



REBEL

ROYAL BASTARDS MC



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

DANI RENÉ

REBEL

ROYAL BASTARDS MC (BELFAST, NORTHERN
IRELAND)

BOOK 5

DANI RENÉ

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NEWSLETTER SIGN UP

There's a gritty, emotional story that awaits you, but before you venture to Northern Ireland, [sign up for my newsletter](#) so you don't miss out on sales, new releases, recommendations, and much more!

Hey gorgeous!

I'm dropping by to let you know that with all the changes on Facebook, and notifications being so strange, there's a new community where I'll be sharing a lot more news on upcoming books, sales, and even exclusive stories, including bonus scenes from old favourites! So, head over to Ream, you can FOLLOW for free, or sign up to one of the exclusive tiers.

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See you there!

ROYAL BASTARDS CODE



PROTECT: The club and your brothers come before anything else, and must be protected at all costs. CLUB is FAMILY.

RESPECT: Earn it & Give it. Respect club law. Respect the patch. Respect your brothers. Disrespect a member and there will be hell to pay.

HONOR: Being patched in is an honor, not a right. Your colors are sacred, not to be left alone, and NEVER let them touch the ground.

OL' LADIES: Never disrespect a member's or brother's Ol'Lady. PERIOD.

CHURCH is MANDATORY.

LOYALTY: Takes precedence over all, including well-being.

HONESTY: Never LIE, CHEAT, or STEAL from another member or the club.

TERRITORY: You are to respect your brother's property and follow their Chapter's club rules.

TRUST: Years to earn it...seconds to lose it.

NEVER RIDE OFF: Brothers do not abandon their family.

WARNING

Rebel is a dark romance that contains scenes that can be a trigger to certain readers. Please be careful before reading further.

*For countless years
They stood apart
He kept her safe
Guarding her heart*

*His past, a shadow
Tries to break their stride
Yet her steadfast soul
Stood by his selfless side*

*But now they've seized
Life's chance to be one
Bound by destiny's thread
Their journey's begun*

*Through trials and tears
They weather the storm
In loves sweet embrace
Their hearts now reborn*

Together
_hydrus

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DEDICATION

This is for those who have been broken by life, and still continue on. You're strong, you're worthy, you're a shining star.

PROLOGUE

REBEL

The Past *Twenty Years Old*

MA IS SITTIN' in the garden, the sun shinin' down on her, when I walk out of the house ta join her. My da's away on business at the moment, and I know Ma misses him while he's away.

The cup of tea in my hand is made fer her. I wanted ta do somethin' special and tell her I love her before I go off to meet Orla. I didn't think I'd end up datin' an Irish girl, only ta bring her over to Italy ta meet Ma. And now I'm plannin' on talkin' ta Ma about movin' Orla over here permanently.

I love Orla. It's somethin' I've spoken ta Ma about, and she's asked me so many questions. Ma seems ta think I'm too young ta fall in love. But I know how I feel about my girl, and I can see myself bein' with her fer the rest of our lives. It's fun when we're together, but I have ta travel a lot fer work, so we don't get as much time as I'd like. I was goin' ta suggest we settle down together in Belfast, but her family aren't too happy about her bein' with me, so I've decided ta bring her out here ta get her away from them.

They're judgemental arseholes.

"Thank you, my sweet boy," Ma says in her strong Italian accent.

I love listenin' ta Ma speakin' with her friends. There's somethin' exotic about it. I've spent far too long in Ireland ta consider myself Italian, and with Da's Belfast accent being so strong, I've picked it up and it's stuck with me.

"I'm thinkin' of askin' Orla ta move out here," I tell Ma who glances up at me, surprise clear on her expression. "What's that look fer?"

“I didn’t think you wanted that kind of commitment. I mean, the only reason you should be thinking about moving in together is if you’re going to ask her to marry you.”

Ma comes from a very traditional background. No sex before marriage. And when you do get married, it has to be in the Catholic church. When she married Da, her family denounced her, told her ta leave and never return. At first she begged for them ta reconsider. But the ultimatum was clear—them or my father.

She chose love over blood.

When Da started workin’ fer the mafia, my parents hoped Ma’s relatives would change their minds about him. With the rest of the men from Ma’s side of the family workin’ fer the mafia, Da hoped he would finally be accepted by them. But it didn’t help.

Da fell into the work easily, and havin’ decided he never wanted ta leave, he took the vow; he made the promise. But Ma’s family still didn’t accept him, and my parents continued to live separately from them.

I know who my relatives are. I’ve seen them around the village where we live, but they won’t acknowledge me. Even if I were to greet one of them, I’d be ignored.

I’ve come ta accept it.

I realise Ma is still waitin’ on an answer from me.

“I don’t know about marriage just yet, but I can see us gettin’ wed in the future,” I tell her. “I’d like her ta live here with me, so we can have more time together. It also means I won’t have ta travel to Ireland as much.”

Ma smiles. It’s as if she knows somethin’ I don’t...maybe she does. With age comes knowledge.

“You know I’ll always be there for you. And I support your decisions, but don’t commit to something you’re not ready for. Okay?” She offers me a gentle smile and I nod.

“Aye, I promise I’ll only ask her ta move here if it feels right. It’s not been an overnight decision, but I’ll think about what you’ve said on the drive to the hotel.” I know Ma’s right. I don’t want ta do somethin’ I’ll regret later in life. “Thanks, Ma.”

“Okay, my sweet boy.”

I lean in ta kiss her cheek before leavin’ ta make my way ta the hotel where Orla is stayin’. When Orla mentioned she wanted ta come out and see me, she said she’d feel less pressure if she were ta have her own space while

stayin' here. I'm not sure what she meant by that, but I want her ta be happy, so I didn't argue.

By the time I arrive at the hotel, I'm nervous ta see her again. I tap out a message on my phone ta let her know I'm in the reception area, and settle down on one of the fancy leather sofas.

When she appears in the lobby, I smile, takin' in the pretty woman who's lookin' like she's anxious, her gaze shiftin' nervously between me and the guests movin' around us.

The expression on her face isn't as happy as I thought it would be, and when she reaches me, she doesn't lean up on her tiptoes ta kiss me like she usually does. Instead, she gives me a brief hug before quickly steppin' back as if I were nothin' more than an acquaintance.

"What's goin' on?" I ask her, confused at the coldness of her greetin'.

Granted, we haven't sat down and spoken about where our relationship is goin', but she knows I want her in my life. I haven't given her any reason ta doubt me.

"Nothin'," she tells me with a smile, but I can see the lie flicker in her eyes.

I know her better than she thinks. We may not spend all day every day together, but I can recognise this girl's emotions. Over the course of our relationship, I've learned how ta read her, ta *see* what she's thinkin'.

Somethin' is wrong. Very feckin' wrong.

I take her hand and lead her ta the small café attached ta the hotel. We settle in at a table before orderin' coffees. Once the waiter has gone, I stare at her and notice she's not even lookin' my way.

"Orla," I address her, but she shakes her head, and I notice her eyes are shimmerin' with unshed tears.

Silence. It hangs heavily over us. It's as if there's a large rift between us, and I can't get ta her. I've known Orla for two years now. She's been my girlfriend fer most of that time, and I've seen her upset before, but never like this.

Just then, the waiter returns with our drinks and places them down in front of us. I thank him before he leaves, and I return my attention ta the girl sittin' across from me.

"What's goin' on?" I reach fer Orla's hand, but she doesn't allow me ta take it, and that's when I realise what's happenin'. "Ye came a fair distance just ta break up with me."

This time, she looks at me. “I... I didn’t want ta come all this way. But I owed it to ye ta tell ye face-ta-face, Ronan.”

I don’t know what ta say at this point. Our drinks slowly cool as they sit on the table, forgotten. There was a while, when we first got together, I second guessed our relationship because I spent so much of my time in Italy. With Da workin’ fer the mafia, and me helpin’ him on jobs, I wasn’t always around. I know long distance relationships are difficult to maintain, but if the feelin’s are real, it can work. I love Orla, and I know she’s good fer me. Everythin’s been great...until now.

“You should’ve stayed in Belfast,” I tell her, anger obvious in my tone. I push ta my feet and slap some money down on the table fer the coffees. “It would have made this less trouble fer both of us.”

Without another word, I leave, but the moment I exit the café, Orla is behind me. I hear her heels clickin’ as I rush away from the hotel, away from the woman who flew here just ta tell me she’s not interested in takin’ things further.

I’m hurt.

Anyone would be.

All the while I’ve been plannin’ ta ask her ta move over here, she’s been readyin’ herself to tell me it’s over.

“Ronan, please. Ye don’t understand.” Her hand on my arm halts my steps. Even though I can’t bring myself ta face her right now, I wait fer her ta speak. “I don’t want it ta end like this. I want us ta stay friends.”

That forces me to spin on my heel and pin her with a glare so fierce she shies away.

I’m taller than her, and loomin’ over her, I say, “Ye want us ta be mates?” I didn’t expect the venom in my tone, but it’s there, causin’ her to wince. “Let me make somethin’ clear, Orla, we’ve never been mates. When I asked ye ta be my girl all those months ago, it was fer somethin’ more than friendship.”

“I don’t believe you really love me, Ronan. I doubt ye ever will,” she throws back, and I don’t have any response.

I’m convinced I love Orla, but maybe my feelin’s aren’t as real as I thought. Ma seems ta doubt them, and now the girl I’d intended ta spend the rest of my life with is sayin’ the same thing. At this point, I’m not sure what ta think, but I am sure I need ta get away from her.

Orla says I don’t love her, but if that’s true, then why does it cut me so

deep ta know she's leavin'. I never thought I could feel this hurt.

"If that's the truth, ye can walk away with a clear conscience. Ye're free, Orla. Ye can find yerself a new man, and ye can move on with yer life." My words must hurt her because she blinks and the tears trickle from her lashes, slowly makin' wet salty paths down her cheeks.

Even though this was her decision, I know I should be nice ta her. She's never done anythin' ta make me hate her...until now. Before today, I'd be the one wipin' her tears away. But she brought this on herself, and it's not my fault she's cryin'. She can find some other fool ta comfort her now. She's the one who's breakin' up with me. Not the other way around.

Feck, I'm such an asshole.

Anger does strange things ta people.

My phone vibrates in my pocket, and pulling it out, I swipe the screen. It's a message from Monster, one of my mates back home. I trust him with my life. He's known me forever, and he's the one bastard who never lies ta me.

Monster: Hey Ro, something you should see

As I open the photo attached to his words, I can feel my chest tightenin'.

I tap my thumb on the photo to enlarge it. There on the screen, clear as feckin' day, is Orla kissin' another man. I don't know who he is, and if I'm honest, I don't want ta know.

I show Orla the image before shoving the device back into my pocket.

"I'm sorry," she whispers, her voice breakin'. "I didn't want ye to find out like this."

"I never want ta see ye again, Orla. Walk away and never contact me. Ye hear me?" My words come out confident, filled with anger and drippin' with pure heartache.

I don't wait fer her ta reply. Instead, I turn on my heel and walk back to my car. I'm not goin'ta give her the opportunity ta explain herself. There's nothin' she can say that will make this okay.

I don't reply ta Monster.

I don't reply ta the message from Orla, apologisin' fer what she's done. Her excuse about me not bein' around enough only makes me angrier.

I vow, then and there, I'll never allow another woman ta hurt me again.

From now on, my heart and emotions will be firmly locked away. They won't be released ever again. Not fer anyone.

When I get home, I head straight fer my office. There's only one thing that will make me feel better—a job fer the mafia.

ONE

REBEL

The Past *Twenty-three Years Old*

I THINK ABOUT DEATH A LOT.

Far more than anyone my age should. I'm in good health, no feckin' ailments to speak of, yet the idea of dyin' is on my mind all the time.

I'm convinced my father's the one who caused those thoughts to invade my mind. My da worked fer the mafia, and when I was growing up, there was never a time he didn't have blood on his hands. He'd come home from a killin' and head straight fer the cabinet where he hid his most expensive Irish whiskey.

My da was a good man, even though he did bad things. He was strong, resilient and demanded respect. He was a hero in my eyes, even though he worked with dangerous men—the Cosa Nostra. I looked up ta him, and I knew I wanted ta be just like him when I got older.

My Ma, an Italian chef from Sicily, introduced Da to the mafia, and when I was old enough, I was thrown into the same dark world.

At sixteen, I killed fer the first time. It was life-changing. I was never the same after that. I had a bloodlust that ran through my veins, and I would satiate it with jobs I did fer the organisation.

I loved it.

I revelled in it.

It didn't last, though. Not when I saw Da gunned down in front of me because he made the Irish Mob angry. They came fer him, and they stole a part of me as well.

I'm still broken from watchin' Orla's expression change from the affectionate one I used to know, to a cold stranger. I thought I knew her, but instead, she surprised me with the break up.

By the time I'm headin' home, it's dark out. I stopped by the bar where I used to come once I was old enough. Da brought me here and bought me my first beer. I was always lookin' up ta him, and wanted ta do everythin' he did.

But when I pull up ta the house, it's in darkness. I'm pretty sure Ma is asleep already. I'll talk ta her in the mornin'. She's goin'ta want ta know about Orla and why she's not with me.

Perhaps Ma was right – my thoughts are broken by a bright spotlight shinin' into our garden. It's not a big property, but it's always been safe. The moment I get out of the car, I realise there's somethin' disturbin' about the air surroundin' me. My intuition has always been on point, Da was always pleasantly surprised when I would tell him I felt off about a meetin', or somethin' is about ta happen.

"Please," I hear voices, but the one that's clear as day is Da's. I've never heard such fear in the old man's words before. "Don't hurt them."

"I think ye need ta tell us when the shipments are comin' in," a unmistakable Irish accent comes through loud and clear. "And then I'll think about keepin' ye family alive."

"I-I... Ye know I can't do that," Da tells the man who I can now see from my hidden viewpoint. He's holdin' a gun on Da, and he had at least five men standin' guard. Even if I tried ta fight them off, I'm drunk, I'll end up gettin' me and Da killed.

Hope burns through me, and all I can do is pray they let him go.

"Ye know, I would think ye'd want ye wife and kid dead the way ye're refusin' ta tell me what I want and need." The arsehole presses the barrel of the gun against Da's head, and the next few minutes pass by in seconds.

"There are two comin' in. Tuesday and Friday," Da tells him and the moment the words are out of his mouth, the gunshot rings through the air. It's as if I can feel the bullet hit me because I go down. Fallin' ta my knees, I watch as another and another bullet fills Da's head and chest, and the men walk away, leavin' him fer dead.

And it's the moment I realise I'm truly feckin' broken.

"I will find him, Da," I whisper into the darkness. "And I will make him

pay.”

That night changed my life. I knew I couldn't stay in Italy. I hadn't taken the oath. I wasn't bound to the mafia rules, so I walked away. Ma stayed in Italy, while I moved to Belfast where Da was born and raised. But there wasn't much fer me in Ireland.

My focus was on revenge. I wanted ta see the bastards who killed Da to pay. I was desperate ta get my vengeance, but they were too well protected by the Irish mob. Instead of findin' them, fightin' my way through their security, I went off the feckin' rails. All I felt was frustration and rage, I lost myself ta drink and women.

But then I found a new home.

I'm part of a new family now.

Ma still calls to talk to me, to make sure I'm alive and well. I'll always be her baby. That's what she's told me anyway. But when I decided to leave Italy fer good and move to Ireland, I know it broke her heart. I travel ta see her as often as I can and she's been ta visit me here in Belfast a couple of times, but I know she misses me.

I left Italy and the mafia three years ago.

Now I'm a biker.

I've known Monster, the President of the Royal Bastards MC, since I was in my teens. When he took over the club, I was still working for the mafia, and I helped with the gun shipments being supplied to the MC.

It took time for trust and respect ta form between us. But then one night, after we'd done a couple of jobs, Monster and I were in a pub together, and the fecker knocked me out because we'd been eyein' up the same lassie. He won, and I stepped back. That's when I knew we'd always be best mates.

TWO

CALLIA

The Past Sixteen Years Old

WHEN I GET HOME after school, I go straight ta my bedroom. The woman who's meant ta look after me, Mrs Duffy, has her boyfriend and his mates over again. I don't like them, and when they're drinkin', it's worse. Her husband up and left her with nothin' a long time ago. The sob story she told ta the social services lady, who brought me here, about her needin' someone to care fer was a pile of shite.

The noise from their partyin' gets louder and louder, and I spend most of the evenin' in my bedroom, only venturin' into the kitchen when I feel like I'm about ta pass out from not eatin'.

I lie on my bed and pray they'll soon head out fer the night. Her boyfriend owns a strip club in the city, one that's well known fer havin' girls of my age dancin' on the bar, performin' on the stage, and even workin' in the back rooms. When ye're from the rough side of the city, everyone expects ye ta be easy-goin' about sex, drugs, and anythin' else that's on offer.

I've managed ta keep myself away from that side of Mrs Duffy's life. But now I've turned sixteen, she's been encouragin' me ta work in the club that vile bastard owns. Part of my daily fight with the woman I'm meant ta call *Ma*, but can't bring myself ta do it, is that I don't want ta become one of *those* girls.

Thankfully, I haven't had ta work at the club yet, but I know it won't be long before I'm forced ta go. I want ta study, to become something more than dependent on a feckin' arsehole who'll end up breakin' my heart when he

leaves.

Everyone leaves me.

I don't remember my biological parents, and I don't want to. I was abandoned by them and put into the system before I could walk—at least that's what I was told. While in foster care, I had more placements than I care ta remember, but no one wanted ta keep me.

When I was taken in by Mrs Duffy and she promised me a family, I figured I'd be happy. But I've learnt that the word *family* doesn't always ensure safety, and I've resigned myself ta the fact I'll never truly have a *home*.

The woman who demanded I call her Ma isn't good enough to be a mother's arse. She has no idea how ta raise a family, let alone be a good example to a feckin' child.

I'm tired of bein' her punchin' bag when she's had too much ta drink.

But it's more than just her violent outbursts.

I close my eyes and allow the pain of what I've been through over the last few months ta wash over me. I recall all the times those men have groped me, dragged me into their laps, and tried ta kiss me.

The anger that comes from those memories fuels me ta get through each day. But after last night, I can't take it any more.

I'm done with their shite.

"You're such a pretty wee thing."

"I think ye need a man ta make ye feel good. What do ye say, darlin'?"

"I wonder if ye're as good in the bedroom as your ma. Will that pretty wee mouth work me over good?"

Remembering all their comments forces the bile to churn in my gut. The acidic taste burns in my throat when I think about what could have happened. Eventually Mrs Duffy managed to calm the arseholes down, but next time, I may not be so lucky. And I know fer a fact there will be a next time.

Makin' my way into the kitchen, I stop dead in my tracks when I see Mrs Duffy's boyfriend, along with his three mates, still asleep on the sofa. There are empty liquor bottles strewn across the lounge floor, and the smell of stale smoke hangs in the air.

It's as if the smoke's seeped into the bricks and paintwork of the house. And soon, it will sink right into my skin. It won't matter how many cans of deodorant I spray on myself, I'll never get rid of the stench.

If I run away, I'll be free of it all finally.

The thought scrambles into my mind, its hands and feet clawing its way into the forefront of the plans I've been mullin' over, and it stays there. Maybe that's the answer. I can leave here and find my freedom. There's no reason fer me ta stay with Mrs Duffy. I'm old enough ta take care of myself. I know she won't come lookin' fer me, because she doesn't give a shite about me. I can easily be replaced with another orphan.

Even though she's gettin' her monthly payments from the government, she's dodgy as feck. But I'm not sure where I'd go. I guess it doesn't matter, though, as long as it's faraway from here.

I quietly make my way back into the bedroom and grab my rucksack; it's the one I use fer school. I empty out the second-hand textbooks from inside. I won't be needin' them where I'm goin'.

Sixteen-year old girls who run away from home don't get to pick and choose where they end up. I have nobody I can turn ta fer help. The people at the homeless shelter will offer me a bed, but I know they'll ask too many questions. Maybe I can find a job. There are some pub landlords who don't give a shite about yer age, as long as yer willin' ta work.

Once I've packed the meagre belongings I own, I make my way back into the kitchen. Takin' a look around, I notice a wallet sittin' on the liquor cabinet, and I wonder if I should take a chance and steal it. If I had more money in my purse, I'd be able ta travel farther.

I pick up the heavy, leather wallet and open it. Inside I find six pinkish notes with fifty on them. That's more money than I've ever seen before in my life. It's enough to get me far away from here.

I steal them all and stuff them into my torn wallet with a skull sewn on one side. It's a relief ta have the start of some savin's. I don't get paid fer lookin' after the house and doing the cleanin', so I don't have much money of my own.

From the kitchen table, I grab the bread buns that are lyin' out, and I open the fridge, makin' sure not ta make any noise. There's never much in here, but thankfully, I find a can of Coke and a couple of slices of processed cheese that's close ta it's sell-by date, but it'll have ta do. Beggars can't be choosers.

I stuff everything into the backpack. Then leavin' the kitchen, I slowly make my way to the front door with my heart hammerin' in my chest. The door creaks as I open it, and I hold my breath when someone coughs. It's as if time has frozen, and I can't move. When no one grabs me by the scruff of my neck, I sigh and rush out of the house, shuttin' the door quietly behind

me.

Out on the street, I walk towards the city. It's easier to get lost in the bustle of Belfast than in the suburbs where I might bump into people who'd recognise me.

I should have planned this better, but after last night, I've no choice but to leave. There's no future for me in that house. I know if I stay it'll only be a matter of time before I'm raped. A shudder of revulsion races through me when I recall what happened.

Mrs Duffy has been allowing her bastard of a boyfriend and his mates to touch and kiss me for months. But now I've had my sixteenth birthday, I've a feelin' the abuse won't stop there. As long as Mrs Duffy gets the cocaine she needs from her boyfriend, it doesn't matter what he and his friends want in return. And recently, what they've wanted is me. The thought of something more sinister happenin' makes me even more determined to get away.

I've seen movies and watched documentaries on telly where the victims speak about the aftermath of their abuse—how they still *feel* hot breath on their necks. How the single touch of a man is enough to send them into a panic attack. It didn't make sense until I was in their shoes. Now I understand it better than anyone—the shame, the disgust, and the feeling of being nothin' more than a helpless doll.

By the time I get into Belfast centre, I'm feckin' exhausted. Mrs Duffy's house isn't too far out of the city, but walkin' and drivin' are two very different things. It's still early on a Friday mornin', and the streets are quiet.

The money I stole is enough to get me out of Belfast. But where should I go? I decide to walk to the bus station and choose a random destination from the departure board. It doesn't matter where it is, as long as it's not in this city.

When I finally get to the station, I scan the various places I could travel to. I have some money now, so that's not a problem for the time bein'. But it won't last long. My chest aches as I look at the names of countless towns and cities I've never heard of before. I don't think I want to travel all the way to England, but perhaps I can go south. There's a bus leaving in thirty minutes, headin' to Dublin.

That could be my escape.

My new start.

I buy the ticket before I can second guess myself. A new start is what I need. It will give me the freedom to become someone else. Even though I'd

prefer to live in the city I grew up in, there's nothing left for me here anymore. I have ta focus on the future.

My chest aches when I think about what's in store. I don't have much of an education, which means that whatever job I do find, it's not going to pay much. But I've survived worse.

I board the coach, and having placed the rucksack with all my belongings at my feet, I settle into my seat. I lean my head against the window and stare out at the world as it flies past.

I've brought with me my second-hand earphones I got at a charity shop, so I plug them into my old smartphone and press play.

The list of songs I created for when I walk ta school starts ta play, and as Jared Leto's voice sings ta me through the miniature speakers, I close my eyes and allow myself ta calm. My breaths are deep and soothing as the vibration of the bus takes me to a brand new life.

I think about the house and the people I've escaped from. They'll be wakin' up right about now, thinkin' I've gone ta school. But when I don't return this evenin', I know there'll be panic because Mrs Duffy won't get her money.

I don't think she'll look fer me, and I'll finally be free. Sadly, she'll find a new innocent child ta take in and abuse until there's nothing left of them. Until they're a shell of the person who first entered that feckin' house.

I'm shaken by the shoulder, and when I open my eyes, I notice the bus has stopped. I look up at the man who's loomin' over me, and I almost scream until I realise he's wearin' a bus company uniform.

"We're in Dublin, lass, best ye be gettin' off unless ye want ta pay fer another trip back up north." The bus driver offers me a smile before he makes his way ta the front of the vehicle again, leavin' me ta collect my things.

I step off the bus and into the afternoon that's turned cloudy. It could be an omen of things ta come. I never did believe in all that shite, but every now and then I think about fate, about what the universe has in store fer me, and I wonder if anythin' will ever change fer the better.

The city is packed with tourists, just like I knew it would be. I've seen online how many people visit Ireland, North and South, every year. But most of them head fer Dublin because the news stories about the violence in Belfast tend to scare most visitors away.

Thankfully, I can get lost in a city like this where nobody knows me.

I shoulder my backpack and start walkin'. From the bus station on Store

Street, I make my way toward the river. The Liffey runs through the centre of Dublin, almost as if it's cuttin' it in two. Its water glistens as the sun shines through gaps in the clouds movin' across the grey sky.

There are so many bridges that span the Liffey, takin' people from one side of the city ta the other. As I make my way along the riverbank, I note how each bridge is unique in its design and style. There's an energy in the city that's very different to Belfast. I can't deny it, Dublin is beautiful.

I head across the Ha'Penny Bridge toward Temple Bar. Once the sun sets, I know that's where the city nightlife will be. Even now, in the late afternoon, the bars and restaurants are packed with tourists and the staff are bein' run off their feet.

As I walk along narrow cobbled streets, there's definitely a livelier, less volatile vibe than my home city. I'm not sure where I'll find work, but I can't keep walkin' aimlessly, so instead of wanderin', I stop at a pub called The Horse and Dog.

I step through the doorway into the richly decorated, old style pub. It's warm and cosy inside. Now I need to pluck up the courage and see if the owner will give me a job. I'll take anythin', even if it's washin' the dishes in the kitchen; just as long as I don't have ta go back ta Belfast.

"What can I do ye fer?" An older man, who's standin' behind the bar, looks down at me when I settle onto a stool.

"Um, a lemonade please?" My voice comes out squeaky, but I clear my throat before he returns with my drink. The cool liquid eases the panic that's been slowly settlin' in, and I inhale a breath before I say, "And I was wonderin' if ye have any jobs goin'?"

"How old are ye, wee thing?" he asks.

Then with a chuckle, he crosses his arms, which makes him seem even more scary and larger than life. His arms are so big I'm sure he could pick me up without strainin' himself.

"I'm old enough," I bite out, tryin' ta put on some fake confidence while prayin' he doesn't ask me fer any form of identification.

He narrows his gaze, and stares at me fer a long while before he nods. "Aye. I can tell ye are." He laughs as he shakes his head. "What can ye do?"

"I can serve drinks, I can wash up in the kitchen, and I can clean when everyone has left." I'm not sure what people do in pubs. besides pull pints, but I offer a few options, prayin' he'll agree to at least one of them.

"Ye can start tomorrow, and I'm guessin' ye need a place ta sleep?"

“Aye,” I say, brightenin’ when I realise I’ve finally struck it lucky.
They always say the luck of the Irish will get ye far. It’s true.
“I’ll have one of my girls show ye around.”
And with that, I start a brand new life. One I don’t have ta be fearful of.
One that’s filled with promise.

THREE

CALLIA

The Past Sixteen Years Old

“LIA!” The name I go by now is partly my real one, but it also belongs ta my new persona.

When I first arrived in Dublin, it was exciting, new. I didn’t think I’d end up workin’ in a pub at sixteen. The owner doesn’t give a shite as long as the work gets done. He pays us cash, so there’s no paperwork to link us back ta him. Clever, but also underhanded.

Without any documents, it’s the only work I can get, but sadly I’m barely earnin’ enough ta get by. It’s been six months since I ran away, and I’ve survived so far. The pride I have in how I’ve handled bein’ on my own has kept me goin’, but the time has come fer me ta find another way ta make ends meet.

I smile over at Kyla, one of my new friends.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

“I’m not feelin’ too good. I’m headed home. Ye think ye can take on a double shift today?”

I can tell she’s ill—her face is pale, and her nose is bright red.

“Aye, I can do that fer ye,” I tell her.

Thankfully, she doesn’t hug me before she leaves. I don’t want ta get sick. The pub landlord doesn’t like us bein’ off work. Even if we’re on the brink of death, he expects us ta get on with what we’re paid ta do.

It looks like I’m goin’ta have a longer night than I thought. What Kyla doesn’t know is I’m startin’ a second job tonight. One that will help pay the

bills and the rent on the flat I share. It's not been an easy decision, and I'm goin' ta have ta swallow my pride, but I decided when I ran away, I would do anythin' ta survive.

Walkin' the streets is the only option left ta me.

Friday nights in the centre of Dublin are busier than the rest of the week. As I walk down the cobbled streets, I offer a smile ta those who greet me. I've found people ta be friendly and welcomin' here. It's as if everyone feels as lonely as I do.

Those who've been workin' their office jobs all week are now out and about, lettin' their hair down and enjoyin' spendin' their hard-earned money. The short skirt I'm wearin' makes me feel as if I fit in with the rest of the women who are all dolled up fer a night out. But I'm nothin' like them. Fer one thing, I'm sixteen, and fer another, I'm not here ta have fun, I'm here ta supplement the pittance I earn at the pub.

As a car pulls up, a cold shiver trickles down my spine. I want ta run, but I don't. I wait as the driver rolls down the window. He's dressed in an expensive suit, and his gaze rakes over me.

"Ye lookin' fer a warm bed tonight? I'll look after ye." The corner of his mouth tilts upward into a salacious grin.

His question makes me want ta shudder and run home, but I know there are bills comin' up that my wages from the pub just won't cover. Maybe, just maybe, I can make enough money tonight ta take the pressure off.

The chill from the cold evenin' trickles down my spine, and I shiver. Even though it's May, and meant to be warmin' up, it's a chilly evenin', and I know rain is comin'. A storm is brewin', and I don't know if it's an ominous sign tellin' me not ta go with this bastard, or if it's karma pushin' me in his direction.

"Aye," I say with what I hope is a seductive smile.

Perhaps he really does want ta look after me. The idea of meetin' a prince who'll whisk me away to a castle and give me everythin' my heart desires flits through my mind. But it's brief.

I don't focus on those kinds of dreams. The girls at school used to giggle and whisper about fairy tale endings, but I know I never did.

“Well, it’s best you slide yer pretty wee arse into my car then,” he tells me.

The man must easily be in his forties. The bile that churns in my belly, knowin’ he’ll want more than I want ta give, burns as it slowly rises to my throat. The taste of acid fills my mouth. It’s like a poison remindin’ me of what I’m about ta do to survive.

He doesn’t ask fer my age, and I don’t offer it up. Instead, I offer him a smile, but as I pull open the front passenger door, a deep rumble vibrates through the pavement, and I can’t help but turn my head ta see where the sound is comin’ from. Behind the car, four bikes come to a stop. The men on them are large, imposin’, and very feckin’ scary. I don’t know them, and I don’t think I want ta.

“Get in the feckin’ car,” the older man shouts at me, and I quickly slip into the passenger seat.

The squeal of tyres as he pulls away is drowned out by the engines of the motorcycles being revved. The noise is deafenin’ as he speeds through the streets and out of the city. Soon the river and bridges are long gone, and my heart is in my throat.

“Where are ye takin’ me?” I whisper as I twist in my seat, lookin’ out the back window ta see the headlights of the four bikes followin’ right behind us.

“Those feckin’ arseholes are lookin’ fer trouble,” the man grumbles as he takes a left turn, then a right. He’s tryin’ ta lose them.

“Why are they followin’ ye?” I ask him.

I look over at the man and see the scar that runs from under his eye down to one corner of his mouth. I didn’t notice it earlier, but as the headlights of a passing vehicle illuminate his features, it’s clear.

He doesn’t answer. Instead, he speeds up, and as panic sets in, my throat closes, threatenin’ ta choke me. My heartbeat quickens, and my stomach twists in fear. It feels like a hand clawin’ inside me, grippin’ me until the ache is far too much ta bear.

The chase lasts fer several minutes, but we finally lose them. The darkness settles around us, remindin’ me I’m now far away from the city and alone with a stranger who’s just escaped a gang of bikers.

When we finally come to a stop, I tug at the door handle, but it’s locked.

“Let me out. Please.” I start beggin’, but my words become muffled when his hand covers my mouth.

I’m dragged over the middle console, and out of the driver’s side.

“Shut the feck up,” the man hisses.

Suddenly, the rumblin’ of bikes gets louder once more. My captor drags me along behind him, and no matter what I do, I can’t fight him off.

“Ye’ll bring in a nice sum,” he whispers in my ear, causin’ dread ta skitter down my spine.

I stumble beside him, as he walks with intent towards a large warehouse. We’re close ta the water. I can hear the lappin’ of small ripples against the wooden beams of what I now see is a dark pier.

It’s then that the sound of a gunshot deafens me, and I fall to the ground as the man with the scar drops dead in front of me with a bullet to his head. The hard concrete under my knees cuts into my skin, and a scream is wrenched from my throat.

Suddenly, strong hands grip me, and I’m lifted ta my feet. I’m spun around as if I’m nothin’ more than a feekin’ rag doll, and I come face-ta-face with a very handsome, but dangerous lookin’ man.

“Leave me the feck alone,” I bite out as anger and fear overwhelm me.

An adrenalin rush shocks my system ta life, and I try ta pull away from his grip, but the man holdin’ onto me is far too strong, and I can’t fight him off. His gaze flickers over me as he takes me in. His jaw ticks, and I can tell from the movement of his strong, angular face he’s grindin’ his teeth. Full lips curl into a sneer as he looks down on me, his green eyes glintin’, like a feekin’ snake watchin’ its prey.

I’m goin’ ta die.

I’m goin’ ta die.

It’s possible I’m chantin’ those words out loud. I’m not sure about that, but I do know I’m shakin’ uncontrollably. My whole body’s tremblin’ with fear.

“Listen ta me, wee thing,” the man hisses.

“What?” I croak, my throat suddenly dry, and my hands clammy.

I attempt ta focus on those forest green eyes. They remind me of summer when the leaves are bright; they’re almost feekin’ luminous.

“What’s yer name?” he asks me, his voice is warm, non-threatenin’, but I still can’t trust he won’t hurt me.

“Lia.” I can hardly hear my own voice when I speak. It’s bein’ drowned out by the deafenin’ rhythm of my heartbeat thumpin’ in my ears.

“And why the feck were ye with that bastard?” His words are a low, feral sound this time. The anger in his question is palpable.

“Let’s go,” Another voice comes from the shadows, and its rumblin’ tone makes my stomach tumble.

When the man attached to said voice walks into view, under the warehouse spotlights, my breath is knocked from my lungs. I don’t know him, but I feekin’ don’t mind learnin’ about him.

He’s the handsomest man I’ve ever seen—with his messy, just got out of bed hair, his angular jawline with a dustin’ of stubble, and eyes that seem ta look right into my soul. It’s as if he’s seein’ all the ugly things I’ve done, and he’s not judgin’ me.

“Who are ye?” I whisper in awe, surprised at my reaction to him.

I can tell these men are from Belfast because of their accent, which has me wonderin’ what they’re doin’ all the way down here. It’s not like it’s an ocean away, but I didn’t think many people came down here from the North. Especially men who look like them.

“We’re takin’ her back with us,” the one holdin’ onto me says.

“No!” I try ta tug away, but I can’t.

It’s annoyin’ I’m so much weaker than them. I hate it. Deep down, I want ta be stronger. I want ta be able ta fight back. Bein’ a feekin’ girl doesn’t sit well with me. The thought almost makes me laugh. But I stifle it and pin the man holdin’ me with a glare.

“I’m not goin’ anywhere with ye,” I tell him.

“But ye’ll go with a feekin’ stranger who was goin’ ta sell ye off to a sex traffickin’ gang?” the handsome prince draped in leather and denim challenges and the fire blazin’ in his eyes shows his anger.

My mouth pops open, but no words come out. I never thought anythin’ like that could happen ta me. Perhaps I am too naïve ta be livin’ on my own.

“How old are ye, Lia?” the man holdin’ me asks. I hesitate because I don’t want ta have ta come clean about my age. I’m sure if I do, he’s goin’ ta take me ta the police. I could be arrested and lose my freedom. “I just need ta know so I can come up with a feekin’ believable story fer ye,” the man informs me with a sigh.

“I’m sixteen, I left Belfast six months ago after runnin’ away from my abusive foster family. I didn’t want ta be taken advantage of any longer,” I admit as his words slowly sink in, and I realise that the man they just shot could have sold me ta some very feekin’ dangerous people. Much worse than the woman who fostered me.

“Well, ye’re comin’ back ta Belfast with us,” my saviour tells me.

“I can’t go back.”

“Aye, ye feekin’ can, and there’s no debatin’ it,” the handsome one says.

“I don’t even know yer names,” I bite out as I finally tug free from my captor’s hold.

“I’m Rebel,” the handsome one tells me, but from the tone of his voice, he’s not happy about havin’ ta speak ta me.

“My name’s Racer,” the one who saved me says. “We’re from the Royal Bastards MC.”

Ignorin’ Rebel, I turn ta Racer and ask, “So why are ye down here, then?”

“We’re on a job. Now, ye’re goin’ ta get on the back of my bike, and we’re takin’ ye back ta Belfast. There are some girls who live at the clubhouse, and they’ll take care of ye. Show ye the ropes and such.”

“Ye’re not takin’ me ta the police?”

Rebel pipes up, “We should. Ye’re underage, and ye shouldn’t be doin’ this shite,” he sneers. “But we know what it’s like not ta have a choice in how ta survive. So I’m trustin’ there won’t be any fightin’ this decision from yer side.”

I ponder this for a moment. Goin’ back to Belfast would be nice. And not havin’ ta work the streets would be really good. So I make a decision and nod.

“She’ll ride with me,” Rebel says to Racer, and for a moment, they lock eyes and it’s as if there’s an electric current chargin’ between them.

“Aye,” Racer finally says with a chuckle. “No bother, mate.” He walks off, leavin’ me with the grumpy, very feekin’ gorgeous, Rebel.

“Ever been on a bike before?” he questions as he steps up in front of me.

He’s tall. So feekin’ tall, and so drop dead feekin’ gorgeous. But to him, I’m probably just another helpless girl.

“No.”

“Then ye best hold on ta me. And put this on.” He hands me a helmet that I know is goin’ ta make a mess of my hair.

“I have ta get some things from my flat first. I can’t leave without them,” I tell him.

When I think of the meagre belongings waitin’ on me, I want ta cry. They’re the only things I own in this world, so I’m not goin’ ta let two scary strangers stop me from gettin’ them.

“Aye, tell me where it is, and I’ll take ye,” Rebel says as he walks towards the bikes, and I have no other choice but ta follow him.

Straddling the bike, I slide forward and wrap my arms around Rebel's waist as instructed. And when the engine rumbles to life, I can't help but squirm against him.

"And quit that, I need to focus on the road," he grumbles as he and Racer pull out of the lot, leavin' the other two bikers behind. I can only assume they're stayin' ta clean' up the mess.

It's Racer, Rebel, and me as we make our way to the flat where I've been stayin' with two other girls from the pub. I'm thankful they've both been good ta me. There are some horror stories about livin' with other people, but somehow, my luck has held out.

Until now.

I don't know if I can trust these bikers, but somethin' tells me I'm not goin'ta be hurt. They saved me, and I'm goin'ta have ta trust my instincts on this one. Even if I did stupidly get into a car with an evil bastard before.

Both men ignore me as I pack what little I have, but the moment we're back at the bikes, Rebel looks at me with those penetrative eyes and says, "Ye're goin'ta start fresh. Anythin' ye knew from yer past is gone. Understood?"

I'm not sure what he means, but I nod. I've tried so many times to put the past behind me. And even though the nightmares still run rife through my sleep, I've managed to survive this long.

"Good. Let's go," Racer says.

And those are the three words that set me off on another brand new adventure. I can't tell what's goin'ta happen, but it can't be worse than what I have been through already.

FOUR

REBEL

The Past *Twenty-three Years Old*

IT'S BEEN a week since the shinin' star came into our lives, and even though the women seem to have accepted her, I still don't trust her. She may be sweet and innocent, and we may have saved her, but I don't know her. And I don't care ta try.

That's a lie.

Feckin' arsehole feelin's seem ta bubble up each time she walks in the feckin' room. She's a feckin' teenager. She's too young fer me, and I ain't goin'ta be doin' that shite. I don't care what the law says about her bein' legal at sixteen, I have my own set of morals.

"Are ye ever goin'ta talk ta her?" Racer asks as he slips into the chair opposite me.

With the rest of the brothers out on runs, O'Hagans, the strip club we own, isn't too busy tonight. Monster saunters in and stops at the table where Callia is seated with one of the old ladies. He's told her she can work at the club as a server, but she's not allowed ta go anywhere near the stage.

The girls dance, but they decide whether they're goin'ta be strippin' or not. The idea of Callia gettin' up there and takin' her clothes off doesn't sit well with me.

"She's a stranger," I tell Racer as I turn back ta look at him.

I've met the bastard when I first asked Monster if I could patch in. I wanted a place ta belong, one that didn't leave me with guilt. After I watched Da killed by the feckin' Irish mob scum, on the same feckin' day Orla left

me, the mafia wanted me to join their ranks, but I didn't see it as my future. I told Ma I was movin' ta Ireland, and I packed my shite and left.

When I first got here, I lost my way fer a while. I drank too much and picked fights with any fecker I could find who was bigger than me. That's how I got my road name, Rebel. In the end, it was Monster who set me straight, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Racer was wantin' to join the club at the same time as me. We went through the shite of bein' prospects together. It solidified our friendship, our brotherhood. And I trust him with my life.

"But she doesn't need ta be a stranger," he responds.

Racer and I have shared a lot of women over the years. Our first time sharin' was on his seventeenth birthday. She was nineteen and we weren't meant ta be at the party, but nobody knew we were crashin' it. The host was nothin' more than a stuck-up arsehole, so we went in there to cause a ruckus. Instead, we had the best night of our lives.

"I think I need ta go out tonight," I tell Racer.

"Oh aye?" He leans back in his chair, liftin' the pint to his lips as he arches a brow at me. He knows I'm goin'ta lose my feckin' mind if I stay here and watch her all night.

"We can go into the city," I tell him. "Find some willin' wee thing and spend the night at her place."

"Is that because ye want ta forget about Lia?" he challenges me, chucklin' while doin' so, and I'm tempted to put a fist in his feckin' smirkin' face. "Ye know she's into ye," he tells me.

"Ye're full of shite," I bite out as I push my chair away from the table with a loud screech and head fer the bar.

Orderin' another drink, I wait while the barman pours the double shot of Jameson. I can feel her eyes on me. She watches me just as much as I do her. But she's too feckin' young. I'm not goin' there.

I swallow back the whiskey, and as it burns its way down ta my gut, I decide I need ta get out of this feckin' place before I end up kissin' her. Over the years, I've seen my fair share of beautiful women, but none of them has ever distracted me as much as this wee thing.

"Goin' out?" Monster says as he steps up beside me.

Even he's noticed my change in mood when she's around. It's clear ta every feckin' one of my brothers, and it's botherin' me; I don't like it one bit.

"Aye," I say, forcin' myself not ta turn and look at where she's sittin'.

“Do ye need me fer anythin’?”

He shakes his head, but he doesn’t look away.

“Ye know, Rebel, she’s more grown-up than a lot of the whores who walk into this place. Ye need ta get ta know her. She’s not goin’ta want ta stay here forever, and once she’s gone, ye’ll always regret not seein’ where this goes.”

“Feck off,” I bite out as frustration claws at me.

As much as I want ta believe my best friend, I know I’m not the man Lia should be with. The girl needs someone who can offer her a happy life, give her a house one day, and a couple of wee ones runnin’ around in the feckin’ garden.

I’m a biker. I’ll never leave this life unless I’m dead. So, fer me ta even consider bein’ with her is ludicrous.

“I’m serious,” Monster says as he grips my shoulder and gives it a reassurin’ squeeze. “She’s a good girl.”

“All the more reason fer me ta stay away from her,” I tell him.

None of my brothers will change my mind on this. There’s never goin’ta be anythin’ between Callia and me.

Monster sighs. We’ve been friends fer years, and he knows me better than most of the other brothers. Once I’ve made up my mind, there’s no changin’ it.

“I’m tryin’ta be the good guy here,” I inform my best friend. “She’s too good fer me. There are things I’m not proud of in my past. If I were ta fall fer someone, if I were ta take an old lady, I’d have ta tell her all the shite I did.”

“The shite ye did fer yer Da,” Monster argues. “Any good son would do the same. And that’s what ye are and will always be. Yer ma believes it as well, I don’t know why ye don’t.”

He’s the only one who knows the true extent of the work I did fer my da. He dragged me into the life when I was just fifteen. I wasn’t officially a part of the mafia, but I still went on jobs with him, and I didn’t turn back from the violence. Even at that age, I did what I had ta do without question.

“I know who I am, and what I’ve done. Ye may not see it, Monster, but I’m not a good person.”

He shakes his head. “Ye’re bein’ a feckin’ martyr, Rebel,” he tells me as he pins me with a look that says he’ll never believe I’m anythin’ other than a good person.

I wish I could see what he does.

“I’m headin’ out,” I announce as I turn and walk towards the door.

Even as I pass the table where she’s sittin’, I don’t look. I force myself to ignore the beautiful wee thing that’s starin’ at me like I hung the feckin’ moon in the sky and lit all the stars on fire.

“Ye need ta grow a pair,” Racer says when he joins me outside.

Instead of replyin’, I light a smoke and pull in a long, deep drag. The nicotine hits my system instantly, calmin’ the racin’ heart that’s beatin’ a rhythm in my chest.

He’s right. I do. But not tonight. Fer now, I’m goin’ ta ignore the idea that some beauty could ever want me around fer longer than one night. I don’t do relationships. They’re dangerous. The longer ye stick around, the more it hurts when it’s over.

“Are ye comin’ with me or not?” I throw back, not even attemptin’ to reply to his feckin’ comment.

I don’t need to get into it with him as well. It’s enough that Monster’s on my back about this girl.

“Aye,” Racer tells me, but he’s watchin’ me with intrigue in his eyes. “Are ye really goin’ ta go out and fuck some random when ye have a pretty wee thing in there achin’ fer a taste of a big, bad boy biker?”

“Feck off.” I drop the cigarette on the ground and stomp it out with my boot. “Let’s go.”

“Can I come out with ye?” An angelic voice comes from behind us as we head ta the bikes.

I know it’s her. There’s a melodic tone to her voice, and it settles in my chest, heavy and unyielding. She’s not goin’ ta let me escape. I want so much ta walk away and not look at her, but a basic instinct has me turnin’ around ta stare into those pretty eyes.

“Ye think ye’re old enough, youngen?” Racer chuckles as he stops in front of her.

He’s much taller than Callia, towerin’ over her as if she were nothin’ more than a pixie.

“I’ve been through more in my life than most have,” she bites back, foldin’ her arms across her chest.

Her fire is beautiful. It burns in in her eyes as if she ain’t afraid of anythin’. But the thing about people who act tough is they behave that way because they’ve been forced to build walls ta hide behind. And that only makes them more fearful than most.

“Ye’re not comin’ with us,” I tell her when I finally pluck up the courage ta look at her. “Ye’re meant ta stay here. Where ye’re safe. Don’t think ye’re goin’ ta start goin’ out on the town every night while ye’re livin’ with the club. If danger is what ye’re lookin’ fer, ye’re welcome ta go back ta Dublin.”

Fer a moment I think she’s goin’ ta argue with me. But instead, she sighs. “I just don’t know anyone here, and if I stay in the club, I’ll panic.”

“Panic?” Racer questions as he places his index finger under her chin and tips her head back. “What do ye mean?”

“Well...” Her voice breaks, and I watch her swallow down what I can only assume is fear. “I don’t like bein’ around people I don’t know. It’s strange, but ye’re the ones who got me out of a dangerous situation, and I feel safe with ye. I’m just worried because if ye’re both not here, I don’t know anyone else.”

“They’re not goin’ ta hurt ye,” I tell her, tippin’ my head towards the club. There’s no reason fer her to feel the way she does, but deep down, I understand it. “And we’re needin’ ta get out of here fer the night.”

“Can ye stay and drink here, instead?” our shinin’ star asks.

She’s like a dove with that pretty hair, shimmerin’ in the dim light. She shines bright—an illumination that blinds me to everythin’ else around us—a radiant star.

I glance at Racer, and I can tell he’s already changed his mind about goin’ out. The fecker thinks I’m goin’ ta confess my undyin’ feckin’ love fer her. I want ta chuckle at him, but I don’t.

“What do ye think, Ro?” he asks me with a glint of mischief in his gaze. I can only imagine the ideas currently runnin’ through his mind.

Nobody calls me by my full name, Ronan. It’s only Racer and Monster who are allowed ta shorten it and use it as a nickname.

“Ach, aye,” I finally answer, and I hear Lia sigh and see her shoulders sag in relief.

I want nothin’ more than to smile, but I don’t. She doesn’t need ta know I’m glad she’s happy we’re stayin’. It’s pure stupidity. This girl can’t be mine. Ever. Firstly, she’s too young fer me. And even if she wasn’t, I’m not the type of man she should ever want as a life-long mate. I’m bad news, and she shouldn’t be lookin’ at me like she is right now. It’s as if I’m her world.

“Go back inside,” I command her, and without debate, she obeys.

The idea of her listenin’ to me, followin’ my instruction, does somethin’

ta me. I want her ta be doin' it a lot more.

Feck.

There's danger ahead because the moment she hits eighteen my own rules no longer apply. My moral compass will shatter, and I'll want ta claim her. I'll have ta leave the feckin' club if I can't control my feelin's.

I look at Racer, who's watchin' me intently. There are questions in his eyes, but I don't want ta answer them. The thought of even considerin' bein' with her is nonsense. Bullshit. I can't be with a woman like her. In fact I need ta keep remindin' myself she's not even a woman yet. I may only be a few years older than her, but it's still feckin' wrong.

"She's trouble," I remark, lookin' at Racer.

The smile that curls his lips reminds me of the one he wears when we're out partyin' with as many women as we can find. We take one or two home and enjoy them together. I've never shied away from my sexuality. The fluid nature of desire is a drug.

But she's different.

Callia is not one of those women. She's so much more. That's what makes her so feckin' dangerous.

"And ye know ye like trouble," Racer responds with a shove of his shoulder against mine. "Ye live fer it."

"I'll feckin' break her heart," I tell him, and it's no joke. I'll do it because it's who I am.

Women don't come ta me fer a happy ever after. They want a night of lust and desire, and then they go back ta their husbands right after. Sometimes, they're still drippin' my seed from their well used cunts when they do. The corner of my mouth lifts slightly as I hold back the chuckle. So many have wanted a second or third go. But I don't do more than one night.

"Aye," Racer answers me. "Ye might. Think about it, though. What if ye don't?"

He poses the question quietly. He doesn't shout it from the rooftops, which makes it even more dangerous because it settles in my mind, takin' root, and I doubt I'm goin'ta be able to get it out anytime soon.

Most people are outspoken about their hopes and dreams. Ninety percent of them don't achieve them. If ye want somethin' in yer life, work quietly, silently, until ye achieve it, and then ye shout it fer the world to hear.

"And that's the problem," I tell him. "I don't believe in forever. I don't believe in fate, or all those other shite things that girls think about."

Racer laughs out loud as I light up another smoke. "I never thought I'd see the day," he says as he grabs the cigarette from my fingers, and putting it to his lips, he pulls in a deep drag.

"The day fer what?"

He meets my intense glare and says, "The day that the infamous Rebel is scared of a wee lass."

All things considered, I could punch him out and leave him in the garden until tomorrow mornin'. It wouldn't be the first time, and it's probably the safest thing ta do. But I don't.

"Ye're a dick head." My insult clearly doesn't hit its mark, because he laughs at me. "I'm serious. Ye think ye know everythin', Racer, when in fact, ye're just as bad as I am."

He's silent fer a moment before he nods. "Aye, I am, but I'm not the one fallin' in love with the wee lass we picked up off the streets."

This time, my fist does make contact with his jaw. I don't knock him out. Instead, I draw some blood, but nothin' that's goin'ta scar that pretty face of his.

His response has me on edge, though. "Only guilty people get violent."

FIVE

REBEL

The Present Thirty Years Old

TIME PASSES and people move on, but there are always things that bring back old memories. It can be a song, a fragrance, even a feckin' word. And that's how my life has been since I was fifteen—a mirage of memories that have eaten me alive.

When I die, and trust me, I've thought about it a good deal, I know I'll still remember certain moments in my life that have changed me. I've come to accept them over the years. I know they happened for a reason, and I need to move on from them.

But, do I move on?

No.

I joined the Royal Bastards MC when I was at my lowest point—after my girlfriend left, my da was killed, and I'd drunk and fought my way into a stupor. Now I'm the Vice President, and I'm one of the most dangerous men in the club. And there are a lot of violent feckers in our clubhouse.

There's only one thing that weakens me. It's the blonde beauty currently lying in the sunshine with her sister Miren. After Orla, I vowed never to allow another woman into my heart, and I've kept that promise.

Even though Callia is a constant in my life, I've kept her at arm's length. But the thought of her bein' mine hasn't left my mind since I first saw her. The need to claim her is a battle I fight daily. But now, her present and my past are about to collide. Her father, the head of the Irish mob and the man responsible for the murder of my da, is our prisoner. Revenge will be sweet,

but will I ever be able ta make a move on Callia, knowin' she's the daughter of the man I helped kill.

Pushin' those thoughts aside, I make my way into the clubhouse and towards the room where we hold church.

"Why the feck are ye late?" Monster looks at me with those dark eyes that bore right down into the depths of yer feckin' soul.

He has a way about him, and I think that's why he's such a good President. When he took over from his da, I know he didn't think he'd be in the position fer very long. But he had no choice, and over the years, he's settled into the role better than anyone expected.

There's a commanding aura that follows him around, even when we're not in church. He could walk around the feckin' pub, and people would kneel fer him if he asked.

"Had some shite to deal with," I tell him.

Perhaps I should offer up the truth about my thoughts, but with the rest of the brothers here, I keep it ta myself. I don't want them hearin' my life story until I'm ready ta tell it.

"Somethin' ye need help with?" I know Monster won't let up until he delves right down into the root of the problem, and I don't mind usually, but for now, I want ta focus on the task at hand.

"Nah," I tell him as I settle into my seat at his right hand. "I'll be fine." I chuckle, hopin' ta calm the feckin' tension in the room.

"Right," Monster says after a long, silent moment. "We have Bragan in the basement, he's locked up, so now we need ta make the fecker talk."

I still can't believe Bragan was that easy to apprehend. I'm havin' my doubts about him, but I know Monster has been waitin' on this moment fer a long time.

The meetin' starts, and soon, the men are fired up and ready ta make Bragan pay fer his crimes. I'm not focused. I should be. But there are other things going on in my head, and it's feckin' me up.

"That's it," Monster says. "I'll be questionin' him with Hades and Rebel." The words drag me out of my thoughts, and I glance across at the man who's in charge. "Are ye ready?" Monster asks me, his dark eyes locked on mine.

"Aye," I say, it's an automatic response because he's the President, and I'm his VP. I have to be ready fer whatever he needs from me.

Havin' Hades around will at least make up fer my own distracted feckin'

mind. Torturin' Bragan, makin' him pay fer what he did ta my da, is somethin' I've waited on fer a long time. But knowin' his daughter is the girl I've been obsessed with fer most of my adult life is a feckin' nightmare. I don't want to have ta go to Callia and tell her I've killed her da, but he needs ta pay his dues.

"Let's go," Monster announces, and we all get to our feet.

The three of us move down ta the basement, but before I walk out the door ta the clubhouse, I see her. She's standin' at the bar with Miren, and it's as if the world feckin' stops. It's always like this with Callia.

I fight the feelin's risin' in my chest. For years, I've forced them down, knowin' I'm no good fer her. But there are moments when I wonder what it would be like ta have her in my arms, ta wake up with her in my bed after a long night of fuckin'. Now, that would be somethin' else.

I'm not sure I'd survive it.

She still hasn't told anybody about what happened durin' the time she spent with Bragan. She chose ta go with him, and the rage that courses through my veins when I think about it has me itchin' ta get into that basement.

When we reach the room where Bragan's bein' held, I can't help but smile. Seein' him helpless, bound to a chair, makes me happy. I didn't want ta walk away from this interrogation. The feral animal inside me wants ta bare it's feckin' teeth. There's blood on my hands already, and I'll gladly drench myself in more when it comes to this arsehole.

I step up to Bragan, who's lookin' up at me with a smirk on his face as he takes me in. Callia's da is not a man I could ever come to respect, no matter what I feel fer his daughter.

"You're an evil bastard," I tell him.

It's no secret that I hate this man with everything I have. Monster watches as I pick up a pair of pliers. I wasn't sure my best friend would want me here when he interrogated Bragan, but when I asked fer just a few moments with the leader of the mob, he agreed.

Bragan may answer ta his wife, but he's been runnin' everythin' while she's locked up tight in prison. Which means he has ta pay fer her sins as well as his own. He's not the real head of the Irish mob, but it doesn't mean he doesn't enjoy what he does.

Bein' in here, ready to torture him, probably makes me as bad as he is, but I no longer care. This is goin'ta change the dynamic between Callia and

me, but that's not goin'ta stop me from hurtin' this bastard, who was partly instrumental in my father's death. That's somethin' my wee lass isn't aware of yet.

Once this is all over, I need ta sit down with Callia and ask her what happened when she went with Bragan. She's never spoken of it, and none of us have ever asked. It's been playin' on my mind, though, and I know she's goin'ta have ta talk about it at some point.

I don't know how she'll feel about me after this, but I have ta make sure her father pays. Torturin' him is not somethin' I'll ever be able ta take back, but it's somethin' I need ta do. I need closure on the past, even if she can never forgive me. I know she doesn't love Bragan, or know him as a father, but it's never easy ta sever the ties of blood.

I vowed to never fall in love again, but even though nothin's happened between us, there's a pull Callia's got on me, and it ain't goin' away anytime soon. I've tried ignorin' her and ensurin' we stay friends.

But it's all a lie.

I didn't intend ta fall in love again, but I have.

"Ye think my little girl will want ye?" Bragan taunts me.

He knows how I feel about Callia. He watched as I saved her from his clutches. I'm not sure what she told him when she went with him, but it's clear I was mentioned. The fecker knows everythin'.

"Maybe not," I tell him. "But at least I know I'll sleep soundly tonight."

I grip his cheeks, forcin' his mouth ta pop open. Then clampin' the pliers down on his front tooth, I pull hard until it wriggles free from the gum. The groan of pure agony comin' from Bragan makes me smile.

He spits blood from his mouth but chuckles when I release him. This is too easy. Too lenient. I set the pliers down and grab the blade lyin' beside them.

"Ye know, fer a man who used to run the mob, ye're nothin' now. There's no respect fer ye, not even from yer own men."

I take the blade, and slowly slice into his forearm that's restin' on the arm of the chair. Blood spurts from the open wound, and the agonisin' groan of pain I elicit has me chucklin'.

"Is that all ye've got?" Bragan challenges me, which only makes me laugh out loud.

I glance up at Monster, askin' permission ta continue, and he nods. He's waitin' on his turn.

Instead of replyin' ta the bastard who will die today, I force two fingers into the open wound, causin' him to cry out. I know the pain is goin'ta make him pass out soon.

"Maybe," I tell him as I dig my fingers further into the wound, and the soft, squelchin' sound of muscle and nerve echoes in my ears. "Do you think fer one second we're goin'ta take it easy on ye?"

That's when Monster steps forward. "Because we're not," he confirms.

He picks up the pliers I used earlier and starts on Bragan's right hand. With ease and precision, he clamps the pliers onto one fingernail and pulls slowly.

More cries of pain bounce around the walls. Torture comes naturally when ye have someone like this in front of ye.

"Tell us everythin'," Monster commands.

This man, who's bound and at our mercy fer once, has done so many evil things. Most of the brothers from the club have had dealin's with this bastard, and they know of the shite he's pulled over the years. We've all lost someone to his organisation. As much as I trust the Italian mafia, I don't trust the feckin' Irish mob.

Bragan locks his glare on Monster. "Ye know all there is ta know. I'm not leadin' them anymore. Ye know it's always been Sinéad callin' the shots. There's never been a time where I acted on my own feckin' ideas."

It almost seems as if he's angry at his wife. Perhaps he should be because she's the reason he's sittin' here.

"I wanted out," he confesses suddenly.

As serious as his expression is, I can't stop laughing out loud. The idea that this murderous bastard, who smiles when he kills, wants out of the mob is ludicrous. He looks at me, his eyes hard with conviction.

"I never wanted ye da dead," he tells me suddenly. Then he looks at Monster. "And I never wanted yer ma ta be killed." Then he tips his head to the side. "I was just followin' orders."

"Speakin' of," Monster says before he looks up at Hades, who's been watchin' everythin'. "Come here, I need yer help."

Hades is our Enforcer, and this is the kind of shite he loves. Get him in the interrogation room, and he's in his element.

"Open his mouth, I think we need to show him what liars get," Monster orders, and the man, who's done some of the most dangerous jobs fer the club, does as he's told.

The mumblin' pleas that come from Bragan almost make me laugh. He thinks he's goin'ta get mercy, but he doesn't deserve it. Everyone has a choice in this life. We decide how we're goin'ta act, what we're willin' ta do, and how far we're willin' ta go when things are on our shoulders. He chose violence and death.

Bragan doesn't deserve ta live. Perhaps it's not our decision ta make, but after we've lost so many loved ones because of him, I no longer care.

With every tooth that gets pulled, more blood drenches Monster and Bragan. It's a scene I've become far too used to seein'.

Monster turns ta me, and asks, "Do you need more time with him?"

For a moment, I ponder his question, but seein' Bragan in so much agony, I realise I'm satisfied with the payment. I needed to see him in pain like I was when my da died, and now I have.

I shake my head. "No. I'm goin' up ta see Lia."

I turn my back on the scene of carnage and walk away. I've been waitin' on justice since Da was killed, and now that Bragan has paid his dues, I need ta move on.

When ye live yer life hell-bent on revenge, and ye finally get it, there's an emptiness that lingers afterwards. It's an anti-climax. Aye, I'm happy we finally got the bastard, but I'm also feelin' as if there's nothin' left fer me ta do now.

Does life just go back ta normal?

When I reach the clubhouse, I walk into the lounge ta find Callia and Miren sittin' on the sofa. They're both chattin' but stop the moment they see me.

It's Miren who asks, "Is it over?"

I can sense Callia's eyes on me. Ever since we first met, she's stared at me. It's as if I'm feekin' magnetic, and she can't pull her gaze away. It goes both ways, though, because I find myself always seekin' her out.

Miren's aware there's somethin' between me and Callia. She once tried ta talk me into givin' a relationship with her sister a chance, but I couldn't do it then, and I can't do it now, knowin' I've just helped torture their father and he's about ta die.

"Soon," I tell them as I pull out my smokes and light one up. I need the nicotine. "Monster is dealin' with the last few things." I can't bring myself to say anythin' more than that, so I turn and walk away.

I head out the back door and into the garden. It's not long before Callia

joins me. Our usual meetin' point is right here, under one of the biggest trees that shades the flowerbeds.

"Did ye get what ye needed?" she asks me in that fairy-like tone.

Her voice is melodic. It's a gentle breeze that sweeps through me, both warmin' me and coolin' me at the same time. Some would say we're made fer each other. But I don't believe in that fate shite. It's all bollocks.

"Aye," I answer, but I don't look at her.

I can't bear ta see those eyes as they peek into my darkened soul. I loved hurtin' Bragan. I enjoyed watchin' him suffer. There was a satisfaction runnin' through my veins I've never felt doin' anythin' else.

I've always been convinced that nothin' matches the feelin' I experience from violence, not even sex. The euphoria that comes from knowin' I'm holdin' someone's life in my hands is a high nothin' else has come close to before. But I know if I were ta take Callia ta bed I would feel the exact same bliss, maybe even more.

"Are ye goin'ta be okay now?"

I finally turn to Callia. Her question hangs in the air between us. I want ta say yes, but I don't know if I will. I know she wants ta know if I can move on, and maybe she's even wonderin' if I'll take a chance at a relationship with her.

Could I?

I've always come up with reasons or excuses not to, but now I've none. She was too young when she first arrived here, but she's twenty-three now. She was broken and needed ta heal, and she has. I was hell-bent on the revenge I craved fer my da, but I've got that now. There's no longer any reason fer me ta push her away. But fer some reason, I'm still holdin' back.

"I can't say if I will," I give her an honest answer. "There's a lot of things goin' through my mind right now, shinin' star," I tell her. "Give it time."

I see the hurt in her eyes. The moment when her heart cracks from hearin' the truth. I've done this to her so many times, yet she still wants me. It makes no sense.

But then again, ye can't choose who ye love.

SIX

CALLIA

SINCE I FIRST MET REBEL, there's never been a moment when I haven't thought about him. When he's near me, I stare at him, my eyes followin' his every move. Even now, as I play outside with the kids, I'm thinkin' about him.

I know my father deserves everything he gets. There's nothin' anyone can do now ta stop the inevitable. Rebel needs ta know I don't blame him fer anythin'. Thankfully, they haven't asked me about the time I spent with Bragan. It was brief, but it was enough fer me to know he's not a good man.

I haven't even told Miren about what happened. She was the reason I went to him. I needed ta keep her safe, and I made the choice ta go. He made sure I'll never forget him or forgive him. One day, I'm goin'ta have ta tell Rebel about it, and I think that day may be comin' soon.

I push ta my feet and follow him out into the garden where he lights up one of his smokes. Since the first moment I slid onto the back of his bike and inhaled his scent of leather and tobacco, I've become addicted to his scent.

"I don't blame ye, Rebel," I tell him once he's inhaled a lungful of smoke. "When I went with Bragan ta keep Miren safe, I wanted ta learn all I could about him, and I did. He's a hateful, violent man, not someone I can proudly call Da. He needs ta pay fer what he's done."

Rebel's leanin' his head against the wall, and the way his shoulders lower as I speak, I realise he's been waitin' on me ta say somethin'.

"He does." Rebel's voice is low. "I was so angry at ye fer goin' with him. I wanted ta keep ye safe, and when that was taken out of my hands, out of my control, it felt like I'd lost my mind."

The smoke rings he's blowin' float up towards the sky before slowly

dissipatin' into nothin', and then it's just us. He lowers those eyes that hold a million secrets and looks directly into mine.

I take a chance and step up ta him. We're so close, I can practically taste the smoke on his breath. He's different ta the rest of the brothers here. There's a gentleness to him. But then again, I've seen the way Monster treats Miren; he's sweet, lovin', and kind when it comes to his woman.

Although Rebel's rugged, he's a gentleman when he speaks to any of the women. He's been like that since the first time I watched him with the old ladies who live at the clubhouse. Even with the women who work at the club.

"I don't want ye ta feel guilty fer anythin', not with me." It's the only thing I can say that I know he'll understand.

Many times the men go off and do jobs that include violence like I know my father is capable of, but unlike my father, the people they torture and kill are bad men who deserve what's comin' ta them.

"I don't know if it's guilt. but I do feel somethin'. Doesn't matter who's in that chair," Rebel tells me as he gestures with his head towards the entrance to the basement. "It's about knowin' right from wrong. We're playin' God when we should let the law handle it. But ye know how that goes down. Nothin' will ever change the fact that men in uniform can't do the job we can."

I know he's right. So many times, when I was growin' up, the police would come ta the house, knowin' my mother's boyfriend and his mates were dealin' in illegal shite. But they never did anythin'. Thing is, even if I'd told them, the police wouldn't have helped, because they were bein' paid ta turn a blind eye. I was left ta fend fer myself, which I did, and I survived.

"Ye know," I start slowly as I consider my next words. "Since I first saw ye, I knew ye were different from a lot of the arseholes around here. It's one of the reasons why I want ta be with ye."

Rebel chuckles, then he looks at me and smiles. Whenever I see a happy expression on his face, it makes my heart skip a beat. I want it ta be because of me.

"Aye?" He arches a dark brow at me.

Noddin', I say, "Aye. Ye know that anyway. I haven't ever hidden how I feel about ye."

My heart leaps into my throat when Rebel kills the smoke and turns ta face me fully. We're inches apart now, and my breath hitches in my throat when he reaches fer my chin. He grips it between his thumb and forefinger

and looks down at me.

“You shouldn’t want me,” he says. It’s somethin’ he’s told me, time and time again, but no matter how hard I try, I’ve never been able to change my feelin’s. He’s in my heart, and even now, seven years later, there’s no changin’ how much I love him. I think it’s only gotten stronger over time.

“Aye,” I whisper. “Perhaps I shouldn’t, but I can’t stop myself from feelin’ those emotions. They’ve been there since the first time I saw ye.”

I’ve never been so honest with him before. We have had a couple of drunken moments where we almost kissed, but he’s never allowed it ta go any further. The idea of his lips on mine has been racin’ through my mind fer years.

“I know,” Rebel says with a nod of understandin’.

Not once has he ever said he feels anythin’ fer me. Miren thinks he does, and she’s said as much ta me, but deep down, I can’t afford ta believe her. I can’t bring myself ta hope when it may not be true.

Silence hangs between us. It’s heavy, forebodin’. The sun has gone now, and as the night steals the day, darkness descends. I wonder if it’s a sign, an omen. I want nothin’ more right now than fer Rebel ta kiss me.

“I shouldn’t do this,” he murmurs before leanin’ in and brushin’ his lips against mine.

The connection is soft and gentle. My stomach flips over wildly, and my chest tightens as my heart thuds against my ribs. It’s a violent rhythm, remindin’ me I’m alive, but it doesn’t confirm if I’m dreamin’ or not.

It’s my fantasy playin’ out, one that’s put me at ease fer years. And now, as I stand here with Rebel’s lips on mine, I need ta pinch myself. He deepens the kiss, his lips teasin’ before his tongue darts out and tastes me. I open fer him, pressin’ my body to his, and soon we’re a tangle of limbs.

He lifts me up, his hands grippin’ my arse, and he holds me with my back leanin’ against the wall. My legs wrap around his waist. We fit perfectly. The hardness of him nestles into my curves as all those years of pent up tension, of hidden desires, spring forth, and I can’t stop the whimper of need that tumbles from my lips.

“If we do this,” Rebel says between kissin’ me, trailin’ his lips down my neck, and bitin’ down on the sensitive flesh just under my earlobe, “there’s no goin’ back.”

I don’t want ta go back. My pulse spikes at the idea of what we’re about ta do. This is what I’ve been wantin’ fer since the moment I met him. I can’t

ever stop my feelin's fer him.

Rebel pulls away from me, then smiles.

“Did ye hear me, lass?”

He cups my face gently, holdin' me so I can't look away, but I don't want ta. It's like he's readin' my mind. It's not the first time he's done it. And I know it won't be the last.

“Aye,” I whisper. “Ye know there's no way ye're gettin' rid of me. I know what I want, and I'm not walkin' away from it, Rebel.”

He laughs. It's a calmin' sound that vibrates through his chest and into mine. We're connected, and I can't stop the warmth that shoots through me at the thought of us takin' things further.

“It's been seven years, shinin' star,” he says then. “And ye still haven't walked away. Some people might think ye've lost yer mind.”

“Aye,” I agree. “I probably have. There's no tellin' what the future holds, Ronan.”

I say his real name, even though nobody else uses it. I know none of the brothers do. Racer and Monster sometimes call him Ro, but the rest all use his street name, and I've always respected that. But every now and then, I find myself wantin' to connect with him on a different level, deeper. So I call him by it, and he doesn't stop me.

I want ta be more than just another woman he brings home. Instead of a one night stand, I want ta be his forever. It sounds so stupid when I think about it, but it's how I've felt fer so long now, and I don't know anythin' else.

“Good,” is all he says before he carries me into the clubhouse.

I can't help the heat that rises on my cheeks when we pass by a few of the brothers who are whistlin' at us. I see Miren smilin' at me just before we disappear up the stairs, headin' ta my bedroom.

I've been stayin' in this same room since I was sixteen. Since Racer and Rebel saved me from the past that could have gotten me killed. I didn't expect ta still be here seven years later, but I found a home and a family—two things I didn't think I'd ever have.

We stop inside the room, and Rebel lowers me ta my feet. Then he cups my face in his large, strong hands and swipes his thumb over my lips. The tender touch sends heat sizzlin' through me. It's a reminder of just how much I want him. The need that's taken hold of me is like a rope bindin' me. I'm at his mercy.

“I didn’t want ta be the one ta kill him. Monster will do that,” Rebel confesses. “But I needed ta know he’s paid fer all the evil he’s done. When you went with him, I was so angry. I’m glad ye came back.”

“Do we have ta talk about this now?” I question, the desire in my urgent tone is evident, causin’ Rebel ta chuckle.

“Aye, sweet dove.” He kisses me fer a moment longer before speakin’ again, “I just need ye ta know before we take this step. I don’t want anythin’ gettin’ in our way once I’ve claimed ye.”

“There’s no need to explain, and no need ta claim me, since I’ve always been yours.” There’s no lie in my confession. It’s the feckin’ truth. I’ve loved him even before I knew what love was.

“Good.” Rebel steps back, and a shiver trickles down my spine. I’m sure he’s got somethin’ planned because his gaze glints with mischief and desire. “Get on the bed,” he orders.

For a moment, I pause before slidin’ onto the mattress as he instructed. Then sittin’ with my back against the headboard, I stare at him. Every part of him is toned. I can see his lean muscle and defined abs underneath his T-shirt as he moves.

“I want ta watch ye strip. Then I want ye ta lie back and show me what ye do when ye’re alone in yer room and thinkin’ of me,” he says softly before shruggin’ off his leather cut, and hangin’ it on the chair at my desk.

“What?” I squeak in surprise.

The idea of him seein’ any part of me makes me burn up with embarrassment. I know there’s no gettin’ around it, but I’ve never been naked in front of someone I truly cared fer before.

“I want ta see what ye do late at night in this room when ye’re imaginin’ what I’d do with ye,” he tells me as he tugs his T-shirt up and over his head.

“Rebel—”

“Do it, Callia. Take those shorts off and show me.”

When he looks into my eyes, there’s no longer a man watchin’ me but a hunter. He’s caught his prey, and I’m about ta be devoured.

I slip my denim shorts slowly down my legs before kickin’ them off onto the carpet. The corner of Rebel’s mouth tilts up into a smirk that causes hummingbirds to flutter in my belly.

“Spread those pretty legs fer me,” he coaxes, and I can’t stop myself from obeyin’ the command of this handsome, demandin’, and sexy man before me.

His eyes burn when my thighs fall open. All he is focused on is the patch

of pink lace material that covers my pussy.

“Let me see what’s mine,” Rebel growls, the feral beast that’s been hidin’ under that beautiful exterior finally rears its head.

My hands move as I hook my finger under the material and tug my knickers ta the side.

“Feck.” His gravelly curse rumbles through me, even though he’s still standin’ some distance away.

The heat from his stare scorches me when I brazenly slide my index finger over my smoothness. My arousal, already soakin’ my fingertip, is enough to lure him to the bed.

Rebel’s hands are on me now, his fingers takin’ over from where I’ve teased myself. He leans in, and his eyes are on mine when his tongue begins ta lap at me, causin’ my hips to lift off the bed and a moan to tumble from my lips.

“Oh feck,” I cry out when his finger dips inside me. It’s an easy movement because I’m drenched. He licks at me again, tastin’ just how much I want him.

My toes curl into the mattress, and I tangle my fingers in his hair, tuggin’ the chocolate strands as he devours me. I’ve fantasised about this moment fer so long, and now that’s it’s here, I’m lost ta the bliss.

“So sweet,” Rebel murmurs against my core.

He teases the strip of hair above my entrance with his finger, then dips two digits deep inside me. Finger fuckin’ me, slow and steady, and sendin’ me to the heights of desire.

My blood turns hot as it races through my veins. I’m so close to the edge. I want ta fly. My eyes are shut so tight I can see stars behind the lids.

“Look at me, Callia,” Rebel demands. “Look at me while I eat this beautiful cunt that’s all mine now. No other man will have you, because *This...*” he dips his tongue into me before he continues, “is *Mine.*”

He’s not laughin’ when he says it. There’s no amusement in his tone. He means it, and that sends me closer and closer to the cliff’s edge.

I watch him enjoyin’ himself. Those beautiful eyes that hold so many secrets are locked on mine. The focus he has on me while he licks and dips his fingers in and out of my body makes my thighs tremble.

“I’m goin’ ta—”

I can’t finish my sentence because Rebel crooks his fingers deep inside me and sends me spirallin’ into the darkness. I leap over the edge and fly, my

whole body shakin' and my hips undulatin' as I lift off the bed, but he doesn't stop. He continues what he's doin' ta me. His expert touch. His tongue. Everythin' about this moment is bliss.

"Feckin' hell," I cry out as another wave of pleasure rocks me ta my very core.

Gradually, my senses return, and it's as if I'm floatin' on the softness beneath me. I feel the butterfly kisses he places on my inner thighs, but I can't bring myself ta move.

When I finally open my eyes, I find him, standin' by the bed, watchin' me. There's a satisfied smile on his face. Rebel has me, hook, line, and sinker, and there's nothin' I can do about it.

Not that I want ta.

"Now it's time for round two," he says with a chuckle as his fingers deftly unbuckle his belt.

The need ta please him overwhelms me, and I shift onto my knees. I'm still shakin' from my orgasm, but I kneel in front of him, awaitin' the moment I can taste him in return.

And I know I'm not goin'ta stop until he's a growlin' mess. I want ta make him feel as good as he's made me.

SEVEN

REBEL

WATCHIN' her kneel fer me is like seein' heaven. Those wide eyes stare up at me as her hands reach fer my hard cock. I'm throbbin' ta be inside her. It's the only thing on my mind, and I can't push it away.

Callia doesn't say anythin' before she leans in and laps at the weepin' tip of my dick. The contact sends lust rushin' through every inch of my body. Shockwaves of pleasure course through my veins when she takes me in her mouth. Perfect lips wrap around the shaft, then she slides her mouth down until she can't take anymore. I don't force her. I allow her ta move at her own pace. With one hand on the base, she wraps her fingers around me, and she teases me until I'm growlin'.

I've never felt pure bliss like this before. I'm not a feckin' virgin, but she makes me feel as if it's the first time I've ever had a woman's mouth on me.

When she looks up at me again, our gazes lock, and she moans as she runs her tongue along the underside of my throbbin' dick that's leakin' precum. Then her pretty mouth releases me with a pop, and she smiles.

"Ye enjoyin' yerself?" I tease as I cup her cheek, tanglin' my fingers in her hair.

"Aye."

I pull her up ta kiss her. I need her mouth on mine. There's no goin' back. This woman belongs ta me and nobody else will ever have the pleasure of her again. I'm a jealous man, and I'll not think twice about killin' some fecker if he looks at her the wrong way.

"I need ta be inside ye," I tell her, the confession makin' those pretty cheeks turn a deep shade of pink. "Lie back. spread those legs fer me."

The way she obeys me without question makes my blood roar in my

veins. Desire and lust, pure and unadulterated, take over me as I nestle between her thighs.

Nudgin' her entrance with my cock, I slip into her. Instead of rushin', I take it slow. She's whimperin' as I gradually bury myself deeper inside her.

"Feck," I curse when her slick walls suck me in.

She's tight, fittin' around me perfectly as I bottom out. I'm all the way inside, and she's clawin' at my back. Her eyes are holdin' mine hostage.

Those plump lips part. "Please, Ronan," she begs, usin' my first name. "Please, do it."

The fact she's pleadin' with me makes me want her ta keep screamin' my name. I need the whole clubhouse to hear who she belongs ta.

Pullin' out, almost all the way, I thrust back in deep and hard, knockin' the breath from her lungs. She doesn't let go. She doesn't ask me ta stop. And I mimic the action, again and again.

Callia wraps her legs around my waist and pulls me deeper. The tight wetness of her body has me bitin' my tongue ta keep from comin' too soon. I can't make this a quick fuck. This needs to be savoured. She needs ta be savoured, but I can't fight back the pleasure. She feels so good around me.

"I don't want this moment ta end," Callia whispers as I look down at her.

I want ta agree, but instead I say, "It's the first of many. Don't think this is a one time thing fer me. Ye're not just another one night stand. I've never felt anythin' fer anyone like I do fer ye."

"Are you tryin' ta tell me I've waited fer ye all this time, and I didn't have ta?" She sasses me the cheeky minx.

I growl as I lower my head and bite down on the sensitive spot on her neck, causin' her ta whimper and her pussy to pulse around me.

"Ye're goin'ta come fer me," I tell her, whisperin' the words in her ear. "I want ta feel ye grip my cock and milk every drop of cum from me. Do ye hear me?"

Then I capture her nipple in my mouth and tease it, grazin' it with my teeth before bitin' down. The moment she mewls, I lap at the sensitive bud, ta ease the ache, before movin' to her other nipple and mimickin' the action.

"Rebel, please, please," Callia begs, her body shakin' beneath mine.

She's tremblin', and her cunt clamps down on my cock, causin' me to hiss as I feel my orgasm nearin'. It's closin' in on me, and I need her ta find her release before I come.

Reachin' between us, I tease her clit with my index finger, circlin' it slow

and steady before I pinch it hard. That's when she flies over the edge and cries out my feckin' given name—Ronan. Hearin' her find pleasure and hearin' my name on her tongue makes every nerve in my body come alive.

"That's it, shinin' star. It's my feckin' name you'll always be screamin'."

And with that, I let go. Fuckin' her hard, fast, and deep before I slam inside her one last time, all the way, and feel my release rushin' through me.

We're more than connected. We're the same feckin' entity in this moment. Callia holds onto me as if I'm a feckin' life raft, and she's about ta capsize. I can feel her warm, soft breaths comin' in short spurts. Her pulse is riotin' against her ribs and vibratin through my chest. The emotions I've been holdin' back are slowly clawin' their way up to the surface.

I didn't expect this ta happen today. Never did I think I would finally have her. I've spent years fightin' the feelin's I have, but after today, I can't do it anymore. She's mine, and there's no goin' back fer us now.

When my dick finally slips from her wetness, I shift my weight off her and pull her into my arms. I don't care about anythin' else. For now, it's only us, and there's nowhere else we need ta be.

I need ta savour this moment fer a wee while longer.

"I'm happy," Callia whispers softly as she strokes my chest with her tender touch.

"I hope so," I say, "Because ye know ye're stuck with me now. I ain't goin'ta be lettin' ye out of my sight ever again."

The need to keep her safe, ta make sure she's never in harm's way is runnin' rife through my veins. I don't want her ta know anythin' other than happiness and love.

Love.

It's a word I've never said ta anyone, other than my parents. I've never felt the need to confess it. I thought for a while I loved Orla, but I never felt the need ta tell her. With Callia, it's different, though.

"I can think of worse things to be stuck with," she teases, causin' me to chuckle.

Then she nestles her head into the crook of my arm, and I want nothin' more than ta keep her here forever. It's taken too long fer me to finally admit I want her. Perhaps it was the protective streak that took hold of me when I first laid eyes on her. It made me want to save her, even from myself.

"Do ye remember the day we met?" Callia questions in a soft whisper as she trails her fingertip over my chest.

“Aye, ye were a reckless wee thing,” I tell her. “And all I wanted ta do was tie ye ta my bed and keep ye there until ye were old enough fer me ta claim ye.” There’s no point in hidin’ the truth from her. We’ve taken the next step and Callia knows I want her.

She scoots up to look at me, a smile brightenin’ her expression as her eyes shimmer. “Oh? And why didn’t ye tell me that, back then?”

I ponder her question fer a moment before I say, “Because ye needed ta grow up. There was time, and I needed ye ta realise ye had other options.”

Callia snuffles, and I watch as a lone tear trickles down her cheek. “There’s still so much ye don’t know about me.”

“When ye’re ready , ye’ll tell me. We’ll figure things out as we go. It’s a journey. One we’ll take together.”

“I want ta know everythin’ there is ta know about ye,” Callia announces. The excitement is clear in her voice as she speaks.

I consider this fer a moment, then reply, “Ye will. There’s more ta both of our lives than we’ve shared so far. We’ll just have ta take each day as it comes.”

I pull her in fer a kiss, and I can’t stop the need that courses through me . I want ta do so much more with her right now, but there’s work waitin’.

“I have ta go fer a wee while.”

“No,” Callia mumbles with a pout pursin’ her pretty mouth. “I want ye ta stay here with me forever. No goin’ out there into the real world.”

I chuckle. “Aye. That would be heaven, but right now, I’m needed in hell.” I laugh when she scrunches her nose at my analogy. “Sleep fer a bit.” I shift from under her. “I need ta go see Monster.”

“Do ye have ta?” She looks up at me with a plea in her eyes.

I don’t want ta go, but I wasn’t plannin’ on leavin’ Monster ta deal with Bragan all alone. He has the rest of the brothers around, but I’m his second-in-command. And I need ta get his advice on goin’ forward with Lia as well.

“Aye, I’ll be back soon. I promise,” I tell her as I press my lips to hers.

Leavin’ her is difficult, but when she finally accepts I’m comin’ back, I quickly get dressed and head out to see the rest of the brothers who are congregated in the lounge.

I’m greeted with whistles and catcalls from the men who are my family, and all I can do is roll my eyes. Feckers. I find Monster outside; he’s with Hades and Sully. There’s blood all over his T-shirt and jeans.

“Is it over?” I ask him the moment I come to a stop beside them.

Monster nods slowly. "Aye. He's paid fer his sins. Sully is leavin'. He's goin' across the pond, so I'll need help with the clean up."

"Aye," I say. "I'll help, no problem." I look ta Sully who I know is itchin' ta go see his lass. "Is Clover doin' all right?"

"I think so. I haven't spoken to her since she left. She wanted space, and I needed to clear my feckin' head." He pulls deeply on a cigarette before he blows out the smoke, creatin' circles in the air.

"Don't leave it too long," I warn. "She's a pretty lass. Ye never know who's goin'ta try ta take yer place." I laugh as I swat him on the shoulder when he pins me with a glare.

"Ye're a feckin' arsehole, Rebel."

"Aye." I nod with a smile. "Everyone keeps tellin' me that. Must be true."

The mood has lightened, but there's still the dead body we need to clean up in the basement.

I look at Monster. "Did Bragan tell ye anythin' important?"

He shakes his head. "Not really. He was still adamant it's his missus that's givin' all the orders. He carried them out because he's a good, obedient soldier. Somehow, I don't believe it."

"Well, we do know she took over the organisation. Maybe she's still runnin' shite from lock-up."

It's a suggestion we've considered already. After Sinéad was arrested, she admitted to bein' the brains behind the operation. She said Bragan was nothin' more than a shield to hide behind.

"She'll never get out, but it's still not over, because the mob will appoint someone to take Patrick's place, no matter what," Monster warns, and I know he's right.

"Aye," Hades agrees. "I can start workin' with Tye and look into who's next in line. I'm ready fer another night of questionin' down in the basement."

Hades hands are bloodied, yet he's already on edge fer more violence. The bastard is a good man, and I know he'll die fer any of the brothers, but at times, I wonder what the feckin' hell happened ta him.

"Go," Monster orders. "I'll head downstairs with Rebel and clean up. Sully, you want ta leave today?"

"I need time off, but I don't think I'll fly out fer a while. I have some shite I want ta work through first."

I think Sully has had some feckin' trauma in his past that's broken him. I

don't know his backstory, but I can only imagine it's somethin' dark.

"If ye need anythin', just ask," Monster tells him. "And you bring Clover home when ye find her."

Sully offers us a grin. "Thank you. I didn't think she'd be welcome here after she lied and I hid it from ye."

"Aye, well," Monster sighs. "We're family, and nothin' changes that. We don't turn our back on our own. We all make mistakes. Miren and Callia are both related to that dead bastard in the basement, but they're good girls. And so is Clover. We can't choose whose blood runs through our veins, but we can decide what we do with it."

I ponder this fer a moment. It's true. I was so angry at Callia when she chose to go with Bragan, but she was tryin' ta keep everyone else safe. She wanted ta protect Miren. We haven't yet spoken about that time, and I know we're goin'ta have ta. Maybe I can ask Monster's advice on how the feck to do it.

We say our goodbyes ta Sully before I follow Monster down into the basement that reeks of death. In the chair, his head lolled to one side, is Patrick Bragan. The once strong, violent leader of the Irish mob is now nothin' more than worm food.

"I've claimed Callia," I blurt out suddenly ta Monster without thinkin' too much about it.

He's the President of the club and needs ta know what's happenin'. Especially when his VP has now taken on an old lady.

"Finally," Monster replies before turnin' ta me. "And ye're sure ye're ready fer somethin' more permanent. Ye know that girl's in love with ye." His tone turns serious, and I know there's no jokin' now.

"Aye," I answer him with a nod. "She's mine, and I'm not walkin' away from her. I've waited seven years. I don't know why it's taken me this long ta finally take that step, but it's the right time."

There are no more doubts in my mind. I used ta tell myself she's too young, and she deserves better. But if I want to keep her safe, the only person I trust her with is me.

"Then I'll support ye both."

Monster grips my shoulder, offerin' it a squeeze of reassurance, and then we get ta work. The place is a mess, and I know it's goin'ta take a while to clean.

But it's finally over.

No more feckin' drama.
Just me and Callia from now on.

EIGHT

CALLIA

WE'RE OFFICIALLY A COUPLE. We've been together for almost two months.

With Rebel out on a job fer the past week, I've been doin' some extra shifts at O'Hagans. I work there most nights, but I've always known waitressin' isn't goin'ta get me far in the long term. I've thought about maybe trainin' ta be a teacher. Last year I told Rebel, and he suggested I look at what qualifications I'll need in order ta get a teaching diploma. I haven't done anything about it yet. I'm allowin' myself time ta figure out what it is I really want ta do with my life.

"Are ye ready fer yer man ta be back today?" Miren asks as she walks into the lounge where I'm sittin' cross legged on the sofa.

It's been a busy mornin', but I can't deny, my mind has been on Rebel comin' home.

"Aye," I tell her. "It's weird. Before we took the next step in this thing we have goin' on, I didn't focus as much on him when he wasn't around."

"Well," she says as she sits beside me, a smile on her face. "You're both new to this. I remember when Monster and I first admitted our feelings for each other. It was exciting. I wanted to spend every waking moment with him. I know your situation is different, because you've known Rebel for years, but I understand how you feel."

"I'm happy, Miren. It's been a long while since I could say I'm truly happy," I confess. "He never showed any interest in me, and ta be fair, I was worried I'd put myself into an unrequited situation where he'd never feel the same fer me."

She laughs. It's a soft, tinklin' sound. "There was no doubt in our minds

that he felt the same way.”

“So ye’ve said.” I can’t help but roll my eyes at her. “But I think bein’ around him all those years and him not showin’ any interest, it made me wary.”

“Yeah, it can do that to you. I mean, if I’d told Monster I liked him and he’d ignored me or told me he wasn’t interested, it would’ve hurt. A lot. But I saw how Rebel was around you. When I first arrived here, it was the one thing I was sure of, his feelings for you.”

I don’t know how Miren has got so wise. We’re the same age. I suppose we’ve grown up in very different circumstances. It’s the only explanation I can think of because she truly is more mature than me.

“I suppose ye’re right.”

“I’m always right,” she teases me, leanin’ over ta nudge me with her shoulder, and we break out in a fit of laughter.

“Aye, is that what ye tell Monster then?” I challenge her.

I never even knew I had a sister until Miren arrived at the clubhouse and the truth about my da was revealed. The connection between us came naturally and easily. It feels as if we’ve known each other all our lives.

“Well, I do try, but he’s a stubborn man. I suppose they all are. That’s what we sign up for,” she says with a smile on her face. I can’t deny she’s right. “They’re good men, which is why we’re so in love with them. And I think they know the power they hold over us.”

“Oh, I have no doubt about that,” I agree.

The fact that any of the brothers would kill ta protect the women in the club, whether they’re an old lady or not, is evidence enough they are truly good men. Right down to their souls.

Aye, I know they’ve done things that are questionable. And they’ve all been through things that brought them ta the club in the first place, ta find solace here. But deep down, they’re not evil. I can say that with certainty because I’ve met true devils in my life.

“I’m still in awe at how easily we fell into bein’ a couple. I mean, I didn’t think goin’ from friends ta lovers would be simple, because we know each other so well. I was actually afraid we’d end up feelin’ like we’re siblings.”

This makes Miren laugh out loud, and I join her after a bit because the idea of that ever happenin’ seems surreal now. The sexual tension between Ronan and I has always been off the charts, so I can’t believe it was a genuine fear of mine. I’m enjoyin’ gettin’ ta know him intimately. Learnin’

what he enjoys, and what he doesn't.

"I doubt there was any way you two would have ended up like that. Whenever he looked at you there was tension. Honestly, it was so obvious to all of us." She leans back on the sofa and looks up at the ceiling. "It's been nice to see you both lowering those walls finally."

"I never had them up, though," I tell her earnestly. "He was the one who made sure I was kept at arm's length for all this time."

"True," she says with a nod. "But when you get used to someone always being there, you no longer see what's in front of you. And I've a feeling he was blinded to the possibility of something more, even though we all knew he wanted you."

"If I think back to the night we met, I remember how possessive he was when Racer offered to take me on his bike. Rebel was havin' none of it."

A warm tingle races through my veins when I think back to that fateful night. I was so close to bein' killed.

"Which is why I'm telling you, that you had no reason to doubt the man. He's crazy about you." As Miren speaks, she looks at me and grins.

When I first met my sister, we quickly became friends. And I do remember her telling me Rebel was interested in me. At the time, I didn't believe her. I was convinced she was imaginin' things. Bein' new to the club, she didn't know our history.

Maybe that's what made it so easy for her to see it, though. Maybe lookin' in from the outside was the answer all along. But there's no need to worry about it now, because we're finally in a good place.

Just then, the door opens and the heavy boots of the men returnin' echo through the house and into the lounge where we're sittin'.

"Are ye gossipin' about us?" Monster asks the moment he enters the room, makin' a beeline for Miren.

"Yeah, you should be so lucky," she responds cheekily as he lifts her to her feet and throws her over his shoulder. "Put me down, Monster."

His only response is a deep chuckle as they disappear down the passage, and all the way, I can hear Miren cursin' him out.

"There's my girl," Rebel says when he enters alongside Racer and Hades.

He saunters over to me, and gives me a long, deep kiss that has the two lads whistlin' and has me blushin'. I'm not used to shows of public affection yet. Even if they all know about our feelin's, paradin' them out in the open is still new to me.

“I missed ye,” I tell him when he flops down beside me on the sofa and rests his boots on the table in front of him. “Get yer feet down,” I scold him, only ta have him chuckle.

“She’s already cracking the whip, mate,” Hades tells Rebel and winks at me when I pin him with a playful glare. “Hey, I’m just saying.”

Hades and his twin brother have been with the club fer years, and they’ve always been good ta me, ever since I first arrived. I don’t know much about their backstory, but I do know it’s a roller coaster of emotions.

“Aye,” I tell Hades. “I’m pretty sure, one day, ye’re goin’ta have an old lady who’ll be crackin’ the whip.”

He laughs out loud, the sound a rumble. “I’ll be a bachelor forever,” he says in his English accent. I know they’re from the Northeast, but I can’t remember where exactly.

“I think ye’re goin’ta need ta move outta Belfast,” Racer says. “Ye’ve already shagged all the single women in the city.”

The guys guffaw at this, and all I can do is roll my eyes. Men. They’re insufferable. But to be fair, the twins are both single, and I can’t judge anyone fer their choices in life. I do know they’re good lads, and they’ll make some girl happy if they ever decided ta give love a chance.

Just then, the doorbell goes, which is strange. None of the prospects are allowed ta send anyone ta the door without consent from one of the patched-in members.

“I’ll go,” Racer says, pushin’ ta his feet and leavin’ the room.

“Wonder who the fuck that is,” Hades remarks.

We haven’t had any visitors at the club fer a long while. None of the brothers have had anyone come ta see them, and they’ve not brought any random women home.

When Racer returns, there’s a woman followin’ close behind him. With her, is a little girl who can’t be more than six or seven. She’s adorable, holdin’ onto a teddy bear as if her life depends on it.

Rebel tenses beside me when he looks up and sees the woman. Then he pushes to his feet, and his voice comes out in a deep rumble. “Orla?”

“Ronan.” She’s uses his real name, which means she knows him from before he joined the club.

“What are ye doin’ here?” he asks her, but when his gaze falls to the little girl, his hands fist at his sides.

When I take her in, I realise just how much she looks like the man I love.

My chest tightens as I consider the possibility of what this means. Fer a moment, we were happy, but I think that idyll is about ta be shattered with the stranger now standin' in our livin' room.

The woman, Orla, looks at Rebel. "Can we talk?"

"We're just on our way out," Hades announces as he and Racer both get ta their feet. They rush out of the lounge, leavin' me sittin' on my own, shock racin' through my veins.

That's when she looks at me, and suddenly, I begin ta feel as if I'm intrudin' on her and Rebel's reconciliation. But then he turns and holds out his hand ta me, and I take it, even though my nerves have me tremblin'.

He pulls me up ta stand beside him before he says, "Aye, we can talk, but whatever ye have ta tell me, ye can tell me in front of Callia."

I wasn't sure what I was expectin' him ta say, but that wasn't it. I thought he would ask me ta give them privacy, but the fact he wants me with him makes me less anxious.

"Okay," she says as she sighs, realisin' he's not goin'ta change his mind. "Aine, sit down there fer a wee while," she tells the little girl. "Mammie needs ta talk ta these people."

Without debate, the child obeys and settles on the armchair with her teddy bear. She doesn't look at us, but instead, focuses on the carpet. I'm not sure if she's scared or shy, but I am sure she looks far too much like Rebel.

"What is goin' on, Orla? Why are ye here?" Rebel's tone isn't friendly in the slightest.

The only thing I can guess is that she's an ex-girlfriend. We haven't had that talk yet, so I'm still in the dark about his datin' history.

"I need yer help, Ronan. Ye told me not ta call on ye, but I have no choice." The woman looks at me before focusin' back on Rebel. "Ye're the only one who can help because... she's... she's yours," she confesses.

My stomach tumbles with shock, and a sick feelin' snakes its way through my veins.

"What?" The disbelief in his tone is clear. "Are ye feckin' havin' a laugh?"

"No, Ronan," she tells him, her expression serious, and her eyes lock on his.

Rebel turns ta me and says, "Can ye give us a minute, Lia? Don't go far, I'll come and get ye, but I just need a moment."

My chest tightens at his request, but I nod and make my way out of the

lounge and up ta my bedroom. I'm reelin'. This is surreal. I thought there wouldn't be anymore drama now we're finally together, but it seems we're not so lucky after all.

I know Rebel loves me. It's obvious ta me. But now she's here with his daughter in tow, I'm not sure where that leaves us.

I don't want ta cry. I don't even want ta think about him leavin' me, breakin' things off because he's goin'ta want ta try again with her. I've never been in this situation before, and I didn't think this would happen. Ronan has a daughter. A beautiful wee girl who's goin'ta need her da as she grows up.

A knock on the door has me racin' fer it, and when I pull it open, it's Rebel. He looks like he's seen a ghost.

"I'm sorry I asked ye ta leave," he apologises, his words comin' out in a whoosh as he pushes into my room and shuts the door behind him.

"What's goin' on, Rebel?" My voice is broken. Cracked by emotion as the waves of heartbreak slowly attack me.

"The child is my daughter," he tells me. "I'm not fit ta be a father, Lia. I'm not a good person to be raisin' a child in this world. When I think of all the shite I've seen and done. I'm too much like my da. I was brought up to emulate a man who enjoyed violence."

Rebel is pacin' the room. I've never seen him so torn apart by anythin'. And I've known him fer seven long years. He stops for a moment and looks at me. I'm not sure what ta say ta him. I don't think he's a bad person, but he's convinced he is.

We're only just learnin' about each other, but I do know he'll make a wonderful father. I didn't think it would be this soon, but life tends ta send ye challenges when ye least expect them.

"Ye're nothin' like yer da, Ronan. But I'm here ta listen if ye need it. I'll try ta offer advice, but I can't help if ye don't tell me the whole truth," I say to him finally.

I hold my breath as I look up at him. I've always seen the best parts of Ronan. Even when he's been down in the basement and walks back into the house drenched in blood, I still see the man he truly is. The man his ma raised—a gentleman.

NINE

REBEL

CALLIA STARES AT ME. I don't like it when she looks at me like that because she isn't seein' the surface, she lookin' right into my soul.

I recall the day I met her and she pinned me with her penetrative stare. It was as if she knew who I was before I opened my mouth.

"Tell me, Ronan," my sweet dove whispers as she leans forward.

She's always been mine. Even though Racer found her, it was me who carried her out of that shite and into a new life. I never planned on bein' a hero. It just happened.

"My da was the one who sat me down and taught me everythin' I know about life. I didn't grow up with some sad story, little star." I lift my stare so it's locked on hers. "We had money. My parents had the means ta do anythin' they wanted. Da was a good man, and Ma was a saint. But I've seen how easily happiness and life can be stolen."

It's no lie. Even though we had enough of everythin' while I was a kid, as I got older, I watched how tired Da was. He worked his fingers to the bone fer the Italian mafia, and Ma hardly ever saw him. When they were together, they were happy. They loved each other. But then one day he was gone.

"Life may seem easy ta those on the outside, but it doesn't mean it is," I continue. "Aye, I was lucky ta go ta a good school, and my parents could afford new clothes when I needed them. But I also realise my da didn't spend enough time with me when I was growin' up. Don't get me wrong, he did his best, and when I was fifteen, I went ta work fer him, but it's those moments with him when I was very young that I wish I'd had more of," I tell her before I push away from the table and move ta the windows.

"I get it," she responds softly.

I don't look at her when I say, "And that's why I know I can't let this opportunity go. I have ta get ta know the wee lass."

Never once did I think I would be a father. I never saw that happenin' ta me. Mostly because I never thought I'd settle down with anyone.

"Aye, I understand," Callia is behind me. I feel her warmth cocoonin' me. I should be the one holdin' her, but I can't bring myself ta turn round. "Life isn't easy or guaranteed, but ye know I'll always be here fer ye," she whispers as her hand lands on my shoulder, the heat of it searin' through my T-shirt.

"I don't know if ye should," I tell her.

Two women have crawled into my heart. One ripped it apart, and I thought I was broken fer a while. The other has burrowed herself into my soul and will remain there forever. Now I have a third. A little girl who needs me ta be a man, ta be a father to her. I don't want ta hurt anyone. If he was still alive, Da would be disappointed if I were ta do anythin' like that. But what does that mean fer Callia and me.

I'll never believe my decision ta let her in was a mistake, but on reflection, it was a lapse in feckin' judgement. I don't want Orla; I don't love her. But I can't commit to Callia when my past is still lingerin'. Not yet anyway. It's not fair on her.

"What do ye mean, Rebel?" The hurt in Callia's voice is clear.

There's a crack in her words, and I know she's on the verge of cryin'. I don't want ta make her cry, but I've always broken hearts. Even when I didn't think it was possible.

"I just don't want ye ta be waitin' on me forever, sweet dove."

Before she can turn away, I cup her face in my hands. I'm not the tender, lovin' boyfriend she deserves. Perhaps pushin' her away is the only good thing I'll ever do in my life.

My shinin' star doesn't like ta be told what ta do, though. I shoulda realised that because I've known her for so long. I can't bring myself to say anythin' more, and she takes that as her cue.

"Let me make somethin' clear, O'Donnelly," Callia spits out, usin' my last name. "I'm not some fragile wee thing ye need to keep safe. I don't need a hero, and I certainly don't want a knight in shinin' feckin' armour. Ye know I'm not like those other girls ye've been with in the past. I don't want ye fer the cut ye're wearin', and I don't need the reputation of bein' an old lady."

Her voice is loud, and I'm pretty sure everyone can hear her now. I don't care, though, because she needs ta get this out of her system. Maybe once she's calmed a wee bit, she'll realise I'm as broken as she is.

"I want ye, Rebel. Nobody else," she continues. "And if ye come with a wee bairn, then so be it. I didn't think I'd ever be a mam, but life throws ye challenges and ye've got ta face them. If ye want me ta leave, I'll leave, but know this, I'm not givin' up on ye. I've only just—"

Before she can finish her rant, I steal her lips with mine and press my mouth against hers. She's soft, mouldin' ta me as if she was always made ta be there. I don't want ta listen ta her bein' angry, and when she wraps her arms around my waist, I pull her even closer. There's not an inch between us now. The fear that had taken hold of my chest, squeezin' the life from me, slowly dissipates as I feel her warm me with those curves.

When I finally break the kiss, I pull away and look down at her beautiful face. I want ta steal her away from this life. I didn't expect ta fall fer her, but I did, and there's nothin' that's goin'ta change it.

"I don't want ta hurt ye, shinin' star," I tell her. There's never been a more honest statement than that. I don't turn away from her when I continue, "This may be a feckin' rocky road we're travellin' on. I can't guarantee I ain't goin'ta do somethin' stupid."

Callia smiles, her eyes shimmerin' and bright as she looks up at me. "We all do stupid shite," she says with a smile. "I'm not losin' ye when I've just found ye. It's taken us too long ta get ta this point ta just walk away."

I can't argue with that. Since she was sixteen and I first laid eyes on her, I knew I wanted her. I didn't second guess my desire, but I did push it all the way ta the back of my mind. I knew I wasn't good enough fer her. I was a feckin' arsehole back then. I still am, but I think she's old enough ta deal with it now.

"I've never considered myself a good person," I tell her. "I grew up with parents who loved me, and my da taught me everythin' I know. But I also realise I'm a stubborn bastard."

"Aye, that ye are," she tells me with a grin on her face. "Look," Callia whispers as she takes my hand, "I'm not askin' ye ta change. I'm askin' ye ta take a chance on us. Nothin' in life is perfect, but we can make the most of it while we have the opportunity. Don't walk away from us, Rebel."

"What if I hurt ye? I'm not good enough fer ye, Callia. I was prepared ta try ta be better, but I'm a father now. I don't know how ta do that."

Callia offers me such a sweet smile, it makes my chest tighten with emotion. I know I'm right—she is too good fer me. But I also know, if I were ta walk away, I'd never forgive myself.

“Look at me,” Callia pleads. “Ye're good man, Ronan. I know ye are. All those men in there,” she says, gesturin' with her head, “they know it too. We all do. It's time fer ye ta listen to us, ta believe in yerself.”

I don't know how I could ever consider walkin' away from her. She has such a beautiful soul, and there's nothin' that can taint it. I see it now. Callia has a bright light that shines so deeply within her, nothin' can extinguish it. That's why she's my shinin' star.

“What did I ever do in my life ta deserve ye?” I ask her before I pull her into my arms once more.

Her warm curves nestle against me, and I want ta get lost in them. But we have so much we need ta talk about, so much ta do, I know it's goin'ta be a long night.

“Let's sit down and talk ta yer daughter. She's young, but she may be able ta give you an insight into how she's feelin'.”

My wee little star is right. I also think she should be there because I want my daughter ta know she's got me, but she's also got someone who has a heart full of love, who'll ensure she's happy and well looked after.

“Ye're willin' ta sit with her ma as well?” I challenge Callia, prayin' she won't say no, because I want her beside me. She's mine now. Nothin' is goin'ta change that, and Orla needs ta realise it too.

When I heard my ex got married and was happy, I allowed myself ta forgive and forget. Now I've found happiness, I don't want ta hurt Orla, but she needs ta understand, even though she's had my baby, she's not goin'ta be in my life as a partner.

“I told ye,” Callia says. “I'll do what needs to be done. I'm in yer life now, and I hope your ex will accept I'm not leavin'.”

I smile at my girl. “Then let's go in and talk ta them both.”

Callia links her fingers with mine, and we make our way ta the lounge where Miren is servin' up some tea and juice to my ex and my daughter. I'm convinced Aine is mine. I knew the moment I saw her, and if I count the years since Orla and I were together, the wee lassie is the perfect age.

Orla looks up at me when I walk into the lounge, and her gaze falls ta where my hand is linked with Callia's. She doesn't look like the girl I remember from all those years ago. She's aged. Some kinda stress and

heartbreak has clearly taken hold of her. It's sad ta see her now. She used to be bubbly—the life and soul of the party.

“This is Callia,” I say to Orla as we approach them.

I can feel my daughter's gaze on me. Her eyes are the same colour as mine, but they're filled with innocence and purity. Mine haven't looked like that since I was fifteen.

“Hi, Callia,” Orla says in a soft voice. I'm not sure what she's been through, but she's definitely not the same person I was with when I was in my feckin' teens. “It's nice ta meet ye.”

They acknowledge each other with a nod. I release Callia's hand before settlin' on the sofa and observjn' the three women who are now unexpectedly in my life. Granted, Callia has been around fer a few years, but havin' all three of them here is feckin' with my head.

Callia sits beside me, and I wait fer Orla ta start explainin'. From the tremble in her hands as she holds the cup of tea, I can tell she's nervous. She doesn't look up at me, her focus on the cup instead.

“I wanted ta come to ye fer so long, but I couldn't,” she tells me in a soft, nervous whisper.

Fear tinges her words, which only makes me wonder what the feckin' hell is goin' on.

“And now is the perfect time. Is it?” I challenge as frustration takes hold of me. I don't know why I'm angry at her, but I can't stop myself from feelin' the emotions racin' through me.

“Can we talk alone?” Orla asks, lookin' up at me.

There's fear in her eyes. Somethin' isn't right. She's scared, and at first, I put it down ta the fact she hadn't told me about our daughter, but deep down, my gut tells me there's somethin' else she's hidin'.

I look to Callia who offers me a nod of support and a gentle smile. “Go with her. I'll stay with Aine,” she tells me.

My daughter's name, pronounced Awnya, is beautiful and suits the pretty girl who's sittin' drinkin' her juice quietly. She's so well-behaved. I know Orla has done a wonderful job raisin' her.

I push to my feet and lead Orla out into the garden. The moment we're free of the house, she stops and looks up at me, regret shinin' in her eyes.

“I'm sorry I waited this long,” she tells me. “But I couldn't come ta see ye when I was with my husband. He wanted me ta focus on our family, not the past. Even after I left him, I was too scared ta come and see you. I realise

now it was stupid of me to have kept her a secret.” She shakes her head and turns away from me.

Now I have feckin’ questions.

“What do ye mean?” Even as I ask, I begin ta suspect the happy life she’s been portrayin’ hasn’t been as blissful as she’s been lettin’ on.

My suspicions are confirmed when Orla looks back at me and she’s cryin’.

“I needed our little girl safe,” she tells me. “If I had come ta ye, he would have hurt me. And I couldn’t let anythin’ happen ta me before ye knew about Aine.”

“I don’t understand,” I finally find my voice as I look at the woman I used ta know so well. Now she’s nothin’ more than a stranger.

“I think ye do,” she tells me. “I had ta make sure my daughter was safe. Our daughter. He didn’t love her like a da should. She wasn’t his and he knew it. He didn’t accept her.”

“And yet, ye married him?” Disgust is clear in my tone as I look at her.

I can’t blame her. And I shouldn’t judge her. I’ve made some choices I’m not proud of in the past, but this is more than I can stand right now.

The sweet little girl inside was in danger, and it’s only now I’m good enough to call on fer help. More anger swarms inside me. It’s like bees attackin’ as I feel the pain from what she’s put my wee little girl through.

“Do ye really think ye can walk in here and expect me ta help ye?” My tone is drenched in anger as I glare at her. I still can’t believe I thought I was in love with her. Now, I see her in a very different light.

I thought I loved her once. But now I know that’s not a feelin’ I’d ever experienced until Callia came into my life. Orla thought she had me back then. She didn’t. I was never hers.

“I know I should have come ta ye sooner, Ronan.”

Even her usin’ my name has my blood boilin’. “Ye don’t get ta call me that ever again,” I growl at her. “I have a daughter ye decided ta hide from me. If you hadn’t left that bastard, would ye have told me about her?” My words come out in an angry hiss, and I notice how Orla winces at my rage.

I don’t want ta scare her away. She’s got the reins when it comes ta my wee lassie, and I don’t want ta risk losin’ contact with Aine .

“I didn’t mean ta hurt ye,” she sobs.

I feel the same darkness takin’ hold of me as I did with that bastard Bragan when I finally got my vengeance. But with Orla, it’s different. I don’t

want ta make her pay fer what she's done. I don't want revenge, but I don't think I'll ever be able ta forgive her.

TEN

REBEL

“DIDN’T MEAN ta hurt me? Ye’re havin’ a feckin’ laugh, aren’t ye?”

My words are filled with tension, and I can’t bring myself ta look at her. Instead, my focus is on the view from the garden. I pull out my smokes and light one with a deep inhale of the nicotine my body craves in this moment.

Orla wasn’t the love of my life, and I realised it not long after she left. It didn’t break me the way Callia leavin’ me would. It wasn’t love, and deep down, I think I knew it even then.

“I found out I was pregnant after I broke up with ye. All I knew was that yer da had died, and ye were on a rampage. I didn’t want ta add ta yer hurt.” Her voice seems far away as she speaks. “I was scared, and mostly alone until I met Paul.”

This time I turn to look at her. “Aye, and then ye married him. I thought ye were happy with him, and you’d moved on.”

She nods. “I was. Things were good until Aine was born, then he changed. He became distant. I think it’s because she looks so much like you. Maybe havin’ ta raise another man’s child didn’t make him feel good about himself. I don’t know the reasons, but things between us changed.”

“Did he hurt her?” The words are out of my mouth before I can consider them. The idea that he even harmed a hair on my daughter’s head doesn’t sit well with me at all.

Orla shakes her head. “No. He didn’t even look at her. She was a ghost in the house, ta him at least. He wouldn’t talk ta her, which in hindsight was a good thing. Because all his anger was directed at me.”

My hands fist at my sides. Violence rages through me, racin’ through every vein in my body. I want ta make this bastard pay fer hurtin’ Orla, not

because I care fer her, but because no man should put his hands on a woman. I can't see any lingerin' scars, which calms me, somewhat, but I'm ready fer a fight.

"I need ye ta take her fer a wee while," Orla says suddenly. "There are a few things I need ta sort out, and I'm worried she'll get caught in the crossfire."

"What sort of things, Orla?" My mind is racin' at the moment. I can't forgive her fer keepin' me from my daughter, but that doesn't stop me from wantin' ta kill the bastard who hurt a woman fer no reason.

When I think about Callia comin' ta me and tellin' me she's pregnant with our child, my chest fills with happiness. But how would I feel if another man was the father? Aye, it can't be easy raisin' a kid that's not yer own, but children are innocent from the sins of their parents. They can't be blamed fer shite their ma and da have done.

"Please," she begs as she looks up at me once more, and this time, I can read the emotion in her eyes—fear.

She's gotten herself into somethin' and she's not goin'ta tell me what the feckin' hell it is. I want ta shake her and force her ta tell me. I want to offer my help, but I know Orla's stubborn. She won't give me any answers yet, and if I fight with her, it could push her away.

"Fine. How long do ye need?" I ask, hopin' it'll give me an idea of what she's goin'ta do. I pray she slips up and tells me somethin', anythin'.

"A week at the most." She pushes ta her feet. "Once I get everythin' sorted, I can collect her, and we can leave Ireland fer good. I'll never bother ye again. I didn't come here ta ask fer money, or anythin' like that. She may be yours, but I'm not tryin' ta trap ye."

"I didn't think ye were," I tell her, my brows creasin' as I look at her pained expression. "Why would ye even think that? I'm angry with ye because ye waited this long ta tell me I have a youngen."

This time, she gives me a small smile. Her eyes fill with tears, and she shakes her head.

"I thought about comin' to ye so many times, but I was scared," she responds. "Ye know what it's like fer women. We're judged on everythin' we do. Knowin' I was havin' a baby without the da around, I would have been ostracised by my family. That's when Paul came into my life, and I had a choice ta make. But then..."

Her words filter off, and the silence hangs in the air between us. I want ta

speak, but I wait fer her to continue. She needs ta give me somethin'. I can't be left in the dark anymore.

"After Aine was born, my parents found out she wasn't his."

She blinks as the tears stream down her cheeks. I pull her into my arms and hold her fer a wee while. Seein' a woman cry makes me uncomfortable. It doesn't matter what she's done. She doesn't deserve ta be sad about havin' a beautiful daughter.

"It's okay, I'll help ye as much as I can. but ye have ta tell me everythin'." Even as I say the words, I know it's not goin'ta help, because Orla will do things her own way. She's made her mind up, I know that much. I step back and look down at her. "Orla—"

"I owe some people money," she interrupts me. "If I can pay them what I owe, things will work out. Please, just let me do this on my own. It's my fault I've gotten myself into a mess, and I need ta get myself out of it. I can do it."

I want ta argue with her, tell her she should accept my help, but I know it won't do anythin' to sway her. There's conviction in her eyes as she swipes at the tears on her cheeks.

"I'll watch Aine until ye come back," I tell her.

The idea of havin' time with my daughter has me both anxious and excited. I want ta learn all there is ta know about her—what brings her joy, what makes her sad, what makes her laugh. Things any father should know about his child.

"Thank you," Orla's tone is filled with relief when she speaks. "You don't know how much this means ta me. I'm thankful, truly."

There's a heavy weight in my gut. It's a reminder that I don't know what Orla is walkin' into, and it has me on edge. I don't like the unknown. I'd rather learn all there is ta know about a situation before bargin' in. A handful of the brothers like ta shoot first and ask questions later, but I'm different. I want a reason fer why things are about ta happen.

"I don't like it, Orla," I tell her honestly. "My gut is tellin' me ta go with ye, ta make sure ye're safe. Your daughter needs ye ta come back."

I wince when I realise what I've just said. *Your daughter*. Not ours. But I don't know Aine yet. Not properly. Even though I'm convinced Orla's not lyin' about me bein' the da, the wee girl still feels like a stranger ta me.

"I'll come back," she promises.

But over the years, I've learnt promises can't always be kept. We may try our hardest ta keep them, but life happens. Shite comes across our paths more

often than not. We can't stop it, and we can't change it. I want ta tell her so, but instead, I nod.

When we head back inside, we find Callia on the carpet, buildin' a wee puzzle with Aine. They're gigglin' about somethin', and I can't help but smile. Knowin' my girl gets along with my daughter is one good thing ta come out of this situation. Callia didn't expect ta become a ma just yet, and I didn't expect ta have ta be a father figure, but life throws ye right in the shite at times.

"Aine," Orla calls to our daughter who's grinnin' from ear to ear.

Her eyes match mine. They're the same colour brown with a glint of gold right at the centre. Then there are those dimples that deepen when she's happy. I've only just met her, but I'm already learnin' things about her. She's a part of me. I can feel it right down ta my core.

Callia sidles up beside me and snakes her arm around my waist.

"She's a sweet child," she says in a soft whisper as we leave Orla and Aine ta talk.

Aine's still so young, I'm not sure she'll fully understand the extent of what's goin'ta happen.

"We're goin'ta have ta play house fer a wee while, Callia." It's not ideal as we're only just startin' this relationship. "I'm sorry."

Callia looks up at me. "Why would ye apologise?"

"I don't know. It's not exactly the perfect situation. There's always pressure when a relationship's new, but includin' a child in the mix is goin'ta put so much more stress on us."

Callia steps in front of me, her back to them. "Listen ta me, Rebel. I didn't plan on havin' a child immediately, but I've always wanted a family. Maybe this is a good thing, and we can see if this will work. Nothin' in life is easy," she tells me. "But we'll take each day as it comes. It's not a burden on me in any way. I have ye, and that's all that matters ta me. Aine is a welcome surprise."

I still don't know how I ever managed ta capture Callia's attention, and I'm not sure how ta deal with the emotions racin' through me. I can't find the words to express everythin' I'm thinkin', so I press my lips ta Callia's in a quick, gentle kiss.

"Thank you," is all I can say when I straighten up and take her hand.

"You don't have ta thank me fer wantin' ta be there fer ye, Rebel. You saved my life seven years ago, and I realised then that my heart was yours. I

didn't want ta give it ta anyone else. If I thought I could, I'd be lyin' ta myself."

Just then, Orla approaches us. She looks tense, and the tears that are threatenin' ta spill over onto her cheeks are evidence enough that's she's broken up about this. I don't blame her. She's leavin' her daughter with me, and I don't even know the wee girl. Even though Orla knows she's safe here, I'm sure it doesn't settle the worry that any parent would feel.

"Thank ye fer doin' this, Ronan. And ta ye as well, Callia. I know ye've never met me before, and ye don't know what type of person I am, but I didn't make this decision lightly."

"I can see ye're hurtin'," Callia tells Orla. "Don't worry about Aine, she'll be safe here. We may not have the same blood runnin' through our veins, but every person who lives in this house is family. We would die fer each other."

It's the feckin' truth as well. The brothers and the old ladies—each one of us has been through rough patches, but we all stick together. Loyalty is how this club thrives, and it'll never change.

When Orla finally leaves, I go ta Aine, who's lookin' up at me with wide, tearful eyes. She's not cryin', but her bottom lip is wobblin'. Seein' her sad, it tugs at my heart, and I fight back the need ta drop ta my knees at her side. Instead, I offer her my hand, and she takes it with tremblin' wee fingers.

We settle on the sofa, and she holds onto the teddy bear she brought along with her. The rest of her stuff has been packed away in one of the smaller guest rooms. She'll have her own space. But right now, she needs support.

"Yer ma won't be gone fer too long," I tell her.

"I know," she mumbles. "But I'm goin'ta miss her."

The sweet innocence in her voice makes me want ta burn down the feckin' world fer her. I want ta fix her sad expression and make it a happy one.

"I'm glad ye're here," I tell her gently. "We can get ta know each other. I can tell ye all about yer nonna who lives in Italy."

Her eyes widen at this news. "That's really far."

"Aye, it's far away, but maybe one day we can go out ta visit her."

She looks away from me and watches as Callia packs the puzzle pieces back into the box.

"Is she yer girlfriend?" Aine asks.

Callia's not lookin' at us, but it's clear she's heard the question from the

smile on her face.

“Aye,” I answer easily.

“So I have two mammies?” There’s such innocence in her question, but I’m surprised she understands the dynamic. She’s only six, but she already knows how life works. Her ma has obviously explained a lot more ta her than I thought.

“Would that make ye happy? If ye have two mams?” I ask her instead of respondin’ to her question. I don’t want ta say yes ta her if she’s not happy about the situation. I know it could take time fer her ta accept us.

She’s quiet fer a while, lookin’ between Callia and me. I can’t help holdin’ my breath, waitin’ fer her answer.

“Aye,” she finally whispers. “I think it’s okay.”

She looks at me then and grins. Her teeth are slightly crooked, and there’s one missin’, right at the front on the top row. Her wavy brown hair hangs down to the middle of her back, and her dimples peek up at me as she smiles.

She’s the perfect mix of Orla and me, but she’s also unique. I know the others, especially Miren, will want ta get ta know her and spoil her.

“Then maybe we should meet the rest of the family. What do ye think?”

“I’d like that.” Her sweet voice makes me smile.

I hope that all her worry and panic will soon dissipate. Orla shouldn’t be gone fer too long. At least that’s what I feckin’ hope.

ELEVEN

CALLIA

A DAUGHTER.

He's got a child, and I'm walkin' into a relationship with him. I'm not sure how this is goin'ta work, but I want ta try. Last night's dream, where I was with Rebel on a secluded beach, holdin' hands, and confessin' our love, is still runnin' through my head as I roll over and feel the warmth of Rebel beside me.

As I lie here, I notice the silence. Usually, I'm asleep until at least nine in the mornin', and by then the clubhouse is filled with noise, but at six, as the light starts slowly streamin' through the window, it's dead quiet.

When I open my eyes, I find Rebel starin' down at me. He smiles when I mumble a *good morning*, then he pulls me into his arms.

"I can't explain why life is so perfect right now," I say ta him as I press my lips to his chest.

"Perfect isn't entirely what this is," Rebel says as I shift until I'm straddlin' him. "But havin' ye with me, wakin' up beside ye," he continues as his hands grip my hips, holdin' me steady. "It's what I've thought about fer a long while now."

"It is?" I tease as I grind against him. "Nothin' in life is perfect, but this is close to it." I run my hands down his chest, scratchin' the smooth tanned skin with my nails.

"I think maybe ye should show me how perfect life can be," Rebel says before he tugs the tank top I'm wearin' down, exposin' my breasts to his heated gaze.

I lean forward, and he captures a nipple in his mouth before bitin' down on it gently, sending shockwaves of desire rushin' through my veins.

“Oh, feck.” The cursed moan escapes my lips as he continues his teasin’ from one nipple ta the other.

The ache that coils deep inside me tightens, formin’ a knot that needs release. I grind faster, and the bliss that eases the tinglin’ between my thighs feels like heaven as Rebel’s hard cock presses against my clit.

My moans get louder, and Rebel’s hand reaches up, tanglin’ in my hair as he tugs my head back and exposes my throat. His mouth slides up from my breast ta my neck, leavin’ a trail of soft kisses and gentle licks. Then sinkin’ his teeth into my neck, he sucks on the sensitive skin causin’ goose bumps to rise on my body.

“Please,” I beg, “I need ye.”

Rebel pulls away, his eyes burnin’ with desire as he looks up at me. The corner of his mouth tips up, and he reaches between us, freein’ his cock from the underwear he’s wearin’. The warmth of him slips into me easily as my arousal soaks him.

“That’s it, my wee star, ride my dick,” he growls before his teeth nip at my skin, travellin’ from my neck, down my chest, and all the way ta my stomach.

I can’t help but obey, my hips undulatin’ as I take him deep inside. The thickness of him sendin’ me higher and higher, and all I want ta do is fly over the edge of euphoria.

I place my hands on his chest and start to move faster. With every roll of my hips, Rebel slams up into me as he grips my thighs. His fingertips dig into the flesh, and I know tomorrow I’ll have bruises, but I don’t care. I want it. I want him.

We move as one. It’s as if we were always meant ta be together.

“My beautiful star, shinin’ so bright. Ye blind me with yer beauty, Callia.” Rebel’s voice is a low, gravelly moan as he looks at me. There’s desire in his eyes as he holds my gaze hostage. “I don’t know how it happened, but ye’re mine and I’m happy.”

While slidin’ back and forth, takin’ him deep inside me, I lean forward until our bodies are flush and my nipples press against the smoothness of his toned chest.

“Come fer me, sweetheart,” Rebel coaxes as he reaches between us, and circlin’ my clit with his fingers, he sends me closer ta the heights of pleasure.

“Rebel, Rebel, please, please,” I beg, and he pinches the hardened nub, sendin’ me spiralin’ into the darkness, and I cry out his name, over and over

again.

My body trembles and shakes as my orgasm shatters through me like a feckin' lightnin' strike. I feel Rebel's cock throb inside me, and he groans in pleasure when he finds his own release. I collapse on his chest, my head restin' close to the sound of his heartbeat, and the rhythm calms my erratic pulse.

"Well, that's how I'd like ta wake up every day," he says as he trails his fingertips through my hair, causin' me ta giggle.

"We have a busy few days ahead of us," I tell him while drawin' circles on his chest.

"I was thinkin' of takin' Aine ta the park. We can have a picnic," Rebel suggests, and I lift my head, restin' my chin on my hand as I smile at the look on his face.

There's somethin' different about him. He's goin'ta have ta work at buildin' a relationship with his daughter, but I know he can do it. When I told him he's a good man, I wasn't jokin'. I've seen his bad side, as he calls it, over the the years, and it's nothin' compared ta the men I knew when I was livin' with Mrs Duffy. And he's nothin' like my father.

"If the weather holds out, maybe we can plan a picnic in the garden. I doubt Monster will mind us usin' the space if he's out fer the day," I suggest.

Rebel runs his fingertips down the side of my face; it's a gentle, affectionate touch that sends a shiver of happiness down my spine.

"Now that's a good I idea. I think ye're a professional at those," he teases before kissin' me.

I giggle when he rolls us over and hovers above me. The warmth of him cocoons me, and I fight back the happy tears that are threatenin' ta fall.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothin'," I tell him. "I'm truly feckin' happy. I didn't think I could feel this way with anyone, let alone with ye after all these years. But I do." There's pure honesty in my confession. "I'm still a bit speechless when it comes ta us."

Rebel offers me a small smile and swipes his thumb over my lips. His gaze is still filled with warmth and emotion. Even though we've not said the L word yet, I know he feels it. I can see it in his expression.

Then he says, "I want ta make ye speechless every day. When ye wake in the mornin', I want ye ta smile. And when ye go ta sleep at night, I'll hold ye and tell ye how much ye mean ta me."

The lump in my throat threatens ta choke me. I swallow it back and whisper, “Nobody has ever made me feel as if I’m wanted. The woman who fostered me kept me out of convenience. She got paid ta have me. My da, as ye know, wasn’t around. And my mother was dead before I was old enough ta remember her.”

“Wait,” Rebel says as he scoots up and drags me with him. “Ye ma died?”

I can hear the confusion in his tone. When I learnt the truth, I was as surprised as he is right now. I grew up believin’ she didn’t want me. But it wasn’t like that at all.

I never told anyone what happened when I went with Bragan ta save Miren. He was goin’ ta take her, but instead, I agreed ta go with him. I thought if I sacrificed myself, she’d have a chance at a life with Monster. She could have her happily ever after.

“When I was with my father fer that short time,” I start slowly as I recall what the bastard, who helped create me, told me about Ma. “He showed me a file on her. And I learnt who I was, or at least, where I came from.”

“Why didn’t ye tell me this before. I knew he hurt ye when he had ye at his house. That’s another reason why I wanted te kill the bastard so badly,” Rebel says then waits fer me ta continue.

“I didn’t think about it. Well, I pushed it ta the back of my mind when I came home. I didn’t want ta recall the things he told me. Ma was a good woman, but she fell in love with the wrong man.”

The revulsion I felt that day he showed me the files shudders through me. It was a moment I never want ta relive. Knowin’ he killed her fer havin’ his child had me wantin’ him dead.

“Ma had an affair with Patrick fer a few years, but when she told him she was in love, he told her she meant nothin’ ta him. He didn’t have any feelin’s fer her. It was all just fer fun. Of course, she was broken-hearted.”

“But she was pregnant too?” Rebel guesses and I nod.

“She didn’t tell him, but one of the men saw her out in the city one day. She’d had me by then, but I was only a few months old at the time.” My voice cracks. I don’t want ta remember the things my father shared, but I have ta finally tell Rebel.

Needin’ some space, I shift off him and pull on my tank top. It gives me a few moments before I have ta talk about what happened. Even though I was too young ta remember, it’s somethin’ that will forever scar me because I

know all the feckin' details. Bragan decided he wanted his daughter ta know what happened to her ma.

"He had her brought ta his house. Since she didn't tell anybody about him bein' the father, he decided ta be lenient. Although I'm not sure I'd call it that. He told me he asked her to give me up fer adoption. He wanted me out of the country."

"And ye ma refused him, of course." Rebel guesses correctly.

He's now sittin' up straight. I can tell it's made him tense. He's ready fer a fight, and I don't blame him. I'm not sure what I'd have done if I'd had some time with Bragan in the basement, but I would have happily tortured him. And that's why I don't blame Rebel fer my father bein' dead. He deserved it.

"She did refuse. She told him that if he'd let her take me and go, she wouldn't call on him fer anythin'," I tell the man who's now fightin' back the beast roarin' inside him. "He didn't believe her. Even though she'd had me fer a few months by then and never once told him anythin' about me. I have a feelin' that was the real reason he was angry. He *wanted* her ta need him. I think he got off on the fact he was in control."

"And yer ma was a firecracker, just like her wee girlie." Rebel offers me a small reassurin' smile, and I give him one back.

"Aye, she was headstrong. And that's when he decided it'd be best ta be rid of her and put me into the system. He told social services I was an orphan and walked away. He made sure Ma couldn't cause any trouble. I was already in my first home by the time she was killed."

I can't hold back the tears anymore, and they trickle like a slow, fatal poison down my cheeks. I swipe at my face, not wantin' ta cry, but I can't stop myself.

"My wee shinin' star," Rebel murmurs as he pulls me closer. His strong arms wrap around me, keepin' me warm as I cry into his bare chest.

When I woke up this mornin', I didn't expect ta be makin' a full confession of my time with Bragan. But as I cry I allow the pain to expel from my body. I don't want ta hold onto it anymore. It's time ta move forward.

"At least I know she loved me." It may not make things perfect, but it does ease my heartache.

"So, that means she did want ye," Rebel says. "You can't keep thinkin' that nobody in your life wants ye around. You're mine, and you're more than

wanted.”

“I’ve just felt alone fer so long,” I tell him as the thoughts that have haunted me fer most of my life raise their ugly heads.

Rebel tips my head back, his fingers grippin’ onto my chin. Those eyes that remind me of cinnamon hold my gaze hostage.

“Ye’re not alone. Ever. In this house, ye have a family, and ye have me. And we’re goin’ ta be with each other fer a long feckin’ time. Ye hear me?”

“I hear ye,” I tell him as I laugh through the tears. “I think we best get up and shower. And I’m goin’ ta need ta wash the sheets.”

We’ve made such a mess. It makes me giggle when I think of wakin’ up beside him every mornin’, just like this. With a quick kiss, we get out of bed, and I’m already missin’ the closeness of his body against mine.

“I’m goin’ ta shower,” Rebel announces, “Join me?”

I can’t help but throw a pillow at him and laugh. “No, ye’re goin’ ta have ta behave. We have a full day ahead of us.”

Once I’m alone, I strip the bed and roll the sheets and beddin’ into a bundle. Then I get dressed, and makin’ a quick trip ta the utility room, I return ta the bedroom with clean beddin’.

Rebel stalks out of the shower, the towel wrapped around his waist and water still drippin’ from his toned, muscled torso. I’m distracted when I look at the beautiful man before me, and all thoughts of havin’ a picnic outdoors leave my mind.

“Stop starin’ at me, wee star,” Rebel warns, his voice takin’ on a mischievous tone. “Or we’ll be late fer breakfast, unless you’re the one offerin’ me a meal fit fer a hungry biker?”

Gigglin’, I race around the bed as he makes his way towards me.

“Go put some clothes on,” I tell him. “Or ye’re goin’ ta be in trouble.”

“Ach aye? Will I now?” The challenge in his tone is clear, and I know if I don’t do anythin’ ta distract him, we’re goin’ ta be in this bedroom all feckin’ day.

“I think I heard Aine awake, so best ye get yer clothes on,” I tease, and it causes him ta chuckle.

“Right, I can tell ye’re not goin’ ta be swayed,” he says and shakes his head before he leaves ta go to his bedroom ta get changed.

It’s the first day we’re goin’ ta spend with Aine, which makes me smile. I always knew I wanted children, and havin’ her around will be practice fer me.

I'm lookin' forward ta it.

TWELVE

REBEL

THE KITCHEN IS busy when I finally make it down. Aine is sittin' at the long wooden table with a bowl of cereal in front of her. She looks up when I walk in and offers me a smile stained with milk all around her mouth.

"Hi!" Her voice is bright, happy, and I'm thankful she's not feelin' too sad because her ma's gone. I know it's not goin'ta be this easy every day. But I'm ready fer it.

"Good mornin', sweetheart." I give her a kiss on the top of her head as she spoons more chocolatey flakes into her mouth while hummin' happily.

"I'm havin' Coco Pops," Aine announces as she stirs the milk, causin' it ta turn a light brown.

"Are they any good?" I ask her, and she nods happily as she she continues eatin'.

I leave her sittin' there and grab some coffee. Monster saunters into the kitchen and arches a brow at me.

"Boyo," he says with a squeeze of my shoulder. "Are you doin' okay with all this shite?"

"Aye, I think so." I sip the coffee and feel the caffeine hit me. "I mean, I didn't plan on bein' a da so quickly, but I think things are goin'ta work out."

He looks at Aine then back at me before askin' in a lowered tone, "Do ye know where Orla went?"

I shake my head. "No. She said she needs ta sort somethin' out, but I don't know what it is. Even when I offered my help, she refused, and I didn't want ta push. She would never have told me."

"Do ye think we need ta get Tye to look into it?" Monster suggests as he fills his own cup with black coffee.

I haven't even thought about Tye. He can hack into any system online and find out things that most people don't know about. It was with his help we found Bragan. As much as I don't want ta bother anyone else with this, I know he's the only one who can give me the answers I need.

"I'll talk ta him," I reply.

"Go now before he gets into somethin' else. Ye know what he's like. Once he starts workin', ye can't get his attention," Monster says before he heads out of the kitchen, leavin' me with my mind racin', thinkin' about what we're goin'ta find.

I don't want ta encroach on Orla's privacy, but I have ta know if my daughter is in any danger. Just then Callia enters the kitchen. She goes straight ta Aine ta chat to her about breakfast and ask her how she slept. I didn't even think about askin' her somethin' like that. But as I listen ta my two girls giggle, the tension I've been feelin', since hearin' Callia's story earlier, finally dissipates.

"I'm goin'ta talk ta Tye fer a bit," I tell Callia with a smile before disappearin' down the passage to the offices. I don't want her worryin' about any of this before we know the full story.

I find Tye behind his desk, typin' away on his keyboard. His gaze flicks ta mine when I walk in, and he offers me a mock salute ta greet me.

"What can I do ye fer?" Tye asks as he leans back in his office chair and smiles.

"I need ye to look into someone fer me," I tell him. "I have a bit of a situation on my hands, and I could do with the intel."

He nods confidently and asks, "Aye, what do ye need?"

"I'll write down the name fer ye. She's the mother of Aine, and I have a feelin' she's got herself into some shite. I don't know what it is, and I'm not entirely sure she's tellin' me the whole story."

I grab his notepad and scribble down all the information I have on Orla. I'm not sure what he needs, but I do what I can ta offer up all the details I know. I can tell somethin' bad is goin' on with her.

"And she's someone ye've known fer a wee while?" Tye asks as he takes the note and starts typin' on the keyboard. His eyes are now glued ta the screen, but he's waitin' on my answer.

"We were datin' a few years back and broke up before I joined the Bastards. I wanted ta take things further, but she told me she was movin' on. Monster sent me photographic proof she'd been cheatin'. I didn't recognise

the man she was with. He was just some asshole one night stand.”

“But then she married someone else?” Tye remarks as he reads whatever has popped up on the screen. “Paul O’Malley?”

“Aye, that was her husband, but she left him.”

Tye nods. “Give me a few hours, and I’ll get ye some more information on this. It looks like there’s a few things I need ta dig into that are password protected. The intel’s all locked up tight. It’s not goin’ ta be easy ta get into this.”

Feckin’ hell, I can’t put him through all this shite. As much as I want ta find out what Orla is hidin’, what she’s gotten herself into, we all have jobs fer the club we need ta be focused on.

“If ye can’t do this, I get it. Don’t go out of yer way ta—”

Tye looks at me, and I immediately stop talkin’.

“Listen, Ro. I’ve been part of the club fer years now, and ye’ve all been there fer me when I needed it. I’m not goin’ ta let ye down.” It’s a promise from one of my brothers, and I believe him. He’s a good lad, and I know he’ll do anythin’ he can ta help me.

“I just don’t want it ta be a burden,” I tell him as I hold my hands up.

“It’s no burden,” he says. “It’s what I do, and I’m thankful it’s somethin’ I can continue ta do while bein’ a part of the club. And if it saves someone innocent, then I’ll gladly keep doin’ it. If it helps put some bastards in jail, or gets them ta pay fer what they’ve done, then it’s no bother fer me at all.”

“Thank you,” I tell him. “You don’t know how much this means ta me.”

He smirks and shakes his head. “Probably as much as it meant ta me when ye boyos helped me get Einin back.”

“Touché,” I reply with a smile. Then I tip my head and offer him a goodbye before I head out of the office, leavin’ him ta his work.

When I get back to the kitchen, I find my girls workin’ on packin’ a basket that’s slowly bein’ filled with snacks and sandwiches.

“Hey,” Callia greets me as she helps Aine add a few small bags of potato crisps to the basket.

The girls are laughin’ and happy, which helps to ease the worry in my chest. Now I know I have a daughter, I can’t be sure of what the plan is, goin’ forward, but I’m thankful I’ve a good woman by my side, supportin’ my new feckin’ journey into the unknown.

We finish up packin’ the basket, and I carry it outside. Aine brings her colourin’ books and pencils, along with her teddy bear that reminds me of

one I had as a child. It was an old brown bear that had one ear almost fallin' off, but he was always on my bed. Even now when I go home ta see Ma, he's still there in my old room.

"Do ye think it will rain?" Callia asks me as we set the blanket down and get the food out.

"Not sure," I tell her while I hand Aine half a cheese and tomato sandwich. "The sun seems ta be fightin' its way out, so I think we're safe."

"Will we spin in circles in the rain?" Aine asks as she chews her food.

Her mouth is filled with bread and cheese, and the slice of tomato that's tryin' ta escape as she talks makes me chuckle.

"Don't talk with food in yer mouth," I say gently. "Once ye swallow all that ye're chewin', then ye're welcome ta say anythin' ye want."

She giggles and nods, offerin' me a playful mock salute. It's what Racer does when I'm tellin' him somethin'.

"With everythin' that's happened, I'm glad we're still here and together," Callia whispers in my ear as she takes a sandwich. Then she sits back with a grin on her beautiful face.

"I am too. It's all on ye fer acceptin' me and my past."

After learnin' I had a daughter, I was worried I would lose everythin' I'd built here. Mostly, I thought I would lose Callia. But with her settled beside me and Aine, I realise the sinkin' feelin' that's been followin' me around has gone.

"I want ta take Aine ta see my ma," I tell Callia.

She smiles at me. "That will be nice fer her. And I'm pretty sure yer ma will love that. Knowin' she has a granddaughter will give her somethin' ta look forward ta."

"Da," Aine says before I can ask Callia ta go with me ta Italy. "I want an apple, but I can't use a knife. I need someone ta cut it up fer me," she says in a playful tone.

Pickin' up an apple, I throw it into the air before catchin' it again, causin' her ta giggle. "I'll do it fer ye."

"Do ye like eatin' fruit?" Callia asks Aine, who nods enthusiastically.

"Mammie told me it's good fer my teeth," she informs Callia with a large grin. Even though she's missin' a front tooth, I'm certain she'll enjoy the crunchy apple.

I set down the segments fer her and say, "When I was a youngen, I didn't like fruit. My ma used ta have ta bribe me ta eat some."

Aine giggles again, her laugh so happy, carefree. “But it makes ye big and strong,” she explains with an animated expression that has me grinnin’.

“And when ye’re big and strong, ye can do anythin’ ye want.”

“And what do ye want ta do?” Callia asks her.

With a mischievous expression, Aine purses her lips and taps her chin with her index finger as if she’s ponderin’ the question seriously. There’s no doubt in my mind, the older she gets, the more of a handful she’s goin’ ta be.

“I’m goin’ ta be an actress like on the telly,” she announces with a flourish of her hands. “But I like ballet, so I’ll do ballet actin’.”

Fer someone so young, Aine is a bright, chatty girl. When I was her age, I was far less willin’ ta talk ta anyone. Ma used ta have ta drag me out of my bedroom ta greet the visitors who frequented the house. Even as I got older, I was very much a loner until Da took me ta work with him and I had ta learn ta speak up.

“Then that’s what ye’ll do,” I tell her, offerin’ her my hand in a high five that she slaps with her tiny palm.

I do know that my da’s belief in me gave me the confidence to grow. He made sure I knew I was worthy of anythin’ I set my mind ta, and I want Aine ta feel the same way.

As afraid as I was about ever becomin’ a father, this moment right here has me wonderin’ if my fear was just a limitation I put on myself. I didn’t want ta have someone love me so much, then have ta lose me. Fer me ta be killed like Da because this life is drenched in violence.

It was one of the reasons I pushed Callia away whenever we got too close. But now I’ve committed myself ta her. I’m now doin’ the thing I was scared of in the first place and lettin’ someone love me, as I love her.

Aine nibbles her apple slice with her focus back on the colourin’ book she’s placed on the blanket in front of her. There’s a satisfied expression on her face, and her smile brightens as she chews and flicks her pencil over the page.

I turn ta Callia and ask, “Would ye want ta come with me ta Italy? I know Ma would love ta meet ye.” I’ve never considered takin’ anyone home since Orla. She was the first and last.

“A-Are ye sure?” Callia’s nervous stutter is cute.

I love how she’s always unsure of what’s goin’ on between us. It means I’m able ta surprise her. But I know it won’t last long. Once she realises she’s mine and I’m never lettin’ her go, she’ll overcome her doubts.

“I’ll talk ta Orla when she gets back. I’ll tell her I want ta take Aine over ta see my ma. She’s can’t refuse. Aine is mine as well. We’re also goin’ta have ta consider joint custody in some way because I’m not goin’ta risk losin’ my daughter again.”

“Get a lawyer before she comes back,” Callia tells me. “I know how long and drawn out these things can be, so the sooner you get advice from a professional, the better.”

“Aye, I’ll call someone in the mornin’. I don’t want ta fight Orla fer custody, I just want ta come ta some agreement so I can see Aine,” I say, keepin’ my voice low. I don’t want my daughter hearin’ my plans just yet. She won’t understand, and I don’t want ta spook her.

“I doubt it will be an issue,” she tells me as she smiles over at Aine, who’s now eatin’ her last piece of apple. “Was that good, Aine?” Callia asks.

“Aye,” Aine tells us with a nod of her head. “I like it because it tastes like sweets.”

That makes me laugh because I would never have thought of an apple as bein’ anythin’ like a sweet. Granted, I wasn’t a very healthy eater as a child, so there’s no surprise there.

“I think ye’ve been eatin’ some weird sweets,” I tease her, which makes her laugh.

Her grin is wide, causin’ her dimples to deepen. I still can’t believe she looks so much like me. It’s definitely surreal ta be lookin’ at part of me.

“Noooo...” she mumbles, draggin’ out the word fer as long as her little lungs can hold the breath. “It’s yummy,” she informs me with an animated tip of her head.

She seems much older than her six, almost seven years. She has a personality that’s goin’ta challenge anyone who steps in her way. I’ve a suspicion my daughter has a lot more of my personality than she has of her mother’s. I know it shouldn’t, but it makes me smile.

“If ye say so.” I shrug as I watch her. “I think we need ta get some sweets fer ye later on, so ye can see fer yerself. We can go shoppin’.”

“Ohh! Yes, please!” Her squeal of excitement is enough ta confirm that’s what we’ll be doin’. I hope I’ll always be able ta make her this happy. I may not have been around fer her birth, or the first few years of her life, but I’ll spend the rest of my life makin’ up fer it.

THIRTEEN

REBEL

I'M ANGRY.

More than feckin' angry.

"I'm sorry, mate," Tye tells me as he stares at my hands, fistin' at my sides. I'm pretty sure my rage is written all over my face right now.

"It's okay. I wanted ye ta tell me."

The thought of Orla bein' in harm's way makes me anxious. Even though there's no longer any feelin's between us, I'm not a feckin' asshole. I want ta try ta save her if I can.

"She's not goin'ta be alive fer much longer, Ro. I wish I could have told ye somethin' positive, but that's the truth."

He looks at me with sorrow in his gaze, and I want ta pretend it's not there. I want him ta say he's lyin', but I know he's not. Orla didn't tell me the truth, and she feckin' should have. I'm pacin' the livin' room as I think about all the shite that could go wrong.

Things were never easy between Orla and me when we were together, livin' separate lives in two different countries. There were times when I was convinced we weren't meant ta be. When she broke up with me, the hurt sent me over the edge. I lost control, but this time, it's different. She's the mother of my child, I can't allow myself to leap over the edge, I have a responsibility to Aine, and I have the love of a good woman to keep me on track.

Callia comes into the lounge and stops in front of me, haltin' me from pacin'.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

"Nothin'," she whispers gently. "I don't want ye ta feel guilty, or responsible. It's not on ye. Orla moved on. She was the one who forced ye

out of her life, so fer her ta do this to ye right now, it's selfish."

Even though I know Callia is right, I can't stop myself from sayin', "Can ye just let me handle this?"

Several emotions cross Callia's expression at that moment—pain, regret, guilt, and heartbreak. I shouldn't have said that, and I immediately pull her into my arms.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," I repeat, chantin' the words so I can get her ta calm down, but I know it's not goin'ta be that easy, not by a long, feckin' shot, because this woman is stronger and more stubborn than I could ever be.

"I don't need ye ta sugarcoat shite fer me, Rebel," Callia says as she pushes away from me, and I feel the loss of her softness immediately, which only adds to my anxiety.

I don't want her ta feel as if she's in my way, but I also don't want her ta think I'm a good person. If I were, none of this would be happenin'.

"Da," a soft, angelic voice comes from the doorway, and I turn to find Aine watchin' us as we have our stand-off. "Where's my Mammie?"

My chest tightens so much, I struggle ta breathe fer a long while. The pretty face of my daughter is wet with tears. She must have overheard the fight, and she may have even heard what Monster said about Orla bein' in danger.

Aine is a smart child, and I have no doubt, she knows somethin' bad is goin' on. I'm meant ta protect her from heartbreak, from all the pain and violence that comes with life.

"She's just with her mates, darlin'," I tell my daughter, and the guilt sits heavily on my chest from the lie.

But as much as I want ta tell her the truth, I can't. And if somethin' does happen to Orla, I'm not sure how I'd even begin ta tell Aine that her ma has died.

"Will she come home soon?" Aine looks up at me, the innocence in her gaze makes me want ta kill those bastards who have her ma.

"I think so," I tell her. "I won't say yes, because she has a lot of work ta do."

I didn't think I'd ever have ta lie to a child. When I was younger, Da used ta tell me shite ta keep me calm. Over the years, there were so many times I was angry with him because I didn't know what was goin' on, and he wouldn't tell me the truth. It's only now I understand why he told me those lies.

“Okay,” Aine says then, but I can tell from the tone of her voice, she’s hurt. Her heart must be broken, knowin’ her ma is away and she doesn’t know when she’s comin’ back.

I look up to find Callia and Miren watchin’ me. They both look as sad as I feel, but I don’t show it. Instead, I keep a straight face to stop myself from losin’ my cool. If I allow my emotions ta take hold of me, I couldn’t be as calm as I am right now. Inside, though, there’s a war ragin’.

“Can ye watch her fer me?” I ask the lassies.

“Aye, ye know we can,” Callia, the woman who I’m fallin’ in love with, smiles at me. No, that’s another lie because I’m already in love with her.

I can’t tell her yet. I need ta wait until there’s no longer any threats ta my life. Thankfully, Callia’s not in danger, but I don’t want the pressure of violence to make me say it. The fact I love her needs ta be somethin’ I confess when we’re happy. But right now, I have ta focus on makin’ sure that Orla is safe. It’s the only thing I can think about right now because my daughter needs her ma.

When Callia heads over ta Aine ta make sure she’s still smilin’, I push ta my feet and turn ta face Miren.

“Please, look after the girls,” I ask her as I look back ta my two beauties. The idea of either of them bein’ in trouble, in danger, makes me want ta kill.

“Ye know I’ll always be there fer them.” Miren tells me somethin’ I already know, but the confirmation calms my erratic feckin’ heartbeat. “I know ye’ll figure it out, Rebel. And I know ye’ll bring that wee girl’s ma back ta her. The brothers are with ye. The whole family’s with ye,” she confirms.

Noddin’, I say, “I know. I’m just worried. I don’t let anythin’ get ta me, but this is a feckin’ shite storm that’s hittin’ us.”

“Are ye ready?” Monster says when he reaches the lounge with Racer and Hades behind him.

The men are prepared fer war. I didn’t expect them ta go with me, but they’ve insisted.

“I am,” I say as I look over at Aine and Callia. They’ll both be safer here than with me, fer now. And I’ll be back.

When Callia lifts her gaze, I can tell she’s worried.

“Come home ta us,” she mouths the words, and I can only nod.

It’s a silent promise, and I don’t know if I’m goin’ ta be able ta keep it. As much as I want ta come home and give them both good news, I know there’s

no guarantee that will happen.

Goodbyes only mean ye're not comin' back. One day, Da kissed ma goodbye, walked out the door, and he never returned. Since then, I haven't used that word. It's a promise I made myself because none of us knows the future.

There's no way of tellin' what's goin'ta happen.

"Let's go," I tell Monster.

Outside, I stop at my bike. Every single brother is here. They've all volunteered ta come with us ta help. I didn't expect it. I know the family always sticks together, but this situation is personal ta me, so I didn't think every one of the club members would get involved.

They should be stayin' home with their families, but instead, they're goin'ta put themselves in harm's way fer me. And it's not even ta save a woman I've claimed as my old lady. Orla is an ex who hurt me and lied ta me.

My future's with Callia. It's been a long time comin'. She should have been mine years ago, but I was too stubborn. Now she's mine, and I find myself havin' ta risk everythin' ta save Orla and give her a second chance at life. I don't like it.

Once we're on our bikes, we take the route Tye gave us. When he told me Orla was not far from Dublin, I didn't want ta believe it. The last time I was down south was when I met Callia. It's strange how things work out, and how your life ends up in a feckin' circle.

I'm not sure what Orla's gotten herself into. Tye couldn't discover much about the organisation that's based just north of Dublin city. All he could tell us was that there were men there who'd gladly hurt a woman ta get what they want.

We do know Orla borrowed money from the man in charge. A loan shark with a reputation for makin' sure debtors pay up, whether it's in cash or in body parts.

The anxiety that kicked in when Tye told me the situation is still coursing through my veins. I'm not sure what ta do with it. It's not fear I'm feelin', it's more anger at the fact that she's taken a chance ta go there and try ta fix this shite herself.

Deep down, I have a feelin' it wasn't her who took out the loan. I know she's not dumb enough ta do that. I have a feelin' it was her ex-husband. The bastard must have put her in this situation, thinkin' the loan shark would be

more lenient on a woman. But these feckers don't know about mercy. They only care about gettin' their money back.

The open road is usually where I go when I need ta clear my head, but right now, my mind's racin' with thoughts of violence. I'll kill anyone who's even come close ta hurtin' the woman who gave me my daughter. And when I do get her back to Belfast, I'm goin'ta make sure she doesn't do somethin' that feekin' stupid ever again.

When I find Paul, I'll kill him. Without a feekin' doubt, I'll make him scream. Orla shouldn't be the one ta fix his mess. He should be steppin' up and takin' responsibility fer the things he's done. He won't, though. Arseholes, like him, hide behind women. I'm the one who's goin' ta ensure he steps up ta the front of the line.

When we finally pull up ta the house, it's already dark out. The night sky is filled with small, blinkin' stars that end up remindin' me of my girl. The full moon is also high and shinin' down on us.

"Are ye ready fer this?" Monster asks when we come ta a stop.

I take in the property. It's not goin'ta be easy ta scale these feekin' high walls, but I'm not walkin' away. I have ta get Orla back fer Aine.

"Aye," I tell him and wait fer his orders.

"Then we best get on with it," Monster announces.

We all park our bikes silently, needin' ta stay quiet to ensure the arseholes inside don't know we're comin'. The element of surprise is on our side.

These men aren't mafia, and they aren't linked ta any other criminal organisations. It makes them even more dangerous because when ye're not protected by a larger criminal outfit, ye have to step up security, ye have ta have plenty of weapons, and ye can't afford ta have any morals.

We move towards the gate quietly. There are lights on in the house, which means someone's home. The bastard must have Orla locked up inside. I don't know if she's been hurt or not, but I'll gladly torture the arsehole anyway.

With every step we take, we have ta make sure there aren't any guards approachin' us. My chest tightens with anxiety as we edge closer. I'm puttin' myself and my brothers in danger fer a woman who walked out on me, havin' cheated, and never told me I had a child. I'm beginnin' ta wonder if it's worth it.

"Front door, back, and sides," Monster doles out the orders with

accompanyin' hand signals, and I know I'm meant ta follow him ta the front door.

The main entrance looks like it could belong to a castle and not someone's everyday home.

"I'm not sure this is the right move," I suddenly announce just before we break down the door.

"Why?" Monster asks, and I know he's frustrated with me.

I'm annoyed at myself, but as much as I want ta save Aine's ma, somethin' still isn't sittin' right with me.

Orla and I went through some shite together when we were young. We both can be stubborn, but I know she's not the type ta stay quiet if her life is bein' threatened. So if she thought she was headin' into danger, I'm pretty sure she would have told me back at the clubhouse. Which is why us bein' here feels wrong.

"Let's just get this over with," I finally tell Monster, who's starin' at me as if I've lost my feekin' mind.

He nods, and soon his booted foot is slammin' into the door. The hinges give way just a bit with his first kick, but with the second, along with my help, they're ripped from their attachment screws and the door of the three storey mansion is now lyin' in the entrance hall of a dangerous feekin' criminal.

I hear heavy footsteps of guards runnin' towards us accompanied by the tinklin' sound of sprayin' glass from the back patio doors as our men gain entry at the rear.

We're now bombarded with men in black suits and crisp white shirts. It reminds me of the years I spent workin' with Da fer the mafia. They were always well-dressed feekin' criminals. I want ta chuckle when I think of *Smooth Criminal*, but I refrain when I realise we're sorely outnumbered.

I lift my gun and start firing at the bastards tryin' ta take us out, and soon, they're the ones fallin'. Gunshots ring in my ears as I drop ta the ground. Monster is behind me as we scoot our arses across the floor, headin' towards the rest of our men who entered from the rear of the premises. The plan is for our teams ta take out the enemy from the front and back, so we'll meet in the middle and find the bastard who's holdin' Orla hostage.

When we get ta the lounge, in all its opulent splendour, we push ta our feet. Racer and Hades are already here, aimin' their guns at a smug arsehole in a fancy suit.

“What are you doing here?” He speaks with an accent I recognise immediately. His Italian lilt is obvious.

“Where the feckin’ hell is she?” I ask, ignorin’ his question.

I don’t know this man, never seen him before, and I don’t intend on makin’ friends with him while we’re here.

“Who are you talking about?” He answers my question with one of his own as he walks across the room to a drinks cabinet.

There’s no threat in his movement. There’s no gun ta see, and there’s nothin’ he can grab to use against us. We’re all too far away fer any close combat. But I’m tempted ta put a bullet in his head anyway.

“Where is Orla?” I ask again, frustration now takin’ hold of me. “Tell me. Now.”

The order is clear. I’m not here ta play games. I’m done with this shite. I want ta get Orla and go home ta Callia and my daughter.

“Why do you want to know where Orla is?” he says as I watch him pour a drink.

I’m not sure what I was expectin’, but fer him ta be so calm wasn’t it. It’s my turn ta be confused. But I’ll get an answer from him one way or another.

With my anxiety and anger takin’ a lead, I step towards him and cock my gun, ta show him I’m serious. “I don’t give a shite what ye’re playin’ at. I’m leavin’ here with Orla before ye have any ideas of killin’ her fer the loans she’s taken out.”

His brows furrow, and this time, it’s his turn to look confused. His gaze never leaves mine as he takes me in from head ta toe.

“I’m not sure what you mean,” he tells me. “Orla is here of her own free will. I haven’t forced her here, and any money she’s uses of mine is hers as well.”

Fer a split second, I lower my gun because what he’s sayin’ is makin’ no sense. Orla said she borrowed money from him. And fer him ta say it’s hers doesn’t make any sense.

And that’s when she walks into the room.

“Ronan?”

“Darling,” the man I was about to shoot greets her. “These men are under the impression I’m going to hurt you. I’m utterly confused.”

And that’s when I realise, fer the second time in my life, this woman has fecked me over.

FOURTEEN

REBEL

THERE ARE no words to describe what I'm feelin' right now. Even if I wanted ta forgive Orla fer the past, I couldn't bring myself ta do it now. Not after what I'm witnessin' here. I didn't want ta believe she would lie ta me again, not after her tearful goodbye with our daughter back at the clubhouse. But seein' her here, standin' beside a man who I know does bad shite fer a livin', I'm speechless.

Everyone's eyes are on us. It's as if we're the feckin' circus act, and they're waitin' fer the joke. There's a heavy silence in the room, and I'm tired of it all. I'm feckin' exhausted.

"What are ye doin' here, Ronan?" Orla asks, her genuine confusion only stokes the anger bubblin' inside me. I'm goin'ta explode.

"What the feck do ye mean, what I'm I doin' here? Ye told me, while ye were cryin', ye had somethin' ta sort out. That was right before ye said goodbye ta our daughter." As I utter the words, I see her expression change. It's an obvious grimace paintin' her features, and I realise it was all an act she put on back at the house.

"Ronan, can we talk about this in private?" she asks as she makes her way towards me, but I step back, puttin' my hand up ta stop her.

"There's nothin' ta talk about," I tell her as the realisation dawns on me.

I know what I have ta do now. It's what I should have done when she first walked into the house. When she first came ta me fer help. She wasn't in a *fearful fer her life* situation. She's here of her own free will, and once again, she's chosen someone else over me.

No.

Over our daughter.

I've always been taught ta respect women. My folks would tell me I must always be a gentleman and ensure the safety of any woman who needs my protection. But right now, I can't bring myself ta feel that way about Orla.

"Are ye tryin' ta tell me that ye walked away from Aine?" I question her, my voice low, but there's violence in every word.

As much as I want ta keep calm, I'm close ta losin' it, and I suspect her whatever she says next will ensure I do.

"I needed time, Ronan," she responds as she takes a step towards me.

Her voice is cool, detached from everythin' that's goin' on around her. She doesn't care. I can see it in her eyes now. There's no emotion there.

"So that whole sob story back at the house, that was all an act?" I challenge her.

With every second that passes, I realise my next steps are already laid out before me. I need ta get custody of my daughter and ensure her mother never gets ta see her again.

"Ye don't know what it's like ta try ta move on," Orla tells me as she takes another step in my direction. "I want nothin' more than ta be a good mother, but I can't. Startin' a relationship with someone and expectin' them ta accept another man's child isn't easy, Ronan."

Bile rises up my gullet and burns my throat as I fight back the disgust I have fer this woman. She's not a mother, she's a lyin' piece of shite.

"Are ye so desperate ta have a man in yer life that ye'll abandon yer daughter, Orla?"

She doesn't react. There's no wince. There's not even an ounce of guilt written on her face.

"Listen, I don't know what's going on, but—" The asshole who's been quietly watchin' the exchange tries to catch my attention.

Liftin' my arm, I aim my gun at him. That shuts him up.

"If ye try ta talk ta me again, I'll feckin' shoot ye. I don't give a shite who ye are," I growl at him.

I don't lower my weapon, even when he holds his hands up in surrender.

"Rebel," Monster calls ta me, but I can't bring myself ta look at him.

My grip on the gun is so tight my knuckles are white. I don't want ta be this person. I have a daughter ta think of now.

"Don't come near me again, Orla. I don't want ye, or need ye, near *my* daughter," I tell her as I finally bring myself ta look at the woman who's decided a man is more important than her own child. As far as I'm

concerned, Orla will never get ta see her daughter again. But that choice will be up ta Aine when she's older.

After a long, silent pause, I lower the gun and step back from Orla. She watches me as if she doesn't even know me. She's a stranger ta me as well. If I were bein' honest with myself, I am not entirely shocked at her choice. But I am hurtin'. I'm the one who has ta go back ta Aine and tell her her ma doesn't want her anymore. Not that I'll say it in those exact words. I'll have ta lie ta her again.

"Ye'll be a good Da," Orla tells me then, and the confidence in her tone makes me laugh out loud.

"Aye," I say. "I don't have a choice. Do I? Ye're the one makin' me lie ta our daughter, tellin' her ye're dead. I'll have ta explain her ma was taken away, and she's never comin' back. Because that's the truth. The Orla I knew has been taken over by some cold-hearted bitch. Ye're definitely not comin' near our daughter again."

Truth is, I'm not sure how I'm goin'ta explain this to Aine.

"Ye don't have ta tell her that, Ronan." Orla's tone is filled with indignation, annoyance at my words, but I'm bein' honest.

"The truth hurts, doesn't it, Orla?" I smirk as I get a reaction out of her.

"You've no right to talk to my fiancée like that." The smug bastard who I'm itchin' ta shoot speaks up, but instead of ragin' at him, I laugh. It's a loud, boomin' sound, and his mouth pops open in surprise.

"All I can tell ye, mate, is I feel sorry fer ye. When the next rich bastard comes into her life, she'll walk away from ye too. She's done it before, and she won't stop now," I inform him.

I realise now it wasn't her husband who was the arsehole in the marriage, it was Orla. She blamed him fer not wantin' Aine, but the intel Tye found on her ex, told a different story. One I didn't want to believe until now. Tye discovered Paul was a rich arsehole, and it was only when he lost his fortune that Orla decided he wasn't good enough fer her.

"Ronan, things don't have ta—"

"Don't you dare feckin' tell me things don't have ta be this way," I hiss in her face as I point my finger right between her eyes. My hand is tremblin' from the rage I'm feelin', and I'm ready ta lose my shite. I'm want ta break somethin' with my bare hands. "Ye chose this. Ye were the one who wanted this ta play out the way it has. Ye were never going'ta come back. I'm not sure what shite ye were goin'ta tell me. Maybe ye were goin'ta fake ye're

own death. Whatever ye were plannin', I don't give a shite."

"I think it's time you leave, mate," the bastard says as he nears us, and I can't keep my cool any longer.

With the butt of the gun, I slam it into his face, breakin' his nose. Orla screams in shock, coverin' her mouth with her hands as she pins me with a glare.

"I'm done," I tell her before turnin' on my heel and headin' fer the door.

I hear her take a few steps towards me, the heels of her shoes clickin' on the floor, but she doesn't come after me. She doesn't call out ta me. The man whose nose is now bleedin' profusely is cursin' at me, and I smile as we walk out of the house.

I don't give a shite what happens ta them now. It's time I went back ta my daughter and the woman I love.

"Are ye okay, Rebel?" Racer asks, as he, Monster, and Hades all flank me.

They're watchin' me closely as we make our way back out ta the bikes.

"Aye," I say, stoppin' beside mine and lookin' at each of the men who came here with me. "I needed ta see that fer myself."

"Ye know that ye have our support with Aine, and ye both can stay at the house fer as long as ye need. I have a feelin' though that ye and Callia will want yer own space soon," Monster tells me with a nod. "Ye know what Orla did and said to ye, none of it's yer fault."

"I know, I'm just angry. How can she walk away from her daughter? It makes no sense ta me. I've only known Aine fer a few days, but already I'll gladly kill fer her. She's my blood. I can't imagine ever turnin' my back on her."

Then I think of Callia, whose father walked out on her when she was a baby. He killed her mother, and he didn't give a shite about where Callia ended up. She could have been hurt, kidnapped, or worse, and he wouldn't have cared.

"I don't get it either," Racer tells me. "I mean, my ma and da weren't rich. They didn't have much, but they loved me. I was the one who chose this life. And even then, they still wanted me around."

"Some people shouldn't be parents," Hades adds. "I'm sorry, but it's true. There are so many women out there who are strugglin' and want a baby, and there are those, like Orla, who've been granted the privilege, and they don't give a shite about it."

I'm still in shock when we start the bikes and make our way home. I'm goin'ta have ta ask Callia what ta say ta Aine. I don't know how it's goin'ta affect my wee girl, and not just now, but in a few years, when she can fully understand what's happened. As much as I want ta lie and tell her that her ma is dead, I know I can't.

Orla has forced me into situations before where I had ta lie to others, lie ta myself. I won't do it anymore. I'll talk ta Callia first, then sit down with Aine. I have ta be strong fer my daughter now.

As the road opens and we speed up, my mind is on how truly bad Orla was fer me. I didn't see it back then, because I was focused on the sex and on the lifestyle I was livin'. But she was never a good person. She'd lie and cheat and didn't care who got hurt. I overlooked so many things when it came ta her. Perhaps she was my first love, I don't know anymore, but she's definitely not someone I'd want my daughter growin' up around.

It's close ta seven by the time we pull into the clubhouse grounds. I kill the engine of my bike and pull off my helmet. The sun has set on the horizon, leavin' the sky a midnight blue with the stars twinklin' against the dark background. I've been away fer almost two days, and I'm missin' both my girls.

Swingin' my legs over the bike, I head ta Monster who's waitin' on me.

"Thanks fer ye help yesterday," I tell him.

I know I don't have ta say it, but he has ta know it means a lot ta me. I don't have my da fer support anymore, but this makeshift family I've found has given me more than I ever expected.

"No bother," he tells me as Racer and Hades join us. "Ye know we're always here fer ye. In this family, nobody is alone."

I know that, but I'm still gettin' used ta it.

Noddin', I say, "I'm goin'ta see Callia and Aine. I have ta sit them both down and talk ta them. I'm not sure how ta tell my daughter she's no longer got her ma."

Hades sighs. "Well, you could ask Rev fer help. He'll know what ta say better than any of us."

"Aye," I agree with a nod.

Rev is Hades' twin brother. The two of them have followed very different paths, and I know they both have their own demons resultin' from their sordid pasts. It's never easy ta fight dark thoughts, but the only way ta do it is by lookin' forward, workin' to a better future.

I leave them outside smokin' while I head inside. I'm lookin' forward ta seein' Callia and Aine, but I'm dreadin' havin' ta be honest about what I've learned. If there's one lesson I want ta teach my daughter, though, it's ta tell the truth at all times, even if it hurts.

Maybe, just maybe, I can do this parent thing.

I find my girls in the lounge with Miren. The sisters are talkin' while Aine is colourin' pictures of sea creatures in her book. Her sweet voice is all I needed. The moment I hear her, my chest fills with love I didn't think I had in me.

Then I look at Callia, and her gaze locks with mine. We're like positive and negative magnets, findin' each other no matter what.

"Hey," she greets me, causin' Aine to look up and squeal.

She's gettin' used ta me already, which is good. The wee thing runs up ta me and wraps her arms around my waist. She's so small, and I can't help myself, I lift her high into the air, causin' her ta giggle. Then I hold her close to me, restin' my head on her shoulder with my eyes glued to Callia's, and I know my shinin' star can tell somethin's wrong. I'm not sure if it's the expression on my face that gives it away, or if my girl can really read my mind, but she's on her feet in seconds.

"Is Monster back?" Miren asks me as she gently rubs circles on Aine's back.

I nod. "Aye, he's out the front smokin'. He'll be in shortly."

"Thanks, Rebel." Miren heads outside, and I'm left with my new family. Small, but strong.

I look at Callia who's starin' back at me, waitin' fer me ta speak.

"Let's sit," I say to her as I take her hand while still holdin' onto Aine.

When we settle on the sofa, I have Aine on my lap and Callia beside me. There's so much love in this room right now, it's stiflin' me. I've never experienced an emotion like this before, not the gentle affection that's now taken hold of me. I'm used to anger and rage. This is all new ta me. But I know it's good fer me.

"Sooo," Callia says slowly, "What happened? I can tell it's not good." Her voice is tentative. My girl knows me far too well.

"Aye," I finally answer after a moment of deliberation, tryin' ta find the right way ta do this.

I look to Aine, and she's watchin' me with those wide eyes, filled with innocence. I know I'm about to shatter all those happy thoughts, and that

breaks my feckin' heart.

FIFTEEN

CALLIA

I DON'T KNOW what's happened, but I do know Rebel isn't happy. The look on his face tells me it's bad. I'm prayin' that Orla isn't dead. The idea of Aine losin' her ma kicks me right in the gut. I never got ta know my mother, but I still felt her loss when I was growin' up.

It's not easy fer any kid ta come ta terms with losin' a parent, no matter their age. But Aine is still so young. She'll be heartbroken.

"Aine," Rebel starts slowly, and she looks at him with wide eyes.

"Is Mam goin'ta come and get me soon?" she asks, and the wonderment written on her face is evidence of how much she's hopin' her ma's comin' back fer her.

Rebel visibly tenses at her query. Whatever it is that's happened, it's bad. It's so feckin' bad.

I have ta fight back the tears that burn my eyes. I don't want her ta see me cryin'. If she does, it will set her off, and I have ta be strong fer Rebel and her. I chose ta be with him, and I'll stand by him no matter what.

"Yer mammie's gone away fer a long while," he starts. "She's with some friends who are goin'ta look after her. And ye're goin'ta stay with me and Callia. Okay?"

"But why?" Aine pouts, holdin' her teddy bear tightly. There are tears formin' in her eyes, and her bottom lip's wobblin'.

The idea of Orla not comin' back makes me feel fer the wee girl. Somethin' about Rebel's words, though, don't seem genuine. I've known this man fer a long while now, and I can tell when he's not bein' completely honest.

"But will she come back again?" The sweet, innocence in her voice tugs

at my heart.

“One day, sweetheart,” Rebel says as he pulls her into a hug.

He looks at me and mouths, *I’ll tell you everythin’ later*. All I can do is nod. We’ve had so much heartache in our lives, and I’ve a feelin’ this is worse than before. I don’t want ta hear any more bad news.

“Let’s colour fer a bit,” I announce, puttin’ on a fake happy smile just ta make Aine feel better. “What page would ye like ta do?” I ask as I flick through her colourin’ book.

I look up ta meet the watery gaze of the little girl whose pout is still evident on her pretty face. She points, and stoppin’ on the page she’s indicated, I set the book down on the carpet in front of us.

“Will ye sit here fer a wee while so I can talk ta yer da?” I ask her, crouchin’ down so we’re eye ta eye.

“Aye,” she mumbles in a broken voice filled with sadness and hurt.

I’m not sure how long it will take fer her ta smile again, but I know Ronan and I will both be here fer her, no matter what.

“When we’re done, perhaps there’ll be time fer some ice-cream,” I suggest, and I get a small, weak smile. It may not be her usual joyful giggle, but it’s somethin’.

Ronan and I leave the lounge and head into the dining room where I look up at him. I can tell somethin’ is weighin’ heavy on him.

“What happened?” I ask him.

He runs his fingers through his hair, shakin’ his head as he looks at me with regret clear in his eyes. “We found Orla,” he tells me in a low whisper. “But she wasn’t taken. There wasn’t anythin’ wrong with her.”

“I don’t understand.” I furrow my brows in confusion.

I know they went down south ta get Orla. She told Ronan she had ta leave ta settle a loan, but if she wasn’t bein’ held against her will, then why didn’t she come back.

“She stayin’ with some bastard who’s runnin’ an organisation that deals in ammunition exports. Tye found her online, and when we bombarded the house, we found her happily walkin’ around with this arsehole as if she owns the place.”

“I’m still confused,” I tell him as I shake my head. It doesn’t make sense, because if Orla chose ta be with this man, then it means she walked out knowin’ she might not come back. “What about Aine?”

Even as I ask the question, I have my answer. Orla wasn’t plannin’ on

returnin' fer her daughter. The woman gave birth ta her, raised her fer six years, and then decided it was Rebel's turn ta be a father. Without givin' him any warnin', and without givin' him time ta get over the initial shock.

"She told me she couldn't do it anymore. Havin' Aine and raisin' her for the last six years was enough fer her. When she decided she wanted ta get married again, she knew the arsehole wouldn't accept her with a daughter. It's too much baggage."

The more he speaks, the more the bile churns in my gut. My stomach is in knots, frustration and anger takin' hold of me.

"She's left her," I mumble, my mind reelin' at the thought of a mother walkin' out on a child.

I know how much it hurt me, growin' up believin' my parents didn't want me. Now I know my mother didn't have a choice, but my father did. Not feelin' like I was good enough scarred me.

There's an emptiness that comes with realisin' yer not wanted. You end up believin' yer not worth lovin', and ye go yer whole life believin' that shite.

"I don't want her ta know all that, not yet."

"I don't even think she'll fully understand," I tell him.

I can see Rebel is broken by this, and I don't blame him. If I were in his position, I would be too. It's not the fact that he has ta step up as a father, it's because he knows that it's hurtin' his wee girl.

He shakes his head. "No, she won't. Which is why we're goin'ta wait until she's a few years older. I want ta tell her the whole truth eventually, but she's too young at the moment."

As intelligent as Aine is fer her age, Rebel is right. It's not good ta lie ta her, but omittin' certain specifics might help her ease into her new life with us.

"I don't expect ye te want te do this," Rebel says as he watches me. There's fear lacin' his tone.

I reach up and cup his face in my hands, and the soft stubble of his beard tickles my palms. I offer him a small smile, one that tells him all I want ta say, but without words.

"Callia, I can't—"

"Ye're not askin' me ta do anythin' I don't want ta do," I tell him, breakin' into his speech, "This is exactly where I want ta be. And nothin' ye say is goin'ta change that. Aine is a beautiful wee girl, and I'll be here fer her

as long as she wants me around. It's not easy ta go through life without someone special ta talk ta, and even though I'm not her real mother, I can be the confidante she'll need as she gets older."

Rebel's mouth pops open, but no words come out. The surprise is clear in his expression. I didn't think I'd be here, right now, promisin' ta be a surrogate mother, but this feels right. I want ta do this, and nothin' will change that.

"Are ye sure?" he asks nervously, and I offer him a smile of encouragement. It's the only thing I can do.

I know he's still worried about what happened with Orla, and he's probably doubtin' what he has with me, even though I'm not her. But I also know that nothin' I can say will change the thought process he's goin' through right now. All I can do is show him with my words and actions that I'll always be here.

"Ro," I whisper his name. "I'm not Orla," I tell him softly. "And if I were ta be honest with ye right now, I'd tell ye I'm feelin' a lot of anger that's slowly boilin' into rage. I can't believe a woman could walk out on her child. Sometimes fathers leave, but fer a mother ta carry her youngen fer nine months, raise her fer years, and then decide she's had enough..." I allow my words ta fade into the silence hangin' between us. But the more I think about it and talk about it, the angrier I get.

"I know," he responds, and I wrap my arms around him.

A fierce need ta protect him runs through me. Even though he's a big, bad biker, I want him ta know I'm also here to keep him safe. I may not be able ta fight, but I can protect his heart...or help ta heal it at least.

"Orla doesn't deserve anythin'," I tell him. "Karma is goin'ta get her in ways ye'll never know about and she'll never see comin'."

I want so much ta believe my words. I used to think I was payin' fer somethin' bad I'd done but couldn't recall. Now I know that wasn't true. But Orla's made a conscious choice ta hurt others.

"Let's go back ta Aine, I don't want her ta be alone," Rebel tells me as he takes my hand and leads me out of the dinin' room. Suddenly he pulls me back and says, "I appreciate ye, my shinin' star."

I swallow back the lump of emotion chokin' me and offer him a nod. I'm afraid if I try ta speak, I'll only burst into tears.

The family I found with the club has been a godsend. I've finally discovered myself, the person I wanted ta be. And now I have the man I was

made fer.

In the lounge, we find Aine colourin' a page filled with dolphins. I've never seen pink ones before, but she looks happy enough as she hums a tune and fills within the lines.

She looks up when we settle on the sofa. "Can we have ice-cream now?" she asks, giftin' Rebel the biggest grin.

"Aye," he tells her. "I think we should go down ta the wee shop and get a cone."

"Yay!" She leaps up from where she's been kneelin' and races fer her da. She wraps her little arms around his neck, and I almost burst into tears.

The forgetful innocence of a child. My heart aches fer her, but I'm also glad she has Rebel. He's goin'ta be a great father, and I know the moment she's old enough, he'll sit her down and tell her everythin'.

"Come on," she says, lookin' over at me. "Don't cry, I think Da will get ye a cone too."

Her giggle makes me laugh, and I swipe at my face to stop the tears from fallin'. I don't want her ta see me sad. It's a new start fer her, and soon enough, we're goin'ta have ta get her ta school and make sure she's got the best start after havin' such a shitty experience.

I push ta my feet, and we head out to one of the cars that sit in the garages, awaitin' the moment they're needed. The club own a couple of second-hand vehicles fer when the bikes aren't suitable.

It's been a while since I've been into the city. I try to steer clear of it in the event I see the woman who fostered me. Since I came back to Belfast, I've been lucky enough not ta bump into her or her boyfriend.

We get ta the ice-cream shop and it's quiet, which is great. There's an empty booth that we slip into and take a look at the menu. This is the first time, since Rebel and I took the next step, we've been out together in public.

"I want chocolate," Aine announces with a large, happy grin, showin' off the gap where the one tooth is missin'.

"And ye?" Rebel asks me, as he stands up ta head ta the counter.

"I think chocolate sounds yummy, I'll have the same." Once he's gone, I look at the sweet girl and smile. "Are ye happy ta be with yer da?"

She nods. "He's nice. But I miss Ma." Her honesty pulls at my chest, tuggin' on my heart. "She sings me songs at bedtime."

"I can sing ye songs too," I offer, and her eyes widen.

"Would ye?"

Noddin', I tell her, "Aye. I can do that fer ye. I know I used ta love ta sing songs ta myself when I was little."

"Didn't ye ma sing fer ye?"

She tips her head ta the side, regardin' me with curiosity, and once again, I'm on the verge of tears.

I shake my head before I explain, "No. She wasn't around when I was little."

"Did she go away like my mam?" Aine asks me, and I can tell from the look in her eyes, she understands a lot more than we've given her credit fer.

"Aye," I answer.

Maybe one day I can use my experience ta explain ta her it's not her fault that her ma left her. Rage surges through me, thinkin' about Orla, and I have ta breathe deeply ta let go of the fury.

Thankfully, Rebel returns with our ice-creams, and the topic is dropped instantly. We don't talk about it again, not even when we reach home and I walk Aine ta her bedroom.

I asked Rebel if I could put Aine ta bed tonight, and I have a feelin' he needed the time alone because he agreed. I'm sure he's at war with himself over what's happened with Orla. But it's not his fault, neither is it Aine's.

"I'm sorry yer mam went away," Aine tells me. Her voice is tinged with the sadness I heard earlier when Rebel explained that Orla wasn't comin' home anytime soon. "It's not nice."

I settle on the mattress beside her. "No. It's not. But do ye know what I learned as I got older?" She shakes her head, but she's watchin' me with rapt attention. I want so much ta make her happy again. I take her small hand in mine and hold it tight. "I learnt that sometimes Mammies and Daddies do things that don't make sense. But even when they do those things, they still love us." I don't know why I'm tellin' her this, because it's clear Orla feels nothin' fer her daughter. Deep down though, I would never want Aine to feel unloved.

"My mammie loves me?" she asks.

"I've no doubt that you are a very loved little girl. And you have a new family now, and we'll always be here fer ye." That's a promise I can keep because it's true.

She ponders this fer a wee while before she nods and smiles. "Okay. Will you sing me a song now?"

I'm not sure it's entirely over, but fer now, she's appeased.

SIXTEEN

CALLIA

IT WAS ONLY two weeks ago, I found out I'm goin'ta be a mother. Well, a stepmother. And now, I can't imagine my life without Aine. She's bright, funny, and she has the sass of a teenager. I can tell we're goin'ta have our hands full.

The lawyer Rebel hired has been givin' him sound advice on how ta proceed ta make everythin' legal, and we've been tryin' ta get all the paperwork ready fer the custody hearin'. I don't think we'll have any pushback from Orla, because she happily walked away from her child and hasn't tried ta make any contact since. But we're not takin' any chances.

"What do ye think?" Rebel asks me as Aine runs around the empty house that's got a For Sale sign outside.

It seems, since we admitted our feelin's fer each other, our relationship has been fast forwarded, and now we're lookin' at movin' in together.

But then again, it's taken seven years.

It's not really a rush.

"I like it," I tell him as I run my fingertips over the work surface in the kitchen.

The house comprises of three bedrooms, an open plan kitchen and living area, and two bathrooms—one is attached ta the primary bedroom, and the other is a family bathroom fer Aine and any guests we have stayin'.

I haven't allowed myself ta consider that the spare bedroom could be fer another baby. Not yet. We're only just now findin' our footin' with one child, so I can't imagine two.

"So," Rebel says as he pulls me against him, his arms wrappin' around my waist. "Do ye think ye can live here with me and Aine and be happy?"

We tiptoed around each other for a bit after we got together and Aine came into our lives, but things have settled nicely. There's no longer any fear in Rebel's eyes when he talks about our future.

And I know there's no anxiety in my expression when I respond, "Mmm... Well, I suppose I could try to live with ye both. I mean, Aine is the easy one, but ye're just a pain in my arse."

His big, strong hand reaches for my bum, and he squeezes until I squeal.

"Be careful, wee star," he murmurs in a low, seductive tone that causes my thighs to squeeze together. "Or I'll make ye sorry for what ye said." The salacious promise has me wantin' some time alone with my man. But that'll have to wait until we get back to the clubhouse. Right now, we're goin' to get caught by Aine if he doesn't let me go.

Just as the thought pops into mind, I quickly step back as she races back into the kitchen.

"I found my room," she tells us as she rushes back down the passage, forcin' us to follow behind.

Her chosen bedroom is the one we'd already planned for her, which works out perfectly. It overlooks the back garden, and it's got enough cupboard space for her clothes and toys. There's also a small area where a desk and some bookshelves can go. We can easily fit a double bed in here, so it will serve as a bedroom even when she's older and probably ready to move out.

This house isn't a short term purchase at all. We're lookin' for somethin' where we'll end up stayin' for the foreseeable future.

"So this is your bedroom?" I ask her as I walk to the window and look out over our new space.

I've become accustomed to bein' around the brothers and their partners at the clubhouse, so this is goin' to take some gettin' used to. Thankfully, we're not too far away from them, so if we needed anythin', we can always call on one of them for help.

"It's my princess room," she says with pride, and her voice is filled with happiness.

I've told Rebel that whenever I hear her laugh, it's enough to reassure me she's gradually gettin' used to not seein' her ma.

We haven't come face-to-face with Orla again. Our lawyers are handlin' the process that will allow Rebel the full custody of his daughter, so it's been easy enough to avoid her.

I don't know what I'd do to the bitch if I ever came across her again. After all she's done, I'll gladly knock her out, and probably break a few bones in my hand doin' so, but the satisfaction will be priceless.

"And our bedroom?" Rebel asks Aine, and she's out the door and across the passageway to the main bedroom.

The room has an en-suite bathroom, which will offer us some form of privacy if we want ta spend time in the shower or bath, locked in each other's arms. Just the thought of it has me blushin'. I hope Rebel doesn't notice, because it's been a while fer us, and I know he's just as on edge as I am. With the stress of the custody hearin', we've both been too exhausted every night.

"This one's yours because it's the biggest," Aine announces. "And ye're close ta me, so I can call fer help." She stops, looks around, then continues, "There's lots of cupboards fer Callia's clothes."

She's havin' the time of her life as she runs around the bedroom, then into the bathroom, and then back out to tell us there's a big bath in there.

"So that means ye have one all ta yerself?" Rebel says, takin' her hand and leadin' her out to the family bathroom.

I don't follow. Instead, I look around the room that Rebel and I will share. We've been sleepin' together in the same room at the club, but this is a big step. This move is somethin' we didn't really discuss, it just happened. As with everythin' else in our relationship, there wasn't any pressure ta do it, it just fell into place.

"Do you like our new safe haven?" Rebel asks in a soft whisper when he joins me.

"I do. I was just thinkin' how easy things have gone. I know there was the drama with Orla, and there's still a whole lot of stress with the custody hearin'. But, fer the most part, everythin' else has been fairly easy fer us."

"It's because we were meant ta be," he announces with a grin. "Not that other couples who've been through the wringer are any less compatible, but we were destined ta be together. I would have always found ye, no matter where ye were."

There are moments where he says somethin' that completely blows my mind. The affection and romance of his words make my heart fill with love.

Lookin' up at him on my tiptoes, I lean in and whisper against his lips, "I love ye, Ronan. I'll always love ye."

It's the first time in my life I've said those words ta someone. And fer a

long, silent moment, he doesn't say a word. There's no reply, and it makes my heart leap into my throat. Perhaps I've jumped the gun and said it too soon. But then I realise if I don't tell him now, I'll definitely tell him at a later stage. I'm not goin'ta change my mind, because he's the love of my life.

He moves his one hand ta cup my cheek. It's a gentle gesture, one that calms my crazy pulse, and he smiles.

"I love ye always. From the earth right up to those shinin' stars that brought ye ta me. Nothin' will ever change my feelin's fer ye."

My heart calms, but my stomach tightens with my need fer him. One thing I'm goin'ta have ta get used ta is havin' a child around. There's no longer any spontaneous sex. We'll have to wait until we can find a more private moment, which will only make it all the more special.

"Let's get back ta the club, so I can show ye just how much I love ye," he tells me and takes my hand as we go in search of Aine.

Those butterflies that awaken whenever I'm near Rebel are flutterin' wildly when I think about gettin' some alone time with him.

In the bedroom back at the clubhouse, we're on our own finally. Aine is chattin' ta Miren about the new house. She's distracted, which means we have time to relieve all the stress of the past few weeks.

"I've needed this," Rebel tells me as he tugs my top off over my head and drops it ta the floor.

He kisses my neck before trailin' his mouth down ta my nipples that are peaked ready fer him. We're a tangle of limbs when we fall onto the bed.

"I think ye're just a horny bastard," I tease him as I straddle his hips, tuggin' at his belt buckle and pullin' the leather from the hoops.

Then undoin' his zip, I shift lower so I can get my mouth on him. I want ta taste the man I love. Lookin' up at him from my kneelin' position, I tug at his underwear, until his hard cock springs free, and I can't help but moan.

Grippin' the shaft, I stroke him slowly before I lap at the weepin' tip, tastin' his salty precum. I love the flavour of him. Bein' the cause of his pleasure, and the reason fer the noises he's currently makin' I can't help but smile. I could do this all day long.

I'm wet and needy already as I take him into my mouth. I slowly sink

down onto his cock until it's as deep as I can manage. Hearin' him hiss the word *feck* is enough to have me achin'.

"Come here, sweetheart," Rebel murmurs as he pulls me up his body until my core is pressed against his cock. "I need ta be inside yer pussy."

With my palms flat on his chest, I grind against him, my wetness coatin' his shaft, and once again, I elicit a growl from him. His hands are grippin' my hips so hard, but I don't care, because the moment he slips inside me, all reasonin' is lost. My focus is solely on the pleasure racin' through my veins as I ride his cock.

Our moans echo in the bedroom, and the smell of sex hangs in the air, remindin' me that he's mine and I am fully his. There's no goin' back, and I don't ever want ta.

Rebel is mine.

Suddenly, he rolls us over, so he's on top, and I'm on my back with him nestled between my thighs. My body arches off the bed when he slams into me, knockin' the breath from my lungs.

"When we're in our own place, I'm goin'ta fuck ye in every room," Rebel promises, and my body pulses around him at the thought.

"Are ye tryin' ta kill me?" I tease him as I pull him closer. Then he slides out of me suddenly, and I can't stop the mewl of frustration that escapes my lips. "What are ye doing?"

He slowly slides his mouth down my body. He presses kisses ta each of my nipples, bitin' them before suckin' them gently ta ease the ache. Once he reaches my wet, needy pussy, he spreads my legs with his hands on my inner thighs, keepin' them apart.

"I'm goin'ta try ta kill ye right now," he vows before he dips his head, and I feel his tongue at my core.

He doesn't stop. He keeps pushin' me ta the edge before easin' his ministrations when he knows I'm gettin' close. Slidin' two fingers into me, he moves them slowly, in and out.

"Please, Ro," I beg, my thighs tremblin' either side of his head.

Then he does somethin' we've not explored before—he circles his thumb against the tight ring of muscle, which has me whimperin'. I didn't think it would feel pleasurable, but his touch and the way he's workin' my pussy at the same time seem to send me higher and higher.

"Oh feck." The curse falls easily from my lips when I feel him pushin' into the tight entrance between the cheeks of my bum. His thumb eases in

gently until I'm filled completely.

His movements are calm and methodical, and my orgasm is like an entity on his own as it shatters through me, and I bow off the bed.

"That's my sweet shinin' star," he tells me as he coaxes a second orgasm from me, this one not as powerful, but I'm soakin'.

I'm pretty sure I've made a mess of the sheets, but Rebel doesn't seem to mind as he licks my pussy while continuin' ta tease my arse. When he finally slips his fingers and thumb from me, I'm still shakin'. I look down ta see him kneelin' on the bed, watchin' me with a smile on his face.

"That was..." I'm not sure what ta say, but I do know I want ta try it again, because I've not felt so much pleasure before. Especially with somethin' so illicit.

"Now, ye're goin'ta come on my cock," he tells me as he hovers over me, and I feel him nudge my entrance. With every inch of him slippin' into me, I gasp at the way he throbs, causin' my walls ta pulse around him. "And soon, I'm goin'ta claim that tight, wee arse of yers as well."

Another promise that has desire coilin' in my gut. I need another orgasm, and I know he'll deliver it with a smile on his face.

"I want anythin' ye're willin' ta offer," I tease him before I pull him in fer a kiss.

I can taste myself on his lips, and I suck his tongue gently, teasin' it with my own. The movement has him groanin' as he thrusts into me. His movements are urgent, and I know he's close.

Reachin' fer his arse, I grip him and pull him in closer. I need everythin' he has ta give. Rebel fucks me harder, pushin' my legs wide apart, so I'm nothin' more than a vessel fer him ta use. The idea of it has pleasure zippin' through my veins. Fer him, I'd do anythin'.

"Feck, Lia," he hisses as he slams me into the mattress, and I can't do anythin' but grip the sheets, my fingers diggin' into the soft material. "I'm goin'ta come," he warns, and I can't help but smile as I watch him lose all control. There's nothin' sexier than seein' a man come undone fer ye.

His hips slap into mine one last time before I feel him fillin' me up. He reaches between us, his finger on my clit, massagin' me until I'm archin' off the bed once more. My body obeyin' him as another release shudders through me, and I chant his name like a feckin' prayer on a Sunday mornin'.

While we recover, we lie quietly fer a moment, Rebel still hoverin' over me, watchin' me as he smiles.

“What?” I ask.

Suddenly, I feel shy. I’m not sure why. We’ve had sex before, but this time was a little different.

“I just love ye,” he tells me. “I can’t stop my heart from feelin’ as if it’s too full. It makes no sense, but when I see ye happy, that makes me happy.”

Tears sting my eyes, but I fight them back. I don’t want ta get emotional, but he does say the most beautiful things sometimes.

“How is it that a rough and dangerous biker can be so sweet?” I challenge him with a giggle.

We shift so I’m lyin’ in the crook of his arm with my arm restin’ on his chest as his fingertips circle my shoulder.

“I just saw how much Ma and Da loved each other.” Rebel gets a faraway look in his eye as he speaks. “And deep down, I always wanted that fer myself because I knew it was possible ta find someone who makes ye a better version of yerself.”

I understand what he means. “Aye. I think that’s what they call true love. Or even a fairy tale romance.”

I smile at him, and I know I’ve found my own version of a prince.

SEVENTEEN

REBEL

THE SMOKE I blow out dissipates in the air as I look at the rain pissing down. It's goin'ta be winter soon, which means I can plan our trip ta see Ma.

Life has been quiet, easy even. I don't know how long it's goin'ta last, seein' as there's always somethin' happenin' when it comes ta the club. But with the weapons arrivin' regularly from Italy, and the shipments goin' out no problem, we've had a steady income fer a few months now.

Racer joins me, and I can feel him starin' at me.

"Ye're different," he says after a long bout of silence. "I can tell ye're finally at peace."

"Aye?" Archin' a brow, I look over at him. "Can ye explain what ye mean?" I inhale deeply on the cigarette as I look at him. I've known Kellen fer a long while.

"Callia is good fer ye, mate," he tells me as he lights up his own smoke.

Grey skies loom overhead, and I wonder if it's a forebodin' sign that somethin' more is comin', or if the rain the storm brings will wash away the past.

"She is," I agree without debate.

In the past, I would've come up with reasons as ta why I couldn't be with her. I no longer have that problem. I can't think of any. It's a good sign. I'm sure of it.

"Do ye think ye'll ask her ta marry ye?"

This is a question that's been playin' on my mind fer a wee while. Everythin' seems ta have been movin' so fast between us. The moment I allowed myself ta admit how I felt, everythin' began ta snowball and fall into place. With the new house bein' transferred soon, it means we'll be livin'

together in a few weeks. A big move, but one that's not givin' me anxiety. I thought it would, but fer some reason, I'm feckin' calm.

"Aye, I've no doubt," I tell Racer. "She was always meant ta be mine."

I recall the night we met her. When we saved her from that bastard we'd been tailin'. Tye was the one who found the connection between him and a few traffickin' rings that were workin' just outside Dublin. They didn't use the main port as a way to transport the women so they weren't in the Garda's line of sight.

It was up ta us ta sort the shite out, but things escalated when the bastard took Callia as a human shield. I knew I had ta take the shot, and I did. Thankfully, she didn't move as I pulled the trigger. Even though I'm a clean shot, things can go wrong in a split second.

It was in that moment I realised I wanted ta keep her safe forever. Even Racer didn't argue with me when I told him she would be ridin' on my bike. I think he was surprised I wanted someone on the back because I'd never taken anyone on it before.

"I don't think I'll find someone like that," Racer tells me suddenly.

He's always been what they call a ladies man. The lad is a goodun, but there are times I've wondered about his past relationships. He rarely mentions them, but then again, none of us ever sit around the fire talkin' about shite like that. I suppose in some ways, that's the problem. I'll always be there fer him, but I've never once said it out loud. I've always assumed it was clear ta him. Maybe it's not.

"Why?" I ask, fascinated by his comment.

I don't think lads consider marriage or think about it as much as women do. But fer someone ta decide they'll never get wed has me intrigued.

He shrugs, throwin' the still lit smoke to the ground and crushin' it with his boot. "Just don't see myself with anyone long term. Wakin' up next to the same face every day, I'm sure it would get borin'."

He doesn't look directly at me when he speaks, and now I have more questions.

"I don't know." It makes me think about my girl. "I don't mind wakin' up ta Callia every day. I mean, besides the perks of havin' her in my arms, there's a kind of calmness about it. Like bein' home."

Callia's a beauty, and lookin' at her is one of my favourite sights. Even before we were together, I was always desperate ta see her pretty face. When I woke in the mornin', she would be the first person I would think about.

Back then, I was frustrated by it. I didn't want ta constantly have her in the back of my mind. But I couldn't fight it. She was etched there, and nothin' I did could erase her. Even if I was with someone else at the time, a random one night stand, it was Callia's face that would haunt me.

"Aye, I'm not sayin' there aren't perks," he tells me as he waggles his eyebrows. "But ye can get those perks from anyone. Ye can take home some lass from the club and wake up with her mouth around ye. Why do ye want ta be tied down with one mouth when there are so many out there."

He's the definition of a slag.

"Ye might think that now," I tell Racer as I laugh at his comment. "But once ye find the one woman who makes others pale in comparison, ye'll think very feckin' differently." Shovin' his shoulder, I grin, lettin' him know I'm teasin', but deep down, I'm not.

I'd like him ta be happy. He deserves it. All of us do. We've all been through hell, and we should have someone who makes us feel like the heroes from those feckin' love stories women love so much.

"He's right ye know," Monster joins us fer a break. He's been workin' on buildin' a bookshelf fer Miren, and he's covered with the sawdust from the wood. "We all have our thoughts on how our lives are goin'ta pan out. We may even have rules we're followin' ta get where we want ta be, but life still brings us challenges we didn't know we were ever goin' ta face."

"Fer me, love doesn't even feature in my mind, and I don't know if that will ever change," Racer informs us with another shrug of his shoulders. "I can't think about a forever with someone. Not fer the next five years, not even fer the next ten. I just don't see the reason behind it. Fer me anyway. But fer ye both, it's changed ye fer the best."

"What's the craic?" Hades rounds the corner and stops beside Monster.

We're like a circle of naughty school boys smokin' at the back of our ma's house.

"Ach, not too much," I tell him. "Racer was just tellin' us how he's never gettin' married. I think he's been jaded by life and all the shite that comes with it."

This makes Racer chuckle and shake his head. He never takes anythin' too seriously, and even now, I know he's not bothered by us takin' the piss. But also, offerin' him some sound advice.

"Aye, there's too much shite goin' on ta even consider marriage or bringin' another baby into the world," Racer tells us then, and he's right

about that.

There are so many dangerous things out there, but I don't think that should stop anyone from bein' happy or startin' a family.

"Just ye wait," Monster says, pointin' a finger at him. "Ye'll be head over feekin' heels soon enough."

Monster was the first ta fall. It was somethin' that happened as we watched on from the sidelines, and it was nice ta see the man smile fer a change. Miren has been good fer him.

"Some wee lass will bring ye ta yer knees," I tell Racer. "And then ye'll be singin' the same old tune we are."

Racer shows us the middle finger, and we all burst into laughter. It really is a feekin' brotherhood. A family.

I offer them a mock salute because I have ta get inside. As much as I would prefer bein' out here talkin' about shite all day, Callia is goin'ta kill me if I don't help her.

"I'm headin' up ta pack," I tell them.

"Aye? When do ye fly out?" Monster asks.

"Tomorrow mornin'," I reply. "And we'll be away fer about a week. If Ma wants us ta stay fer a bit longer, it will be two weeks. But I'm not sure what she's got planned."

"Aye, no bother. I have Hadrian and Blaze handlin' the shipments, and these two will help me with local deliveries."

The club runs like a well-oiled machine. We each have specific roles, but when it comes down ta it, we all pull our weight together and help out when it's needed.

With Sully gone, it's also put pressure on one of us to pick up the slack on cleanin'. Luckily, we haven't had the need fer that in a while. It could be the calm before the storm, but I'm not goin'ta think about that just yet.

I head into the house and up to the bedrooms. Even though Callia has her own room, she's been spendin' her nights with me. I'm not complainin'. When I told Racer I wanted ta see her every day, I wasn't lyin'. I find myself smilin' each time I wake up and open my eyes ta see that sweet angel next ta me.

There's no doubt in my mind I'm goin'ta marry her. I just need ta plan it so the proposal is romantic. I may not buy her flowers every day, but that doesn't mean I can't make memorable moments with her.

I've never been much of a romantic. That just isn't in my DNA. My da

wasn't either, but he did do little things every now and then that made Ma smile. I remember her always laughin'. The home I grew up in was filled with happiness, even though Da was workin' with criminals. Some might call him an anti-hero, but Ma loved him unconditionally.

I was lucky enough to come from a lovin' family. Deep down, I wanted that fer myself one day. Unconditional love, like my parents had. Da always held Ma up when she was down, and she did the same fer him. It was a perfect example of happiness, which I always craved fer myself. And now, I've found it with Callia.

I stop outside the bedroom when I hear whispers. The door is cracked open and my girls are sittin' on the bed. Aine is playin' with a makeup brush in her hands while Callia uses another one on Aine's face. There's a soft pink glow ta my daughter's cheeks as she giggles.

"Now," Callia tells her. "This isn't fer every day, only special occasions. Ye're already beautiful, so ye don't need to put too much on."

"Do ye put it on fer special oc-oc-occassions?" Aine stumbles over the word, but she gets it right and smiles brightly, clearly pleased with herself.

"Aye," Callia tells her. "When yer da takes me out on a date."

"Ewww," Aine mumbles, scrunchin' her nose. "I don't like boys."

Her announcement makes me grin. I hope she'll feel like that when she turns sixteen, or I'll need ta make sure the gun I have is always loaded. I know what the youths are like these days, and I don't want my little girl fallin' in love and gettin' her heart broken by some arsehole I'll be forced to kill.

"Well, one day, when ye're much older, I think ye'll change yer mind." Callia offers her a smile.

My chest tightens as I watch them together. I couldn't have asked God fer a better woman. She didn't have ta accept Aine. Callia could have told me where ta shove the whole relationship.

But she's still here.

And that's why I need ta go and get a ring. I want ta ask her ta marry me. I know there's not goin'ta be a day in my future that I don't want ta spend with her. Seein' life through together while holdin' each other's hands is definitely my plan.

I push the door open and step inside. I have ta ride into the city before the shops close.

"Da! Look!"

Aine points to her cheeks and then her lips. They are shimmerin' with a gloss that I know Callia often wears. It's clear, so there's no colour, but there's a sheen that's obvious when Aine pouts her lips at me.

"Are ye goin' out, somewhere special?" I play along with her, laughin' when she shakes her head and strands of her hair end up stuck ta the gloss.

"That's yuck," she says, spittin' out nothin' while swipin' at her mouth. It's a mess, but she's adorable.

My heart fills with emotion as I crouch down and take her sticky hands.

"Da is goin' out real quick to get somethin' important," I tell her. "Ye'll have ta help Callia pack fer our holiday. Can ye do that fer me?"

Her face brightens when she realises I'm givin' her a job ta do. I've learnt that when Aine's put in charge of somethin', she plays her role happily.

"I can do that," she tells me with confidence and a nod of her head. "I'm all grown up and I can do anythin'."

"I think ye should stay a little girl fer a wee while longer, but ye can be responsible," I tell her. "It's much more fun bein' a child anyway."

She tips her head ta the side as she ponders this, then she shrugs and says, "Okay, but I want ta do the packin' with Callia anyway."

"Ye can do that." I pull her in fer a hug, not carin' that I'm goin'ta have lip gloss all over my T-shirt. I love Callia, and I love Aine. They're both very different forms of the emotion, but they both leave me speechless.

"Where are ye headin'?" Callia asks as she packs away the makeup.

"Never ye mind. I'm buyin' somethin' fer our holiday. Ye'll see it when we get there."

I know she's not goin'ta stop askin', tryin' ta figure it out, but I know she won't, because we haven't really talked about marriage. The proposal will come as a complete surprise ta her.

But before I ask her, I'm goin'ta need ta talk ta Ma. I want ta hear her point of view. And since she's meetin' Callia, she can tell me honestly what she thinks of my girl.

"Fine," Callia tells me, but I can see she's thinkin'. Her mind must be racin' with thoughts on what it could be. "Don't be long because ye need ta sort out yer own suitcase."

Her cheeky tone makes me grin, and when she looks at me, she knows what I'm thinkin'. She can tell I want to bend her over and spank her arse until she's beggin' fer forgiveness.

She done somethin' ta me. She's changed me and made me want ta be a

better man. Her beauty drives me insane, and I want ta spend every second of the day with her. I know she'll be mine forever.

EIGHTEEN

CALLIA

TO SAY I'M NERVOUS MEETIN' Rebel's ma is an understatement. I think I packed and unpacked my suitcase five times before he got home ta the clubhouse and helped me decide what ta take. The back and forth has made me dizzy.

All my life I've spent fightin' fer what I want. After I ran away from home, I didn't look back. I was on my own, and I made my own destiny. Now, I'm with Rebel, and I'm relyin' on him. I've no control over what's goin'ta happen when we arrive in Italy. When I see his ma, I'm not sure what she's goin'ta make of me.

There are so many instances when I've wondered what she's like. And now that I'm goin'ta finally come face-ta-face with her, I'm on edge.

I don't know if she'll like me. I've been imaginin' I'm not the type of girl she would want fer her son. But maybe that's my own self-conscious doubts playin' games with me.

The trip ta the airport isn't long, and when we finally board the plane, I'm in need of a serious drink.

"Ye'll be okay," Rebel tells me when he notices me wringin' my hands.

We're settled into our seats. I'm next to the window, Rebel is by the aisle, and Aine is in between us. I lean back and take a long deep breath.

"It's not the flight I'm worried about," I tell him with a smile.

I don't want him thinkin' I don't want ta meet his ma, but the pressure of bein' good enough fer him is immense.

"She's goin'ta love ye both," he tells me then looks to Aine. "Ma is lookin' forward ta seein' the two girls I love."

"She's my nonna," Aine announces while holdin' onto her bear.

The teddy still goes everywhere she does. I didn't have somethin' like that while growin' up. I didn't have many toys, or even luxuries like colourin' books. The school text books I worked from were the only ones I owned. At times, I'd sneak into Waterstones, without Mrs Duffy knowin', just ta read somethin'. I couldn't afford ta buy books myself, and she kept all the money she got fer lookin' after me.

"She is yer nonna," Rebel tells Aine. "And she'll be there fer ye, no matter what. Just like me and Callia." The promise he makes has me smilin'.

We haven't had a chance ta talk about anythin' beyond us movin' in together. So, fer him ta be talkin' long term has my heart flutterin'. I don't know if he'll ever want ta get married, but if he were ta propose, I will say yes without havin' ta think about it.

Maybe, just maybe, when we get back from Italy, we'll be able to plan a future together.

Growin' up, I wasn't one fer plannin' anything'. I didn't see past the week ahead, because gettin' by and makin' sure I was safe were the only things I could think of. The fear I lived with daily was at the forefront of my mind. So, I wasn't like other girls who had a fairy tale, dream weddin' in mind.

In some ways, I'm sad I didn't, but then again, I know that I learnt ta look out fer myself. I grew up quickly, and it made me the strong woman I am now. On reflection, I don't think I'd change anythin' I've been through. Except, I would like to have known my ma. That would have made my life perfect.

But, right now I'm happy with my lot.

When we disembark, the sun is shinin'. The flight wasn't bad, and now we're off the plane, I'm back ta worryin' about what Rebel's ma will think of me. Even though he says she'll love me, I can't stop myself from playin' all sorts of scenarios in my head. I suppose it's somethin' I've done all my life. I've never felt good enough. And deep down, it's a problem of mine I know I still need ta work on.

Rebel holds Aine's hand and mine as we head into the arrivals area to collect our bags. It doesn't take us long, and thankfully, we manage ta grab a

taxi shortly after walkin' out of the airport.

We're lucky; the weather is beautiful.

"See, Aine," Rebel tells her. "This is where I grew up. I spent my youth in this town."

"Did ye swim?" she asks when she notices the blue ocean that twinkles in the sunlight. It's so blue, it's an unbroken connection to the sky, makin' it seem as if there's no end.

"I did. It was a lot of fun. I think we should go fer a swim when we get ta yer nonna's house. What do ye think?"

Her excited squeal is answer enough. I feel so lucky ta be here, ta see where Ronan was born, where he grew up. I've never left Ireland. Granted, the north and south of Ireland are different countries, but it's nothin' like travelin' overseas.

There's a new culture to get used to. Another language that I can hear spoken as I walk around. There's a promise of discoverin' somethin' new every day. It's a magical experience.

The roads seem much narrower here than in Belfast, and as the car weaves through the traffic, I can't help but want ta cringe each time another vehicle passes too close ta us.

"Almost there," Rebel tells me when I look up ta find him watchin' me.

There's a small smirk tippin' the corner of his mouth upward. He's so handsome. At times I wonder how I ever got so lucky.

"It's a tight squeeze," I tell him when I gesture ta another car zippin' by us. I do notice that a lot of the vehicles are small hatchbacks, makin' them easier ta manoeuvre.

"Aye," he says with a nod. "But, we'll be there soon, and ye can relax."

When we finally pull up to a beautiful old house, with two storeys, I gasp at the size of it. I didn't think Rebel's ma would be livin' alone in such an enormous home. But the moment we step inside, I realise the lounge and patio take up most of the lower floor along with the kitchen. The house is built up the way, rather than out.

"My sweet boy," Rebel's mother rushes to him and pulls him in fer a kiss on either cheek.

She's a beautiful woman with long black hair and the greenest eyes I've ever seen. Her curves are perfect, and I wonder if she spends time doin' yoga while lookin' out at the ocean.

"Ciao, Ma," Rebel says, which sounds strange in his accent, which has a

strong Belfast lilt, entwined with a very slight Italian inflection. “This is my sweet girl, Callia,” he tells her as he steps aside to allow her to greet me. And that’s when my stomach twists into knots. “And, Callia, this is my mother.”

“Hello, Mrs O’Donnelly,” I say, my voice so quiet, I wonder if she can hear me. But then she smiles at me with such happiness, and the churnin’ in my gut eases.

“Oh my,” she says as she cups my face in her hands. “You’re as beautiful as I imagined you would be.” She pulls me close, the same way she did with Rebel, and she kisses my left cheek then my right. “And ye can call me Elena,” she informs me, and all the worry and tension that had a hold of me dissipates. “You’re exquisite. What are you doing with my boy?” This has her laughing loudly as Rebel groans behind her.

“Okay, Ma,” he says, holdin’ her shoulders and turnin’ her to see Aine. “And this is my little girl.”

“Hello,” Aine says with a grin. “Ye’re my nonna,” she informs Elena who offers her hand for Aine to shake. But the little girl surprises us all when she wraps her arms around her grandmother and leans her head on her belly.

The sweet gesture causes tears to form in my eyes, and when I look at the older woman, I notice she’s also emotional.

“Ronan,” Elena says after we’re all welcomed into the house and settled on sofas in the lounge. “Why don’t you take Aine and show her where she’ll be sleeping. I’ve made up your old room for her.”

“Okay.” I can tell the only reason he’s been given these orders is because she wants to talk to me alone.

Once we’re on our own, she turns to me and once again, the knot in my stomach twists.

“I wanted to tell ye Ronan is a good boy, even though at times he does stupid shit.” Her brutal honesty has me smilin’. And I know she’s not wrong. “I’m sure we’re going to get on well. I can already tell that there’s something different about him.”

“To be honest, I think it has more to do with Aine than me.” As I shrug, she shakes her head and takes my hand.

“Listen to me,” she whispers conspiratorially. “He’s never once brought a girl home before or after Orla. After her, he wasn’t interested in a relationship. Then his father died. There were a lot of things he did with his father when they were working together. Ronan was fifteen when he started going out on jobs. The violence became a part of him, and he focused on it

too much. After his father was killed, my son was broken. I watched him turn into someone he's not."

"He was closed off," I agree with her. "When we met, he saved my life. I wasn't in the best place, and neither was he."

"That's what I'm trying to tell you," she says. "He's back to the person he was before he was broken."

"He's definitely not like that anymore," I assure her. I can't even imagine Rebel bein' like that. "He's a gentleman. I waited seven years fer him because I knew from the moment I met him, that he wasn't like other lads."

My confession has her smilin'. Her eyes are glistenin' with unshed tears, and I feel bad fer makin' her want ta cry. But I need her ta know how much I love him.

"You're a good girl," she tells me. "When I meet someone, I get a feeling, call it intuition, and mine is telling me that you are a kind person. So I don't want you to feel out of place here. This is your home now too. You're with Ronan, and I can tell he's in love with you."

"Thank you, Elena. I...I didn't grow up with a mother in my life. Mine was killed when I was a baby. And the woman who raised me till I was sixteen wasn't good to me."

I don't know why I'm spillin' my whole life story ta her, but she doesn't seem ta mind.

"I'm so sorry." She pulls me closer and holds me fer a long moment.

I've never had someone just hold me before. With Rebel, it's different. The nurturin' comfort that can only come from a parent is foreign ta me, but as I sit there with Elena, I realise I'm finally complete. All my dreams of a family, of a happy future, is right here and now.

My forever has finally started, and I don't want anythin' ta change it.

"Now go, change into your swimsuit, and get into that ocean. It's a beautiful afternoon, and you shouldn't waste it sitting inside with me." Elena squeezes my hand in reassurance.

She's happy, she likes me, and she's accepted me into her home. That's what matters the most ta me.

"Thank you," is all I manage before I disappear up the stairs ta find Aine already dressed in her swimmin' costume, and with her hair tied into a long ponytail.

"Will you wait downstairs with yer nonna?" I ask her, and she nods enthusiastically.

I find Rebel in a guest bedroom, pullin' on a pair of shorts. It's not often I see him in somethin' other than jeans. Especially when he's workin'. But seein' him so laid back makes me smile.

"Yer ma is lovely," I tell him when I make my way over ta him and snuggle into his chest.

He wraps his arms around me and holds me fer a while. We don't speak. We don't need ta, because the fears I had are all gone, and I'm pretty sure he can tell that from my posture.

"So, did ye both gossip about me?" he asks as he steps away from me and settles down in an armchair ta watch me change.

When we're at home, he's gotten into the habit of watchin' as I change out of my clothes. Most times, it' ends with us naked on the bed or me bent over the dressing table. But fer now, we have ta behave.

"We did, but mostly we spoke about me. She listened to me explainin' a few things, which was nice. I think we're goin'ta be okay."

When I finish tyin' the strings of my bikini, I look up ta find a heated gaze on me.

"Did ye even listen ta what I said?" I place my hands on my hips and pin Rebel with a glare of frustration.

"Aye." He nods. "I heard ye loud and clear, but ye can't be expectin' me ta focus when ye're naked." He pushes to his feet and makes his way towards me. "I told ye that ye had no reason ta be worried. I knew Ma would adore ye."

"I know ye did, but there are times I still feel so out of place."

My confession twists at my chest, but when Rebel leans in, he presses his lips to mine so gently, it's like a soothin' balm that wipes away the pain.

"With me," he whispers along my lips. "There is never a need fer ye ta feel anythin' other than perfect. In my eyes, ye're everythin' I've ever wanted and needed. And I want ye ta remember that the next time ye're feelin' out of place. Do ye understand me?"

There's no way I can argue with him. The man is a walkin' poetry book at times.

"I promise, I'll try ta remember. But sometimes, I think ye may have ta remind me." I tell him with a smile.

I didn't think about love before. I didn't even allow myself ta consider the possibility. It was so far out of my reach that I buried the notion deep into my subconscious. But I've found it now. I don't know how I did it. Perhaps it

was puttin' myself in danger that forced the universe ta shove me into Rebel's sight.

I like the idea of fate bringin' us together.

And I love the idea of kismet keepin' us right here in each other's arms.

NINETEEN

REBEL

“I’M glad you brought them here,” Ma tells me as she watches my daughter and my girlfriend.

Both women are special ta me, and I’m overjoyed they’ve met my mother, the one woman who always taught me right from wrong. She stood by me when I was a stubborn teenager, and she supported me when I grew up and decided I wanted ta join the MC. She knew I’d be happy, so she stepped back and allowed me my independence.

My mother taught me respect, morals, and loyalty. I’ll forever be grateful fer how lucky I am ta still have her in my life.

“It wasn’t easy,” I tell Ma. “I was so angry fer so long, and I didn’t realise it until Callia walked into my life. I pushed her away for seven years. It’s a long time.”

“Oh, I know you were going through heartache. I watched you spiral for years,” Ma says. “Seven years may seem a long time, but ye can’t rush somethin’ like this. If it’s meant to be, it will happen.”

“That’s true. But ye’ve always believed in that kinda shite.”

I get a harsh swat on my arm fer my words. “Watch your mouth, Ronan. I’m not averse to punishing you for cursing,” she threatens.

“Aye, sorry, Ma.”

I may be all grown up now, but ta her, I’ll always be her sweet boy. She’s not jaded by my lifestyle. She still sees me as a teen who has ta obey her rules and regulations. Which I will be doin’, seein’ as I’m stayin’ in her house.

I’m proud of havin’ been able ta buy my mother a house. When she told me she wanted ta stay in Italy, ta live her last years in the sunshine, I wanted

ta argue because I wanted her closer. But, she's right, she is happier here. Even though she visits me in Belfast, from time ta time, I know there's nowhere else she feels at peace.

The house has ocean views that stretch on fer miles. Even if there's a shitty bout of weather, it's still beautiful ta look at. Our old house was fallin' apart, and it held too many memories of Da. They were everywhere, and I knew she needed a fresh start. We all need ta look forward. Lookin' back only breaks ye down.

"She's a lovely girl," Ma says, nudgin' her head in Callia's direction. "I like her for you. I think she must challenge you. I can tell she has a strong mind."

"Aye, she definitely has," I tell Ma. "There's always been somethin' about her I could never shake. I wanted her ta find someone who'd give her the future she deserves, but fate brought us together, and I can't deny my feelin's fer her anymore."

"You know, your father was a lot like you when we first met. He was a stubborn mule, but I loved him, and nothing was going to change how I felt."

"And he ended up marryin' ye." I finish Ma's thoughts, and she chuckles.

"He did. The thing is, there isn't a wrong or right way of doing things. When the time comes, you know it in your heart."

Ma looks at me with a soft smile on her face. She's always had a way with advice, makin' sure I didn't doubt myself. I've trusted her ever since I was a child. I know she'll always look out fer me, and even though we haven't always seen eye ta eye on certain things, I know she loves me, no matter what.

"I love her," I tell Ma then. It's the first time in my life I've ever admitted that word out loud, about anyone.

"Then ye best make her yours, sweet boy. Don't let her slip away." Ma places her hand on mine and gives it a quick squeeze. "She's a good one."

When I was a youngen, I watched how my father doted on Ma. They were the perfect couple, and I thought I'd found that when I met Orla. Then she left me. I never believed I'd find someone else ta love until Callia came into my world and turned it upside down. And now I have a wee one ta take care of and make sure she turns out ta be a good person.

"Aine looks just like you," Ma whispers in my ear, I can hear the

amusement in her voice. "Going to be a little heartbreaker that one."

"Like feck she is. I have a shotgun, I'll make sure the boys don't even glance her way until she's at least thirty," I tell my mother who only laughs at my outrage.

I look at my daughter. Her dark, wavy hair hangs down to the middle of her back, and her hazel eyes shimmer in the sunlight, makin' it look as if she's got gemstones in her gaze. She's smilin', which makes her dimples deepen in her cheeks.

I can see the resemblance ta me, but she also has some of her mother in her, even if Ma doesn't want to admit it. She's angry because of what Orla did ta me and ta Aine. I can't blame her.

I spent a lot of time bein' angry when I first got back from seein' Orla that day. But the more time I spend with Aine, and the more I see her relationship with Callia grow, I know it's not scarred her too badly. Perhaps when she's older, she'll be angry, or maybe she'll forgive the woman who gave birth ta her, cared fer her, and then moved on without her. I pray fer the latter.

"Are you ever going to ask Callia to marry you?" Ma asks me then, and I snap my gaze ta hers.

It's strange ta hear her say that. When I told her I was goin'ta ask Orla ta move ta Italy with me, she didn't seem all that positive about it and tried ta sway my decision, but with Callia, it's different.

"Maybe," I tell her, but she swats me again on the arm, and it stings if I had ta be honest. Ma has a backhand I don't want ta be on the other end of ever again. "I was plannin' on doin' it on our last night here. On the beach, where we can have a quiet moment if you'll watch Aine."

"You know I will, Ronan." The surprise in Ma's voice makes me laugh, and she shakes with the chuckle rumblin' through her.

She's still so young fer her age. I don't want ta ever think of Ma bein' gone. I know I'll still have Callia and Aine with me, but the idea of losin' Ma doesn't sit well with me.

"When ye ask her, make sure she says yes," Ma teases me with a smile on her face.

"Aye, I'll tie her up and keep her in the house until she does," I throw back, shakin' my head.

I have no doubt that Callia will say yes, but then again, nothin' is guaranteed. Ye never know what someone else is thinkin'.

With Aine in bed, and Ma watchin' the telly, I take Callia's hand and lead her out onto the patio. It's not far to the beach, and as we make our way down the steps that lead ta the sand, I know she can see the flickerin' candles.

"Have you planned a romantic dinner, O'Connolly?" Callia teases me when we step onto the soft white beach.

The night is lit by a million stars, and the moon hangs in the sky, half way ta full, illuminatin' the earth just enough so we walk ta the table that's been set up fer us.

"I thought since it's our last night in Italy, we needed ta celebrate." Even though the ring is burnin' a hole in my pocket, I haven't given her an inklin' as ta what we're doin' here. It's just a date. Nothin' more.

"Aye, celebrate indeed. This is the most beautiful settin' I've ever been in," Callia says with a sigh.

I pull out the chair and wait fer Callia ta sit before helpin' her scoot closer ta the table. Then, I take my own seat across from her.

The dinner plates are already in front of us, covered by large silver domes. Ma's friend, who owns a restaurant, helped me set this up. We even have a server who'll come ta pour the drinks and clear the table once we're done eatin'.

White wine fer Callia, and a beer fer myself. She should be drinkin' Prosecco, I know it's her favourite, but that's fer after dinner.

I lift my glass and say, "I want ta thank ye fer bein' my partner in this journey. I didn't expect ye, and I didn't ever think I'd find ye, but now I never want ta lose ye. Sláinte."

"Ye'll never lose me, Ro," Callia whispers with a smile and tears shimmerin' on her lashes. "We're in this together. Fer as long as we're breathin'."

I didn't think I could allow myself ta love her, but all those years, I'd been lyin' ta myself. My heart was hers from the night I saved her life, and it's never been anyone else's. Everyone around me knew, they saw what she'd done ta me, but my focus wasn't on love or a relationship.

"Are ye all right?" she asks me as she tips her head ta the side, her gaze takin' me in.

"Aye." I shift in my seat. "I'm just thinkin' about how long it's taken us ta get here. I was so focused on everythin' else, rather than allowin' my

feelin's ta show. But all this was worth that wait."

I wanted ta do this after we've had our supper, but I can't wait anymore. I'm a nervous feekin' wreck, and I know if I delay it, I'm goin'ta be a mess fer the rest of the night.

Pushin' ta me feet, I round the table and stop beside her. I know if I don't go down on one knee, Ma will have my arse fer it, so I do.

I lower to the sand and slowly pull out the ring that feels like it's completely burnt a hole in my jeans.

Callia gasps in surprise, her eyes widen as she looks at me and then tears start ta fall. I'm not sure what ta make of it, but it's now or never.

"Callia," I murmur her name as I take her hand in mine. "I know ye're mine. I knew it since the moment I feekin' saw ye standin' there in yer short skirt and tank top, tryin' not ta burst into tears outside that warehouse. It was then I realised I'd never want anyone else, because I knew I needed ta keep ye safe. Even if it was from me."

I look into her eyes, watching those beautiful orbs glisten from the tears. She's smilin', which is a good sign. I'm thankful fer that, and it gives me the courage ta continue.

"I don't want ta live my life without ye, and I know ye know that. I'm never leavin' ye, and I'm never goin'ta want ye ta leave me. So, with that said, I'm askin' if ye want ta perhaps marry me?"

My voice lowers when I say the last few words as uncertainty takes over. My confidence isn't high right now, but my desire ta make her happy, no matter what, is as strong as ever. It's a surety I can count on.

Callia giggles then and whispers, "Ye know I've always been yers. And I'm most definitely want ta be yer wife." She's cryin' now, her tears no longer a trickle. They wet her cheeks as I slide the diamond ring onto her finger.

It's a perfect fit.

Just like us.

It may have taken us seven feekin' years ta get here, but it was worth the wait. I push ta my feet and pull her up into my arms. Those curves fit so perfectly against me, I'm achin' ta take this further, but I know we have a dinner ta finish, and I'm not goin'ta do anythin' out here. Not where we could be spotted by neighbours... or by Ma.

Even though it would be much more romantic ta do it out here, I'll make sure Callia knows just how much I love her when we're in the privacy of our

bedroom.

“I love ye,” I whisper in her ear. “I love ye forever and a day.”

Callia nestles into my neck and replies with a gentle sigh, “I love ye too, Ronan.”

There’s no music, but we sway together in the candlelight shimmerin’ around us. The orange glow is enough ta make this moment seem magical, and havin’ Callia in my arms, that’s like havin’ heaven on earth fer me.

“I can’t believe it’s taken ye so long,” Callia teases me as we pull apart ta look at each other. “I’ve waited a long while fer ye, Ronan.”

“Aye, I kept searchin’ every face, tryin’ ta find the one and never seein’ what was right in front of me. No one has captivated me the way ye do, my wee shinin’ star.”

I know if the brothers heard me now they’d be takin’ the piss out of me. Fluffy romance and sweet words aren’t fit fer a big, grumpy biker. But this is just between the two of us. There’s no one else around.

“I’m not sure what I’d do without ye,” I tell her earnestly.

Callia’s given me so much more than just happiness. She’s taught me that love doesn’t have ta hurt. That when someone truly wants ye in their lives, they’re willin’ ta take the good and the bad and not run at the first sign of trouble.

She offers me a gentle smile before sayin’, “Ye’d be lost, Ro. Ye’d be very, very lost.”

As the night wears on, I can’t stop my heart from fillin’ with emotions that are so fierce I’m not sure what ta do with them. But I let them flood through me.

I’ve spent too many nights in anger. Moments where I didn’t believe love was possible and pushed people away.

No more.

From today, our love story starts.

EPILOGUE

REBEL

IT'S A SET OF TWINS.

Callia is havin' my babies. I can't believe that our weddin' has been and gone, and I'm goin'ta be a father again. She's only showin' a small bump so far, but I can imagine in a few months, I'll be able ta feel them kickin'.

The rest of the brothers are on their way, and soon there'll be a rumble of bike engines comin' down the road. When I planned the party, I didn't think we'd have such good news ta tell them. We weren't plannin' on babies just yet, but it's been a welcome surprise.

Callia walks into the room and smiles at me. Dressed in a flowin' summer dress, she's looks beautiful. My mind starts racin' a million miles a minute, and it has nothin' ta do with thinkin' about the food we still have ta get ready and all the other preparations.

"I've got all the salads done," she says with a smirk, as if she can read my filthy mind. "Where is Aine?"

"I'm here!" my daughter shouts as she races into the kitchen where Callia and I are standin' at the counter.

We've told her about the twins, and she's as excited as we are. Although she did mention she'd be old enough ta babysit, which is most definitely not happenin'.

"Go put your dress on, Aine" Callia tells her, and she quickly obeys.

We've been watchin' her carefully, makin' sure she's doin' okay since Orla left. I'm not sure if she's hidin' her heartbreak, or if she's truly happy bein' with us and it's not botherin' her, but she seems ta be a happy, contented child.

"I'm nervous, Ronan," Callia tells me then. I know my wife tends to get

anxious, but the news about the twins is good, and everyone will be happy fer us.

“Stop worryin’ so much. I mean, why would ye need ta? Yer husband is one of the handsomest men in Ireland.”

She swats me with her hand and rolls her eyes. I can’t stop myself from pullin’ her into my arms and holdin’ her close. When she’s like this, I know it’s easier ta give her a moment ta panic, and then she’ll settle against my chest.

And I’m right. Moments later, she steps back and takes a deep breath.

“I’m fine now,” she says with a sigh.

“I know.”

We’ve become what they call *an old married couple* over the past year. We argue from time ta time, which is expected, but things are good between us. I didn’t think everythin’ would fall into place so easily, but then our whole relationship has been like this.

“They’ll be here soon. Do ye want ta start the barbecue?” she asks me as she pulls out a bottle of juice fer Aine and one fer herself.

Now that she’s pregnant, we’ve been focusin’ on eatin’ healthy and maintainin’ a no alcohol in the house rule. However, today is different. We’re celebratin’. And I’ve bought her a bottle of non-alcoholic champagne.

We have a lot ta be thankful fer.

I thank my lucky star every day fer bringin’ me Callia.

CALLIA

As we wait fer our family ta arrive, I can’t deny I’m still feelin’ anxious. The thought of carryin’ a baby was a lot fer me, but havin’ twins is dauntin’. I know I’ll have the support and love of everyone around me, but there’s still a nigglin’ feelin’ of fear in my gut. I love Rebel, and I don’t want ta let him down. I want ta make sure that these twins are healthy, and happy once they’re born.

Aine comes into the kitchen in her new floral dress that she picked out on our last shoppin’ trip. She looks so grown up. Over the past year, she’s shot up, gettin’ taller every month. I’m pretty sure she’s goin’ ta be takin’ her

father on soon. He's tall, and she's got the gene.

"Hey," Rebel calls, and I turn ta see him starin' at me. "We'll be okay."

"I know. I'm actually just thinkin' about how tall Aine is gettin'."

He chuckles at me when I admit what I had actually been thinkin' about. There's a lightness to us. Our home is filled with love and happiness. There's always laughter. We may have our disagreements, but we talk it through. Any problems, and we fix them.

I'm not sure if every marriage is like ours, but I love Rebel more and more every day. If that's even possible.

"She is," Rebel finally agrees when he stops laughin'. "And I'm pretty sure the other two that are joinin' us will also be tall. Ye're the short arse in the family." His teasin' earns him a swat on the arm. "Ouch! It seems ye're also the violent one."

"Aye, so ye better watch yerself."

We're still laughin' when we hear the engines of the bikes slowly pullin' up ta the house. Each time we have the family over, it's the same ground vibratin' sound. Thankfully, we have understandin' neighbours, or there would be complaints all the time.

Even though we don't live far from the club, we do miss not havin' our family close by. But since we've moved, we haven't truly had a chance ta feel their absence because most of the time Racer and Hades are here, and Monster and Miren visit regularly. I'll always be thankful fer our family of misfits who welcomed me in and gave me a home when I was at my lowest.

The past is now far behind me. I've walked a difficult, lonely path and discovered secrets about my family, about my bloodline, that didn't help my pain. But now I have someone who accepts me fer who I am. He doesn't question me, and he doesn't judge me because of where I've come from. He loves me unconditionally, and that's all I can ever asked for.

It's been a roller coaster ride.

"I love ye," Rebel tells me before he kisses me.

"And I love ye," I whisper before the madness descends.

My family.

My home.

My love.

My happiness.

THE END

Have you met the rest of the Royal Bastards in Belfast?

If not, dive into the first book in this romantic suspense series now!

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Or dive into Tye's story, and learn more about the IT expert of the club...

[CLICK HERE](#)

WHAT'S COMING NEXT?

SNEAK PEEK

Thank you so much for reading Rebel! I hope you fell in love with him, Callia, and Aine, as much as I did while writing them. I'm including a little **unedited** sneak peek of what I'm currently working on...

Please note this is subject to change slightly

Prologue

Dante

As I twist the knife, I can't help but smile. Blood spurts from the wound, my hand now drenched in crimson as I look at the asshole who is gurgling through the agony. The sound is like a symphony. There's nothing like hearing a predator take his final breath.

I've spent my life doing this. My brother and I grew up in a house that was never a home. It was a space where the horrors of daily life would forever haunt us. It didn't matter what we did, there was never a reprieve from the pain, from the torture.

Our father was a monster. My brother, Drake, and I are survivors. Even though I hate thinking of myself in that way, there is no denying it. We got through some of the worst experiences any child and teenager should.

And that's why I've made it my life's mission to make these fuckers pay. Each and every one of them will die by my hand.

“Dante,” Harper’s voice comes from behind me. She’s been taking notes on names, addresses, anything we could get out of this sick bastard.

I pull the knife from the larynx of the man who’s now dead. His head hangs morbidly to the side, as if it’s about to fall off. I don’t care if it does, I’ve seen worse.

“Have you got all we need?” I ask her. Even though I love her, I’m still a cold-hearted bastard when I’m working. The beautiful thing about Harper is that she understands. It’s Rayne who struggles at times with my aloofness.

“Yeah,” she whispers as she pushes to her feet. Her long, purple hair hangs to the middle of her back and she swipes it to the side as she runs her fingertips over her neck. When she decided to color her hair, she said she needed a change. It was when we left for Europe that she seemed to grow even stronger. Perhaps it was the idea of leaving the past behind.

“Are you okay?”

Before she can reply, Rayne walks into the dungeon with a smile on her face. “I feel good today,” she announces as she bounds up to me and leaps into my arms. The blood I’m caked in isn’t a bother to her, she’s so used to seeing the destruction that comes from violence, she’s numb to it. I’m not sure that’s a good or bad thing, but I wrap my arms around her and walk us over to Harper.

“I’m glad you’re feeling good,” I tell Rayne, before turning my attention to Harper. “Are you okay?” I ask her again.

Rayne slips her legs down so she’s standing beside me, reading the tension on Harper’s face. Something has her spooked, it’s clear. I’m not sure if it’s the interrogation we just did, or if it’s something else, but she will have to tell me.

The one thing we agreed upon amongst the three of us is that we will always offer the truth. We don’t hide shit from each other anymore. When we first started this relationship, I didn’t think we’d be here months later. But, it’s been the best thing for me, and for the girls too.

“The name he gave us,” Harper finally whispers, and I watch as she struggles with her thoughts. “I know him.”

I don’t even remember what the asshole said, but Harper hands me the notebook, and I scan what she’s written down. We know Thanos is the one we need to take down, he’s been running trafficking rings for years now. But the rest of his minions are still unknown to us.

Are you intrigued?
Meet Drake, the younger Savage brother today!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dani is a *USA Today* Bestselling Author of seductive and deviant romance.

Her books range from the dark to emotional, but every hero is alpha, and each heroine is strong-willed, bringing the men down to their knees.

She now lives in the UK, after moving from Cape Town, exploring cemeteries and old buildings while plotting her next book.

When she's not writing, she can be found binge-watching the latest TV series, or working on graphic design. She has a healthy addiction to reading, tattoos, coffee, and ice cream.

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Spotify

