mold her back into my memories.

“Wow, how's you do that?” Leo stares, mouth agape.

Ellie fans the cards in the air, moving them from one hand to the other. Even her surly eight-year-old wears a look of wonderment.

“I taught her that,” I say, sitting a little straighter.

“When?” Lorenzo says, his default skepticism instantly returning.

He wants to like me. But he's his father's son. And as days go by and summer wanes and his father doesn't appear, I think

it's becoming clear to him that Ellie hasn't told him the full truth. I wouldn't be surprised if he believes I'm to blame for his separation from the man. Does he see the way I look at his mother? Thank fuck he's not old enough to understand how thoughts of her keep me awake at night.

Ellie deals the cards in a clockwise pattern, giving Lorenzo a pointed look. "When I was about your age. Now pay attention. This guy won't go easy on you." She juts her chin in my direction.

I can't help but smirk. "Nah, I've gotten less competitive in my old age."

Ellie's responding laugh fucking destroys me. It's a little raspy and filled with fucking joy.

"I'll believe it when I see it," she mutters. Then to Leo she says, "You'll be on my team, and Alesia and Lorenzo can pair up."

"What about me?" I tease.

The smile Ellie wears snaps another one of the cords binding my heart. The ones that have kept the organ locked down tight because I knew the minute I saw her, I'd be fucked.

The effort was wasted, though. I've tried to deny it for a long time, but Ellie took up residence there years ago. Girl has been tucked away in my heart for decades. Her memory traveled overseas with me, then stuck around in Boston. Putting a chain-link fence around it wouldn't make a difference now.

The first round is brutal. Alesia's strategy would be better fitted to a game of Go Fish, and Lorenzo is quiet when Ellie and Leo win. I offer to help Lorenzo during the next round, though, and Alesia watches. We get lucky with two kings, and the smile on his face is everything.

Ellie's interactions with Leo make my chest ache. She's so gentle with him, so loving and kind. The only time she lets her guard down is when she's looking at her sons. When her attention is anywhere else, she's rigid and wary, watching me,

studying my every move, likely overthinking every action I take in hopes of discovering my grand plan.

I wish I fucking had a grand plan. The one I came up with has gone out the window, and now I'm stumbling blindly through each step. Even when I think I've made a calculated maneuver, I realize my body is just following her lead. Her presence alone has caused my brain to short-circuit. It's dangerous and stupid, but I can't get myself to care.

Leo throws down a pair of twos, and Ellie smiles as she brushes his hair off his face.

"Nice try, buddy, but I think their aces might beat that."

Leo scrunches his face. "But I thought the ace was a one."

With a chuckle, Ellie tosses the cards onto the table. "All right, boys, brush your teeth and get to bed. I'll tuck you in after I clean up."

When she stands, I find myself doing the same. Like I said, my body can't help but follow her.

With a wave, Alesia follows Leo to the stairs. Before he can take the first step, though, Leo spins and rushes back to us. He's only a couple of feet away when I realize he's about to launch himself into my arms, so I bend down to catch him.

"Thanks for playing with us, I wish. And for the bikes," he whispers.

I squeeze him tighter. "It was no big deal. Maybe, if your mom says it's okay, we can ride again tomorrow."

Leo spins in my arms and looks up at Ellie. "Can we?"

Ellie shakes her head, but she's smiling, as if she's exasperated by me. "Yeah, we can probably make that happen."

Giddy, the kid squeezes me tight around the neck once more. The scents of ice cream and shampoo linger even after he bounds toward his aunt, who's waiting at the top of the steps.

Lorenzo hasn't moved from his spot at the table, and Ellie gives him a warning look.

“Bed. Now.”

He lets out a loud sigh and pushes back in his seat. “Thanks for teaching us to play.” His voice is almost too quiet. Like he doesn't want anyone—especially his mother—to hear him. Like he worries his father can hear his betrayal too.

I pat him on the shoulder. “Hey, you're the one who spotted the royal flush.”

Lorenzo looks up at me like he knows I'm full of shit and calls me on it. “Yeah, and the brand-new bikes were just sitting in the garage.”

I fucking guffaw for probably the first time in a decade and slap my hand to my mouth. “Don't know what you're talking about.”

His *you're full of shit* look has me smirking again. Kid definitely has smarts.

“Night,” he finally says.

“Night, Lo.”

He perks up at the nickname that slipped out, making me feel a tad lighter.

As soon as the door to the basement shuts, tension sparks in the room, making the air crackle. Ellie shuffles the cards in her hand awkwardly. The finesse she showed just an hour earlier has disappeared completely.

I clear my throat and move in her direction, but Jones and Daisy settle at her feet and eye me, creating not just a physical barrier, but a mental one too. I swear they're daring me to try to get close without getting bitten. I'd be annoyed if this wasn't precisely what I wanted them to do when someone approached her. Just sort of thought my own dogs would show me a bit of deference.

Ellie runs a hand over Daisy's head. “She's too sweet.” Her voice startles me in the quiet room.

I grab the glasses from the table and take them to the sink, needing a moment away from her to process my thoughts.

I drop a glass into the soapy water with a thunk when, in my periphery, I catch her hovering just a couple of feet away.

How the fuck did she walk into the kitchen without making a sound?

The dogs, on the other hand, are still seated by her chair. Now I *am* annoyed. How'd she convince them not to follow? It's like she possesses some kind of voodoo magic.

"The bikes," she says quietly as she picks up the glass that I've just washed and dries it with a towel.

"Hmm?" I hum in response.

"You didn't have to do that," she breathes out quickly. "I've been a jerk to you since we got here—"

"You still planning to fire me?"

She lets out a breathy laugh. "I don't understand why you're here. Hell, I don't understand why I'm here, but—" She pauses, studying me, like she's weighing her words.

I turn and prop a hip against the edge of the sink and take her in. Her black hair has fallen across her face, hiding her eyes from me. She uses the back of one hand to swat it away, but the offending piece of hair immediately falls into her eyes again. Without thinking, I brush against her soft skin and tuck the silky hair behind her ear. Her green eyes widen as she watches me, and her tongue peeks out to wet her lower lip.

Before I do something stupid like press her body against the counter and kiss her, I jump back into our conversation. "But?"

She sighs in defeat. "But you can stay."

Shocked, I grin and take a step closer.

"*For now,*" she adds. "I'm still trying to figure out a way to sell this place. The boys and I need a fresh start."

"And this can't be your fresh start?" I hold an arm out and motion around us.

She gives the room a perusal, wearing an almost wistful expression.

“Maybe,” she says softly. Then she shocks the hell out of me when she lifts up on her toes and presses her lips to my cheek. “Night, Irish.”

The emotional highs and lows of the day have gotten to me, and for the first time in I don't know how long, I succumb to the temptation of lying in bed in the dark.

“So you're not planning on offing him after all?” Alesia asked after I kissed the boys good night. She was sitting on the couch in the basement, her legs folded under her, sipping a cup of tea with one of those housewives shows muted on the television.

I laughed, hiding my wince. “He'll live to see another day.”

“When are you going to admit that he means something to you?”

Without answering her question, I stood and told her to get some rest, then I rushed up the stairs without looking back.

Means something. Ha. That sentiment doesn't even begin to skim the surface of my feelings for Frank.

Feelings for Frank.

Ugh.

My stupid feelings for Frank got me into this mess to begin with.

Though it's got me in its clutches, I fight sleep. Because now that I've gone down memory lane, there's no way I'll avoid the nightmares. But I'm too tired to resist for long.

“You practically drowned me,” I say between giggles as Frank and I walk home.

It’s late. We spent far too long at the beach, listening to music and lounging on the sand. Frank had the nerve to pick me up, dart down the beach and into the ocean, and toss me into the freezing water. I was so shocked I momentarily forgot how to swim, and then he had to jump in and rescue me. Considering that the water only came up to my chest, it was absolutely absurd. All I had to do was stand up, but the icy water made my brain go blank.

Frank squeezes his shirt again dramatically. “Only because you forgot how to stand.”

I’m laughing so hard I have to stop for a moment to catch my breath.

He rolls his eyes and snakes an arm around my shoulders, pulling me in close and forcing my feet to move again. “Brat,” he mutters, pressing his lips to my forehead.

I’m so shocked I don’t reply. All I can do is stumble along as my heart thuds in my chest and butterflies take flight in my stomach.

“Well,” he says, jutting his chin. “Home sweet home.”

I let out a sarcastic laugh and pull him to a stop. We’re still a block from ‘home sweet home,’ but I won’t let him get any closer. Can’t be sure my uncle isn’t still there. Head bowed, I kick at an imaginary rock. “Thanks for spending the day with me.”

Frank sighs. “It really is rough being your best friend.”

With a punch to his arm, I walk away so he can’t see the grin that splits my face. He really is my best friend, and I’m glad he considers me his. As I shuffle up to the porch, I find my neighbor Lorenzo standing in his yard with a baseball glove on one hand and a ball in the other. He grimaces, and his gaze drifts to where Frank and I just parted. “You’re not supposed to be hanging out with him,” he gripes.

Scoffing, I roll my eyes. The Italians and Irish aren’t supposed to associate with one another. It’s absurd. Like it

matters where our great grandparents were born. We all live in the same neighborhood, walk the same streets, go to the same school. So what if my last name ends with A and his starts with Mc? That shouldn't make a lick of a difference, but to some, it's the only thing that matters.

"He knows you were with him," Lorenzo warns.

"How?" I whisper, my stomach twisting. Swallowing thickly, I glance at the door.

Lorenzo shrugs. "You don't belong with him. Next time, I'll take you to the beach. Or wherever." He tosses the ball in the air and catches it in his gloved hand.

I know he means well, so all I do is duck my chin. "Thanks for the heads-up."

He nods once and throws the ball again. "I mean it, Elena. Just knock on my door if you ever need to get away."

He and I both peer at my front door. Shit. Is what goes on in my house that obvious? Has he seen the bruises? I'm always careful to hide them, but clearly, I haven't been doing a good enough job.

"Thanks," I mouth, stealing a breath before I step inside the house. I guide the door shut slowly and silently, then toe off my shoes. If I'm lucky, I can make it up to my bedroom and change out of my wet clothes without being seen. My hair clings to my shoulders, and the air conditioning sends a chill through me as I rush toward the steps. I move as soundlessly as I can, but when I'm halfway up, the door to the kitchen swings open, and I freeze.

"Just where the hell do you think you're going?" my uncle shouts. His voice is as cold as the air, and my body shivers in response.

Hoping my mother is with him, I hold my breath and turn.

"Just you and me, kid," he sneers, as if reading my mind.

An exhausted sigh vibrates through me. I bite my lip to keep it from trembling as I compose myself. Once I think I can speak without wavering, I reply, "I'm sorry, sir."

“No need to apologize,” he bellows, but his words drip with malice. “You know what to do.”

I hold back my wince, knowing it will only make it worse, and nod. With a steadying breath, I drop my backpack on the step I’ve been glued to and spin back in his direction. Slowly, but exuding as much feigned confidence as I can muster, I make my way down the stairs.

“Bend over the couch and pull down your pants,” he says, as if I don’t know. I’m familiar with the routine. But this is all part of the punishment.

I drag my jean shorts down my body obediently. The damp fabric clings as if it’s trying to latch on and protect me.

“Palms flat against the sofa.”

I do as I’m told, keeping my attention fixed on the living room wall. Behind me, he undoes his belt. The sound of it makes dread coil in my stomach. He takes great joy in moving slowly, leaving me standing there, bare ass up and trying to hide my trembles. The sound of the belt coming down against my thighs is one I’ll never forget. The whoosh of the air before it slices at my skin is a feeling that will stick with me for life. If I scream, it’ll last longer, so I bite the inside of my cheek until I taste blood and hold in even my whimpers.

With each whip of the belt, tears pour down my face, but no sound leaves my throat. He counts out the punishment, all the way to ten. Stars dance in my eyes, and it’s almost like I’ve left my body and am hovering above myself, watching the scene unfold.

“Don’t fucking move until your nona comes home,” he hisses as he does up his belt and leans over me. He runs his hand up my leg, and I have to hold back the nausea that threatens.

It’s not until he’s gone and Nona opens the door that my screams come. And then they don’t stop.

FRANK

I listen for the click of her bedroom door closing, then I pull out a bottle of Angel's whiskey and pour myself two fingers. The dogs follow me, their nails clicking on the floor, as I head to the deck. Glass in hand, I settle in the rocking chair, and a moment later, they're flopping to the floor beside me.

While the sky is a deep navy, the ocean is black and angry. I take a few moments to settle my pounding heart by counting the stars that dot the night sky. The ache in my chest pulses as I relive the moment Ellie's lips made contact with my cheek.

What I would give to feel those lips in other places. Against my lips, my chin, my shoulder blade, around my cock.

I've never so much as felt her lips against my own, and that's a fucking travesty. I've imagined it for most of my life, and yet I've never tasted her tongue, let alone the other parts of her that are surely as delicious as her personality. Most describe a woman's taste as sweet, but Ellie? I guarantee she would be salty. Spicy. With a hint of oranges.

I chuckle at my ridiculous thoughts. I've always associated the smell and taste of the fruit with Ellie. Every afternoon when we were kids, we'd have her grandmother's iced tea with oranges in it. She can't possibly taste like that, but in my imagination, that sweet and spicy tang is all I savor.

An owl hoots, and Jones scrambles to his feet, his paws slipping on the deck. "Guard dog, my ass," I grumble, though I have to stifle a laugh.

He scowls at me, then he gives himself a good shake, his jowls swinging obnoxiously. Once he's circled two or three times, he drops back down and rolls over.

Daisy blinks up at me and then closes her eyes, bored with whatever she finds. I get it. I'd be bored looking at me too. Sitting here with me night after night while I'm lost in my thoughts has got to be dull. What I want to do is go upstairs and have a real conversation with Ellie. I want to spend hours talking, discussing every day of her life I've missed.

I want to know how she spends her Saturdays. How her pregnancies went. How her nona is and whether she still drinks her iced tea with oranges.

Did she think of me as often as I thought of her?

But none of the answers would change the past. And she'd likely never give them to me anyway. Because, unlike me, she's not lonely. She has two boys who are her world, a sister who would follow her to the ends of the earth, and a stubbornness that would never allow her to admit that, just maybe, there was a time I meant something to her.

I down the rest of my whiskey in one go and heave myself up. The chair creaks with my movement, making both dogs scramble to their feet. After I shut the double doors leading out to the deck, I latch the lock and then go through the house, flipping switches until the main floor is bathed in nothing but the light of the moon. "Come on, mutts," I call to my only real friends. They follow me up the stairs and stop along with me at Shane's door.

No sounds filter out through the door, and there isn't even a sliver of light peeking out from under it. For what is likely the thousandth time, I wonder if I made the right decision by bringing Shane with me. He hates it here. He wants nothing more than to be back in Boston. Any city, really. He was meant for more than this little town in Maine.

In another life, I could have set him up at James Whiskey. He'd likely be one of my best friend's most trusted employees by now. He's smart in ways I've never been. While I use my intuition, my body, and my heart to move through life, he has

real brains. I shuffle closer, ready to knock, but my guilt holds me back. I don't want to see the look of disappointment tonight. So I move to the next room, tugging at the key I wear around my neck. It's electronic and no bigger than a mini lock. I slip it over my head, press it inside the hidden space between the door and the frame, and then slip inside.

Once the dogs have followed me over the threshold, I close the door with a soft click. Flicking on the light, I allow my eyes a moment to adjust before I study each crime scene again, zeroing in on the red marks that mar every victim.

Bella Morte's signature.

The one thing that could eventually land her behind bars.

"No, please no!"

The screams startle me. The dogs too. In a heartbeat, they're on their feet and moving in impatient circles, ready to be set free. When I open the door, they skitter out and down the hall, with me hot on their heels.

Shane's door flies open, and he steps out, his eyes wild and his hands clenched into fists at his sides. "What's going on?" He looks from me to the guest room door. The one I'm physically holding myself back from breaking down.

I shake my head. "She's having a nightmare."

"Why don't you wake her up?" He glares at me, aggravated. He's obviously in the middle of one of his chats, and he hates being pulled away from them. Who he talks to and what the conversations are about is beyond me. He's never confided that kind of information.

I sigh heavily. Fuck. I've heard these kinds of cries more times than I can count. Nightmares weren't uncommon for the guys I served with overseas. Especially once we hit our third tour. Ellie wouldn't want me to be the one to comfort her. Being trapped in the horrors that live in the mind can make a person feel so raw, so vulnerable. She'd hate for me to see that. And this isn't the kind of dream I can just shake her out of. No, she'd have to be coaxed out of it. Startling her would only compound the problem. "I'll take care of it. Go to bed."

He shakes his head. Under his breath, I'm pretty sure he mutters, "What the fuck else is there to do?" Then he slams his door loud enough that it might actually wake her up. But once he's gone, her cries continue, the sound absolutely wrecking me.

I remember those cries. I hated them. And I'd have done anything to stop them. I honestly didn't know she still had it in her. Ellie puts on a good show. She makes it seem like she's scared of nothing. Like she can take on anything and anyone and she'll come out on top. She's a badass. There's no doubt in my mind that's true. But not even this badass stubborn woman can control what happens within her brain when she sleeps.

I slip downstairs and grab a spoon and a jar of peanut butter from the pantry, then pad back upstairs. The dogs are still stationed outside her door like sentries when I return, holding the goods out and wagging my brows. "It's your favorite."

Jones licks his jowls, and Daisy sniffs the ground and spins in circles. Hovering close to keep my suddenly excited pups back just a little, I scoop a spoonful of peanut butter from the jar and wipe it against her door. I put it high enough that they'll have no choice but to scramble to reach for it. Then I step back in the dark hallway and wait.

The dogs ignore me and do what they do best—follow their noses. Their nails click against the floor as they pace in front of the door, desperate for a taste of one of their favorite treats but unable to reach from all fours. Finally, they get daring and jump up on the door and scramble to keep themselves upright, clawing at the door as they do so. But despite their best efforts, they can't *quite* reach. Daisy whines her displeasure, and Jones lets out a worried yelp.

It only takes a few minutes of this before the door swings open. In the glow of the moonlight, her white T-shirt leaves absolutely nothing to the imagination. The hem falls to the tops of a pair of thighs I haven't seen since we were barely teenagers. Thighs that are now covered in swirls that travel up her legs like vines overtaking a desolate house. I can't make

out the details in the dark, but I'd give my life savings to explore them.

Groggy, she blinks at the dogs, then drops to her haunches and shushes them. In a voice so out of character for the cold woman she's become but absolutely fitting for the girl I once knew, she coos at them. "You guys lonely?" She pats Daisy's head and rubs under Jones's chin. "Me too," she says on a sigh that pulls at the organ in my chest. Her sadness makes me want to rip myself open and present her with my heart. Fuck, I can't take it when she's sad. Never could.

Her exposed skin glistens with sweat, making me stifle a groan. Shit. She was so upset she was actually sweating. The thought is a punch to the gut, but at the same time, the sight of her damp white shirt clinging to her obviously bare body is a fucking turn-on. Her pink nipples pebble beneath the fabric as she lifts her hands and rubs at her eyes. "You can sleep with me," she breathes out, the wariness of her tone tugging at my heart.

I want to come out of the shadows and take her in my arms. I want to pull her against my chest and tell her that she's okay. That she's safe here. That I've got her.

Ellie steps back to usher them in, and Daisy eagerly prances over the threshold. Jones looks back at where I'm hidden in the shadows, almost giving me away. I give him a single nod, and he bows his head and follows her in.

They've got her, I remind myself, forcing my legs to carry me to my room. But the stupid organ imprisoned behind my ribs is held just as captive by her, and it fights all logic and forces me back to her bedroom door. Sliding to the floor beside it, I close my eyes.

Wet puppy dog kisses wake me, bringing a smile to my face. When I blink the world into focus, Daisy is watching, waiting for me to react.

“You’re a bed hog. You know that?” I mutter, my voice scratchy from crying. That’s probably why the dogs came to my door. Thankfully, no one came knocking, so if I’m lucky, only the dogs heard me.

Jones lifts his head from the foot of the bed, where he’s curled up near my feet, gives us one assessing look, and then plops his head back down and licks his lips before yawning. Daisy licks at my chin again, and I bat at her. “Okay, okay, I’ll get up.”

I groan when I see the time. According to the clock on the nightstand, it’s just after five. “This is because Frank gets up so early, isn’t it?” I grumble, forming a plan to push the dogs out into the hall and climb back into bed for another couple of hours of sleep. They can go wake him up, and he can take them out. I don’t even know where he keeps their leashes. For the past few weeks, I’ve done my best to ignore Frank and all he does, including walking the dogs. Yes, that makes me an asshole. I’m not proud of it, but if I look at Frank too closely, if I give him any more attention than he already steals, I’ll fall right back into the trap of believing he can save me.

The only person who can save me is me, but being around him sometimes leads me to forget that. Like last night when I stupidly kissed his cheek and told him he could stay. A few

minutes of kindness directed toward my boys, and I started to crumble. Started to forget why we're here. What I'm running from. How someone like him could never want someone like me. And he'd see that the second he found out who I truly am. A monster.

I grab my gray robe from the chair in the corner and tie it around my waist, then slip on the sandals I left by the door and head out into the hall. When I reach Frank's bedroom, the door is open and his bed is made. I grunt.

“Such a marine.”

While I didn't keep up with all of Frank's movements after he left for boarding school, I knew he'd enlisted in the Marine Corps. For some naïve, ridiculous reason, I wanted to attend his graduation from boot camp. I have no idea why I thought it was a good idea. Hell, he probably would have thought I was strange if he'd seen me. Why would a girl he hadn't even bothered to say goodbye to or write to or ever visit come to his graduation at Parris Island years after their friendship ended?

It was insane.

Later, I heard talk that Frank spent years serving overseas. I'm not a religious person, but every night, I'd silently plead for his safety. *Please, let him be okay* became my nightly prayer.

I heard little after that, and eventually, my life became too chaotic for me to pray for him. I was begging for my own life.

And then I saw him.

Jones barks as he circles the steps, pulling me from my memories. “Sorry, let's go.”

Carrying on conversations with the dogs is probably only slightly less unhinged than talking to myself. I follow the hounds down the steps, unable to keep up as they bound down them and head straight for the screen door. Jones doesn't wait for me to let him out. No, he easily pushes it open. I can't help but chuckle as he trots down the steps without looking back. He's already lifting his leg and relieving himself against a tree

when Daisy steps into the grass. She sniffs the ground for a bit before she finds a spot herself.

I guess that answers that. No leashes. The dogs walk themselves. Now that is my kind of pet.

After another couple of minutes, I call them in and shuffle to the kitchen, assuming they'll want to be fed. They dart past me and dive straight for their bowls, which have already been filled. I swear they inhale the contents in under a minute before slurping up their water.

Jones steps back and shakes, his ears flapping loudly in the silent house. Daisy rubs against me and eyes me for a moment before they trot out to the double doors that lead to the deck and settle on the floor as if they've worn themselves out and are ready for a nap.

I yawn and consider doing the same, but not before I fix myself a cup of coffee to bring with me. Warm mug in hand, I head back up the stairs and shut myself in my room. Not quite ready to settle back into bed, I walk out onto the small balcony just big enough for one chair and its footstool and rest my arms on the ledge, taking in the beauty before me. The ocean is calmer than I've seen it thus far and almost silver in the early morning light.

A splash has me scanning the water, wondering if the seals are playing again. But then an arm breaches the surface. I raise my hand to my forehead and squint, trying to get a better look. It takes a few seconds to comprehend the scene, but sure enough, it's the Irish bastard doing laps.

He's insane. It's chilly enough in the sun on the deck; I can't even imagine how cold the water is, even with the black wetsuit he's sporting. I take another sip of coffee and watch him, transfixed. His strength is apparent with every stroke, his determination, his grit.

There's no doubt about it. Frank is impressive. He always has been. I don't take my attention off him until he reaches the shore. I counted fifty laps back and forth along the beach area. Who knows how many he did before I caught sight of him. Knowing him, probably one hundred.

Once he's on the shore and I'm positive he's not going back in, I head inside. I won't allow myself to put too much thought into why I felt it necessary to make sure he was safe on shore before I did so.

Settled now that he's back on dry land, I climb back into bed and fall into a deep sleep.



I WAKE up what feels like days later. But a look at the clock shows that it's only nine a.m. Downstairs, Alesia and the boys are sitting around the dining room table with Shane, and Frank is manning the stove.

Both dogs trot over to me and give me their droopy puppy dog eyes until I squat down and scratch their heads. Once they're satisfied, I pad over to my boys.

"Sleep all right?" Frank asks from the kitchen.

Feigning annoyance, I walk into the kitchen. "Not really. You need to feed those dogs later in the evening and walk them before bed. They were scratching at my door in the middle of the night."

"Sorry," he says, his focus locked on the eggs he's scrambling.

I shuffle to the coffeepot for a fresh cup. All the while, the damn dogs are under my feet. A pang of guilt hits me at the negative thought, so I ruffle Daisy's head, but before I can move on to him, Jones heads in Frank's direction. It only takes one shake of the man's head before the dog is headed back to me. I swear it's like he told the dog to stay by me. But that's insane. Why would he do that?

Cup in hand, I survey the scene, and my attention immediately catches on Leo. He's holding his fork in the air, a big chunk of pancake dripping with syrup dangling from it.

Without a second thought, I practically scream, “Leo, don’t!”

Every head turns in my direction as Leo holds the bite of pancake just shy of his lips.

“He’s *allergic*,” I growl, the assertion aimed at Frank as I march toward the table, practically sloshing hot coffee from my mug.

A clanking sound behind me draws my attention just as I’m posed to rip the fork from Leo’s hand. Frank’s spatula is now resting on the kitchen counter, surrounded by little bits of scrambled egg.

In a heartbeat, he’s at my side. “They’re gluten-free,” he says softly to me, then he winks in Leo’s direction. “Sorry, buddy. I should have told your mom that, but you should always make sure to ask. Allergies are serious business.”

My chest tightens painfully, and heat works its way up my neck and to my cheeks until I’m burning with embarrassment. I’m positive I’m as red as the apples in the fruit bowl sitting in the center of the table.

Leo nods and then looks back at me, fork still gripped tightly in his hand. “Can I eat it, Mawmy?”

I blow out a breath and nod. I’m speechless. Partly because of the fear still ebbing from me. Because the risk of Leo going into anaphylactic shock is real. But mostly, I’m stunned silent. No one but Alesia has ever shared that burden with me. Their allergies, their tears, their disappointments have all been my responsibility. If not for my sister, these two souls would be under my care alone. Frank only met them a few weeks ago, but he’s paid close enough attention to understand Leo’s allergy. Even more than that, he used my moment of panic as a lesson for my son, rather than using it to make me feel foolish for reacting.

I’m speechless.

And utterly fucked.

Because I don’t give a shit if he’s the Irish Ghost. I just care that he’s here.

“So what are we doing today?” Alesia asks, likely trying to alleviate the tension in the room.

With his lips pressed together, Frank studies me for another moment, even after everyone else has gone back to eating. Uncomfortable under his scrutiny, I head to the kitchen. “You’re going to burn the eggs,” I grumble, picking up the spatula and pushing the scrambled eggs around the pan. Even in his haste, he managed to turn off the burner. God, does he ever screw up?

The man lives when he dies. Swims through shark-infested waters. Teaches my child a lesson while simultaneously making me swoon, even as he puts me in my place. And he doesn’t even burn the goddamned eggs in the process.

Give me a fucking break.

God is obviously not a woman.

“Breathe,” he murmurs. His lips are so close to my ear I feel them move as he speaks. He presses up against me and takes the spatula, but he doesn’t let go of my hand. Instead, he cages me in as he moves the utensil through the eggs. His chest is warm and strong against my back, and although I hold myself rigid, I want nothing more than to lean back into him.

He smells like soap, likely having taken a hot shower after his cold early morning swim. How can he stand the freezing ocean water? I’ll never ask him. Then he’d know I was watching him.

Staring at him.

Obsessing over him.

“I’m going to make some toast,” I rasp, pushing myself out of his embrace.

Frank’s lips tip up as if he’s amused by me, his green eyes dancing with mischief. “Toast?”

“Yeah, toast.” I turn from him, trying to push away the feelings his presence elicits in me. Once the toaster is going, I finally answer my sister’s question. “I need to look for a job. You and the boys want to come into town?”

Quietly, Frank says, “I can help.”

Ignoring him, I continue speaking to Alesia, a little louder this time. “I’m thinking I can walk around and look for help wanted signs.”

Frank chuckles and raises his voice too. “People are nervous about strangers here. They don’t trust tourists, but I can ask around town and see who’s hiring.”

I scoff and in a low voice reply. “I’m not a tourist. I own this house, remember?”

He smirks. “But no one knows that. You’re a stranger.” He shrugs. “So tell me, what are your skills?”

I stare down at the knife I pulled from the silverware drawer. “I’m really good with a knife.”

He laughs as if it’s a joke. Right. Because normal people don’t joke about their murder weapon of choice.

I slather butter on the toast and take a bite, considering his answer. I’ve never had to work. Or, more accurately, I’ve never been *allowed* to work.

Not when I was a teenager and living under my mother’s thumb—a pretty prize she intended to sell off, though I didn’t know it then. And certainly not once I was married.

Unless murder for hire counts. Though I never actually got paid for that.

A growl escapes at the thought of how my darling husband forced me into that position.

Frank raises one brow at me, obviously not letting this go.

I put my toast down and sigh. “I’m sure I could work in a store. Or maybe a restaurant.”

Nodding, he goes back to his task of plating the eggs. With a tilt of his head, he motions for me to follow, and because my body apparently doesn’t want to be too far from him, it obeys his instruction, and I settle next to him at the table.

“Alesia, if you can watch the boys this evening, I’ll take Ellie to Ruth’s.”

Shane chuckles as he forks a bite of pancake and shoves it into his mouth. He doesn't bother swallowing before he speaks. "Ruth'll love her."

With anger igniting in my stomach at his tone, I narrow my eyes at him. "And what's not to love?" I grit out.

Leo turns to me and smiles. "I love Mawmy."

Shane coughs. "Isn't there a saying about a woman only her children could love?"

Frank smacks him on the back of his head. "Shut up."

Alesia tries to hold back her grin but fails miserably. "The saying is a face only a mother could love."

"Like yours," I snarl at Shane, stabbing at the egg on my plate.

Frank chuckles. "Careful there, killer."

Alesia's eyes bug so far out of her head I'm afraid she'll do permanent damage. I kick her under the table. She literally would be the worst accomplice. It's a good thing I work alone.

"What's Ruth's?" Lorenzo asks.

I could kiss my firstborn for changing the subject.

"Dive bar," Shane replies.

Frank smacks him again. "It's a restaurant the locals like. And Ruth likes me." I must make a face, because Frank laughs again. "Not like that. She's in her sixties."

"Like older women?" Alesia teases.

Frank's eyes don't leave mine. They smolder with heat and intention. "Nah. I'd say the perfect woman for me would be about thirty-nine."

My heart lurches and blood rushes in my ears. And beside me, Alesia's mouth falls open, but she doesn't respond.

"Hey, my Mawmy is thirty-nine. Aren't you, Mawmy?" Leo asks, his dark eyes wide and full of affection.

Frank swallows thickly, his attention locked on me, but I ignore him.

Shifting in my seat, I bite my lip and answer my son. “Yeah, I am, bud.”

Frank smiles as he takes a bite of pancake. “Hmm,” he hums. “Well, look at that. So what do you say, Ellie? Dinner at Ruth’s?”

Across from me, Lorenzo scowls. “I thought you were taking her to get a job.”

I fold my lips over to fight back a grin. Frank thinks he’s won over my sons. But ice cream and some bike riding aren’t going to cut it. I like that Lorenzo is making him work for it. I certainly don’t seem to be.

Frank shrugs. “Woman’s gotta eat.”

“I eat with my kids,” I state. “We can go after dinner.”

Unbothered, Frank shrugs and takes another bite. “Suit yourself. But I’m telling you, after you try a burger, you’ll be begging me to take you back.” Setting his fork down, he clears his throat. “All right, boys, finish up and go brush your teeth. I’ve got a surprise set up in the boathouse.”

Lorenzo’s eyes flash in excitement but his expression remains stoic. “What kind of surprise?”

“Clean your plates first. Teeth brushed, beds made, then I’ll meet you up here *innn...*” He drags out the word as he lifts his wrist to check his electronic watch. It probably counts his steps. Or his fucking laps. Show-off. “Thirty minutes.”

The boys are up from the table, plates in hand and heading toward the kitchen before I can conjure up an argument. What the hell? Frank has decided he can tell my kids what to do? And he’s planning surprises without even running them by me? I’m grateful for his help and that he cares, but there are lines he should know better than to cross.

“Can we talk outside?” I stand without waiting for his answer.

As soon as the screen door slams behind him, I start in on him. “What is this surprise?”

He smirks. “Gotta put your dish away to find out.”

I run my tongue over my lips and narrow my eyes.

“And make your bed,” he adds.

I huff.

“Come on, Ellie. It’s a surprise. It’s not drugs or guns. I’m not going to use the boys to run stolen goods into town.” He chuckles, rocking back on his heels as he inspects me.

What he doesn’t get is that what he just described is our life. Maybe he was lucky enough to get out when he was young, but I wasn’t.

“You need to run things by me before you tell my kids you’ve got things for them. I thought I made myself clear yesterday with the bikes.”

“And look how that turned out. Lorenzo can now ride a bike, and Leo was happy. Isn’t that all that matters?”

“Frank,” I breathe out, exasperated. *Why* is he fighting me on this? “I get that you don’t understand since you don’t have kids of your own—”

His jaw ticks. “I took custody of Shane when he was sixteen. Been parenting and guiding him since.”

“And he’s just a ball of joy,” I snap. As soon as the words are out, I regret them. Commenting on someone else’s parenting is a lesson straight from Asshole 101. What the hell is wrong with me? “I’m sorry. That was out of line.”

He slips his hands into the pockets of his gray sweats. The movement pulls them down just a little. But it’s enough to hint at the ink peeking out there. I can’t take my eyes off that little sliver of art. My cheeks burn hot as I drag my attention up his body until I’m focused on his face, which is alight with a cocky grin. “It’s fine. The kid is an ass, but you’d be an ass too if all you had was me.”

My heart squeezes, because nothing could be further from the truth. How many nights was that all I wished for? That he’d come back and take me with him. I didn’t need anyone else. I never did. Shane’s lucky; Frank did come back for him. I, on the other hand, was left to fend for myself.

None of it matters, though. I'm not that girl anymore. I haven't prayed for a miracle in years because miracles don't exist. I'm a mother who's doing all she can to survive this summer. A woman who needs a job so she can support her kids until she can find a way to disappear again. And to do that, I need his help.

"Truce?" I hold out my hand.

Frank cocks a brow, likely surprised by the gesture. His white T-shirt strains against his chest while his hands remain in his pockets. Those eyes of his examine me far too intently. In the early morning light, the mixture of greens in his irises are swirled with golds and dotted with dark, almost black flecks. The swirls of gold are a reminder of how perfect he can be, but those black flecks? They're representative of the darkness that lives within him.

He's not perfect. But fuck if he hasn't always been the closest thing to it I've ever known.

Tilting his head, still inspecting me, he finally takes my hand in his, but he doesn't shake it. No, the man pulls me against him, taking me by surprise. His lips ghost my ear as he holds me tight. "No truce needed. I like your sharp mouth far too much."

He lets go of me and walks inside before I can even wrap my brain around his words or how it felt like maybe he needed that hug even more than I did.

FRANK

No matter how good the kid's poker face is, Lorenzo can't hide the excitement that flashes in his eyes when he spots the makeshift boxing ring in the boathouse. There's a gym in the basement, but I told Shane to stay out of it since Alesia and the boys have been staying down there. I moved a selection of weights out here as well. Add in my laps in the ocean every morning and the runs I take once everyone has gone to bed and the sun no longer wears on me, and I've had no trouble staying in shape for my real job.

Not to mention the physical demands of taking care of this property. My cover job is just as much of a workout as anything else.

"Do you have those in my size?" Lorenzo asks, pointing at Shane's boxing gloves.

"Sure do, bud." I special ordered them from Amazon a few days ago, along with a set for Leo. I snag the bigger of the two new pairs where they hang next to mine and toss them to him. They drop to his feet because he's too focused on taking in the ring to even look my way. He crouches and picks them up, pulling his bottom lip between his teeth as he works one on with a bit of difficulty.

"I got 'em," Shane says, kneeling in front of Leo. "The first time my uncle taught me to box, want to know what he told me?"

Leo nods seriously.

“The importance of wrapping up your hands. Want me to teach you?”

The grin that spreads across Leo’s face at Shane’s offer grips me right in the sternum. This is the first time my nephew has shown any interest in the boys, and it gives me hope. Selfishly, I want this to be an activity for the boys and Shane. He needs a purpose. I’m worried that if he doesn’t find one, he’ll leave.

He’s twenty-six, and unlike me, he’s not a ghost. Technically, he’s considered a runaway. He could easily start fresh. And if he asked, I would set him up with all the resources and money he needs to move on from this lifestyle.

Ellie isn’t wrong about him; he’s got an attitude. But the kid is loyal. The only reason he’s still here is because he doesn’t want to leave me alone, doing what I have to do and hating myself for it. There’s no returning to the life I once knew.

If I was smart, I would have met a woman here, settled down, and created a life. Instead, I’ve been chasing ghosts and living in the past.

A past that is now the only future I can see, even if there is absolutely no chance of it ever becoming a reality. Even if Ellie is the only thing I’ve ever really wanted, she’s the last thing I need. And I’m no good for her either.



ELLIE’S light laughter as she hoists herself into my old green ford has me momentarily forgetting to breathe. “This truck is so not you,” she mutters.

Once my heart is beating again, I turn the radio on. Filling the cab with noise will ensure that if she lets out any more of that breathy laughter, it’ll be drowned out. “It’s me now.”

Her attention affects me as physically as if she were touching me. She might as well be raking her nails along my skin; I feel it everywhere. “Yeah, I guess you aren’t the person I used to know.”

This forces a chuckle from my throat. “That’s rich coming from you.”

She hums and rolls down the window, finally setting me free of her scrutiny. “Guess we both grew up, Irish. Speaking of,” she says, turning back to me, “in town last week, people were calling you Irish. How come?”

I knew this would come up, and honestly, I planned to bring it up before we walked into Ruth’s anyway. “When I was relocated here, I was given a new identity. They named me Brian.”

Her responding grimace pulls a laugh from me.

“Tell me about it. In the beginning, I’d forget to answer when people referred to me that way. Figured if they used my nickname, losing my real name wouldn’t hurt as much.”

She blows out a breath, probably shocked by my openness. Even if it’s only one small facet of the truth.

Her lips twitch like she’s holding back a smile. “Have you been going by Irish all this time?”

I shake my head, hating that I can’t give her answers she wants. Hating that life has made us strangers. “When I was enlisted, the guys in my squadron gave me the name—it’s a military thing; nobody goes by their real names.”

“My nona gave you that nickname,” she says, frowning at me like she’s offended by the idea that I’d give someone else the credit.

Lit by the moonlight, she’s nothing short of glowing, and her fierce defense of the nickname, that she feels ownership of it, makes my chest swell.

Fuck, I want to be owned by her.

I clear my throat and focus on the road again. “That she did.”

“So, in Boston...” She watches the scenery out the window for a moment before focusing on me. “In Boston, what did they call you?”

“I was just Frank.” I have to keep so much of my life hidden, but for once, I can elaborate, so I add, “To everyone but my best friend’s sister, I guess. She called me Irish too.” Thinking about Cat never fails to make me smile. She always used a teasing tone when she called me by that name. Probably because using my real name reminded her that I was Cash’s best friend rather than the man I became after the military.

“You slept with her,” Ellie says, her voice dry, almost robotic.

Cocking a brow, I reply. “For someone who can’t stand me, you’re awfully worried about the women I’ve slept with.”

“Hey, I called a truce.” She crosses her arms over her chest in a way that’s meant to signal her frustration, I think. It’s adorable.

“I told you exactly how I felt about that truce.”

She rolls her eyes, but the hint of a smile breaks through before she huffs out a breath, causing her black hair to float around her face.

The ache to pull her onto my lap, wrap my hand through her hair, and kiss her nearly has me driving off the road.

The way Ellie makes me feel is dangerous. The last few minutes of the ride are quiet as I remind myself of my goals.

Get Ellie into Ruth’s, get her a job, and take her home.

Not take her on a damn date.

Not *kiss* her.

At a stop sign, I text Hazel asking if she’s around. After I’ve met my goals tonight, she can help me get Ellie out of my mind.

Because an obsession with Elena Romano would be a death wish, and that’s exactly the kind of thing I’d like to avoid.



IGNORING my need to take care of her, I don't help Ellie out of the truck. I barely wait for her as I walk into the bar. Despite the way my body protests, I only pause momentarily to hold the door open for her with my foot. She doesn't seem to notice my lack of manners, and that pisses me the fuck off. Her husband had two decades with her, and from the looks of it, he treated her so poorly she doesn't expect to be regarded as anything but an afterthought. It shouldn't be this way. Nothing should. But once again, I have to silence my concerns over the *woulda, coulda, shouldas*. The past is written. There is no going back.

The room is small and wood paneled. There are five tables scattered about and a bar with eight stools in front of it. Couples I recognize occupy two tables. I give them each a polite nod of acknowledgment. The back table, where I normally sit because it's shadowed and away from the fray, is where Seamus has taken up residence. When my eyes adjust to the dim room and he comes into focus, he's already sizing up Ellie. Before he has a chance to blow my cover, I shake my head and ignore him.

"Irish!" Ruth singsongs from behind the bar. Her gray hair is pulled back in a ponytail, and her white bangs peek out from under the green bandana she's sporting. She's wearing overalls with one side undone and a green shirt. A bar rag hangs from one of her pockets, and she stills the spray bottle she's holding as she spots Ellie. "You brought a friend." She smiles as if she thinks this is a date, something I wouldn't hate if life were different.

I nod at Ellie. "This is Elena."

"Nice to meet you, Elena. I'm Ruth." She nods and turns to me. "Your usual?" She doesn't actually wait for my answer

before she picks up the bottle of James whiskey she keeps stocked just for me and pours two fingers.

I nod a thank you and pick it up when she slides it to me.

“And what about for you?” Ruth asks.

Elena takes the barstool beside me and shakes her head. “Oh, water—”

I cut her off. “She’s a whiskey girl like you. But she likes it with water,” I add.

Ruth scoffs but puts the drink together and pushes it toward Elena before she disappears to tend to her next customer.

“I don’t drink,” Ellie grits out, glaring at the glass like if she looks away, it might jump out and slide down her throat of its own accord.

“Ruth doesn’t trust people who don’t drink. Says it’s suspicious.” I have to bite back a laugh when Ellie’s mouth falls open and her eyes turn murderous. “Her words, not mine.”

She huffs.

“Just sip it, swirl it around. Fuck, do whatever the hell you want, but if you tell her you don’t drink, you’ll never get this job.”

“Maybe I don’t want this job,” she snaps, her anger getting the best of her.

“Either way, you don’t want Ruth to not like you,” I say. “Remember, you’re an outsider. If she decides you aren’t trustworthy, the entire town will be in agreement before you wake up tomorrow.”

She studies the drink, then holds it up to her lips and takes a sip without wincing. It’s impressive for someone who doesn’t drink.

“How come you don’t drink?” I ask. I’m not supposed to be getting too close. I literally just decided to put up walls

between us. Yet here I am asking a question I don't need to know the answer to.

With her chin dipped, she keeps her attention trained on the drink. "Alcohol lowers your defenses. I always had to be ready for the next hit. Otherwise, my boys might have woken up without a mom."

With a long exhale, she finally turns my way. Her green eyes find mine, and the honesty in them, the raw, ugly truth, rips through me. Before I can reply or pull her against my chest and promise that no one will ever lay a hand on her again, fingers circle my bicep and I'm pulled from our conversation.

"Hey, Irish. Thought I was meeting you later."

I don't have to turn to know it's Hazel. Even if she hadn't spoken, the look on Ellie's face would have given it away. Fuck. The hurt that flashes in those electric green eyes will haunt me for the rest of the night.

I blow out a breath and turn on my stool. "You are."

"*After* your date?" she bites. Her blond hair is curled in waves, and her red cotton shirt is ripped right down the chest, exposing a little too much of her large breasts. The look caught my attention when I met her, and to be honest, has held it for the last few years.

Tonight, though, it does nothing but expose the differences between her and Ellie. There's absolutely nothing wrong with Hazel. Any man would be lucky to have her. She's devoted and runs her own small business, and she's kind. But what we have will never be more than what it is. And that is 100 percent because of the woman sitting on the other side of me.

"Not a date," I say softly, swiveling to give her my full attention, and to also remove Ellie from the conversation. Doesn't matter that there's no way she and I could ever be. I still don't want to hurt her. I just want to move on. Or, at a minimum, distract myself. Because the truth is, I could never really move on. "I brought Ellie so she could meet Ruth. She needs a job."

Hazel brightens instantly. “Oh.” She licks her pink lips and steps closer, snuggling against my chest as she looks at Ellie. “The Myerses are hiring at the taffy shop. Clayton is looking for some help around the house too.”

If Ellie is bothered by the way Hazel has settled herself so she’s practically in my lap, she doesn’t show it. “Oh, thank you. I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Did I hear that right?” Ruth asks, propping herself against the bar and tossing her rag over her shoulder. “You need a job?”

Ellie nods. “Yes, I’m a hard worker and a fast learner.”

Ruth’s husky laugh fills the bar. “Oh, hunny, we just need a warm body. Those qualities are perks, though. How soon can you start?”

Ellie’s face brightens, and I find myself wanting to turn into her light. To bask in the glow she so rarely offers. It’s silly, really. Even though the moon brightens a dark sky, it has no warmth. And yet I’d rather stare at the night sky than bask in the sun any day of the week.

Transfixed, I’m waiting for Ellie’s response to Ruth when Hazel grips my chin and pulls my attention back to her. “I was thinking you could stay over tonight. We could go out to Rocky Point tomorrow. I can pack lunches. It’s supposed to be a beautiful day.”

I can feel Seamus’s eyes on me. He’s watching the entire situation unfold. Normally, I don’t get myself into messes like this. A woman on either side of me—one practically throwing herself at me while the other woman, the one I’m obsessed with, barely shows an inkling of concern.

Ellie and Ruth continue their conversation, their words humming in the background. This is what Ellie needs from me, what I promised. A job. A fresh start. Help with her kids. *Friendship.*

Being anything more than friends was never an option when we were kids, and it certainly isn’t now. Whatever her reason, she’s on the run from her husband. The head of the

Romano Family. A man who no doubt hasn't taken her leaving with his kids kindly. Who is probably scouring every inch of Boston in search of her. Would he even think to look for her here?

Ellie sticks out like a sore thumb in this small town. Her beauty—with that raven hair and pale skin and those green eyes—would stick out anywhere, though.

Though maybe she's only showstopping to me. Maybe to anyone else, she's one in a crowd of thousands. Maybe I'm the only one distracted by the thoughts of what is drawn on her thighs. The ink and all the questions it elicits leaves me unhinged. What is the design, and what does it mean? Where, exactly, does it start? Where does it end? These fucking questions take up an unreasonable amount of space in my brain.

I want to know every inch of the woman sitting on the other side of me. Want to run my fingers along the designs, trace every inch with my eyes and then follow that trail with my tongue.

Pulling Hazel closer, I position her between my legs and turn so I can see Ellie. "We'll see," I reply to Hazel.

Ellie's got an elbow propped on the bar, and she's laughing at something Ruth says. The sound causes my grip on Hazel to tighten and my cock to jump. Because, fuck, Ellie's laugh might be the most beautiful sound in the world.

The fuck is wrong with me?

"Please?" Hazel says, her bottom lip jutting out in a pout.

My annoyance with her must show on my face, because Seamus's deep chuckle resounds from the corner. The fucker is watching me like a hawk. I don't like that he thinks he knows what I'm thinking. Even if he's right. But more than that, I don't like the thoughts in my head. The last thing Ellie needs is me fantasizing about licking her. All she needs from me is friendship.

And, more importantly, I can't fantasize about Ellie. Happily ever after isn't in the cards for me, especially with

her.

I grip Hazel's chin with my thumb and middle finger, holding her in place. It's not gentle. I'm fucking angry. She's not the one I want to have my hands on. I want the woman to my left. But it's Hazel's blue eyes that shimmer with excitement. It's her tongue that darts out and licks her lips, waiting, anticipating. She knows precisely how things will go down tonight when the evening starts like this.

Hazel likes it rough, which is good, because there is nothing soft about me.

And then, when Ellie finally glances my way, even though it's the last thing I want to do, I lean in and kiss Hazel.

ELENA

Ruth offered to drive me home since the blonde from the farmers' market was giving Frank a saliva transfusion. He tried to talk me into letting him drive me home before he headed to Hazel's, but if I had to spend even five more seconds around either of them, I was going to be sick.

Seeing him with her, though, even if it was slightly sickening, was exactly what I needed to push away all the thoughts of him that had been swirling in my mind over the last few days. And truth be told, the minute they left, I put them out of my mind. I was eager to step behind the bar so Ruth could prepare me for my first day of my first real job.

She showed me each bottle of liquor—she kept one brand of each on hand, except for the whiskey. She kept a second brand in stock just for Frank. He apparently has expensive taste. The red, white, and blue signature lines down the middle of the James Whiskey label were easily recognizable. The Romanos only drink Hanson whiskey, but I knew they were comparable in price.

I briefly wondered how different the two brands were. The whiskey and water I sipped hadn't been horrible, but what did I know?

Then, at eleven, Ruth shouted "last call." While we cleaned up, she talked and I listened. I was able to turn any personal question she asked back in her direction. All I let slip was that I was staying at the house with Irish, that I had kids,

so I needed a job that allowed me to be home with them during the day, and that I kept to myself.

Ruth's husband died a few years ago. She inherited this bar from her father, and when she isn't there, she spends her days at the docks talking to the lobstermen. According to her, they're great to hook up with because they're rarely home during the summer. She can have her fun and then get back to her one true love: the bar.

I laughed—*laughed*—a lot while we chatted.

It was strange feeling so content with someone I'd just met, but it was incredible to not have to worry that she had an ulterior motive like all of my husband's associates. Most people looked at me like they were trying to figure out what they could get out of me. But not Ruth. She lived to entertain.

She pulls out the fancy whiskey of Frank's and holds two glasses between her fingers as she lifts her chin, signaling for me to follow her. With the moon casting a dull glow between the trees and onto the steps of the porch, we settle in, and she fills me in on the local goings on.

"You gotta understand how small towns work," she explains, eyeing the drink in my hand, which I've yet to touch. I bring it to my lips and hold back a grimace as I sip. If I can take a kick to the stomach without flinching, I can surely down this glass. "Everyone talks about everyone. Honestly, it's not as bad as it sounds," she adds, probably sensing that being the topic of conversation—even if it's only conjecture—leaves me uncomfortable.

"Not so bad?" I tease, forcing a lightness to my voice I don't feel.

She shakes her head, and her silvery white hair falls forward. The moon sets a shadow across her weathered face and makes her light blue eyes look silver. "Nah. It's harmless. And sometimes helpful. Take Clayton, for example. If I hadn't heard Hazel telling you how he needs someone to help around the house, I wouldn't be warning you that he needs help toileting."

This time I let the responding shudder work its way through me without hiding my reaction.

Guffawing, she points to my face. “See, aren’t you glad this small town talks?”

Blowing out an exaggerated breath, I drop my chin and shake my head. “Yeah, thanks. Toileting?” I giggle at the term.

She shrugs, her expression turning mischievous. “Better than saying you’ll need to wipe his ass, right?”

I suppose. Because now, even unaware of what this Clayton character looks like, I can’t get the image of having to wipe an old man’s ass out of my mind.

“Speaking of Hazel,” I say, changing the subject.

Her lips twitch as she brings her glass to them. “What about her?”

“What’s the gossip around her?”

“You mean what’s the gossip around her and Irish?” she asks, no bullshit in her tone. No judgment either.

I shrug. “Sure. Either, I guess. Is she a good person?”

Ruth puts her drink on the table beside her chair and scans the dark forest. It’s quiet back here. The only sounds are the cicadas and a gentle breeze rustling the trees. Cool too, but not too cold that I want to go inside. I’m enjoying the company and the quiet. The fresh air.

“Her mama was a good woman.”

I side eye her. “Didn’t ask about her *mama*.” I use air quotes.

“No, I suppose you didn’t.” She chuckles. “But she’s been a sad soul since losing her mama, so that’s why I say it.”

My heart pinches. Frank is a sucker for helping those in distress. For putting broken things back together, or at least providing a little glue. It’s impossible to put a truly broken person back together. Sure, they’ll function, and maybe even look fine from the outside, but they’ll never be the same again.

Guess I'm not his only charity case.

Or maybe he likes her, asshole. That seemed obvious when her tits were pressed against his chest and her tongue was down his throat.

“As for her and Irish—”

“Doesn't matter. That's his business, and while you might think gossip is a good thing...”

She quirks a brow, daring me to disagree after her toileting story.

“And it may be in some cases,” I let out a light laugh, “when it comes to him, it's better if I don't know.”

She pushes to her feet, obviously understanding the note of finality in my voice. But as I follow her inside, she turns over her shoulder and adds, “He's never so much as looked at her the way he looks at you. And I've seen him with her for years.”

Years.

That should be the word that sticks with me. But it's the other ones. The ones I don't dare question. I don't need to know how he looks at me. Or how she perceives it.

All I need to know is that it's different.

She's the woman he goes home with. I'm the woman he ran from. Strike that. The girl he once ran from. As a woman, God, he'd be smart to run and never look back.



RUTH PULLS UP in front of the house after refusing to let me out at the top of the hill like I suggested. “You can't walk around at night in the dark.”

“I can take care of myself,” I mutter.

“I can too,” she says, stopping me with her words as I throw open the door, “but that doesn’t mean we always have to. See you tomorrow night, Elena.”

I mull her words over as I ready myself for bed. When I make it to the second floor, I stride by Frank’s door without pausing. There’s no use listening for movement inside the room. He went to Hazel’s house. I know this.

Swathed in the sheets in my room, I’m hit with how screwed I really am. Because Frank isn’t here. The first thing I should have done was run to the locked door and try to break in. But it didn’t even occur to me until now. Instead, I was too focused on what he might be doing while *not* here.

Now that I’ve remembered the locked door, though, I’ll never fall asleep. I glance out at the balcony. Could I climb out onto the ledge and break in through the window? Why haven’t I thought of that before?

Oh, right. Because instead of checking out the house, I’ve been studying the way the Irish bastard’s arms glide through the water. I’ve been watching for sharks, concerned for his safety, rather than working to uncover the secrets he has locked away here. Secrets that could be far more dangerous than any shark would be to me.

I grab the robe from beside my bed, tie it around my waist, and head for the hall. First, I need to count the doors so I can figure out which window goes with which room. As soon as I open the door, I’m met with two sets of droopy eyes. Since Frank isn’t home, I guess it’s up to me to let these hounds out before bed. I grumble to them as I stomp down the hall. “He should take better care of you.”

Daisy looks at me with what I swear is a smile under her jowls while Jones’s expression is flippant, if such a thing is possible. Like he knows I don’t truly mean it. Like he thinks I’m annoyed because he’s with *her* rather than because he left me to take the dogs out. For all I know, he could have asked Shane to do it.

I consider knocking on Shane’s door. I’ll tell him the dogs need to be walked, and maybe I’ll subtly inquire about

whether Frank texted him to tell him what his plans were. Or worse, were these plans already in place? Maybe he warned him before we left tonight. Or maybe he does this all the time and Shane just knows what to do.

Years.

Those were Ruth's words. He's been with her for years.

Has he been here since right after he supposedly died? Have they been together since then?

The thought has my stomach tying itself in knots. I don't want to think about how long they've been together. I don't want to think about Frank with anyone, period.

Dammit. I don't want to think about Frank at all. But as I walk the dogs around the property, studying the windows so I can determine which belongs to the secret room, a dozen more questions surrounding the man swirl in my head. Because as I explore, I realize that there is no window where that room should be, which makes zero sense at all.

And when I move closer, squinting in hopes that I can make out details in the dark, I spot a difference in the siding in one area. It lifts from the house only slightly. If a person isn't looking for it, it would be virtually undetectable. But since I've been counting the windows, expecting one to be precisely where those extra boards are, its presence here is as clear to me as it would be if a bright yellow warning sign had been painted on them.

It seems who Frank sleeps with at night isn't his only secret.

I contemplate the ocean as I wait for the dogs to finish their business, then I bring them inside. I'm not surprised in the least when they follow me right up into my bed.

It's not until I'm falling asleep that I allow my thoughts to deviate to Frank again. To the way he looked when he kissed Hazel. The hard way he devoured her.

And unfortunately, those are the images that plague my mind as I finally fall asleep.

“Stop being so dramatic.” The words are on repeat in my brain as I run down the streets of Boston, dodging traffic. I don’t know where I’m running to until I land smack dab in front of his old house.

Out of breath and with no clue what I should do, I pant, hand over my heart, wishing for a different life. One with the boy who used to live here. Who maybe still does? We haven’t seen one another in years. In that time, I’ve sneaked by. I’ve waited across the street, watching the door for hours, longing for even a peek at him.

But he’s never there.

Coming here was stupid. But I didn’t know what else to do after my mother told me what my future entails. Only seventeen, and she sold me to the Mafia.

Nona chased her with her cane. It wasn’t until Mom’s newest boyfriend pulled out a gun and told Nona to stop acting like a crazy bitch that she stopped wailing. Then the tears just slid down her face as she looked at me, apologizing in her native tongue over and over again.

My mother scowled. “Stop being so dramatic. This is our life.” Her boyfriend slid his gun into his pocket and stepped outside to smoke a cigarette. Then, in a voice hissed in my direction, my mother sliced me open. “I’ve been sucking cock and getting fucked for sport since you were two. How the hell do you think I’ve been paying to live here and put food on the table? If not for your uncle, God rest his soul”—she made the sign of the cross—“we’d have been out on the street. This is our life, Elena. You aren’t smart enough to hold down a job, and we need the protection.”

I simply stared at her in shock, stunned speechless. With a shake of her head, she walked outside and settled on the stoop beside her asshole boyfriend. He handed her a cigarette, but instead of taking it, she opened her mouth, waiting for him to slide it against her lips. He licked them first. That was all I could bear. My stomach rolled in disgust, and I turned away. If I didn’t get air, I would lose the dinner we’d just finished.

My little sister was watching cartoons in the living room. The scene was in complete juxtaposition to what was going on only a few feet away.

Shockingly, she's still innocent and sweet, even trapped in a life like this. It's like she exists outside of this hellhole. I love that for her just as much as I hate her for it. Because she's his daughter. The man who worked to destroy me. The one who almost did. And now I'll be someone else's. I'll be expected to do things. Maybe my mother doesn't mind whoring herself out, but I sure as hell do.

So I ran and somehow ended up standing in front of Frank's house. I'm hidden in the shadows as a limousine pulls up. When Frank gets out, my entire body jumps. It's like I summoned him precisely when I needed him. As I step off the curb, a car flies down the road in front of me. I stumble back a bit, but even then, I can't stop the smile from consuming my face.

Finally.

Finally, I'll see him.

Just being in his proximity will calm me. And although I hate him for leaving me, maybe now I'll finally get answers. I can work on a plan that will stop my mother's absurd one. Frank will help. He'll know what to do. He may have disappeared, but I can't help but believe that he still cares. He's always cared. It's just the kind of person he is.

I right myself and look one way, then the other, to be sure the street is clear. Then I look at the front of his house again, ready to rush to him before he can make it inside. Before his family sees me.

But as I focus on him once more, another person climbs out of the limo. He holds his hand out to her, and when she steps into view, he smiles and cups her chin.

Everything in me wants to scream, yet I remain silent, unable to make a sound. And then, as if I'm in yet another waking nightmare, I watch him bend down and press his lips to hers.

FRANK

I'm officially fucked.

There's no denying it anymore.

The minute I stepped into Hazel's tiny apartment above the grocery store, I knew it.

Normally, even when I'm not in the mood, the sight of her stripping down and kneeling before me, her breasts swollen, her nipples pebbled, and her pussy dripping is enough for me to tune out the fucked-up world I can't escape. And if those don't work, watching her lips circle my fat cock does it.

Tonight, though?

I couldn't do it.

I couldn't even step in far enough to close the door behind me. The smell of her apartment nauseated me. Vanilla mixed with blueberry cobbler—a scent she mixed herself and one I had always found comforting. But not tonight. Tonight, it was all wrong.

The thing that pissed me off the most, the part that made it almost impossible to breathe, was that I had no idea what Ellie smelled like. When we were kids, a hint of garlic always clung to her clothes and hair.

But by the time she was old enough to have her own scent, I was gone. When she replaced her childhood shampoo with one of her choosing. When she started caring about clothing and makeup and perfume. And since she's come back into my life, she hasn't let me get close enough to find out.

And now it's all I can think about.

Visions of running my nose down the curve of her neck assault me. Holding her still while I get my fill. And don't even get me started on the way I dream about losing myself between her legs. Discovering that scent and the feel of her.

"Fuck," I mutter, not really looking at the blonde in front of me wearing a come-hither stare.

She laughs. "That's the plan, Brian."

I wince.

Everything about this is wrong. My name, the woman in front of me, the blond hair instead of the raven color that makes my blood heat. Although I'd hate it even more if she called me Irish. The instant Ellie used that nickname again, it was hers and no one else's.

"I gotta go," I mutter, stepping back like I can't get out of here quick enough.

"What?" she asks, confusion marring her pretty face.

She is beautiful. And I like her enough.

But *that* isn't enough. At least it isn't anymore.

I can't have Ellie, there is no doubt about that, but as long as she's living under the same roof as me, I can't imagine spending my nights anywhere else.

I give Hazel a bare-bones apology, feigning a headache, and rush home. I don't go inside once I get there. Instead, I grab a beer from the fridge in the boathouse and flop into one of the Adirondack chairs.

When I finally make it upstairs, I'm pleased to see the dogs aren't waiting for me in my room. That means they've made themselves comfortable with Ellie. What I'm not pleased about, though, are her soft whimpers. They aren't the sounds of nightmares. They're pure sadness.

And I'm just enough of an asshole to believe there's a chance they're because of me. Because I left with Hazel.

Because I tortured all of us by kissing her right in front of Ellie.

Slumped beside her door, I war with myself. Do I go in there and show her I'm here for her? Does it even matter? Nothing about our situation has changed. She's still who she is, and I'm still me. We're on a collision course, and I can't summon the energy to care. I can't stay away from her. And I can't turn my back on her again. No matter who she is, no matter what the circumstances are, for just this summer, maybe all that matters is that she's mine.

FRANK

For days, Ellie barely looks at me, and she speaks to me even less. I offer to take her to work, but she refuses time and again. Fortunately, Lorenzo still wants to learn to box, and she hasn't forbidden him from spending time with me. Instead, she watches from the deck, her focus allegedly on a book, the pages of which she never turns.

In the afternoons, the boys and Alesia and I ride bikes, but Ellie remains perched in her spot. Always watching, but never interacting. It isn't until I take my leave, until property maintenance beckons or I take the boat out for a spin, that she moves from her spot. And out of respect for her, I stay out until dinner is finished. I give her that time to be a mother to her boys without the stress of dealing with me.

Normally, I'd hang out at Ruth's a couple of times a week, but with Ellie out of the house, I choose to meet Seamus in the little cabin across the street. He fills me in on what's going on in Boston. Our underground gambling ventures are taking an even bigger hit. He encourages me to start making plans. Otherwise, my guys might revolt.

It's exhausting being a double agent. I care about my guys. Many of them grew up in my neighborhood, and while they're mobsters and would have no qualms about breaking a person's arm if necessary, they're also family guys who go to one another's little league games and whose wives are best friends. They're doing their best with the hands they were dealt. I'm one of the lucky ones who escaped. But only because I was lucky enough to befriend Cash James. Money and his

friendship went a long way and gave me an out most will never have.

And the military. My time as a marine kept me out of this life. The one Elena wasn't lucky enough to avoid. Whether she wanted to live in it or not, she may never tell me, but it's obvious she doesn't want it now.

"You've got to come in soon," Seamus says, tapping his pack of cigarettes against the table, then flipping it over and over, making my knee shake in rhythm.

"Stop." I snatch the cigarettes out of his hand and throw the package into the garbage. "Those things will put you in an early grave."

"If I'm lucky," he quips.

My jaw ticks. No one jokes about death in our line of work.

"Calm down," he gripes. Then, in a quieter voice, he prods, "Tell me about her."

"What are they saying?" I ask instead.

"Husband is pissed. Word is they disappeared into thin air. There was blood everywhere when he got home. Three bodyguards with slit throats. It wasn't pretty. He's saying one of the families kidnapped them."

Not bodyguards. Her prison guards.

Images of blood spatter in Ellie's hair taunt me. Did she really do it? Kill three men with guns and the wherewithal to fight all by herself? And why? What could have pushed her to do that? *Why now?*

I don't for a second believe that her sister helped. Alesia is good with the kids, but outside of keeping her eyes on them, she doesn't lift a finger. When the boys are with me some afternoons, she lays out on the deck or does her nails. Her attitude and know-how are in stark contrast to Ellie's. It's nearly impossible to imagine her even talking to a mobster, let alone taking one out.

“Who’s he pointing to?” I ask, forcing a calmness into my voice that I don’t feel.

He chuckles. “*The Irish Ghost.*” His eyes twinkle when he whispers it. “Your name precedes you, ya know? It really was the most brilliant thing you ever did.”

I nod sardonically. “Maybe. Give me two more weeks.”

He winces. “They want to hear from you before that.”

Resolute, I stand. “Too bad. I need a few more weeks.”

“I’ll do what I can.”



THAT EVENING, I don’t take no for an answer. I call Ruth and tell her I’ll drive Ellie to work. She must pass the information along, because the person who normally picks her up doesn’t show.

Ellie stomps around the house, glaring at me when it comes time to leave. “Can you give me a ride?”

I smile. “Happy to.”

Without waiting for a response, she trudges to the front door and puts on her shoes.

Alesia is watching a movie with the boys, but she turns from her spot on the couch and glares at me too. The look knocks me back. This woman hasn’t so much as raised her voice since she arrived, yet it’s obvious that she’s pissed at me now. “She doesn’t need another man controlling her” is all she says.

Noted.

“I didn’t think—”

Alesia holds up her hand and turns back to the movie. “Exactly. Next time, *do.*”

“You ready?” Ellie grumbles from the porch.

I take that as my cue to leave and give Leo’s hair a good ruffle before I go. He looks up at me and smiles, giving me the hit of positivity I need before I head out and deal with his angry mama.

Sauntering outside slowly is sure to piss her off more, but I do just that. I’m not one to rush toward anything unless someone I care about is in trouble. I may currently be in trouble, but I’ve never been good at saving myself.

Especially when it comes to this woman.

Ellie is wearing a jean skirt and a black T-shirt that’s been cut just enough to offer a peek of the porcelain skin at her waist. Her gray leggings come to her ankles, hiding the ink I’m dying to see. No matter whether she’s sitting outside in the sun or walking around the house, the woman’s legs are always covered.

It only leaves me more intrigued, hungrier. Despite my best efforts, the ache inside me grows each day.

The ache to touch her, to peel off those leggings, to trace what lies beneath them, to kiss each design, to worship her the way she deserves to be worshipped, is so overwhelming I can barely think straight.

“What are you staring at?” she barks, brushing past me. She jogs down the steps and yanks on the passenger door, huffing when it doesn’t open.

I swear she practically growls when I crowd her, letting my fingers brush along her shoulder so I can put the key in the lock.

When I open her door and turn to her, she glares in response, but she doesn’t argue. She only huffs and heaves herself into the passenger seat.

“You’re acting weird tonight,” she grumbles.

I don’t reply until I’ve started the car and rolled my window down. The old green ford rumbles to life, and I find myself smiling. This is precisely how it was meant to be. Ellie

and me and an old ford truck. Never in my life could I have imagined the two of us ending up in a cabin on the ocean in Maine, riding in a truck like this. Yet we fit here.

Or maybe the location doesn't matter. Maybe it's just us. We fit together.

Whether we were walking the streets of Rome, dining at a fancy restaurant in Boston, or flying on my best friend's private jet, I'd be comfortable as long as she was by my side.

It's her.

It's always been her.

"Just tired of fighting this," I answer her finally.

The way her attention heats my blood is something I'll never get sick of.

"What?" she coughs out.

The truck bounces along the dirt road. "This. *Us*. You and me." I wave a hand between us and give her a sly grin.

Her green eyes practically glow in the moonlight. "You bump your head while riding your bike today? Or maybe suck in too much of that ocean water on your daily swim?"

I laugh. "Knew you were watching me."

"Yeah, I keep my eye on anyone who's spending time with my kids," she huffs, crossing her arms as if the physical barrier will protect her heart from me. It won't. I won't allow it. She stole my heart like a little thief, and now she'll pay the price.

"Your kids don't swim with me. I do that all on my own. Early in the morning," I tease. "Long before you allegedly wake up."

A thrill runs through me, a shot of adrenaline pushing me forward. Shit. She wakes up early just to watch me swim? It's the only explanation. And then what? She goes back to sleep? She doesn't come down for breakfast until hours later.

"Just—" She shakes her head. "You're annoying," she finally says, her voice almost inaudible. With that, she drops her head back against the headrest and faces away from me.

I chuckle softly. “I know, Ellie. Believe me, I know.”

Before I even have the truck in park in the gravel lot at Ruth’s, she’s hopping out and slamming the door behind her. Without a goodbye or even a glance back, she rushes inside. Her feistiness makes my heart fucking float. Because I’ve made up my mind. I’m tired of starving myself of the only thing that will ever feed my hunger. I’m done keeping myself from loving her. So I roll up the window and turn off the ignition.

By the time I get inside, Ellie is behind the bar, and her scowl is aimed directly at me. She’s already filling a lowball glass and pushing it toward Mr. Myers.

His family made their money in oil decades ago. They have a house on the water that his kids and grandkids spend almost no time visiting. He, however, retired and moved up here permanently. Here and there, his sons will visit. Each and every time, the man sits a little straighter and smiles a little wider. Even if they’d rather be in Bora Bora or Italy on some adventure. For him, this little slice of paradise is all he needs.

Not everyone can see the beauty of this quiet town. I’ve always liked it here, but its appeal has only grown over the last few weeks. There are no street wars to contend with, unless Clayton accidentally mows over Iris’s flowers. It’s happened a time or two, but he can’t see, and one of us will replant them and bring Iris a jar of jam to smooth things over.

The last time, Hazel brought the jam, and I did the mowing.

I doubt *that* will be happening again.

After I left the other night and refused to reschedule, she got the hint. Now she’s pissed, and I don’t exactly blame her.

“Irish.” Mr. Myers nods in my direction, holding up his scotch. The man has more zeros in his bank account than even my old best friend, yet he drinks the well liquor. It’s disgusting.

I can’t hide the way my face scrunches, but I school my expression quickly and dip my chin. “Myers, when are the

grandkids coming?”

Ruth drops a glass of my favorite whiskey in front of me, and I take a sip.

“Should be here at the end of July,” he replies, scratching at his unruly white hair. “Not sure which ones are coming, though.”

“When they get here, they should come out and see our boys. Right, El? I can get a few extra bikes or get them in the boxing ring.”

Ellie gapes at me, her mouth falling open and everything, but she doesn't respond.

Ruth nudges her. “Irish teaching those boys to box? That's great.”

She wipes at the spot next to my drink and nods. “Yeah, Lorenzo is really getting the hang of it.”

My insides warm just a little, and I laugh. “You should see his right hook.” I put my hands up and fake a swipe toward Myers.

Ducking, he barks out a laugh. “Yeah, I'm not sure my daughter would love it if I taught my grandsons, but sounds like fun.”

I pat him on the shoulder. “Just let me know when they confirm dates. I'll make sure to have a few extra sets of gloves, for you and them, just in case you can persuade her.”

His smile grows, and I settle back on my stool, my legs spread wide and relaxed. When I look up, Ellie's eyes are on me, *studying me*, as if she's trying to figure me out.

I've stopped trying to figure her out. I'm just enjoying the moment, embracing the way things play out.

Finally, as if she's just gotten the answer she's looking for, her lip tips up on the side where her beauty mark sits, and she fucking smiles.

Then she rolls her eyes as if she's annoyed at me for making her happy. She tosses the rag that was in her hand at

my face and laughs.

The light, airy, breathy, fucking sexiest laugh I've ever heard. The sound makes my spine tingle. I reach for her hand because I can't not touch her when she's like this. I want to pull her happiness close. I want to keep her laughing, keep that smile on her face, *keep her*.

The sound of the stool dragging against the hardwood floor is like a record scratch, but I ignore everyone but her. The whole place is probably staring, but I use my hold on her to pull myself closer to the bar. Placing her hand on my chest and locking eyes with her, I silently urge her to feel the way my heart beats for her. How it gallops in my chest, fast and excited, all because she fucking laughed.

She licks her lips, and I'm so damn tempted to pull her over the bar, into my lap and against my chest, but the sound of a familiar voice in my ear is like a bucket of cold water dumped over my head.

"I knew it was because of her," Hazel hisses.

Anger, I expected. But I never fathomed she'd lay a hand on Ellie. When she grabs at Ellie's wrist, attempting to break our connection, I see red.

"Do not fucking touch her." My voice is hushed, but my tone makes my meaning clear. She'd do well not to fuck with me.

Ellie withdraws her hand, taking her warmth with her. Then, calmly, she rounds the bar until she's standing beside Hazel and me. "I'm not sure what you think you know, but you're wrong."

"She's not wrong," I argue.

Hazel scowls, and her face flushes. Then she's lunging for Ellie. My girl bounces to the side, dodging the attack, and Hazel stumbles forward, bumping into the stool I previously occupied, her long blond hair swaying as she does.

"Bitch," she growls, righting herself and readying in a boxing stance.

I'd laugh if I wasn't so fucking enraged right now. Not giving Hazel the chance to swing, albeit badly, again, I reach for Ellie, ready to pull her behind me to protect her. But for the first time since this confrontation started, Ellie flinches, and her body folds in on itself.

I don't have time to process the implication there, but it makes me angry all the same. And sad. So fucking sad.

Gritting my teeth, I turn to Hazel and point toward the door. "Out."

At this point, Ruth has joined the party, and when she eyes Ellie and tips her head toward the kitchen, Ellie listens.

"Hazel, hunny, I know you're hurting, but you can't come in here and threaten my staff," Ruth says.

Her voice is stern, but her eyes are full of compassion. She was close with Hazel's mom for most of her life. They grew up together. I'm sure it kills her to turn away her friend's daughter when she's so broken, but I can't summon the energy to feel any kind of sympathy for the woman right now.

Fat tears fall down her cheeks, and she tugs on the front of my shirt. "Five years. I gave you five years of my life. Was I just a placeholder? For her?" She sneers, flinging her arm in Ellie's direction.

I scrub a hand over my face and gather my thoughts. There's no easy explanation here, so I go with honesty. "I never thought she'd be here. I never thought I stood a chance."

Hazel gapes, her jaw hanging open. Maybe she expected me to tell her the realization just hit me. Maybe she thought I'd assure her that I wasn't using her. But aren't we all just using one another until the right person comes around? Who the fuck knows. What I do know is that the minute a life with Ellie became possible, no other options existed.

She's it.

And she always will be.

ELENA

The second the truck rolls to a stop, I'm out and running inside. Fortunately, it's late, so the kids are already asleep. But Alesia is sitting on the couch with her legs tucked under her, watching a movie.

She jumps when I slam the door behind me. "Whoa, you okay?"

No. I'm not okay. I'm not sure what the hell I am, but I am definitely not okay.

Frank storms in right behind me, his steps heavy as he crowds my space. "Can we please just have a conversation?"

I don't spare him a glance as I retreat to the deck to get away from him. I need a few minutes to find my bearings. To sort through these feelings and make them stop.

But Frank doesn't care about my need for space. He's on my heels, catching up to me as I grasp the banister. He reaches for me, and once again, I can't help but shrink into myself the second he wraps his fingers around my arm.

He freezes and holds his hands out in front of him, his brow furrowing as he scans my face. "You're afraid of me."

"I'm not afraid of you," I huff, pulling my shoulders back and tipping my chin up. The idea is absurd. Why the hell would I fear this man?

"You flinched when I touched you. And earlier, when I stepped in front of you—to *protect you*, mind you—"

“I wouldn’t have needed protecting if your insane girlfriend hadn’t come at me,” I seethe.

“She’s not my girlfriend,” he murmurs, his face so open and sad.

I hate it. The tone of his voice, the way he’s looking at me, the kid gloves he’s put on, like he’s afraid I’ll break.

I won’t fucking break. I’ve never fucking broken. Why the hell would I start now?

“Ellie,” he prods, his green eyes swimming with defeat. “I’m sorry.” He backs up and steps into the house.

I blow out a breath when I’m finally alone.

The door to the porch hasn’t even clicked shut, though, before it creaks open again.

“You shouldn’t be so hard on him,” my sister says, propping herself against the banister next to me.

My heart is pounding against my rib cage, my adrenaline in overdrive. Normally, I can control my reactions regardless of how out of control I feel. I’ve had years of experience with punishments and the consequences that come with reacting to the pain. My body is disciplined to remain calm through even the most violent attacks. It’s in the aftermath that I’m most dangerous. When my body no longer has to remain rigid in preparation for the beating, when my fight-or-flight instincts finally kick in.

“You have absolutely no idea what you’re talking about,” I snap, gripping the wooden railing tight.

“I know the man is trying. He’s good with your kids, which is more than either of us ever got when we were growing up.”

“Your father was a monster,” I say, for once letting my true feelings about the man shine through, “and mine was dead. Of course Frank is better than either of those options.”

Alesia bites her lip and drops her gaze to the planks beneath us. “I didn’t know him.”

“He was a monster,” I say again. I know precisely how horrible her father was. How dare she stand here and tell me who to forgive and when? “The only solace I had was Frank. And when the beatings got too rough, when I was finally ready to tell someone”—I hike a thumb over my shoulder—“*he* disappeared.”

Alesia squeezes my upper arm in what I imagine to her is reassurance or compassion. But for me, it’s a reminder of the way *he* used to grab me. Hold me. To keep me still so he could render another punishment.

I flinch at her touch, and she pulls back.

“He was a kid, Elena. You were both kids.”

A sob mixed with a laugh falls from my lips, and I shake my head. “You all get to rewrite history. I lived it. I know exactly what happened, and I know how this goes. I’m his little project. He wants to fix me, but soon enough, someone prettier with less baggage will come along, and he’ll go to her. He’ll choose her. Why the hell would anyone choose me?”

Without giving her a chance to respond, I rush inside and straight up the stairs. Fully clothed, I climb into bed. Tonight will be another sleepless night. Because if I dare to close my eyes, visions of all that happened after Frank left will haunt me. But just like I couldn’t stop the horrors back then, I can’t stop the nightmares as exhaustion takes over.



I DIDN'T EXPECT it to hurt so much. He's been gone for years. Why wouldn't he have kissed someone in that time? All along, I knew he wouldn't be waiting for me like I was waiting for him.

He left.

He walked away.

The tears roll down my face, soaking into my shirt as I run back to my house.

Afterward, I hide in my bedroom and avoid my nona for days. She's just as distraught as I am. And knowing her, she'll do anything to keep me from having to marry the man my mother has sold me to.

"You're lucky," my mother hissed while I brushed my sister's hair.

She's four and still living blissfully unaware of the life she's been born into.

"You'll never want for anything. He's second in command. That he even wants you is a miracle."

I didn't fight back again. I didn't remind her that he's forty-seven, overweight, and balding. That is why he wants me. I didn't tell her that the smell of him alone could make poverty look appealing.

That I'd gladly live on the street before subjecting myself to what she deemed lucky.

Nona appears in the doorway, her usual smile missing and her eyes wary. She looks as though she's aged thirty years in the last few weeks. I don't want her to age. She's my only solace. In that moment, I vow to put on a brave front. To keep her from worrying. While money doesn't matter to me, my nona's happiness does, and if she thinks I'm miserable, she won't rest.

"He's here."

I squeeze my thumb against my forefinger, keeping my hands steady as I approach her. "Thank you, Nona."

She eyes me, perhaps thrown by my lack of theatrics. I've been screaming and yelling for the past few weeks, and now I've suddenly gone quiet. Accepted my fate.

I haven't, but I want her to believe that I'm okay. So I keep my face neutral. I'm not sure I'll ever truly smile again, but for her, I muster a peaceful expression.

"Angelina, please don't do this," Nona hisses in Italian.

My mother rises from the couch and glances back at Alesia, who's curled up at the other end. "Get into bed and don't come down, no matter what you hear."

My little sister doesn't so much as flinch at my mother's harsh tone, proving how typical this coldness is. She's used to going to bed without a kiss, without a bedtime story. She's used to existing silently. I suppose that will soon be my fate too.

If I'm lucky.

The possibility that my future husband will take an interest in me is far scarier than a lifetime of quiet. Than a lifetime of being ignored.

That I could prepare for. I've existed that way for the last few years. Since he died and Frank disappeared.

But as I step into the hallway, my nona hovers close and slides something into my hand. It scrapes against my skin, and I almost cry out at the shock of the cold metal in my sweaty palm. "Just in case," she whispers in Italian.

She follows my mother down the stairs without turning back, and I duck my head, willing myself to do the same. With a deep breath in, I pause at the top and wait until they're in the foyer and out of view. Then I turn my hand over and stare at the tiny knife my nona slid into my palm.

The hallway light glints off the blade, like it's been sharpened and shined. The dull black handle is heavy in my hand. I'd lied to myself when I thought I couldn't smile again. Examining the knife gives me the kind of thrill I haven't felt in a long time. It's a lifeline. I can't help the way my lips tip up in surprise at my grandmother's audacity. At her ferociousness. At the permission she's given me to protect myself.

But my smile dies when my attention snags on the man at the bottom of the steps. The one I've been promised to. His beady eyes brighten at my smile. Like he honestly thinks it's for him. Without a word, he grips the banister and takes the first step toward me.

FRANK

After Ellie flinched for the second time when I attempted to go near her, I stormed into my office and locked the door so I could pace in peace.

I wanted to throw things and punch holes in the wall. I wanted to hunt down the person who'd broken her like this and destroy them. Fuck, I've done it once before, and I'm under no illusion that I couldn't do it again.

It's been years since he laid a hand on her, though. *Decades.*

Lorenzo didn't seem like the type to hit a woman, but maybe I've been wrong about that. He'd obviously changed. If not, she wouldn't have run. *Right?*

"Fuck!" I grab the first thing I can get my hands on and launch at the wall, right where a window used to be. The shattering glass that cascades to the floor glitters in the glow of the overhead light.

With a grunt, I turn toward the board that hangs on the wall on the other side of the room. The only thing that could possibly settle my heart before it beats right out of my chest.

God dammit. She doesn't want me. She can't even stand to be near me. When Hazel nearly attacked her, she didn't so much as blink, but when I look at her, her expression turns to one of anxiety.

I cause her pain.

The glint of what I can only assume is the murder weapon is the first thing that snags my attention. Every time I look at these pictures, a new detail jumps out at me.

The ponytail tied with a green ribbon. The jacket cinched tight at her waist. The way she dips her head so her red hair falls like a curtain, blocking her face.

What do her victims think in their last moments? What must they think of being bested by the beautiful monster, *the Bella Morte*? The woman who takes down those who have done the worst of the worst to the worst of the worst.

Is it possible she's a vigilante seeking justice for those who can't obtain it themselves? Possibly. It'd definitely be easier if I believed that. Maybe then I could allow her to continue taking out man after man who deserves it.

That's not how justice works, though. Or at least that's what the government says.

Overseas, when we're at war, they have no qualms about vigilante justice. They condone conviction and punishment without judge or jury.

And I agree. I wouldn't have done their bidding if I didn't.

For every life I've ever taken, I can comfortably look in the mirror and say I was right.

It's the lives I couldn't protect that haunt me. The people I *couldn't* save.

When our mission was over and I was told to come home.

Or the girl I was forced to walk away from, though every bone in my body screamed for me to protect her.

THERE'S no making sense of any of it. And tonight, this board gives me no comfort. No answers. I'm not sure I want them either way. Because once I put it all together, it won't be up to me anymore. I'll be forced to hand Bella Morte over to the government, and an actual judge will rule over her punishment. A figure who has no idea why she did what she

did or how awful the people she removed from this earth really were.

But if I discover her secrets, then I can go back to my life. Maybe. At least Shane can.

I can come out of hiding. I'll no longer be the Irish Ghost. I can see my friends. Get to know Cash's kids. Get back to the life I led when I thought *she* wasn't an option.

For a decade, I never questioned whether that was what I wanted. But now I can't help but think that maybe my version of justice isn't justice at all.

Because once again, I'll have to walk away from the one person who matters most when she so obviously needs me.

Even in this sealed room, Ellie's loud whimpers reverberate as she's lost to a nightmare.

"Fuck."

Without my permission, my body moves in the direction of her room. For the first time, probably ever, I don't stop to check that the office door has shut properly. No, my sole focus is getting to her. Outside her door, her whimpers are louder, and the way her bed creaks as she tosses and turns is audible. The idea of her thrashing and crying eats at me. Even with the comfort the dogs give her, she isn't settled.

I can't do this anymore. I can't stand here and listen to her break over and over again. Not like I did when I was a kid. Day in and day out until I snapped. And I can't snap again.

When I turn the knob and the door creaks open, my heart squeezes painfully in my chest. She didn't lock herself in? That alone gives me courage. Maybe it was a subconscious thing, but it means she trusts me not to hurt her. She knows she's safe.

Jones lets out a low growl from the bed when I tiptoe toward them. "Weak boy," I chide, pressing my hand to his head and rubbing softly. He yawns and lays his head back down.

Daisy doesn't even blink her eyes open.

Some watchdogs.

Another cry from Ellie pulls me from my thoughts. Her face is highlighted by the glow of the moon. It's glistening with a steady stream of tears, but her eyes remain closed. She's sobbing in her sleep. When she thrashes forward again, she sucks in a breath. "Please, no," she rasps, fighting demons in her dream.

I can't take it. The pure terror in her voice, the devastation etched in every line of her face, the defeated movements, and the fear. It's all too fucking much. I scoot Jones out of the way and settle next to her gently, wincing as the bed creaks under my weight. Her terror doesn't lessen at my proximity, so I wrap my arms around her and pull her against my chest. "Shh, I got you, Ellie. No one is going to hurt you. I got you."

She doesn't fight my hold. No, she leans into it, but her sobs become steadier, almost like this is what she was waiting for. Like she can finally let it all out. Her body shakes in my arms, but she doesn't pull away.

"No one will ever hurt you again," I whisper against her hair, squeezing her tighter.

She inhales a deep breath, and then it's like every worry deflates. Her body relaxes almost instantly, and the sobbing stops. I don't let go, though. Instead, I nuzzle closer, burrowing my nose into her hair until I find her neck where I can do nothing but inhale and satisfy my curiosity.

Cinnamon and maple syrup.

That's what she smells like.

As I let my lips ghost against her neck, I sigh, finally content.

ELENA

Despite having the most insane dream that Frank spent the night holding me, I wake up to an empty bed. Even the dogs are gone. I sigh at the ceiling, wishing it hadn't been a dream. Frank's arms around me felt so real, and if I didn't know any better, I'd swear I could smell him on my sheets.

Like a fool, I pull the covers over my head, sealing in the phantom scent. Irish whiskey and fire.

Kicking my legs, I throw the covers off, giving in to the urge to throw a private tantrum over the loss of his imaginary touch. Mid-fit, my attention snags on the coffee cup on my bedside table. I bolt upright and inspect it, as if it walked into my bedroom of its own accord. Beside it is, quite randomly, a set of binoculars that weren't there last night. I can't help but frown. "What the hell?"

My stomach lurches when I spot Frank's familiar scribble.
For your stalking.

A throaty laugh rips through me, instantly turning my scowl into a smile that's so big even my heart lifts with it. The feeling is so foreign that something set in stone inside me long ago shifts, and I swear my ribs crack a bit.

Not sure how late it is, and not wanting to disappoint him, I jump out of bed and swipe my robe from the chair in the corner. In jerky movements, I wrap it around my waist. Then I'm out the door and on the deck, binoculars in hand, searching for the Irish bastard.

I spot him immediately. His strong strokes are even more determined today. Almost as if he can sense me tracking his every move.

My body heats and my stomach twists, because at the sight of him, it hits me. Last night—his arms holding me tight, his scent enveloping me—was real.

He held me through a nightmare. Even after I yelled at him. After I stormed away and refused to talk to him, he showed up.

Like every day for the past few weeks, I don't leave the deck until he's safely on land, peeling his wetsuit down and revealing his rippled chest covered in ink and muscles.

When I finally come down for breakfast, the boys are eating and Frank is in the kitchen, like always.

My sister is chatting with Frank quietly, and he responds with a kind smile on his face and warmth in his eyes. Would he go to her if he heard her crying? Would he wrap his arms around her, hold her tight, comfort her?

Was that all it was? His savior complex?

I tamp down my jealousy. It doesn't matter anyway. When Frank picks up the coffee carafe, without pausing his conversation, and winks as he fills a mug and holds it out to me, the blood in my veins heats.

And there goes another pop in my chest. Another crack. Another sliver widening, letting in the light of day.

“Sleep okay?” Frank asks.

It's innocent enough. He asks the same question every day. But this morning, there's a message hidden there. His words are coated in whiskey. They sear my throat and burn down to my stomach, warming me from the inside out.

With a tilt of my head, I reply. “Eh. Have a bit of a crick in my neck. Almost feels like an ogre slept on top of me.”

Frank's green eyes dance with amusement, the skin at his temples crinkling. “Oh yeah?”

I bite down on my lip, holding back the smile that threatens to overtake my face. “Yeah. Even my bed had this weird smell. Moldy or something.”

He chuckles and shakes his head as he puts the carafe back on the warming plate of the coffeepot. Then his gaze swings back in my direction, like he can’t help but take in every detail. Like he wants to look *only* at me.

For a heartbeat, we share this private moment. This small joke. It’s nice to share a secret as innocent as this one. One that brings a smile to my face and not a lump to my throat.

My sister coughs lightly. “Want me to crack your back?”

Frank smirks, but he still doesn’t look away. “Maybe you should come out to the gym with us later. I’ll help you stretch.” His tone is definitely flirtatious.

When he turns to check the pancakes he’s got on the stove, my sister jabs me in the ribs, making me almost double over in pain.

“Deck. *Now.*”

I ruffle Leo’s hair as I walk past him. “Morning, little man.”

“Mawning Mawmy,” he replies. He looks up at me with a pancake grin, then goes right back to spearing another bite.

I laugh at Daisy, who’s positioned herself at his feet, likely waiting for him to drop a piece. She’ll probably luck out with the way he’s shoveling it into his mouth. The kid acts like he hasn’t eaten in a week.

At the end of the table, I pause and take in my other son. He’s eating an omelet. This is a new routine. Because, secretly, he wants to be strong like Irish.

It makes me stupidly giddy to imagine Lorenzo seeing his son look up to Frank. In the past month, Frank has spent more time talking to and playing with my sons than their father has in the last eight years. “Want to ride our bikes into town later?” I ask.

Lorenzo and Leo both look at me with wide, shocked expressions, but then my oldest grins widely and nods, and I swear my heart doubles in size. Before it explodes, I head out the door to speak with my sister.

“You slept with him!” Alesia hisses.

I scoff. Technically, we slept together, but we didn’t *sleep* together. Just the idea of it has my toes tingling. “No, Alesia.”

She points at me and circles my face with one finger, her face scrunched up like she might have a coronary or maybe like she ate something bad. “Your face is weird.”

I smile. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“That!” she jeers, her eyes all big and wild. “You’re smiling.”

“I smile,” I protest.

She pops a hand on her hip and gives me the sternest glare I think I’ve ever seen from her. Clearly, she doesn’t believe me.

But maybe she’s right. I do feel a million times lighter today.

Running my tongue across my teeth, I do my best to tamp down the way my lips keep wanting to tip up like I’ve actually experienced something worth the smile lines and wrinkles.

With nothing left to say, I turn back around and head inside, where I sit at the table with my kids and eat a pancake.

For the next few days, we continue on like normal, never actually addressing what happened. A calm settles over the house that has every one of us smiling more. On the nights I work, Frank drives me, and rather than heading back home, he sits in the corner, sipping a beer or his whiskey and chatting with the locals.

One night, Hazel stops in, and he immediately gets to his feet, ready to protect me. Ruth is by my side as well, and she gives Hazel a stern look.

My adversary holds up her hands, her expression full of embarrassment, defeat, and sadness. And then she glances at Frank, and a look of longing takes over.

I don't blame her for wanting him. I've been there. Broken. Wishing he could love me the way I loved him.

Rather than giving that thought any power or admitting to myself that I still feel that way, I pull out Frank's bottle of whiskey, pour us each a shot, point at the table, and motion for her to join me.

I don't force an apology out of her. I don't even expect one. I just hold up the drink and clink my glass against hers.

Broken people recognize broken people. Regardless of her demons, regardless of what she's been through, it's clear she's broken like me. She's experienced loss and heartache and disappointment just like I have. She suffered the agony of realizing that the man she loves doesn't love her back.

She doesn't need me to accept her apology, to tell her that she fucked up or to grant her any sort of redemption. That's between her and the god she prays to at night.

When Frank and I drive home after my shift, he rests his hand on my covered thigh and squeezes. "You're a good person, Ellie." He says it in that gravel tone of his, the earnest one I know so well.

The truth is that I'm not. Not a single ounce of me is good. So I go to bed and cry myself to sleep, knowing that, once again, the nightmares will haunt me. No one can grant me absolution.

I DIDN'T EXPECT him to be so forward here, in my mother's house.

With my nona and my mother downstairs. With my little sister asleep in the bedroom next to us.

I thought maybe he'd talk. Or like my mother's boyfriends, he wouldn't be good with words, so he'd just grunt. The men who come here to see my mother don't actually talk to her, and

I've certainly never witnessed them do anything else, thank God.

So when he didn't so much as say hello before he lunged at me, I didn't even stop to think...

FRANK

For a week, life has been easy, smooth. I'd even go as far as to say I've been happy. I've spent my mornings teaching Lorenzo how to box and my afternoons laughing at the funniest fucking four-year-old I've ever met. His mispronunciations and made-up words make my chest ache every fucking time I hear them. And his wit? My god, that kid knows how to make me laugh.

On occasion, despite the absolute joy I've been feeling, anger and grief bowl me over out of nowhere. Because my time with these boys reminds me how much I've missed. My brother kept me from Shane for the first sixteen years of his life, so I missed the moments where he learned to talk and ride a bike and hit a baseball. And then my best friend's daughter, Hope, and his son, Teddy. He's making communion this week, and I can't be there to celebrate with him. That pisses me off too.

In another life, one where I didn't have to blow myself up to protect the people I love, I would've been that kid's godfather. I'd be spending this week helping Cash plan ridiculous and overly extravagant things for his son. I'd be boxing with him in the afternoon, going to dinner in the city.

Hell, in a perfect fucking world, the little boys who make me smile every day would be mine. I never would've left Ellie. She never would've become this person whose smile is so fucking rare it's like the sun bursts through a cloud every time it makes an appearance. I physically ache when she smiles because I hate that she does it so infrequently.

Ellie rushed to her bedroom as soon as we got back from the bar. Hazel's appearance tonight shook her. I think. Or maybe it was me.

Who the fuck knows? The woman is so damn skittish. Anything could have set her off.

I dipped into my office, hoping to lose myself in my project. In my actual job—the one that keeps me from the life I miss so damn much.

Tonight, what catches my eye is the red lipstick on the collar of the man's shirt. We've found a similar smudge on every victim since the first murder. The first murder we were able to trace to her, that is. It's unclear whether she had killed before.

The lipstick is so bright it's obnoxious. It's hard to imagine she would even purchase it. The color is cheap, like a dollar store find. But the woman in the red soled boots with the perfect auburn hair doesn't look like the kind of woman who shops at Dollar Tree.

To be fair, the blood spatter made it almost impossible to see on first inspection. But as the years went by and the body count grew, her lipstick mark became more obvious. A signature, if you will. Almost like she kills her victims, watches them bleed out, and then kisses their collar.

Of course, if she actually kissed their collars, we'd have DNA evidence. She's not fucking dumb. She either draws the lip print with the lipstick or, more likely, she had a damn stamp made. Because it's too perfect. Too exact.

I step closer and finger the picture on the board, my mind working overtime as I run through all I've put together so far.

"Please, no!" The sound of Ellie's cries leaves me rigid.

Without hesitation, I do what I've done every night for the last week. Settling in the bed next to her, I pull her close and kiss her head, murmuring that she'll be okay.

Having become more brazen since that first night, I pull her body against mine, nuzzle the spot where her neck meets her shoulder, and inhale that spicy scent.

And then I get angry.

Tomorrow, she'll act like this didn't happen, because these moments, they aren't real. Her kids aren't mine, and worst of all, neither is she.

For the first time in a week, when I wake, there is no coffee on the nightstand. No note. Every day, he's left me teasing messages in his chicken scratch.

Hope the ogre didn't squeeze too tight.

Did you know you snore?

What is your smell? All fucking day, I get whiffs of it on my skin, and it's driving me insane. Cinnamon? Sugar? Put me out of my misery.

Beside yesterday's note, he'd propped up a pair of sunglasses. *Let's take the kids to the beach today.*

We did too. We hung out by the water all afternoon. We haven't spoken about the notes or how I stalk him during his morning swims. Or how I can't sleep unless he's holding me.

Now I wish we had. Because suddenly, it feels like it's over before it's really begun. Or maybe it never happened at all.

Maybe I've lost my marbles. Maybe I'm living in this house all alone, conjuring up my companions. Loving kids, the comfort of my sister, and the man I've dreamed about for years. That would be a true hell, though it's one I surely deserve. To be given a taste of everything I've ever wanted, only for it to be taken away in one night.

But the dogs are here. Jones circles the bed, his nails tapping on the hardwood floor as he eagerly waits for me to get up. Daisy's still curled up in her spot behind my bent

knees. Her warmth still soaks through the sheet and into me. So no, it's not a dream.

“Frank left you guys up here,” I say in a groggy voice, still confused.

Since last week, I've been waking to an empty bedroom, and the dogs have been out and fed before I get downstairs. Something is very off.

A peek out the glass door to the deck confirms my suspicions. Frank is always in the water at this time, but this morning, there is no Irish Bastard to be found.

Downstairs, my concerns are compounded. It's early still, but the boys are up. They're sitting at the table like they are when I come down most mornings, but they each have a bowl of cereal in front of them rather than the pancakes and omelets Frank has been spoiling them with. Lorenzo is wearing a frown as he peers at the kitchen, then back down at his bowl. It seems I'm not the only one who's noticed Frank's disappearance.

“Morning, sunshine,” Alesia teases. “What's with the scowl?”

Clearing my throat, I wipe the expression from my face and pull my lower lip between my teeth. I want to ask, but I don't want to sound needy.

Where is Frank?

“Mawmy, can we go to the beach today?” Leo asks with a sigh. Frank's absence is even affecting my bright, happy boy.

Why does it feel like he's gone? Like not just out for the day, but completely gone.

Or maybe I'm being overly dramatic.

Would he really take off just because I'm a complete and utter disaster and he's tired of having to pick up the pieces?

Maybe. I wouldn't blame him if he did.

I paint on a sad excuse for a smile and agree to take the boys on an adventure. But I accompany my promise with strict

instructions for my sister. I don't care if I sound desperate; I need to know.

“Find out where Frank went.”

Alesia bites back a smile and nods. “Still sticking to the story that you hate him, you're not sleeping with him, and you'll probably kill him?”

I shrug. “Anything's possible.”



WE TAKE our bikes into town for the day, and naturally, we run into Hazel outside the ice cream shop. Her face turns pink when she sees me, and she stumbles a little on the sidewalk. But my thoughts from last night remain. She's been hurt. I've been hurt. Despite the anger and the jealousy that infused our first couple of meetings, we're kindred spirits. So I invite her to join us for ice cream.

I'm crossing lines, and I have no idea what she does or doesn't know about Frank's past, but when the boys run to the shoreline to skip rocks the way Frank taught them, I turn to her and ask my questions anyway. “How long have you lived here?”

“My whole life.”

Ensuring my boys stay in sight, I scan the shoreline. “And when did...Brian,” I grind out, finding it strange to say that name, “move here?”

She cocks her head and furrows her brow, shifting so she's facing me rather than the water. “He didn't tell you?”

“No, I didn't ask.”

In my periphery, she gives me a rueful smile. “Because you knew he wouldn't provide an answer.” She laughs, but the sound is light. Like we share a special secret understanding of Frank-slash-Brian.

“Truthfully, I didn’t really care till right this minute,” I admit.

She lets out a long breath. “That must be why he’s so smitten.” She twists her hands in her lap. “I’m not saying you’re not deserving. Obviously, you’re amazing. From what I’ve seen, you’re a great mother, and you’re providing him with the family thing, which, as much as he says he doesn’t want, I think he does.”

My stomach drops at that last bit. Frank doesn’t want a family? The man is so good with my kids, so good with Shane. He deserves a family of his own. Not with me, obviously, but with someone.

“I never played hard to get. I was always very honest about wanting him. I mean, you’ve seen him. Who wouldn’t want him?”

I nod. There’s no point in denying how good-looking he is.

“So you going to tell me how long he’s lived here?” I ask, forcing out a light laugh to hide my insecurities.

She shrugs. “Probably about six or seven years.”

“And has he always lived in that house?”

She scoffs. “God, what do you guys talk about while you’re there?”

I side-eye her. “If I’m being honest, we really don’t talk.”

Her jaw goes slack and her spine goes ramrod straight.

Desperate to clear up the misconception, I hold up my hands. “No, I didn’t mean it like that. We don’t really interact.”

I suppose that’s not entirely true. He holds me every night to keep me from having nightmares, but I’ll keep that to myself.

“Gotcha. Well, I’m sure you’ll figure it out.”

I sigh, resigned to moving on from this conversation. This should be awkward, talking to the woman who used to date the guy I can’t get off my mind, and yet she’s not making it

awkward. I've never had friends outside of Frank. I didn't have girlfriends when I was a kid, and I wasn't allowed them once I was married. My sister is far too young and has never understood the truth of my marriage. So, embarrassingly, this is the most girl conversation I've had in my entire life. It's been nice.

"I appreciate you allowing me to spend time with your family," she says. "I know I didn't handle things well."

I shake my head. "Like I said last night, no apology necessary."

"Any chance you'd be interested in doing this again? Tomorrow, lunchtime?" she asks.

My stomach twists at the thought of tomorrow. Will Frank be back? If he's not, I'll be even more anxious than I am today. But having something to look forward to, and honestly, someone to commiserate with if he is really gone, doesn't sound too terrible. "Same time tomorrow," I reply.

After our ride back to the cabin, the boys are tired, so we turn on a movie in the living room and get them set up on either end of the couch. Then I head outside, nodding to my sister to follow me.

"What did you find out?" I ask.

"Geez, you didn't even bring an ice cream cone back for me. You're awfully demanding," she whines.

Hands on my hips, I glare at her. "I gave you time to relax without the boys. And how did you expect me to bring an ice cream cone home on a bike? Spill. What did you find out?"

She smiles. "Aw, you're worried about him."

"And you're annoying. You'll probably look really pretty with your throat slit. Now will you stop?"

She squeaks, and her mouth falls open.

"I'm teasing. Red is totally not your color."

"It's creepy because I don't always know whether you're messing with me."

I shrug. “Any day now.”

Alesia folds her arms over her chest. “Apparently, he’s in Boston.”

“He’s what?” Annoyed and slightly scared, I pace to one end of the deck. “What is he doing in Boston?” I ask, turning and making my way to the other end. “Could he be checking out my story? Dammit. What if he leads Lorenzo back to us?”

“Shane said it had something to do with his best friend. I guess any time it’s his birthday, or when Christmas or any holiday rolls around, Frank goes quiet. Like he misses everybody, and the loneliness kind of sends him into a depression. There’s something going on now. He wanted to be there even though he can’t be. So yeah, he’s in Boston.”

“He’s in Boston,” I mimic, the words hollow. He misses someone. Is it a woman? Did he leave someone behind that he can’t get over? Is that why he could never commit to Hazel?

I don’t voice these things. If I did, I’d have to admit to my sister that I care—*why I care*—and even I don’t understand that.

I’m married. I’m on the run. Frank left me when I needed him most. And here I am, thinking he could be someone I rely on, but then he up and vanishes again.

It’s been eye-opening to watch him with my boys. But it’s not real. They aren’t his sons. They aren’t his responsibility. And in the end, he wouldn’t choose us if he had the chance to go back. I can’t allow myself to entertain thoughts of *more* with someone who will always make me feel like I’m less.

FRANK

The ride from Bristol, Maine to Boston takes two hours. And here I sit in the rafters at the church, watching Theodore Francis James make his first communion. Kid is the fucking spitting image of his father.

My best friend is in the front row, with his arm wrapped tightly around his wife's waist. His daughter, Hope, sits on the other side of her. Chloe, his niece, is with her parents, Cat and Jay. A little boy, their youngest, James, is curled up next to Jay, and their middle child, Jonathan Francis, stands beside Cash's son. Both boys are wearing white suits and shit-eating grins.

Fuck, the world will be in trouble when these boys are grown.

There was a time where I would've been in that row alongside all those people—my people—sitting tall and proud to be part of their lives. Yet today, I've never felt so far away from them. They aren't mine anymore. And to them, I've been gone for years.

Hidden from sight, I fume. My life has been in limbo for a fucking decade, yet they're living out their happily ever afters. Happily ever afters that only exist because of me. Cash almost lost Grace altogether. If not for me, Hayden, Jay's brother, would be sitting beside her right now, raising Cash's child. And Cat and Jay? Don't even get me started on those two. What a fucking disaster.

God damn, it's unfair. They're all growing old together, and I'm sitting in the rafters like the damn phantom of the opera, annoyed with myself. Should have brought a fucking mask.

I'm never like this. Normally, I'm happy for them. I did the right thing, and I'd do it again. But now that I've spent time with Ellie and her boys, now that I've experienced a life that should be mine, I'm bitter.

I have her, but I don't.

I want what's in that front row, and I want it with the people I left behind at the house on the ocean. But even though they've been offered up to me on a silver platter, like they're mine for the taking, they could never truly belong to me. What can I even offer them? My freaking ghost? They can never come back to this city. They can't make communion or walk down the streets of Boston. All because of the goddamn Mafia and the Mob and the never-ending wars they've chosen. Because of greed and an unending hunger for power. Because people take what doesn't belong to them. Because people like me have to sacrifice everything to clean up their messes.

I'm the help. The fixer. Whether it's for my family, my friends, or the government. Just once, I want to be selfish. I want to have that. The happy.

I don't even go home when the ceremony is over. There's no point. We all know exactly where I'm going. I head straight to Ruth's and walk my ass in like I have every right to be there. Like I didn't just disappear for the day. I don't bother saying hello to Ellie. I sit at my regular table—the one I occupied before Ellie started working here and made me want things I can't have—and hold up a hand to Ruth. She knows what I want.

And like I should have known she'd do, she sends Ellie over with my whiskey.

Dammit.

I grit my teeth, wishing I hadn't come. Right now, all that's in me is mean. Spiteful. Malicious. I'm angry and I want to tell

her exactly how I feel. But that's not fair to her. It's not her fault that she is the way she is. It's not her fault that she's in the situation she's in. And it damn sure isn't her fault that I'm in the situation I'm in. We just are.

That's how it's always been for us. For our whole lives, the people around us have put us in impossible situations. And we can't get ourselves out of them.

We don't have much choice but to react. So how can I blame her for any of her reactions over the last few weeks? I can't, but right now, I'm a live wire ready to snap. And if she continues to look at me the way she is—narrowed eyes and an angry scowl on her face—she's going to be the one facing my wrath.

“You can leave the bottle,” I grit out, pleasantries and hellos long forgotten.

“Or, and hear me out, instead of drowning your sorrows in a bottle of whiskey, why don't you talk to me about whoever it is you're missing today?”

“Fucking Shane,” I mutter. Kid should know by now to keep my whereabouts to himself.

“No, my sister's the one who told me.”

I laugh. “Even worse. Because if my nephew told her, that means he has a crush, and that can't happen,” I grit out.

“Why are you so angry?” she whispers, subtly scanning the bar like she's worried we'll be overheard. Like anyone gives a fuck if some guy at a bar is upset. That's basically why people drink.

I shake my head and sip my whiskey. “You aren't the only one who's lost everything,” I say. I've allowed her to walk around with a chip on her shoulder, to treat me like crap so she can keep herself hidden safely behind those walls she's erected. But she doesn't get to corner the market on misery. “I've been the Irish Ghost for ten years, hiding in plain sight from everyone that matters. And right now, even when you're right in front of me, you aren't really here. You aren't really mine.”

“You’re the Irish Ghost?” she asks breathlessly.

I shake my head and down my drink. “I think we both know exactly who I am. Just like I know exactly who you are. I’m done playing this game.”

“You left,” she hisses.

Those two words garner my attention. I snap my head up and study her, confused.

“You were my only friend. My person. And you left me all alone to deal with the demons. To live the nightmare. You just walked off, went to your fancy school, met your rich best friends, and you never came back.”

“I came back.” I laugh bitterly. “I fucking came back, and you were with *him*.”

“Who?” she asks, eyes wide.

“Lorenzo.”

“What?”

I sigh because none of this matters anymore. But fuck it. I’m tired of her painting me as the villain. “I came to ask you to prom. Fuck, Ellie, I thought about you every day. I came back to ask you to give us a shot. But when I found you, you were wrapped in his arms. I was too goddamn late.”

She shakes her head in disbelief. “You came back?”

I look her right in the eyes, and in an even voice, I say, “I. Came. Back.”

Tears flood her green eyes, and she swipes at them quickly.

It grates at me. She’s always hiding herself. Never feeling. A goddamn robot unless she’s having a nightmare. How sick is it that I’ve come to look forward to her nightmares? At least they prove she’s still human. With a curse, I stand and grab her wrist so she’s forced to rise with me.

“What are you doing?” she whispers, tugging away from me.

“Collecting on the dance I’m owed,” I say, pulling her closer.

“But there’s no music,” she mutters, attention darting around the bar.

The place is almost empty. A lone light hangs from the ceiling in the middle of the room like a spotlight for us to dance beneath, so I drag her under it and pull her close.

“I’ve got a song.”

Quietly, I hum. It’s gravel mixed with hurt. The lyrics ones I’d know in my sleep. Swaying, I sing the words to “Green Eyes” by Coldplay. It only takes half a verse for her to melt against me. She rests her head on my shoulder, and I pull her in tighter. Our bodies are flush from hip to sternum, her hand in mine. Like this, I guide her around the tiny bar, singing in her ear.

When the words die on my lips, she lifts her head and locks those damn emerald eyes on me, holding me hostage. “Where’d you go today?”

“Communion for my best friend’s son.”

“Did he see you?” she asks softly.

I continue to spin her around. I refuse to stop dancing for fear that she’ll pull away. “No. But I saw him, and that was enough.”

“Was it, though?” she asks, as if she understands. And I suppose maybe she does. She ran from her life too. But she got to bring those who matter to her. She has her kids, her sister.

I shake my head tightly, and she sighs against my chest.

“I’m sorry you had a bad day.”

“It’s better now that I’m dancing with you,” I reply, hoping she can hear the sincerity in my voice.

She hums in response, her head still pressed against my beating heart. It’s probably echoing in her ear for how hard it’s working right now.

“Can we pretend you came back and I wasn’t with Lorenzo? Just for tonight,” she adds, lifting her head again. She bites her lip, like she’s readying herself for disappointment.

One night with this girl would never be enough, but a reality doesn’t exist in which I’d say no to her offer.

“I need so much more than that, El.” I can’t be anything but honest with her.

Her tongue sweeps across her lips. “Like what?” she asks, almost breathless.

I never imagined our first kiss happening in a dingy bar, but with her eyes hooded and her lips practically trembling with need, I know I won’t make it out of here without dragging my tongue across hers.

With my knuckles, I lift her chin. Then I brush the pad of my thumb across her plump lower lip, pushing it down. A throaty moan echoes between us. I’m not sure if it came from her or me or both of us. All I know is that the sound is like a gunshot at the starting line. I can’t help but dip down and press my lips to hers. She plants a hand at the back of my neck and pulls me closer. I take that as a signal to sweep my tongue across her lips. In response, she opens her mouth and returns the kiss. This time, she’s definitely the one who whimpers. The sound makes my cock ache.

She pulls away, panting. “Tell me what you need, Irish.”

“You, Ellie. All of you. I need to take you home and lick you until you can’t help but cry. I’m going to sink inside you and take you apart until tears stream down your face, until you feel every year we’ve missed, just like I’ve felt them. I’m gonna fuck the feelings back into you. You’ll never be this cold again. I swear it. And then, *then* once you’ve finally accepted that this is real and I’ve always been the one for you, I’m going to keep you. I’m going to protect you from all your demons. Say yes to all of that, and I’ll drag you out of this bar right now, and we won’t look back. You and me. What do you say?”

Blood rushes in my ears as she watches me, like she's inspecting every inch of my face. My heart pounds so hard Ruth can probably hear it behind the bar. But I stand silently, waiting for her to turn me down. To tell me why she's no good for me, or why I'm no good for her. I wait, never taking my focus off her face, for her to tell me she's still married, or that her kids can't handle this.

What I don't expect, what I never would have anticipated, is her hand slipping into mine. Or the way she bites her lip and smiles before she whispers, "Promise?"

With his palm against mine, Frank drags me out of the bar as I holler back to Ruth. “Sorry! Can you close up?”

She laughs, her eyes lighting up. “You kids have fun now!”

Frank just pushes through the door without slowing and heads straight for his truck. The air is hot and sticky tonight. The August sun has finally warmed up even the coldest parts of Maine. And maybe it’s even been slowly thawing my heart.

Though that credit really belongs to Frank. He’s been doing it one subtle act at a time. Pancakes and omelets for the boys, bike rides in the afternoons, boxing lessons. Nights spent sneaking into my room and holding me so I feel safe. The dogs. Years ago, he promised me I’d have them, and because he’s Frank, he always follows through. He created a safe place for me without knowing if we’d ever see each other again.

All summer, he’s been showing me that he isn’t going anywhere this time. Showing me that I matter. For the first time in my life, I know without a shadow of a doubt that I come first for someone. That he loves me. He doesn’t need to say it. His actions speak for him.

When I get to the car, he opens the passenger door, but before I can step in, he grabs my waist and pushes me against the seat. His big palms land on my thighs, the move causing me to brace myself on his chest. Beneath the cotton of his T-shirt, his heart beats a million miles a minute, just like mine. “Please tell me you won’t take it back.”

I can't help the smile that stretches across my face. "Take what back, Irish?"

"Tomorrow, when you wake up," he says in a gravel that rolls against my skin and sends shivers coursing through me, "promise me you won't change your mind. You won't go back to acting like we're enemies. Or worse, like we're nothing."

The pain etched in the lines of his face as he pleads with me breaks my chest open a little more, and blood rushes in my ears so loudly I can barely hear my own reply.

"You're not nothing, Frank. I promise."

He surveys the way he's gripping my thighs, then his eyes flash to mine. "I'm scared to let go."

"I want this as much as you do," I promise.

Sliding my hands up his chest and around his neck, I angle closer and dig my hands into his hair and tug. With our lips only a breath apart, I say, "I'm holding you to your promises. Take me home and make me forget that anyone else exists."



AT HOME, before I can make it to the front steps, Frank throws me over his shoulder and carries me to the backyard, sending me into a fit of giggles. "Shh," he says, although he's laughing too. "Don't want to wake the kids."

When we hit the back deck, he guides me down his chest until I'm steady on my feet. He holds me close, his hands kneading my ass, and gazes at me with more tenderness than I've ever seen from a man. "Fuck, El, you are a dream come true. I can't believe I get to touch you right now."

I drop my forehead to his and let out a shaky breath. I'm nervous. I've never been with a man willingly.

I want him in a way I've never experienced before. My body aches and my legs shake, so I grip him tighter to keep

myself steady. Or maybe I hold tight out of fear that he'll disappear or that he'll suddenly morph into the man who used me for decades.

That Lorenzo even has a spot in my story infuriates me, let alone that he's even a thought while I'm in Frank's arms. But there were years where I pretended he was Frank. Where I closed my eyes and retreated to my mind. It didn't take the bastard long to figure out what I was doing. That I didn't want him. So he forced my eyes open. Talked to me through every painful step, his hurtful words and gritty voice reminding me all along that even my subconscious wasn't free of him.

"You're shaking, baby," Frank whispers, bringing me back to the present. "Talk to me. Tell me what you need."

Gripping him tighter, I close my eyes, and to my relief, he doesn't demand I open them. He allows me to just lean against him, to breathe through the moment, to feel his heart beating at the same tempo as mine until we're both steady. That's what he's done all along. He's been patient. Present.

"I've never..." I shake my head, mortified by this truth.

God, I'm so weak. I've worked so hard for so long to be strong. Right now, though, I'm falling apart. But I'm falling apart in his arms. I know he'll hold me up. He'll piece me back together.

I let out a long breath. "I've never been with a man like you."

Frank doesn't smirk or make a joke. He just holds my gaze, his green eyes studying me, and waits for me to speak.

"I just want to be like other girls you've been with," I admit, swallowing past the lump in my throat. "I want to be fun. Sexy. I want to make you feel good."

Frank tightens his arms around my waist and hugs my body to his. "You couldn't be like other women if you tried, El," he whispers against my hair. "I've never felt for another person what I feel for you. I've never thought my heart might explode out of my chest at just the thought of kissing another person."

Emboldened just a little by his words, I raise my chin so I'm looking at him.

There's nothing but sincerity in his expression and in his voice. "I've never loved another woman. Period. The end. You're it for me. You always have been."



Without my permission, tears well in my eyes. No one but my nona

and my sister and my kids has ever told me they loved me. No one.

“What?” My voice cracks, but I fight back the tears.

“I love you, Ellie. So fucking much. Don’t be anyone else. Don’t wish you were another woman, because the only woman I’ve ever loved like this is you. Now please, let me show you,” he murmurs against my lips.

A tear slides down my cheek as he kisses me. I open my eyes, frustrated that I can’t keep my emotions in check, but when Frank comes into focus, his face is the one glistening in the moonlight. The sight has me pressing closer and kissing him harder.

This man cries for me. Aches for me. And I know, above all else, he’ll protect me.

FRANK

With one arm behind her back and the other cradling her legs, I carry Ellie up the stairs. Neither one of us breaks eye contact. I believe her when she says she won't disappear tomorrow. That the girl I once knew is finally back in my arms and she's not going to run. But it's still so surreal. That I can touch her the way I want, kiss her, tell her all the things I've wanted to say for years.

The dogs trot behind us down the hall, but I nudge her bedroom door shut before they can follow us inside. "She's all mine tonight," I say without looking away from her.

Even her eyes smile in response.

She's happy.

I'm not sure I've ever seen her smile like that, and damn if it makes me feel like the strongest man in the world. The ability to make her happy was my greatest superpower when we were kids, and it's been slowly returning over the last few weeks, thank God.

There's a part of me that wants nothing more than to throw her on this bed and devour her, but the hesitation in her eyes earlier stops me. The way her body shivered. I need to go slow.

Gently, I place her on the bed and take a step back to behold her. She watches me just as intently, her expression full of so much trust it practically breaks me. My eyes trail down her body, trying to figure out where I want to start first.

“I’m dying to know what’s under these leggings.” I drop to my haunches and rest her foot against my thigh.

She laughs, but it’s a nervous sound, and her body tenses subtly.

“Your ink. What is it? Need to see it, baby,” I plead in agony as I unlace her black boot.

It’s practically all I think about. I’m dying to know what the designs are, why she chose them, what they’ll look like when her thighs are wrapped around my legs or when my head is between them.

“You keep them covered...your legs,” I say as I take off her other boot and peer up at her.

“Oh.” Her mouth falls open and her eyes go wide. “I don’t want to talk about it. They’re...they’re ugly,” she whispers, looking away from me.

I crawl up her body and plant my palms on either side of her shoulders so I’m hovering over her. “You don’t have to show me anything you don’t want to, Ellie. But there isn’t an inch of you, inside or out, that I won’t love. *Nothing about you is ugly.*”

She’s quiet as her green eyes study me, her lips quivering. “They hide the scars,” she says in the most broken voice I’ve ever heard.

Rage almost blinds me, but somehow, I keep my voice even. “What scars, baby?”

Swallowing, she raises her chin and meets my gaze. “The ones he inflicted when he found me with you.”

Nausea rolls through me. And guilt. So much fucking guilt. Her uncle was such a bastard, and I’ll never feel bad about the way he died.

But tonight isn’t about him. Or her fucking husband. If I find out he laid a hand on her, he’ll suffer the same fate as his predecessor.

“We don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do. I’m happy to just hold you tonight.”

She's quiet for a moment, but I can practically hear the pounding of both our hearts. Finally, she gives one small shake of her head and presses her palms to my cheeks. "When you look at me like that, I don't feel so broken. Help me forget, Frank. I don't want to remember anyone who came before you."

Pride and longing take over, and I lower my lips to hers. "That's my plan."

Then, because I want to take her mind off her insecurities and her sadness, I go first. Hopping off the bed, I pull off my shirt.

She follows me up so she's sitting and sucks in a breath as she studies my hard muscles and the tattoos that cover my torso. Dragging her fingers down my pecs, she traces every design, making little humming noises as she does.

"Fuck, you keep making those sounds, and I'm going to have to be inside you to feel them."

She smiles as she tugs on my belt loops. "I like this little strip show." Her tone is playful. Something I have yet to witness since she arrived.

"Take 'em off," I dare her with a lift of my chin.

She licks her lips, working the button and then the zipper. Then she yanks the rough fabric along with my boxers down my legs.

I shake 'em off proudly, my cock heavy and bobbing and so fucking ready for her.

Ellie gasps at the sight of my piercings and lets out a delighted laugh. "Oh my God. Women must love that!"

Looming over her, I tip up her chin and kiss her softly. "Only care about one woman. So tell me, El, you want me to make you forget every moment before you became mine?"

She smiles devilishly. "You already have."

Raking her hands through my hair, she pulls me in and kisses me hard. Now's the time. She's eager and excited. All her apprehension has evaporated. I run a hand down the curve

of her waist and under the fabric of her shirt and tug on it until she raises her arms so I can take it off her. I groan at the sight of the swell of her breasts in her black bra. Fuck. There's even more ink drawn across her breasts. I don't focus on why it's there—more scars—because it's beauty I see.

Fierce beauty.

A woman who took a life filled with pain and painted it with color. I only intend to add to that.

Unable to stop myself, I press a hand to her chest and guide her to the mattress. Then I run my tongue along the cup of her bra and trace the vines. “So fucking perfect,” I mutter, sliding down her body.

She arches up for me, and I unclasp her bra so I can suck on her perfect nipples. Her soft, throaty moans make my dick weep.

“Fuck, Ellie, I feel like a goddamn virgin about to lose it after one small taste.”

She laughs her sexy laugh and then surprises me by pushing at the waistband of her leggings. I pull back and watch from my position on my knees as she pulls them all the way down, taking her panties with them.

“Make love to me, Frank. Please,” she begs.

“God, the sound of you begging...” Smiling, I shake my head. Then I dip low again, this time sliding down farther. “But I've waited years to have you, dreamed about the way you'd feel, the way you'd taste. I'm taking my time, baby. Let me lick you until your legs are trembling. Then, right as you come, I want you to pulse around my cock. Can we do that?”

She bites her lip and nods slowly, her eyes molten. “Yes, please.”

“Oh, you like the idea of coming on my tongue, don't you? Or is it my piercings you're most excited about?” I drop my hips so we're skin to skin. “You want to ride that and fall apart on top of me? Soak my cock?”

“Oh fuck,” she whispers as I glide against her clit, the bars of the Jacob’s ladder piercing massaging her in a way no one ever has.

I grind against her again, pulling loud moans from deep within her.

“Don’t stop.”

I swivel my hips again, and in response, she sweeps her leg around my hips, pulling me closer. The feel of her wet pussy grinding against me leaves me throbbing.

“Keep doing that, and you’ll make me come,” I warn.

She keeps it up, though. Her hooded eyes are on mine, like she’s relishing the way my jaw clenches and how I have to fist the sheets to control myself while she humps the fucking base of my cock.

“Okay, you’ve had your fun,” I say, practically panting with want. In one quick move, I pull her thighs over my shoulders. “You want to fuck something? Fuck my face.”

She cries out the minute I suck her clit into my mouth. “Oh my God.”

“Not God, baby. Irish. Pray to your Irish Ghost. Beg him to show mercy and give you his cock.”

I lick and suck and lave at her throbbing pussy. She bucks her hips like a wild horse, and I have to fucking hold her down, break her slowly, bring her to life beneath my lips. The sounds of her pleasure, the taste of her on my tongue, it’s so unreal it’s like I truly am a ghost. I’ve died and gone to heaven.

The years of loneliness, of putting others before myself, were all worth it if this is where I spend the rest of my days. Buried deep inside this goddess of a woman.

“I’m going to come,” she cries out in warning. She knows precisely where I want to be when she does.

Pulling back, I reach for my jeans and dig a condom out of my wallet. She grasps my hand, stopping my movements, and for a moment, stopping my heart. Has she changed her mind?

“Can I do it?” she asks.

Exhaling in relief, I drop it into her waiting palm and then lean back and enjoy the view. She rolls it down over my head and tugs twice on my shaft. My cock jumps for her, and I let out a low groan.

“It’s like a shiny new toy,” she mutters, running her fingers over the barbells.

I drop my head back with a laugh, but it’s cut off by a groan that rumbles up from my chest when she pulls me down between her legs and grinds against my cock again.

“Need you to fuck me now,” she begs.

I notch myself at her entrance and press in one inch at a time.

“My Irish Ghost.” She whimpers, holding my face in both palms and watching me intently as I sink inside her.

“Aye, *your* Irish ghost,” I remind her. Because that’s what I am. Hers. Before tonight, I was a spirit among the living, but as I hit the deepest part of her, her warmth squeezing me, I know I wasn’t alive before today. “Your pussy is choking my cock,” I tease. “This how you gonna kill me?”

“Death by pussy,” she says in a straight tone, as if she’s reading for the news. Then she pulls me closer so her lips are pressed against my ear. “I’ve done worse. Now fuck me properly and I’ll consider allowing you to live to do it again.”

I pull out completely and slam back into her, pulling a gasp from her lungs. And then I do it again and again until she wraps her legs around me and we’re fucking one another with abandon. Her pussy clenches around me, and she bites down on my shoulder to stifle the scream that rips through her as she comes undone around my cock, pulling and pulsing and squeezing me tight. It takes every ounce of strength I possess to continue sliding in and out of her and keeping up the pace to hit her precisely where she needs it, and when my orgasm rips through me, I take her mouth and growl my pleasure between us.

Panting, I fall to my side and pull her against my chest. Fuck, I need her close.

“That was...” She exhales, searching my face with the most serene expression I think she’s ever worn.

“Earth-shattering,” I reply, sliding the condom off and tossing it into the bin beside the bed.

“I was going to say okay.” She giggles, dipping her chin.

I grab her by the waist and hoist her so she’s straddling me. When she rolls her hips over my piercing, we both groan.

“I’ll show you okay.” Heaving myself up, I bite at her plump bottom lip. Her hair is full, her lips are puffy, and she has that just-fucked dazed expression that makes me want to hold her, not tease her. “Now fucking kiss me and lay back down. I want to snuggle.”

She rolls her hips again. “Snuggle?” she teases.

“Yeah,” I say, narrowing my eyes. “I want to hold my girl, run my fingers along her body, and talk. I want to catch up on the years I missed. Fight sleep with me, baby. Don’t make me beg.”

She smiles as she presses her chest against mine and tucks her head under my chin. I can only imagine the way my heart sounds galloping against her ear.

With her snuggled close, I ask the question that’s been plaguing me. “Tell me why you ran.”

ELLIE

Frank's words echo through the room as I lie on top of him. We're naked, pressed skin to skin, and now he's asking me to completely bare myself to him in another way.

I laugh, trying to infuse a lightness into it, despite the gnawing concern growing in my stomach. "Because the bogeyman was chasing me," I tease.

"Ellie," he growls.

"Frank," I mimic in the same stern voice.

He squeezes my hips. "I'm serious. I need to know what we're dealing with here. Are you in danger?"

I roll my eyes. "I can take care of myself."

He digs his fingers into my hips, and for a moment, my mind gets lost in all the thoughts of him. In the sensations he elicited in me. In the way my body is still reeling from the most intense orgasm of my life. But his next words bring me back to my current predicament.

"So it was all bullshit, then?"

"What?"

"You promised it was you and me. Promised we were in this. So was it bullshit, or are you going to finally tell me why you packed your kids and Alesia up in the middle of the night and drove here, leaving your life behind without a backward glance?"

Biting back a growl of frustration, I reply, “I told you. That attorney called and gave me all the details about this house.”

“And Lorenzo just let you leave with his kids,” Frank drolls.

His name on Frank’s lips sends an electric pulse through my system. “No,” I reply quietly, pulling away and breathing through the hit of adrenaline.

He loosens his grip, but his eyes hold me captive. Agony swirls in his irises, silently pleading for me to let him in. But if I tell him the truth, he may never look at me the same. Don’t I deserve to feel this way, to be loved like this, if only for one night?

“Ellie, please,” he rasps.

I slide off him and burrow into the pillow beside his. He rolls to his side, putting one hand beneath his face, and I do the same. For a long moment, we just stare at one another. But finally, I pull in a fortifying breath, and then I tell him my story.

“Lorenzo was there the night my mother sold me to Vincent Moretti.”

Frank growls quietly and grinds his teeth, but outside of that, he remains perfectly still.

“My mother left me alone with him. She told me we were just going to get to know one another.”

I close my eyes, feeling the weight of the knife as my nona put it in my palm.

“But Nona knew better.” I smile, because just the mere mention of that woman makes me happy.

My smile fades and my chest constricts, though, because this story is not a happy one. “He didn’t even introduce himself.” No, the fucker just sauntered into the room and sized me up, unconcerned about whether he was being watched. “‘A little on the scrawny side, but we’ll fatten you up’ were the only words he spoke to me. Then, without warning, he put his big paw on my breast like he had every right to grab me. I”—I

take a deep breath—“I didn’t even think. I just slammed the knife into his throat.”

“Holy fuck,” Frank says, bringing a hand to his mouth and rubbing across his lips in what looks like a mix of horror and surprise. When he pulls his hand away, though, he wears a ghost of a smile. “Fuck, Ellie. Good girl.”

The pride in his tone makes me keep going.

“He was screaming and holding his neck, and I knew I only had a second to decide, so I slid the knife across his throat, and then I ran. His body hit the floor with a loud thump, and I thought for sure my mom would rush up the stairs and catch me. But I guess she expected those kinds of sounds, sick bitch that she was, so she just turned the music in the kitchen up louder. When I ran down the steps, Nona was waiting at the bottom, and she pushed me out the door. I didn’t have a plan, and I don’t think she did either. When she gave me that knife, she probably didn’t think I’d actually kill him. I was eighteen, and I weighed a hundred pounds soaking wet, for fuck’s sake. She probably thought I’d flash it to keep him away from me. Or that maybe I’d stab him in the leg with it. I mean, what kind of person fucking slits a mobster’s throat?”

He smiles. “My girl does. When she’s threatened, when she *has* to, my girl does.”

I roll my eyes at the possessive pride in his tone, though there’s something about it that makes me stronger. That makes me feel like less of a monster. At least a little. I never would have hurt people if I hadn’t been forced too. At least that’s what I tell myself.

“When I got outside, Lorenzo was pacing on the front step. He’d made no secret of how much he liked me, and he wasn’t happy when my mother sold me, but...” I shake my head. I don’t know how that Lorenzo, the boy who cared about my wellbeing and helped me anytime he could, became the man he is today.

“He saw the blood on my arms and my clothes and cursed. Those words still echo in my head as loud as he screamed them. ‘Geez, Elena. What the fuck?’ He stared at me for a

second, and then it's like he came out of a daze. He grabbed me by the arm and shoved me forward. 'Run,' he told me. He said he'd take care of it. 'You weren't here' was what he muttered when he pushed me toward the street."

"What did he do?" Frank asks, as if he doesn't know the story. It's notorious in the Boston circles Frank used to run in. But I oblige because he asked for the story, not my snark.

"He walked into my house, trudged up the stairs, and put his hands on the murder weapon. Then he used Vincent Moretti's phone to call his boss—Joseph Messina—and he told him he'd be his new number two."

Frank's jaw drops, and he laughs. "Fuck, that's ballsy."

I smile. At the time, I thought so too. And back then, I was so grateful that he would take a risk like that to protect me.

"God, I never loved my husband. I know that's awful to say," I whisper, "but in those days, it felt like we were a team. He somehow got away with it. Everyone was sick of Vinny's shit, and Joe Sr. knew Lorenzo would make a good runner. And for years, he was." I rub my lips together. "Until Lorenzo killed Joey."

That's a half truth. I killed Joey; Lorenzo forced me to. But admitting that is confessing to a sin too many tonight.

"Fuck, El, I'm so sorry you've had to do all of this. But what changed? Why did you run?"

"The day before Lorenzo and I were to be married, I'd heard you were back from boot camp."

Frank furrows his brow in confusion. "What?"

I sigh. I'm embarrassed by how many times I sought out the man in front of me. A man who very obviously had forgotten about me until I literally barreled into his life a month ago. "Even though we hadn't spoken in years, the thought that you might go to war and not come back terrified me. I just needed to say goodbye." I lift my shoulder in a shrug. "I don't know. The idea of not seeing you one more time made me sick."

Frank drops his hand to where mine rests on the bed between us and squeezes. “I thought about you every day.”

Then why didn't he ever come back?

No. It doesn't matter now. I just want to get this story over with.

“I told Lorenzo I wanted to see you. I didn't think it would be a big deal. But—” I look away as shame swamps me. Maybe if I'd made Lorenzo feel loved, things would have been different. But I can't continue holding on to what-ifs. And I'm not sure I'd have done anything different that day, even if I could go back in time. I wanted to see my friend. I wanted to tell him that he mattered to me. That even though he'd disappeared on me, my time with him was what kept me afloat for so many years. He saved me so many times. I wanted him to know that his smile was what I focused on when things were hard at home. “Lorenzo had always warned me to stay away from you. Even when we were kids.”

Frank's jaw goes rigid as he surveys me, but he remains quiet.

I pull my hand out from under his and smooth the lines of anguish on his face. “He knew I'd always loved you. That if I'd seen you before the wedding, I might not have gone through with it, and by merely asking, I unwittingly destined myself to live my life ensconced in his hatred. Because, with that simple request, he knew I had never loved him. That day, he became someone else completely.”

“Would you have? If you'd come to see me, would you have gone through with the wedding anyway?”

“I don't know,” I answer softly, honestly. “I was so young. And Lorenzo was there for me when I needed help the most. He saved me. But at the time, I had no idea he was already becoming more of a monster than Moretti.”

“What did he do?”

I smile sadly and cough out a laugh. “What didn't he do? Raped me, forced me to do things I didn't want, beat me...” I leave it at that, because the laundry list of things I could

provide would make Frank's head spin. He doesn't need the visuals. And I don't need to relive it.

"I'll fucking kill him," Frank growls.

"It's like fighting off a hydra, Frank. Cut off one head, and two more grow in its place, both stronger than the first. I don't want to live that life anymore. I just want to be free. When I got the phone call about this house, it was like my prayers had been answered. I couldn't keep living the way I was. But I couldn't get out, because I had my boys and my sister to worry about. And Lorenzo knew just how to control me. Any time I stepped out of line, he'd threaten to marry Alesia off to his number two."

"Antonio—" Frank cuts himself off, going rigid for a moment, like he didn't mean to let that slip.

I smirk. "You going to tell me your story now, Irish?"

He huffs a sardonic laugh and runs his hand down his face, but that's the only answer I get.

I push closer to him. "It's fine. I'm tired anyway. And I'd rather hear you talk about how much you enjoyed being inside me than go on about bogeymen."

Frank's deep chuckle makes his chest shake under my cheek. "Liked being inside you? I fucking intend to spend the rest of my life inside you. There is no *like*. It's an obsession. The feel of your pussy..." He shakes his head as if he's at a loss for words. "Fucking perfection."

I kiss him. "Such a romantic."

"You want romance, Ellie?" he asks. "How about this? I intend to fuck you while your husband bleeds out beside us, dying a slow, painful death, so it's the last thing he'll ever see. And then I'm going to spend the rest of my life reminding you of how much I love you."

FRANK

The rain tapping on the window at dawn encouraged me to bury my face in Ellie's hair and doze off again rather than make my way to the ocean for my morning swim. I wanted nothing more than to spend the day in bed and have a repeat of last night. But a call from Seamus dashed any hope of that. I answered quickly in hopes that the ringing wouldn't wake her. On the other end, Seamus didn't have much to say except that he needed to meet immediately. We had problems, and they were just getting worse.

I pressed a kiss to Ellie's shoulder and whispered that I'd be back later, then laughed when she scowled in response.

"Go away already," she growled. "Trying to sleep."

Fuck, I was obsessed with her.

With a slap to her ass, I hustled out of her room and woke Shane's grumpy ass up so we could hit the road.

For the most part, I try to keep Shane removed from this part of my life. But the kid has no reason to stay underground with me. He could leave at any time. And my hope is that by allowing him this bit of interaction with the life he used to have, the life he'd be living if I hadn't dragged him from it, I can keep him from running.

"We going to talk about it?" Shane asks as we make the short drive to the breakfast spot where we're meeting Seamus.

"'Bout what?" I ask, playing dumb.

Shane sighs. “I don’t know. How your trip to Boston went? Whether anyone saw you? Did you stop by the old neighborhood? How about how it felt to finally fuck the woman you’ve been lusting over for the last month?”

My blood boils, and I have to grip the steering wheel tight to keep from smacking him upside the head. “Don’t fucking talk like that.”

“It bother you that I mentioned sex, or is it just sex with Ellie that’s off the table?”

“Shane,” I growl.

He barks out a cruel laugh. Fuck. Maybe I shouldn’t have brought him along. He’s angrier lately. This situation isn’t working for him like it used to.

“So it’s Ellie, then.” There’s a bite to his tone when he says her name.

“What is your problem with her?”

Taking my eyes off the road for a second, I survey him. His hair is darker than mine and my brother’s. It’s a deep auburn, and it’s long and full and wavy. We rarely make it to the barber, but he seems to prefer it longer anyway. Probably because it keeps him from looking like me.

I know Shane loves me in the way any kid loves his family, but I’m not sure he likes me all that much.

He’s lost, and he has no one but me. No one else in his life took any kind of interest in him or even bothered trying to get him away from his drug addict of a mother. It only took a thousand dollars, and she handed him over. Fucking pathetic.

Not that I’d ever tell him those particulars.

It’s better he hates me if it keeps him from hating himself.

“She’s using you,” he mutters, his knee bouncing. He has a pen in his hand—he always has a pen in his hand—and he flips it back and forth, tapping it against his thigh like he doesn’t know what to do with his pent-up anger.

Normally, he gets out a pad of paper and scratches out equations. I've never been good at that stuff, but he thrives when his mind is focused. I really need to get him into college classes. He's so much more content when his mind is occupied.

Last night changed things for me. If I'm honest, my plans have slowly been shifting. I used to think we'd turn in Bella Morte, then we'd pick an area and settle under the radar. From there, Shane could start over, and I could maybe, I don't know, meet someone?

Now? Fuck, there is no world in which I don't end up with Ellie and her boys. There is no scenario in which I'm alive and she's not by my side.

So I need a new plan.

"She's not using me. And she's not going anywhere. So get used to her."

Shane huffs as I pull into the diner. "Ah. I see how it is."

"You don't," I grumble. "Her husband abused her for years. She's skittish around you and maybe a little rough around the edges, but that's what years of abuse does to a person." Throwing open the door, I give him a hard look. "Cut her some slack."

He doesn't snap back as we get out of the truck and stride to the entrance.

With my hand on the door, I turn back to him and add a *please* to soften my demand.

He nods and drops his gaze, like maybe I actually got through to him. I can only fucking hope.

Seamus is sitting in the corner, a newspaper in his hand and two cups of coffee steaming on the table in front of him. When I pull out a chair, he lowers the paper and raises his brown eyes to me. But instantly, he whips his gaze to my left when he catches sight of Shane. "Ah, didn't realize we'd have company." He folds the newspaper and holds out a hand over the table, palm up. "Take a seat. Good to see you, Shane."

Shane grunts a hello, probably still pissed about our conversation, and I motion to the server to bring over another cup of coffee while sliding mine in front of him.

“How are things at the house?” Seamus asks. He hasn’t come by since Ellie arrived, but he’s seen her at the bar a few times.

“Under control,” I reply, and I leave it at that.

“Oh, under control?” Shane scoffs. “Sure, if *under control* means sleeping with the woman, then he’s doing a great job. He has her scratching his back and mewling all fucking night.”

Seamus scowls, but before he can speak, I hold up my hand.

“I’ve got it under control,” I grit out. “What’s the word on the Italians?”

Seamus huffs and leans back in his seat. “Lorenzo is getting more ballsy. With his family gone, he’s been even more erratic. I gotta be honest. I know he’s always had girlfriends, but I think he might have actually loved her. He’s unhinged.”

Angling forward, I growl and shoot him a hard look. “What he loved was controlling her. He goes nowhere without eyes on him, understood?”

Seamus cocks a brow and surveys me with a cool expression. “I know who I take orders from.”

I grit my teeth, knowing precisely who’s in charge.

“Now tell me what’s going on with the casinos.”

FRANK

By the time we leave the coffee shop, the rain has stopped, but the sky is still overcast. The mood outside fits well with the vibe in the cab of my truck on the way home. Determined not to let Shane's attitude ruin the rest of the day, I formulate a plan. It'll require some supplies, so we make a quick stop at the grocery store.

Shane and I don't discuss his little outburst at breakfast or the shit storm he's likely stirred up. He's acting out, and I can't blame him. For so long, it's been just the two of us. But now I'm flipping the script. Nothing about this has been easy for him, and I get that he's frustrated that I've gotten someone from my past back, while he's still just stuck here. I've got to do something to rectify that. He needs to feel like he's part of the family rather than like I'm moving on to a new one without him.

Or maybe he's just a broody asshole and nothing I do will change how he feels.

Either way, it's worth a shot. I want to do something for all of us. And for Ellie.

I stalk up and down the aisles until I have every ingredient I need to make Nona's meatballs. And then on the way to the cash register, I spot the oranges. Grinning and with my heart practically floating in my chest, I toss a few into the cart, along with a box of tea bags.

I consider grabbing ingredients to make dessert but decide that I'd rather take Ellie and the boys out for ice cream. We

haven't spent much time in town together, but maybe if we do, Ellie will come to love this place as much as I do. It's not Boston, but for the first time in a long time, because of her, it feels like home.

When we haul things into the house, I'm prepared to hear a snarky comment from Ellie about all the grocery bags or leaving the dogs in her room or any number of things she could gripe about. Instead, I find the boys on the couch watching a movie with Alesia.

Setting the bags on the counter, I frown at the sight. "Where's Ellie?"

From the couch, Alesia smiles. "Miss her already?"

I hold back a growl, because I'm not in the mood for games, and cock a brow at her. She sighs. "God, the two of you are perfect for one another. So damn moody, and you always want your way."

Shane laughs, so I turn my nonplussed expression on him.

"She went to town to have lunch with someone. Harriet, maybe? No..." She giggles and shakes her head. "Hailey? Nah, that's not right—"

"Hazel," Lorenzo chirps. "We saw her at the ice cream shop yesterday. Mom made plans to have lunch with her today."

Fear rattles at my heart, knocking loudly in warning. Ellie and Hazel shared a round of shots recently, but that doesn't mean they're on good terms, and I don't trust her. The image of the moment she walked into the bar and attacked Ellie rushes through my mind, and I break out in a cold sweat. Had Ruth and I not stopped Hazel, I have no doubt that she would have really lost it.

"Put the groceries away," I mutter to Shane. "Alesia, give me your sister's number so I can check on her." Snagging the keys from the counter, I head for the door.

Alesia wanders closer, leaving the boys to their movie, and shrugs. "She doesn't have one."

My stomach sinks and my jaw hardens. “She doesn’t have a phone?”

Why the hell don’t I know this? For over a month, she’s lived in my house. For the last week, we’ve shared a bed. And last night, I was inside her. But now that Alesia mentions it, I realize I’ve never seen her with a phone. Never wondered how to get in touch with her because she’s always just been here. I’ve been driving her to work. I sit at the bar while she’s there. When she’s in the house, either I’ve got my eyes on her or I feel her eyes on me.

There hasn’t been a moment where I couldn’t have contacted her. Not until now, when I want nothing more than to check in and make sure she’s safe.

Alesia’s eyes dart to Shane’s. “We left our phones in Boston. Believe me, it’s sucked not having any way to communicate with friends and no social media. Yes, we had to get out of there, but it’s different for me than it is for her. She found the person who’s been missing from her life, but I’m just stuck here wondering what our next move is.”

Dropping my head, I run my hands through my hair. She and Shane obviously have a lot of the same issues. Wouldn’t be surprised if they’ve commiserated over them. But I don’t have time to dive into that right now. “Did she say where they were having lunch?”

Alesia shrugs. “She took her bike, so it can’t be far.”

Keys in hand, I head for the door, but before I get there, I turn on my heel and jog back to the couch. Leaning over the back, I ruffle Leo’s hair. He drops his head back and shoots me a big, toothy grin. Then I hold out my fist to Lorenzo. He eyes it, and then with a hint of a smile, he bumps it with his own. “I’m gonna go find your mom, and then I have a surprise for all of us later, okay?”

He nods subtly, but his eyes are alight. He craves attention. He’s silent, and he’ll never flat-out demand what he wants or even blatantly hint at it, but when he gets it, he flourishes.

My truck kicks up gravel as I speed down the dirt roads with my eyes peeled, in search of her little yellow bike. As soon as I cross the bridge into town, I search every corner for the damn thing. With every minute that passes, another scenario enters my brain. What if she never made it to lunch? What if she's hurt and she has no way of getting help?

Of course, I would have seen her on the way here, so that makes zero sense. But what if Lorenzo tracked her here? What if he's got her?

Realistically, she's probably having lunch with Hazel, like Alesia said. But that doesn't calm me. Why would she agree to lunch with the woman?

Why doesn't she have a phone?

Those questions run on a loop in my brain until I'm insane with worry and ideas that make little sense. By the time I pull up in front of Hazel's apartment, I'm convinced she's got her tied up and at gunpoint.

I hit the brakes at the sight of Ellie's yellow bike propped up against the brick building. The truck jolts to a stop, and I barely have it in park before I'm swinging my door open and bolting upstairs. My heart hammers so loudly I can't hear anything but it and the air sawing in and out of my lungs. I don't bother knocking on the gray door decorated with a yellow wreath. I simply turn the knob and rush into the open space, my loud steps echoing on the wooden floor. I see Hazel first. She's standing behind Ellie. They both have their backs to the door, and Hazel has a knife in her hand.

"Ellie, no!" I shout, storming toward them. They both spin, and I take the opportunity to knock the knife from Hazel's grip. In a heartbeat, I'm reaching for Ellie, trying to push her behind me. She flinches at my touch, just like she did that night at the bar.

I grit my teeth. "I'm not going to hurt you," I mutter, then I spin back to Hazel. "But she was about to. What the fuck, Haze?"

Hazel's eyes are wide, and her lip is trembling, but she says nothing, like she's in shock.

"Irish," Ellie hisses, squeezing my arm. When I don't turn in her direction, she pinches me, making me flinch for once. "Irish!"

I keep one arm behind my back and looped around her waist, blocking her from danger, but I turn slightly and side-eye her. "Take the phone out of my pocket and call the police. I cannot believe you don't have one," I growl.

"Why the hell would I call the police?" she grits out.

"Because she was trying to kill you!" I roar, my chest tight and my mind racing.

Ellie steps around me and picks the weapon up off the floor. "With a butter knife?" she asks, holding it out in front of her.

Frowning, I study it. My pulse is still erratic and my vision is slightly blurry, so it takes a second for the weapon to come into focus.

Ellie grasps my shoulder and spins me so I'm looking at her head-on. She holds the butter knife up between us, then puts it on the counter. Then her hands are back on me. With her palms flat against my cheeks, she brings me back to reality. "I'm okay. I taught her how to make my nona's bread, and we were just about to try it with Hazel's blueberry jam. That's what the butter knife was for."

"But she was standing behind you...and she had a knife," I croak.

Ellie sucks her lips into her mouth like she's trying not to laugh at me. "A butter knife," she whispers. And then she does it. She bursts out laughing, and it's like hours of anxiety release like a popped balloon.

She presses her forehead to my chest and giggles and giggles, and then does it some more, her shoulders shaking the whole time. Behind her, Hazel is gawking at me like I've lost my damn mind.

With a shrug, I mutter, “I’m sorry.” It’s not enough, but it’s all I can muster right now. “She didn’t have her phone and...”

“And you thought I’d kill her because you fell in love with her?” Hazel sneers. “Fuck, Brian, that’s insane.”

Ellie straightens at the use of that name. With her eyes on me, she takes a deep breath. Then another. Then she turns toward Hazel. “It really is my fault. I told him some pretty heavy stuff last night. I’m sure it had nothing to do with you and everything to do with that.”

I squeeze her shoulders, unable to take my hands off her. I need to know she’s real and that she’s here and that she’s safe.

Hazel’s homed in on my physical connection with Ellie. It’s cruel parading this new relationship in front of her, but I can’t pull myself away.

With a thick swallow, Hazel averts her attention to the loaf of bread on the counter.

Breaking the awkward silence, Ellie says, “Thank you for sharing the jam with me. The boys will love it.”

Hazel blinks and shakes her head. “Of course. Bring them by the store this week so they can pick out some candy.”

Ellie nods. “Guess I better take this big guy home. He’s had enough excitement for the day.” She spins toward me and tilts her head. “Can you put my bike in the back of your truck?”

“Like I’m letting you out of my sight for two seconds,” I mutter under my breath.

With a roll of her eyes, she pulls away from me, then shuffles in close to Hazel and wraps her in a hug. Without a glance back at me, she walks toward the door.

Licking my lips, I watch her, then turn to Hazel. “I really am sorry.”

She eyes me, uncertainty and hurt swimming in her eyes. “You really care for her.”

“She’s everything to me,” I admit, my gaze sweeping back toward the door, where Ellie waits.

She gives me a soft smile. How the hell this woman has flipped my life upside down in the last month is beyond me, but I’ve loved every second of it.

“You going to be okay?” I ask Hazel. Because the past five minutes have been heavy as fuck. Not to mention the last week or so.

She nods, and her chest rises and falls with a deep sigh. “Yeah. Sometimes it takes seeing things in a different light to move on. I’m glad you found her. You deserve it.”

With a silent nod, I make my way to the door and lace my fingers with Ellie’s, then let her lead me down the stairs to the truck.

She clings to me just as tightly as I cling to her, only letting go of my hand when I open the passenger door. Hands on her hips, I lift her into the seat. She gives me an amused smile, but she doesn’t give me any lip over how she could get in the truck herself. Pushing my luck, I hover over her and pull her seat belt over her lap. With a final tug to make sure it’s tight enough, I kiss her softly, then pull back and press my hand to her cheek, reminding myself that she’s fine. She even puts her hand over mine and leans into my touch. Eventually, I pull myself away so I can grab her bike and put it into the bed of my truck. Then we head back to the house silently while I try to sort through my jumbled thoughts.

Where do we go from here? What does the future look like for us? I’m ready to uproot my life for this woman, and I’m not sure she’s even prepared to walk into the house holding hands. Will she tell her kids about us? Should she?

By the time we pull into the driveway, it’s raining again. My anxiety has reached an all-time high, and a thousand questions pummel me from the inside. “What are we telling the kids?” I blurt out.

Ellie sucks in a breath and scrutinizes me. “Frank, I—” She takes a deep breath. “Lorenzo will never accept you if he

thinks you want to replace his father.”

“His father who used to beat and rape you? Yeah, he’s never coming near any of you again.” Frustrated, I open the door and slam it.

To Ellie’s credit, she waits until I round the car to open her door. “He’s their father,” she says, stepping out into the rain, her attention fixed on the ground. “I don’t know what the future looks like for us, but I’m begging you to give me time to figure out how to tell them.” Her mossy green eyes glisten with unshed tears when she lifts them.

Without hesitation, I step up to her and cup her face so I can press a kiss to her forehead. “I just love you so damn much,” I whisper against her damp skin. “The idea that I could lose you after just getting you back makes me crazy.”

Her lips tip up in a lopsided smile. “Yeah, I got that when you practically tackled your ex because she was holding a butter knife in my vicinity.”

I close my eyes and inhale her, working to calm my racing heart. “I’m crazy about you, El. Fucking gone for you.”

She wraps her fingers around my wrists and squeezes. “I know. Trust me to figure this out, okay?”

What other choice do I have?

ELLIE

For the first time in I don't know how long, my brain shut down completely. Not a single thought crossed my mind overnight. Not a nightmare, nor a dream. I think it's because my good dreams have finally come true, and because now that I've spoken my nightmares aloud, they hold less power over me.

Having confessed to Frank about how I took a man's life to save myself, then witnessing the look in his eyes as he told me he was proud of me for handling it how I did, I feel more at ease than I have in years. For the first time in what feels like forever, I feel at least a little human.

After I made breakfast with the boys this morning, we watched the rain fall and the wind churn the ocean water while we played a game of cards. Poker, of course, because the boys are now obsessed, thanks to Frank, and Lorenzo weaseled me out of ten bucks.

During a break in the rain, I rode my bike into town and met Hazel for lunch. Talking and laughing with a friend is so foreign to me, but it feels incredible to spend my time doing what most people do on any given day. I'm finally experiencing a normalcy that has evaded me for decades.

Even Frank's appearance and his outburst didn't ruin my day. The man acted like a paranoid lunatic, but I can't help but smile at the memory of him stepping in front of me. He's exactly who he says he is: mine. And now I just have to figure out a way to fully become his.

By the time we get inside, we're drenched, but I can't focus on anything but the beauty of the storm over the ocean.

"Mawmy, you see the lightning?" Leo asks as he stands by the floor-to-ceiling window.

The next flash of lightning illuminates the sky over the angry sea.

"Cool," Lorenzo whispers.

The answering boom of thunder rattles the windows and shakes the floor, making Leo jump.

Frank presses in behind me just close enough that I can feel the heat radiating off him, but he doesn't touch. It's like he can't help but gravitate to me, even though he's trying hard to respect my request regarding keeping this from the boys for the time being.

I don't know how to talk to Lorenzo about our reality. I can never return home. If I do, my husband will kill me. But I'm not ready to explain to my sons that they'll never see their father again.

My time to make a decision is running out, though. The school year starts in a few weeks, and I have nowhere to send them. Can't exactly enroll the boys in the local school without providing their names and birth certificates. While I don't think Lorenzo has notified the authorities that I took our children and ran, I can't be positive. I need information about what he's been doing since we disappeared. How he's spun the murders of his men, the disappearance of his family.

Which means I have to reach out to someone from home. Or find someone else to do it.

"You're shivering," Frank says, his breath warming the back of my neck. "Go upstairs and take a shower. I'll entertain the boys until you're done."

"I've got them. Both of you, go get cleaned up. You're soaking wet," Alesia offers from the couch.

When I turn to look at her, she's got her eyes on me and she's wearing a smirk. She so knows I have real feelings for

Frank. She's probably always known.

Leo looks up at me with his big green eyes. "Can we touch the lightning, Mawmy?"

I can't help the laugh that escapes as I pick my boy up and kiss his cheek. "No, buddy. Lightning is dangerous."

His eyes go wide, and he arches back, scrutinizing me like he's not sure he believes me.

"But we can build a fort," Shane says from the chair in the corner.

I hadn't even noticed him there. He's normally hiding upstairs, and he's always so quiet. I'm surprised by his offer to play with the boys, since he's mostly ignored all of us since we moved in.

Frank squeezes my shoulder and pushes me toward the stairs. "Thanks, Shane. Boys, why don't you build a fort big enough for all of us so we can watch movies in it? We'll get showered, and then I have a surprise for all of you."

Alesia grins at Shane, likely ecstatic to have help with the boys. For a moment, I observe their interactions, looking for signs of flirtation. But the interaction appears friendly and innocent enough, so I drop my shoulders with a long breath out and allow Frank to steer me upstairs.

At my doorway, I pause to tell him I'll see him in a bit, but he pushes me into my room, then up against my door as he closes it with a loud thud. Then his mouth is on mine, devouring me, nipping at my lips, and he's pulling at my wet clothes.

First, it's my pants. He fumbles with the button, and when the backs of his fingers brush against my belly, I squirm in anticipation. His lips don't leave my skin as he pulls my pants down, though he does move on to kissing my neck while I wiggle my hips to help him get them off completely. Then it's my shirt. We break the kiss for a second so he can get it over my head, but he's immediately back, devouring me again. Our tongues tangle and our moans mix.

Pulling back, I rip at his shirt, desperate to have his skin pressed to mine. Breathless, I explore the designs on his chest. Kissing at each one and memorizing every detail so I can ask about them later.

With my tongue, I trace the familiar family crest with the Celtic cross and claddagh. I press my lips against the eagle on his rib cage and then below it, where *Semper Fi* is inked on his torso. Dropping to my knees, I pull at his pants.

Frank ducks his head and cups my chin. “You don’t have to do that,” he says, all gravel.

Lust flares in my belly. “But I want to.”

With a silent nod, he presses his hands to the door behind me to steady himself. Then he allows me to pull down his pants. His thick cock juts out, eager and proud. I kiss the head before softly tracing the Jacob’s ladder piercing.

“Did this hurt?” I ask stupidly.

His eyes smolder as I take him in my mouth, licking across the cool metal bars. “So fucking worth it,” he grits out as he watches me.

Never having been interested in doing this before now, I find it intoxicating. Kneeling at Frank’s feet and sucking him off while he hovers above me. Because it’s my choice. He doesn’t even thrust into my mouth, despite the fire alight in his eyes and the tension in his shoulders and neck. He’s holding himself back, allowing me to control his pleasure. Fuck if it isn’t a turn-on.

I swirl my tongue around his crown, and his head hits the door with a thud.

“Fuck, Ellie, your lips on my cock. I’ve never seen a prettier thing in my entire life.”

I laugh around him, and with one hand on his shaft, I grip his wrist with the other and place it behind my head. Once it’s in place, I peer up at him, giving him permission to do what he wants to me. To use me for his pleasure. To give me pleasure by allowing me to pleasure him.

He licks his lips. “You want me to fuck your mouth, Ellie?”

I swipe my tongue in circles and nod, my eyes still holding his.

“Fuck, you’re perfect,” he mutters, tightening his fist around my hair and dragging himself slowly out of my mouth.

Once his crown has slid along my lips, he snaps his hips and pushes in. It’s still not rough. He’s still holding back. But I groan when he hits the back of my throat, and his response is to do it again, this time a little faster and a little harder.

“Such a good fucking girl you are. On your knees, taking my cock down that perfect throat. You want me to fill you with my cum, Ellie? You thirsty?” he taunts.

His words are wicked, making me feel wicked too. They hit at the other part of me, the naughty part. The part that craves doing the wrong thing. It’s like he sees every side of me and he’s not scared. He likes that person.

He’s feral for her.

I dig my nails into his thighs, and in response, he fucks me harder, hissing. “Yes, Ellie. My dark angel, my perfect little slut. Fucking take it from me. Take it all. I know you want it.”

I rub my legs together to dull the way my core throbs. But it’s in vain. I’m desperate for him. When I reach down to ease the pressure, Frank growls. “Don’t you fucking dare. That pussy is mine; I want it to soak me when I lick you.”

Obediently, I slide my hand back to his thigh, whimpering but never slowing my movements.

Without warning, Frank hoists me to my feet and plasters me to him, guiding my legs around his waist, then walks us toward the en suite bathroom. “Are you on birth control?” he grits out, the head of his cock bumping against my clit as we move.

“Oh fuck,” I breathe as he hikes me a little higher. He controls my movements with his hands on my hips, grinding

me against his piercings as he continues his trek to the shower. His strength leaves me stupid with lust.

“Birth control?” he asks again.

I shake my head. “No. Lorenzo wouldn’t allow it.”

He groans. “Don’t fucking say his name while you’re dripping on my dick.”

Clawing at the back of his neck, I hike myself up higher, aching to get him to press inside me. “You can pull out,” I offer.

He chuckles darkly, the sound sending a rush of tingles through me. “The need to fill you is consuming me, Ellie. I want to mark you. I want my cum so deep inside you there’s no coming back from this.”

Without hesitating, I snake a hand between us and grab his cock. In one quick movement, I line him up and thrust against him.

He hits the bathroom wall with a groan. “Fuck, Ellie. Really?” he pants.

For a second, he doesn’t move. Face to face, our lungs warring for breath, he just holds me tightly against his chest.

“Make me yours,” I whisper. There’s no turning back. I’m a thief, taking what I can from him when I have no idea how our story will go. But there’s the slightest glimmer of hope that we could be tied together forever, *that he could be my forever*, and that’s enough to make me selfish and reckless. Enough to make me crave what I’m not sure I deserve.

Frank complies, moving slowly at first. “Look at us, baby. Look at how perfect we are together,” he whispers, dropping his head so he’s gaping at the way our bodies move in sync. I follow his gaze and watch as his perfect cock slides in and out of me, coated in my wetness, thick and strong, hitting my insides like he’s rearranging my organs.

And I feel it too. Not just in the way he stretches me or the way his piercings massage me, or even in how full I feel every time he hits that perfect spot. No, it’s in my heart, in the way it

flutters every time he mutters an *oh, fuck, baby*, or when he whispers *I'm so fucking in love with you El. You're everything to me*, or when he leans in for a kiss and our tongues tangle in a mess of promises and pleas, wanting and wishing for more because nothing is enough. Nothing will ever be enough. I want to live inside this man. Want him by my side for always.

Anything short of that will always leave me wanting.

My body tingles like it did last night. A warning that I'm headed over the edge in ecstasy.

"Fuck, Ellie. I'm going to come. Are you ready for me? Ready for this? Last chance. You and me. Forever. This is it."

In response, I kiss him, squeezing him closer with my thighs so he can't do anything but spill into me. With a growl, he comes in hot waves, his cock jerking inside me. That's all it takes to trigger my orgasm. I explode around him, my body pulsing and pulling his cum from him, taking him so deep that I'm boneless in his arms.

Frank squeezes me tightly and kisses down my jaw. "I love you so much, El. So fucking much," he mutters against my tired body.

I pull back, my arms still wrapped around his neck, anchoring me to him, and smile. How the hell did I get so lucky?

"Shower?" I tease.

He laughs. "Yeah, we can shower." He drops me to the ground and turns the water on before turning back to me. When I reach for toilet paper to clean myself up, he stops me.

"Leave it there," he murmurs, pulling me close and swiping against my sensitive sex. With two fingers, he pushes his cum, which had started to leak out, back inside my body. "You're mine now, Ellie. All mine."

If only he knew that I planned it that way.

Dressed in comfy clothes, I head downstairs and find the boys hidden inside their fort. They've tied three sheets together and have anchored them to the chairs they've dragged in from other rooms and set up as a perimeter. Frank is in the kitchen, and Alesia has apparently disappeared downstairs for a shower.

But it's Shane and my boys that have my attention. He's got a book in his hand—*Harry Potter*, if I'm not mistaken—and he's reading to Lorenzo and Leo, using different voices to narrate the characters. I can't help but smile.

Candles flicker on the dining room table, pulling my attention. On the other side, at the stove, Frank watches me. Seeing as the boys are otherwise occupied, I saunter toward him, eating up the way he's examining me. How hungry he looks even though he's just had me. Again. While we were in the shower, he took me from behind. When he went too easy on me, I begged him to take me harder. Without a doubt, I'll be wearing bruises along my hips from the way he gripped me after that.

"You look satisfied," he murmurs, low and seductive, his smolder in full effect.

I bite my lip to hold back my smile. "Actually, I'm still thirsty. I was promised something, and then it was taken away."

Frank's green eyes turn molten. "Fucking talk like that, baby, and I'm liable to take you right here in front of

everyone.”

I smirk. “Can’t. Hands off in front of the kids,” I taunt, just above a whisper.

Frank chuckles darkly. “Oh, you think you’re the only tease? I’ll have you begging for me within the hour. *Dripping* for me.”

Sucking in a heady breath, I dart a glance at the tent, where the boys are still blissfully unaware of what’s happening only twenty feet away.

I step toward the wine Frank has decanted, hoping to catch my breath. Beside it is an oversized mason jar with what looks like iced tea with orange slices. “What’s this?” I ask, my heart in my throat.

Frank wipes the knife he was using to chop onions on a towel and sets it on the counter, then folds his arms across his broad chest and props himself up against the counter. “Iced tea.”

I let out a breathy laugh. “I can see that.”

His eyes burn with promises and memories that are almost too much for this room. He’s playing a dirty game using Nona’s iced tea to get me to crack.

“So what are we having for dinner?” I ask, trying again to ignore the electricity charging through the air.

“Meatballs,” he says evenly, as if it means nothing. He holds my attention for a heartbeat, then one side of his mouth lifts slightly. “Nona’s recipe.”

“Fuck,” I whisper. It’s breathy and filled with angst.

“Going to teach the boys how to make them. Just like she taught us.”

This time, he full-on grins and my knees go so weak I have to steady myself against the fridge. Witnessing one of Frank McCabe’s smiles is like sucking helium from a balloon. It leaves me lightheaded and woozy. But when he smiles that secret smile, the one he reserves for me, I know he’s all-in. That look means he’s playing this game not only to win me but

to win my sons. And let's just say that I know from personal experience that what Frank wants, he'll get. And it appears that what Frank wants is my family.

And I can't think of a single reason why I don't want the same thing.

For the first time, I register the music playing from a small Bluetooth speaker on the counter. When the familiar tune hits me, I groan. Dammit. It's Frank Sinatra crooning "Fly Me to the Moon." The man has pulled out all the stops.

On afternoons when Nona would teach us how to make all of her favorite meals, she'd sway along to song after song from the Rat Pack while she talked us through each recipe. She never did the cooking. We used our hands and smiled and sang. Then, when the food was done, she'd set the table, always with formal dinnerware and candles, just like Frank has done tonight, and we'd talk about our day. I learned more about Frank during those afternoons than when we were by ourselves, because Nona asked questions I never would have dared to ask. Questions I never even considered.

She told us stories too. Stories of growing up in Italy. Stories of falling in love with my grandfather. Stories of my history that were so much better than my present.

And she gave me hope. Hope that I could have that kind of love story. Hope that the boy who sat across from me, learning all my family stories and recipes, would one day share them with a family the two of us would make together.

Yes, Frank was playing dirty. And I was loving every minute of it.

"Come on, boys. Time to make dinner," Frank calls without taking his eyes off me. He's propped up against the counter, his hands planted on the surface, showing off the corded muscles of his arms. God damn, the man exudes confidence, even in the most relaxed state.

The boys whine, and in response, Frank straightens up and claps. I know what he'll say before the words even leave his

mouth. “You want to eat the good food, you gotta learn to make the good food.”

I mouth it along with him, smiling at the memory of Nona using that line on us.

Lorenzo pops up first, his mouth agape and his eyes as big as saucers. “That’s what Nona says.”

“I know,” Frank says. “She’s the one who taught me to cook. And now I’d like to teach you—if your mom hasn’t already.”

Lorenzo snaps his mouth shut and scrutinizes me, looking for the lie.

“It’s true,” I say with a nod.

“But Mawmy, you don’t cook,” Leo says, climbing out of the tent and scratching at his head.

“Your dad preferred the chef’s cooking.”

Frank’s eyes bore into me, and like I normally do when discussing my husband in public, I hold back my grimace.

Lorenzo is still studying me, likely struggling to figure out which question to ask first. So many of them plague him, I know. Where is his father? Why hasn’t he met us here? Why wouldn’t I cook? Who is Frank really? He’s smart. He knows far more than he lets on. More than I probably even notice. But since we’ve been here, he’s kept those questions to himself.

Frank’s demeanor has changed in an instant. Gone is the joy he’s radiated since I entered the kitchen. Now, nothing but anger rolls off him. No doubt he’s angry that I no longer cook. Angry at the mention of Lorenzo’s name. Angry that we can’t just move forward and tell the boys the truth.

Fortunately, my four-year-old breaks the tension between Frank and Lorenzo and me. “What we making?”

“Meatballs,” Frank and I say at the same time.

I turn to him and find him already watching me, so I give him a smile. Lorenzo doesn’t get to ruin anything else for me.

I'm making dinner with my boys. All of them.

ELLIE

Each one of us is kneading our own bowl of meat. It's exactly like Nona used to do it. Separate bowls. Learning side by side. Music in the background to hum along to.

"Ew, it's cold. And gooey," Leo says, waving his hands in my face.

I laugh and dodge his gooey fingers.

Lorenzo laughs, his attention still on his bowl. "Looks like brains."

Shane nods. "True."

Alesia sidles up next to me as Frank helps the boys roll their meat into balls. "I didn't know you knew how to cook." Tilting her head, she studies me, as if she's extra interested in the answer. Normally, I'd give her snark or skip over the reality of things, but it seems she wants the truth. And maybe after all this time, she needs it.

"Lorenzo knew it was something Frank and I did with Nona," I whisper so the boys don't overhear. "We all grew up together," I say softly.

She narrows her eyes, then shifts her attention to Frank for a moment before turning back to me. Finally, it seems to click. "He was jealous," she mouths.

I shrug. I don't have the answer to that question. That's a him problem and something only he can truly answer. I can't change the past, but I can teach my sister our nona's recipes. I

can teach my sons. We can actively create the future we want to have.

“C’mere,” I say, motioning with my head for her to stand beside me as Frank talks us through the recipe.

We play a few rounds of poker while the meatballs cook, and then Alesia and I set the table while Shane takes the boys to wash their hands and Frank plates the food. Then, like a real family, we sit at the table and eat while soft music plays in the background.

Even the dogs settle beside my feet, as if they don’t want to miss out. Or at least they don’t want to miss out on the food the boys will inevitably drop.

“Tell me a good thing that happened to you today,” Frank says to the boys.

When he catches me gawking, he tosses me a wink. He’s so good at this, the dad thing. He talks to my kids like they’re little adults. He’s learned about the things they love because he asks questions, and he actually listens to their responses. He remembers their preferences, then makes sure to incorporate them in the activities he’s orchestrated for us day after day. He’s made it abundantly clear to me that it’s not just the sex he’s after. He wants the whole package.

But they aren’t his kids, my wicked mind taunts. They have a father, and sooner or later, I’m going to have to deal with him.

The boys fall asleep in the tent while the movie continues to play. Once they’re out, Shane heads upstairs, but he surprises me by saying goodnight before he goes.

A short time later, Alesia pulls me into a fierce hug. “Thank you,” she says against my ear. “I know you only stayed for me and the boys. You lost a lot because you were trying to protect us.” She pulls back but doesn’t release me. “But you deserve to be happy.”

I squeeze her back, surprised by her outburst of affection and also unsure of how to reply. How do you tell someone that

you'd do it all again—all the terrible things—when you really wish you'd never had to in the first place?

It's true, though. If push came to shove, I'd do anything to protect my kids and Alesia. But dammit, I don't want to run anymore. I want to be selfish. I want to choose Frank. And I truly don't know how I could ever go back to that life. How I could hurt another person, no matter how deserving.

Somehow, Frank's love, Ruth's affection, and even Hazel's friendship—hell, this town—it's *all* changed me. Made me remember the person I used to be.

They've reminded me that, deep down, I'm a person. Even if I've been living as a monster for years.

Without waiting for a response, she lets go and heads for the stairs. I release a breath, relieved that I don't have to dive into our past tonight.

Frank tugs me toward the couch and pulls me onto his lap. When I open my mouth to protest, he holds me in place with a gentle grip on the back of my neck.

“Kids are sleeping. Everyone else has gone to their respective corners. Not that they give two fucks about what you and I are doing,” he murmurs. He guides me in and nips at my lip, leaving me smiling. “And I want to spend time with you. I want to hold you. Outside of the bedroom.”

“What if the kids wake up? How, exactly, would I explain why I'm sitting on your lap?”

He smirks. “Tell them I'm Santa?”

I laugh. “Ah yes, the red-headed tattooed Santa. I read about him somewhere.”

“The best one.” He grins, his eyes alight with humor. “So tell me, Elena, have you been a good girl or a bad girl this year?”

“Depends,” I whisper against his lips.

His fingers dig deeper into my neck. “On what?”

“On who I’m dealing with. For you, I’m always a good girl.”

He rubs his lips against mine and closes his eyes. “You don’t have to be good for me, Ellie. I want you just as you are.”

He says it like he knows who I am. But he has no idea who I used to be. And I hope to God he never finds out. With any luck, I can create a better version of myself and be that person for him. *For all of them.*

“But I want to be,” I answer honestly. “For you, I want to be different. I want to be good.”

“Then cuddle with me on this couch and let me hold you,” he says, flipping me over so I’m lying in his lap.

I have to hold back a squeak of surprise, but when he nuzzles against my neck, I can’t hold back a smile. And as he pecks me gently on the lips, then the nose, then the forehead, my heart floats in my chest, lighter than it’s ever been.

Without loosening his hold on me, Frank reaches for the remote, then changes the channel. When the familiar music from a telenovela we used to watch comes on, my breath catches. My eyes fly to the screen, then back to his face, then back to the screen again.

“How did you—” I can’t even formulate a sentence.

“Shh. You promised to be a good girl. Good girls don’t ask questions. They sit and do as they’re told.”

I bite my lip to hold back my laugh. “We both know I’ll never be that good.”

Chuckling, he takes my hand in his and squeezes. “We’ll see about that.”

If only sleep didn’t steal that joy I was feeling, bringing the nightmares to the forefront of our relationship again.



I THOUGHT WE WERE HAPPY. *That thought was on repeat as I walked down the aisle toward Lorenzo. To everyone else, he looked happy. He wore a smile, and his tuxedo was impeccable. The church was crowded with all the important members of the family.*

In the front row, Joseph Messina sat proudly as I reached Lorenzo and he took my hands. But when my future husband leaned in to kiss me on the cheek, there was no warmth in the gesture. No, he vibrated with anger.

Last night, he flirted with one of my bridesmaids. Marissa. I was embarrassed, and when I confronted him afterward, just before we separated for the night, he almost looked surprised. Surprised that he could make me jealous, perhaps.

But what he thought was jealousy was pure fury. He'd banned me from going to see Frank the day before. Frank, who had returned for only a few days before deploying. And even as I stood, eyes locked with my future husband, about to say our vows, it was the idea that I may never see Frank again that flitted through my mind. Not whether Lorenzo and I would be happy together. Not even whether he'd cheat on me. That was a given. He was a member of the Mafia. The only loyalty those men had was to money. They'd stab each other in the backs for it. And they put the business before their families. I knew where I stood among his list of devotions.

Honestly, it didn't bother me all that much. I just wanted a quiet life. A safe one. One where I didn't live in constant fear of being hurt.

So imagine my surprise when, in front of over two hundred guests, my husband managed to slide my hand into his pocket, wrap my fingers around an object, and whisper, "I own you now."

My fingers brushed along a sharp blade, then a short handle. For as long as I lived, I'd never forget the feel of it. I'd held it when the last of my innocence was stolen. I'd protected myself when I slammed it into another man's neck. A man I was supposed to marry. A man I killed to keep myself from being forced into living this exact life. And then, foolishly, I'd trusted the man standing in front of me now. The one whispering that he'd use what he knew, he'd use what I did and who I'd become, to control me.

It wasn't enough to pledge to honor and obey him for the rest of his life. He was ensuring it was true.

I hated him in that moment. I wanted to run out of the church and scream and cry and beg for salvation.

But I was all alone. There was no one here to save me.

He kept me by his side all night, never allowing me to escape from his view, but he didn't speak to me.

After the reception, as we walk down the hall to the honeymoon suite, he still doesn't speak.

I want to apologize for asking to see Frank. I want to fix things between us. Even after his threat during the ceremony. Maybe I misinterpreted his anger. Maybe—

"Are you on birth control?" he asks, his attention on the hallway before us.

Reaching for his hand, I summon back the friend who saved me only months ago. "No, I've never been with anyone."

"Good." His answer is quick and his breath uneven. But he still doesn't look at me. Why won't he look at me? All I want is a little of the kindness he's always shown me, rather than this newfound coldness.

Today has been nerve-racking, and with each step closer to our room, my anxiety grows. He'll be my first, and since our engagement, I've let that knowledge bring me comfort. Because I've always trusted him.

Until this week.

Until I destroyed everything, apparently, by asking to see Frank.

He holds the door open and finally looks at me, his eyes hard and his voice devoid of emotion. "Take off the dress."

There's no kissing. No I love yous. No foreplay like I expected there to be.

But I obey. Or at least I try to. My bridesmaids helped me into the dress. The zipper that runs down my back is impossible for me to reach on my own, so I turn around, pushing my black hair off my shoulder, and keep my voice steady as I ask, "Could you unzip me?"

For a moment, he doesn't move to help. His warm breath, still uneven and harsh, hits the back of my neck two, three, four times before he grips the dress tightly. His hands shake as he lowers the zipper, but he remains quiet, and his breath begins to even out.

I've known him all my life. I know he doesn't want to be this person. But he doesn't know how not to be. But maybe if I make it easier, if I stay quiet and let him work through his feelings, he'll remember who he is. Who I am. That we were friends before I apparently broke his heart by falling for someone else.

Will it help matters that I chose to marry him? That I'm giving him my virginity? God, I hope so.

When the dress hits the ground, I turn around to step out of it, clad in nothing but a pair of white silk panties.

He sucks in a sharp breath, scanning my body and taking in the designs on my chest, the green vines I used to hide all the ugly scars.

I had them done over the last few months, knowing I would eventually bare myself to him. Needing to be in control of what marked my body. Taking power back from the memory of the man who had given me the scars all those years ago.

But then his eyes snag on the only design within the ivy. It's so small it's practically insignificant. But it's inked over my heart.

In this moment, I realize allowing myself this tiny memorial was a mistake.

“What the fuck is that?” he practically spits. His tone is filled with more anger, more disgust, than I knew he was capable of.

“A Celtic knot,” I whisper.

It’s so much more than that, but I pray he doesn’t understand.

“And why the fuck does my Italian wife have it over her heart? For him? You branded yourself for him? The man who left?”

Tears forming in my eyes, I shake my head. I’m such an idiot. Why did I do this? Of course Lorenzo would know what it means. It’s the freaking crest of the most prominent family in Boston. Frank’s family. Why can’t I quit him when he’s so obviously forgotten about me?

“Turn the fuck around,” he commands.

Without a word, I do as I’m told.

“Hands on the fucking bed and don’t make a sound. I don’t want to look at you while I fuck you. I want to forget that my whore of a wife is the one I’m fucking.”

Tears flood my eyes as he unzips his pants behind me, and then his hands are on my panties, ripping them from my body.

He gives me no warning, no warm-up, before he slams into me. I scream at the searing pain literally ripping through me as he pounds into me with no mercy.

“I said no screaming, whore!” he yells, bringing his palm to my ass with a violent slap. He digs his fingers into my hips as his thrusts turn even more violent.

I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to block out the pain, searching for the place I used to go when I was a kid and my uncle would hit me.

“Maybe I can fuck him out of you,” he grits.

But it's too late. I'm already numb, my mind holding my mouth hostage. When he finishes, he strides to the bathroom, and a moment later, the shower turns on. Even then, I don't move. Too shocked to do anything more than lie on my stomach on the mattress and stare at the wall.

What could be minutes or maybe hours later, he reappears. Throwing a white towel at me, he orders me to clean up.

Then he lays out the rules I'll be expected to follow for the rest of our marriage.

And he gives me my first assignment.

I barely breathe as he speaks, and he doesn't wait for any type of response. Before he leaves me alone in our honeymoon suite, he tosses an object at me. Beside me, against the white sheets stained with my blood, is something else red. A lipstick tube. The color is the one my mother forced me to wear when I met Vinny last year. Wet and Wild Rage Red.

"Remember the red lipstick."



I WAKE WITH A START, the nightmare so real my body itches and my skin hurts and I'm covered in a cold sweat.

Frank is still cradling me in his lap. Taking my face in his hands, he whispers, "You're okay, love."

I flinch at his proximity, and his eyes burn. "I will never hurt you," he says, studying me closely, as if he's willing the words to sink in. "But I want the names of everyone who has."

"I'm not a good person." I whisper the words, but a sob escapes along with them.

"I don't fucking care what you did in order to survive. What I care about is you. That you feel safe in my arms. That you know that I will hunt down every person who's ever laid a

hand on you. They'll fucking wish they were dead when I get to them. I won't go easy, baby. I'll make them beg for death."

I blink at him.

"See, Ellie, I'm not so good, either. For you, I'll be the devil. The executioner. For you, I'll go to hell, and then I'll come back and worship at your feet. I'll raise your babies with you. Protect your family. You don't have to do it on your own anymore."

"I don't want you to change, Frank. I don't need revenge. I just need you."

"You already have me."

"Take me to bed," I plead, nuzzling against his neck. "Please just help me forget."

We ensure all the candles are out, and Frank takes the dogs out for a quick walk while I can't help but take in my boys, who are curled up peacefully in their fort. I don't know how I'll explain that we're never going back. That I can *never* go back.

They may never forgive me for keeping them from their father, but that's a risk I have to take. In the depths of my soul, I know there is no other option. Whether or not I'm to blame for the man their father has become, a world doesn't exist where Frank wouldn't be a better role model for them. I won't allow them the chance to turn into their father, and that's exactly what would happen if I allowed Lorenzo back into their lives.

Upstairs, Frank guides me to my room, but instead of following me in, he holds up one finger, then disappears. A moment later, he's back with a toothbrush in hand. "Come on, El, let's get ready for bed."

I shuffle behind him into my bathroom and watch as he picks up my toothbrush from the granite countertop. He squirts toothpaste onto the toothbrush and sets it next to the sink, then he turns and lifts me into his arms. After a quick squeeze and a peck to my cheek, he settles me on the counter next to a meager assortment of inexpensive beauty products and

toiletries. When he slips between my legs and hovers closer, I hug him to me.

“I love you, baby,” he whispers against my chest. “I’m going to take care of you.”

I kiss his head and rest my cheek against his scruff. “I know you will.”

Standing straighter, he presses his lips against mine, then he snags my toothbrush from the counter and runs it under the water before bringing it to my mouth. “Open.”

I smile. “You don’t have to brush my teeth for me.”

“I know. But will you let me? I want to brush your teeth, wash your face, and brush your hair. I feel so helpless, El. Let me just do this for you.”

Tears burn behind my eyes. My husband couldn’t even look at me when he stole my virginity, couldn’t even come close enough to hand me a towel or help me clean up, and Frank is sitting here between my legs asking to brush my teeth and wash my face.

I don’t deserve him.

Swallowing back my tears, I give him a small smile. Then I open my mouth.

He sticks the toothbrush in so far I almost gag. His eyes go wide and he guffaws. Then, with a huff, he feigns annoyance and grumbles, “Fine. You can brush your own teeth. But I’m still brushing your hair.”

I smirk. “Deal.”

Then he grabs his toothbrush, and we smile stupidly at one another while we brush our teeth. He doesn’t move from his position between my legs, and he’s sure to rest his free hand on my thigh, warming me with his touch.

When we’re finished and he’s set our toothbrushes on the other side of the sink, he guides my legs so they’re folded beneath me and spins me so I’m facing the mirror. Smoothing my hair with my brush, he inspects me in the mirror, and I do the same to him.

“I couldn’t tell you the last time someone brushed my hair,” I say. I nibble my lip, practically swooning at the look of concentration on his face.

His furrowed brow smooths, and he shoots me a smile, but he doesn’t respond. Because what is there to say? *I’m sorry you had an awful childhood, followed by a terrible marriage?* I don’t want to be pitied. Right now, I have everything I’ve ever needed. My kids are happy. My sister is safe. And the man I’ve wanted since I was eight is brushing my hair.

Maybe true happiness really is that simple.

With only the glow of the moon peeking out from the clouds to light the room, Frank sinks into me slowly, his green eyes burning with emotion. We make love, and after we’ve both come, he doesn’t release me. Doesn’t move to clean up. He just pulls me against his chest and holds me through my dreams.

When I wake in the middle of the night, I know what I need to do. Gently extracting myself from Frank’s arms, I slide to the edge of the mattress, then drop to the floor and drag the small box out from beneath the bed. When I open the lid, the knife Nona placed in my palm all those years ago glints in the moonlight. It’s the same one my husband returned to me on our wedding day. The weapon responsible for countless murders. I slip out the door, quietly make my way through the house, and tiptoe across the deck. Once I hit the cool, dewy grass, I take off at a sprint, only slowing when I hit the dock.

Standing on the wooden boards under the light of the moon, staring into the dark, angry ocean, I hurtle the knife into the abyss.

And then I let out a decade’s worth of sighs, smile up at the moon, and finally, *finally*, forgive myself.

FRANK

I stand on the balcony, in awe of the sight before me. It's the most goddamn beautiful thing I've ever seen.

I kept my eyes closed and my breath even as she slid out of my grasp and climbed out of bed. I've never been much of a sleeper. Even as she pulled something from beneath the bed, I held still and let her have the moment. I knew precisely what she was grabbing, yet the knowledge didn't scare me.

Last night, after she begged me to make love to her, gave me permission to come inside her, risked tying herself to me forever, I knew she was choosing to move on.

But I wasn't prepared for the beauty that is watching her toss the one thing that still tied her to her past. The moment it hits the water, she throws her head back, and her body shudders. With her mouth open wide like that, I can't tell whether she's screaming or not, but I can practically see the agony leaching from her.

For a moment, I wonder if she'll break down. If I'll have to go down there and carry her back to bed and remind her that I'm here for her. That above everything else, I'll protect her.

But she doesn't drop to her knees. No, she spins on her heel, and when she does, the light of the moon illuminates the smile on her face. Then she runs. And I know she's running back to me.

To our life.



“WHERE’D MAWMY GO?” Leo asks, kicking at the stones at the edge of the driveway while we wait for the dogs to do their business.

“She ran to the store. She wants to make another one of Nona’s recipes tonight. Chicken parm.” I waggle my brows when he turns back to face me. “My favorite.”

“You sure like eating,” he retorts, eyeing me seriously.

I can’t stop the bark of a laugh that leaves me. The kid is so fucking funny.

When Jones takes off after a squirrel, Leo is hot on his tail. Beside me, Lorenzo remains. He’s always quiet, but this morning, he’s barely spoken a word. Even during our boxing session, which is when he normally comes out of his shell.

I peer down at him and bump his shoulder. “You doing a lot of thinking?”

With a shrug, he bends over and picks up a stick. He tosses it for Daisy, who happily chases after it and brings it back to him, ready for him to repeat the activity. “Are we staying here?”

I squint to block out the sun as it peeks out from behind a cloud and take a moment to consider my options. I don’t believe in lying, even if it’s sometimes necessary. But even I don’t truly know the answer to this question, so I go with my truth. “I certainly hope so.”

“Because you like my mom,” he says evenly. Fuck, the kid is a master at hiding his emotions.

“And you and your brother. I like having you all here.”

He picks up the stick and tosses it again. Turning from me, he takes in the ocean, his shoulders slumped. “Mom’s happier here.”

This makes me fucking giddy, because he's right. I make her a thousand times happier than his fucking loser father ever could, but I school my expression. The last thing I want to do is rub that in his face. "What about you? Are you happy here?"

"Our dad isn't coming, is he?" He tucks his chin, directing his question to the ground below his feet.

I shake my head. "I don't think so, Lo."

He nods but doesn't look my way. "You won't hurt her like he did, right?"

I drop to my knees beside him, the wind knocked from my chest. Shit. He knows so much more than he's been given credit for.

Daisy returns with the stick but settles at our feet and chews on it when neither of us reaches for it.

Turning him so that he's looking at me, I hold his arms gently as I speak. "I will never hurt your mom. Or you. Or Leo. And I will never allow anyone else to hurt you. You understand that, right?"

He bites his lip and closes his eyes, but tears form along his lashes. "I can protect her now too. I just need to work on my left hook."

He's so serious. God, I'm so fucking proud of him. My eyes burn, and a hot tear slips down my cheek, but I can't hold back the shattering laugh that escapes my throat. "You've got one hell of a left hook, buddy." I pull him against my chest and hold him as he falls apart in my arms, his silent sobs shaking us both. I cry too. Because he's the same age Elena was when I met her. When she was forced to grow up. And I'll do anything to keep him from having to worry about this. I'll do anything to protect them all.



WHEN ELLIE and Alesia return from the store, their laughter carries from the kitchen as they unload the groceries. The boys are riding their bikes down the hill that Ellie hates so much, and I'm on the deck with an iced tea, enjoying the warm afternoon sun. I close my eyes, loving the sound of a happy Ellie.

“Does it work differently?” Alesia says over giggles.

“He'll hear you,” Ellie hisses.

I grin. I know exactly what they're talking about.

“It does, actually!” I holler through the screen door. I can't see their reaction, but when I hear a burst of laughter from Alesia and a muttered “fuck” from Ellie, I snort.

The screen door squeaks, and Ellie appears, wearing a sheepish grin. “How mad are you?”

I choke on my laugh. “Mad? That you're bragging about my penis?” I smirk and cock a brow.

She rolls her eyes.

“Not one bit. But I will be mad if I don't get a kiss hello.”

Her eyes dart to the boys, who have their backs to us as they push their bikes up the hill, chatting and panting all the way.

“The boys,” she mouths.

“Are busy,” I reply, patting my knee, summoning her.

She shakes her head once, but she's pondering it. Her gaze slides to the boys, then back to me as she nibbles on her bottom lip.

I lick my lips and watch her eyes dilate in response. She squeezes her fists like she's trying to stand her ground, so I continue my teasing.

“If you don't give me one now, I'll make you beg for it tonight,” I warn.

She shakes her head and gives me a coy smile. “You'll never outlast me.”

“Ha,” I bark out. Then I stand and crowd her space. “I was a marine, sweetheart,” I murmur in her ear. “I trained for this.” With that, I brush my knuckles against her jaw and saunter away.

Inside, Shane is sitting at the table, running numbers on a pad. “Everything okay?” I ask as I head to the fridge to grab two beers.

When I settle across from him and twist the top off my bottle, he scratches at his chin and frowns.

“The numbers just don’t add up,” he mutters.

After his outburst at our meeting with Seamus, I gave Shane access to the books for our casinos. I’d already been concerned that he was itching to leave, and yesterday confirmed how discontent he is. He needs something to keep him here. I’ve sheltered him from our family business as best I can, but at this point, it’s doing no good. And rather than risk losing him to Boston, where he could put himself in real danger, I figured I’d bring him in on the business here. Of all the terrible options, this is the safest.

Besides, he’s right. Something isn’t adding up. And it’s not just because the influx of legal gambling in the city is affecting our bottom line. Something else is going on, and honestly, I need his help to figure it out.

Do I care that our illegal activities aren’t as profitable as they could be? Fuck no. I have more than enough money squirreled away if Ellie and I decide we need to disappear one day. While working for the government these past ten years has lined my pockets quite nicely—having zero expenses while living on their dime will do that—I also earn a hefty amount as the figurehead of the Mob. And then there’s the little fund my best friend Cash set up. The bi-weekly deposits were set up when I was his second-in-command and driver.

Why the fuck he hasn’t stopped contributing to it is beyond me. Either he’s got so much fucking money he doesn’t even notice the transfers, or he just can’t bring himself to stop them, even a decade after my supposed death.

So yeah, I have plenty of money. More than I'll ever need. But what I don't need is a revolt at the lower levels of the organization. I don't need the guys blaming their Irish Ghost of a boss for the dip in their pay. And I sure as shit don't need any of them to come looking for me.

They're happy to play along and to keep their mouths shut and not ask questions so long as they're compensated handsomely. But based on the numbers coming in lately, no one is getting their proper cut.

"That's what I thought," I grumble, scratching at the light stubble on my chin.

Before I can ask for his take on things, Ellie walks in, her face perfectly calm. There's no sign of the flush she was wearing only a few minutes ago. I offer her a sly smirk, and in return, she swings her hips a bit, teasing me. I hide my chuckle behind my palm, only pulled back to the conversation by Shane's huff.

"You guys are so in love it's sickening," he says. His words lack the bite they held yesterday.

I grin.

She hasn't said it yet, but she feels it. And even if that wasn't clear, I can love her enough for the both of us until she feels secure enough to utter the words. When she does, I won't be surprised if it brings me to my knees.

"If I have Tommy send you his books, think you could find what I'm missing?"

Shane straightens in his chair. He tries to hide his excitement, but he can't mask the way his face brightens at being included. At being trusted with this. "Yeah. Or I could go—"

I hold my hand up. "I know I can't keep you here forever, and I promise I'm working on bringing you into the business. But I'm not ready for you to be there yet."

He works his jaw back and forth, but he doesn't argue. Probably clinging to that last word—*yet*. I get it. Waiting.

Wanting something so bad and having no control over when it can be attained.

My gaze turns to Ellie again. She's dancing around the kitchen with the Rat Pack playing lightly in the background while she talks Alesia through another one of their nona's recipes. Feeling the attention, her eyes snap to mine, and her smile grows as her eyes heat.

It's the hope in the word *yet* that keeps us all going. The idea that one day we'll have everything. Right now, I'm living in the *yet* too. And it just makes me want more.

More happy. More dancing. More Ellie. Just...more.

ELLIE

The boys absolutely devour the chicken parmesan. Between bites, Leo looks at Frank, his green eyes big and swimming with admiration. “I get why it’s your favorite. Tastes better than ice cream, and ice cream is my favorite.”

Chuckling, Frank leans back in his chair, lifting the front legs off the ground. “How about we have both of your favorites tonight, little man?”

Lorenzo breaks out into a rare smile. “Ice cream in the fort?”

The sheets are still spread across the living room, and the boys insist that they’ll sleep there until school starts. To my surprise, Lorenzo hasn’t asked about returning to his school in Boston. Almost as if he’s accepted that we’re staying here.

The plan is still up in the air, but for now, I’m grateful that he’s not anxious.

If only I was at ease over the situation too. Because I’m at a loss as to how I could even enroll them here—or anywhere, for that matter—without alerting Lorenzo to our location.

Frank’s eyes dance. “Nah, I’ll do you one better. We’ll leave in thirty minutes. But let’s do the dishes first, since your mom cooked.”

“Where are we going?” I ask, unable to hold back a smile. God, he’s so great with them.

Frank smirks at me. “That’s a surprise.”

“You and your surprises,” I mutter as I rise from the table, grabbing plates as I go.

Frank stands as well, planting his feet wide, and snags my elbow before I can sneak by. “Leave them,” he commands in a tone that has me wanting to drop and do whatever he asks. “Go get sweatshirts for you and the boys.”

I like that he doesn’t say please. It’s absurd, but I like that he controls me. I’ve spent my entire life being controlled, but with him, he’s always got my best interests in mind. And it means I don’t have to overthink. Don’t have to agonize over my next move, if what I’m doing is right, if the boys are happy. *If, if, if.*

I trust him, so his control is comforting rather than overbearing.

But that doesn’t mean I won’t tease him about it. Can’t let the man think he can boss me around all the time. “Fine, bossy, but only because I get out of doing the dishes.”

Leo grumbles, “Wish I’s could get out of doing dishes,” causing laughter to echo off the walls of the dining room.

Half an hour later, with sweatshirts on, the boys and I squeeze into Frank’s old green truck. Neither Alesia nor Shane is interested in ice cream, so they stay back.

Frank guides us in, then jogs back up to the porch. When he returns, he hands me a stack of blankets. “Hold on to these for me,” he murmurs as he leans across me, checking the boys’ seat belts and then giving mine a tug.

I smirk at him. We both know I can buckle myself; he’s just using it as an excuse to be close to me. To tease me. He thinks he’ll have me begging by the end of the night if he continues.

We’ll see about that.

I run my fingers across his arm as he pulls back, stopping at his wrist and gently tracing his pulse point. The hiss he breathes out leaves me smirking.

“Tease,” he mutters before closing my door.

“Why you teasing Iwish?” Leo asks, a serious expression on his face. “I like him.”

I peer down at my son, ready to reply and possibly tease him as well, when Lorenzo pipes up with a quiet “me too.”

Momentarily speechless, I survey them both as Frank slides into the driver’s seat.

He glances over at us and grins. “Who’s ready for an adventure?”

Both boys cheer, and Frank winks in my direction. Then he shifts the truck into gear, and we bounce on the worn leather bench seat as we drive over the dirt road. I roll down the window and let the fresh air and the chatter of the boys soothe the ache in my chest. Slowly and almost imperceptibly, Frank has been helping me heal. Giving me space to find happiness again. To find joy.

As we travel down the main road in town, I smile at the familiar faces we pass. Frank waves to just about everyone, and when we get to the stoplight, a couple stops along the sidewalk to shout a hello and ask how he’s doing. One even turns to me and asks how I like working at Ruth’s. It’s all very friendly. Normal. But it’s still so foreign after the life I’ve lived.

He pulls up in front of the store, and Lorenzo is already unbuckling himself and Leo, itching to get out. “Hang tight, Lo,” Frank says with a chuckle.

The nickname and the affection with which Frank says it crash over my heart like a tidal wave, blanketing me in warmth.

Nothing could ever take away even an ounce of the love I feel for my son, but knowing he shares a name with a monster is sometimes hard for me.

“We always let the ladies out first,” he says. With that, he hops out, rounds the truck, and opens the door for me.

Lorenzo looks at me, brows raised. “You heard the man. Ladies first, Mom.”

I let out a surprised laugh. “Thank you.”

Once we’ve all exited, the boys run ahead, and Frank splays his hand across my lower back as we follow behind. Nothing has ever felt more right than this. I want nothing more than to lean into him. To press my body against his chest, to tip my chin up for a kiss, to show the world that I belong to him.

Of course, I don’t do that.

Instead, I flick my gaze toward him quickly before we go inside, and we share a secret smile. His is warm, reaching his eyes and making them crinkle at the sides.

The smell of fudge assaults me as soon as we step inside. The boys are already peering into the glass and reading each flavor aloud when we sidle up to them.

“I want what I wish is having,” Leo says, puffing his chest out and lifting his chin so he can get a look at the man himself. The expression on his face is one of pure adoration, but it’s mixed with a hint of hope that he’ll pick a good flavor.

Frank winks at him, then side-eyes me with one brow lifted.

I mouth cookies and cream, and that’s all it takes for Frank to ruffle Leo’s hair and step toward the counter.

Smiling at the girl behind the counter, he says, “We’ll take two cookies and cream in a cup.”

“With sprinkles,” I hiss.

Frank chuckles. “With sprinkles,” he adds, shaking his head and suppressing a grin.

Leo jumps up and down. “That’s my favorite! We’s ice cream buddies.”

Lorenzo rolls his eyes. The kid surely witnessed what happened behind the scenes. He’s too smart for his own good, but he doesn’t say anything. Instead, he takes his place beside Frank and quietly orders his standard Oreo. I get the blueberry cobbler flavor because it’s homemade and apparently what

they're famous for. Then we take our ice cream back to the truck, much to the boys' chagrin.

"We eat in store," Leo whines.

"That's because you don't normally get to eat beneath the stars," Frank replies. With a smirk, he takes Leo's cup and sets it in the cooler he put in the in the back of the truck. "We can eat them in just a couple of minutes. I promise."

We leave town and make a turn toward the woods, headed in a direction Frank has never taken me. I don't have to wait too long to discover his intended destination. In a handful of minutes, the pickup is climbing a hill, then breaking into a clearing.

"Wow," Lorenzo mutters, craning his neck so he can see the sky. "Look at all the stars."

Frank shifts the truck into park in the middle of a field. We're surrounded by trees on three sides, and on the fourth is a cliff that overlooks the ocean. It's utterly beautiful and absolutely quiet. Our presence is the only disruption to the solitude. Frank points to the stack of blankets I set on the floorboard when we left the house. "Grab those for me, El. I'll get the cooler and help the boys."

The boys jump out of the car, their disappointment over waiting for the ice cream all but forgotten, and rush up the hill to get a better look at the view.

"Be careful!" I screech.

Frank whistles, and instantly, both boys come to a halt and spin around. "Plenty of time for that, you two. I gave you guys jobs. First, come help."

They run back without complaint, and definitely without fear or devastation in their eyes like when Lorenzo screamed at them. Though they're the picture of obedience, nonetheless.

Flabbergasted and honestly amazed, I stand frozen, watching the three of them as Frank drops the tailgate and they set up a little picnic area for us. The three of them are settling in when I finally get my feet to move. As I approach, Frank stands and holds out his hand to help me. I place my palm in

his, and he hoists me up, bringing me far closer than necessary. While the boys are focused on the stars once more, he presses a quick kiss to my hand, then lets it go.

They've laid out the blankets, and the cooler has been moved to the center of the space, just waiting to be opened. I find a seat beside Frank, and Leo immediately hops into my lap, spinning sideways so he can watch the man he idolizes. He's practically salivating as he waits for the signal that it's time for the ice cream.

Frank fiddles with his phone, and suddenly Vance Joy is playing from the portable speaker beside him. It's like we've got our own private show going on back here. Frank passes out the ice cream and settles into easy conversation with Lorenzo while Leo focuses on every bite of his dessert.

I relish every second of the night. The stars above, the music, and ice cream with my three favorite boys. What could be better?



THE BOYS FALL asleep in the car on the way home, and they don't wake even when we carry them into the house. We should rouse them to brush their teeth after all that sugar, but we lay them down in their fort, and I promise myself I'll make them scrub extra good in the morning.

Never wake a sleeping child. It's like mom 101.

After I kiss both boys on the forehead, I make my way out of the tent, only to find Frank smirking at me.

"Not sure why you're acting all cocky. I haven't begged once tonight," I quip.

He chuckles. "Who said the teasing has ended?"

I frown. Kids are asleep. That means the parents can play. That's another mom thing. I shrug, though, to hide my

annoyance. “I lived years without good sex. I can last another day.”

Frank lunges at me, a growl in his throat, and tosses me over his shoulder, then starts toward the steps. “What did I tell you about mentioning sex with anyone else while you’re with me?” he says in a low voice, simultaneously slapping my ass with a loud smack.

I hold back the moan. I refuse to be the one doing the begging, but damn, it’s hard not to make noises when he rubs his warm palm in circles over my backside, soothing the sting.

“You trying to be quiet, little tease?”

I shake my head against his back, holding back a giggle. He stalks into my bedroom and shuts the door quietly, careful not to wake the rest of the house, then he tosses me to the bed and crawls over me.

“You going to beg yet?” I whisper.

He shakes his head and grins. “Fuck, I love you.”

“Beg for it, Irish. Beg for my love.”

His eyes flare, igniting with a flame so hot he just might burn the place down. “I don’t beg for sex, Ellie. But if your heart is on the line, baby, I’ll get down on my fucking knees.”

Like putty, I melt for him. I tug on his shirt so that he’s fully on top of me. “You don’t have to beg for that. You have it.”

Frank smiles, and it’s genuine, all teasing gone. “Where do you want my lips, baby? Here?” he asks as he kisses my jaw. “Or here?” A peck beside my mouth. “Or how about here?” he murmurs, then licks at my lips.

In answer, I moan against him and tangle my tongue with his.

Letting out a rough breath against my mouth, Frank tugs on the hem of my shirt, urging me to lift my arms. With my shirt out of the way, I unclip my bra and point to the place above my heart. “How about here?” I whisper.

He obeys, pressing a kiss to the spot, but as he pulls back, ready for my next command, his eyes go wide and he sucks in a breath. “What’s this?” he rasps, his fingers running over the tattoo I got in honor of him.

“My Irish,” I whisper as I stroke his cheek. “I’ve always been yours.”

“When did you get this?” he asks, his voice cracking on the last word.

“On your eighteenth birthday.”

He goes completely still above me, except for his eyes. He blinks rapidly, like he’s trying to process my words.

“Thought you said you wouldn’t make me beg,” I whisper when he’s been frozen in place a little too long.

He licks his lips. “You’ve had this on your body since you were seventeen?” He rubs his thumb over the ink like he can’t quite believe his eyes.

I nod.

“It’s like a fucking billboard, proclaiming how you feel about me. You’ve had a fucking billboard on your body for twenty years and I—” His voice breaks.

“We’re here now. You and me. I’m yours and you’re mine, right?”

Frank buries his face in my chest, and tremors rack his body. “I don’t deserve you,” he whispers.

With my hands pressed against his cheeks, I force his head up so he has to look at me. “Then earn me.”

That’s all it takes to pull him out of his sorrow. A heartbeat later, he’s dragging my pants down and sinking between my thighs, and then he’s eating me. Licking and sucking and fingering me until I have to hold a pillow over my face to muffle the noises escaping me. But it’s not enough.

“Need something to moan around?” Frank whispers as he nips at my clit, making me writhe against the sheets.

I nod greedily. “Yes, please,” I pant.

He pops up and crawls up my body until he's hovering over me. "Thought you weren't going to beg, baby."

"Fuck you," I bite out with a laugh.

He chuckles as he lies beside me. "C'mere, baby. Fuck my face and suck my cock like a good little slut."

"*Your* good little slut," I murmur as I climb on top of him. "Never tried this position before," I admit, settling my thighs on either side of his head.

He smacks my ass. "How many fucking times do I have to tell you? Not another word about that selfish prick."

The sting still prickling my ass makes me grin. Damn. "But it gets you all riled up and bossy, and that leads to you fucking me. It's a win-win," I say, grinding against his mouth and effectively ending the conversation before he can get the last word. And for good measure, I lean forward and suck him into my mouth.

This new position is one I'm quite fond of almost immediately. Frank digs his hands into my thighs as he eats while simultaneously lifting his hips and fucking my mouth, but I quickly put a stop to that by balancing my hands on his thighs so I can remain in control. I love being on top of him. I love the way he loses it the minute we're together.

I love him.

FRANK

“**T**his greedy pussy is dripping for me.” I finger her and nip at her thigh.

Ellie grinds down, wanting my tongue.

I slap her ass again, and she fucking drips on my face. “My dirty girl likes being spanked, doesn’t she?”

The way she wiggles her ass in response makes me chuckle against her, but then she startles me by grazing her teeth against my shaft.

I bite the soft skin of her thigh in retaliation. “Fuck, El. Don’t do that, baby. I’m going to come.”

“That’s the point,” she says, her lips brushing my crown. Then she dives back into doing exactly what she wants. I growl and flip her around, ass in the air, face against the mattress.

“What the—”

She doesn’t get the last word out before I’m slamming into her. “I come inside this pussy. And only inside this pussy, hear me?”

I slap her ass for emphasis, and she squeezes around me, making me groan.

“Harder,” she demands.

I’m not sure if she means the slaps or the pounding, so I give her both, pulling the most animalistic growl from her.

“Yes, Irish. Just like that.” She pushes up on her forearms and peers over her shoulder at me.

I mark the other cheek, and she bounces against me, fucking me just as hard as I fuck her.

“Play with that perfect clit for me, baby. I want you to come so hard you pull my cum from my body. I want to fill you up. Mark you. Make you mine. Over and over again until your body is swollen.”

“Yes.” She’s so gone she’s babbling almost incoherently while she works herself over with her fingers and I plow into her with abandon.

Fuck, I wish I could see it. I want to watch her touch herself. I want to see her face when she comes. But this position is too good. And the view of her ass as I fuck her is perfection. “You are perfect, baby. So fucking wet for me. Squeezing me so tight. Come on, baby. Come all over my cock like the good little slut you are.”

She drops her head between her shoulders and moans. “I’m coming.”

I go with her, nearly blacking out from the way she pulses around me. I empty myself inside her, praying to anyone who will listen that I put a baby in her. That I’ll see her pregnant with my child soon. That we’ll be a family forever—me, her, her boys, and our child.



“THINKING WE TAKE the boys to the real beach this weekend,” I murmur as I run circles across Ellie’s bare back. We’re lying in bed, her body sprawled over mine, on the edge of sleep, but I’m fighting it. Because staying awake means more time with her. And I fucking love this. Cuddling after sex, when everyone else in the house is asleep. When it’s just about us.

“They’d like that,” she mumbles.

“And then maybe we can take them to the outlets. Get them some stuff for school.”

She swallows thickly, but she doesn't speak.

“El,” I whisper.

She gives me a noncommittal hum in response.

“We have to enroll them in school.”

She's still quiet.

I sit up and roll her off me so I can look her in the eye. “You're not leaving,” I grind out.

She sighs and closes her eyes for a moment, and my heart drops.

But two heartbeats later, she opens them again and regards me with a look of anguish. “I'm not leaving. But it isn't that easy. I have no idea if Lorenzo put out anything to the authorities. If I enroll them, he could find them. Then he'd take them, Frank. He *can't* take my kids.”

“He's not coming near them,” I promise her.

“I need to know what he's been telling people. Then I need to deal with him. Somehow.”

“He's unhinged, El. More so than he's ever been.”

Her eyes bulge. “How do you know?”

I give my best *are you fucking kidding me* face, mouth in a flat line and brows raised. “Because it's my business to know.”

“Because you're the Irish Ghost,” she murmurs, biting her lip. Like she's reminding herself of who I really am. It kills me that she still doesn't truly know everything, but I need a plan before I give her all my truths. I'm scared that if I tell her everything, she'll get spooked and disappear before I can even finish talking.

“And because *you* are my business. You and the boys. You're all that matters to me. So yeah, I looked into what your asshole of an ex is up to. He hasn't reported it to the

authorities. Just to the families. He's playing it off like you were kidnapped. Using it as an excuse to further the wars."

She laughs bitterly. "Typical Lorenzo. Never waste an opportunity to wreak more havoc." Though her words are sardonic, she nibbles at her lip, obviously worried but trying to hide it.

I squeeze her hand and pull her close. "I won't let him anywhere near you."

"I could kill him with my eyes closed." With a sigh, she sinks into me and buries her face in the crook of my neck.

"Then why didn't you?"

She's the strongest person I know. How did she live with the abuse for all those years without snapping? What kept her from hurting him when she so obviously could have?

"I worried that his family would take my boys from me if something happened to him. Or that if I didn't succeed, Alesia would be the next to be sold. The only way I could protect all three of them was to stay alive and take it. In the end, the risks outweighed the rewards."

"Lo knows," I tell her.

She flinches beneath me and lets out a pained whimper.

"He knows your ex beat you."

She sucks in a ragged breath against me. "I hid it as best as I could, but Lorenzo didn't. He'd openly hit me if I didn't obey him, whether the boys were there or not." Her voice wavers. "So I tried really hard to listen, but sometimes"—her voice cracks—"sometimes he'd goad me just so he could knock me down in front of them. Remind me of what he held over me."

"You're not going back," I grit out, squeezing her tighter.

She settles against my chest, her fingertips running circles against my leg. "I know. I just need to find a way to tell the boys. And I need papers. And Frank—" She pulls back and considers me, wearing a nervous frown. "I'm not sure why you've been hiding here for years, but if you plan to ever go

back”—she sucks in a ragged breath—“I won’t hold it against you. But we’ll likely always be on the run, my boys and me. I have to keep them safe. But you—”

I cover her mouth with my fingers. “Will always be by *your* side. I’ll follow you to Timbuktu. You want to live on a beach, I’m there. Mexico? Done. Fuck, I’ll move out west and put on fucking cowboy boots and say yeehaw. I’ll be the best damn cowboy there ever was if that’s what I need to do. But I’m not going *any fucking where* without you. Hear me? I don’t need Boston. I don’t need my old life. I just need you, Ellie. You and those boys, our dogs, and maybe a baby or two.”

Her eyes water, but I think I may have stunned her speechless.

I kiss her cheeks. “I’m so fucking in love with you, baby. I’m going to earn this place above your heart.” I press my palm to the tattoo that still makes me breathless.

She puts her hand over mine. “You’re not above my heart, Irish. You’re in it.” She leans up and kisses me tenderly.

But fuck, I need more. I take her lips in a desperate kiss. I can’t get close enough. Even when she’s promising not to leave, even when she’s telling me she’s mine, I can’t help but think we’re racing against the clock. That soon, we’ll be faced with obstacles that leave us without choices. That she won’t have the option to *choose* me. That her husband will choose for her.

“Tell your boyfriend to stop glaring at every man who looks at you. He’s scaring the customers,” Ruth grumbles, wiping down the bar and shooting daggers at Frank.

I laugh. “No one in this bar is here for me. And they’re all used to Irish.”

She side-eyes me. “That is not the man who used to come into my bar. He’s far broodier. Believe me, no one in this town is going to come in to chat with the pretty bartender if her man keeps scowling like that.”

I bat my eyes. “Awe, you think I’m pretty?”

She swats me with her towel. “Take him his whiskey. I’ll be in the kitchen eating the leftovers you brought me. You got the bar covered?”

With half a grin, I nod. I’m pretty sure I can handle the four locals sitting at the bar with beers already set in front of them. Not that I’m complaining. I love this job. I’m truly beginning to love this life. Since Frank carried me out of here a few weeks ago, everything has fallen into place.

We spend our days with the boys, exploring the hiking trails around the property and taking the boat out on the water. The boys have fallen in love with tubing, and they’re getting more proficient in the boxing ring. Dinners are made together as a family. Every night, we use another of Nona’s recipes.

On nights I don’t work, we take the boys into town for ice cream or to skip rocks off the tiny bridge and wait for the

boats to come by. And on nights when I do work, we leave the kids with Alesia, and Frank sits in the corner and chats with the locals while I serve drinks.

After work? Our nights are filled with filthy sex. The way that man talks and the things he does to my body? Never in my wildest dreams could I have imagined it would be like this. That his touch alone would bring me to life. Not to mention the way our bodies move together. I never thought I'd love being spanked or being called a dirty slut, but when Frank wraps his thick fingers around my throat and squeezes, I don't feel like the broken woman I was two months ago. I feel like a goddess. Like I make him feral. And that knowledge makes me drunk with power.

Licking my lips, I set the bottle in front of him.

His eyes blaze. "Careful, Ellie. Keep licking your lips like that, and I'll think you're thirsty and in need of a little attention."

A low heat stirs in my belly, and I move a step closer. "But what if I am?"

The growl that leaves his throat has me squeezing his glass tighter. "Lips. Now." He curls his finger, summoning me closer.

I can do nothing but obey. I tilt at the waist so my face is mere inches from his. In response, he grabs me by the back of the neck and pulls my mouth to his. And shit if he doesn't own me with a kiss.

Knowing if he gets his arms around me, I'll be in his lap and ready to ride him an instant later, I push back. "Work," I pant.

He smirks. "You have an hour, then I'm taking you home, tying you to the bed, and using you like you're my personal fuck toy."

My thighs clench, and that simmering heat inside me ignites to full-on flames. Why is that so hot?

"You want that, don't you? You want me to use you. To fuck you. To lose count of the number of orgasms I've given

you. You want me to flip you over—”

“Oh my God, this sauce is incredible,” Ruth calls from the kitchen.

My heart drops to my stomach, and I take a step back. After a heartbeat, when my head’s a little clearer, I have to smother a smile. Because if Frank had gotten even one more line out, I would have rushed him into the bathroom and begged him to squeeze my throat as he took me from behind.

“Where’d you get this?” Ruth continues, appearing in the doorway to the kitchen.

I walk toward her, bottle of whiskey in my hand. “I made it.”

She blinks at me a couple of times. “You did?”

I shrug. “Just meatballs and spaghetti. No big deal.”

Ruth sucks in a breath. “It reminds me of my anniversary trip to Italy with my husband years ago. Every meal we had was incredible. Just like this. Perfectly light, not too sweet...” She shakes her head. “Elena, it’s perfect.”

Her words tug on my heart. She considers something I created perfect? It’s still strange to be showered with compliments since I’ve spent almost my whole life fending off insults and criticism. This especially means so much. Because cooking has become so much more than preparing a meal for my kids in the afternoons. It’s become an escape. A pastime of my own making and one I’ve chosen. And every day that we work together in the kitchen brings me closer to my kids.

“Can you make anything else?” she asks, her tone just a little challenging. Because that’s Ruth. A little forward and a little blunt.

Frank materializes beside me and grips my waist. “Name an Italian dish, and my girl has a recipe.”

Rolling my eyes, I lean into him. “That’s an exaggeration. But yes, I can make a few other things.”

“Chicken parm?” she asks.

I nod.

“Lasagna?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“How ’bout a fettuccine alfredo or a penne vodka?” Her eyes get brighter with every dish she rattles off.

I laugh. “Yes, I can do those.”

She claps her hands in excitement and grins. “I’ve got an idea, but first, let’s sit.” She heads our way, container of spaghetti in tow. “I need to enjoy every bite of this meal.”

Over the next few days, Ruth creates a list of meals she wants to try, and then on Sunday, she joins us for a family-style dinner at the cabin. I’ve laid out every dish on the deck, and Alesia has decorated the outdoor space with gorgeous silverware and plates, as well as candles and pretty linens she found in the cabinet in the dining room.

Frank has the Rat Pack playing softly, and he’s set up a cart with drinks and taken on the duty of bartender. The boys style their hair and are dressed in outfits that are adorably similar to Frank’s. He must have purchased them on one of his trips to Boston. The white polo practically strangles his chest, and his tattoos peek out from the collar and sleeves. The combination makes him look preppy and dangerous at the same time. It’s hot, especially when he’s walking around with Leo in his arms and a smiling Lorenzo at his side.

“Take a picture. It’ll last longer,” Alesia whispers with a giggle.

Not concerned about my blatant display, I lick my lips, literally salivating at the sight.

“C’mere El. I agree. We need a picture,” Frank summons, waving me over with his free arm.

Hesitating, I worry on my lip. *Will the boys find it odd if we take a picture together?* I only let that concern hold me back for a moment, because, beside Frank, Lorenzo is looking at me expectantly, his brown eyes shining. Over the last two months, he’s gone from a nervous, quiet, angry boy on the

verge of growing up too quickly to this easy-going, excited one. He's wearing a face of innocence while he waits for me to join them.

That's all I need to make my decision. Setting the glass I was wiping down on the table, I head toward my boys. When I reach Lorenzo, I can't help but ruffle his hair and drop a kiss to his cheek.

"*Mom*," he whines, "now I gotta fix my hair."

Frank laughs. "Perks of having a shaved head."

"Okay, look at me," Alesia says, holding a phone out in front of her.

For a moment, panic slides through me. Phones are tools my husband uses to find me. A connection to a world outside this little piece of Maine. The anxiety sends dread curling in my stomach, but before it can blossom, Frank wraps his free arm around my waist and pulls me close so I'm pressed against him, with Lorenzo in front of me. Frank's warmth and the feel of Lorenzo's shoulder under my palm immediately soothe me, and I let out a breath. Beside me, Frank is watching like he knows exactly what's going through my mind. He presses his lips to my forehead, and my entire body warms. That gesture alone sends a current running through my veins.

"Okay, look at me once more and say *cheese*," Alesia directs.

We both turn and smile at the camera as she snaps away.

Shane steps out onto the deck, stumbling when he sees us standing in front of the railing that overlooks the ocean and the gorgeous lawn behind us.

"I got so many good ones," Alesia calls.

Taking that as a sign that we're finished, Leo tugs on Frank's arm, begging to be put down so he can see. Frank sets him on his feet, and the kid rushes off, with Lorenzo close behind.

Frank slides a hand into my hair, behind my ear, and tugs just hard enough to hold my attention to him. "Lips. Quick,"

he whispers, glancing at the boys to make sure they aren't watching.

Without hesitation, I pop up on my toes to grab a quick kiss.

Shane hisses in a breath as he gets closer, but I ignore him and press one more kiss on Frank's jaw before brushing my nose against his and pulling away. I want to see the photos that the boys are still chatting about.

Once Ruth arrives, we're lost in a flurry of activity. Frank serves drinks, and we dive into the food spread out on the table. Pastas—including a selection of gluten-free for Leo, of course—meatballs, chicken parmesan, and picatta style. Salads and anti-pasto. It's a traditional family-style Italian meal. One I'm sure my nona would have loved to have served if we'd had a family big enough to make it for.

The boys and Frank tell Ruth about their boxing ring and their bike rides. The dogs sit by my feet, on alert for fallen food. And I take in the sight as the people I care about most enjoy a meal together.

After dinner, while Frank cleans up, Alesia and Shane entertain the boys with a round of Go Fish—the only game Alesia can actually follow along with—and Ruth and I sit on the deck with glasses of Nona's iced tea.

"This is a beautiful house," Ruth says, scanning the property in awe.

I let out a breathy laugh, still shocked months later by its beauty. Shocked that it's all mine. That *Frank* is all mine.

Sometimes I still wonder if I went over that cliff that first night. Maybe this is my personal version of heaven.

"John and I visited this one place on our trip to Italy. It was magical," she says, bringing her hands to her lap.

"Tell me about it," I beg. The idea of traveling to a place like Italy has never crossed my mind. Just escaping the streets of Boston that served as my prison for all my life was my only focus. I never dreamed I could travel, never even wondered what it would be like. Yet here I am, looking out at the most

beautiful scenery I've ever seen, wondering what else I've missed out on for all these years.

“It was on the Amalfi Coast, a small outdoor restaurant sitting atop a cliff. Bougainvillea wound along the bamboo frame of the dining area. There were chandeliers and twinkle lights everywhere, and then long picnic tables like this one.” She closes her eyes and grasps the edge of the table, like she's grounding herself and easing her memories. When she brings her attention back to me, she smiles. “John wanted to recreate the feel of it at the bar. Crazy, I know. But God, that man had plans. And he could cook. Just like you, Elena.”

I blush under her praise. “Thank you.”

“What do you say we try to recreate it on Sundays? Family-style meals in the backyard. I can have some of the guys set up a spot out back. We'll open it up to the town, and you and I can cook.”

I twist my hands in my lap, pondering her words. I'm shocked to say the least. “As in, we charge for my cooking?”

Ruth nods. “I'm not sure we can continue it through the winter, but for the next couple of months, we can make it work. Maybe get a couple of outdoor heaters to get through October. I know it's not ideal. You deserve a nicer kitchen and could probably get a job in a better restaurant—”

I grasp her arm and pull her in for a hug. I think we're both surprised by the action, because she stiffens at first, but then she laughs and squeezes me closer.

“I would love that,” I say quickly, worried she'll take it back.

Ruth wants me to cook. For other people. And she wants to pay me to do it.

It is 100 percent too good to be true.

When I pull away, her eyes shimmer, evidence of emotion threatening to spill out. I swipe at my own, feeling like I may just cry too.

Since Frank moved into my bedroom, I haven't had a single nightmare.

The memories of the person I used to be are fading, and they're quickly being replaced with those filled with bike rides with my boys, long, lazy nights making love with Frank—and plenty of wild, not-so-lazy nights—and oh so many laughs. This house is really beginning to feel like a home. The *town* is starting to feel like home too. And after Ruth's offer last night, I'm feeling ready to move forward and make this more permanent.

"I need to enroll Lorenzo in school," I say, lying across Frank's chest.

He squeezes my bare thigh and hums, his cock stirring beneath me.

"We just had sex a couple of hours ago," I tease, pressing up on one arm, ready to push away.

He pulls me closer and growls, his chest rumbling beneath me. "You talking about the future makes me horny. What can I say?"

I laugh and swat at his chest, but he catches my hand and brings it to his lips. "We'll talk to him in the morning, yeah?" Frank's eyes are all warm and gooey, like a brownie sundae.

"Yeah," I whisper, melting against him.

In a flash, Frank is above me, positioned between my legs. His cock is already hard, and the barbells on his shaft are

massaging my clit, leaving me moaning.

“Right there,” I murmur as his lips meet mine.

“My little fuck toy.” He licks at my lips, then bites down on the bottom one. “My dirty girl. Your pussy is dripping for me, isn’t she?”

I nod as I arch into him, desperate to increase the pressure of the metal against me. I’ll never tire of this feeling. Of his weight above me, his lips on me, and his cock teasing me.

His thick head pokes at me, and I cry out, squirming to reposition him so he’s precisely where I need him.

“Oh, you want me to fill you up, baby? You feeling empty?” he asks, gliding against me easily. On either side of me, his arms flex, caging me in and keeping me from getting exactly what I need.

Aggravated, I wrap my arms around his neck and pull. When he smirks in response but doesn’t budge, I slide my fingers between my legs, wrap them around his cock, and press him to me. Then, with my other hand, I grab his ass and dig my fingers into his flesh until he slides into me in one quick thrust.

“*Fuck*,” he groans out as I squeeze the walls of my pussy tight around him, keeping him there.

I wrap my legs around his hips and dig my heels into his ass, then thrust up, holding myself there while I rub my clit against him, fucking him slowly.

“Yes, Ellie,” he praises. “Right there, baby. So fucking good. Take what you want. I’m so proud of you.” His lips find mine, and our tongues tangle. My brain short-circuits from the feel of him inside me, the taste of him on my lips, and the way his dirty words echo in my mind.

“Hand on my neck, Irish,” I beg.

He knows exactly what I need. With his fingers pressed into my throat, he holds me down. My legs drop open, and with that, he begins fucking me in fast thrusts. With his other

hand, he grabs my knee and pushes my leg up so he's hitting me at a better angle.

My restricted breathing makes the sensation of him thrusting inside me even stronger.

"My dirty girl loves my hands on her, doesn't she?" he taunts as he tightens his grip on my neck.

My lips fall open, but no sound escapes.

"Such a good girl. Taking my cock. You going to take my cum now, baby? You going to squeeze it out of me?"

I shudder beneath him, and then my orgasm explodes. Blackness engulfs me, followed by bursts of light. My toes curl in on themselves as Frank groans and swells inside me. Then he's filling me up just like he promised. I come out of the inarguably best feeling of my life with Frank's lips on mine and his thumb stroking gently against the pulse point in my neck. "You okay, baby?" he asks, genuine concern swimming in his eyes.

I bite my lip and smile. "Well, that's one way to wake up."



"WE NEED to get you enrolled in school, and to do that, we need to give you a new name. Any suggestions?" Frank asks Lorenzo later that morning, while Leo watches cartoons on the couch with Alesia. We agreed that it was time to talk to him, but I can't help the nerves that worm through my body as I wait for his response.

"New last name too?" His forehead crinkles, as if he's giving it real thought. Is he angry with me? Upset? Am I doing the right thing?

Frank shrugs. "Yeah. We'll let your mom handle that, but we figured you might have a preference on first names."

Lorenzo presses his tongue to his cheek. “Can I stick with Lo? That’s what you call me anyway, and I like it.”

My heart stutters in my chest, and the heavy weight on my shoulders lifts. He’s not nearly as bothered as I expected he would be. Probably because he doesn’t quite understand that we’re never going back to Boston. That he’ll never see his father again.

Or maybe, like Frank said, he knows more than I give him credit for. Maybe, deep down, he wanted to escape as much as I did.

“That works. Lo it is.” Frank scoops a bite of omelet into his mouth and smiles at me.

“What’s your last name?” my son asks him.

Frank pauses, his fork in front of his face. “It was McCabe,” he says, lowering his fork to his plate. “But like you, I had to change it.”

Lorenzo doesn’t even flinch. “What’s your name now?”

With feigned nonchalance, he shrugs. “Brian Irish, but honestly, I don’t feel like a Brian, so I go by Irish.”

I drop my fork, and it clatters to my plate. “What?”

Frank gives me a smile I’ve never seen from him before. It’s almost...*sheepish*. “If I couldn’t be a McCabe, then I wanted to be the boy you used to look up to. Someone worthy.” His voice is as soft as I’ve ever heard, and his eyes are downcast. When he finally lifts them, they’re swimming with something I can’t quite place.

“Can I have that name too?” Lorenzo asks. He has no idea what kind of impact those words have.

I suck in a breath and bring the back of my hand to my mouth to hide my reaction.

Thankfully, he doesn’t seem to notice. “Lo Irish. What do you think?”

Frank swallows thickly, his focus trained intently on my son. Then he turns to me, as if he’s looking for direction. But

it's not really mine to give. I'm taking so much from my sons. If they want to share a last name with Frank, who am I to say no?

But I don't want Frank to feel like we're forcing ourselves on him either. "That's up to the two of you," I say. Yeah, it's a total cop-out.

Frank's lips lift into a smile. He's full-on beaming as he lets out a laugh. "Yeah, Lo. You can have my last name."



THAT AFTERNOON, we ride our bikes to town, and Frank gives each of the boys five dollars to spend at the candy store.

It's a far cry from our one-dollar spending sprees, but I still find myself searching for the Tootsie Rolls.

Frank swaggers toward me, arm outstretched, revealing a handful of the little brown- and white-wrapped candies.

"You remembered," I breathe out softly.

"Everything, Ellie. I remember everything."

Before I get pulled under by his sweet words, Leo ambles up beside us, a big toothy grin on his face and clear bag filled to the brim with sugary sweets. "What's those?"

Frank unwraps one and offers it to him. "Chocolate that tastes kind of like wax."

Leo, who's got his mouth open, ready for Frank to pop the candy on his tongue, rears back and stomps his foot. "Why would I want that?"

I grab it from Frank's outstretched fingers and toss it into my mouth. "Delicious," I say around it.

Lo laughs. "Mom, you aren't supposed to talk with food in your mouth."

I put my hands on my hips in mock surprise. “Wow, who made you so smart?”

Leo giggles. “You, Mawmy. You always tell us not to chew with our mouths open.”

Frank smiles at me over their heads, and another piece of my heart slips into place.

Then his eyes shift to the candy by my side, and he brightens.

“Oh, and that waxy chocolate? They put it in lollipops. Those come with a serious challenge.”

He pulls four Tootsie Pops from a bin and shoots Lorenzo a wink. “You up for it?”

“Yes!”

Leo pumps his fist in the air and tugs on my hand, urging me to follow Frank to the counter, where he pays far more than the five dollars he promised to each boy. Once we’ve paid and Leo and Lorenzo have their paper bags of candy in hand, he guides us outside and to a bench, then hands us each a sucker.

“Here are the rules,” he explains. “You have to lick the pop. No biting.” He ruffles Leo’s hair as he says it. “And then we see how many licks it takes to get to the center.”

The boys unwrap their pops, disregarding the wrappers, so I snatch them up before the wind takes them. And then they’re licking, each one counting as they go.

Lo gets to over one hundred, and after about thirteen licks, Leo copies him, since he can’t actually count that high.

“Twish,” Leo whines at about number one hundred twenty, “my tongue is crampy.” He sticks out his tongue, and his eyes cross as he tries to inspect it.

Frank and I fall into a fit of laughter, and Leo takes that as his cue to bite into the candy, breaking the rules and ending the competition.

After we crown Lo the champion, we head back to the house to pick up Alesia and Shane and head for a picnic down by the water.

August is coming to an end, and I can't help but wish time could stop.

Shane offers to take our empty plates up to the house, and I settle back on my palms, head tilted back and face to the sky.

"Mawmy, I needs to pee," Leo announces. I force one eye open and watch as he dances in front of me while holding himself.

Oh, motherhood. Just when I was finally relaxing. I sigh and sit up straight, brushing the loose blades of grass from my hands. "Kay, bud. I'll take you into the house."

Frank's on his feet before I can heave myself off the ground. "Come on, buddy. Let me teach you something else about the woods." He winks at me.

Confused, I watch as they head toward the tree line. Leo follows Frank, because that's what my boys always do. Like the dogs are always at my heels, the boys are always at his. Lo hops up and scurries after them. At the edge of the woods, Frank drops his pants, and the boys mimic the move. Their bare asses lined up in a row have me screeching in laughter. Beside me, Alesia covers her eyes in mock horror.

I can't help myself. I pull the phone Frank forced on me out of my pocket and snap a picture of the three of them. This one will definitely be printed and hanging in our bathroom one day.

Our bathroom. Holy shit. Out of the blue, I'm making plans. But I like the sound of it. I like the idea of having a house with him. Not like this one—where it's his job to keep up with the place and I feel like a guest.

But a house that we pick out together. One where we raise the kids and maybe add another child or two to our family. A place where we have Sunday dinners and take walks to the ice cream shop in the evenings. A place where Frank and I can

sink into one another late at night when the boys are finally asleep.

A home.

“Look at you,” Alesia whispers beside me.

I don’t turn to her. I don’t want to miss a moment of this view. So I remain still and take in the perfect image for a heartbeat. Then I follow the boys’ movements as they meander down to the water. The pink sky and setting sun paint the most gorgeous backdrop behind them. I couldn’t conjure up a more beautiful image if I tried.

I hum a response as I stare at them.

“I’ve never seen you like this,” she says softly.

I finally let my gaze shift to hers. “Like what?”

“Happy,” she replies easily. “You are so freaking happy.”

I smile. It’s big and unbidden. It’s years in the making. It’s Frank.

“I am. I really freaking am.”



“TODAY WAS PERFECT,” I say to Frank as we’re unpacking the picnic supplies.

He smiles at me from the sink, but the smile doesn’t reach his eyes. There’s no crinkling at his temples or joy dancing in his expression. His phone rang just as we walked into the house, and he disappeared for a good fifteen minutes. He’s seemed off ever since.

“Maybe tomorrow we can take the kids to the real beach,” I suggest. “And we still need to take them shopping for school clothes.”

Frank sets the plate he's drying on the counter and spins to face me, his expression hard to read.

He's not smiling, but he doesn't look angry either. He's just kind of there. "I actually have to go out of town for the next few days."

"Oh." The word slips out before I can hide my disappointment. "Of course," I add, trying to recover. "Alesia and I can take them, then. She would probably love to get out and shop for a while."

Frank crowds me, pushing off the counter and pressing his palms to my cheeks. "I want to go with you guys."

"I get it," I reply hoarsely, nervous that I actually don't. Were we moving too fast? Is he not enjoying playing house as much as I am? Is he going to disappear again?

Thumbs rubbing softly against my cheeks, he brushes his lips against mine. "No you don't, baby. You get nothing if you're giving me that look. If you're preparing for me to run. I'm not going anywhere. I just need to do a few things. I'll be back. I promise."

I want to beg him to stay. I want to wrap my arms around him and never let go, but instead, I nod and kiss him gently one more time.

His answering kiss is just as tender, but soon, he's pulling away and saying he needs to hit the road shortly, so he's going to pack a few things.

An hour later, I watch with my heart in my throat as his taillights disappear down the road.

From the porch, I can hear the land line ring. It's after nine, so I rush to it before the sound can wake the boys, who are probably just falling asleep.

"Hello," I say quickly into the phone.

"Hello, may I speak to Elena?" a man asks.

"This is she."

“Elena, this is Mr. Jennings,” he says. “The attorney handling your uncle’s estate,” he adds, like I don’t remember precisely who he is. He changed my freaking life two months ago. He’s hard to forget. “The trustee says you’ve met the requirements outlined in Mr. Rivera’s will. If you want to sell the place, we have a buyer lined up. We can have money in your account by next week. Then you’re free to leave.”

My stomach plummets and my head spins as I try to make sense of the words. Pulling the phone away from my ear, I gape at it in shock. Now what the hell do I do?

I t's been two days since Frank left, and I haven't heard a single word from him. The nightmares are back in full swing. Images of each time I was forced to slit a man's throat hit me in the face like blood spatter.

By day three, I'm ready to snap. The man told me not to go anywhere without my phone, yet he hasn't even bothered to check in on me in over forty-eight hours. What if he's dead? What if he went back to take care of Lorenzo like he said he would?

"I won't hurt you, but I want the names of every person who has. I will hunt down every person who's ever laid a hand on you. They'll fucking wish they were dead when I get to them."

What if he underestimated Lorenzo?

Out of my mind and in need of fresh air, I ask Alesia to watch the kids and meet Hazel for lunch. I need to focus on anything but the nightmares plaguing me.

"School starts next week, right? Is Lo ready?" she asks.

Lorenzo is sure to notify everyone he talks to that his name is Lo now. It's adorable.

"He can't stop talking about it," I tell her. "Any idea where I can take the boys to get clothes and school supplies?" Biting into my lobster roll, I have to hold back a moan. The shack on the corner is normally mobbed during the season, like an hour line to get the famous buttery lunch, but Hazel called ahead,

and when we arrived, they had two lobster rolls waiting for us. So we grabbed the paper bag and wandered to the bridge where we've settled across from one another at a picnic table and are watching the boats go by.

"I'm sure Frank could take you to the outlets."

"He's out of town," I mumble.

"Oh. He'll be back in time to take them shopping, right? You've still got a week till school starts."

I shrug. "I thought he'd be back already."

She gives me a knowing smile. "He disappears like this sometimes. Without a word, he's gone. And then suddenly he's slipping into bed beside you without explanation of where he's —" She clamps her mouth shut and winces when she realizes what she's said.

Or maybe when she catches sight of my glare.

I didn't even mean to do it, but the reminder that he used to share a bed with her, even if it was nothing more than sex, makes me rage with jealousy.

"Sorry. That was dumb to say. Obviously, you guys are nothing like we were. He's in love with you and your boys. I'm sure he's told you all his secrets, so don't let my insecurities get in the way."

I swallow my jealousy, but it's thick in my throat. "It's fine. He is secretive," I admit.

"When you work for the FBI, you sort of have to be, right?" she says. She picks up her lobster roll and takes another bite, focusing on the boat passing by.

I school my expression even as my stomach bottoms out and her words claw at my heart. He works for the FBI? *What?*

"I could never compete with his obsession with his job. Or you, obviously. Even if I didn't know you existed," she jokes. "You must be tired of hearing about *Bella Morte* and what he'll do when he finally catches her. And the way he locks himself in that room with all the crime scene photos. God, it always gave me the heebie-jeebies."

I nod in understanding and take another bite, silently urging her to keep talking, because I can't find a single thing to say.

My heart is pounding so hard I can't make out any more of her words, though.

Frank works for the FBI. I'm the woman he's been after for years. And he lured me right into his trap.

It was all a setup.

FRANK

Bennett wasn't pleased when I asked for the papers for Ellie and the boys. He told me he couldn't support this plan. That I'd cause more problems between the families if I did this.

I told him I didn't fucking care. If he wouldn't help me get new identities for all of them, then I was out.

To say that conversation didn't go over well would be an understatement.

It took another day of talks and plenty of criticism before I stormed out and got in the car, already formulating a new plan.

If he won't help me, then I need to reach out to someone who will.

The only person I've ever truly trusted to keep my secrets. And the person who has access to unlimited funds and resources. The man I hope will eventually forgive me for disappearing ten years ago.

My best friend, Cash James.

As I make the drive to Bristol, Rhode Island, I can't help but chuckle at the irony of the name. We both ended up in Bristol, only in different states. He left Boston to live in the seaside town of Bristol, Rhode Island. The town where he was raised until his mother died. Then, years later, when I blew my entire life up—quite literally—I was placed in Bristol, Maine. Another New England town with a kind of charm I'd never known in Boston.

But fuck if I didn't wish time and again that we had ended up in the same town rather than separate places that shared a name.

It's dark when I pull onto the property, which now houses the home that Cash built for Grace when he proposed to her. Lights line the long driveway, and an elaborate playset sits proudly in the yard. By my calculations, his daughter is now eleven, and his son is seven. To the left of the house is an oversized barn, and in front of it, a corral.

Though he grew up in Boston too, Cash spent several years in Nashville while I was overseas and became a regular ole cowboy. From the look of things, he's brought that lifestyle home with him, and from what I've heard, Hope competes in horse competitions and has an abundance of blue ribbons under her belt.

I run my hand across my face as I pull up in front of the barn. I confirmed that Grace has an event at the winery in town, so Cash should be the only one home. If I know my best friend as well as I used to, he's likely in the barn, which houses his boxing ring—a hobby we shared for years and that we both still keep up with.

My heart races as I step out of the truck. Fuck, I'm about to see the man I considered a brother for the better part of twenty years. A person who, outside Ellie, was the hardest to walk away from.

From the tabs I've kept on him over the years, I know my death destroyed him. Losing him was heart-wrenching, but at least I've had the opportunity to follow along with his life. I can't imagine being in his position, believing my best friend to have died on my wedding night.

Cicadas sing, an orchestra accompanying my march to the door. The fuck if I know how I'll explain the last ten years or the decisions I made before I left. The light in the barn glows dimly, encouraging me forward. As I press open the gate, the familiar voice that calls out signals the perpetual ache in my chest to flare, leaving me rubbing at it in hopes of a little relief.

“Coming back for another round?” Cash hollers.

As I step into the light, I find my best friend standing in the middle of the ring, pulling his gloves off with his teeth, his attention cast down.

“Didn’t think the wife would be happy that you’re out so late, but I could go for another round. Or we could grab a whiskey and relax instead,” he suggests, still not looking up.

“I’d kill for a drink with my best friend,” I rasp, the words barely audible as I force them out past the lump in my throat.

The whoosh of breath escaping Cash is audible as he snaps his head up and almost falls back onto his ass.

“The fuck,” he mumbles, stumbling forward and gripping his thighs.

“I could go for a round or two in the ring, if you’d prefer,” I offer, trying to lighten the mood.

Jaw slack and his hands still in his gloves, Cash gapes at me. The light above him highlights the graying at his temples, but for the most part, his hair is still a rich chocolate brown.

He’s thicker than the last time I was this close to him. Probably because he spends more time working on the property than in the office these days. Though his skin is tanner than it was those last couple of years I spent with him, when he lived and breathed James Whiskey, his face has barely aged. He looks like my best friend from ten years ago.

The anger forming on his face as he realizes I’m not actually dead is familiar to me too. I’ve seen this expression a thousand times. During our teenage years, and especially during those months when he was taking over his family business while also getting precariously close to losing the love of his life.

“Or we can chat while we box,” I offer, walking closer and snagging a pair of gloves hanging on a hook on the wall. Probably left behind by one of his brothers.

I step on one rope and tug the other up so I can dip between them, and then I stand stock-still, giving Cash a

minute to catch a breath.

“You’re alive?” he asks, scanning me up and down.

I pat at my own chest. “Appear to be.”

Cash’s eyes turn to slits. “You fucking died. I named my kid after you. We have a memorial every year...” He trails off, his voice steeped in agony.

“I’ve seen pictures. He’s a cute kid. Obviously, he looks more like Grace.”

He lunges for me. I don’t stop him. His first hit is a punch to my gut. I grunt at the ache, but I don’t stop him. Don’t fight back.

“What the *fuck*, Frank? Where the fuck have you been?” he howls, this time landing an uppercut.

I bounce back to give him a moment to recover. “Maine.”

He hits me again, this time across the chin. I grimace as a shot of pain radiates through my jaw, but I keep my hands at my sides.

At my reaction, his eyes go wide, and he stumbles back, like he’s been snapped back to reality. His gloved hands fall to his knees, and he doubles over, his head hanging. “Fuck!” he cries, his emotions taking over.

I undo my gloves quickly and go to him, placing my hand on his back. I don’t have the words to explain or comfort him. I just keep my hand there, grounding him to the realization that, yes, I’m real, and I’m alive.

After a few deep breaths, he looks up at me, gloves still perched on his knees. “You’re really alive?”

I hold out my hand to help him up and nod. “Yeah, and you’ve gotten quite the left hook since I left.”

Coughing out a laugh, he pulls me into his chest and hugs me tightly.

I squeeze him back and revel in the way it feels to be so close to one of the people I care about most.

“You’re an asshole,” he mutters as he lets go. With his gloved hands bracketing my arms, he studies me. Or maybe he’s holding on to make sure I don’t disappear again.

“I know.”

He lowers his eyes and blows out a long breath. Then he shakes his head and tips his chin toward the door. “Let’s go have that drink.”

Outside, we sit in a pair of rocking chairs on either side of a whiskey barrel turned table with a bottle of whiskey and two glasses. He pours us each a generous serving from his favorite bottle. I was there ten years ago when he first thought of it—blended three times, unlike the normal two. Hope’s Angel—named after his wife and his mother.

“How’s Grace?” I ask when he hands me a glass.

He holds his glass inches from his lips and smiles. “Fucking perfect.” Taking a sip, he studies me, then clears his throat. “And busy as ever. Woman doesn’t know how to relax.” He laughs as he shakes his head. “I can’t believe I’m sitting next to my best friend right now.”

Following suit and sipping the amber liquid, I lean back in the chair and close my eyes for just a minute. I press the glass against my throbbing cheek and grin. Fucker probably left a bruise.

Everything about this is surreal. It’s like I’ve gone back in time—like he left on his honeymoon, and I didn’t die and spend years away from him.

“Tell me ’bout it. I can’t count the number of nights I’ve sat by myself, wishing I could have just one hour with you like this.”

“You need ice?” he asks, brow furrowed.

I shake my head and open my eyes. “Nah, I’m good.”

He nods, but he assesses me with such intent I have to force myself not to squirm.

“Ask what you want,” I tell him. He’s got to have thousands of questions.

“I don’t even know where to start,” he mutters, scratching at his chin. “Actually...” With his elbows on each armrest, he pulls himself up a little straighter. “I have no idea what to even say. I’m so fucking pissed and so fucking happy. I just...fuck, Frank. You were dead.”

“You sound like Ellie.” I smile just thinking of my fiery girl. She almost took me out too when she saw me again. God, how has it been two months already?

Cash smirks. “And who’s Ellie?”

I can’t help the way my face lifts, even though it hurts to smile. “My world.”

With a shake of his head, he laughs. “Never thought I’d see the day.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Are you married?” he questions, his tone guarded.

“Nah.” I drop my head back against the chair and let the warmth, not from the whiskey but from the thought of Ellie, spread from my stomach through my limbs. “But hopefully soon.”

Cash chuckles. “I remember that feeling.”

“It’s why I’m here, honestly.” I blow out a breath, my heart squeezing in my chest. “I need your help.”

With a nod, he scoots forward in his seat, attention locked on my face. “Of course. Am I allowed to ask where you’ve really been all these years?”

“You can ask me anything. I trust you understand that you can’t tell anyone. Not even Grace.”

He winces and opens his mouth, ready to argue, but I put up my hand.

“For now. I hope to have dinner with you both soon. With both our families. But for now,” I rub at my leg and swallow thickly, “for now I need to focus on protecting Ellie.”

With a squeeze to my knee, Cash nods. “Of course. It’s between us.”

Confident I can trust him, I lay out what happened ten years ago. How my brother was blackmailing Cash's brother-in-law, Jay. How Jay saved my life by shooting my brother. And how, if I hadn't gone underground after that, the Mob would have come after Jay and his sister. A person can't just kill the head of the Mob and get away with it.

"I needed help, and the only people who could help me wanted something in return," I explain.

"Fucking Jay," he mutters, shaking his head. "That man is still a pain in my ass."

I laugh. Doesn't surprise me, but my heart swells at the thought of him and Cat. "But he loves your sister."

Cash nods, rubbing his lip. "Yeah, like no one ever could. The man is unhinged and obsessed."

"Would you have it any other way?"

Though he clearly wants to say otherwise, he grumbles out a *no*. "Also, don't think I didn't notice how you coasted over that detail about fucking my sister."

I hold up my hands, not sure whether to laugh or shield myself from his retaliation. "Don't hit me again. I'm still in pain."

He rolls his eyes and sips his drink. "I suppose blowing yourself up to save her gets you off the hook."

Dropping my defenses now that I know he's not going to take me out, I lean back in my chair.

"So the FBI blackmailed you into faking your own death and taking over as head of the Mob so you could what? Dismantle it?" He scoffs. "That's fucked up."

I shrug. "It's not so terrible. I keep the bad guys from being too bad," I say, though that's beyond an oversimplification. "And that wasn't the only issue. Someone has been taking out members of both families, and apparently, I was on her list."

"It's a woman?" he asks, shocked.

I run my finger over the rim of my glass. “Yeah. Anyway, Ellie recently came back into my life and—”

Cash holds up his hand. “Wait. Ellie. *The* Ellie?”

I smirk. “Yeah.”

“Holy fuck,” he whispers, blinking at me. “Didn’t she marry the mafia boss?”

I grit my teeth to rein in the rage that bubbles up at the mention of Lorenzo Romano. “She was forced into it.”

Cash scrubs at his face and sighs. “I’m trying to keep up, but this is like one of those damn telenovelas you used to drone on about.”

“Tell me about it. Long story short, she escaped her abusive husband, and she’s in hiding. I need papers so we can enroll her kids in school. The government won’t help me, and obviously, I can’t use my connections.”

“She has kids?”

I smile as images of her boys surface. The boys I already love like they’re my own. “Yeah. You should see them. They’re awesome. Lo is eight, and he’s so fucking smart. He’s already got a better left hook than you.”

He laughs. “Tell that to your face.”

“And Leo. God, that kid. He’s four and so talkative and funny.”

“You’re really all-in?” he asks, a hint of awe in his tone.

“I am. But I don’t want to throw kindle onto the fire that is this war between the families. I’ve kept it at bay for years. I’ve run the Mob in secret for a decade. The fucking Irish Ghost. The mystery behind it all has kept the Italians just nervous enough not to fuck with me. But if he finds out I have his wife and kids,” I grit my teeth, hating even having to refer to them as his, “the blood that will spill could paint the streets of Boston ten times over.”

He shakes his head. “This is insane. You’re alive. You’re the head of the Mob, and you’re also working for the

government. Did I get all that right? You've reunited with the girl you used to go on about in high school, the girl you saved yourself for," he says, leveling me with an intense look.

"Ellie was always meant to be mine."

"But she married him. And she had kids with him. Kids she's now kidnapped. You'll be an accessory to kidnapping, Frank. You can't come back from that."

And he's worried that if he helps me, he'll never see me again. We can't come back to Boston if I do this. I never thought I could, but this will solidify that notion. If we change her kids' names and move forward as different people, we'll always be on the run. We'll spend our lives hiding from her psycho ex. There's no coming back from this.

"I know." It's all I can say. Because there's no other option. "But what would you do? If Grace was in danger. What if her ex-husband hadn't just cheated on her? What if he'd put his hands on her, hurt her, *raped her*? What would you do then? Walk away and let her fend for herself?"

Cash's dark eyes ignite and his jaw hardens. He's practically vibrating with anger at the images I've conjured and the mention of Grace being in any sort of danger. "I'd do whatever it fucking took."

I survey the land before us, the gorgeous property, and the life he's built. Damn it, I can't help but be proud of the man he's become. I want it too. I want to build a house for Ellie and the boys. I want to build a life with her. "I can't wait for you to meet her."



CASH AGREES TO HELP, and since it's late, I spend the night in his guest house on the property. The hours we spend in those rocking chairs, sharing a bottle of whiskey, catching up on our lives, laughing over bullshit I've forgotten, and just hanging

out, are fucking idyllic. But the moment he hands me the documents I need the next afternoon, I'm hugging him goodbye. I don't let myself wonder if I'll see him again. No, my adrenaline's pumping through my body and my fingers are aching to hold Ellie. That's enough to keep me focused on the task at hand.

I'm disappointed to find the house so quiet when I return a little after nine. No doubt the boys are already in bed, so I head straight for the stairs, taking them two at a time and dying to wrap my arms around my girl.

When I open the door to her room, I find it dark and empty. I peek in the bathroom, but it's unoccupied as well.

In the light of the moon, I finally see her, standing on the deck, hair falling down her back as she stares out at the ocean.

Heart pounding with a need to touch her, I cross the space quickly and throw open the door. But before I reach for her, I let her know it's me. I'm painfully aware that I can't sneak up on her. "Hey, baby," I rasp, itching to touch her.

She spins around, her gaze sweeping over me. "Irish." Her voice is a pained whisper.

"I missed you." Unable to hold myself back any longer, I reach for her. Needing to touch her. To kiss her. To just fucking hold her.

She smirks, her lips a bright red, even in the dark. The color is so unlike her. Before I can ask about it, though, she drops to her knees, and all thoughts vanish from my mind.

"Me too. Let me show you how much."

All my blood rushes to my cock as she unbuckles my belt and works my pants down my thighs. In the span of a couple of heaving breaths, she has my hard dick in her hand. She licks her red lips, pulling a groan from me. Goddamn, they're going to look gorgeous wrapped around my cock, staining it with that color. I want her mouth on mine so badly, but I can't find the words to tell her when her tongue darts out and her eyes lock on mine while she lifts my shaft slowly.

"*Fuck,*" I rasp, entranced by the siren kneeling at my feet.

She sucks my cock into her mouth and moans around it, her tongue flicking along my shaft.

With my palm pressed to her cheek, I stroke her smooth skin, relishing the way she bobs back and forth. Jesus Christ. I'm already so close. My balls tighten, though I grit my teeth to stave off my orgasm. "Baby, I'm gonna come, and you know my rule," I grit out.

She doesn't stop, though. Instead, she grabs my ass and pulls me tight to her. And dammit if I can stop myself from swelling and exploding down her throat.

"Get up here," I say, grasping her upper arms and pulling her to my chest. I devour her lips the minute we're pressed together. With her ass gripped tightly so she can't escape, I growl. "You're gonna pay for that, baby. I come in your pussy. That's the rule."

She bites her lip and lowers her lashes. "I've got a present for you."

God, if this woman shows me a positive pregnancy test right now, I'll fucking drop to my knees and cry. It's all I want. Her pregnant with my baby. Her as my wife. Growing old together, spending our life together. "All I need is you. You know that."

She squirms out of my arms. "Let me show it to you."

Watching her walk through the balcony doors and into her room, I sigh. Because that's how this goes. I'm gonna spend the rest of my life following her like the damn dogs do.

Silently, she hands me a box about eight inches long and only a couple of inches wide. It's white with no markings on it.

"What do you got here, baby?" I ask as I pop the lid off.

Inside, stretched along the length of the box, is a silver necklace with a claddagh pendant.

"I saw it in town. It reminded me of you."

I smile and run a finger over it. "I love it."

“Here, let me put it on you,” she offers, taking the box from my hand.

Dropping my chin, I glance at the necklace I rarely take off—the one that holds the key to my office. Without a second thought, I pull it over my head and drop it on the bedside table, then I spin so she can drape the new one around my neck.

She shuffles up behind me and presses her lips to the skin between my shoulder blades and sighs. My stomach twists at the gesture. It’s sweet and gentle, but it’s all wrong. She’s holding back.

With an arm over either of my shoulders, she slides the necklace across my skin and clasps it at my nape, her small fingers brushing my skin and sending a skittering of shivers down my body. Her forehead falls to the back of my neck, and she breathes deeply again.

“What’s wrong, baby?” I don’t turn around when I ask. Instead, I give her the opportunity to collect herself. Maybe talking to my back will make it easier to open up. She’s been conditioned to be so closed off, but little by little, she’s been letting me in. She’s yet to say I love you, and I can’t fucking fault her for it. She struggles with emotions in general. Who wouldn’t after having to hide them for so long from the people who were supposed to protect her?

First her mother, then from the man she spent her life with.

A husband’s job is to protect his wife. The amount of damage that man did instead blows my fucking mind.

“I love you, Ellie. You can tell me anything,” I whisper, giving her what I think she needs.

She nods against my back, but I can practically hear her heartbreak in the way she sucks in a breath.

“Just tired,” she murmurs. “Can we go to sleep?”

I turn around and pull her against my chest. “Of course, baby. Let’s go to bed.”

Hours later, she gently extricates herself from my hold and pads across the floor, then out the door. Thinking she just

needs a little air, I roll over and let the exhaustion pull me back under.

I'm not sure how long she's gone, but when I wake again, her side of the bed is cold. Gut clenching, I stumble out of the bedroom on a search for her. Expecting to find her downstairs, cuddled up with the dogs, I shuffle down the hall, rubbing the sleep from my eyes.

The last thing I expect is to find the door to my office wide open. I slow at the doorway and do a double take. Because there is Ellie, standing in front of the whiteboard filled with picture after picture of every murder she's ever committed.

"Fuck."

ELLIE

Broken and unsure of how tonight would go, I sent Alesia to a hotel with the boys. I spent the day there with them and only returned an hour ago. When Frank still wasn't here, I started to wonder if he was ever coming back or if the FBI was readying to storm the place.

I hugged my boys close and made sure they had a perfect last day with me. The ocean, the candy store, ice cream, pizza, and lots of laughs. They'll never wonder whether I love them. I made Alesia promise that no matter what happens, she'll keep running with them. She swore to me she'd never let Lorenzo near them again. Or Frank.

And then I waited.

I watched the roiling ocean waters, wondering if I had the strength to do it. Could I kill him? The dozens of men I'd killed had meant nothing to me. And every one of them had been evil.

But most importantly, it'd been me or them. My sister or them. *My kids* or them.

That was the answer I needed. I could do this, because my choices were a life with my kids or Frank.

My kids had to come first.

But I was numb, sick to my stomach, and fucking devastated.

It had all been a lie. A beautiful one, but a lie all the same.

Of course he didn't love me. He wasn't proud of me for protecting myself. He didn't understand me. How could anyone love a monster?

Was any part of him conflicted? Was any of it real? I'd pondered those questions, wringing my hands while I surveyed the ocean and the stars above it.

And then he'd appeared. As if answering my questions, he looked at me like I was everything he ever wanted. Reached for me, cried out for me, held me...

And I swallowed down my pride, my emotions, the betrayal...

I tried to go to that place in my mind. The place where I locked my consciousness away when Lorenzo would force himself on me. I tried to separate myself from what was happening between us, but it was so much harder. Because Frank is the only man I've ever loved. I should have known I couldn't do it.

Nothing could have prepared me for what I find when I finally sneak down the hall. Naturally, Daisy and Jones follow behind me, but I scurry to Frank's bedroom door and usher them in so their whining doesn't wake him. Then I take a deep breath, pull my shoulders back, and unlock the door to his office.

The tiniest sliver of me believed that Hazel's words were a lie. That she was jealous and fucking with me. That Frank loves me and this was all some gigantic joke.

But all of that goes up in smoke as I scan picture after picture from every crime scene.

But the ultimate betrayal? The note beside the pictures. The descriptions I provided to Frank beside the crime scene photos of Vinny's death.

He reached for her.

Without hesitating, she plunged the knife her grandmother gave her into his throat.

Considered her next move for a moment—thirty seconds at most—then slid it across his throat.

My stomach drops as bile works its way up my throat. I cover my mouth, because I don't need any more DNA evidence tying me to what I need to do.

He took my words. He took every heartbreaking confession I gave him, and he put it all on this damn whiteboard.

He set a trap, and I walked right into it. I fucking sprinted through it, danced, fucking laughed and smiled, believing his every word.

A sob escapes my throat, but I keep my hand clapped over my mouth to quiet my cries. Moving closer, I inspect every picture. The murders are separated by date. Beside each one is a list of details. Place, location, time. Then a picture of me, always from the side or the back.

Surveillance photos from cameras I knew were there. Lorenzo always gave me the specs for the hotels. I knew which direction to look in so I'd never get caught.

As much as I hate my husband, I didn't lose sleep over taking these men out. Every one was a traitor. Men who used Lorenzo's operation and the power he'd given them to do awful things. But he didn't want his men to know he was behind their deaths. He couldn't risk a rebellion in his organization. So I was his secret weapon.

Dead center is the one photo that I didn't expect. It's a still image from a security camera. Taken a week or two before I fled with my children. I was exhausted that day. The nightmares the night before had been horrific, and Leo had woken up sick that morning. I'd wanted to be the one to hold him. Alesia could have taken care of him, sure, but as his mother, I couldn't not rub his back as he threw up. I couldn't not kiss my baby's neck and rock him to sleep. I didn't need sleep. I just needed my boys.

But according to this evidence, that choice cost me everything. I was tired, so I got sloppy. I didn't know it at the

time, but the image makes it plain as day. In it, I'm looking directly into the camera. My green eyes are worn down, and my red wig is pulled back instead of hiding my face. That must have been the moment Frank finally found me. Recognized me.

And then he plotted and schemed. Made this elaborate plan to get me here. And I walked right through the door and handed him every piece of evidence he needed to take me down.

Hazel told me he was obsessed with taking down Bella Morte, and she wasn't kidding.

I *am* his obsession, just not in the way I wanted to be.

My stomach plummets when the blade of a knife glints under the lamplight. It's peeking out from beneath a towel on a table beside the whiteboard. My feet carry me closer, and suddenly my fingers are circling the stubby base. It's a weight I'm familiar with. One I thought I'd never feel again. After experiencing what I thought was the love of the man I'd always craved, I threw this knife into the ocean, sure that part of my life was over.

What a fucking fool I was.

I examine the details of the whiteboard again, my heart heavy, as footsteps pad down the hall behind me.

Then I take a deep breath and wait.

"*Fuck,*" he says, though I don't turn around at the sound. I'm not sure I can do this if I look at him yet.

"Yeah," I mutter. "Fuck is right."

"It's not what you think," he urges, his voice emphatic.

"Is this not a board covered in photos of and information about every person I've ever killed?" Angry, I turn around and hold the knife up. "Is this not the weapon I used to do it? A weapon I very clearly remember throwing into the fucking ocean after you told me you loved me and promised to protect me for the rest of our damn lives."

I'm unhinged, my heart beating so loud I can barely hear his response. My vision tunnels, and my breath goes ragged. Everything around him is blurry, and even his face is hazy. I blink a few times as he gets closer and flinch when he brings his arms up like he might come at me.

In warning, I hold up the knife again, pointing it toward him.

He raises his hands in front of him. "I'm not going to hurt you," he says slowly.

I laugh. "Not any more than you already have. That's for damn sure." With a step back, I tip my chin to the whiteboard. "You missed one, though." My voice is eerily placid, even to my ears, and a calm settles over me. Because I know what I must do.

His brows furrow in confusion. "Huh?"

"You've created a pretty extensive list of the men I've killed. But you're missing one."

"Who?" he asks, tilting his head and scanning the board.

"You."

FRANK

For a moment, I hold my breath, readying for her to lunge at me. I can easily subdue her since I've studied the way she attacks for years. Granted, this is not the way I saw this playing out. When I lured her here months ago with promises of a fresh start, I wasn't sure she'd take the bait. Though it was worth a try, I honestly didn't know if she'd show up.

There was no way in hell I expected her to pull up on the same night she got the call from Bennett, who'd spun an elaborate tale about being an attorney handling a long-lost relative's estate.

Never imagined she'd kill three people and make her way here in the middle of the night with her kids in tow.

But the most unexpected thing, what took me by complete surprise, was how I fell head over heels in love with her—again—almost the minute I saw her.

Bennett didn't think I would, either. Which is why he's so fucking pissed right now.

None of this was part of the plan. I was supposed to get my evidence, hand it over to the feds, and let them deal with her. Then Shane and I would start fresh in a new place, and I'd be done running.

I've never been so happy to be wrong.

Although, with the way she's gripping the knife—the one I located quite easily and intended to plant at Lorenzo's house

before turning him in as the killer—it looks like she isn't too happy with me.

“Baby, I know you're upset,” I say softly, hoping to calm her.

Ellie's eyes turn to slits. “He told me he was responsible for your death. So he's the reason you lost everything. You know that? He saw my tattoo”—she slaps a hand over her heart—“and lost it. Told me I'd never have you.” Swinging the knife wildly, she takes a step toward me. “So it's because of me that you're a ghost. Because I loved you.”

“Loved?” I whisper.

Her face crumples. “I loved you so damn much. I never would have stopped,” she whispers.

“Don't say that,” I beg, pushing myself closer despite the weapon she's wielding.

Her shoulders sag, and she lowers the knife to her side. “Why? It's the truth. If you'd come back for me—”

I press my fingers to her lips. “No. Don't say that. Because it means that at some point, you stopped, El. I can't live in a world where you don't love me, baby. Your love is the only thing I've ever needed. And I love you so much, Ellie. So *fucking* much.”

Her eyes swim with anguish, and her voice comes out pained. “I can't trust you. And even if I could, how the hell could you love me knowing this is who I am?” She throws out her arm, knife still in hand, and points to the board. “I did that.” She moves the tip of the blade to the image of Vincent Moretti lying in a pool of blood, his throat slit. “And this one.” She whips the weapon to the photo of a man on the ground covered in his own blood. “And this one.” One of my brother's associates.

“And honestly”—she shrugs with one shoulder while waving the knife too damn close to her face without even noticing it—“I don't feel bad.”

Hands up in front of me, searching for words to placate her, I open my mouth. But she's on a roll. Body clearly restless

and coursing with adrenaline, she presses closer to the board, looking at it now instead of me. “Did you know this guy sold women for sex? And him.” She rips this picture right off the board and drops it to the hardwood floor. “He raped a fourteen-year-old. And him.” Her voice breaks as she runs the knife over yet another photo. “He laughed when I told him I knew about the kids he’d touched. *Laughed.*”

I wince and my stomach rolls, but I force myself to step into her space, to help her see what I see. “I don’t think you’re a monster. Every single one of those men got what they deserved. And you didn’t cause my death. Neither did Lorenzo. I did.”

“What?” she whispers, taking a step back.

I blow out a breath. “Can you put down the knife? I’ll tell you everything.”

Her answering laugh is sardonic and weary. She doesn’t trust me, and I deserve that. I’m not sure there is any way to come back from this, but I have to try. She needs to see that while this all started as a trap, the only person who fell for anything here is me. I fell so fucking hard for her that the second she stepped across the threshold into my house, there wasn’t a shot in hell I’d go through with Bennett’s plan.

When I take a step closer to her, reaching out, she flinches.

My heart fucking cracks. “Ellie, I’m not going to hurt you.”

“I know you aren’t going to hurt me,” she hisses. “I don’t flinch because I’m afraid of you. I flinch because, for the first time in twenty years, I allowed myself to trust someone.” The glare she levels me with would make a lesser man cower. “I let you see my emotions, Frank. To the rest of the world, I’m a robot, emotionless. I have to be that way. It’s the only way I can physically hold my body together to keep from flinching when people come near me. But I never did that with you.” She laughs again like she’s angry. “But now, I can’t even trust my own fucking instincts. I trusted you. I believed I was safe with you. That I could show you who I really am. I let myself be vulnerable. And yeah, maybe that meant if you got too

close, too quick, I'd flinch. I'd show my nervousness. But I wasn't scared of you then, and I'm certainly not scared of you now."

My heart aches for her. She has no idea how much I love her. No idea how I plan to make this right. Nothing will keep me from allowing her to have that small luxury. One that should be an inalienable right. The ability to be herself. Fuck if I'd take that away from her. She'll live the rest of her life trusting that she can be whoever the hell she wants to be. That no one will ever hurt her.

That is a fucking promise I can keep.

"What would make you comfortable right now?" I ask softly, breathing through the ache in my chest.

She rolls her eyes and huffs out a breath. "Stop pretending you care. Stop—" She bites her lip and pulls in a breath through her nose. "You used me. You *used my kids* to get me to trust you. I *trusted* you." Her voice breaks, and her shoulders slump in defeat.

Fuck the knife. I reach for her, prepared to be sliced open. If that's what it takes to touch her, I'll risk it. But instead of attacking, she melts against my chest, her body shaking with her desperate cries.

"Yes," I whisper. "I used what you told me to put the pieces together," I admit, my lips pressed to her hair.

She stiffens beneath me, but I squeeze her tighter, forcing her to listen.

"So I could find a way to pin it on Lorenzo. Not you," I rasp. "Never you. The minute I saw you, I knew I couldn't go forward with the plan. Fuck, El, I'll take the goddamn blame. I'll walk into the FBI office and take the blame for every fucking one of these deaths before I'll let this touch you. It's me and you. Always. You can trust me. You can love me. Please, baby. Please love me." I break, because the idea that I've lost her, that I've cost her more pain, wrecks me.

"Where were you?" she whispers into my chest. "Where did you go? You disappeared, and then the lawyer called about

the house...”

I go rigid and pull Ellie away from me so I can look at her. “Who called about the house?”

“The lawyer. He called and said I could sell the house. Was that your way of getting rid of me? You all set now that you have your proof?”

Anger burns in my gut, its flames licking up my insides. I have to grit my teeth to keep from squeezing Ellie’s arms too tightly. *Fucking Bennett*. “Elena, I swear to Christ, if you hear nothing else I say today, I want you to hear this: I fucking love you. I have loved you since we were kids. You don’t scare me. Nothing on that board scares me. Ask me what happened to your uncle.” I cock a brow, challenging her. Because, fuck, if this is what it takes, then I’ll gladly tell her everything. “Want to see pictures of what I did to him?”

She sucks in a breath, her eyes going wide. “*What?*”

“The reason I disappeared when we were kids? The reason my grandfather sent me to boarding school? It’s because I saw what that piece of shit did to you. Your fucking scars. I know how you got them. I came back. After we went to the beach that day. You forgot your necklace in my bag, and I thought I could return it to you while your mom was gone. But instead, I saw what he did to you. How he *hurt* you.”

Her eyes glisten as she studies me.

“So I returned the punishment. I told you I’d make anyone who hurt you wish for death, and it’s the goddamn truth. I know it is, because it wouldn’t be the first time. I showed up at your uncle’s house that night and burned him alive. And I *laughed* while it happened. So no, Elena, you don’t scare me. I’m not running from you now, and I wasn’t running back then. My grandfather saw what I was capable of and got me the hell away from my father’s lifestyle. The only regret I have about any of that is that I lost you in the process.”

Her eyes dance back and forth as she scrutinizes me, looking for the lie. She won’t find it. Even at twelve, I knew right from wrong, and there was nothing wrong about what

happened to that piece of shit who laid his hands on her. I'd do it all again in a heartbeat.

"You killed Tony?" she whispers, as if the concept is too foreign to understand.

"Yes," I huff out a breath. "Listen, we have a lot to discuss, but we need to get back to the most important part. What the fuck did the lawyer say?"

Shaking her head, she spins out of my hold and paces to the far end of the room. "He said the trustee approved the sale," she explains, turning back and striding to the opposite wall. "That I'd lived up to my end of the bargain. That if I said the word, the place would be sold. They have a buyer lined up already, and if I tell them to proceed, the money will be deposited into my account."

"Motherfucker," I curse. "Then what happened?"

She shrugs. "Nothing. I spent the next few days going crazy and wondering if you were ever coming back. I was losing my mind and needed to get out of the house. Hazel and I met for lunch, and she told me all about your obsession with Bella Morte. That's when I put two and two together and bought that necklace, knowing I needed a way to get access to the key you wear around your neck."

"What?" I snag her by the wrist, stopping her. All the pacing is making me dizzy, and I must have heard her wrong. "Hazel mentioned Bella Morte?"

She tilts her head and rolls her eyes. "She told me about your FBI gig and your obsession with the serial killer, a.k.a. me."

I stumble back, bumping into my desk in the process. *What the fuck is she talking about?* Running my hand over my head, I pull on my neck. "How would she know that?"

"Because you told her, you idiot. What the fuck were you thinking? I thought the FBI was more secretive than that."

I shake my head. "Ellie, I never told her a goddamn thing. No one but my handler knows that I work for the FBI. *No one.* Not even Shane."

She huffs out a laugh. “Well, she does. She told me all about this room and your obsession with me.” Smirking, she lets out a hum. “To be fair, she didn’t know she was talking about me. Unlike you, I don’t go around announcing that I’m a damn serial killer to the people I fuck.”

I wince. “Shit, El. It’s no secret we slept together, but I didn’t tell her any of that. We hooked up here and there over the years. She wasn’t my girlfriend, and I didn’t tell her shit. She doesn’t even know my real name.”

Ellie gasps and claps a hand to her mouth. “Fuck. She called you Frank. She *does* know.”

“Where are the kids?” I ask, dread unfurling in my stomach.

She bites her lip as if she’s still not sure she trusts me.

“El, look at me, baby.” I step in front of her and grasp her wrists gently. “I went to Boston to get approval to take you and the kids with me. I wanted to get the papers for the boys. But my handler—the only one who knows my real identity—got upset. Fuck. In the end, I knew they’d never let me go. That I’d be stuck playing this damn game forever.” Pressing my luck, I brush my knuckles over her cheek. “So I went to see my best friend. I told him all about you and the boys, and he got me what we need. New identities and all the paperwork that goes with them.” I point to the door. “I’ve got everything we need to start over. You and the boys? You’re mine. You’ll be my wife. They’ll be my kids. That’s the only way this ends. Us. Together. Now tell me, where the fuck are our sons?”

Tears well in her eyes, and she sucks in a muffled breath. “You’re serious? After seeing all this,” she motions toward the board again, “you still want me? You still want my boys?”

“I don’t want you, Ellie; *I need you*. You’re my family. Now, please, baby, you need to tell me where the boys are so I can make sure they’re safe.”

“They’re with my sister,” she rushes out. “They’re fine.”

“Take me to them,” I demand, my heart racing with panic. Because, fuck, I never thought Bennett would betray me in

this way, and now I don't know what to think. We served overseas together. We've worked together for the last ten years. Sure, he's upset with me because I want out, and there's no way in hell he believes my bullshit about Lorenzo being responsible for the murders and not Ellie. He helped me lure her here; he knew the plan.

A plan that went out the window the moment I saw her again.

"It's the middle of the night, Frank. They're sleeping."

"I need to see them. Please. Take me to them so I can make sure they're okay," I beg.

Before I deal with all the other details of this clusterfuck, I need this. And I can only hope that once I deal with Bennett and Hazel, Ellie will give me the opportunity to make this up to her.

Frank has an answer for every one of my questions, and he's given them all willingly.

Why he faked his own death—apparently, he was protecting his best friend's sister.

How he managed to stay underground and remain head of the Mob—his second in command also works for the FBI and served with him overseas.

The one question he can't answer? How Hazel found out about all of it. Though he suspects it was his FBI handler. According to Frank, he's the only one who knew where he was. And he's the only person who knows that Frank wants out.

The man also knows who I am.

Frank swears he'll take care of it. That he won't be a problem. But after the life I've lived, I don't like loose ends.

But killing an FBI agent probably isn't the best way to start my new life.

Decisions, decisions.

The truth is that this summer has played out a bit too perfectly. My escape has been a bit too easy.

I'm just supposed to accept that we have papers for the boys and we can move forward with our life? That he's spent the last ten years hunting me, that he ensnared me and got me right where he wanted me, only to decide, the moment we

were in the same room again, that instead of turning me in, he wanted to make a life with me?

Yeah, I'm not sure I buy that.

But what's the alternative? Walking away from him? Running again? Spending the rest of my life *missing* him?

Maybe.

Or the third option—I uncover the truth. I follow him and verify his claims.

Option three is why I'm here now. And it's the reason I once again left Alesia with the boys. It'll be the last time, because Frank has offered her a fresh start too. She can stay with us, or she can go to France.

Frank's best friend from high school, the one who supposedly procured the documents for my boys, has a sister. And according to the digging I've done, the woman really does own Bouvier Media Company, like Frank says. It's the largest media company in the world these days, and he said there's a job waiting for Alesia if she wants it.

No matter what I decide about Frank, I won't let her pass this opportunity up. Alesia deserves a fresh start. She deserves a life that's unmarred by our mother's misdeeds and my husband's threats. I want her as far away from Boston as she can get. So Paris seems like as good an option as any.

Shane has a position lined up with Frank's friend's whiskey business. Looks like every one of us is headed toward a damn happily ever after. If only I believed in that stuff.

Do I believe in that stuff?

Sitting in the diner across from a park in Boston, I'm still pondering that question. Frank assured me that he was making the trip so he could introduce Shane to his friend. That he'd be back in the morning. So why is he meeting with Hazel now? Why is he touching her cheek and gazing at her with so much intensity?

Does he really take me for a fool? After everything he's dug up on me?

I flick on the earpiece and listen. When investigating, it's helpful to live with the person under surveillance. It was disgustingly easy to slip the listening device into his jeans before he left this morning. And I don't even feel bad about it.

He strokes her chin, and my stomach clenches in anger. I want to rip her eyes out. And claw at his.

Then his deep voice reverberates in my ear. "Not sure what he paid you, but I hope it was worth it."

"Please, Frank, I'm so sorry," she mumbles, her voice meek. Her lip wobbles, and twin tears track down her face.

That hand he was using to caress her face suddenly grips her chin, and he yanks her head so she's forced to look at him. "You don't know the meaning of that word. *Sorry*. But you will," Frank coos. His voice is soft like butter, even as he cuts her like he's wielding a knife. "You'll go to the hotel. Key's in the outside pocket. Dress in the clothing packed in that bag. Don't forget the...accessories. Be sure you follow every instruction to the letter. At ten p.m., you'll walk into the casino with your hair pulled back. And you'll look at the damn camera. Understand?"

"Frank, I—"

Pressing his fingers to her lips, he silences her. "Do you understand?" he grits out slowly, annunciating each word.

She bites her lip and nods, tears still running down her face.

"Good, now go." With that, he turns away and scans the park.

The late afternoon shadows steal his features for a moment, but as he breaks into the sunlight again, he's looking in my direction. Almost like he feels my eyes on him, but from here, there's no way he can see me.

What are you planning, Irish? And why are the possibilities alone making me all tingly?

FRANK

“Shouldn’t Seamus be here?” Shane grumbles as he settles into the booth at the diner.

“He will be,” I reply, my attention drifting to the door, where my traitor of a friend—ex-friend—should appear at any moment. All it took was three phone calls to determine that the last ten years of my life had been a lie.

Three fucking calls.

Seamus Bennett played me. In war, soldiers have no choice but to rely on one another. We trust each other with our fucking lives. Naturally, one would assume that trust would extend outside the framework of battle. I should have known better. Should have vetted him. But I assumed the marines had done their fucking job.

Though I can’t blame the institution. It’s not their fault.

It’s mine.

It’s no secret that Bennett came from nothing. That the Marine Corps was his ticket to getting out of a shitty upbringing. A ticket to a better future. He isn’t unique in that way. Plenty of people join the military for the stability. A steady income, a place to live, a place to belong. And the G.I. Bill only sweetens the deal. It’s a great incentive, especially when the country is at war and the government needs more boots on the ground.

During the time we served, Bennett told me about his family, about his poor upbringing, and I opened up about my

life. I didn't grow up poor the way he did. My family had money, but even more valuable than that, my family possessed a great deal of power. The McCabes have run the Mob in Boston since my ancestors traveled across the ocean from Ireland in the 1940s.

Personally, I've always hated my family name. Hated the affiliations. For years, I lived my life as a James, though I kept the McCabe name until my death a decade ago. I spent my weekends and holidays with Cash's family, and any time I came home from deployment, the Jameses were there to greet me. While Cash's father was a scoundrel no better than mine, his brothers and sister were family to me.

But Bennett knew who I was, and he used that to weasel his way into the Mob. What I didn't know ten years ago was that Bennett was dishonorably discharged not long after I got out. He didn't go to work for the feds. He went to work for my brother.

And my brother put him in charge of convincing me to work for the family. They concocted a plan, knowing the only way I'd do it was if I thought I was a double agent. I'd made it clear since the time I was a teenager that I'd never live my life the way my brother and my father did.

At the time, I didn't realize it, but my connection to the James family made me even more enticing to my brother. He wanted the James money just as badly as Bennett did. He even tried blackmailing Cat's husband to get it.

When it became clear that I wasn't going to bite—that I had no interest in the fake FBI offer he'd conjured—they dangled Bella Morte in front of me.

At the time, I had no idea it was Ellie. If I had, I'd have figured out a way to go to her. Maybe I could have spared her ten years of suffering. But then we wouldn't have Lo and Leo.

What happened in the past doesn't matter now. Only what's going to happen now that I know the truth. Bennett betrayed me. He never worked for the FBI. He dangled the right carrots in front of me and I fucking fell for it. I should have known. Things fell into place far too easily when I called

him ten years ago and told him I needed a way out of the situation when everything went to shit with Jay and Cat.

The reason he knew where I was, the reason he made things happen so quickly—the explosion, the cover-up—was because he was there with my brother.

And when my brother was dead, he set his sights on making me the successor so he could keep the money running to his bank account. Recruiting me and insisting he be my second-in-command ensured that. Every single piece fell into place far too easily. I should have known.

The truth is that I never questioned him. Never considered the idea that he could be a traitor. And I never would have had I not had Shane look at our books.

Shane found the issue immediately. The kid doesn't know the half of what he uncovered. How Seamus, a man he considered another uncle, has kept us locked in a gilded prison of our own making while he's been skimming off the organization's casino earnings and running the family business into the ground.

And the damn prison he kept me in—he didn't lie to Ellie about that. The deed is in a fucking trust, but I'm the damn beneficiary. My grandfather apparently purchased it decades ago. Seamus told me the government owned it...all this fucking time...

I clench my fists to keep my anger at bay. There's no point in looking back.

When Bennett steps through the door, he nods at the hostess, who smiles and immediately follows behind him with a pot of coffee like he's fucking royalty that should be served immediately. It's the treatment he's gotten used to as the right hand of the Irish Ghost.

I have to clench my fists under the table to keep from jumping up and squeezing his throat until his face turns blue. He almost cost me Ellie by telling Hazel everything. If Ellie wasn't the kind of woman who fights back, she could have run, and I may have never found her or the boys.

And for that, he'll pay.

“Not going to lie, I was surprised to get your call,” he says, sauntering up to the booth. He slides in across from me, bumping Shane's shoulder before he even notices he's there. “Oh shit, Shane. Didn't see you there.”

Shane shrugs. “It's fine. Not really sure why I'm here anyway.”

Both men look at me silently as the server turns over the mug in front of Bennett and fills it. Ready to get started, I wave, signaling for her to leave. She looks to Bennett, but he doesn't let his gaze wander from mine. He knows who's in charge when I'm around. He's not stupid enough to openly defy me. Only in secret does he betray so easily.

“Wanted to talk to you about the books,” I rumble.

He straightens, but his expression remains calm. Beside him, Shane studies me beneath furrowed brows. He knows the numbers, but he doesn't know where I'm going with this. Not yet, at least.

“Sure, what about?” Bennett replies, bringing his coffee to his lips.

“Shane, why don't you fill him in on the work you did for me?”

My nephew lays out what he found. How money is missing, even though a review of the ledgers from all our locations indicates that attendance is up and so are house wins.

Bennett shrugs. “That's so strange.”

I nod and stretch one leg, purposely knocking into Bennett's shin. He bites down on his cheek, but he can't hold back the grimace of pain.

“I thought so too. So I paid a visit to each location,” I offer.

The face he makes in response is even more pained than the last. He knows where I'm going with this. Good, let him squirm.

“You know what I found?” I ask, though I don’t wait for an answer. “Turns out you visited all of those locations too. Told them you were there to collect a fee. A weekly cut, if I’m not mistaken.” I scratch at my chin, catching the way Shane’s mouth pops open in my periphery. “Odd, isn’t it? Since I don’t remember telling you to collect a fucking fee. Is that something you think I would have forgotten, Shane?” I turn to my nephew.

His eyes bulge, and he clears his throat. “No, you forget nothing.”

“But that wasn’t the only interesting thing I discovered,” I continue, ignoring the way Bennett is now looking around the coffee shop. My voice *might* have gotten a little loud, and maybe a few people are starting to stare. “I called Devlin. You remember him, right? Strange guy with the foot cream? Remember him? He’d use it every night. Made the barracks smell like menthol. Turns out he went to work for the FBI. As did Rodrigues. You remember her? She lost a finger on our second tour. FBI scooped her up because of her coding skills. Doesn’t need the trigger finger for that. And then there’s Harrison.”

At the mention of our old buddy, Bennett swallows thickly.

“He runs the organized crime division for all of New England. Imagine his surprise when I told him I’d been working for him for ten years.”

Bennett lets out a nervous breath. “It’s not what you think.”

I nod toward the front of the restaurant, where Harrison sits with a few other men, all in plain clothes. “Yeah? Why don’t you share that info with him? He’s eager to hear all about what we’ve been working on.”

Bennett scrambles to his feet, his head whipping from one side to the other in search of a way out. But not only are the guys at Harrison’s table watching at the ready, a group of men in the back of the restaurant are glaring at him too. He spins and smacks straight into Harrison’s chest.

“Where ya going?” Harrison asks. “We have so much to catch up on.” He slides his arm around Bennett’s back, and in one quick move, he has him pinned to the table. I snatch my coffee off the surface before he makes contact, but Bennett’s cup tips over, and the hot liquid hits his face. Must still be pretty damn hot, because the traitor screams and bucks, but he can’t get out of Harrison’s hold.

“Whoops, I tripped,” Harrison says with a smirk at me. “Don’t disappear, Frank. We’ll need to debrief you.”

I nod. “You have my number. And my address,” I add.

Bennett glares at me. “I’ll tell them all about your serial killer.”

I grin. “Already did. Turns out the FBI isn’t all that interested in a person who’s taken out the worst of the worst. You’re probably safer in prison. Wouldn’t want her to go after you next,” I add with a wink.

Harrison pulls him to his feet and pushes him toward the door. His grip on his shoulders is the only thing that keeps Bennett from going down when he stumbles halfway across the dining room. It isn’t until he’s in the back of the unmarked car that I finally unclench my jaw.

“Wow, that was—” Shane starts.

“Fucking amazing,” I finish.

Shane chuckles and rubs his hand across his face. “So, the FBI?” he says, cocking his head to the side.

With a sigh, I put my elbows on the table and drop my head. “I’ll fill you in on everything soon. Right now, I have to go deal with another asshole.”

He smirks. “Ellie’s husband?”

I growl at that word. *Husband*. “Just stay far away from the city tonight. Head back to Maine. In a few weeks, if you want it, this can all be yours.”

Shane’s jaw falls open. “Huh?”

“Before my father and your father fucked everything up, it wasn’t such a bad gig,” I admit. “Personally, I never wanted it. This lifestyle isn’t for me, but I can’t make that decision for you. You can do honest work for Cash James, or you can find a way to lead this family.” I scrub at my chin. “If it’s not you or me, someone just as bad as our fathers could wind up in control. So while I don’t love the idea...”

He nods. “I understand.”

“You don’t,” I tell him honestly. “You won’t understand until you’re in it. But if you want it,” I shrug, “the choice is yours. Just run it like my grandfather did. His priority was helping the families in the neighborhood. He kept things as honest as he could, and he kept the Mafia at bay.”

“I can do that.”

“No need,” I say, standing from the booth and digging my wallet out of my pocket. “I’ve got the Mafia handled. What’ll be left of them after tonight, anyway.” I toss cash onto the table and give my nephew a nod, then head to my next stop.



THOUGH I’M NOT NORMALLY one to believe in revenge—more of a live and let live type of guy—I’m having a blast today because every single person I’m serving revenge upon has fucked with my girl, and for that, they’ll pay.

And the look on Lorenzo’s face when he walked into his dark office and found me sitting at his desk with my feet up and a gun pointed at him was worth the headache I’ll have to deal with when I explain it to Harrison.

Though maybe he’ll give me a pat on the back and thank me rather than reprimand me. I’m practically doing his job for him. Cleaning up the streets of Boston, one mobster at a time.

I chuckle to myself as Lorenzo narrows his eyes.

“The fuck are you doing in here?” he drawls, his voice thick with alcohol and his eyes rimmed with dark circles.

Dammit. I have to hold back a sigh as Lo beckons me from his eyes. This man is the devil, but his sons are my world.

“There are only two things I need from you,” I say, enunciating my words so he can’t claim not to understand.

He laughs. “And why the hell would I care what you need? Let me guess, the cunt ran off with you?” he scoffs. “Pathetic.”

“Your kids are great, by the way. Thanks for asking,” I grind out.

He pulls at his hair, leaving it sticking up wildly. “Just do it. You’re gonna shoot me, then just fucking have the balls to do it.”

I bite my lip and set the gun down on the desk, though I don’t take my hand off it.

“Whether I shoot you is up to you.”

He laughs and steps closer. His suit is wrinkled and baggy, like he’s been subsisting on alcohol alone. “Then I’ll go with *nah*. I’d rather you not.”

I smile. “Sorry. Not like that. I want a list.” I lift the gun and tap the barrel against the piece of paper in front of me. “Everyone who ever hurt her. Your name is obviously at the top of that list, but you’re the boys’ father. One day, they’ll ask about you, and I don’t want to have to lie. And I really don’t want to fucking tell them I killed their father. Doesn’t sit well right here.” I pound on my chest with the hand not holding the gun.

He scrutinizes me. “You’re really going to let me live? After what I did to her?”

I grind my teeth. Fuck. I don’t want to, but it’s what Ellie would want. She wouldn’t want her sons’ father’s blood on my hands.

Unless he forces me too.

“Don’t push me. Reminding me of what you stole from her is of no benefit to you,” I seethe.

“I didn’t steal shit,” he says weakly.

“Her fucking consent. You stole her choices. Her body. Her rights. You took it all, for what? Because she didn’t love you? You’re weak, Lorenzo. Only a weak man rapes his wife. Only a weak man holds a woman down. Only a weak man forces a woman to kill for him.”

“That the story she spun?” he taunts. “She killed Vinny all on her own. I took the blame, *I* protected her,” he rants.

“Because her mother sold her,” I growl. “And then you stole her. You aren’t the hero here, Romano. You’re cancer. Now sit in this fucking chair and give me a list. I want names. I want dates. Give me everything you have. Then you’ll sign away your rights to your boys. And you’ll promise to never come back. Because they are happy. Took them a while, but those boys? For the first time in their lives, they’re happy.”

I point to the chair and the piece of paper and pen on the desk.

Lorenzo grinds his teeth, but he sits without further argument.

I don’t take my eyes off him as he makes his list and then signs the papers I had drawn up. With nothing left to say, I point my gun at him. “Come near them again—even look at her—and I’ll end you without remorse.”

Then I turn and walk out the door.

As I hit the threshold, he sighs heavily. “Take care of them.” And then I hear the cock of a gun.

I don’t spin. I keep walking, right to the car. As I get in, the sound of his cowardice reverberates through the air. My head hits the steering wheel, and I let out a shuddering breath. Fuck. There will come a day when I’ll have to tell my sons that I was there the day their father died, but I’m just damn glad I can look them in the eye and tell them I didn’t pull the trigger.

ELLIE

At nine thirty, I stand outside the casino, hidden in the shadows beneath the trees. I watch as, one by one, my husband's associates enter the building, and it clicks.

"I will never hurt you, but I want the names of everyone who ever has."

When Antonio gets out of his Lincoln Town Car and ambles toward the door on the stubby legs that can barely hold up his weight, I practically squeal.

What are you doing, Irish?

My husband has been complaining about this casino since its inception. It's been cutting into his profits. He'd never allow the men who work for him to come here. And to spend time with the head of the Mob? No fucking way.

The sound of heels tapping against the sidewalk steals my attention, and I practically drop my jaw when a woman wearing a trench coat cinched tightly around her waist walks toward me. She's wearing a red wig pulled back tight on her head, and she's walking with her head up, staring straight into the camera on the outside of the building. But it's the glint of the knife in her hand that has me clamping my mouth shut to silence my scream.

That's my fucking knife.

And the boots clacking against the pavement look just like the Louboutins my husband always ordered me to wear. He

loved the red heels. Said it was poetic since I was spilling blood while wearing them.

To be fair, I didn't hate them.

I'm witnessing a woman that, by every indication, is Bella Morte strut toward the casino.

What the hell is going on? Just as I'm about to storm up to her and yank on that wig so I can see who she really is, a hand covers my mouth, an arm circles my waist, and I'm pulled back against a hard chest. "Don't make a sound," Frank grumbles, his breath warm against my ear.

With my heart beating out of my chest, I take in a deep breath through my nose and nod.

At my acquiescence, he spins me to face him. "What are you doing here?" he growls.

"What are *you* doing?" I hiss.

"Giving you options." He strokes my cheek, his touch so comforting I can't help but lean into it. "And keeping a promise," he whispers before pressing his lips against mine, like he just can't *not* do it.

"And what is that?"

"I'm going to make them all pay, baby. And then I'm going to let you decide. Do you want to be Elena and Frank McCabe, or do you want to be Ellie Irish? Do you want to move back to Boston? Take up residence on a tropical island? Fuck, El. Want to move to Montana and ride horses?"

I grimace at the thought. Hell no.

"Yeah, neither do I." He laughs. "But for you, I would. For you, I'd do anything. You want to stand here and watch it all burn with me? Or are we going inside and taking them apart piece by piece?"

My eyes dilate at the thought. God, he's fucking crazy. And he's mine. "You're serious?"

"As a heart attack. I'm killing a few birds with one fire. This casino has been a thorn in my side for over a year now.

Hazel needs to learn a lesson. And everyone else in there? They deserve what they have coming.”

Hazel.

She's the woman dressed as Bella Morte.

“Frank,” I whisper, almost at a loss for words. “You can’t kill her.”

He lifts my chin and forces my gaze to his. “I won’t. But everyone will think Bella Morte died in the fire. She walked right in wearing her pretty little outfit. The knife, the shoes, the hair? It’s all on camera.”

“And what about you? You’re willing to come back from the dead? Just like that?”

“For you? I’d do anything. So say the word. How are we doing this?”

My pulse is still racing, but warmth unfurls in my stomach. “You knew I’d be here.”

He grins and kisses me again. “Of course. My girl wasn’t going to sit in Maine and trust that I was taking care of things.”

Dropping my forehead to his chest, I laugh. “You’re nuts. You know that?”

He squeezes me tight and kisses the top of my hair. “I warned you.”

The door to the casino opens, and one by one, men dressed in matching black tuxes leave. Bartenders or wait staff, maybe?

“What’s happening?” I whisper over my shoulder, watching the movement.

He spins me so I have the perfect view of the building. “It’s starting. My men are getting the staff out. No one innocent gets hurt. You want to watch it burn, baby?”

I bite my lip. There is no joy in watching a person die, even if they deserve it. So I slip my hand in Frank’s and turn back to him. “I don’t want to rule Boston. I want to live in a

cabin in Maine. I want frigid winters and warm summer afternoons. Cooking on Sundays with Ruth and the boys. And you, Frank. All I need is you. Take me home,” I say against his lips.

With a smile against my mouth, he says, “Happily, baby.”

A black car with tinted windows pulls up, and for a heartbeat, before the window lowers, panic takes over, and my body readies for an attack. Has Lorenzo found me? Was it stupid to think I could ever truly be free?

But then Frank laughs beside me, and I sag in relief. “What the hell are you doing here?”

A man leans out the back window. “When Grace was kidnapped, you were there every step of the way. You think I’d let you do this alone?” The man grins. “Get in,” he says, sliding away from the window. “Or did she decide we’re going in?”

Frank guides me toward the car with a hand on my lower back and opens the door.

“Nah, we’re all set here,” he says as he gets in next to me. Once the door is shut behind him, he pulls me in close.

“Heard you’re the other best friend,” the man beside me says with a grin, holding out his hand. “Cash James.”

I smile and take his hand. “I’m Ellie.”

He laughs. “Oh, I know exactly who you are.” Then he grins at Frank. “Where to?”

As the car pulls away from the curb, Frank looks back for a moment. When he faces forward again, he slips a hand into his pocket and pulls out what looks like a key fob. With another glance at the building we’re quickly moving away from, he tilts his head to one side, then the other, cracking his neck. Then, with a sharp inhale, he presses the button on the fob. The car rocks forward briefly as the sound of an explosion hits my ears.

For a few seconds, the sky lights up and the world around us sounds muffled, but the car keeps moving forward, away

from the blazing building behind us.

“Home to our boys. Right, El?”

I study his face, focusing on his words and not on what’s behind us. From now on, there is no looking back.

FRANK

October hits Maine with burnt oranges and reds. The deep blue of the ocean thrashes wildly like it's getting in its last hurrah before winter sets in. The boys and I had the same idea.

"This is fucking wild," Cash says, gripping the worn red bar to gain his footing. Before the cold wind gets unbearable, we wanted to spend a day on a lobster boat, so here we are.

Cash forbade me from disappearing again. Stubborn ass wouldn't let up, and I believed him when he said he'd blow my cover if I didn't tell him where we were living. So even though the rest of the world still thinks I'm dead, I gave him my address and told him not to overstay his welcome or show up too often.

He's been here every weekend since.

And fuck if it doesn't feel incredible to watch Leo and Lo run around the lawn with Cash's son, Theo. Seeing my boys smiling and happy after having to tell them their father was dead soothes the aching guilt that hits occasionally. Because, despite their father's depravity, I hate that they have to suffer the loss of him.

"You nervous?" he adds, cocking a brow at me. Probably because I have yet to respond to his first comment.

Leaning over the railing beside him, I smirk.

"Right. Frank McCabe doesn't get nervous," he jokes.

Damn, this moment, with the man I've always considered a brother, joking with me—it's everything.

“Not nervous about Ellie at all. It’s this conversation that worries me,” I admit, jutting my chin toward my boys.

Cash claps my shoulder and pulls me close. “We both know blood doesn’t make a family. You and I both had shitty fathers, but look at the families we’ve created despite that.” Without breaking his hold on my shoulder, he pats my chest with his free hand. “It’s what’s in here that matters.” Glancing over his shoulder, he grins. “And I happen to know you have the biggest heart around. Those boys will be beyond lucky to grow up looking up to a man like you.”

I blink a few times and keep my attention fixed on the churning water. If I think too hard on his words, we’ll both be blubbering messes.

From the front of the boat, Shane hollers, “They’re pulling up the traps. You don’t want to miss this.”

Shane moved back to Boston after the fire that took out the entire Messina/Romano crime family. But Ellie was right. Cutting off one head would only lead to two more popping up. The key was to leave just a few heads and to be strategic with those choices. So we left only the handful she believed had always hated the wars. People we could potentially establish agreements with in the name of ending the violence.

To no one’s surprise, those men weren’t unhappy about the casino’s destruction. Less competition.

So while we had our work cut out for us, it was easy to pin the casino explosion, my brother’s death, and essentially every other terrible occurrence over the last decade on Bennett—the man who’d betrayed me. The world believes he was the one in control of the Irish Mob for the last ten years anyway. Since he’s now in federal custody and will likely remain that way for a long-ass time, I *could* come out of the shadows. With my brother’s death firmly pinned on someone else, I don’t have to worry about my men coming after me or Jay for what went down the night he died.

And according to surveillance footage, Bella Morte was in the casino when it went up in flames. She’s presumed dead, and the evidence I accumulated was burned in a bonfire the

night before I left for Boston. There's no reason we have to remain in hiding any longer. Ellie and I are both free.

But I kind of like my anonymity. I like being Irish. So until I make that decision permanently, Shane has replaced Seamus as my boots on the ground, and the Irish Ghost lives on.

We rush to the side of the boat, where the boys are already shouting their excitement and the lobstermen are pulling the traps from the water and unloading our dinner for the evening.

On the way back, the boys sit on either side of me, worn out from the excitement but wearing smiles on their faces.

I squeeze Lo's shoulder. Immediately, he straightens and turns to me. "Was hoping I could talk to you boys about something."

Leo looks up at me with his big green eyes. "You's can talks to us 'bout anything."

Damn. This kid. I can't hold back my grin. Ellie and I have told them the same thing over and over. They lost their father. They were uprooted in the middle of the night without explanation. Things haven't been easy on them, and we want them to come to us with any questions they might have.

"Thanks, bud." I swallow and sit up taller, glancing at Cash, who's sitting on a bench on the other side of the boat with his arm around a dozing Theo. "I was wondering what you'd think if I asked your mom to marry me."

Lo's face remains impassive, but his breath hitches. The boy is so much like his mother in that way. Hiding his emotions but feeling more than anyone.

"What's that mean?" Leo asks, his curious expression making me smile again.

Like a good big brother, Lo gives him the rundown. "Means he'd be family, and maybe they'd have more kids." He glances at me. "Right?"

I nod. "That's my dream."

Lo studies me for a beat, his brow low and his eyes so damn serious.

I try not to show my nervousness, but fuck, I don't think there's anything scarier than being under this boy's scrutiny.

"Would we still call you Irish?"

"You can call me whatever you want."

Leo smiles and bounces on the bench beside me. "Can I call you Daddy? 'Cause I calls my Mawmy, Mawmy."

My heart stutters, but I try to keep my cool. The innocence of this kid.

I eye Lo before I let my feelings show. I need to know what he thinks first. Even as tears start to burn behind my lids. I'm a fucking crier. Who knew?

"Yeah, I mean, if you don't care...since we're gonna have the same last name anyway," Lo says, hiding behind that cool exterior. He's a pro, but he can't hide the hope shining in those dark eyes.

That's all it takes—his approval—and a fucking tear slides down my cheek. I don't hide it or wipe it away. No, I want my sons to know that it's okay to cry. It's okay to feel. I never want them to hide like their mother had to. I want to be their safe space—the person they can rely on forever. Their daddy.

"It would be the best thing in the world if you called me Daddy," I say, my voice thick with emotion.

Leo smiles and throws his arms around my shoulders. "Don't cry, Daddy. Mawmy will marry you and we'll have lobsters."

Cash's laugh floats to us on the wind, and my eyes find his. We're both crying. This fucking moment is everything.

Lo nods and leans against me. "She'll probably say yes."

Cash laughs louder, disrupting Theo, who rubs his face on his dad's shoulder and settles down again.

I nudge Lo, and he smiles up at me. Fuck. It only makes me love him more.

He's mine. They both are. And soon, their mom will be too.

Being the sweet man he is, Frank sent Alesia and me to the spa while he and the boys went fishing. But a stranger's hands on me? It's literally the least relaxing thing I can imagine. Instead, Alesia and I went to another place that's far more my speed.

"I can't believe you're making me do this," Alesia grumbles as the tattoo artist works on her wrist.

The designs I wanted were more complex so we came in to go over the artwork.

I'll have to come back a couple of times to complete my project, but I'm happy with the design we came up with. The artist used henna to show me exactly how it will look. On my wrist is a lotus flower that will match the one being inked on my sister. Since she's leaving for Paris she decided to get hers done today. She'll only have one, but I'll have a few added to the vines on my chest and legs.

The lotus flower rises daily from murky waters, blooming under the most difficult situations. It represents healing, strength, and perseverance.

The Egyptians believed the blossom could bring people back from the dead. And since I always tease Frank about my bringing him back to life, it felt appropriate. The truth is, he's the one who resurrected me. Or maybe we did it together. Our love. Even under the murkiest of conditions. Wars between our families. The star-crossed nature of our love—the little girl

from the Italian Mafia was never supposed to spend time with, let alone fall in love with, the son of the Irish Mob boss.

And yet here we are. Blooming. Living our life out loud and with such joy. Together. The tattoo artist sprinkled lotuses in an array of colors along the vines on my legs. And with those details, I'm finally ready to show the world exactly who I am, scars and all.

I examine the other tattoo I commissioned. It's on my other wrist. An infinity loop with *Irish* in script within it. I can't wait to surprise Frank.

"You're moving to Paris. You need a reminder of me."

She laughs and then grits her teeth at the pain from the tattoo gun. "Like you're even remotely forgettable."

Not sure whether that's a compliment, but I don't feel so stabby today, so I'll let it slide. I haven't felt stabby in a while. Lorenzo took himself out, and Frank took out every other person I would have liked to stab. And, thank fuck, the nightmares have mostly ceased. As long as Frank's beside me.

Lorenzo's death hit me with a mix of emotions. I dreaded telling the boys, but a vise that had been choking the life from me for so long loosened the moment Frank told me. It's a mindfuck, for sure. He was a huge part of my life, both good and bad, but in the end, I'm choosing to forgive us both.

I'm starting new, like the lotus. Rising from the muck and choosing to show the world my beauty.

I squeeze my sister's other hand. "Thank you," I whisper.

She rolls her eyes, but she's smiling too. "Like you have literally anything to thank me for. How do you think Frank will react?"

I let out a light laugh. "Oh, he'll probably cry."

He cries about everything. It's adorable. I'm still not much of a crier, but his open displays of emotion only draw me closer to him. I still haven't said the words that I know he's craving. But I try to show them daily.

I love Frank, and he deserves to hear it, see it, feel it, and experience it. And today, I'll ensure he knows it.



WE PULL in later than I intended, and when we arrive, our driveway is full of cars. Ruth, Cash, and Shane are parked in the circular drive in front of the house, but there are at least half a dozen others I don't recognize.

"You throwing a party?" Alesia asks, her brows pulling together.

I throw her a blank stare and push my door open. "Since when do I throw parties?"

"Don't get your panties in a wad," she teases over the hood of the car.

A low growl leaves my throat. I'm not annoyed at my sister, but I was looking forward to a quiet night after being gone all day. The boys, Shane, Frank, Cash and his family, and Alesia. An intimate gathering before Alesia leaves for Paris.

Grace, Cash's wife, is sitting on the porch sipping an iced tea. Hope is in the other rocking chair. She lights up and stands when she sees me. "How was the spa?"

Alesia laughs, and I shrug. "Perfect." No need to explain where we really were.

"Good. I have specific instructions to usher you up to your room," the brunette says with a twinkle in her violet eyes. I've come to really like Grace. Being burned by Hazel made me wary of befriending women, but after the first weekend Grace spent out here with us, it was obvious that she was nothing like Hazel.

Her children are her entire world, and it's clear as day that she's the center of her husband's universe. The two of them are like an ad for beautiful, happy people.

And apparently, like Frank and me, they end their days dancing. We've had quite a few kitchen dance parties when they visit. After long evenings filled with story after story about Cash and Frank and the "good ole days."

Frank lights up around Cash. I can't imagine how much he missed his friend over the decade he was in hiding. I swear his eyes are a brighter shade of green these days, all because he's free to be himself again. And he's free to communicate with the people he loves.

"Angel, we're almost ready," Cash calls as we step inside. He rounds the corner, and when he catches sight of us in the entryway, his eyes go wide. "Hey, El. How was the spa?"

Beside me, Alesia snorts and presses her lips together to keep from laughing.

I nudge her in the ribs and hold my head high. "It was great."

"Cool. Well, I'll leave you to it. Just wait until you see your boys." He ducks and gives his head a shake. "They're something else. Really great kids."

Warmth spreads through my body at the compliment. "Thank you."

They've settled so well here. Lo loves his new school, and so does Leo, who's now attending pre-k for half the day. Frank picks him up every day, and they spend their afternoons adventuring until it's time to pick up Lo. The three of them spend the early evenings in the boxing ring, then head in for homework. We still cook together almost every night.

I love our life. Every single moment of it. More than I ever imagined I could love anything other than my boys.

Cash disappears around the corner, and Grace leads me upstairs, telling Alesia to follow us. Apparently, she has stuff for the both of us in my room. Whatever that means. With Irish, it's anyone's guess.

I smile when I spot a green dress laid out on my bed with a card propped up on it. Beside me, Grace smiles and nods at the

card. With quick steps, I snatch it off the bed, then, needing a moment of privacy, I walk out to the deck to read it.

Hey baby,

Do me a favor. Put this pretty dress on and don't ask any questions.

The man knows me so well. Though I can't help but smile at his note, I have to swallow past a lump in my throat and breathe through the nerves working their way through my belly. I don't do well with surprises, because surprises mean a lack of control. He knows that, and it's obvious he's done his best to alleviate my anxiety, but I don't think I'll ever truly be okay not being in control. I grip the railing and look down at the lawn to steady myself. When I do, the scene before me makes my heart jump.

My boys are running up and down the lawn wearing black suits. Scratch that. Black *tuxes*. There are chairs set up in the grass, separated by two rows of candles spread just a couple of feet apart that lead from the house to Frank's old green ford.

A sob escapes my throat in the form of a laugh.

Oh, Irish.

I look back down at the note.

I love you, Elena. Don't make me wait any longer.

FRANK

Standing next to Cash on the deck, sipping a glass of whiskey, I take in the view in front of me, anxiously waiting for the moment she'll appear.

"She'll be down any minute," Grace says, stepping out onto the wooden planks.

"Was she surprised?" I pull at my tie with a shaky hand. I lied when I said I wasn't nervous. But it's only because I'm about to ask for everything I've ever wanted. The one thing I never believed I could have.

A family with the woman of my dreams.

Grace, in a purple wrap dress that makes her violet eyes pop, beams. "I think your future bride doesn't like surprises, Mr. McCabe."

I laugh. "She give you a hard time?"

"Nah, she was just fine." She shakes her head and strides to the stairs. "Okay, folks, let's let this guy have a moment with his girl before he springs a wedding on her."

Cash reaches for Grace and presses a kiss to the back of her hand. They watch each other silently, sharing a moment that once would have made me jealous.

They are one another's person, and I'm about to see mine. I'm about to ask her to be my person forever.

The boys, who have been running around the yard like madmen, zoom by. I whistle to get their attention, and like the

good soldiers they are, they freeze and turn toward me. “Stay up here for a minute.”

Lo grabs Leo’s shoulder when it looks like his little brother might dart off again. He’s so antsy his little legs are running in place. I laugh. Shouldn’t have let him have that orange soda and candy after our lobster trip. Kid is wired.

I crouch so we’re eye to eye, ready to do my best to calm him. But the second I do, the door opens and Ellie appears.

In the green chiffon dress with a high slit up the thigh, she is devastatingly beautiful. Her raven hair hangs in waves, and the green lace on her arms leaves only hints of the most beautiful designs inked on her skin. Fuck, I can’t wait to spend yet another night kissing each one, discovering more details. My favorite remains the claddagh. Not sure anything could top that. I spend an inordinate amount of time with my head on her heart, just listening to her heartbeat.

God, I love this woman.

She rolls her eyes, but she gives me a breathtaking smile. “Whatchya doing down there, Irish? Thought you didn’t get on your knees for anyone.”

A throaty laugh escapes me, and I practically choke on my own drool because goddamn, she’s gorgeous. I clear my throat and give her a once-over, memorizing this moment. “Only for you, Ellie.”

“Mawmy, I wish is gonna asks you to be our daddy!” Leo exclaims.

My heart stutters, and I can’t help but bark out a laugh.

“*Leo,*” Lo grumbles. “He’s asking her to marry him. Not to be our daddy. She can’t be our daddy; she’s our mommy.”

Leo frowns. “That’s what I saids.”

Licking my lips, I take a deep breath and pivot from my stance so that I’m no longer talking to Leo, but to his mother.

She offers a sheepish grin and mouths, “Sorry they ruined your moment.”

Tears prick the backs of my eyes, and I smile. Nothing could ruin this moment. This is us. Our sons, our chaotic life, I wouldn't change any of it.

“Elena, I have loved you since the moment you breezed back into my life and almost killed me with those tiny hands of yours.”

She bites her lip to contain the smile that threatens.

“I already asked the boys, and they agreed—we make a pretty good family.”

Beside me, Leo nods. “The best.”

I shoot him a wink as Lo shushes him.

“So what do you say we make this official? Be my wife, Ellie. Marry me.”

Ellie's green eyes shimmer in the light of the setting sun as she holds out her hand to me and pulls me up. Then, in a whisper, she says, “Sorry. You were too far away for my liking.” She pushes her body in close to mine and buries her face in the crook of my neck.

Her heart beats wildly against my chest, and I rub circles on her back. “Breathe, baby,” I whisper into her hair. Then I tip up her chin so she's forced to look at me.

Watery green eyes meet mine, and her chin wobbles. “Trying.” She obeys, inhaling a deep breath, and licks her lips. “I love you, Frank McCabe,” she says, her voice breaking as a sob rips through her.

Fuck. My heart might explode right here. To hear those words from her mouth, that she loves me, is all I need. If I died now, I'd die happy.

I swipe at the tears that drip down her cheeks, and she takes a deep breath and continues. “I never thought I could be loved. My dark pieces, my scars...but you make my ugly feel beautiful.”

I press my lips to hers and whisper, “Nothing about you is ugly.”

She kisses me quickly and pulls back. “I’m beginning to believe that. Thank you for being patient with me. For not rushing those words. For helping me feel again.”

I rub my nose against hers. “I always felt it, baby.” I press my hand to her heart. “Always knew this belonged to me. You didn’t have to say it for me to know that.”

With a sigh, she relaxes in my hold. Her heart settles beneath my palm, the erratic beat slowing. “We really doing this?”

I gaze into the green eyes that have held me captivated for most of my life. “If you’ll say yes.”

She smiles. “Yes, Frank McCabe, I’ll marry you.”

Behind us, Leo cheers. “Yay! Told you she’d say yes to being the daddy.”

Lo grunts. “To *him* being our daddy.” But he’s grinning when I turn to him.

Ellie spins in my arms, her back to my chest. “Will you boys walk me down the aisle?”

Lo’s back straightens, and his face goes stoic again as he nods. Damn, kid makes me proud to call him mine. I press a kiss to Ellie’s cheek and reluctantly let her go. It’s time to marry my best friend.

On the lawn of our cabin in Maine, at sunset, with the most important people in our lives as our witnesses, Elena walks toward me with our boys on either side of her. The guitarist plays “Green Eyes,” and I hum to myself as I home in on the teasing smile she wears on those perfect lips. When she reaches the altar, I turn to Cash, who’s acting as our officiant. Thank fuck Grace figured out how to have him ordained on such short notice.

His words are lost to me because I’m wholly entranced by Ellie. Squeezing her hand, pulling it to my lips, kissing her palm. When he asks if we have the rings, I snap back to attention and turn to Lo, who is pulling them from his pocket with a big smile, reveling in all the important roles he’s playing today.

When I open the black velvet box and pull Ellie's ring out, she gasps. It's a green diamond within a claddagh and has the Celtic knots on the sides, just like the tattoo she has over her heart.

"Oh, Frank," she murmurs.

"His matches," Lo says proudly as he hands her the gold band I had created to complement hers.

She takes a shuddering breath and spins it in her fingers, examining it.

As she turns her hands over to get a better look, I spot a new detail on the inside of her wrist. When I reach for it, she peeks up through her lashes and smiles, allowing me to turn it over. I run my finger lightly around the new design. It's a green infinity symbol with *Irish* written inside it.

"I love you," she whispers.

Without a word, I pull her to me and kiss her fiercely.

"Hey, we didn't get to that part," Cash jokes.

I pull away reluctantly and run a thumb against her lips, cleaning up the lip gloss I can feel coating my lips too.

"Won't apologize for kissing my wife," I mutter.

Cash barks out a laugh. "Haven't pronounced that yet."

I growl. "Well, get to it."

Beside me, Leo pulls on my tuxedo jacket. "Manners, Daddy."

The crowd of people behind us breaks out in laughter, and I straighten my tie as I look down at my son.

"Sorry, bud." Then I take a deep breath and look back at Cash. "You were saying?"

Cash's whiskey eyes shine with laughter as he begins again. "Do you, Elena, take this man to be your husband? Knowing he's grumpy and sometimes growly, but has the biggest heart and will love you with everything he has?"

Ellie's eyes go soft as she looks at me, holding out her hand so she can slip my ring onto my finger. "I do love your growls," she mouths.

Cash clears his throat. "We need to hear the words, El."

She laughs. "I do love his growls," she says loudly.

She's met with another round of laughter from our friends. I pinch her side, and she sticks out her tongue.

"I do to all of it," she says. "I take you as my husband. As our sons' daddy. As my person. The one I know will always love us, who will always put us first. And Irish," she says with a glint in her eye, "you'll always be our first too. Our person. You have us. We're your family from here on out."

Any remnants of the barriers I erected around my heart years ago crumble with that one final blow. She owns me.

"I do too," I rush out.

Cash laughs as he rolls his eyes, giving up trying to control the ceremony.

"I take you and our boys as my family. I'll take care of you, baby. I'll put you first. Always. You're the love of my life. This life and every life after it."

"Well, you have been known to rise from the dead, so that's good to know," she teases.

"I take you as my wife," I finish, cocking a brow at her interruption. But damn, those words feel too good on my tongue. I couldn't hold them back any longer.

My wife.

I slide her ring onto her finger and squeeze her hand, tethering her to me for the rest of time.

"Then, with the power vested in me by the State of Maine and my gorgeous wife's online certification, I pronounce you husband and wife. You may now kiss your bride."

Before he's uttered the last word, I have Ellie in my arms and her lips pressed against mine. Our tongues tangle, and the world around us realigns.

My wife. My boys. My people. Everything I've ever wanted.

EPILOGUE

FRANK

We had dinner on the lawn served family style, and then we spent hours dancing and laughing with our loved ones.

It's late at night when everyone is finally heading into the house. The boys shuffle their way downstairs with Alesia after big hugs. I tried not to tear up when Lo whispered "night, Daddy," and Leo wrapped his little arms around my neck, kissed me on the cheek, and said "love you, Daddy" like it was a normal occurrence. But fuck, it was hard, and a tear or two definitely slipped past my defenses.

Even if we lived this exact scenario every night for the rest of our lives, I would never take it for granted.

Somehow in the bustle of cleaning up, I lost my wife. So here I am, on the deck, searching the grounds for her.

"She told me to have you meet her in the boathouse," Grace says with a knowing smile.

That's the only instruction I need, because damn if I don't already miss the feel of Ellie beneath my touch. So without even a glance back, I bound down the steps and take off toward where my wife awaits.

Cash's loud laugh echoes across the yard. "Come on, Angel, I'm taking you to bed."

Heart pounding in my chest and my need for her consuming me, I hustle across the lawn and push through the brush that leads up toward the boathouse without

consideration for the condition of my tux or my four-hundred-dollar shoes.

Inside, the entire space is lit with flickering candles. In the center of the boxing ring stands my bride. She's wearing a coy smile and practically glowing in the candlelight.

"Thought we could get a round in before the night is over," she teases, picking up the gloves.

Brows raised, I challenge her. "You want to spar with me?" I slide my tie off and toss my jacket, then get to work on the buttons of my shirt.

Ellie presses her teeth into her lip and unzips her dress slowly. She allows the green fabric to cascade down her body and pool at her feet, exposing her breasts. They're a fucking dream, hanging heavy, nipples pink and pointed, beckoning my lips.

I groan and bite my fist, then slip off my shoes and pull down my pants so I'm left in nothing but my boxers.

Eyes still on the prize, I stalk toward her and duck between the ropes. Ellie stands before me in nothing but a white lace thong, watching my every move.

In the light of the flickering candles, I don't notice the gorgeous flowers blooming from the vines on her legs until I'm a couple of feet away. Fingers itching to touch her, I reach out and ghost them across her thighs.

"Fucking beautiful," I murmur, pulling her closer. "You do this today?"

Sighing, she nods. "What do you think?"

"Perfect, baby. Absolutely fucking perfect."

She eyes the gloves at her feet and cocks a brow at me.

I stare her down, heart pounding. "We're really boxing?"

She shrugs. "You afraid of my left hook?"

I growl out a laugh. "No, but my cock is hard and wants to sink inside you, not dodge out of the way as you pummel me."

She laughs. “Death by pummeling?”

“Nah, you promised me death by pussy, remember?”

Before she can snag the gloves, I wrap both arms around her waist. And in two seconds flat, I have her on her back. Already panting, she bucks her hips in an attempt to gain control, to fight me, but then her clit rubs against my hard length, and she goes languid with a groan.

“You really want to fight me, El? Or do you want me to make you feel good? Make you come so hard you feel like you died?”

She laughs. “Pretty sure of yourself there, Irish.”

“Yes, wife,” I grind out. “I’m sure your husband’s cock can satisfy you.”

Eyes flaring with heat, she licks her lips and grinds her pussy against me.

“Greedy little thing you are,” I tease as I slide my boxers down and rub the metal barbs of my piercings against her. “You’re soaking right through your white panties.” I run my cock up and down her, feeling how drenched she is. “Fuck, that’s hot.”

Ellie whimpers beneath me. “Please,” she begs.

“Please what, wife? Use your words.”

“Please make love to me. Fill me up with my husband’s cock. Make me feel—”

My mouth is on hers and I’m tugging at her panties before she finishes her sentence. Impatient to have her bare, I rip at the lace, tearing them to pieces. She moans as I lift them up and pull them between us, inhaling her arousal.

“Fuck, Ellie. Your scent drives me fucking insane.”

Somehow, the little vixen gets her leg wrapped around mine while I’m focused on her panties, and I’m flipped to my back with a thump.

Her husky laughter makes my vision tunnel. “I win,” she says as she slides herself against me, fucking herself with my

piercings and groaning in pleasure.

“I’m watching your beautiful tits bounce in my face while you rub yourself all over my cock. Pretty sure I won, Ellie McCabe.”

Lifting up, she grins and sucks my cock inside her perfect pussy, then slides down my length quickly.

She mutters curses that match mine as she leans down and kisses me through the moment until I’m fully inside her. “I love you, Irish,” she whispers against my lips. Then she’s sitting back and planting her hand on my chest and riding me with abandon.

With the moonlight pouring in through the windows and the flickering candles around her, my wife fucks me. It’s the most provocative and fucking delicious thing I’ve ever witnessed. And I get to experience this for the rest of my life. When I rub circles around her clit, her movements only get more intense, more wild, until she shatters above me, pulling my orgasm from me at the same time.

When her spasms subside, she falls against my chest, her wild heart pressed to mine.

I run my hands along her back, circling her skin gently. When she puts her hands on the mat on either side of me, ready to move, I pull her closer.

“Let me stay inside you, baby. I want to make sure you keep every drop.”

She giggles and then whispers the words I’ve waited to hear since she came back into my life. “We’re already pregnant, Irish. You’re going to be a daddy again.”

And to no one’s surprise, least of all mine, I cry.

THE END

Want more of Frank and Ellie? Click below for their extended epilogue.

<https://BookHip.com/TPCFSFV>

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book would not exist if not for all of my lovely readers asking, “When are we getting Frank!” on the daily. In truth, he didn’t have a story—or at least not *this* story—until I stepped foot in Bristol, Maine while visiting one of my best friends at the house that this book was based upon in June. *Extra Dirty* was about to release and I knew everyone would go feral for Frank and my readers did not disappoint. He has been my most requested character so when I walked outside and sat on the deck overlooking the cove in Maine I knew his story was sitting within these trees.

But I think we can all agree, Ellie stole the show.

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Now, I know you are all wondering what I'll write next... so make sure to follow me on Instagram and join my reader group on Facebook.

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