

Fighting

TO BE FREE

A BEAUTIFULLY BRUTAL NOVEL

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

EMMA LUNA



Fighting
TO BE FREE

A BEAUTIFULLY BRUTAL NOVEL

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

EMMA LUNA

Copyright © 2022 by Emma Luna

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise without written permission from the publisher. It is illegal to copy this book, post it to a website, or distribute it by any other means without permission.

This novel is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is entirely coincidental.

Emma Luna asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

Emma Luna has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party Internet Websites referred to in this publication and does not guarantee that any content on such Websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Designations used by companies to distinguish their products are often claimed as trademarks. All brand names and product names used in this book and on its cover are trade names, service marks, trademarks and registered trademarks of their respective owners. The publishers and the book are not associated with any product or vendor mentioned in this book. None of the companies referenced within the book have endorsed the book.

First edition

Ebook ISBN number: B09VC7ZBPH

Paperback ISBN Number: 9798430659851

Hardback ISBN Number: 9798362354978

Editing: Amber Nicole

Cover Design: Pretty In Ink Creations

Formatting: Emma Luna at Moonlight Author Services

CONTENTS

[Blurb](#)

[Author Note](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Prologue - Freya](#)

1. [Kian](#)

2. [Freya](#)

3. [Kian](#)

4. [Freya](#)

5. [Freya](#)

6. [Freya](#)

7. [Kian](#)

8. [Freya](#)

9. [Kian](#)

10. [Freya](#)

11. [Kian](#)

12. [Freya](#)

13. [Kian](#)

14. [Kian](#)

15. [Freya](#)

16. [Freya](#)

17. [Freya](#)

18. [Freya](#)

19. [Kian](#)

20. [Freya](#)

[Author Note](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About Emma Luna](#)

[Follow Emma Luna](#)

[Also by Emma Luna](#)

BLURB



FREYA

I was raised to be a prize. Something to be traded for the right price.

I didn't have a choice, but I guess it comes with the territory of being the daughter of a mafia king. I've always longed for more, though.

A life without chaos and blackmail. One where I don't have to worry if my lover will be murdered at the hands of the enemy, and I can just fade into the background.

But when Kian drifts into the picture, I consider abandoning that dream.

He shouldn't like me, and he's never wanted a relationship before, but he makes me feel things I never have. He speaks to my heart in a way only a lover can.

For so long, I've fought for normal, but now Kian is fighting for me, and I'm not sure I can say no.

KIAN

She's everything I never knew I wanted—empathetic, compassionate, and knows what she wants. The complete

opposite of someone who has been brought up in a world of crime.

She isn't hardened or heartless. She's soft and delicate, but the life I live isn't one she wants to be part of.

Although she doesn't like it, she's no stranger to combat. I've fought for the things I want my entire life, and she'll be no exception.

I'll make her see she can't deny me or the chemistry we have. That we are worth fighting for.

Freya Doughty will be mine.



Fighting To Be Free is the fifth book in the Beautifully Brutal Series. This is Kian and Freya's love story.

Whilst each book in the series focuses on a different couple, and they do get their HFN/HEA in their own book, the series features connecting themes. That means that whilst this book could be read as a standalone, it's advisable to read the whole series in release order. You will get more from the story that way, and you get to see more of your favourite characters.

Fighting To Be Free is a dark mafia romance that is only intended for mature readers. It may contain themes that are distressing for some people.

Please note - this book may contain scenes that are triggering for some people. If you have a trigger, and would like to find out if it features in this book, please email me at emmalunaauthor@gmail.com. You will get a reply within 24 hours, and your email will be dealt with in the strictest of confidences.

If you enjoy reading **Fighting To Be Free**, I would be eternally grateful if you could leave me a review. Reviews, particularly on Amazon, are essential, as when we get over 100, Amazon starts promoting our books for free!

Here are the links you need to leave the reviews:

[Amazon](#)

[Goodreads](#)

[Bookbub](#)

Thanks again for all your support. I really hope you love Kian and Freya's story as much as I enjoyed writing it!

Em xx



To My Amazing Mum

You taught me what it means to be a fighter.

To wake up every morning and fight for a better day,

To fight the pain and the darkness,

To fight for the good days.

You are my best friend and my rock.

I'm incredibly lucky to call myself your daughter.

No matter what life throws our way,

We will fight it...together!

I love you lots, Mum.

Fighting
TO BE FREE
A BEAUTIFULLY BRUTAL NOVEL



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
EMMA LUNA



“Tell me! Tell me!” Ryleigh sings as she jumps up and down with her knees on my bed, her long, bright purple hair flying around behind her.

A loud groan escapes me as I scrunch my eyes closed tightly, hating the way the light blinds me, and I try to ignore the pounding in my head that worsens with each shrill sound she makes. Not to mention the way she’s bouncing is causing the contents of my stomach to swill around, worsening my nausea.

Sadly, my annoying little sister isn’t one to give up when she wants something, and gossip is like her kryptonite. “Freya! I know you went home with him. What happened?” Her voice seems to get louder and more annoying the longer she talks.

How the fuck is she this hyper when she literally had to be carried home last night by Shane? She was beyond drunk, yet she’s jumping up and down on my bed like a fucking energiser bunny. I know she’s only eighteen, and probably has a better functioning liver than the rest of us, but I’m only twenty. I should be able to bounce back just as quickly. But, right now, even the thought of bouncing is making me want to throw up.

“Ryleigh, how are you not hung over? Can we have this discussion another time, please?” I beg, reaching out randomly in her direction, hoping to make contact. When I do, I lightly tap what I think is her arm before my hand flops down onto the bed, beyond exhausted by even the simplest of movements.

“I vomited a couple of times when I got in. Shane made me drink a load of water. Then he gave me some painkillers when I woke up, and so I’m doing okay. Shall I get you some so we can talk?” she asks, her voice sounding hopeful.

“No. I don’t want painkillers, I want sleep.”

She chuckles, and I feel the bed beside me dip as my sister lays down. She takes my hand into hers and laces our fingers together, just like she used to do when we were kids. Growing up as the only two girls in a mafia family was the epitome of hard. We’re just insanely lucky we had each other—and Liam. He was, and still is, always there for us.

But it’s not the type of life I ever wanted. If it weren’t for the fact I love my family, I would have run as far away as possible a long time ago. Instead, I have to figure out a way to have my family in my life, but to get as far away from the family business as I possibly can. Although, I have to admit, moving in with Liam and Bree—who essentially run the biggest mafia family in the UK—isn’t exactly the best way to achieve my goal. But that’s all I have for now.

“Come on, Frey Frey. I know something happened between you, and I need all the juicy details. Is he as fucking delicious without his clothes on as he is with?”

“Ugh, Ry, take the hint. I don’t want to talk about it. Last night was a massive mistake, and the alcohol has forever scrubbed it from my memory. Leave it that way.”

Except, we both know that’s a big, fat fucking lie. I can still feel the way his hand skimmed over my body, lighting a fire wherever he touched. Or the taste of whiskey and sex as he pressed his lips against mine. Hard, bruising. My back pressed firmly against the wall as his body caged me in, the hard lines of his muscles pressing against me. The feel of his hard length promising me so much more. I can still see his

cocky smirk plastered on the back of my eyelids as he told me I wanted him. No matter how many times I told him I wasn't interested, my body said something entirely different. I want to hate him. He's everything I said I would never have, yet my body craves him. I said I never wanted a bad boy, someone part of the mafia lifestyle, but my body never got that message.

Kian O'Shay is everything I shouldn't want, so why doesn't my body know that?

"It was a good hen party, though, wasn't it?" Ryleigh laughs, and I can't help but chuckle alongside her. My sister had been very fucking adamant she wanted to throw Liam and Bree the best hen party she could, and everyone had been against it. Ryleigh has a tendency to run a bit on the wild side, and so when she said she wanted to be in charge, everyone was wary. But, Kian stepped in to keep her on track, and together, they actually organised a pretty good night at Declan's club, Belle's Rose.

"I saw Kellan left with Mia, too. It's only a matter of time before they get together. I think the only people who can't see that are Kellan and Mia." I can't help but laugh at my sister and her naivety. It's like the pot calling the kettle black with her.

"Speaking of people who can't see what's right in front of them. What happened with you and Shane? I saw him carrying you off in his arms like a knight in shining armour," I joke, and now it's my sister's turn to groan and it makes me laugh even more.

Fuck! No more laughing. Not only does it make the pounding in my head worse, but the vomit is threatening to rapidly make an appearance.

I love Shane—or Vinnie, as he used to be called. From the moment I first met the shy, sweet boy who got messed up in a whole lot of shit that he was far too young for, I knew I liked him. Not only did he risk everything to save Bree's life, he put his own life on the line and went against his family.

Vinnie's family history is much more complex than mine. Liam murdered his father at the request of Bree's father, Vernon, who worked with Shane's dad, Leo. They set Shane up to make it look like he was running the Marcushio's and was power mad, plotting to take over from Bree's family. In actual fact, Shane was just the fall guy—a kid messed up in his father's drama. Vinnie helped keep Bree alive while she was kidnapped, and gave Liam the information he needed to rescue her. He hated the way they treated Bree, and didn't think she deserved what they did to her. But, going against his family and Bree's father, put him in a lot of danger, which is why Liam and Kellan made it look like Vinnie died, and he became Shane.

By creating a whole new identity, it's given Shane the chance to finish school and live a normal life. Which is something he's loving. He's finishing school with Ryleigh at the moment, and then they're both moving to London for University when the school year starts.

Ry and Shane have been best friends from the moment she took him under her wing and took him to school with her. It's blindly obvious to everyone that Shane is in love with her. Well...everyone except Ryleigh. I don't know if she's just choosing not to see it as she wants to keep their friendship, but that boy is head over heels for her. I'm just not sure if she's too much of a wild child to be tamed just yet. Though, if I have a read on Shane, like I think I do, that boy will wait for her as long as it takes.

“Why does everyone keep saying this? We are just friends.”

Opening my eyes, I give myself a moment to adjust to the light, before rolling over slowly onto my side. Thankfully, my stomach stays still, and my head doesn't explode from the slight movement, so I think that's a good sign. As I look at my sister, I don't see the badass rebel she tries to portray to everyone. Her usual dark eyeliner is gone, her bright lipstick is missing, too. She's dressed in sweatpants and what looks to be Shane's T-shirt, and it dwarfs her, making her look so small.

When she looks like this, I'm reminded of the little girl, just two years younger than me, that used to crawl into my bed when Dad was shouting, or gunshots were echoing around our house. She would always say she was there to comfort me, but I knew differently. My feisty sister puts on a good front, but she's as broken as the rest of us. How can we not be, having been raised by Desmond fucking Doughty?

"Now you know how I feel when you ask me about Kian," I grumble, before adding, "But I think Shane would be good for you. He's a nice guy."

Ryleigh groans before rolling onto her side so she's facing me. Her crystal blue eyes match Kellan's and she gives me a small, almost sad smile. "But the last thing I want is a nice guy. You are the one who wants out of this life. You want a nice guy, in a nice house, with a nice, boring life. And that's great...for you. But I want excitement. I want adrenaline. I want to live. I might want to settle down with a nice guy one day, but until then, I want to live crazy and dangerously with all the wrong guys."

Her eyes twinkle with excitement as she becomes more animated. Her desire to rebel has always been strong. Even though Ry is my sister and best friend, we couldn't be more different. She's right, I want a nice quiet life. Call it boring if you like, but I won't miss Dad shooting the cook at the breakfast table because he served him his eggs the wrong way. I barely flinch when I hear a gunshot anymore, and that's most definitely not the normal way to live.

That's exactly why I can't go anywhere near Kian, no matter how much I might want to. Not only does he work for Bree, and is so deep in our mafia family that he can't see the other side, he's also a cage fighter. You look up cocky asshole and bad boy in the dictionary, you will find a picture of Kian O'Shay with his signature cocky smirk, complete with sexy dimples. He's alluring and my body is drawn to him, but my brain knows he's off limits.

There's just one enormous problem, he's set his sights on me, and Kian isn't the sort of guy who likes to hear the word no. And to make matters worse, Liam told me the other day

that there's a chance that when I move in here permanently in a couple of weeks, Kian may also be living here. How the fuck am I going to avoid that annoying asshole if he's living in the room next door to me?

The sooner I figure out what the hell I'm doing with my life and get out of this house, the better. I have a terrible feeling that avoiding him isn't going to be possible. Not when he's all I see when I close my eyes. I can still feel the way he made my body sing, like he knew exactly what buttons to press to make me fall apart. He's the most dangerous type of temptation. But, I need to stay strong. If I want a life outside of my mafia family, that means I can't go anywhere near bad boy Kian.

CHAPTER ONE



Kian

“Tell me again why we’re doing this?” Kellan shouts towards Liam before groaning as I throw another punch at the focus mitt Kellan’s holding.

Hopping from one foot to the other, focusing on the drills in my head, I try different combinations of jabs, crosses, and hooks, while remaining light on my feet. Normally, my trainer would be the one shouting out the drills, but since the only people I have to work with me at the moment are these two out of shape idiots, I will have to make do.

“Did you just call us out of shape, idiots?” Kellan snaps, lowering the focus pad. His flushed, sweaty face looks almost comical as he gives me his best glare. Oops. I hadn’t meant to say what I was thinking aloud.

“Well, we haven’t been practising for that long and you are both exhausted. I expected you both to be better than this,” I explain, whilst indicating to Kellan that he needs to hold the focus mitts up if he wants me to hit them. He looks less than impressed, his glare becoming angrier, which of course makes me smile. I love winding up these assholes.

“We have been doing this for three fucking hours. How are you *not* exhausted?” Kellan moans before dropping to the mat

beside Liam.

“Because I’m in shape.”

Kellan looks at Liam, who shakes his head. “If I had the energy to chase the cocky asshole, I would,” Kellan mutters to Liam, who just laughs.

“Look, Kian. When we said we would help—”

“*You* said,” Kellan snaps, interrupting Liam. “*You!* This was all you. I never agreed to this bullshit.”

“Fine. When I volunteered us to help you train, I had no idea it would take three hours. Or that it would be so fucking exhausting. I mean, we both run and use the gym a bit each day, so I thought we’d have no problems keeping up, but this is crazy,” Liam groans.

“My arms hurt so badly, I won’t be able to lift my baby girl for at least a week.” Kellan looks deadly serious as they both sit on the floor, panting as though they’ve run a marathon.

Hopping from one foot to the other, desperate not to start to cool down, otherwise that will be the end of the training session, and I have a few more drills I want to practise today. I remind them both of my predicament. “Look, I know I promised Bree I would stop using my usual gym, after what happened there last week, and the more pregnant she gets, the scarier she is. So, I was always going to do as she tells me. But, I made it very clear my training can’t suffer. Training in their home gym has been fine, but not having access to a trainer has seriously been hindering me. And it’s very fucking clear you two are no replacements, so please can I vet someone to come here and train with me? I have a big fight coming up, and I need to win.”

My mind flashes back to what happened at my usual gym last week, and I remember exactly why I agreed to move in with Bree and Liam in the first place. Four men walked into my gym, the one I used every single day, and they caught me off guard. I was sparring with my trainer, Mitch, when they surrounded us. They got a few sucker punches in before we were able to start fighting back. The only problem was that

one asshole brought a fucking knife. I ended up with a couple of slashes across my arm and side, but it was Mitch who bore the brunt.

He was stabbed twice in the side and nearly died in my arms. We were lucky enough to get him to the hospital in time. Bree has all four men in her warehouse, and no matter how many techniques we've used on them, they haven't talked. I don't know who I'm a threat to, but I plan on fucking finding out. I just need to stay alive long enough, which is why I agreed to move into Bree and Liam's house.

The place is more than big enough to accommodate all the house guests they seem to be collecting, and the security is second to none—as it should be, since I run it. I just can't get used to living with people though. I've never really had a family. I've always been by myself, but Bree has an incredible ability to make everyone she cares for feel like family. And so when she insisted I move in, I knew there was no point arguing with a hormonal, pregnant woman. I'm not an idiot.

"I vote we find him a trainer, because I'm not fucking doing this again," Kellan grumbles like the miserable asshole he is.

I can't help winding him up. "Come on. I'm sure Mia will thank me when I teach you a bit of stamina."

"I'm keeping count, dickhead. When I can feel my legs again, you will be sorry," Kellan snaps, before turning to address Liam. "I say we let him go back to the gym to train. It will do us all a favour if the cocky twat gets stabbed."

Liam just rolls his eyes, like he's bored of us arguing. "We are not letting him get stabbed. Do you know how much trouble we would be in with Bree if that happened? But, I agree we can't keep doing this." Liam turns to me before continuing. "We can help you organise a trainer. Find a couple of people you trust and who you'd want to work with, and give the list to Kellan. He will do background checks and deep dives so we can be sure the person we select won't be a danger to anyone in the house. This is our safe place, Kian, and that's

why we don't tend to allow strangers in. But we can make exceptions under the right circumstances."

I take a break from pounding on the punching bag to look over at Liam, and I can't help but smile at him. No matter how much I may mess around with these two, I know they really do care about me, as I do with them. Other than Declan, I've never had many friends in my life, but I definitely class these two as friends. "Thanks, man. It means a lot. I really need to win this fight."

Fuck, never has a sentence been more accurate. If I don't win this fight, I'm in some serious shit. If I thought men with knives attacking me were bad, that's nothing compared to what will happen if I lose this big fight. I never meant to get into this much shit.

Hell, I didn't even realise I was in so much trouble until I got my first warning. But, I guess the mere fact I'm a player on the board puts me at risk. I knew working for *the* Patrick O'Keenan would be trouble from the minute I joined his family, but that didn't stop me. Then the higher up I became, the bigger the target on my back. Now, standing next to the first female mafia leader has made me a very big fucking target, but I don't care. I believe in Bree, and so I will always stand with her, no matter what.

Liam and Kellan look at each other, and it's clear they're doing their bromance thing, where they have a silent conversation with each other without ever uttering a word. They look like they're about to speak when we're all interrupted by the door to the gym opening. I freeze what I'm doing as soon as I see her bright blonde hair appear.

"Sorry to bother you guys, but Bree says to get washed up and come down for dinner in ten minutes. There was also a threat involved if you said you couldn't, or if you're late, but I will leave that to your imagination," Freya chuckles, and it's like her laughter has a one-way connection to my cock as he starts to twitch.

My gaze is fixed on her, like it always is whenever she's in the room, doing everything she can to avoid looking at me.

We've barely spoken since the hen party a few months ago. Even though we are living next door to each other, she seems to be going out of her way to avoid me. Even when we are in the same room as each other, she doesn't make eye contact, and she just says the bare minimum. I fucking hate it, but I know why she's doing it. She's trying to convince herself that she doesn't want me. That her body doesn't call out to mine. We didn't get as far as I would have liked that night, but now that I've had a taste, I know I want more.

"Oh God, did she mention her damn cankles again?" Kellan asks, a look of sheer dread on his face that I can't help but laugh at.

"Only you could insult a pregnant woman with a love of knives," I joke, and Kellan shoots me with a gaze determined enough to kill.

"So it was you who told her she had cankles that look fat?" Liam snaps, looking less than impressed with his best friend, as he stands up from the ground. He stretches out his body with a moan.

"I merely mentioned they were looking more swollen than normal. I definitely did not use the word fat. I'm not suicidal," Kellan groans, as he holds his hand out for Liam to help pull him up. As he gets to his feet, he moans loudly before pulling his shirt off and wiping the sweat from his face.

"You're an asshole who doesn't think before he speaks," I laugh, and Kellan gets ready to snap at me, but Freya beats him to it.

"Oh, and you're the expert at talking to women, are you?" Her voice dripping with sarcasm.

"What can I say? Women love me." I'm wearing my best cocky grin that I know will have my dimples on display, and I top it off with a wink. Freya just rolls her eyes at me.

"Not all women, Caveman," she grumbles.

"Well... if they don't like me to start with, I can always turn on the charm to win them over."

“Oh yeah, I’m sure they will be blown away by your charm,” she replies sarcastically, making sure to exaggerate everything she says like it’s all one big joke. But we both know she’s trying very fucking hard to not look at me because the minute she does, she won’t be able to look away. I’m aware I sound like a massive fucking tool by saying she can’t stop looking at my body, but it’s true, and the feeling is definitely mutual.

No woman has ever had the same hold over me that Freya Doughty has. I should hate it, but strangely, I don’t. Maybe it is the thrill of the chase, of wanting what I can’t have. But it seems like more than that. One thing I know for fucking certain, I plan to find out what this thing between us is, and if Freya wants to run from it, she better prepare to be chased.

“Well, if not my charm, then my good looks should do it. After all, you can’t stop looking at my abs,” I add with a chuckle.

“For fuck’s sake,” I hear Kellan and Liam groan at the same time, which just makes me laugh even more. How nobody realised these two were brothers before the big announcement a couple of months ago, I will never know. They are like two peas in a pod.

Freya looks like a fish out of water, her mouth flopping open and closed as her eyes dart around exaggeratedly, trying to prove she’s looking anywhere except at me. I’m about to put her out of her misery when she pulls herself together enough to reply.

“Well, you have to have some redeeming features. Too bad a set of pretty muscles doesn’t detract from the fact you’re a massive twatwaffle. Now, put your damn shirt on, get washed up and come down for dinner, or I will send Bree to find you all. And advanced warning, she’s hungry. Every minute it takes you guys to get your shit together, is another minute she gets hungrier.” Freya doesn’t wait for a reply. She twirls around, her blonde hair fanning out around her as it’s caught in the speed of her turn, before she storms out of the room, the door slamming behind her.

“FUCK!” Liam shouts as he springs to his feet. “Kian, don’t just fucking stand there. Get a move on.”

Liam pulls together his stuff that’s on the floor near where he was sitting, and Kellan does the same. I look over at the clock and wonder if I could get a few more minutes’ practice in. Kellan obviously sees me looking and addresses me. “Don’t even think about it, dickhead. We’re already minutes away from cutting your balls off for flirting with Freya, so don’t make it worse. Just get ready.”

“I wasn’t...” I’m not sure which part I’m backtracking over, because we all know both parts of that statement are true. I was flirting with Freya, and I absolutely was considering carrying on training.

“Don’t bother lying. You haven’t had the pleasure of meeting hungry Bree, yet. Let me tell you, you don’t fucking want to either. She’s evil,” Kellan says, his tone deep and eerie as though he’s talking about an old, ancient ghost story, rather than my pregnant boss.

“You do remember that I work with Boss Lady all day, right? I know what she’s like,” I mutter, shrugging my shoulders at Kellan and his exaggerations.

Liam stops, eyes wide before he rolls them in a way I’ve come to realise only Liam can do. “As much as I love my wife, you have not seen her hungry. Yesterday, I thought she was going to stab Kellan in the leg for being five minutes late to dinner.”

“I was changing Hallie. It’s not like I did it on purpose,” Kellan grumbles, using his T-shirt to wipe the sweat off his face.

“It doesn’t matter. Get a move on before she comes looking for us,” Liam says, practically pushing Kellan through the door whilst giving me his best stern look. Liam is going to make an amazing dad when the time comes, because he’s already acting as a parent to us all now.

“This pregnancy could be the death of us all,” Kellan mumbles, and Liam smacks him around the back of the head

before pushing him out the door. He turns to face me, a serious mask coming across his face as his eyes glare at me.

“Just a word of warning, stop flirting with Freya,” Liam grinds out, clearly hating even having to utter the words aloud.

I can't help but chuckle. “Why? Are you worried she might actually like me?”

The corner of his mouth lifts up into the briefest of smiles, and it looks almost cocky. “No. I'm saying it so you don't get hurt. You don't stand a chance in hell of winning over Freya. She wants out of this life. Always has. She will be the one that marries a nice, boring boy and has a happy life in the countryside somewhere, away from all the drama that comes with this family. And, you know what? I will be really fucking happy for her because it will be one less sibling for me to worry about. She deserves that life, Kian, and I don't want you and your wandering dick to distract her from that goal. I like you, man. But she can do so much better than you and this life.”

Fuck, he really went for the jugular with that last comment. What's worse is he isn't telling me anything I don't already know. Of course I know Freya is too damn good for me, but I can't help liking her. I probably should take his advice and leave her alone, but I don't think I can.

“I know she's too good for me. So, relax, bro. It's just a bit of innocent flirting. It won't go anywhere, I swear,” I reply, hating the way the promise feels like ash on my tongue. Normally I'm good at sticking to my word, but I know with this, if Freya even hints that I stand a chance, I will break this promise in a heartbeat. There's something about her I'm drawn to.

Liam laughs as he turns to walk out the door before adding, “It's your funeral. Don't say I didn't warn you.”

Everyone has warned me, including Freya herself. They've all told me she's out of reach and that I'm not good enough for her. That she deserves someone who isn't stuck in this fucked up life we live. But none of that matters to me. I like Freya, and if I only get one night with her then I'll take that. But, if I

can have forever, that would be even better. I don't know why I want her so badly. Maybe it's because she's forbidden fruit? Either way, I need to find out why I'm so drawn to her. I will not give up on her just yet.

CHAPTER TWO



Freya

Move in with your family, they said. *It will be fun*, they said.

When I agreed to move into Bree and Liam's house, so that I could get my head on straight and decide what the hell I want to do with my life, nobody told me that meant I would have to live with Kian. They asked him to move in after they'd asked me, and yes, I could have objected. I could've decided not to move in, but in all honesty, I thought I could manage it. I thought I was stronger than I am. I thought I could be close to him and not want to continuously tear his clothes off before jumping him in the hallway.

I don't know what it is about the sexy asshole that makes me want to punch him and kiss him both at the same time. I thought the sensible side of me—the punching side—would be the strongest, but there's just something about him. It's like all good sense goes out of the window when he flashes that cocky, dimpled smile my way, and my lady parts take control.

It's been over two weeks now since I moved in, and honestly, it's driving me crazy. It's not even like he's being anything except his normal obnoxious self. He flirts and I do my best to ignore him, the way it's always been between us.

But after that night, Bree and Liam's joint hen and stag party a few months ago, it's been different between us. The ghost of his touch literally haunts my dreams. Nobody has ever made me feel the way he does, and that fucking kills me.

Kian might be able to set my body on fire in a way no one else ever has, but that's not enough. He's deep in the life I hate. Don't get me wrong, I love my family—well, maybe not my parents—but the life they lead sets my nerves on edge. I grew up surrounded by gun shots and death, and most people, like Liam, learn to adapt and shine in that world. Even Bree, who is probably the most unexpected mafia family leader you can get, loves it. It's where her talents shine. But I'm not one of those people.

Their lifestyle constantly has me on edge. I'm worried someone I love will be kidnapped or get killed. It's hard enough thinking that about my brothers or friends, but for that to happen to someone I'm in love with... I don't think I would survive it.

I'm not saying I'm in love with Kian. At the moment, everything I feel for him is pure lust, and my body craves more of him. The feel of his hard muscles pressing against my soft skin. The way his lips feel sucking on my neck. The way he tastes on my tongue. It's a delicious craving, but Kian has made it clear he wants more.

The bad boy who has never had a long-term relationship can't stop talking about how he will change for me. How he will stop seeing other women because I'm enough for him. It's like listening to the best porn in the world. What girl doesn't want to tame the bad boy?

But we both know that Kian's world isn't safe. Hell, the reason he moved in with Bree and Liam is because of the threats he's receiving. My heart fell into the pit of my stomach when he came home from the gym that day with knife wounds across his arms and his back. If him being injured can hurt me that much when we are just flirting, imagine how much pain he could cause me if I really let him in.

I try to push all these thoughts out of my mind as I propel myself through the water, pulling my arms back, as I kick with my legs to move me forward. I love the heated pool here at the house. I've always loved to swim. It's the ultimate form of relaxation, and it's not bad exercise either. With each movement that pushes me forward, I try not to think about Kian.

This has been my routine for the last week. Every morning when I get up, I come down to swim. By this point, I've usually had at least one run in with a scantily clad version of Kian. He's doing it on purpose, making sure I see him in as little clothing as he can get away with. I'm not saying I hate it, because let's be honest, he's not bad to look at—fucking understatement of the century. Kian is hot, and he knows it.

*W*e share a bathroom, and this morning, the moment I walked out after cleaning my teeth and getting ready to go for my swim, he's waiting. Standing in the hallway beside the bathroom door, leaning against the wall, wearing nothing but a tight pair of black boxers that leave nothing to the imagination. I try not to look, to keep my eyes fixed on his cocky grin and sexy as hell dimples, but I can't help myself. As quickly as I possibly can, I rake my eyes over his perfect, rock-hard muscles. Taking in the delicious V that slips down into his boxers, towards a very sizeable bulge.

Great, now I'm thinking about his cock, and the way it felt that night pressed up against my stomach. How hard he got the more we kissed, and how he felt under my touch when he moved my hand to rest over his denim covered dick. I wanted to put my hand inside his jeans, to feel the silkiness of his shaft, but there would have been no going back from that. So, I'm left with the memories to get me by.

Kian loudly clears his throat to get my attention, chuckling slightly as a blush spreads across my cheeks, the embarrassment of getting caught fills my body. He doesn't care, it's exactly what he hoped would happen. "See something you like, Beautiful?" His voice takes on a deep, raspy tone that is filled with sex, and I have to hold back a groan.

Determined to put him through as much agony as he inflicts on me, I purposefully pull off my baggy T-shirt, revealing the little black bikini I have on underneath. Black triangles cup my decent-sized breasts in just the right way, covering what needs to be covered, while the strings help to boost my cleavage a little more. The bottom part of the bikini is the same, with black patches covering all the important bits, and strings joining together at the side to secure them.

It's not normally what I would swim in—preferring to keep this for when I'm at the beach. But I used my normal bikinis the last couple of days and haven't been able to get them washed in time. Although, at this moment, I couldn't be happier that I'm wearing this one.

Kian's gaze travels over my body, and I can feel the path he takes as my skin feels like it's burning up. My core tightens as a fire rages in his eyes. Pushing off the wall, he stalks towards me, causing me to step back until I'm pressed against the wall behind me. He steps into my personal space, and he's so close that our breath mingles together.

I can feel the heat emanating from his soft skin, and the urge to reach out and touch him is overwhelming. I tighten my hands into fists to keep control over them. I can't touch him, as I will lose the last bit of control I have left.

I keep my eyes averted, looking anywhere except at Kian. I don't want to fall further under his spell, and that's exactly what will happen if I see the fire in his eyes. Although Kian knows he can exert his control over me in a different way, and when he tilts his pelvis, pushing his growing erection into my stomach, I can't hold back my groan.

Kian leans forward, his lips right next to my ear, and as his breath hits my sensitive skin, a bolt of electricity ripples down my spine. "Are you sure you want to tease me like this, Beautiful?"

His voice drips like pure sex, and I can feel all of my nerve endings prickle with anticipation. Fuck, whenever he does this, it's like I'm enraptured by his charm, and that fucking cocky

grin tells me he knows it. So much for me trying to make him jealous.

Turning my head slightly, so that our lips are almost touching, I arch my back until my breasts push against his chest, and I love the deep rumbling sound that escapes his throat. Our breaths mix together and I resist the pull to press my mouth against his. “Why? Do you see something you like, Caveman?” I return the comment he made earlier, and his responding chuckle sets my core on fire.

“You already know I do. I’m just standing here hoping you’ve never worn this bikini out in public, because the idea of other men seeing you in this is driving me crazy,” he growls, his lips almost pressing against mine.

Fuck, how does he always do this to me? I need to clear my head. Placing my hand on his chest, I let it linger for a few seconds more than I should, before pushing slightly, making it clear he needs to take a step back. Obviously my puny strength is no match for Kian’s raw muscles, but he listens to my request, taking a step back without hesitation. He’s still in my space, but he’s far enough away that I can think clearer. The idea of this guy getting jealous over other men looking at me does funny things to my insides, and the feminist side of me is screaming to stay strong.

Feeling a little braver, I raise my eyes to meet his bright blue orbs and I can’t help but be in awe of how fucking stunning his ocean coloured eyes are. Though, now there’s a fire to them that he always gets when his mind is on naughty things. “Why does it matter if other guys look at me? I’m not yours.”

He actually fucking growls at that last part, and fuck does it cause my core to tighten and my pussy to become wetter. I’ve never found a man being jealous or possessive particularly attractive, but I guess I’ve never had a man like Kian get possessive over me before. Though that doesn’t mean I’m going to let him get away with his caveman routine.

Pushing past him, I make my feelings very clear as I walk away, turning only to get one final word in. “Drop the

caveman bullshit. Just because you want me doesn't mean I'm yours. I never will be. You won't ever leave this lifestyle, and I won't ever date anyone in it. So you may as well walk away now, or at the very least, let me." My voice sounds almost like a plea. Every time we have an interaction like this, the closer I get to breaking, but I don't want to break. I don't know how much longer I can stay strong, so I need him to listen to me on this one.

I turn away, hating the intense stare he gives me. It's like he can see deep into my soul, past all the bullshit, and that scares me. His deep voice ripples through me as I keep walking away. "You can walk away, but I will always chase you, Beautiful. You are mine, even if you don't know it yet. I can be patient, but I promise you, no matter what your excuses are, one day you will be mine."

Those words echo through my mind with each lap of the pool I complete. I'm supposed to be swimming to clear my head, but as usual, Kian has taken up residence, and it doesn't look like he's going away any time soon. What scares me is that he might be right? Maybe we are supposed to be together? The problem is, I can't—and won't—ever date someone in this lifestyle. So, unless he plans to drop out of the family business anytime soon, there is no future for us.

I swim until the familiar burn in my muscles becomes too much to bear, and I've lost track of the amount of laps I've done. I float around in the water for a bit, trying to give my aching limbs a bit of a break to cool down. When I finally feel like I'm starting to relax, I climb out of the pool and wrap my towel around me. Just as I'm about to head inside, Bree, Mia, and baby Hallie come out the patio doors into the pool room. Bree is holding a tray that she sets down on the table in front of her.

"I've brought you some coffee and cakes. I know it defeats the purpose of eating sugary food after you've exercised, but honestly I'm craving sweet stuff, and I need you all to get fat with me," my flame haired sister-in-law says as she flops down into one of the seats.

Mia sits down beside her with a chuckle, Hallie perches on her knee and reaches for one of the glazed doughnuts. Mia catches her in time, and the loud shriek that erupts from Hallie makes her feelings perfectly clear. Holding out her hand, she opens and closes her fist in the direction of the sugary delight.

Bree laughs before reaching over and breaking the doughnut in half, giving the smaller piece to Hallie. Mia rolls her eyes at how easily Bree caved in to Hallie's demands. "I thought we agreed Hallie should have less sugar. It's a bloody full-time job keeping up with her as it is," Mia grumbles, but her frown soon disappears when she hears the squeals of delight coming from the gorgeous toddler.

"Look, I'm the fun aunt. I can do whatever I want. When I pop this little peanut out, then you can be the fun aunt while I lecture you about giving it too much sugar."

Mia laughs. "I look forward to that day."

Flopping down into the seat beside Mia, I reach over to grab the coffee they indicated is mine, lifting it in the air in a silent thank you before taking a gulp of the boiling hot nectar. "Can we not call my future niece or nephew peanut, please," I groan, as Bree laughs. Ever since Liam and Bree went for their first scan, they've nicknamed the baby peanut. At first, we thought it was quite cute, until Bree started saying it might be good to really name the baby peanut. We all hope she's joking, but you never know with Bree. She's the epitome of unpredictable.

They're due to have their main scan when they can find out the baby's gender this month, but I don't think they will. I think they will keep it as a surprise—at least that's what Bree wants. I think Liam would quite like to know now. But Bree always gets what she wants where my brother is concerned.

"So what—or should I say who—has got you pushing yourself so hard in the pool?" Mia asks, reaching over for a croissant that was sitting beside the doughnuts. With expert precision, using just her free hand, she's able to pull a small section of the croissant off and put it into her mouth, all whilst using the other hand to hold Hallie and stop her from stealing

her food. Of course, the minute she sets eyes on Mia's croissant, she drops her doughnut onto the table and reaches for Mia's food. Luckily, Mia is well prepared and gives her the doughnut back instead.

At first, Hallie doesn't look happy, but that soon goes away as she stuffs more of the doughnut into her mouth. Bree looks on eagerly, waiting to hear my reply.

Over the last couple of weeks, I've grown closer to these two girls. Even though they aren't my real sisters—like Ryleigh is—they have become just as close. It also means they've taken on the same annoying qualities that any good sister has, and they can't help being nosey and getting stuck into my business.

“What makes you think I'm not just swimming for exercise?” I grumble, reaching out to take the only Belgian bun left on the table. I know the girls have brought it out especially for me. They've learned more about me, the longer we've been living together. They know how I take my coffee, when I prefer to be left alone, and annoyingly, they know when I'm thinking about Kian.

Bree chuckles and quickly covers her mouth in an attempt to stop bits of doughnut that she's crammed into her mouth from falling out as she laughs. She chews quickly while we wait for what she's trying to say. Holding her finger out, telling us to wait—although we already are—she takes a gulp of the lemonade she has in front of her. “Sorry about that. These cravings are getting the better of me,” she says, staring lovingly at the cream bun sitting in the middle of the table. Mia clears her throat to pull Bree's attention back to us, and it works, although as she turns her gaze to me, I'm starting to wish we hadn't. “We can all see the way you are together. Besides, we know the difference between exercising because you're trying to get fit or lose weight, and swimming until you can barely move to dull the ache between your thighs. And what you are doing is definitely to detract from your lack of panty action.”

“Ugh.” I can't help the loud groan that escapes as I cover my face with my hand. As much as I love Bree and Mia, and

they're fast becoming my best friends, they're still both dating—or are married to—my brothers. So hearing Bree talk about my panties is embarrassing as fuck.

Mia chuckles beside me, and even though she has no idea why she does it, Hallie giggles too. I see this as an opportunity to distract everyone from talking to me. Lowering my hand, I reach over to Hallie's cute little podgy belly and lightly tickle at her tummy. "What are you laughing at, you little monster? Just you wait until you're old enough to talk about boys. Then it will be you hiding behind the pastries," I joke, and both Mia and Bree start to laugh.

"Oh, I can only imagine how much of a pain in the ass Kellan and Liam will be when this little monkey is old enough to start showing an interest in dating," Mia says, a hint of amusement in her tone.

"Kellan will be bad, but if peanut is a girl, Liam will be worse. I'm already worried about how he will be with Hallie when she wants to date. At the moment, Liam is the only man in her life, and I think he secretly quite likes that. So, I can only imagine how he will react when another guy steals her heart instead," Bree muses, as she gently strokes her growing baby belly. She's only around five months pregnant at the moment, so there's hardly much of a bump at all. But because she's such a small girl, it's a lot more obvious on her. We've noticed her starting to stroke her bump more and more. I don't even think it's something she's aware she's doing. Just on occasion I will look up to find her cradling her bump, or talking to it in the kitchen while she's making dinner.

At the start of the pregnancy, particularly in the first trimester, Bree really struggled. She didn't want to tell anyone for fear of losing the baby. After the loss she suffered last year when she was kidnapped, she was terrified the same thing would happen again. And it's not just Bree that worries about that. If Liam could wrap them both in cotton wool and bubble wrap and lock them in the house until the birth, he would. But Bree has been stepping back from any direct action with the family.

She still shows her face and gets her hands dirty when needed, but it's always in a very carefully controlled environment. I know she misses the action, but she will always put her baby first.

I've never told Bree or Liam this, but I've often wondered if they're doing the right thing by bringing a child into this world. I mean, being part of our family got their last baby killed before it could even take its first breath, yet still they're willing to risk it. I know they say they will always protect their peanut and keep it safe, no matter what. And I really do believe that. But the problem is, being in this world means there are often circumstances beyond their control. I mean, Bree herself has been kidnapped. You just don't know what lengths your enemies will be willing to go through to punish you. That's a risk I'm not sure I could take.

Bree clears her throat to get my attention, and it's clear she spoke while my head was in the clouds and I missed what she said. I mumble out an apology and encourage her to repeat herself. "I said, stop trying to change the subject. Tell us what's going on with Kian."

As soon as the words leave Bree's lips, it's like the last of her resolve caves, and she reaches forward to pick up the cream bun. She doesn't even hesitate, diving straight in with a bite so big it smears whipped cream all over her nose. We all start to chuckle, Hallie included, but Bree doesn't seem to care. She's in a blissed out sugar state.

"But only if you want to tell us. You don't have to," Mia adds, her shy, introvert side winning out. Though she quickly hides behind Hallie when Bree gives her a very pointed stare, making it clear I don't have a choice.

With a groan, I try to explain the situation. "Okay, so yes, Kian is hot, and I'm insanely attracted to him. How can I not be? But the truth is, I don't want to date anyone in this life. I love you guys, but this lifestyle, being surrounded by danger and drama all the time, gives me nightmares. I just want a nice boring life, with a nice boring guy, who I won't ever have to worry about. I don't want to spend my life wondering if today's the day he gets murdered, or I get kidnapped. I grew

up watching what this life has done to Mum, and I won't let that happen to me. So, the fact Kian can get under my skin like no other is irrelevant."

Both Bree and Mia sit there in stunned silence, the only sound coming from Hallie as she mumbles away to herself while pulling her doughnut to pieces. She clearly prefers to play with her food instead of actually eating it. Both avert their eyes, like they don't want to make eye contact with me, and I'm worried I've offended them. They've both chosen this life, after all.

"I'm sorry if that offended you. I didn't mean to," I mumble.

"You didn't offend us, Frey. For me personally, I understand where you're coming from. If you want out of this life, then you should definitely do it," Mia replies, although I can tell she's holding back.

"I know for Bree there was never really a choice involved. You were born to rule, even if the misogynistic assholes in your family couldn't see it," I say to Bree, before turning to address Mia again. "But for you, Mia, it was a choice. You weren't really part of our world. I mean, I know your dad is a massive cunt, and you had the world's shittiest childhood, so you were kind of aware of our business, but you got out. You walked away from your father, flipping him the biggest bird so you could be free to do whatever you wanted. Why then did you choose to dive back in to the shit again? I mean, you've been kidnapped too."

A small smile spreads across Mia's lips and as she looks at me with her bright hazel eyes, she doesn't hesitate to reply. "That's the thing. I didn't choose this life... I chose Kellan. Everyone comes with baggage of some variety. It didn't bother me what job Kellan does, or that there's a risk I could get kidnapped a million times over. I know that I'm at risk just by being in Kellan's life. But for me, none of that even came into the equation. All that mattered to me is the fact I love Kellan. I love him with all my heart, and even with all the shit that he comes with, I would still take all that to have him in my life. I didn't choose this life, but if I had to make a choice, I would

make the same one each and every day because I love Kellan. I love every part of him, and he loves his job. So I live with it.”

Fuck, hearing her talk about the love she has for Kellan warms my heart. Even though Kellan has only been my brother officially for a few months, I always saw him as another sibling. I was only a toddler when Kellan came to live with us, but we welcomed him into the family. He was always quiet and a bit shy, which I really liked.

There was so much noise and drama in my house growing up that being around him was almost peaceful. The older we got, the more we enjoyed the silence. Kellan and I grew close, and he was there for me whenever I needed him, the same way all my siblings were. While Liam and Evan were the ones I could turn to when other kids were picking on me, and Finn would be the one to give me a hug and tell me it would all be okay. Kellan was the brother who would just sit with me and allow me that moment to feel worried or insecure. He would allow me to feel whatever emotion I wanted, safe in the knowledge that he would protect me while I was vulnerable.

So when we found out that Kellan really is our brother—as in, we officially share the same DNA—I couldn’t have been more pleased, and I know my siblings feel the same. The only one who has struggled with it is Kellan. Even though he knew we would always have his back, he never saw himself as a Doughty. So, finding out he’s had a family all along really has been hard for him, but he’s starting to adjust to it now.

“So, I guess the question then becomes, is Kian enough for you to forget all about our lifestyle?” Bree asks, in between taking large bites out of her cream bun.

I ponder her question for a moment, trying not to think about the way he sets my soul on fire, because the truth is, no matter how much my body calls to him, it isn’t enough. My desire to get free of this life is far greater than what I feel for Kian, and I’m not prepared to give him more of a chance. I know there’s a good possibility that if I do let him in, he will become more important and I can’t let that happen. For my

sanity, I need to walk away from this life, which means walking away from Kian.

I explain all this to Bree and Mia, and although it's very clear they don't agree with me; they support me. I don't know why they're so keen for me to be with Kian. Other than Bree's comment that we will make beautiful babies, I think they just like the idea of the whole family sticking together. With Kian working as Bree's left-hand man—as he calls his job—they've become close, and by extension, he's started to fit nicely into the family. So, of course, they want us to be together. Besides, they know what they're getting with Kian, whereas if I choose someone new, they don't know him or how he will fit in with our family. But that's for me to worry about.

“Well, if you really are sure you want to find a boring guy and live a boring life outside of the family, there really is only one way you can make how you feel clear to Kian,” Bree muses and Mia starts shaking her head.

“No. I don't like where this is going,” Mia mumbles as Bree finishes what she was saying.

“You need to date someone else. No better way to tell Kian that you're moving on than to actually show him. Meet someone else and go on a date.”

“I knew it would be a fucking terrible plan,” Mia adds, before looking down at Hallie and chastising herself for swearing in front of the baby. But, Hallie is babbling along in her own language, chomping on bits of doughnut, not paying any of us any attention at all.

“Why is it a terrible plan?” Bree snaps at her best friend.

“Because Kian is just like Kellan and Liam. He's a jealous, possessive asshole, and he's staked his claim on Frey. Which means, whichever guy she chooses, he will make his life a living hell, and he will no doubt drag our guys along to help. No good will come of this.”

As soon as the words leave Mia's lips, I can't help but groan because it's true. Every single word she just said is the truth. Whoever I date will have to run the gauntlet through my

brothers, and hope like hell he survives. But Bree is right too. If I want to live outside of this life, the longer I put it off, the harder it will be. The boys aren't going to change anytime soon, they will always be over protective. As for Kian, I need him to see I'm moving on, so hopefully he will too.

Why does the thought of him dating someone else tear me up inside? I can literally feel my stomach twisting into knots as nausea takes hold. There's also a level of anger there I'm not used to. Why do I feel angry towards these imaginary women? Especially when I'm the one who is telling him to move on. How the fuck can I be jealous?!

"Can I ask one question?" Bree mutters, and I'm actually quite shocked the fiery red-head is even bothering to ask that. Normally, she just barrels ahead, saying whatever she's thinking without dealing with the consequences. I think it's part of being a leader—you can say whatever you want and someone else can deal with the fallout afterwards. Only this time she seems almost too shy to ask, her eyes darting down to stare at her empty plate instead of at me.

I say for her to continue, and she pauses to take a breath. "If you leave this lifestyle, and go off into the sunset with Mr Boring, does that mean you're done with us? Does leaving the life mean leaving us, too? Because a certain level of danger will always surround us, no matter what happens. We're determined that our kids will not grow up like you did. Our home is our sanctuary, a place of safety. Security around this place is second to none, and our aim is for this to be the one place people will always feel safe. But we can't guarantee that. Although we'll work damn hard to make sure we can. So, if that means you can't—or don't want—to be part of this family, for that reason, we would understand. We'd never be okay with it, but we would always support you."

I ponder her words, and the more they sink in, the more depressed I start to feel. I'd been so consumed with Kian, and making the decision to stay away from him, deciding to choose a plain, normal guy over him, that I completely forgot there's a bigger picture. I don't think I can walk away from my

family completely, but I may need to distance myself from them.

“I won’t ever leave this family. You all mean the world to me, and I’m beyond grateful that you’ve allowed me to move into your safe space while I attempt to get my shit together. The truth is, I never really gave that a thought. I knew I would have to meet a nice, normal guy to live in his world, but it never occurred to me that to live a normal life, I would have to leave you guys. I know that sounds stupid. I want to get away from the life, not you. I have no idea how it’ll work, but I will make it work. You are my family, and I will always be a part of this family, but when it comes to setting up my own life, it will be as far away from the family business as can be.”

Mia gives me a shy smile, but I can tell she understands. Bree, on the other hand, doesn’t look as convinced. “Normally we say there’s no leaving the family,” she mutters, trying hard not to morph into Bree the leader, instead of Bree, my sister-in-law.

“Yes, you do, but Freya is different, Bree. She never had a choice to join. I think, if you have this discussion with Liam, he will be pleased Freya wants to get out from under our shadow. He’s spent years trying to keep Frey and Ry safe, and if they can get out of the business, that’s the best way for them to stay safe,” Mia adds, but Bree simply shakes her head.

“If she’s in the family, I can have security watching her. I can make sure she’s safe,” Bree states firmly, her eyes narrowing as she glares at Mia for supporting me.

“Look, Bree. I love you and my family. But I shouldn’t need security to be safe. If I’m away from the family business, my life won’t come under threat. Like I said, I will always be a part of the family. Birthdays, holidays, whatever event you want, you name it and I’ll be here. But, for the rest of the time, I want to be off living my nice boring life where I never see another gun for as long as I live. Is that too much to ask?” I plead with her, because I know that unless I have her onboard, leaving and getting free from this life will be nearly impossible.

“Okay,” Bree sulks, her face morphing into sadness with the biggest puppy dog eyes I’ve ever seen. “But you can’t leave anytime soon. We only just got you here. I can’t lose you yet.”

Reaching over, I place my hand on the top of hers. She turns her hand over and we lace our fingers together, both staring at our equally pale skin as we clasp hold of each other firmly. Neither one of us wants to let go, and I don’t miss the irony in the gesture. We both stare longingly at our clasped hands until I break the silence. “I’m not going anywhere just yet. I may have decided that it’s time to date, but that seems like an easy decision. I still have to figure out what the hell I want to do.”

Mia reaches over and places her palm on top of our clasped hands, and we both look over to Mia. Her beautiful chocolate eyes are misty with unshed tears that she’s desperately trying not to let fall. I can see she’s biting the corner of her lip to distract herself. It’s something I do. Cause pain to distract the body until I can blink away the tears.

“You will always have us,” Mia says, her voice thick with emotion, and I can’t help but feel my eyes glazing over with unshed tears, too.

Bree breaks the connection by pulling her hand away first. “Stop it. This is too emotional for a hormonal pregnant woman to deal with. If one of you cries, that will be me sobbing hysterically for at least two hours. I cried hysterically over a sob story on *America’s Got Talent* yesterday, and Liam looked at me like I’d grown another head. So, no emotional situations for me for a while, please. Not until I have a grip on all these extra hormones.”

Hallie chooses this moment to throw a piece of doughnut straight at my face, smacking me right in the middle of my forehead, and this evil maniacal chuckle replaces her usual light tinkling laugh. She sounds like a Disney villain, which, of course, causes everyone to laugh along with her.

“I guess Hallie doesn’t like the idea of you leaving the family either,” Bree mumbles, and Mia’s brow furrows as she

gives Bree a pointed glare. “But we will all support you with whatever you decide to do. If you need help to choose a life path, we will be here. But until then, we are more than happy to help you find a date.”

Now it’s my turn to groan. I know I need to date someone else to make it clear to Kian I’m not playing games with him, that I really don’t see myself having any kind of future with him. I wish I was the sort of girl that could just enjoy one night with a guy. One night of hot, sweaty, passionate sex where I could fuck him and get him out of my system for good. But my brain doesn’t work like that. I form attachments too easily, and I over-analyse everything. So, a one-night stand would kill me. Though the idea of at least getting one night to really feel Kian, to let him take ownership of my body for just one night, sounds fucking amazing. Too bad it will never happen. I need to find someone who makes me forget all about Kian O’Shay.

CHAPTER THREE



Kian

“What do you mean, she’s going on a fucking date?” I shout, as I leap from my place on the sofa between Bree and Liam.

Kellan, who is sitting opposite in an armchair with Hallie sleeping on his chest, fixes me with an evil glare. “I swear to God, if you wake this baby, I will chop your bollocks off and turn them into a rattle for her to play with. Maybe that will get her back to sleep.”

We all, in turn, look over at our extremely sleep deprived friend, and there’s no denying, the bags under his eyes have worsened the last couple of days. But still, offering to let his baby play with my bollocks is a strange thing to say. When his brain finally catches up with why we’re all staring at him like he just grew a second head, his face wrinkles in disgust. Kellan looks like he’s about to explain himself—or say something as fucking moronic as he normally does—when Hallie starts to grumble on his chest.

We all freeze. Bree is halfway through taking a piece of chocolate out of the bag she has in front of her, and she tries her best not to crinkle the plastic. Kellan gently takes his hand and starts to slowly stroke across Hallie’s back and that’s when

she catches us all off guard by letting out the biggest sneeze, followed swiftly by the most bloodcurdling scream. Bree nearly drops her bag of chocolate, but quickly catches them as Liam moves from the sofa to sit on the floor beside Kellan.

We all watch as Liam slowly reaches for Hallie, who is now screaming and crying like she's being murdered, and Kellan's eyes widen so much you can see the bright whites of his eyes. He looks horrified that Liam would even dare to go near her when she's screaming like this.

We all know that when Hallie's screaming like that, it's hard to comfort her, but we should have known better. From the second Liam's hand touches the side of her cheek, her eyes flutter closed and her breath hitches. Her sobs turn into little blubs as she tries to catch her breath. Her little hand is gripping tightly to her dad's snot and tear covered shirt, but as Liam continues to stroke his hand across her cheek, muttering soothing words in her direction, she quickly settles and begins to sleep again.

Kellan visibly relaxes and scrunches his eyes closed, like there's a pounding in his head that's clear for us all to see. The last couple of days have been really rough for Mia and Kellan. Hallie has a fever from an ear infection, and she spends most of her day clinging to one of us while she catches up on the sleep she misses throughout the night when she's screaming the house down. Everyone is trying to do their best to help, but Kellan has turned into an overprotective dad and is trying to do everything himself.

The first day, Mia and Liam spent the whole time trying to convince him Hallie didn't need an ambulance. Thankfully, he's letting Mia help, which is why she's gone to bed to catch up on a couple of hours sleep while we take turns looking after Hallie. Although, I don't know why any of us bother, because the only one she ever truly settles for, other than Kellan, is Liam. That little girl adores him, and even though I won't admit it, it's actually very cute.

As much as I very much don't want to irritate Hallie, as it's better on everyone's heads if she doesn't scream the house

down again, I still can't get my mind off Freya. As I pace up and down the living room, my mind reels.

"Stop changing the fucking subject," I shout as loudly as I can in a whisper, so as not to disturb the little devil in Kellan's arms. "Why did none of you tell me Freya is going on a date?"

Kellan rolls his eyes before closing them again, like he's bored with the conversation already—asshole. Whereas Liam and Bree look at each other, their eyes flitting around nervously as they try to avoid my gaze. It's like they are communicating with each other without words. And with a big sigh, Liam finally looks at me. "We didn't tell you because, quite frankly, it's none of your business... and Freya asked us not to."

A red hot fury ripples through my veins as I fix my glare on Liam, my tone lifting as I speak in outrage. "None of my fucking business? I thought security was exactly my business, or is that not the case any longer?" I ask, turning to look at Bree, since she is my boss.

My argument is weak, and everyone knows it. I'm arguing that I should have been kept in the loop for safety reasons, but we all know that's bollocks. We have an amazing security team that I hand picked and trained myself, so I trust they would have handled all the necessary security arrangements, and at least Bree or Liam will have checked it. I never normally get involved in the family's security, only Bree's. But, it's the only argument I can use. The real reason is far worse.

I'm pissed that she's going on a date...with someone who isn't me. I'm pissed that the people I thought were my friends would keep it from me. But worst of all, I'm so fucking angry that I feel this way. I know I like Freya, and I've not exactly hidden the fact I want to get into her pants. I've even told her I'd consider a relationship, if that's what she wants—although I probably said that when all other efforts to get her into my bed failed.

The truth is, I've never had a real relationship before. I've never cared about any woman, ever. And nobody has ever had

the power to make me feel such strong emotions. I didn't even know I was capable of being jealous, but I am and I have no idea who this guy is. I've joked with Freya telling her she has power over me and makes me feel things I've never felt before, but up until now, I was only referring to the way my dick responds to her more than any other woman. Now I'm scared it's actually more than that. Maybe I really like this girl? If that's true, then I definitely need to do something about the douchecanoe she's going on a date with.

I may not know if what I feel for Freya is purely related to my cock, or if my cold, black heart is finally starting to beat, but I sure as fuck intend to find out. If she thinks dating another guy will stop me from chasing her, she's got another thing coming. When I decide I want something, I don't stop until it's mine. I'm a winner for a reason, and I've decided Freya has to be mine. Whether it's in my bed for one night, or something more, Freya will be mine.

Bree pulls me out of my thoughts with her stern tone. "Stop being an asshole, Kian. We all know you are not pissed because of safety reasons. You're mad we didn't tell you Freya was going on a date, and I am really sorry if us keeping that from you hurt you. But, it wasn't our secret to tell." Boss Lady, as always, is the voice of reason that gets through to me. Don't get me wrong, I'm still fucking fuming, but there's nothing I can do about the situation now.

Flopping down onto the opposite side of the sofa to Bree, I look over at Kellan. His eyes are closed, but his hand is still stroking Hallie's back, while Liam strokes her cheek, keeping her soothed. He's obviously not asleep, so I don't feel bad about disturbing him. "Kellan...please tell me you've done a deep dive on this asshole?"

Kellan lets out a groan, but still doesn't open his eyes. "Of course I did, and there was nothing to find. He literally couldn't get more boring."

Fuck. Normally, hearing that the guy is boring wouldn't be a bad thing, not when he's my competition. But with Freya, boring is exactly what she thinks she needs right now. It's not what she needs, and I plan to show her that.

“Kian, why the hell is this bothering you so much? You told me just the other day that you weren’t interested in my sister,” Liam groans and Bree chuckles beside me as she rubs her hand across her growing baby bump. I don’t even think she realises she’s doing it.

“Of course he’s going to say that. You told him he had to stop chasing Frey or you would break his legs,” Bree chuckles, looking at Liam with a pointed stare.

His mouth lifts into the cocky grin he reserves just for Bree, and a smile spreads across her face. “Well, she is my sister. It looks like the idea of me breaking his legs is turning you on, Princess.” Liam’s voice has taken on a husky tone that’s dripping with sex, and as though we are both in sync, Kellan and I groan.

Ever since Bree got past the first trimester of her pregnancy, and the nausea stage died down, they’ve both been acting like fucking horny teenagers. It’s no wonder they’re pregnant at the rate these two go at it. Thank fuck the rooms in this house are all soundproofed, or you can bet I would have moved out by now.

“Can we leave the sex stuff for when my daughter isn’t in the room?” Kellan moans, opening just one eye to make his feeling very obvious.

Liam chuckles, which earns him an angry glare from Kellan with both eyes open, which means he’s really pissed. I’ve never seen him this tired, which means he’s even more of an irritable asshole than he normally is. “She’s asleep,” Liam grumbles.

“Well, I’m not, and if you two keep looking at each other like you’re one step away from tearing each other’s clothes off, I’m going to have to bleach my eyeballs,” Kellan moans, which earns him a chuckle from Bree. He may be over-exaggerating a tad, but I happen to agree with him.

When you aren’t getting any yourself, seeing other people having a very active sex life is just depressing. And given Mia and Kellan can barely get any sleep at the same time, I’m guessing sex has been off their menu for the last few days. So,

I understand his frustration. This push and pull with Freya has given me massive blue balls.

Ever since the hen and stag party a few months ago, when I came so close to having her in my bed, I haven't been able to fuck anyone else. Don't get me wrong, I've tried meeting other women, but all I can think about is how they aren't her. But, if she's going to date Mr Boring, then maybe I need to push those thoughts to the side and get laid. Though, I will have to wait until after next week's fight.

I'm not superstitious like most fighters. I don't withhold sex because it's part of my routine; I do it for a reason. Those pent-up frustrations, and the thought that I can reward myself with a hot, wet pussy when I win, is all the encouragement I need. Though, if Freya were to spread her legs for me right now, I would have a hard time saying no. Luckily, the big fight is only a week away, which means the countdown to my win and my celebratory pussy is on. Now, I just need to find a way to make sure Freya is that pussy.

"Stop changing the fucking subject. I need to know all I can about this guy," I snap, gathering all their attention back to me.

Bree rolls her eyes at me as she replies. "Here's a novel idea, Kian. Have you tried asking Freya?"

I freeze, and it occurs to me that's exactly what I should do. But, at the same time, I need to make her see this date is a massive fucking waste of time.

Jumping to my feet, I rush over to Bree and lean down to place a quick kiss on her cheek. I can hear Liam growl possessively from across the room, causing Bree to chuckle. "Thanks, Boss Lady. That's a great idea." I take off in the direction of the stairs, but their joint voices, all talking at the same time, stops me.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Liam snaps.

"Don't be a twat!" Kellan calls at the same time.

"No! Kian, I didn't mean now," Bree says.

I don't know how I'm able to tell who said what, as they're all speaking simultaneously, and they're also trying not to be too loud because of Hallie. But one thing is certain, none of them look very pleased with my plan.

"You are all correct. I shouldn't be asking you about this. It isn't your secret to tell... remember?" I repeat their own words back to them, and that stops them all in their tracks. "I have to talk to her."

"Kian, wait," Bree calls out, although I haven't moved since they all started having a go at me. "Look, Freya is getting ready for her date. We have vetted him fully. She will be safe. You have to let her go. She will not thank you if you try to ruin this. I'm telling you now, Kian. You have to let this one go and hope that the date goes badly. If you stop her now, she will always have that what if moment. Right now, she wants to leave the family business and get as far away from our lifestyle as she can. I do not know if she will stick with it, but for now she wants to and we have to respect that. She isn't leaving the family. She just doesn't want to deal with all the shit we deal with. She doesn't have the blood lust and the dark cravings that we all do. She thinks she wants a boring life, so for now we have to let her have that. Who knows if that's really her future, but she won't know until she tries?"

"I'm in it for the money, no blood lust here," Kellan adds, causing Bree to roll her eyes at him. Not that he can see, but he chuckles anyway, like he knows that's exactly what she's doing.

"I get all that. And if she chooses a boring country life away from us, then I'll be happy for her. But, surely she has to see what both sides can offer. Right now she thinks she wants boring, and I will let this guy show her what that life will be like. But on the flip side, shouldn't I be allowed to show her what life would be like with me? Full of adrenaline rushes and excitement."

I plead my case, and I can see Bree's expression change. When she first started, her stern gaze made it very fucking clear I shouldn't disobey her orders. But now, she's looking at me like I might be right.

Liam, on the other hand, looks less than impressed. His piercing green eyes glare at me as his brow furrows. “No. I have spent my entire fucking life making sure my sisters are safe. If she wants to get away from the fucked up life we live, then that’s one less person for me to worry about. So, no. You can’t date my sister. You can’t talk her out of going on this date. And you definitely shouldn’t fucking try to tempt her into this life. I don’t know how to make that any more fucking clear.” His voice gets louder and more stern the more he talks, and for a moment I want to listen to his warning.

He’s Freya’s big brother, so of course he’s going to want what’s best for her. But the problem here is that he shouldn’t be the person deciding what’s best for Freya. I’m not even going to say I’m what’s best for her, but I sure as shit want to make sure she knows all the options available to her.

“Sorry, guys. I have to do this,” I shout over my shoulder, as I rush out of the room and up the stairs.

I can hear their faded voices behind me. “What a fucking tool,” Kellan mutters.

“I’m going to break his legs,” Liam shouts, and only his wife can calm him down.

“No, you are not. Just leave him. Who knows, maybe this is exactly what Freya needs?” Bree says calmly, her voice fading the further up the stairs I get.

I’m almost out of hearing distance when I hear Liam replying to his wife. “You want Freya to get with that egotistical ball sack, don’t you?”

Bree’s laughter trickles behind me, and I can’t help but smile when I realise, maybe Liam is right. Boss Lady has never told me not to pursue Freya, and actually seems to try to help in her own way.

I make it to the top of the stairs and turn towards the side of the house that we share. My room is at the furthest end of the hallway and Freya’s is beside me. There’s a room next to hers that Ryleigh uses, and the one besides that nearest the stairs is the room Shane uses. Both of those are empty at the

moment, and so I rush past them to Frey's room. Her door is shut, and I freeze for a moment, considering what to do next.

I rushed up the stairs, but didn't really think the damn plan through. If I listen to my cock, he wants to burst through the door and show her exactly what she would miss out on if she goes on a date. In fact, he wants to distract her so badly that she can't even remember she's supposed to be going on a damn date in the first place. But, I'm very aware that letting my cock control the situation is never a good thing.

As I think of the best thing to do, I start to pace again. I look like a caged bear walking up and down the short stretch of corridor outside of Freya's room. If I walk much more, a damn track line will appear in the carpet—then Bree really will let Liam murder me.

Just as I'm about to knock on the door, hoping like hell the words just come to me when I see her, the door springs open, causing my heart to literally skip a beat. Freya stops dead in her tracks, looking just as stunned as I am, as she glances around for a clue as to why I might be standing outside her door.

Her moments' hesitation gives me a few seconds to fully appreciate her beauty. Freya has always looked beautiful to me, from the first moment I met her, but this is different. Tonight she looks fucking stunning, and my heart races as my gaze rakes over her body.

Her short blonde hair has been curled and hangs in little waves around her face. A small clip sparkling with lots of little diamantes pulls her hair back to one side, exposing her neck. I've never really thought of necks as sexy, but as her hair hangs behind her back, exposing her neck and shoulder, I follow the exposed patch of skin with my eyes and wish I could pepper a line of kisses there instead.

Following her exposed shoulder down, I take in the swell of her breasts and I can feel my heart pounding in my chest. She's wearing a tight little black dress that has no sleeves. The top of the dress sweeps across her cleavage in a heart shape, dipping into the valley between her tits, which only

emphasises them further. The material clings to every curve, almost like someone has wrapped her in tight black bandages, as opposed to actual clothes. It's moulded to her perfect body, showing off her cinched waist.

The dress stops about mid-thigh, and is a little too short for my liking, given she's wearing this with another guy in mind. As my gaze drifts across her creamy legs, I have to bite my lip to hold back a groan, particularly when I catch sight of the sexy black stilettos she's wearing. My palms are sweating, my breaths coming out almost in pants as I'm overcome with a whole heap of emotions. My cock is definitely leading the way, straining to break free from my jeans and getting impossibly harder the more of her body I take in.

When I finally drag my gaze back to the stunning beauty standing in front of me, and I catch sight of her face, I know I wasted time admiring her body. Don't get me wrong, it's fucking hot to look at, and I'm literally bursting at the seams to see what she looks like underneath the dress, but her face is the real beauty.

Her stunning emerald green eyes are sparkling as she stares straight at me, a blush spreading across her cheeks. Her plump pink lips are darkened by red lipstick that just make them all the more fucking endearing. When she clasps the lower lip between her teeth, chewing on it lightly, all I can think about is what her mouth would look like wrapped around my straining cock.

I must stare for a moment too long, just trapped in the bubble of her beauty, and it's not until Freya lightly clears her throat that I'm pulled out. "Did you, erm... did you need something?" she mutters, shifting from one foot to the other, suddenly looking uncomfortable under the scrutiny of my gaze.

"You," I reply, hating how fucking incredibly cheesy that sounds, even for me. But in that moment, words abandoned me and all I can think about is how much I fucking want this girl.

Freya lets out a sigh. “Kian.” She says my name almost like it’s a plea. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about my date. But, honestly, I don’t owe you any kind of explanation. We aren’t together. We aren’t even seeing each other. I’ve made it clear I’m going to date other people, and this is me doing that. I don’t know what else to say.” She begins moving forward, causing me to back up to let her out of her bedroom. She closes the door behind her and as she turns back around to head downstairs, I realise that if I don’t say or do something now, she is going to go.

I’m very aware that even if I lay it all on the line, she may still go on the date, but at least I know I will have fought for what I want, just like I always do. I take a step forward, and she matches it with a step back, only she has nowhere to go as her back hits the bedroom door. I take another step until we are so close we are breathing the same air. I can feel her breath on my lips, and it takes every last amount of strength that I have to not close the last little bit of a gap and press my mouth against hers.

Her eyes flit from side to side, as she tries to decide what to do next, her lower lip caught between her teeth again—which is one of the sexiest things I’ve ever seen her do. The more I stare at her mouth, the more I notice a blush spreading across her cheeks. Sensing her desire to flee, I place one of my hands flat against the bedroom door as I press my hips against hers, caging her in. With my free hand, I slowly move it until it’s splayed across her hip, helping me keep control of exactly where I want her to be.

Leaning in so my lips are hovering next to her ear, I feel her body shudder beneath me as my breath touches her skin. “Maybe we shouldn’t say anything at all. Maybe we should just listen to what our bodies are saying.”

A little gasp escapes from her lips as I lightly rock my hips, pressing my hard length against her stomach. “Kian.” I know she means it as a warning, but that breathy tone sounds like she’s begging for more.

Gently, I press my lips against that sweet spot just below her ear, on the side of her neck, that I discovered the last time

our bodies were moulded together like this. It's the faintest of kisses, but it's the promise of more. Instantly, her hand flies to my waist and she grabs hold of my T-shirt for dear life. "Do you have any idea how fucking gorgeous you are? You're driving me insane," I growl, as I pepper light kisses along her jawline and down her neck.

The soft little whimpers that leave her lips are like music to my ears and I feel on top of the fucking world, knowing I'm the one who made her sing like that. "Kian, we can't," she groans, as she brings her hand up flat against my chest, but she doesn't push me away. If she put even the slightest bit of pressure into her movement, I would stop in an instant, but she doesn't. There's hesitation there and I fully intend to capitalise on it.

"But we are," I reply, as I move the hand on her hip down until I reach the hem of her dress. As the skin of my hand connects with her bare leg, my nerve endings start to tingle, and it's like she sets my whole body on fire. I want to move my hand underneath her dress—I am a guy after all—but I wait, knowing she needs time to be sure this is what she wants.

Her breath hitches, like she feels the electricity humming between us too, and I lift my lips from her neck. Looking into her glistening eyes, it's almost like they've darkened in colour, consumed by the passionate fire we both have simmering between us. I can tell the moment she realises what I'm about to do as she stops chomping on her lip. Her eyes are fierce and fuck does that turn me on even more?

I close the last little gap between us and press my lips against hers. It's soft and gentle at first, but then the moment consumes us. As soon as I get a little taste of her, I know I need more. Our lips crash together in a passionate fury, as Freya snakes her hand off my chest and up into my hair.

Sliding her fingers through my locks, she grasps the short strands and tugs on them gently, holding me in position. The sharp tugging sensation on my scalp is the perfect mix of pain and pleasure, causing a deep groan to echo through me.

Our tongues battle for dominance as we both get lost in the feel of each other. As I taste her on my tongue, I can't hold back the frantic need to taste and touch more of her. Pulling her lip in between my teeth, the same way she was doing to herself earlier, I gently nibble on it, and a loud guttural moan breaks free, causing shivers to ripple down my spine. My hard length is straining to break free of its denim confines, and is pressing hard against her lower stomach.

The friction of my cock rubbing up against her, desperately trying to get free, is causing it to become even more sensitive. Every time her body shifts against me, it's like she's stroking my length, getting it harder, ready for her. The urge to free him is growing stronger as my hand grazes higher up her thigh. My fingertips reach the edge of her panties, and I follow their path, leading to my goal.

Just as I'm about to lightly trace my fingers across her panty-covered pussy, to really feel how hot and wet she is...

BUZZ!

The loud shriek of the doorbell downstairs echoes around the house, followed swiftly by Hallie's shrieking cries. Normally, if I'm in my room, I wouldn't be able to hear her cry, but out in the hallway, you can hear everything.

Freya's head snaps up, and I can tell the sound has broken the bubble we were trapped in. Our moment is gone, and a guilty look spreads across her face. This time when she presses her hand against my chest, I feel her lightly push me away, and so I take a small step back. I'm still caging her in, but it's enough for her to catch her breath and let her brain catch up.

"Freya. Your date is here," Liam calls up the stairs, and I hear Kellan shout something that sounds an awful lot like a curse word as he tells everyone to stop shouting. Although there's little point in being quiet now, I can hear Hallie's screams from here.

"I'll be down in a second," Freya calls down to her brother before catching my gaze.

“Will you?” I ask, struggling to keep the confused expression from my face.

Is she going down to tell the boring asshole to go home? Or does she really plan on going on this date after everything we just did?

Her gaze drops to the floor, like the last thing she wants to do is maintain eye contact with me. I reach up and lightly clasp hold of her chin, guiding it until her eyes meet mine. I hate the shame and guilt I see reflected back at me. Freya is a good girl, and I know she doesn't normally do stuff like this. In fact, other than me—and now Mr Boring—I've never seen her even talk to a guy. I know she's had boyfriends in the past, but that's all. She's not the type of girl who dry humps guys in the hallway just minutes before going on a date with another man.

Even though I don't regret a single second of what just happened between us, it's not exactly how I planned for this to go. I was just supposed to talk to her. To tell her he's not good enough for her—even though I have no idea who the guy even is. I definitely didn't plan on putting that look on her face. I want to take it away, to bring back the blissed out look she had a moment ago as she gasped my name.

“I'm sorry, Kian. I have to go.” She looks towards the stairs, but doesn't make any attempt to move. It's like her brain is telling her to go, but her body is begging to stay right where it belongs—underneath mine.

“No, you don't. You think you want Mr Boring, but you really don't. If you listened to your body right now, what's it telling you to do?” I ask, pressing my hard length against her stomach to really hammer home my point. Her hips tilt slightly, almost of their own accord, as she shuffles to feel more.

“It doesn't matter. I have to go. You and me can't ever happen, Kian. You aren't good for me,” she mumbles, averting her gaze at the last second, and I know it's because she doesn't want me to see the truth in her eyes. She can lie to me all she wants, but we both know that I'm exactly what she needs.

I take a step back, instantly missing the warmth of her skin against mine, and I don't miss the way her body sags and a little groan leaves her lips. The chemistry and tension seems to crackle in the surrounding air, and I desperately want to close the gap between us again, to give us both what we crave. But I'm sick of being the only one fighting for us.

Maybe I need to let her really see what she's missing. As much as it fucking kills me, I think, for now, I have to let her make dumb decisions. What's that famous saying? If you want something, let it go, and if it was always meant to be yours, it will come back to you. Right now, I have to let Freya go, but I know, I can feel it deep in my gut, she will return to me.

“Okay, you win. Have a good date. But let me tell you one thing before you leave.” I lean in so that my lips are right next to her ear, my breath causing her to shiver. “While you're on your date with Mr Boring, try not to think about me. About the way my hand feels sliding across your soft, silky skin. Or the way I taste on your lips. Try not to imagine my mouth pressing little kisses all over until I know every curve of your body by heart. Try to ignore the pulsing heat in your pussy as you squirm in your seat, desperate for some release. Maybe this guy could help, but we both know it's not him you will be thinking about. I'm the only guy your body craves, and the sooner your head realises that, the better it will be. My door is always open for you. All you have to do is come in, and I will show you how much pleasure you really deserve.”

I don't bother waiting for her to reply, and I sure as fuck don't hang around waiting for her to go down to her date. I do cast a slight glance back over my shoulder, and I can't keep the cocky grin off my face when I see her slumped against the wall, breathing heavily.

Some might say it's a bad idea to turn a girl on so much and send her on a date with someone else, but I'm confident this guy won't ever measure up.

CHAPTER FOUR



Freya

Fuck! How the hell am I supposed to go out on a date with Brandon, when all I can think about is Kian? That cocky asshole. I should have known he would try something and wouldn't just let me go on the damn date.

But he didn't exactly force me into anything. That's the thing with Kian, he never has to. He just has to get close enough that I'm enveloped by the delicious peppermint and chalk smell that's all him, and my brain loses all logical thinking. In fact, it's most definitely not my brain that's doing the thinking, it's all my lady bits.

I know it's been a while since they got any attention from a guy, but that doesn't mean it can go kissing arrogant jerks in the hallway while there's another boy waiting for me downstairs.

Shaking my head, I try to gain back some of the composure I had before I ran into Kian. I had been nervous about the date before, but now I'm worried my lips will look swollen from Kian's bruising kiss. Or that my curled hair will show that Kian's just been raking his hands through it, rather than me styling it. Even worse, what if I smell and taste like him?

Fuck, I don't even have any time to fix it. Brandon is waiting for me downstairs, which means he's with my brothers, and I can't leave him to the wolves for too long. Luckily, Kian walked into his room rather than down the stairs, or things really would have got awkward.

I take several deep breaths as I straighten down my dress and try to run my fingers through my curls to calm them down. My heart rate attempts to return to normal, and I grab my pocket mirror from my handbag that had fallen to the floor when Kian...

Nope, no more thinking about him!

My lips look bee-stung and swollen, my lipstick smudged, but thankfully I have the tube in my bag so I can fix it. Though, even once a fresh layer has been added, it's hard not to see that they're plumper than normal. And don't even get me started on the tingling sensation I don't seem to be able to get rid of.

I don't know what it is about Kian, but it's like my body calls to him and he knows exactly what to do to devour me. I don't want to think about him, or taste him on my lips. I want to give Brandon a chance, and hope like hell I can forget about Kian long enough to make a real go of this. Because Brandon is exactly the kind of guy I should want... the type that will get me out of this life. I just have to ignore the strange knotting sensation in my stomach that's telling me I'm doing the wrong thing. That I'm betraying Kian.

Fuck. I have no loyalty to Kian. We aren't dating. We aren't exclusive. We are nothing. I owe him nothing. I can repeat the words as many times as my little heart allows, but I'm not sure if I will ever start believing them.

As I reach the bottom of the stairs, I take several deep breaths as I try to regain control to slow my heart that's started racing all over again. Just as I'm about to move, I hear voices from in the living room and I pause to listen. "Okay, Brandon," Liam sneers, like he doesn't even trust that's his real name. "We have agreed you can date our sister, and you know what time you need to have her back here by. We have

your location recorded and you will not deviate from that plan. Do you understand?”

Liam’s voice is hard and stern, and I can’t help but roll my eyes. I expected some level of overprotective bullshit from him, but I never expected him to go this far. I’m not remotely surprised to hear a quiver of fear in Brandon’s reply. “I understand. I submitted the itinerary to the security guard like you requested.”

Fuck my life. I did not know they’d made him do that. I thought Kellan would do a deep dive on the guy, make sure he’s legit, and then just leave it the fuck alone. I didn’t know they would go this far. I’m so angry, I can feel my hands starting to shake with rage. Just as I’m about to move, I hear Kellan talk.

“Now that Liam has got the threats out of the way, I have a very important question for you, Brandon. Freya is almost the baby of the family. She has four older brothers, and all of us will not hesitate to protect her, as I’m sure you’ve now realised. So, what we would all very much like to know is: what are your intentions with Freya?”

Oh, for fuck’s sake. At this rate, the poor guy is going to shit himself and run out of here without a second look back. No first date is worth this bullshit, and I feel so bad for dragging him here in the first place. I knew we should have just met at the restaurant, but Liam wouldn’t allow it. He said it was too dangerous, and even Bree agreed. They aren’t exactly selling our lifestyle to me when they say shit like that. This whole fucked up scenario is just reaffirming to me the importance of getting the hell away from all this.

I walk to the living room, desperate to put a stop to this, but when I hear Brandon starting to talk, I freeze next to the door. I don’t know why I don’t go in. Maybe I want to hear the answer too.

“Honestly, I just want to take her on a first date. When we met in the coffee shop, we had a nice chat and seemed to get on really well. She’s funny and smart, and so easy to talk to. Not to mention unbelievably beautiful. I didn’t even hesitate

asking her out, which isn't something I do regularly—in fact, I've never asked a girl out like that before. But I felt a connection with Freya, and I want to explore it. I didn't expect to have to pass all these tests to be able to take her on a date though. And as much as you guys scare the crap out of me, I have a very good feeling that Freya's worth it.”

“Good answer,” Bree says, and I can almost hear the smile on her face.

Liam starts to speak, but I can't risk him saying any more. Bree's right, Brandon gave a bloody great answer and passed their little test, so now we are leaving before things get worse.

I move into the living room, and all eyes shoot towards me. I first cast a glare at my brothers, who are both standing together, leaning over Brandon who is sitting in the armchair. They both have the nerve to look a little sheepish as they see me, like they're almost ashamed I caught them grilling my date.

Bree is on one end of the sofa, bouncing a smiling Hallie on her knee. I'm surprised Hallie isn't making any noise, until I see the teething ring she has jammed in her mouth. Poor baby has been feeling poorly recently, and on top of the ear infection she has, her back molar teeth are coming in, which is causing her pain. She's surviving on Calpol and cuddles, but at the moment she seems relatively settled, which means she's probably just had another dose.

My eyes finally settle on the guy in the armchair, and as I take in his appearance, I will my body to feel something. His dark black hair is short and spiky, styled slightly with gel to give it a purposefully messy look. His raised cheek bones and chiselled jaw are covered with patches of short stubble that look more like he's forgotten to shave than a purposeful look. Hiding behind thick-rimmed glasses, his emerald green eyes appear almost dull, as though they lack any shine to them, and they're focused on me.

Raking his eyes across my body, it's clear he's checking me out, but I don't see any reflection of that in his eyes. It's almost like he's going through the motions, rather than

actually appraising me. As a large smile spreads across his lips, he looks pleased with what he sees, but his eyes tell a different story.

Maybe he's nervous with both my brothers glaring down at him? Or maybe I'm just used to bright crystal blue eyes that glisten when he stares at me, and blaze brightly, like they're on fire, when he wants me? *Bad brain—stop thinking of Kian!*

I take a quick moment to cast my eyes over the rest of his body, although it's hard to see much when he's sat down. He's wearing dark black jeans that fit his slim frame well, and he's combined it with a navy blue button-down shirt. The top button is undone, making it look slightly less formal, but still smart. The shirt hangs a little loose, and it's difficult to see his lean body.

When we met at the cafe, he was wearing a white T-shirt, and despite it hanging a little loose, it was easy to see he had a hard chest with some clear muscles across his abs. His body is what I would refer to more as lean and defined, like you would expect from a long-distance runner. His biceps hold the hint of muscles, without being bulging to the point his T-shirt was tight.

Brandon isn't bad to look at. I guess, as I glance at him right now; he looks smart and sweet, but also kinda cute. With his glasses on and smart shirt, people might consider him a little geeky, but that's okay with me. I'm surrounded by asshole men who like to prove they're alphas. I quite like the idea of spending the evening with someone a little more chilled out.

"Hey," Brandon says, holding back like he wants to say more, but his eyes keep flitting between Kellan and Liam. I'm not sure which one is terrifying him more. It's ironic that the most dangerous person in the room is the one he's ruled out. But I see Bree taking in the whole scenario, her keen eye never missing a beat.

"Will you two baboons please sit down," Bree snaps, and her husband turns to look at her, his face wrinkled like a small

child who's just been chastised by his mum. She ignores him and turns her attention to me. "Freya, you look amazing."

"Bootiful," shouts Hallie, before stuffing her teething ring back in her mouth with a giggle as she bounces up and down in Bree's lap. Ever since her first birthday party almost two weeks ago now, she's started speaking more and more. Not exactly full, understandable sentences, but the odd word, which is always funny.

"My daughter has excellent taste. She's right, Frey, you do look beautiful," Kellan adds with a smile.

Liam grumbles something about me needing a longer skirt, but is soon silenced by an elbow to the gut from Bree. Brandon capitalises on the rare moment of quiet by capturing my attention. "You look really nice, Freya." He's so quiet I can barely hear him, and his eyes continue to flit around the room—more specifically between Liam and Kellan—while he tries to work out how much danger he's in.

Realising I have to save Brandon from this hell if I want to stand any chance of having a good date, I hold my hand out to him. "Shall we get going?" I ask.

Do you want to have a good time with Mr Boring? Or do you want to go back upstairs, let yourself into Kian's room, and get lost in his arms?

I'm not sure if the voices I hear inside my head are mine or Kian's, but they are dangerous. I already know the answer, but I'm choosing to ignore it. I'm doing what's best for me in the long run, rather than chasing a moment of pleasure that might cause me pain and suffering.

Brandon stands and takes hold of my hand in his. I expect to feel something, even just a little stomach roll to indicate I'm nervous or excited. But there's nothing except the feel of his cold touch against mine as our fingers laced together. He gives me a small smile, but it doesn't quite reach his eyes.

At first I think it's because he's fucking terrified of the two dipshits who are quizzing him, but it's almost like there's more to it. There's the odd flash where his whole face is unreadable,

a mask in place to hide whatever he's thinking, but then it's gone just as quickly as it appeared. So much so that I can't help question my own sanity at one point.

You are just looking for flaws because you want an excuse to ditch him. Fuck, inner Freya is a real bitch at the moment, but I think maybe she's right. I agreed to this date and I need to give it a chance.

"Do I need to go through the security lecture with you again?" Liam asks, and Brandon quickly shakes his head, but I'm not entirely sure if my brother's talking to me.

"No, Sir. I remember it all, and I have the plans saved on my phone," Brandon mumbles, trying to look anywhere but at Liam. Bree and Hallie chuckle from over on the sofa, and I cast her a glance, making it clear this is hardly a situation to fucking laugh at. She quickly schools her face, though the wrinkles across her forehead and the puffing of her cheeks make it clear she's trying her hardest not to continue.

Kellan turns to me from beside Liam, his bright blue eyes sparkling back at me, as he meets my gaze. He gets the exact same pointed stare as Liam. With them both standing side by side, looking at me with the same expression and their bossy, domineering attitude, I wonder how we didn't see Kellan was really our half-brother.

They've always been like two peas in a pod, one never without the other. But, now it's almost glaringly obvious that Kellan's related to us by blood and not just loyalty. The disapproving sneer on Kellan's face is a perfect match for Liam's, and I can see flashes of Evan in his eyes, too.

"Have you got your pepper spray?" Kellan asks, his Irish accent becoming more prominent for just a second. It feels like the longer we're in London, the more diluted our accents have become, though I doubt it's something we will ever lose.

Brandon's eyes snap up to meet mine before he looks down at the handbag I'm carrying, his gaze wide with fear. I want to roll my eyes at his less than manly reaction, but instead I flick my gaze over to Bree, pleading with her to help

me. If I don't get Brandon out of here soon, he's going to walk out and never look back.

"Right, enough of that. Here, Kellan. Take hold of Hallie, please," she says to Kellan as she passes Hallie into his arms before turning to face Liam. "And you can get me a can of Diet Coke please, because I'm very thirsty." She practically pushes Liam in the direction of the kitchen before finally walking over to me. "Have a lovely time, and you know where I am if you need me. Don't be too late back," she adds onto the end as she walks us to the door.

I watch as she rakes her eyes over Brandon from behind as he leaves. It's hard to get a read on what Bree's thinking at that moment. Normally she's an open book with us, but right now, she's very much in mafia family leader mode, her face a blank mask as she smiles politely when Brandon turns to face her.

"I will look after her, I promise." For the first time since I walked down those stairs, Brandon's voice didn't shake. He appears to have found his backbone now that my brothers are gone, and it's almost like he's standing a little taller. It's hardly surprising to me that he was terrified of my brothers, and now they're out of sight, he can find his nerve again. Though, I can tell Bree doesn't look convinced. She's staring at him with interest, like she's trying to read whatever parts of himself he's trying to hide.

After what feels like an incredibly long couple of seconds standing at the front door, while Bree flicks her gaze over Brandon, waiting for him to crumble again like he did in front of my brothers, but he doesn't. He stays strong, standing tall, and I can tell that bemuses Bree just as much.

When she finally replies, there's a hint of a threat in her tone that makes her sound very fucking menacing. "I appreciate that, thank you. But I should probably make something clear. Just because Freya is a woman doesn't mean she needs protecting. She's a fighter, so never underestimate her cute, shy exterior. The men in this family may look like the alphas, but that's because we let them. The women in the family are the real powers, and you should remember that."

Brandon audibly gulps, but other than that, it's the only recognition that he's even taken in Bree's threat. She's obviously bullshitting about my role. I'm not a fighter. Even though I know how, I have no fucking intentions of ever throwing a punch. But she's right about the other parts. Everyone assumes Liam is in charge of our family, and Bree allows them to believe that. Then, when she needs to strike against them, they never see her coming. Bree is proof that you should never underestimate a woman, as it might be the last thing you ever do.

I quickly say my goodbyes, thanking Bree and letting her know I will stay safe. I allow Brandon to pull me towards his car. He's parked at the very end of the driveway since he was the last to pull in. As I walk past the sleek silver Mazda MX-5 convertible sitting nearest to the house. I try not to think about the time Kian came to pick me up from a night out.

I'd called him drunk, my body craving him like it always does. I remember the way the smooth leather felt against the back of my thighs as my skirt rode higher. Or the way Kian's fingers danced around the edges of my panties while he drove. Or how we laughed when the car almost swerved off the road when his fingers finally made contact with my wetness and he groaned, his head full of distraction as he almost lost control of the car, but neither of us cared. Nothing more happened that night, but his car will always hold that memory.

When I reach the plain, red Audi sitting on the edge of the driveway, I almost want to roll my eyes. My brothers have always said all Audi drivers are assholes, and it would appear they still agree with this assessment, as they didn't seem too keen on Brandon. Not that I care, as I will date whoever I want. Unfortunately, they have to know about the date so they can ensure my safety, which admittedly is something I'm keen to escape.

Brandon pulls the door open with a smile, and as I go to climb in, I look over at the house. Bree is standing at the door, waving, while my brothers and Hallie are standing in the living room, trying to look out through the curtains while they pretend not to be looking, and failing miserably.

A small glimmer of light catches my attention, and my gaze is pulled up to the window above the main door. It's the window at the edge of the hallway that Kian and I share, and though the curtains are closed, I can see flicks of light appear beyond them. Kian has pulled the curtain back just enough for him to look out, and it's hard to see him properly because of the darkness of the night sky, but with the light from the room behind him lighting up his face a little, it was enough to see the distraught look on his face.

For the first time since I met Kian, he doesn't have a smile lighting up his face. Instead, he looks like a lost little boy who is being left behind while everyone else goes out and has fun. He doesn't let me see his pain for long, quickly pulling the curtains to cover his hiding spot. But that moment was enough to rip me open and tear out my heart, leaving me raw and bleeding. I have no idea what these feelings mean, but I need to push them away. I will deal with Kian when I get home, but for now, I need to have fun with Brandon.

CHAPTER FIVE



Freya

The drive isn't too long, just under half an hour, but it feels longer, as long bouts of uncomfortable silence fill the air. We've asked each other all the awkward first date questions, and I've even brought up the weather, but still the conversations withers away to nothing. I can tell we're both nervous, but if we don't get over that soon, it's going to be a long fucking night.

We pull up outside this fancy Italian restaurant on the outskirts of London. I'm not very familiar with the area, having only wandered around the streets near Bree and Liam's house. I've never been brave enough to venture completely into London, so most of the streets Brandon drives through are new to me, and I'm enjoying looking at the beautiful sights.

The restaurant is sleek and looks very fancy, and I'm even more surprised when a valet steps forward to take Brandon's car key. A man with deep olive skin wearing a smart black suit and red tie that matches the writing above the restaurant window—Cibo dell'anima—walks towards us with a bright smile on his face.

“Mr Nicoli, welcome to Cibo dell'anima. How lovely to see you again, and with such a beautiful guest this time,” the

man says, as he reaches over to shake hands with Brandon. I have to say, I'm a little surprised by the interaction. This place looks fancy—I'm talking hundreds of pounds for miniscule plates of food, fancy—and yet this man is insinuating Brandon's a regular here.

Admittedly, I don't know Brandon all that well, given the only time we had a decent conversation was the day we met in the coffee shop, and a few texts since, but he never gave off any hints that he might be loaded. And since he met my brothers, he's barely said anything to me.

“Mario, how lovely to see you, too,” Brandon says, as he pulls the man in and kisses both his cheeks like something out of an Italian movie. As he pulls back, he sweeps his arm over to draw Mario's attention to me. “This is my lovely date for the evening, Freya. I'm hoping to show her a good time, and made sure to call ahead to book a table.”

Mario leans forward with his hand and on instinct I reach out to shake it, but as he does, he pulls me in and kisses my cheek before moving to the other. I try to smile, but I'm shocked by how overly friendly this guy is. My brothers would be going mad right about now.

They have all these rules in place about strangers getting too close to you, because of the dangers they face, but this is just an overly friendly guy at a restaurant, so I don't see the harm.

“Well, aren't you a vision?! Come, let me show you to your table.” He leads us through the restaurant and I'm overcome by how beautiful the place is.

The walls are painted cream to make the space appear bigger, and are adorned with what look to be old family photos. The tables are deep mahogany with sparkling silver cutlery already set. The frame of the chairs match the mahogany tables, but the seat cushions are a plush, velvety red colour. They look almost like little thrones, and I can already tell they're comfortable.

High ceilings sweep above with the odd rooftop window that allows the moonlight to shine through, sparkling on the

stunning chandelier that takes centre stage, hanging from the middle of the room. The sparkling crystals hang low, causing the glow to ricochet off in different directions, casting a mixture of light and shadows across the tables. It makes the whole place look even more luxurious, and suddenly I start to feel out of place.

Don't get me wrong, I've dined at fancy restaurants before. Desmond loved to take us out and show his power off around the town. I guess that's probably where my dislike for this type of place came from. I associate it with fakeness. Like the people who eat here are more interested in putting on some sort of show for whoever is watching, rather than actually enjoying the food and company. I can have just as good a time with the person I'm with, chowing down on a burger, letting the sauce drip from my face while we laugh, than I can here.

But I guess Brandon doesn't know enough about me yet to know my dislike of places like this. To any other girl, this would be one hell of a first date, and I can appreciate the effort. So, just for one night, I will put aside my preconceived notions about places like this, and I'll give it a chance—give *him* a chance, should I say.

Once we're seated and Brandon has ordered us a bottle of wine, allowing me to pick my favourite, we settle in, just the two of us. Our table is in the back corner of the restaurant. It's got a beautiful view of the space, but due to the layout of the tables next to us, a partition cuts us off from view. It's almost like we're in our own little private section of the restaurant, and it's so quiet we can barely hear the other diners.

“So, I'm guessing you come here a lot?” I say, my tone turning the statement into more of a question at the end. It's obvious he knows Mario, and you only build that kind of rapport with someone if you interact with them a lot. Back at school, I had the same connection with Joel, who delivered our local Chinese food order. Ry and I regularly ordered from them, to the point that Joel actually started sending us a Christmas card.

A small smile tugs up on one corner of his mouth as he tries to look shy about it. “Yeah. But it's not what you think,”

he says, and my brows furrow.

“What do I think?” I can’t keep the judgemental tone from my voice. I hate when people assume they know what I’m thinking or what I’m going to do.

“You think I’m some pompous rich kid who brings girls on first dates here just to show off, and that’s how I know Mario. Right?”

As I take in what he’s saying, I ask myself if any of that is true. Was I thinking that? “Honestly, I might have been thinking that,” I say, an embarrassed giggle breaking free before I can bite my lip to stop it. Blush spreads to my cheeks and I at least have the nerve to appear embarrassed for thinking it.

“Some of it is true. So, I do know Mario because I eat here a lot, but not because I bring girls here. You’re actually the only girl I’ve ever brought here. But the part about me being a rich kid is also true, the pompous bit I personally think isn’t right, but I will let you judge for yourself. This is my parents’ restaurant.”

Wow, I look around at my surroundings with a whole new admiration. “Do you work here too?” I ask, trying to rack my brain to remember if he’s ever told me what he does for a living. I seem to think when we were at the coffeehouse he may have told me, but he definitely didn’t tell me he ran one of the best restaurants in London.

“I’m the PR manager for this place. So I do their website, social media pages, and press interaction. It’s my job to spread the word far and wide about how amazing this place is, and to tell the world my family means business.” The way he talks about his family and their business, the more he seems to rise up, his back straightening as he sits taller, and it’s clear he’s incredibly proud of his family. Not to mention the fierce loyalty that shines through.

“I remember you telling me about the PR stuff, but not about the family restaurant part,” I add, and a shy smile crosses his lips.

“Well, I had to keep some secrets. Otherwise, how would I be able to surprise you?” He winks with a swagger I definitely didn’t expect, and I can’t help but chuckle.

After that, things become a lot easier between us, and conversation flows more naturally. When Brandon starts to relax—or maybe when we both do—the date really picks up. The food is next level amazing, and I have to try my best not to make ridiculous sex noises when the tantalising flavours hit my taste buds. I rarely use this accolade as I’m extremely fussy when it comes to food, but this could quite possibly be the best chicken carbonara I’ve ever tasted. Brandon chuckles when I tell him this.

“My Nonna will be very excited to hear that. It’s her old family recipe, and only a couple of chefs have ever been good enough to learn the secret recipe. Hell... she doesn’t even trust me with it,” Brandon grumbles, and I can’t help but giggle.

He describes his Nonna—Grandma to us—as this larger than life, very typical Italian Grandmother. She’s obsessed with everyone getting married and having more little Italian babies. And when she’s not planning her grandchildren’s weddings, she’s feeding everyone. Apparently, it took her a couple of years to trust other chefs enough to cook her recipes without her. For the longest time, she insisted on being the chef. She wanted to create a family restaurant filled with home cooked, good family food, and that’s what she did.

Though as the restaurant became more popular, and his Nonna got older, managing the kitchen became difficult. He said dragging her away was so hard, but now his other family members with kids get all Nonna’s attention at the moment.

“Do all your family work here?” I ask, leaning forward to take a sip of the wine we’re sharing. I’m trying not to have too many glasses, as I’m very aware the more I drink, the lower my inhibitions seem to drop, and I need to be well behaved on the first date. Besides, it wouldn’t feel right for something to happen with Brandon, while I can still taste Kian on my tongue. No amount of rich, creamy carbonara can wash away the taste of him. It’s like it’s imprinted on my tongue and will forever be there as a reminder.

“Not all of us, but we all work for the family in some capacity. My family has a few different ventures and so there’s something for everyone to join,” he replies, his voice taking on an almost sour tone. I’m not sure which part he’s sour about though. Maybe this is like the normal version of my family, where everyone has to work at the restaurant or connecting businesses to help keep the family name and brand going. But, if that’s the case, then of course I can see where his problem lies. It’s near impossible to spread your wings and fly as an individual when you have the brighter, better, more vibrant wings of the family overshadowing you.

“Is that a good thing?” I ask, hoping he will clarify which bit he sounded bitter about, without it sounding like I’m being too nosy.

He chuckles to himself. But there’s definitely a darkness around the edge that I can’t explain. “Well, growing up, it was a pain in the ass. None of us wanted to be in this business. We all had different hopes and dreams, but slowly the older we got, the more we realised they were pipe dreams, whereas this was real and tangible. Nonna never stopped us from following our dreams because it’s like she knew they’d all turn to shit and we’d end up here, anyway.”

I don’t know why, but I reach over and place my hand on top of his. I guess there’s a part of him that is intrinsically linked with me, and that’s the part I relate to. My family might be slightly more of the dangerous and illegal variety, but we both have that feeling of wanting to step out from underneath the family’s shadow. So this part of him I definitely can understand.

As my skin touches his cold hand, little shivers prickle a short way up my arm, heating as it goes. My stomach does a little flip and I can’t help but smile. Maybe I am starting to like Brandon after all.

Turning his hand, he laces our fingers together, and it’s like my warmth starts to heat up his coldness and I feel a slight tingle, which is unexpected. As he grasps my hand tighter, my heart races at the closeness.

“What about you? Are you in the family business?” Brandon asks and I freeze. I should’ve known that asking about his family would lean to him asking about mine. I should have changed the subject, but I liked the fact he was opening up about himself. I’m surrounded by people on a daily basis who have to lie and keep things to themselves. They know not only do I not want to know about their business, but they can’t tell me either, so there’s a lot of silence when I walk into rooms. I guess I liked the fact he could talk to me.

Quickly, I remember back to the lies that have always been drilled into me, Kellan’s voice resounding in my head. He went over all this with me when he gave me the green light to date Brandon. He did several security checks on him before I could even consider a date, and even though it took a while, once he was sure Brandon was clear, he reminded me of all the rules and lies I needed to keep straight. I try to ignore the pang in my heart as I lie to Brandon.

“My family is in security, and they all do different things. One’s cyber security, one does personal security, one trains security personnel to fight, one comes up with safety plans. Things like that. I don’t exactly fit into that type of business...” I don’t really know how to finish that sentence. There’s a million reasons why I don’t fit in with my family, but none of them I can really voice.

“Are they okay with you not being in the business?” he probes, and I give him a small smile that I hope hides how uncomfortable this conversation is making me.

“Yeah, I suppose so. They’re letting me live here until I find out what it is I want to do with myself. I feel like for the last year since finishing school, I’ve been floating around, unsure of what I want to do. I knew I didn’t want to work in security, but other than that, I do not know what I’m supposed to be doing with my life.” I don’t know why I’m telling him all this, but the more he holds onto my hand, the closer I feel to him. I guess he’s the first person I’ve had to speak to outside of the family, and it feels nice to be able to voice all my worries and fears.

“You will get there. You seem to be surrounded by people who can help. Is it all family that lives with you?” Brandon freezes for a moment, and I can tell we’re both thinking back to the shit show earlier on when he met my brothers for the first time.

“Well, you met my brothers Liam and Kellan. It’s technically Liam’s wife, Bree’s house. Kellan and his daughter Hallie live there with his girlfriend, Mia. Then there’s me.” I don’t know why I miss Kian off the list. I know it’s basically lying, but I just can’t bring myself to mention him. I’m trying my hardest not to think of him, to just enjoy being with Brandon, and if I mention him, it might chip the wall I’ve built to keep him out.

“It’s nice that you can all live in one house together. Then again, the house looked massive, and I only saw a bit of it. Who was the blonde guy we saw as we were leaving? He didn’t come down to grill me, so I’m guessing he’s not another brother?” Shit, I didn’t think he’d seen Kian, but he must have.

“Oh yeah, Kian. He’s only just moved in. He’s a friend of Bree’s, and he works with her,” I add casually, trying to make him seem so insignificant that it was only natural for me to forget he fucking lives with us.

My heart races, and I’m worried he can feel the sweat building on my palm where our hands are clasped together. This is what happens when the wall I put up is chipped away at—Kian comes crashing through. I try not to think about him, or what happened between us before I left. But of course, that’s easier said than done when it feels like he owns my body.

I look over at Brandon, hoping like hell he’s not picking up on anything between me and Kian. The smile remains on his face and he doesn’t appear to be looking at me any differently, which I’m grateful for. He looks like he’s about to say something when the server appears with our desserts, and I couldn’t be more grateful. I tuck into the cheesecake so quickly, hoping desperately for the subject to move on, which thankfully, it does.

The rest of the evening goes by without a hitch and after our meal, we go for a walk around the little village where his restaurant is based. Things between us have become nice and easy, and the conversation flows really well. We chat about things, anything and everything, and I try to stay as far away from subjects that might bring up Kian.

“So, tell me a secret that nobody else knows?” he asks, as we are back on the home stretch heading towards his car. It’s getting late and we both know he needs to take me home, but I guess we’ve been dragging this part out for as long as possible.

After getting off to a rocky start, we were now having a good time, and Brandon even made me laugh a few times. I don’t want to look too far into things right now; thinking about if I’m actually attracted to him, or if we have anything in common? Is this going anywhere? All of those questions are far too heavy for a first date, so instead I’m living in the moment. I’m enjoying the feel of his hand clasped with mine as we walk around, just talking and getting to know each other.

We stop in front of his car, and the valet hands him back his key, but he just leans against the door, waiting for me to give him my answer. “I write,” I mumble, and Brandon’s brows draw together in confusion.

“What do you mean?” he asks, like I haven’t exactly divulged a great secret.

“Nobody else knows this about me, not even my siblings. But I love to write,” I reply, a bit more confident this time.

“What sort of things do you write?” He looks genuinely curious, and I can’t help the blush that spreads to my cheeks.

“Erm... well, I-I write romance books. They aren’t porn, before you even think about making that comment,” I snap, before continuing. “I write paranormal romances, mostly. So vampires, shifters, witches, things like that. But I do write some contemporary, my lighter stuff. All my books are a bit on the spicy side, but they are heavy on the plot. The smutty scenes just add to it.”

A big smile spreads across his cheeks like he's genuinely pleased I've told him this. "Do you publish them?"

I nod in confirmation. "Yes, but under a pen name."

His eyes scrunch and his brow furrows as he looks at me, confused. "Why doesn't your family know you publish, or your friends?"

I've asked myself the same question time and time again. It started out as just a hobby. I didn't even really realise that I could self publish until I looked into it. When I found out that I could, I was so nervous. I didn't know if I was good or not. So when the first book came out, and it was a success, I was high on the thrill it gave me. I loved the feedback and seeing people buying my books was amazing. So I kept doing it.

"You have no idea how many times I've come close to telling them. My books are actually starting to do well now, and I'm making a nice bit of money for myself. But I guess I worry they won't see it as a real job, or my brothers will hate that I write sex scenes. I don't really know...I mean, there's a part of me that thinks they'd be supportive, but a part that thinks they won't. I guess that part of me is winning right now."

Stepping towards me, Brandon's standing just inches away from me. He's so close we're breathing the same air and I can feel the warmth of his breath against my cheek. I wait for that shiver, that build of anticipation, but it doesn't come. He's close enough to whisper in my ear. "Maybe you'll tell them eventually. Until then, it can be our little secret." He presses a little kiss against my cheek and my stomach does a small flip. It's not quite the big fireworks I was hoping to feel, but it's something.

"Can I trust you to keep my secrets?" I ask as I watch his dark green eyes glisten. "Maybe you should tell me a secret so it's fair?"

A smile spreads across his face, and suddenly he looks a lot less boring. I know that sounds harsh, but he has this very nice and normal, almost boring appearance going on. But

when he just smiled like that, with a hint of mischief in his eyes, there was something exceedingly different about him.

“I might look like a nice guy, but I’m not always,” his voice is almost like a growl and I can’t deny the way my muscles coil in my lower stomach at the gravelly tone. At that moment, I really believed him. There’s something very different about the Brandon standing in front of me right now than the one I spent all evening with. This guy has an edge, a darkness to his glint, and my heart races with confusion.

“So, I’m guessing I’ve been out with good Brandon, but when does the bad version appear?” I ask, our faces still just inches away from each other, and for the first time all evening, I can feel the chemistry and tension crackling between us.

“He only appears when I need him. I just don’t want you thinking I’m completely boring. I can make your heart race too,” he says, as he closes the gap between us. His chest is pressed against mine, and there’s a hardness to his body that I wasn’t expecting. He’s not muscular, but that doesn’t mean he’s not ripped, and I can feel the hard plains of his stomach against mine.

My breathing hitches, and he capitalises on that moment. Slowly, he presses his lips against mine. He feels soft and gentle at first, but then it changes. As soon as he feels me returning his kiss, he presses his mouth against mine harder; the kiss becomes more bruising and desperate. His hand snakes behind my neck, holding me in place while the other reaches down to grab a hold of my hip. Once he has complete control over my body, he swipes his tongue across my lower lip, requesting access. There’s a part of me that wants to pull away, worried this is a little too full on for a first date, but I don’t. Instead, I let him in, enjoying the way he groans as he tastes me with his tongue.

At first, I give myself over to the moment, enjoying the way he feels against my skin. He may not set my skin alight or make me see fireworks, but there’s definitely something there. So when he pulls away, I’m almost sad it’s over. I know we probably shouldn’t go further, and that we need to take things

slow, but there's a blonde asshole that I need to forget about, and the feel of Brandon's hard body against mine was helping.

I know that's an asshole move, and I'm using Brandon a little, but I think I like him. The date has been nice, and he's easy to talk to. I thought I got to know him well, until right at the end when he threw that curveball at me. Making me think there's a different side to him I haven't seen yet, and that mysterious side calls out to me. His kiss wasn't as intoxicating as I would have liked, but it was still nice.

Fuck, why does the word nice suddenly not sound so great?

We get into Brandon's car as he starts the journey home, neither of us knowing quite what to say. I keep casting side glances at him, and I catch him doing the same to me. We both smile and that cuts through the tension enough for him to speak. "I will not apologise for kissing you, as I enjoyed it very much. But I apologise if it was a bit much for a first date."

"It wasn't," I mumble, shyness causing me to avert my gaze.

Brandon reaches over and takes my hand in his, clasping our fingers together as he rests our hands on my thigh. I look over and find him smiling the brightest smile so far, and it really lights up his face, making him look young and carefree. It's the hottest he's looked all night.

"I like you, Freya. I'm sorry if that comes across as too strong, but I would love to go on another date with you. If you'd like to, that is?" He adds on the last part quickly, a slight blush spreading below his stubble.

"What, even if it means facing my brothers again?" I joke, and his awkward chuckle lets me know he's not as comfortable with that as he says he is. Although I can hardly blame him. I will give my brothers strict instructions to keep away next time.

"I faced your brothers today, so I know I can do it again. However, I noticed Kian looks a little muscular. He's not

going to threaten me next time, is he? I'm going to have to start doing weightlifting at the gym if he is," Brandon jokes, and I choke on nothing. It's like the air gets caught in my throat at the mere mention of how Kian will take the news of me going on a second date. Will he say something or threaten him? I don't think that's Kian's style.

"No, you're good. Kian is a cage fighter, but he only fights in the hexagon. He's not the type of guy to threaten you. He's far too laid back for that," I explain, and Brandon's eyes widen as I mention Kian's hobby.

"Wow, that explains the muscles. Is he a professional, or does he just do the underground stuff? I've always wanted to go to an underground fight. They look so cool, but I don't exactly hang out in the right circles to get an invitation to things like that," he jokes, and I look over at him to see if he's serious. I would never have had him down as the type of person who likes to go to underground fights.

"Mostly underground. I don't really know how it works or how you get an invitation." That's not entirely true. I've been to a fight before, back in Ireland, though I've never seen Kian fight. You have to know someone who has an invitation for them to invite you.

The location is kept a secret from everyone. Kian knows he's fighting on a certain night, but that's all he knows until a couple of hours before. Then he gets a text with the location. The attendees get the text an hour before, but not early enough for word to spread to the wrong people, or the law. Nobody gets in that hasn't been verified by the organiser, and you need the password. It's not something I do regularly, but I will be going to Kian's fight next week, no matter how much my brothers try to dissuade me against going.

"Oh well, if you do ever find out about a fight, I would love to go. Maybe that could be one of our future dates?" he asks, squeezing my hand with his as he looks at me with a big smile before turning back to look at the road.

My heart races as my stomach does a little flip. "Is that your way of asking me out again?" I ask, as I try to hold the

smile back from my face to hide how I'm feeling. I don't know why I'm acting coy, but it seems to work, as his eyes flash with lust.

“I think I already said I like you and want to see you again, but yes, that's me officially asking you if you want to go out with me again sometime? I had a great time tonight and would love to do it again.”

I'm just about to reply as we pull into the drive of my house. Brandon winds the window down as I speak to security at the gate, who instantly lets us in. Brandon looks over at me, his brow furrowed. “You sure have a lot of security,” he states, although it sounds a little like a question.

“We are the best in our field, and I guess that creates enemies. You can't sell security if you don't have the best yourself,” I state, repeating the same thing that was drilled into me by both Kellan and Liam. Brandon doesn't quite look convinced, and he's about to say something, but I know I need to distract him.

As the car pulls to a stop, he reaches over to pull on the handbrake and I lean forward and press my lips to his. It's hard and bruising, but I pull away before either of us has the chance to deepen the kiss. I'm not a teenager who makes out in the car in front of my family home. I hate the idea that one of my brothers is going to barge outside any minute to stop us.

“I think a second date sounds lovely,” I say, as I pull back to my own seat and give him a nice smile, one he's quick to match. Placing my hand on the car door, I continue. “I have your number, so I will text you and we can sort something out. But, I just need to clarify, we're just seeing each other at the moment. I'm not saying I want to date a load of other people, but I'm not ready to declare any kind of exclusivity at the moment. I'm sorry if that's not what you want to hear.”

“I didn't ask you to be exclusive, Freya. It's too soon for that, and I'm happy for us to just see how things go. I'm hoping we will have a future together, but for now we can be friends and see what happens. Shall I walk you to the door?” he asks, though he doesn't look at all like he wants to leave the

car, and when I catch him glancing nervously at the entrance, I decide to put him out of his misery.

“That’s okay. I can manage a few steps by myself. I will talk to you soon.”

Opening the car door, we say our goodbyes and as I’m about to climb out of the vehicle, Brandon grabs hold of my arm and pulls me back before pressing his lips firmly against my own. It’s over before it even began, but the feel of his tongue against mine made my stomach ripple and my core heat. There was more passion in that kiss than any other this evening, and I think it was because Brandon took what he wanted from me. He wasn’t gentle, and he left no room for argument.

Fuck, what the hell is wrong with me? Why am I only attracted to men who are assholes?

As I say goodbye to Brandon and watch his car pull away, I turn to look at the house. I can already feel everyone staring at me. I didn’t need to see to know they would be looking. In fact, all of them are curtain twitching, hiding behind the fabric, hoping desperately to catch a glimpse of me coming home. I expected to find Kellan and Liam there, but I was shocked Mia and Bree were there too.

That’s when I saw a flash of light in the upstairs window. Kian’s standing exactly where he was when I left, and unlike the others, he’s not trying to hide. He wants me to know he saw me. The pain etched across his beautiful face suddenly makes everything very real. I feel as though I’ve been stabbed through the heart, and the worst part is, I’m the one holding the knife. I’ve never seen Kian look so devastated, and suddenly I’m hit by a feeling of shame. I knew this date would hurt him, but I wasn’t prepared for this.

I know I shouldn’t care. We aren’t together, and so I’m not cheating on him or anything. But the way he’s looking at me makes me feel like I am. The high of the date dwindles quickly and I haven’t even reached the door. Tears begin to fill my eyes and I feel the most lost I’ve ever felt.


How does this guy, someone I'm not even dating, hold so much power over me? Why do I care that he's upset? Most importantly, why do I feel as though I'm cheating on him? I'm very much single and he's not even a contender. Or at least that's how it should be. So why am I standing here, scared to go into my own house, to face him?

Pulling my back up straight, I wipe away a stray tear that's threatening to fall and I give myself a pep talk. I've done nothing wrong. If he thinks I have, that's his problem. If he can't be happy for me, then he needs to stay away from me. I have a real chance at happiness with Brandon, and I can't have Kian ruining it for me.

Though, I can't help but think back to the moment when I made it clear to Brandon that we are not exclusive. I most definitely wasn't thinking about Kian's lips at the time, hoping to feel them against my skin again. Fuck, that's exactly what I was thinking. That I don't want to be accused of cheating if something happens with Kian. I can already hear Bree giving me a lecture about having my cake and eating it too. I don't think I'm leading both guys along, but I'm definitely not being honest with them, which I think is worse.

Fuck, I really need to get my head screwed on properly and decide what I want. It's not fair to lead them both on... if that's even what I'm doing. I need to decide if I want a future with Kian, even though he's everything I said I would never have in a guy.

Or do I give Brandon a try, and accept that he won't ever set my soul on fire like Kian, but he's the nice guy I always thought I wanted? I can't help but think whatever I choose, I'm going to hurt someone. I just hope I don't break my own heart in the process.

The graphic for Chapter Six features the words "CHAPTER" and "SIX" in a serif font, arched over a central illustration. The illustration depicts a human skull surrounded by several vibrant pink roses and green leaves. Below the skull, the name "Freya" is written in a large, elegant, black cursive script.

CHAPTER SIX

Freya

A deep vibration coming from the table beside my bed drags me out of my musings, and I couldn't be more grateful. It's been just a little over two weeks since I went on my first date with Brandon, and if I'm being honest, I've been a mess ever since.

I like Brandon, and we had a really nice time, so when he asked me out again, the logical answer was yes. We've been texting and talking every day since the date, and things have only got easier between us. He makes me laugh, and I've noticed more and more that we have things in common, which we are starting to share with each other.

But mostly I love how he takes an interest in me and my day. He would quite happily let me talk about my day, or moan about my family all the time, preferring that to talking about his own.

Don't get me wrong, I try to even the playing field, to get him talking about his day or his family, but compared to the shit show that is the Doughty clan, his family has nothing on us. At times, I can't help but wonder what it would be like to have a nice normal family, instead of the crap I have to deal with every day.

I can already hear what you're asking me. If things are so good with Brandon, why haven't we gone on a second date yet? Which is a really good fucking question to ask, and one that brings me back to my daydream. Every time I think about saying yes to Brandon, all I can think about is the look on Kian's face after I came home from the last date. I'd never seen so much pain on his beautiful face before—and I helped clean up the wounds after that psycho at his gym stabbed him.

What made things worse is that, with the exception of that first night where he didn't talk to me at all and he just went straight to his room, he's gone out of his way to seem completely normal. He'll smile at me, make small talk with me, have a laugh and a joke with me when others are around, so to the outside world, it doesn't look like anything has changed, but it has.

Whenever it's just the two of us in the same room, he leaves. It's like he can't be alone with me. Or when we are in the same room as other people, he makes sure to keep a safe distance away from me.

He doesn't flirt or try to get into my personal space. He doesn't even try to touch me anymore, and I know that's what I should want. I told him we could only ever be friends, and for once he's actually respecting my wishes, but, for some reason, it fucking hurts.

I've spent the last few nights lying here, unable to sleep properly, just thinking about Kian. About how much I miss his cocky smirk and his incessant flirting. And the way he would casually run his hand along my body, making it seem like an accident, when I know he's trying to get a reaction from me. All I can think about is how my body feels numb without his touch. Like I'm missing a vital piece of my soul, one that I didn't even realise I was missing.

This line of thought usually gives way to chastising. I mean, I asked for this. I told him to stay away from me. I'm the one who said there was no future for us, and I meant it. I just had no idea being away from him would be so hard. I mean, we've never even been on a date or done anything more than a bit of fooling around. So why do I feel so lost?

The vibration sounds again, and with a groan, I roll over onto my side, so I can reach my phone from the bed-side table. As I do, I notice the clock says it's only five in the morning, and I grumble to myself, wondering who the hell would text me at this time in the morning?

Brandon: Morning, Lovely. Hope you slept well. So, I heard from a friend of mine that there's an underground fight happening tonight and I wondered if your friend knew how to get an invite? I would love to go. We can even make it our second date, if you'd like? Or I can take you out somewhere today?

Ugh, I groan to myself. Every morning he starts the day the same way, with an invitation to some kind of different date. He's offered everything from coffee, to the cinema, or a meal. Right the way through to a fun day at the beach—which is crazy in this weather.

I have to give him credit. He really has tried everything, and I actually feel bad for blowing him off each day. I make it clear it's not because I don't want to date him, I just can't at the moment, which isn't technically a lie. I can't go out on another date with Brandon until I've sorted this thing with Kian out in my head.

Freya: I will ask him about the fight, but I don't think I will be going. It's not really my scene. I'm crazy busy this weekend, but we will sort something out soon.

I send the text back to Brandon quickly, hating myself for lying to him because we are all going to the fight tonight. I made a promise to Kian a while back that I would go and support him, and I'm not going back on it.

Even though Brandon has met my family, going out with them for the night to an illegal underground fight is most

definitely not the best second date I can think of. Not when the guy who occupies so much of my thoughts will be there.

I don't even bother waiting for a reply, and there will be one. Brandon will try to convince me to go on a date with him. He doesn't give up—and I'm not entirely sure I want him to. But I also know he will keep hounding me about an invite to the fight. He's mentioned it a few times, and I've always fobbed him off, claiming I didn't know much.

We've talked about his interest in the sport a few times, and even though he has more than enough money to get legit tickets to real fights, they don't interest him. Apparently, the underground fights are so much better, given their lack of rules, and the sheer grit and determination of the fighters. I don't even want to think about what the hell that means. The mere thought of someone throwing a punch at Kian causes my stomach to flip and anger to boil through my blood. I hate the idea of anyone hurting him.

Ugh, there go those damn thoughts again. He isn't mine, and he never will be, so I need to stop fucking thinking about him like he is.

Dropping my phone onto the mattress, I pull myself out of bed, dragging the closest baggy T-shirt on over my head. I pick up the bootie shorts on the chair next to my bed and pull them on too. They just about cover my ass, but it's not like it matters. The long T-shirt I'm wearing comes down to my mid-thigh, covering up more than enough of my flesh. Besides, I'm just going to run downstairs to grab a coffee, and I can bring it back up to my room to do a bit of writing. I'm almost at the end of finishing my book. I just have a few more chapters to write before I start the dreaded editing process.

The house is still in darkness; the sun hasn't even risen yet, and I'm surprised that Hallie doesn't appear to be awake. Hopefully she's been getting a bit more sleep recently. Kel and Mia have looked like they're on their last legs for the last couple of mornings when I've met them downstairs. So when I make it into the kitchen and the room is still in darkness, I'm very surprised, but also pleased. They definitely need their sleep.

I busy myself, getting the coffee maker up and running, then jump up so I'm sitting on the edge of the breakfast bar while I wait for it to make the coffee. I'm feeling a tad rebellious, as Liam always shouts at me about sitting up here. Apparently it's for eating or preparing food on, not somewhere for me to park my ass. Naturally, since this is his house, I have to listen to him, but I can still take a little pleasure in my rebellious act while he's not here.

"You're up earlier than usual, Beautiful." Kian's sexy, deep rumbling voice pulls me out of my daydream, and I realise I must have been lost in my own head for a while because the coffee is ready.

Turning, I see him leaning against the wall at the entrance to the kitchen. My mouth waters as I take in his low-slung grey sweats and his bare chest. I trace my gaze across every hard ridge of his abs, and the deep V that disappears along with the happy trail that's on display. His body is like that of a fucking Greek God, but it's his face that causes the butterflies in my stomach to fly around at full speed.

His dirty blonde hair is swept over his forehead, looking like the perfect bedhead, while his lips pull up into his signature cocky smirk. Those bright, ocean blue eyes of his sparkle with mischief as I watch him rake his gaze over me.

Fire travels along my flesh, heating me from the inside out, tracing the path his eyes have taken over my body. I feel naked under his gaze. So much so that I begin to squirm, trying to quench that delicious itch only Kian seems able to produce.

"Couldn't sleep," I mumble, the only response I can give him. I can't exactly tell him Brandon's text woke me up. This is the longest Kian has been alone in a room with me since I went on my date a couple of weeks ago, and to say I miss him is an understatement.

Not the flirting and the sexiness—although I hate to admit that my body seems to like that—but I miss the friendship part. I miss talking to him, hanging out with him. Even though he can be a cocky asshole, he's still funny and smart, and we used to have a good time just hanging out together. Even if he

spent the vast portion of the time winding me up or trying to get into my pants.

“Shall I pour the coffee, since you look so comfortable sitting there?” Kian asks, as he makes his way into the kitchen and reaches into the cupboard to pull out two mugs.

Watching the way his back muscles clench and move every time Kian reaches for something does weird things to my insides, and I find myself having to bite my lip to stop myself from groaning. Who would have thought a bare back could be so sexy? I guess his tight, sculpted ass isn't bad to look at either.

Fuck, grey sweatpants should be illegal on guys like Kian. He's hot enough as it is without the magic powers of the low-hung sweats helping him out, too.

With that cocky smile showing his dimples, he reaches over and passes me the mug of coffee, made exactly the way I like. I take it with thanks, and my heart drops when Kian takes a couple of steps back so that he's standing against the opposite kitchen counter. I'm so used to him trying to invade my personal space, now that he's not doing it, I actually miss it.

“Thanks for the coffee,” I say, as I raise it up like I'm going to press it against his to say cheers. But people don't do that with coffee, so I quickly lower my hand and hope he can't see the blush invading my cheeks. “Why are you up so early?” I hope the change in conversation moves him away from my awkward as fuck behaviour.

Kian chuckles, and we both know he noticed me behaving strangely. “It's the big fight tonight. I never sleep well the night before. Too much pent up energy buzzing through my veins.”

Now that he mentions it, I notice the way he doesn't seem to be able to stand still. He's almost vibrating with nervous energy. His left leg is jiggling up and down rapidly where he stands, and the hand that isn't holding his coffee mug is tapping along the edge of the mug. It's like you can see the

electricity humming through his veins, putting him more on edge than he normally is.

“What do you normally do on fight day to get rid of the energy?” I ask, genuinely curious about what his fighting regime is. Does he have any superstitions that he follows? I’ve never really pegged Kian as someone who believes in superstition or things like that. He’s always seemed to me to be someone who does what he wants when he wants, and just lets the cards fall where they may. Basically, the opposite of me. I need a plan, and I hate that right now I don’t have a plan. In fact, my life is so far off plan I have no fucking clue how to get it back on track, and that scares the shit out of me.

I wish I could be more like Kian. More carefree, not really giving a shit about what happens. Just going with the flow. But, that terrifies me because it’s so unknown. How do I know I’m doing the right thing?

Kian wiggles his eyebrows at me suggestively, causing me to giggle, but as soon as the laughter leaves my lips, Kian’s expression falters and a hard-faced, blank mask appears. All signs of the happiness and carefree laughter that I like about Kian are gone. No cocky smile or cute as hell dimples either, and I feel as though I’ve been stabbed.

He takes a sip of his coffee before replying, his voice sounding almost bland. “I try to get rid of as much excess energy in the gym early on, then I just try to rest for the remainder of the day. Declan usually tries to get me to nap in the afternoon, but I’m not a great sleeper. I also have to try and bulk up on carbs for when I burn the energy later. Truthfully, I don’t prepare in the way most fighters do. For me, it comes easily and I don’t even really need to train for it. I train because I want to be the best, but if someone randomly pushes me in the hexagon one day, I’d battle as fiercely as I would after weeks of preparation. I love the thrill, and I get off on the adrenaline of the fight.”

“Almost like it’s something you were born to do,” I mutter, before taking a gulp of my coffee. I’m sure I see a hint of a smile before he raises his own cup to his lips to cover it. He looks like he’s about to turn and leave, but I’m not ready for

that, so I keep talking. “Haven’t you ever wanted to do it professionally if you’re that good? Why just do underground fights?”

Jumping off the counter, I shuffle around the kitchen, before moving to one of the stools beside the breakfast bar and pull it out to sit on. I do the same with the chair next to me, and hold it out to indicate to Kian that he should sit down. He doesn’t even try to cover up the sigh that huffs out of him before he finally moves to sit next to me. I don’t miss the way he pulls his chair further away from mine, and I try to pretend that he didn’t just slice through me with a knife.

“Honestly, it never seemed like it was a possibility for someone like me. Dec and I didn’t exactly grow up under the greatest of circumstances. We didn’t have people in our corner, pushing us to be the best versions of ourselves that we can be. We only ever had each other. Fighting was something I fell into, for money more than anything. It’s not like we ever had a career teacher pointing us in the right direction. Where we’re from, they wrote us off pretty early in life.”

The more Kian talks, the more I realise I hardly know anything about him. I knew he and Declan were raised in foster care together, and I guess I just fit the pieces together from there. Few people raised in foster care have a great life, unless they are adopted out—which I know they weren’t. Makes me sad to think that a beautiful little boy with cute dimples like Kian wasn’t wanted by any families looking to adopt.

When Kian speaks, I realise I must have said that last part out loud. “I was a cute kid,” he chuckles, before a glazed look appears in his eyes, and I can see pain there that I’ve never seen before. “But, from the moment I met Dec, we refused to be separated. Most people only wanted one child. Even when they managed to separate us, we would run away to find each other. They tried telling us that because we’re not blood relatives, we can’t stay together, but he’s more family to me than anyone else. He’s been my brother nearly my whole life.”

“Why didn’t people want you both?” I ask as I fiddle with the rim of my coffee cup. Anything to avoid looking at the

pain in Kian's eyes. We've never really talked about anything this deep before, and even though I can tell this conversation is painful for him, I'm really glad he trusts me enough for us to have this talk.

We may not be able to act on the feelings we have for each other, but I really want to keep him as a friend. He's part of our family now, and that means he'll be in my life permanently. I can't deal with anything awkward between us, even if I'm the one who made it that way.

"Honestly, it was Dec. Even as a kid, he was just as stern-faced and angry as he is now. He's mellowed a lot since finding Belle, but when we were kids, he had a lot of pent up rage and frustration. I guess we both did. But while I hid it behind cute dimples and a cheeky smile, Declan wore his pain for the entire world to see. Nobody wanted a sad, angry looking kid, and I refused to be separated from him," Kian explains, whilst leaning over the counter and opening a packet of biscuits. He munches on the chocolate chip cookie before holding the packet open for me to take one. I will not say no to chocolate. I'm actually surprised we have any left. Bree has been demolishing all the sweet stuff in the house at quite an impressive pace.

"I think that was really brave of you at such a young age. You gave up the chance of a proper family," I reply once I've finished my cookie.

Kian shakes his head. "I already had a family in Declan. If they didn't want us both, they aren't the kind of people I want to call family. I mean, look at the Doughty's. You guys have taken in so many strays and have proved that family doesn't have to just be blood relatives."

"Well, I for one, am glad you decided to be part of our family." Kian looks up at me and his bright blue eyes shine with an emotion that's hard for me to read. It looks to be a mix of happy and sad, all at the same time.

"Thanks," he mumbles before squeezing a full cookie in his mouth. His eyes flick over to the door, like he's

considering making a run for it. I hate that he can't even bear to be in the same room as me anymore.

"Kian..." His eyes flick up to meet mine, and I take a breath to steady my racing heart as I try to find the right words. "I miss you."

"Frey... I—" His voice sounds pained, and I hate it.

Cutting Kian off before he has a chance to say anything more, I try to explain. "I'm sorry if I hurt you. Please know, that was never my intention. I really like you, Kian, and I don't want to lose you as a friend. Like you just said, we're family now, and I hate this weird tension between us. You can't even look at me. You leave the room whenever we're alone together, and this is the most you've spoken to me in weeks. Does it really have to be like this?" I plead, needing him to hear how much it's cutting me up inside to have this rift between us.

"Yes, it has to be this way." His voice isn't stern or harsh, if anything it's barely audible, void of any real emotion, and for some reason, that's worse.

"Kian—"

Slamming his mug down on the counter, Kian jumps off the chair and begins pacing around the kitchen, raking his hands through his dirty blonde hair. He cuts me off before I can say anymore, his bright blue eyes fixed on mine. "No, Frey. You can't have it both ways. You decided to date that dickhead, and now you have to live with the consequences. Unlike you, I can't just turn my feelings off. I still want you so fucking much. You're all I think about, all I dream about. Hell, my cock gets hard at the mere thought of you, let alone when I'm actually near you. But, I'm not the type of guy who flirts with girls who are taken. I may be an asshole, but not having anything to do with taken women is a rule I stand by. You made the decision to see someone else, and now we have to live with it.

"But it's so fucking hard. Whenever I'm near you, I want to touch you. I want to flirt with you until that sexy as fuck blush appears on your cheeks, and I want to push you until you

snap at me because even our banter is hot. I don't know how to just be your friend because to do that would mean trying to turn off the way I feel about you, and I don't think I can do that."

Fuck, I don't even know where to begin processing everything he just said. He's right, I fucked this up and now I need to try and fix it. The sad part is, I actually miss him flirting and touching me. I miss our snappy banter. Fuck, I even miss the way he can set my soul on fire with just a kiss. But, I made my decision and I can't keep messing with him. That's not fair on anyone.

"I'm sorry, Kian. I really wish things could be different. But, just for the record, I'm not actually dating Brandon. I mean... I am going on dates with him, but we're not like exclusive or anything. It's still early days." I don't know why I'm telling him this, as it changes nothing, and Kian obviously agrees with me.

"You don't need to wish for things to be different, Beautiful. This is all down to you. You just have to make the right choice. But I will not stand in the way while you are seeing someone else... exclusive or not. I'm not going to beg for you to choose me," Kian states firmly, his resolve fixed.

"Do you want me to choose you?" I mutter, my voice low and husky as I look up at Kian through hooded eyes.

He stalks closer to me, nudging my knees apart until he's standing in between my legs. As the chairs to the breakfast bar are more like raised stools, my head is level with his shoulders, and our hips are the same height. If he closes the rest of the gap, I'd be able to feel him pressing against my core.

He's so close I can feel the heat from his breath tickling my nose and our lips are almost touching. I'm intoxicated by the scent that's completely Kian, and I can't help but bite my lower lip to suppress the groan I can feel building inside. Whenever he's this close to me, it's like all good sense is thrown out the window, and all I want to do is devour him.

Leaning forward, his cheek brushes against mine and he moves to whisper in my ear. The second his breath hits my ear, a shudder ripples down my spine. “I don’t know how to make it any fucking clearer for you, Beautiful. Of course I want you to choose me.”

His voice is a low, deep rumble and fuck if it doesn’t feel like he’s got a direct line of communication to my core, heating me up so much, I have to stop myself from squirming to ease the ache I feel between my legs.

I turn my head slightly, our cheeks still pressed together, so that I can whisper my reply in his ear. I try to ignore the way my cheek tingles from the slightest bit of contact with him. “You only want me for my body.”

I take great pleasure in watching his body shiver as I whisper in his ear. I know if I look down now, there will be a bulge in his sweats, and it takes all my willpower not to look. Kian reaches out to cup his hand at the back of my neck, and the shock of him actually touching me, sends jolts of electricity whizzing around my body, setting my nerve endings on fire. His fingers tangle in the back of my hair, and I wait with bated breath for what he’s going to do next.

Pulling his head back slightly, he uses the hand on the back of my neck to tilt mine so that I’m looking directly at him. His bright blue eyes are almost black thanks to his lust-induced dilated pupils, and I know mine will be just as dark and seductive. Kian affects me like nobody else can. He makes me crave his touch, his body, until it’s the only thing that makes sense. All logic goes out of the window, my brain shuts down, and my lady parts are very much running the show.

With my gaze fixed on his, he leans forward until his plump pink lips are right in front of mine. I wouldn’t even need to lean forward too much and they would be touching. I keep biting my lower lip, hoping to pull back a little bit of self-respect. Or at the very least, stop from throwing myself into Kian’s arms. It doesn’t help that when he speaks, I can feel his breath on my lips and it draws me to him.

“Of course I want you for your body, just like you want me for mine. But don’t make the mistake of thinking that’s all I want. I may never have had a real relationship before, but that doesn’t mean I don’t ever want one. I always said to Declan that when the right girl came along, I would know. She would be enough to make me want to settle down and do things right. To go on dates, woo her, and treat her like the princess she is. So when I met you, I knew you were the girl. The one who would make me give up my manwhore ways and settle down. I’m not saying we’re going to get married and live happily ever after, but we might. What I’m saying is that I like you enough to try. I want to date you, I want to treat you right, and of course I want to fuck you so hard that you’re screaming my name. With you, I want it all. I just need you to want it, too.”

Fuck, his words are like the most perfect drug, causing my nerve endings to prickle with excitement. I don’t think there’s a single girl in the world who doesn’t want to hear that the bad boy is willing to change his ways just for her. It’s every girl’s dream, and fuck am I tempted. My lady parts are saying I should throw myself at him, but it’s not that easy. He’s still a bad boy, high up in my crime family, and that isn’t going to change anytime soon.

“Kian...” His name is like a desperate plea dripping from my lips.

Answering my plea, Kian closes the already small gap and presses his lips to the corner of my mouth. It’s more cheek than I would have liked, but that little taste of him is more than enough to set me into action. I reach out to grab the back of his head, my hand fisting in his hair as I pull his head towards mine.

I press my lips to his in a kiss that’s hard, bruising. Sweeping my tongue along his lower lip, I demand access, taking from him exactly what I need. At first he doesn’t let me, until I gently pull his lower lip between my teeth, nibbling slightly, and I feel the resulting moan that rips from his body deep in my core.

Once he opens up to me, our kiss becomes all consuming as we both try to take as much from each other as we can. The

taste of his tongue as it battles with mine is intoxicating, and I can't get enough. Using my free hand, I grip his hip and pull his body closer to mine as I shuffle to the end of the chair.

I have to open my legs wider to make room for Kian between them, and as soon as our bodies touch, I can feel his hardness pressing against me. Only his sweats and the thin layer of my shorts separate us, and I already feel like that's too much. I want us to shed our layers and get as close as we possibly can.

It's like this every time I'm near Kian. His taste affects me. He's like my personal brand of heroin. A drug my body craves thanks to the sweet ecstasy only he knows how to give me. All logic and sense have gone out of the window, and all I can think about is getting more of Kian.

Without warning, Kian pulls away from our kiss, taking a large step back as we both remain there panting, trying to catch our breaths. My body tingles in all the places where Kian was just a second ago, and I can't help but feel empty. Like something is missing. As I look up at Kian for answers, I notice he's wearing the same mask of indifference he was when he came into the room and my heart splinters. Gone is the cheeky chappy with the cocky smile who lights up my body like a Christmas tree.

Tears prickle the back of my eyes and I try to push them away. Kian's voice is low, barely above a whisper, but I hear his words like they were shouted through a microphone. "I'm sorry, that shouldn't have happened. And it can't ever happen again. I can't be in the same room as you, and that's why we can't ever be friends."

I know he doesn't mean for the words to come out as mean or hurtful, but they cut me harder than any knife could. "Kian..." My voice is clogged with emotion, and I do a piss-poor job of keeping the tears at bay as they cloud my vision. I try to blink them away, hoping I can stop them from falling, but I can't.

Kian's breath hitches, and I see him take a step towards me with his hand raised. Like he wants to come over and wipe the

tears away, but then his brain kicks in and he thinks better of it. He drops his arm and stays frozen. But as his gaze meets mine, I can see the pain shining back at me.

“Please don’t cry, Beautiful,” Kian pleads, the pain ringing out with every word. “I don’t want to hurt you. I’m just trying to be honest. As long as you are seeing other people, we can’t be near each other. Maybe with time we can learn to just be friends, but right now, every time I see you, it takes every bit of self-control I have left not to rip your clothes off and fuck you so hard you never want to date anyone else ever again. Until that passes, I can’t be around you. I hate people who cheat, and there’s no way in hell I will ever be the person who gets in the middle of a relationship. I can’t be that guy.”

Making sure he keeps a decent distance from me, he reaches over and swipes his thumb across the bottom of my eye, wiping away all the rogue tears that have fallen without my permission. He repeats the process on the other side and I try to ignore the fire that blazes underneath my skin just at the mere feel of him.

“I understand.” The words tumble out of my lips, but I’m not entirely sure I mean them. I mean, I understand what he’s saying. Of course I do. But do I agree with him? I don’t think so. I know it sounds like a cop-out, or a loophole, but I clarified that I’m not exclusively dating Brandon, so from my perspective, the whole cheating issue is not a problem. But I know I’m just trying to bullshit my brain on that one. I know that if I plan on dating other guys, then I need to stop whatever this thing with Kian is. I’m just worried that I won’t find this chemistry with anyone else.

“I’m going to go, Beautiful. But, promise me you will still come to the fight tonight.”

I had been on the fence about going, particularly since before today he’d barely spoken to me. Now, after everything that just happened, I’m not sure it’s such a good idea if I go. “I’m not sure, Kian. I don’t want to be a distraction for you, or to make things awkward.”

Shaking his head, his thumb continuing to stroke my cheek even though all the tears are gone, and his fierce eyes lock with mine. “We can call a truce just for one night. I want you there. You’ve never seen me fight, and I’d like you to. I will do my best to treat you like we’re just friends. No flirting, I promise. You’re right, we’re in each other’s lives now, so we need to figure out a way to be around each other without wanting to rip the other person’s clothes off, and I think that starts with us just being friends. What do you say? Shall we give it a try?”

His cocky lop-sided grin appears, and although it doesn’t quite light up his eyes like I’m used to, those dimples I love appear and that’s enough for me. “Okay, I will be there. Let’s try just being friends.”

As I say the words and return his smile, I can’t help but wonder if I actually mean it. Can I push aside the way I feel about him to just be friends? I don’t really have any other choice. Well...not unless Kian suddenly decides he’ll leave this world behind and we can start over as Mr and Mrs Normal. But that’s a fantasy that will never come true.

Kian is knee deep in the criminal underworld, and he’s the same as Bree. He thrives in it. Taking him away from the world he loves, from the career he’s worked hard to achieve, just doesn’t feel right. So, if I want to be with Kian, I need to push aside my desire to leave this world, and that’s not something I think I can do.

Ever since I was eight years old, I’ve had this overwhelming desire to get as far away from the death and violence that are an everyday part of my family’s life. On my eighth birthday, I had a princess party. There were around twenty girls who came around my house, all dressed up as princesses to help me celebrate. Liam made all my brothers dress as princesses too, as that’s the theme I wanted for my party. The house was decorated in pinks and purples, and the beautiful princess castle cake I had was straight out of my imagination. It was the party I’d always dreamt of, and we were all having an amazing time. Until my dad’s business spilled over into the party.

All the parents were in one corner of the garden, with a food and drink section catered specifically for adults. One of my guests, Keisha, had come with her dad. He did some small time jobs for my dad, so I'd seen him around the house a few times. One minute Dad is shouting at him, while he tries to respond, and the next thing I know, Dad shoots him in the head. Blood sprays across the lawn, covering some of the other guests and the food. Screams erupt as everyone panics, desperately trying to run away from the madman with a gun. I'm frozen to the spot, just staring at the casual way Dad put his gun away and cleaned the blood off himself as best he could. While everyone else was running around scared, I stood there just staring at the body thinking, *not again*.

My brothers walked over to me, gathering myself and Ryleigh so that we were all huddled together. Whilst everyone else was running around like headless chickens, fearing for their life, the Doughty children just stood there watching the life drain out of the man's eyes. We had seen this more times than we could count. So much so that it didn't even cause us fear anymore. That's the moment I realised I didn't want to be a part of this life.

It's not normal for children to not be scared of a gunshot. We shouldn't be so used to watching the life drain out of someone's eyes that it doesn't affect us. Dad ruined my birthday party, and I wasn't mad or surprised. I'd seen him do so much worse, and that alone disgusted me. I knew I needed to get as far away from this life as possible if I didn't want that to be the norm.

As I grew up, I watched my brothers become the type of men they always vowed never to be. Liam and Kellan managed to keep some of their morality, but Finn and Evan are still lost to my father. Ryleigh and I were lucky to break free, thanks to Liam, but we're still tied to the family.

I've watched people I love get beat up, kidnapped, or have their lives threatened. I'm terrified every time I leave the house that this time it might be my turn. But I'm even more scared that something so much worse could happen to the people I love. I can't keep living with this axe hanging over

my head. I may not be able to keep my family safe, and I will always worry about them, but I can remove myself from the situation.

I can keep myself safe, which will pass on to any future family I may have. I hate the idea of separating myself from my family, and I will always have them in my life, but I have to do what's best for me and my future. No matter how hard the decision may be.

So, I'm not just choosing to give up Kian, which hurts like fucking hell, I'm also giving up some parts of my family, too. It's not an easy choice, but I have to be strong now for the sake of my future. I just hope I don't lose the people I love in the process.



CHAPTER SEVEN

Kian

Fuck, walking out of the kitchen this morning, leaving Freya behind with tears rolling down her beautiful cheeks, was quite possibly the hardest thing I've ever had to do. I wasn't trying to be an asshole—quite the opposite. I actually thought I was doing the right thing by telling her how I felt.

I can see how hurt she's been over the last couple of weeks, every time she enters a room and I walk out. Of course, I can see the way her face falls or her body sags. The way I'm behaving saddens her and every time I do it, it's like I'm carving a knife through my own chest. But what other options do I have? I fucking despise people who cheat, and I would never want to be the person responsible for ruining someone's relationship.

I know Frey said that her and Mr Boring aren't exclusive, but that doesn't matter to me. While she's dating him, nothing can—or should—happen between us. Not only because of the cheating issue—though that is pretty fucking important to me—but there's a very big reason she's dating him and not me. I can't ignore that, even if I really fucking want to.

Freya is so lost at the moment, unsure what direction her life should take, or what she wants to do with her future. Of course, Liam is so protective of his sister that he would let her live here forever, and he would give her all the money she needs to live a happy life. It's just the type of guy he is—he will make a great dad.

Despite the fact Frey is accepting his help right now, she won't do that for long. She's fiercely independent, and behind the shy, timid exterior, there's a very stubborn girl who is determined to prove herself. I have no idea what path her life will take or who she will become, but you can sure as shit believe that I will stand beside her. No matter what. Even if that path takes her away from the life we live and our family business.

Freya may want a life that doesn't involve crime, threats, and death occurring regularly, but she doesn't want to cut her family out of her life. Personally, I think Freya will need to realise that if she wants any of her family in her life, then our lifestyle will always be there.

What she wants is a pipe dream, and the sooner she realises that of her own accord, the sooner I can plan how to make her mine. At the moment she thinks it's possible to separate her family from the lifestyle we lead, but it's not. Every time she comes over for a family dinner—it will be there. If she goes out for a coffee with Bree when she's had her baby—it will be there.

We will always have danger following us, and the sooner she realises that, the better. I just hope when she realises, she doesn't decide to cut us all off for good. I think she loves her family too much to do that, but then again, her desire to live a life free from fear is a pretty motivating factor at the moment.

“Kian!” I hear my name echoing loudly as someone pulls the ear bud out of my ear. The music is playing ear splittingly loud, as I don't want to hear any of the crowd in the next room. “I have been shouting your name for fucking ages, Brother. Are you ready?” Declan yells, as he spins me around, his dark gaze taking in my obviously unprepared state. He

shakes his head, and even though the music is still blaring in my other ear, I'm sure I can hear him tutting.

"Would you believe me if I said yes?" I joke, throwing him my signature cocky grin, but Declan has been immune against that for a long time and simply rolls his eyes at me.

"They have just called the warm up fight to start. You should be prepped and stretching now. I have a funny feeling Linford is going to go down like a sack of potatoes in the first round," Declan muses, a deadly smirk crossing his face.

We used to share the same gym as Linford before Bree banned me from going there after the stabbing incident. Declan hates the guy, and I don't blame him. He's cocky, arrogant, and thinks he's so much fucking better than he is. I think this is his first real fight, and I'm sure Declan is pissed he's missing him getting his ass kicked. But Dec has been by my side, helping me to prep for every fight in Ireland, I should have known he would be here too.

This is my first underground fight since Paddy moved me here to London. To say I left behind a few very pissed off people is an understatement. Especially the guy who runs the Irish underground fight scene, Mulligan. He liked the fact I was his cash cow, and I was supposed to do a big fight the week I left. Apparently, because I left halfway through the promotion of the fight, I lost him a lot of money. People had placed bets and wanted their money back, money I'm sure he no longer had.

I became criminal enemy number one in his eyes, and he's been threatening me ever since. He not only wants me to go back and finish the fight as planned, he also claims he has a hold over me. That I fight for him, and that means I'm not allowed to fight in the London scene. I politely reminded him, I belong to nobody. I signed no contract and made no promises. I fight for myself.

I've actually missed fighting since I moved here, but the timing has never been right. Since arriving, they've thrown me headfirst into the Doughty bullshit. Kidnappings, threats, torture. It's been one thing after another and the timing just

hasn't felt right. But now I'm done waiting. Ever since I was threatened with a knife, warned against competing, I've had an overwhelming drive to fight, which is why I'm here.

Donny Miller is the guy who runs all the underground fights in London, and he was over the fucking moon when I told him I would be competing. Obviously, I warned him about the shit with Mulligan, but I honestly think that just made me a more appealing candidate. He's clearly a psycho, and the idea of trouble got him far too excited for my liking. I don't want drama, I just want to fight.

"I'm all stretched and warmed up already. I was doing it before you walked in. I just need to get all strapped up," I reply, turning the music off and placing my earbuds in their container on the bench beside me.

I pull off my shirt, leaving me in just a pair of black running shorts and the boxers I'm wearing beneath them. I will get changed into my fight shorts after Dec leaves. Declan wordlessly begins the process we've done so many times before. Using physiotherapy tape, he applies it in a certain way across both my knees to strengthen my ligaments and joints. He does the same for my elbows and shoulders. I only have a slight twinging injury to my left knee, but if that's the only area I tape, it would be obvious where my injury is, and that would give my opponent an advantage. So, we tape up everywhere, which means my injury is supported without the opposition having an advantage.

Declan then moves on to my hands. Even though this is an underground fight, and some fighters will choose to opt for the bare-knuckle style, I've always preferred to wrap my hands. Contrary to what most newbie fighters believe, I don't wrap to give me more power, or to pack more behind my punches. I do it because it helps to protect all the little bones and ligaments in my hand. I can't keep throwing punches good enough to win a fight if I get a hairline fracture on the first blow.

I hop from one foot to the other, trying to keep warm and build up my energy while I hold my arm out for Dec to wrap. A knock sounds at the door, but before Declan can growl at

whoever it is and tell them to fuck off, Liam and Kellan burst through.

“Woah, you should see it out there. It’s fucking packed, man. The crowd is out for blood. Every time that dick Linford gets thrown on the mat, they are screaming for the other guy to end it,” Kellan explains animatedly, his arms flying about the way they always do when he’s overly excited.

“We need to get this done then if it sounds like it’s going to be over soon,” Dec grumbles, as he works a bit quicker trying to wrap my hands, while still making sure he maintains his usual precision.

“Nice to see you again, Dec. We were just talking to the lovely Belle. She’s with Bree, Mia, and Freya,” Liam explains, as he claps Dec on the back to say hello.

Dec’s eyes narrow at Liam. “You brought your pregnant wife to an illegal underground fight?” he asks, not even trying to conceal his judgemental tone.

Liam doesn’t take offence, and he just laughs. “The more you get to know Bree, the more you will realise that nobody lets her do anything. She does what she wants, and if her mind is made up, there’s no stopping her.”

I can’t help but add my own opinion on this particular subject. “Boss Lady is a force to be reckoned with, Dec. If you tell her she can’t do something, she will want to do it even more. Besides, since we’re all here, she’s pretty safe.”

Kellan snorts. “I pity whichever fool is stupid enough to start on Bree. That girl is more than capable of taking care of herself, pregnant or not.”

Everyone nods and agrees, and I can tell Dec still looks a bit confused. He’s a typical alpha asshole, and he’s very open about the fact he’s a Dom. I know Belle is his sub in the bedroom, but I don’t get the impression she’s all that submissive at other times. She’s still very shy and timid, preferring to be a wallflower than be noticed. She probably lets Dec have his way a lot of the time because it’s easier, but

I've seen her stand up for herself if the subject matter is important.

"How is everyone?" I ask, averting my eyes down to my hands so neither of the boys can see the question I'm really asking them. Sadly, Liam's too fucking clever for his own good.

"You mean, how's my sister?" he growls, and I have no choice but to look at him as I try to keep the blush from my face. I don't want him to know that just a few hours ago we had the best kiss of my whole damn life, and then I left her in the kitchen in tears.

Liam and Kellan would pull my limbs clean from my body, but it's Bree I should fear. Ever since I started flirting with Freya, Bree made it clear that as long as I made her happy, she was fine with it. But the minute I ruin it or upset her, she would cut my cock and balls off, shove the dick down my throat, and make me wear my balls around my neck as a necklace. I don't even fucking doubt her. She has an unhealthy obsession with her knife!

I don't bother answering Liam, but I don't miss the way Dec's eyebrows raise as he looks between the brothers and me. It's a silent language we've been using most of our life, and he's making it very fucking clear I owe him an explanation. It's not that I plan to not tell him. He's my best friend, and I always tell him everything in the end, but even saying the words aloud, telling him she's dating someone else, they cut me and make me bleed. I don't want my brother to see that.

"She's fine. Bit nervous about being at her first fight, I think," Liam muses, and I can't help but chuckle.

"This isn't Freya's first fight. I mean, it is her first here in England, but she's been to a few back in Ireland with Ry. I don't think she's ever been to one of my fights though, and it's weird that we could have been going to the same fights for years, but never met before." It's something I've been pondering since Freya told me she'd gone to a few fights back in Ireland. I think one of her friends at school was dating a fighter, and so they went to some matches.

Ever since I met her, I've been aware of her. I can feel her whenever she enters the room, like we're connected by this invisible piece of string, and I know whenever she's near. I like to think that's always been there, and that I would have noticed her. But, the truth is, back in Ireland, I was so busy sleeping around and getting into fights, I barely noticed women's faces.

All I saw was their banging body, or how fuckable they were. I know I sound like an asshole, because I was one. Well... I was a teenage boy with a rock hard cock and an overwhelming desire to use it. That desire lasted a few years, right up until the time I met Freya. Now I only see her. She's the only person my rock hard cock is interested in. Even if I wanted to sink myself into another girl to help me forget about her, I don't think he would work. It's always been her.

Liam's face distorts with anger, and I wonder if he can tell I'm thinking about how much I want to fuck his sister, because his gaze really is murderous. "What do you mean, it's not her first fight? Are you shitting me?"

Argh, okay... so it would appear I've just got Frey and Ry into some trouble here, and the laughter lines appearing around Kellan's eyes while he tries not to smile tell me he's rather amused by the situation. I need to think quickly to get myself out of this mess without getting the girls into any more shit.

Thankfully, I'm halted from having to come up with an excuse when the door to the changing room bursts open and a short, balding man with large wire-rimmed glasses and a potbelly, that his T-shirt is struggling to contain waltzes in. Declan gets ready to tear him a new asshole, as he usually does with anyone who tries to distract me while I should be warming up, but I lay my hand on his arm discreetly, and that's enough for him to know to stay quiet.

Donny Miller may look like a plain, old, fat man with very little about him, but it's all an act. Donny is one of the most ruthless men I've ever met, and some of his decisions lean more towards fucking psychotic than sane. There's a reason he runs the best underground illegal fight club in the UK and

hasn't been caught. He just doesn't look like a typical psycho gangster, but then again... I think that's the look he's going for.

He likes the fact your eyes would normally run straight past him when he enters the room. Being forgettable is probably one of the best things for someone in his line of work. If nobody even suspects how deadly he really is, he can strike without anyone knowing it was him.

"I need to speak to you alone, boy," he grumbles in a thick cockney accent. His tone becomes incredibly patronising when he says *boy*, like I'm some child he's about to scold.

Donny's eyes flick from Declan to Liam and Kellan, and I can tell he's assessing them to see why they would be here. His eyes fix on Liam, who is glaring with a fierce intensity that is so much worse than his usual look. They share a look that makes it clear to the room they both know each other.

"Sorry, Liam. I didn't realise it was you. Would you mind if I just have a word with Kian on his own... please?" Fuck! This large, imposing asshole who usually has men trembling in their boots has been reduced to a bumbling mess, all because of Liam's hard stare. The way Donny adds please onto the end of his question, his voice audibly shaking, makes it very clear he's terrified of Liam, which is a funny thought given if you'd asked me before who the most deadly person in the room is, I would have picked Donny. I guess I severely underestimated Liam.

"Nice to see you again, Donny. All well in your business, I'm assuming?" Liam asks, and Donny takes a step back and you can clearly see his neck bobbing as he gulps hard.

"Yes, thanks to you. Once that problem was taken care of, things have been running a lot smoother. Although, I may have another issue coming up soon that I need your help with. I'm just trying to deal with it amicably for now." His eyes cast over to me, and it's obvious the problem he's referring to has something to do with me, but I can't think what the hell I've done. Especially something bad enough for him to need to hire an assassin.

“If that’s the case, I think it’s important we remain in the room while you talk to Kian. He will only tell us about it afterwards anyway, so may as well save us all some time.” Liam leaves no room for argument, but I can see Donny’s gaze flit between Kellan and Dec. Dec’s hard, piercing gaze is enough to make him back down.

Donny turns to me, but he makes sure to give Liam a polite nod before he addresses me. This guy is terrified shitless of Liam. “Look kid, you know I like you, and when you told me you wanted to be part of my fights, of course I put you on the roster. And you were open with me when you told me there was some bad blood when you left Ireland. But you didn’t tell me how much of a fucking twat Mulligan is. I’ve had some of my men attacked, hate mail, threats, and all because I’m letting you fight. Mulligan claims you owe him a final fight, plus the money he lost when you bailed from that fight. He thinks until you’ve paid your debt, you are still employed by him. Therefore, he wants me to pay him a cut for letting you fight. Naturally, I told him to go fuck himself, but that’s when things got worse. I did some digging, and you’re in bigger shit than you realise. Mulligan isn’t the person in charge, he’s just the face. He has some pretty serious backers behind him, and I’m struggling to find out anything about them. Whoever it is wants to hide their involvement, and they’ve done a fucking good job,” Donny explains, and Kellan being the cocky twat he is, chuckles.

I turn to look at Kellan just as he playfully elbows Liam in the stomach and his overly confident tone comes out louder than I think he intends. “Bet I could find out who they are. Give me forty-eight hours. Deal?”

Liam rolls his eyes at him, but I can see the ghost of a smile that he’s trying to hold back. “What are we betting?”

Before Liam has the chance to reply, Donny cuts in. “I will give you ten grand if you can find out who they are within forty-eight hours. If you do it within a week, you can have five. I’ve had my best hackers on this for a week now and they’ve got nothing. What makes you think you can do better?”

Donny looks Kellan up and down with a sneer, and both Kellan and Liam stand a bit taller, their hackles raised at the way Donny is looking down his nose at Kellan. At first appearance, Kellan looks like a typical guy. He's got this hot geeky vibe that women seem to love, and despite being a little neurotic and sarcastic, he's actually not a bad guy. Weirdly, I feel just as protective of him as Liam does. These guys are my family now, and nobody treats Kellan like shit except me.

"Kellan's the best hacker we know. He will have it done, so don't doubt him. What I need to know is how much of a problem Mulligan—or whoever the fuck is pulling his strings—is going to be to me and my family?" I snap, getting Donny to focus on the main issue here. I need to know if my family is in any danger.

Donny sighs and his belly gets bigger as he exhales, causing the hem of his shirt to ride up, exposing a patch of his skin, and I can't help but retch. His hairy beer belly is the last thing I ever want to see. "Honestly, I have no idea. There's no way in this fucking world am I paying them any of tonight's royalties though. They can suck my big hairy balls if they think that. So, I imagine when we don't pay, we will shoot higher on their radar and it might be worth being prepared for that."

"How the fuck do we do that?" Dec grumbles, as he paces around the small locker room. I can see the concern in his eyes as they keep flitting towards me. Dec has been my brother since we went into the foster system together as kids, and he's been looking after me ever since. I'm a couple of years younger than him, and he's always acted like the protective older brother. The mere thought that I'm in danger has him on edge. I don't know how many arguments we've had recently about me getting out of the life and settling down like he has. He runs a successful nightclub and spends all his free time with his girl, Belle. Well... he does when she's not training to be a doctor or working on the wards.

Kellan, who looks like he's about two seconds from joining Dec in a pacing race, runs his fingers through his hair as he cuts in. "I know this probably sounds like a stupid

fucking question, but I have to ask, why the hell don't you just go back to Ireland and do the fight like he wants? Surely that would solve everything?"

He's right, it would solve everything, but as I'm getting used to expecting, life isn't that easy for me. With a huff, I explain the predicaments. "I offered to go back and do the fight, but it's not that simple. Before I moved here to work with Bree, I was working for Paddy, and I had a big fight scheduled. We'd been promoting it for months and had already sold tickets and bets had been placed. It was going to be epic. But, then this asshole here decided to kidnap Bree and when you both decided to get married and take over the business, the timeline was brought forward. Paddy told me he needed me to move straight away... so I did. I planned to still go back to do the fight, but then Bree got kidnapped, and so I cancelled the fight to move here to help her with the business while she was in the hospital. He lost a lot of money, not to mention what he would have made on bets. He thinks I owe him that. His suggestion was for me to do the fight as planned, promote it the same way I did before, to big it up as much as I possibly could. Then he wanted me to throw the fight and go down in the fourth round. He will obviously have bet on that happening, and he will clean house, as everyone would expect me to win. But, I can't cheat, and I sure as fuck will never ever throw a fight. I have a winning streak for a reason, and I sure as shit am not going to end it on purpose."

I can feel the blood bubbling away under the surface as my heart begins to race. My hands open and close into fists as I let the rage simmer under the surface. I try to grasp onto it, knowing I can use it in the fight soon.

"Anyone who really knows you knows that you'd never throw a fight. He's an idiot for even asking," Dec spits, his voice becoming a low growl as he does a piss-poor job of hiding the anger in his expression. Both he and Liam have matching pissed off looks on their faces.

"I think that's the point. He wouldn't get any backlash because nobody would accuse Kian of throwing the fight. It would also throw the bidding of future fights here into turmoil,

as Kian wouldn't be the sure thing people thought before. So it's a double-edged sword. He gets his money, but it will ruin Kian's reputation, and Donny here would lose money in future bets. It's actually a very clever plan," Kellan muses aloud, and suddenly he's faced with a lot of angry glares. "What? I'm not saying I agree, I'm just saying it's a clever strategy!"

Kellan throws his hands in the air like a dramatic teenager, and I can't help but laugh. "Kellan's right. It's a smart plan, but we need to be smarter. I have no doubt he will come for me after I win this fight."

"So what do we do?" Liam asks, his face scrunched up, like he's trying really hard to solve the puzzle, but it's missing a piece.

"I have no fucking clue. Let's worry about it another day. Can I just get on with kicking the crap out of that shit stain, Brown, please?" I ask, as I hop from one foot to the other, continuing my pre-fight warm up. I don't have time to worry about future threats. I need to worry about the here and now, and that means I need to get my game face on, get in that fucking hexagon, and just do what I do best.

"We will be in touch with you, Donny, with a plan. If you get in any trouble, you have my number. Keep me updated. And make sure you send me everything I need to know, so that Kellan can get started on his task tomorrow. Okay?" Liam asks, though his voice really leaves no room for discussion. He all but kicks Donny out of the locker room, his hand on his back as he guides him to the door.

As he's leaving, Donny gives me instructions about the fight, but I can't hear him. I'm in my own head, psyching myself out. I shut out the world around me as I jump and stretch, slowly elevating my heart rate and getting all my muscles and ligaments ready to fight. Mentally, I give myself the pep talk I always do. Telling myself I can win, this will be a walk in the park.

I go over the game plan I've been perfecting over the last couple of weeks, reciting all Brown's weaknesses. I've watched replays of his fights and have memorised his moves

and how best to counter them. I know exactly how he will behave, and what I need to do in return. I'm better than him, and he knows it. I just need to go out there and do what I do best.

I try not to think about the gorgeous blonde out there in the crowd. I definitely don't think about what she might be wearing, or if she's going to be cheering my name. Will she be worried about me if the guy manages to land a blow? Will she get hot under the collar, watching me destroy him?

Fuck! I really need to focus on the fight because any more thoughts of Freya and my dick will never go down. And I'm fairly certain it's not safe to have a massive hard on in the middle of a cage fight. I definitely don't need a trip to the hospital with a broken dick. I'm quite fond of my cock and I need him in full working order.

Dec taps my shoulder twice, signalling the fight is about to start. The guys peel out of the door and as it slams shut, leaving me alone; I squat down low and jump up as high as I can. I repeat that a couple of times, and on the third time, as I jump, I let out the loudest roar I can. My throat vibrates and my body shakes as I embrace the tensions and the nerves.

I let the adrenaline flood my system, and I feel my heart racing as my nerve endings tingle. This is why I fight. The thrill. I can't wait to get in that hexagon and show everyone exactly who Kian O'Shay really is. I'm a force of nature, and I'm not someone to be messed with.

CHAPTER EIGHT



Freya

The energy in the large, rundown abandoned warehouse is electric. It's almost like you can feel the nerves, excitement, and anxiety pinging all around the room. It reminds me of when I used to watch *Sonic The Hedgehog* as a child, and he'd run around bouncing off the walls. That's what it feels like in here. But it also feels like the crowd could turn at any moment, and I think that's part of the excitement.

Liam, Bree, Mia, Kellan, and I arrive together. Kian left home about an hour earlier than us when Declan and Belle picked him up. Declan is his unofficial trainer, and they go early to get set up in the locker room before any of the fans arrive. I was in the shower when Kian left, so I didn't get a chance to speak to him.

After this morning, I'd spent most of my time hiding out in my room editing my latest book, but all I kept thinking about was going to him. But the mortification over the fact I cried in front of him was more than enough to keep me locked up in my room forever.

I don't know what it is about Kian, but he pushes my buttons in ways nobody ever has. It's like my body is drawn to his, and whenever we're in the same room together, we can't

help but end up in each other's arms. It's like we're magnets, and it's our destiny to connect. But Kian's right, it's not fair on anyone involved if we go down that road.

I may not be exclusively dating Brandon, but he still deserves better. Kian does too. I can't keep doing this frustrating dance with him, where he pulls me close, only for me to freak out and push him away. He scares the shit out of me because he's everything I shouldn't want, yet he's everything my body craves. But, if I want out of this lifestyle, then I have to get away from Kian, and allowing these little trysts to keep happening—no matter how fucking mouth-wateringly hot they are—it's not fair on any of us. I've made my choice and now I have to live with it.

I can understand Kian's point of view when he said that while he feels this way about me, and I'm all he thinks about, then he can't be in the same room as me or pretend to be friends with me like nothing's ever happened between us. I know it causes him physical pain, and so I completely understand his desire to not be alone with me, or get too close. Just because I understand where he's coming from, doesn't mean he still isn't ripping my heart right out of my chest with a spoon.

I was so busy hiding from him, I completely forgot to ask if he still wanted me to come to the fight. I know in the kitchen this morning he said I should come, but I wanted to check beforehand, so I sent him a text.

Freya: Hey, so I meant to catch you before I left. I wanted to check with you after everything that happened this morning. Do you still want me to come to your fight? You can say no! I don't want to distract you and risk you getting hurt.

I end the message and throw the phone on my bed, but I barely turn around before it beeps to tell me I've received a reply. That was fast.

Kian: No chance of me getting hurt, Beautiful. I want you to come and see me fight. Put the bullshit from this morning aside for just one night. Please promise you will be here.

Freya: I promise. If you promise me you won't get hurt. I'm not sure I can watch if you get hurt.

Kian: No chance of that, even if I get distracted by your beauty. I'm a fucking beast. I will rip Brown from limb to limb, and my cocky grin won't ever leave my face.

Freya: Calm down, Caveman. You're starting to sound a little big-headed.

Kian: Nah, Beautiful. Just confident, because I am that fucking good.

Freya: If you win tonight, I don't know how we will get your over-inflated ego back in the house.

Kian: No ifs involved. I will win. So what you're saying is I need someone to help me deflate my large head? I've always found sucking to be rather effective.

Freya: Trust you to turn everything dirty!

Kian: What can I say... I have a one track mind.

Freya: Well, get it back on track for your fight. You have to win. I can't watch you get hurt.

Kian: Careful, Beautiful...it almost sounds like you care.

Freya: I do care...too much.

Kian: Stay out of trouble until I find you after the fight. I care about you, too.

I've been staring at the message since I received it over an hour ago. The whole time I was getting dressed, putting on a bit of make-up, styling my hair. No matter what I was doing, I kept thinking about that message, and about whether I should reply to him. Once we got in the car and were on the way to the fight, I realised my window of opportunity had long since passed, and I just wanted to see Kian.

No matter how much I tried not to think about our little exchange, the more I analysed each and every text. What's really bad is that those short little messages brought me more excitement than the weeks I'd been texting Brandon.

Don't get me wrong, I enjoy talking to Brandon, and we really do get on well, but he doesn't make my heart race or my stomach flip the way Kian does. Maybe he will in time?

I'm pulled out of my own head by a loud voice calling out to us over the booming music that seems to echo around the large building. "Hey, guys," Belle calls, as she rushes over and pulls Bree into a hug. Once she's done with Bree, she moves on to Mia, before finally holding her arms out for me.

Belle is quite literally one of the nicest people I've ever met. We met her for the first time at Liam and Bree's joint hen and stag party before their wedding. Kian had helped Ry to arrange the night, and got a booth at Belle's Rose, one of the hottest new nightclubs in the city. That's when Kian told us his best friend, Declan, owned it, and we all met.

The connection between Dec and Kian is undeniable, and it's clear they are as close as brothers. They remind me a lot of Liam and Kellan, and I'm pleased he has someone like that in his life. At first when he introduced us to Belle—or Issy, if you're using her real name—I was a little jealous by how close they are. But you only have to be in Dec and Belle's presence for a few minutes to see how hopelessly in love they are. I'm not even ashamed to say I blushed an embarrassing shade of pink when Belle told us all how they met in a sex club. I try to let my mind gloss over the fact Kian bought Belle's virginity,

reminding myself that he did it for Dec and he never touched her. I don't even want to think why it makes me so jealous.

As soon as we're all finished saying hello to each other, Liam turns to face us girls with his usual stern big brother face. "We are going to go check up on Kian. Go to the bar to get a drink, and then head over to that table up on the balcony. Give Dec's name and they will let you in. Do not go anywhere else or get into any trouble." He looks fleetingly at each of us, but he's mainly focused on Bree, his tone softening just slightly when he reaches her. How Bree puts up with his overprotective bullshit, I will never know.

Bree cocks her hip and juts out her chin in a sign of rebellion as she meets my brother's firm gaze. She rolls her eyes as she tuts. "What trouble could we possibly get into here?"

I can't help but think Bree is tempting fate by saying something like that. I can see why Liam is worried. Bree's probably the most powerful person in this room right now, and there will be a fair few people who know that. For the most part, Bree leads a very normal life. We all go together to take Hallie to the park, and nobody stops us. But then there are times when men in suits will come over to show their allegiance, or if they're feeling really suicidal, they will tell her she's on some other family's patch, where she shouldn't be.

Usually she has security with her who deals with it, but sometimes if they're really rude, she shows them exactly why she's the leader. So, I can understand why Liam is worried about Bree attracting trouble, and he's only got even more protective of her since she became pregnant.

"Let's not find out, please." It's rare I see my brother beg, but there's definitely an element of pleading in his voice, and the way Bree's lips cock up to one side slightly tells me she knows she's won this round.

The boys start walking away to the locker room, and I act without thinking, running a couple of steps to catch up with them. Kellan's the person closest to me and so I grab hold of

his arm lightly. His head flips around so fast, his eyes full of fire as he looks at where my hand is connected to his inked arm, before looking down at me. When he realises it's me touching him, his expression softens slightly.

“Sorry..I-I just...Can you please...erm, give...Kian a message from me?” I ask, tripping over my words so badly they barely come out audible, and I sound like a mumbling mess.

Liam and Kellan's eyes bore into me, but they say nothing. The silence drags on until Kellan rolls his eyes at me. “What's the message?”

Oops. I was so flustered when I first started talking, asking him to pass along a message for me, that I'd forgotten to actually say what the message was. No wonder he's looking at me like I'm a lunatic.

I take a deep breath to try and counter the nerves, averting my eyes from his piercing gaze, in the hope that not looking at him will make me less nervous and a bit more coherent. “Sorry. Can you just tell him I'm thinking about him, and I hope he has a good fight? And remind him he promised me he wouldn't get hurt.”

My brothers have matching judgemental looks on their faces, and they're so intense they have me squirming. To have the full weight of their gazes aimed at me suddenly makes me want to shrink back. Why had I thought getting them to pass on the message was the best option?

They both drag their eyes over my body, like they're really looking at me for the first time since we got here, and I can't help but feel like they're assessing me. I'm back to trying not to squirm as I consciously try to pull the hem of my dress down.

I'm wearing a black skater-style dress with straps and a scoop neck that drops low enough to show off a decent amount of cleavage thanks to my favourite black lace push-up bra. The hem, which has a bright electric coloured pink strip around the bottom, sits mid-thigh, and is high enough to look sexy, but low enough to not look too slutty. I paired the dress with a

black pair of Converse, thinking that I didn't know what the flooring would be like in an illegal underground cage fight, and heels may not be appropriate.

Something that was confirmed when I saw the warehouse is in the middle of a muddy field. Besides, I knew we would be standing for long periods of times, and I fucking hate heels, so this was a great opportunity to not have to wear them.

Even though I know I look fine, particularly compared to some of the slutty outfits I've seen dotted around here—I mean, one girl had on a bikini top and a belt she's trying to pass off as a skirt—but under their gaze, I feel very judged.

Suddenly, Kellan shakes his head, chuckling to himself. “Kian's got his work cut out with you. And I will pass on your message.”

With that very cryptic exchange, the boys quickly turn and walk towards the locker room. I return to Bree, Mia, and Belle's side before we all make our way over to the bar.

“What can I get you all?” asks the young, good-looking guy behind the bar. I'm actually amazed they have a bar here. Kian told me they didn't release the actual location of the fight until an hour or so before. Kian finds out about an hour earlier than everyone else so he can get to the venue ahead of time and warm up in peace. But he also likes to check the venue out on the whole. He likes to make sure the hexagon is safe.

As I look around at this mind-boggling building, nothing would suggest this had been built recently. From the outside it looks like an old abandoned warehouse, but on the inside, you would think they built it for this exact purpose.

There's a top of the range lighting rig, suspended high in the air, which features a mixture of strobe and coloured lights, as well as some high-powered spotlights. Not to mention the fully stocked bar along one wall, and the VIP balcony that hangs over the hexagon. It all looks so professionally put together, like it's what this building was made for. Yet from the outside, it looks completely run down and dis-used. I guess that's the look they're going for.

“What are you having, Frey?” Mia asks as she lightly taps my shoulder to get my attention. I’d been so busy casting my eyes around this place, I completely zoned out and missed everyone placing their drinks order.

Turning around, I give the guy behind the bar an apologetic smile. “Vodka and coke, please.”

Returning my smile, he turns away to prepare our drinks as Bree lets out a big sigh. “Urgh. What I wouldn’t kill for a vodka right now,” she grumbles, looking angrily at the orange juice she has in her hand.

“Yeah, but you have a pretty good reason for not being able to drink,” Mia adds, trying to cheer Bree up, but she obviously is not in the mood.

“At this moment in time, I’m not seeing any good reason. My back aches, my pelvis feels like it’s grating on itself, and I need to piss like every five minutes. Not to mention the fact my hormones are literally all over the place. One minute I want to climb Liam like a tree, next I’m genuinely considering chopping his bollocks off so this can’t ever happen again. Oh, and then I cried at the Andrex advert on the TV because I thought the little labrador puppy was cute. I’m a fucking mess!” A light sheen of sweat coats Bree’s forehead, and she wipes it away with the back of her hand before she fans herself with it. “And it’s far too fucking hot in here.”

Mia and Belle both look at me, eyes wide as saucers as they take in Bree’s state, wondering what the hell to do. “Okay, I can’t help with most of those things, but maybe if we go and grab a seat where Liam told us, sitting down may help with the back and the pelvis thing. And maybe if we get out of the crowd, it won’t be as hot.”

We all wait on bated breath to see if Bree is going to agree or explode in some other way. She wasn’t kidding when she said her hormones were all over the place, but this isn’t the first time we’ve noticed. We’ve all been walking around on eggshells for the past few days, wondering which version of Bree we’re going to get.

Don't get me wrong, I love my sister-in-law to pieces, and I'm so happy she's having a baby. I just can't wait until the baby's here and Bree isn't as unstable.

"Yes! That's a great idea. Then if I'm still too hot, you can go find your asshole brother and he can come and fan me for the evening," Bree adds with a chuckle, as she leads the way towards the stairs.

Even though she's just over halfway through her pregnancy, and she doesn't have too big a bump, it's already starting to take its toll on her petite body. She's walking with a slight sway from one side to the other, almost like she's got something between her legs. Naturally, none of us have commented or asked if she's okay, since we are quite fond of keeping all our limbs. And with Bree's mood the way it is at the moment, you never know if she will be pleased that we care so much, or think we're picking on her and lose her shit.

Once we get up onto the balcony, it's not long before the guys reappear with their drinks and come to sit with us. I don't miss the matching scowls all three boys have, and for some reason it makes me anxious. I know Dec and Liam usually have their asshole masks in place, but not Kellan. He usually wears his heart on his sleeve, and you can see whatever is going on with him in a heartbeat. So the fact he looks a mixture of worried, anxious, and pissed, it sets my nerves on edge. They were just with Kian, which means he's involved somehow.

I try not to say anything, to just keep sipping my drink while listening to everyone talk about nothing, but as hard as I try, I can't stop the worrying. "Is everything alright with Kian?"

All eyes snap to me, and I feel judged under the weight of their differing looks. Some are confused as to why I would ask that, my brothers look pissed that I'm concerned about Kian, but Dec looks like he's almost amused. "Why wouldn't it be?" Dec asks, his eyebrows raising as he assesses me.

"You all looked worried when you came out from seeing him. You didn't seem concerned when you went to see him,

which would lead me to believe something happened in the dressing room, and I would like to know what.” I try to sound strong and confident, but inside I’m shaking like a fucking leaf.

“Why do you want to know? Kian said you wanted out of this lifestyle. Surely, if that’s the case, you don’t need to know what’s happening.” It seems like Dec is trying to test me, or wind me up. I can’t tell which. Maybe he’s right? If I really do plan on getting as far away from all this shit as possible, then I’m going to have to get used to being kept out of the loop with these types of things. Knowing about them means I’m part of it, and that’s something I was very sure I didn’t want.

But as I’m standing here now, faced with the decision to walk away or not, it’s suddenly not as easy as I thought. My brain is going to the worst-case scenario, and the more I overthink things, the worse it’s going to get. So, maybe knowing is the best thing?

“I just want to know if Kian’s okay,” I mumble, suddenly not sounding as confident as I did before.

“He’s fine. We just had a little trouble—”

Before Declan gets a chance to finish his sentence, Bree cuts him off. “Trouble? What kind of trouble? Is he okay?” I can hear the concern in her voice, and it almost makes me smile—if I wasn’t so fucking worried.

I know when Paddy first told Bree he was sending Kian down to help her, she was pissed. She wanted to rule with Liam by her side, and she didn’t think she needed anyone else. Then Kian inserted himself into her life, and he’s just one of those people that’s hard not to like. Bree and Kian really bonded while she was in the hospital after being kidnapped, and she classes him as family now. So I’m not surprised that she’s both pissed and concerned over the idea he might be in some trouble.

“Relax, Princess. He’s fine,” Liam soothes, as he takes hold of Bree’s hand to try and reassure her, but you can tell by the look on her face, she’s having none of it.

“Liam! Tell me now or so help me God I will castrate you!” Bree snaps, her voice just as fiery as her bright red hair.

Kellan, who obviously has a death wish, starts to chuckle. “No, you wouldn’t. You like his cock far too much for that.”

Mia smacks him around the head, which causes Kellan to grumble while the rest of the table chuckles. Well...all but Bree, who has now turned her death stare onto Kellan. “You’re right, I do quite like Liam’s cock...”

“Gross,” I mutter as a ripple of disgust shudders through my body at the mere mention of my brother’s cock. Obviously, my comment goes unheard because Bree continues.

“Your cock, on the other hand, means nothing to me. So, tell me what’s going on with Kian, or I will cut your cock off and hang it around your neck on a necklace. Hallie will have to live with being an only child!” Bree’s tone is hard and fierce, and her matching glare makes it very clear how serious she is.

Kellan’s neck ripples as he tries to gulp, his eyes wide at the threat of what Bree would do to him. I also notice he tries to discreetly move one of his hands to cover his crown jewels. But that’s a pointless task because we all know if Bree wants to cut off his cock, she will without hesitation. Combine that with her obvious hormonal instability, and Kellan looks very sure Bree might actually follow through with her threats, which is why he wastes no time spilling everything he knows.

“Kian is being threatened by the Irish fight organiser. Donny, who runs the fights here in London, is getting threats too. Apparently, until Kian pays off the Irish debt, he’s only on loan to Donny. They expect a cut of his royalties, which, of course, Donny won’t give them. Kian says he doesn’t owe them anything, which is causing problems. Long story short, they want him to go to Ireland to fight, but if he does, the only way he can settle his debt is if he throws the fight and loses on purpose. Because Kian won’t ever do that, he’s screwed. Oh and there’s a secret backer involved that nobody knows the identity of, and he’s pulling a lot of the strings, but nobody seems to know why.”

Kellan talks so fast I can barely keep up with him. To be honest, as soon as I hear that Kian is being threatened, a loud buzzing starts in my ears, and my heart races. Fear ripples beneath the surface of my skin, and I hate the fact I'm scared for Kian.

Bree looks like she's about to burst with rage, and it's only Liam's hand on her knee that's stopping her from leaping to her feet. "We promised him he could have tonight to do his fight, and we would worry about all that shit tomorrow. So, just enjoy the fight tonight, Princess. You can use your knife tomorrow."

The way Liam looks at Bree is so fucking beautiful, and a look of tranquillity passes across her face and she seems to relax. Even though I'm happy to agree with Liam's plan to just let Kian have tonight, I can't relax. No matter what I try to do, or how much I try to distract myself, the idea of Kian being in danger scares the shit out of me. This is exactly why I told him I couldn't ever date him. If I'm this worried for him now, and he's just a crush, how will I feel if I ever fall in love with him? The terror would cripple me, and I can't live like that.

We all look like we're waiting for someone else to talk, to move past the elephant in the room and start a new conversation, but nobody seems to know what to say. We're all worried, not just for Kian, but for the whole family. With the Doughty's, if you threaten one of us, you threaten us all. Kian's enemies will learn that soon enough, but it doesn't stop us all from mulling that over now.

Thankfully, we are pulled out of our funk when the music cuts off and a loud, gruff voice rings out over the extensive speaker system. "Ladies and gentlemen, I want to thank you all for coming to our fight tonight. I hope you all enjoyed the warm up fight, but we all know you're here for the main event. This is your last warning. The betting booths will close the minute the second fighter steps into the ring. Even if you are in the queue, you will not be allowed to bet. So, if you want to, don't wait. Go now!" He points towards the row of betting booths that are adjacent to the bar, and a steady crowd of people make their way towards the booths, pushing and

shoving at each other to make sure they get a good place in the queue and don't miss out.

“What kind of fucking idiot leaves it this late to bet?” Kellan grumbles, and I can't help but agree with him.

I placed my bet the moment I arrived, although everyone else thinks I went to the toilet. Obviously Kian is the odds-on favourite to win, given his undefeated streak in Ireland. So, if he wins, I won't make a great amount of money. But I did put an extra on my bet, specifying how I thought he would win and when. If those guesses pull through, I could be in for a nice little windfall. I haven't told anyone my bet, I just want to see how well I know Kian.

The announcer continues, his voice seeming to get even louder as he shouts into the microphone. “This is the fight you have all been waiting for, and so let's not waste any more time. Let's bring out your first contestant. He's a regular here with us, and he's won his last four fights. He's a crowd favourite and an absolute pleasure to watch. Ladies and Gentleman, let's give him the biggest welcome you can. Introducing... Johnny Brown.”

The music starts up louder than before, and I'm actually embarrassed for the guy that he chose *Eye Of The Tiger* as the song to walk out to. But there's no denying he's a crowd favourite, as the roars and screams echo around the building. Without saying a word, we all stand up and move towards the edge of the balcony so we can lean over and get a better view.

I can hear Liam and Bree arguing over whether Bree should be standing up. Liam wants her to sit on a stool, and Bree kindly reminds him that she's not a doll before telling him that if he gets her a stool, she'll hit him over the head with it. They have such a funny relationship, I can't help but chuckle.

As I look to the other side of me, Kellan is cuddled up to Mia, looking over her shoulder while kissing her neck. The cute as hell smile on her face lights up the room. Who knew Kellan could be romantic?

Sometimes when I'm surrounded by so much love, it makes my heart ache, wondering if I'm ever going to find that. But, at the same time, I'm also afraid for them. Their relationships have already been tested so much, with kidnappings and other drama. My heart hurts for all they've been through. I don't know how they can get out of bed each morning. Whilst they're in bed, in that little bubble with just each other, nothing can stop them or hurt them. But once they leave that bubble, they will always be in danger. I worry about them as they're my family, but I can't imagine how it would feel if they were my world.

The crowd seems to get even louder when a very large man enters the room below from a door on the left-hand side. He's flanked by an older man with a bald head, and a younger kid who looks to be carrying some bags. Brown, the guy who is fighting Kian, steps through the open door into the hexagon, and from the second his foot touches the canvas, it's like he's brought to life. He jumps from one foot to the other, raising his hands in the air to try and pump up the crowd while he roars.

I try to take in as much of his appearance as possible, which isn't easy, given how fast he's moving. He looks to be in his early twenties, but it's difficult to tell as his face is so crumpled with pent up aggression. His dark hair is flicked to one side using so much gel that his hair actually reflects off the spotlights. It's so much that it almost looks greasy.

This guy is tall, probably well over six feet, and even his muscles have muscles. He's built like a bodybuilder, and his biceps are so large that you can see the veins bursting from the skin. He doesn't need any tattoos, the blood vessels create their own sort of pattern. The muscles on his back and shoulders are so pronounced that you can barely make out his neck. He's wearing no T-shirt, and the blue shorts he has on are much shorter than they should be, showing off far more of his big thighs than I would have liked to see.

He moves towards the left side of the hexagon, and his two assistants stand on the other side of the cage. The young lad pokes a straw through the metal, and Brown leans in for a quick drink while the older man tries to pat his brow. It's

almost comical that they're trying to do this through the tiniest holes in the fencing, all while the crowd chant and cheer his name.

The announcer moves the microphone to his mouth to continue his introductions, and already my stomach is doing flip-flops and my heart races. "Our contestant is a newcomer to the London scene, but he's in no way a newbie. Over in Ireland, this fighter is a God, with the longest undefeated record they've had in over fifty years. With an impressive thirty-two wins under his belt, our next fighter is determined to bring his winning streak over to London too. Let's just hope for all the ladies here that he doesn't mess up his pretty boy face. So, without further ado—and please remember, the bets will finish now—let's welcome... Kian O'Shay."

As soon as Kian's name is mentioned, all the lights and music in the room are turned off, plunging us into darkness. Mumbblings from people wondering what's happening fill the room, but it's not long before they're silenced. The blackout seems to last just long enough to get everyone's blood pumping, sending the anticipation skyrocketing through the roof, and when it feels as though we're all sitting on a knife's edge, that's when Kian—the cocky motherfucker that he is—decides to make an appearance.

"I'm sexy and I know it..."

The spotlights flick on as the LMFAO song, *Sexy and I Know It* rings out through the warehouse. Kian blasts through the door on the right-hand side of the room, wearing just a pair of hot pink shorts that hang down to just below his knees. Even from up here on the balcony, I can see his fucking cheesy grin, complete with those adorable dimples, as he practically skips towards the hexagon. I don't know if he's wearing some kind of oil on his skin, but the lights seem to reflect off his rippling muscles, making them even more mouthwatering.

"I know I ripped the piss out of him for them, but those fucking pink shorts do actually suit him," Kellan chuckles, and I can't help but laugh along with him because it's true. Kian is probably one of the few guys I know who could get away with wearing that colour. I once asked him why he fought in pink,

and he laughed, telling me about the very first time he fought everyone called him a pretty boy and said he would get his pretty face all smashed up. Naturally, Kian kicked his opponent's ass, and he's been playing up to his pretty boy name ever since.

I'm transfixed as I watch Kian work through the crowd. It's obvious they're not cheering for him anywhere near as much as the other guy, but there's definitely a few people on his side. I spot a couple of very scantily clad women pushing their way forward, right into his path as they thrust their tits into his face.

The tiny scraps of clothing that pass as a bikini top just about cover their nipples, but the rest of their tits are all on display. As they drag their hands over his six-pack, I can feel my grip tightening around the bar I'm leaning on. I try not to think about why it bothers me so much to see them throwing themselves at him. It's obvious he isn't interested, and it doesn't take long before Dec is practically barging them out of the way so Kian can get through. He made his way down there to be with Kian as soon as the lights went down. He only came up here to check on Belle, which is ridiculously cute, and not at all what I've come to expect from the hardness of Declan.

I watch as Declan gives him some kind of pep talk, and it's obviously getting Kian riled up, because he starts bouncing more energetically from one foot to the other, before a loud whooping noise rips from him. With that, he climbs into the hexagon and the referee, who is in there with them, closes the door and locks it. Once that happens, the mood in the room seems to change and everyone quietens as they all wait patiently to see what happens next.

I'm completely engrossed watching Kian in his element as he stretches and warms up for the event. The other guy appears to be doing a lot less jumping and a lot more shouting abuse at Kian. Some of the names he's calling him would make a nun blush, and I can feel anger bubbling away under the surface, threatening to rip free. I don't know why, but I feel defensive over Kian, like I want to stand up for him. To shout abuse back at the dick opposite him.

Kian doesn't appear to be paying him any attention at all, which I think is irritating him even more. The referee shouts for both men to get into position, and Brown jumps at the chance, springing forward to stand beside the ref. Kian, on the other hand, takes his time, having a final word with Dec as he stands on one foot, his arm behind his back grabbing his foot as he stretches. He repeats the stretch with the other foot, and Declan moves away from the steps to stand beside the hexagon. He obviously isn't allowed to stand up on the steps while the fight is going on, and Brown's trainer has stood down from his steps too.

Before Kian joins his opponent in the middle of the hexagon, I watch as he scans the crowd, almost like he's looking for something in particular. He spins full circle, looking at the crowd standing around the cage, before he casts his eyes up to the balcony.

I can tell the exact moment his eyes meet mine because it's like time stops and my breath catches. Even from this distance, I can see the sparkle in his crystal blue eyes as they bore into me. His mouth tips up into his signature cocky grin, those cute as fuck dimples back on display, only this time they are all for me.

I try to tell myself that it's not just me he's looking at. We're all standing beside each other. It could be any one of us, or all of us, that he's smiling at. But I know that's just my brain's way of bullshitting myself. He's looking directly at me, his eyes are fixed on mine, and my heart is racing under the intensity of his gaze. Then the cocky fucker goes and winks at me, before turning around quickly and running to the centre of the hexagon next to the referee. As Kian stares down his opponent, my breath finally returns in short gasps and all I can think is, what the fuck was that about?

It was only a look and a wink, but he ignited a fire in my body that I'd prefer to ignore, and as the crowd gets rowdier, they fuel the fire. I can feel it burning under my skin, travelling deep into my core the more I watch the lights reflect off Kian's muscles. This is Kian in his element. The spotlights are on him, his muscles are on full display, and he's talking

shit to his opponent. I can see he's winding him up, baiting him, because he wants him to make the first move.

His opponent is a lot bigger than him, which is exactly why Kian's strategy will be to exhaust this guy as soon as possible. Getting him to make the first move and to get all hyped up is perfect, and Kian has that special ability to annoy the fuck out of people, which is clearly benefiting him right now. I know in just a couple of minutes, Brown is going to start throwing punches at Kian, and it's a fact that at least some will hit him, and I hate the thought of him getting hurt.

That's why there's a war of emotions swirling around at the moment. Part of me—controlled by my lady bits—is so turned on, watching him display how powerful and strong he really is. But then the part of me controlled by my brain can't help the logical thinking, which is that I'm about to watch a guy I care about very much get beat up, and that fucking terrifies me.

The referee seems to tell Kian and Brown the rules, and I can see Kian is still winding Brown up rather than listening. I guess it's the same speech they get before every match, so they aren't all that bothered about listening. I'm so busy watching the way Kian's muscles ripple as he moves about that I miss the referee signalling for the fight to start. It's not until Brown launches himself at Kian, his fist raised, that I realise it's even begun. The crowd roars as Kian manages to duck out of the way at the last second, monopolising the situation by planting two quick jabs into each side of his opponents ribs.

The round continues on like that, with Kian bopping from one foot to the other, weaving out of the way of Brown, who looks like a bull in a china shop, charging recklessly at Kian while he continues to duck out of the way. You can see Brown is getting more tired, but that doesn't stop him. He just keeps coming, though his swings look a little more lacklustre.

The first time his fist makes contact with Kian's face, I feel my heart stop and my stomach drops. I'm leaning so far over the balcony I'm close to falling, but I don't care. I shout along with the rest of the crowd, making sure Kian's okay, telling him to keep fighting. Obviously, Brown still has some power

behind his punches because when the second one hits just above his eye, blood pours from the cut.

I'm struggling to stop myself from running down to the hexagon next to Declan to find out if he's okay. Luckily, before I have the chance, the referee calls time for the first round. Fuck! Has it only been one round? I don't know how much more of this I can take. I feel like I've aged ten years in just one round. I'm going to go home grey with a nervous disposition.

I watch as Declan climbs into the hexagon, along with the old man I saw come in with Brown earlier. Brown has blood pouring from his nose and a cut above his eye, which I have to admit makes me a little proud. I know I probably sound like a fucking psycho, but I'd rather see his blood than Kian's.

Dec wastes no time patching up Kian's eye, as Kian wipes his brow and has some of the drink Dec brought in with him. Declan is clearly giving him a pep talk to keep Kian's spirits up, but the buzz of the crowd is so electric that you stand no chance of being able to hear anything.

There's some background music playing, but the crowd is so loud, I can't even make out the song. Everyone is rushing around, either trying to get closer to the hexagon, or moving towards the bar to get another drink. It feels as though the tension in the room has increased as everyone waits anxiously for the next round to begin.

The referee indicates its time for Dec and the old guy to clear out of the ring, and I can't help but notice, even with the butterfly strip over his eye, Kian is still wearing that damn cocky smirk and I can't help but smile. He's confident, and after watching that round, I can see why. He's good, and I have no doubt he will destroy Brown before long. I just hope he holds out a little longer so I can win my bet.

The next round starts, and Kian catches everyone off guard by launching himself at Brown. He clearly wasn't expecting it because Kian lands a couple of punches, and a knee to the ribs before Brown even tries to push Kian off. But Kian knows he's got the advantage, and he wastes no time ducking and

weaving, landing blows wherever and whenever he can. Brown cries out in pain as Kian smashes his knee into his gut, and as he folds over, Kian takes advantage of the situation and drives his knee up into Brown's nose.

Blood squirts out of what I'm very sure is now a broken nose, and Brown howls like an injured animal that Kian has trapped up against the cage wall. He doesn't let up, taking advantage of his weakened state by pressing him up against the fence so that he's caged in and can't move, giving Kian the ideal target. He manages to get in a couple of hard punches and a knee to the ribs before the referee pulls Kian off him, and Brown slumps to the floor.

I can't help but notice the crowd has quickly turned its allegiance, having seen how good Kian is. They're now chanting his name, calling for him to end this and destroy Brown who not too long ago they were cheering for.

The referee checks Brown over to make sure he's okay, and I wonder what happens next. I've been to underground fights before, but if I'm honest, I've never really paid all that much attention. Ryleigh's the one who's into danger and destruction. I just went because she dragged me along with her, and being the good big sister I am, I couldn't let her get in trouble by herself.

Now I'm starting to think I should have paid more attention, so I'd know the rules. Luckily, Liam and Kellan know the rules, and when they start shouting at the referee, I can pick them up really easily.

"For fuck's sake, ref... start the fucking countdown," shouts Kellan.

Liam, who is also leaning far over the balcony besides Bree, shouts down at the referee too. "This should be fucking over, ref. Count him out or let Kian finish him off."

The ref obviously can't hear what they're saying, as they are just one of hundreds of people who are currently shouting abuse at him. So, when he calls the end of round two, the crowd erupts in uproar. Unlike the last break, where everyone seemed to fizzle down slightly so they could go and get

another drink or have a walk about, this break is different. The tension in the air, if anything, seems to worsen, and the crowd remains in place, pushing to try and get closer to the hexagon.

The old man rushes over to Brown and begins to patch him up, but it seems like a bit of a useless task. I mean, he can barely hold himself upright, needing to lean on the cage for support. One arm is gripping his side where Kian's knee made contact pretty hard, and it's not difficult to tell he's in pain. His face is crumpled up, his eyes barely visible as one side is almost swollen shut. He looks a right fucking mess.

"The ref should have ended it that round," Bree mutters, more to herself than anyone in particular, but we all mumble our agreement.

I can't drag my eyes from Kian. I hate the fresh blood pouring from another wound and the swelling that seems to be growing over his other eye. Although it's clear he's winning, and will win the fight, he won't walk away from this without injury, and that hurts me more than anything. But, at the same time, I can't get over how fucking hot he looks.

His cocky confidence borders on arrogance, but he can be because he knows he's that good. He's covered in a thin layer of sweat, his normally fluffy dirty blonde hair is now plastered to his forehead, but it doesn't make him look any less gorgeous, and for that fact alone, I want to punch him.

It's impossible not to get overheated in here. This building was not made to hold this many people who are all getting hyped up, with the high-powered light and sound system overhead kicking out heat. Even though we aren't working out, I know we're all feeling a bit hot and sticky. So when Kellan reaches in front of Mia, who is standing to my right side, to pass me a bottle of water, I gladly accept it.

Taking a couple of big gulps, I go to hand it back to Kel, but Mia takes it from me instead, a small smile tipping up one side. She leans in closer before whispering so only I can hear. "He'll be okay, you know."

Mia looks at me with that knowing smile, and I lean into her slightly so she can put her arm around me. I know that, and

I know he will win. It's just a lot harder for me to see him get hit than I thought it would be. I explain this to Mia as discreetly as I can, given Kellan isn't too far away, but she just chuckles. "When you care about someone, it's hard to watch them fight. Maybe this has shown you just how much you care for Kian?" I can't help but notice there's a hope in her voice that I've not heard before, and I turn my firm gaze to her.

"You're the one who told me to date someone else," I snap. I'm very aware I'm being a bigger bitch than I should be, but it's the truth. She pushed me to date Brandon, to see if I could find someone normal, and now I have. So why can't I stop thinking about the stupid asshole voluntarily getting punched for fun? It's not Mia's fault I feel this way, but she is the person closest to me to take my anger out on. Luckily, she's used to dealing with Kellan and his pettiness, which I obviously inherited, and she just rolls her eyes.

"Please! Bree and I encouraged you to date Brandon for two reasons. First, we thought it would encourage Kian into action. Get him to stop pissing about flirting with you and actually ask you out. But second, we thought it would make you see that the feelings you have for that plain guy you seek will never live up to how you feel about Kian. If you decided not to leave the family in the meantime, then that's a happy by-product."

My jaw literally drops to the floor. "That's an awful lot of meddling," I mutter, and she chuckles.

"You two are idiots. The only two people who can't see how good you are for each other is you. I know the idea of you being with someone from our lifestyle scares the shit out of you, but surely the idea of not having him in your life is worse."

I contemplate what Mia's saying, and honestly, this isn't something new. I've been considering this for the last couple of weeks every time Brandon asks me out on a new date. I know there's a reason I haven't nailed down that second date, and the reason is wearing bright pink shorts below. He consumes my every waking thought, and a fair few when I'm

not awake too. But to say yes to him would mean me giving up on things I told myself I would never compromise on.

Thankfully, I'm pulled away from those thoughts and from finishing the conversation with Mia when the referee indicates its time for the fight to start, and the responding roar of the crowd practically has the walls vibrating. Either Kian wasn't ready for the fight to begin, or Brown got a microsecond head start, because before Kian even has time to throw his arms up in a shield, Brown lands two punches on the side of his head in quick succession. The force of him barrelling towards Kian, combined with how unsteady he is after the hits, means he's pushed towards the wall of the hexagon, caged in by Brown's body.

Brown only manages to land a couple of hits before Kian pushes him away, but you can tell the hits that found their target are having an effect on Kian. He's swaying a little more and there's fresh blood pissing down his face. He tries to shake his head from side to side to pull himself together, but his eyes scrunch up like he's in pain and my heart lurches. I have to grip a hold of the railing to stop myself from running down there.

Thankfully, the few punches Brown could land take it out of him, and he's stumbling back towards the cage. He's clearly used the last little bit of his energy, and once Kian gets over the initial pain and shock of the surprise attack, it's not long before he launches himself at Brown. His fists rain down on him, his knee raising a couple of times in quick succession to slam into his abdomen as Brown screams out in pain. The referee pulls Kian off him slightly, but that just gives Kian the space he needs to pull back his left hand before slamming it straight into the middle of his face.

I can hear the stomach churning crunch of bone all the way up here on the balcony, and blood sprays out of Brown's nose yet again, as his head seems to drop at an unnatural angle, looking like it just hangs there for a couple of seconds. His eyes flutter shut and his body sags against the cage wall, before hitting the ground and the roar from the crowd is deafening as his body makes a loud thud.

I cheer louder than anyone and I feel like for the first time since the fight began, I can catch my breath. The referee leans over Brown, and the whole crowd falls silent, waiting on bated breath as the ref tries to rouse him, but it's clear he's out and so he doesn't even bother with the countdown.

He raises his hand to signal that the match is over, and a loud bell rings out over the loudspeaker. The crowd erupts, as do all of us. We jump up into the air, shouting at the top of our lungs, hoping Kian can hear us.

My brothers hug their partners, but I keep my gaze fixed on the guy in the ring. My eyes scanning his body, looking for signs he's hurt, but he doesn't appear to be. As soon as Dec makes it into the hexagon, they pull each other in for a hug as they jump up and down like teenage girls at a boy band concert, and I can't help but laugh.

The referee takes hold of the microphone and walks over to Kian. Dec obviously knows what's about to happen, so he takes a step back, leaving Kian standing alone with the ref. With his free hand, he takes hold of Kian's arm and raises it in the air while shouting into the microphone. "And your winner... the still undefeated... Kian O'Shay."

The crowd goes wild, and you would never have known that at the start of the fight, he wasn't their favourite. I expect Kian to take in the crowd, to bask in the glory—the cocky asshole probably loves all the attention. But instead of addressing the people who are cheering his name like he's a local celebrity, he very deliberately raises his gaze to look up at us. The smile on his swelling face is bright, with a hint of smirk—just the way I like it. Even with cuts that are bleeding, the start of bruising, swelling, and covered in sweat, he's still unbelievably fucking beautiful.

I try to tell myself he's probably looking at all of us, and the guys all around me are shouting down words of congratulations to Kian, which has to be pulling his attention. But I know I'm just trying to bullshit my brain...again. There's no denying his eyes are locked with mine, and as the side of his mouth raises into a bigger smirk, I know that's all for me. Then, using his eye that isn't swollen, he winks at me

before bringing his hand to his mouth and he mimes blowing me a kiss. My heart stops and I can feel the blood rushing in my ears. He's very publicly acknowledging how he feels about me, and I have no idea what that means.

"I'm going to fucking kill him," Liam grumbles from beside Bree, and she shuts him up by slapping the back of her hand against his chest. He huffs before rubbing his pecs, trying to make out like Bree hurt him, but she just rolls her eyes and turns back to look at Kian.

Kian is doing a walk around the hexagon while the old man and the young kid try to carry a very dazed Brown out of there. Kian goes over and offers to help, but they obviously decline him as he goes back to cheering on the crowd, as the club promoter climbs into the ring and claims the microphone from the referee.

"I hope you all enjoyed our main event. We will have a couple more junior fights for you to feast your eyes on, so I highly recommend sticking around. For anyone who placed bets on this match, I can confirm that the match ended in the third round and Kian O'Shay won by knockout. Congratulations to anyone who won, and I hope you will all come back to see us sometime soon. I'm sure it won't be long before we convince Kian to put his undefeated streak on the line again. What do you say, Kian?"

He holds the microphone out to Kian, who leans forward to reply. "I will take on anyone, anywhere, at any time. I'm undefeated because I'm the best, and I will stay undefeated. There's nobody out there better than me. But, if anyone thinks they are, then by all means, come and challenge me." Kian's Irish accent becomes more pronounced as he talks, and I can't help but chuckle. Only he could make himself look even more cocky than he did before. Although, his argument is that he's not cocky, he's confident, and he has every reason to be confident because he's obviously the best. His stats speak for themselves.

"You heard it here, folks. If you think you can take on Kian, let me know. Until the next fight starts, grab some drinks at the bar and celebrate. The party will go on until the early

hours of the morning. So, have fun!” The promoter once again raises Kian’s hand in the air, earning another round of cheers from the people around us.

They’re obviously not cheering the flash of beer belly that appears as the promoter’s T-shirt rides up the higher he lifts his arm. I can’t help but laugh at Kian’s disgusted look when he catches sight of the hairy belly fully on display.

Reaching into my handbag, I pull out the betting slip from earlier, and read the writing printed on the slip. Kian O’Shay to win in the third round via knockout. Specialty bid. 250 to 1, with a bid of £100.

Holy shit! I just won twenty-five thousand pounds!

I’m staring at the betting slip and both Bree and Mia, who are standing either side of me, must have seen it too, because I can hear their gasps of realisation over what I’m holding.

“Holy fucking sweaty balls!” Bree shouts. “Did you bet on Kian and win?”

Nodding my head, I try to find the words. “Yeah. I knew he would win, so I thought I would take a guess at how. Obviously it was a complete fluke, and now I’m a little shocked.”

By this point, thanks to Bree’s outrage, everyone is hovering and looking at the betting slip. “Shit. Let’s hope people don’t think Kian threw the fight, so you would win,” Kellan adds, and my stomach drops.

“Shit. Will people really think that? I hadn’t thought of that when I placed the bet.” I genuinely hadn’t. I just wanted to support Kian. I was so confident he would win. It just felt like the right thing to do. Now I’m worried I’ve done the wrong thing.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Dec leading Kian out of the hexagon, and a crowd of scantily clad women throw themselves at him, thrusting their tits in his face. I don’t know what happens, but it’s like a red mist descends and I’m moving before I even realise it. My blood is bubbling as anger flows through my veins. There’s a little voice in my head

acknowledging this is jealousy, and that I have no fucking right to feel that, but I don't care.

I hear my family asking where I'm going and if I need someone to go with me? Before I reach the stairs, I turn to shout back at them. "I will be fine on my own. I've got my phone. I'm gonna claim my winnings and get a drink. I'll be back soon. You guys stay here." My brothers have matching looks of concern, and I can tell they are moments away from coming with me. If it weren't for the actions of Bree and Mia holding them back, they would have followed me.

The girls have smiles on their faces that I don't have time to read into. Instead, I run down the stairs, in the direction of Kian. I have no idea what the fuck I'm doing or why. All I know is that my body is pulling me this way, and for once I feel I have to listen.

CHAPTER NINE



Kian

Fuck! The thrill of winning never gets old. The cheers from the crowd as they change allegiance and suddenly start worshipping me like I'm a God, completely forgetting that less than half an hour ago they were booing me to cheer for Brown.

As his coaches carry him away, my stomach bottoms out a bit and I feel an overwhelming sense of guilt. I know I went in hard at the end, but at the start of the third, he caught me off guard. The ref should have called it at the end of the second, so when Brown came out swinging and got in a few cheap shots at the start of the third, I was fucking pissed. I was angry at myself for letting my guard down, and for not expecting him to fight back. But fuck me, he was half unconscious at the end of the second round. I never expected him to get a sudden boost of energy.

Nevertheless, I shouldn't have let my anger rule me. I went in harder than normal. I knew I had him beat, but still I wanted to punish him for getting an advantage over me, no matter how small. But now, as I watch them having to carry his big ass out of here, I worry I went in a bit too hard.

I know I shouldn't think about that sort of thing, or let it ruin my high. When we step into this ring, knowing it's an illegal underground fight, we accept the rules are different here than if we were fighting legally in the UFC. If this was a legal fight, there's no doubt in my mind the ref would have ended things in the second, but this isn't the same kind of fight, and when we sign up, we acknowledge that. We know there's a high probability we will get injured, and the more blood there is, the more excited the crowd gets.

Dec guides me out of the hexagon, his arm around my shoulder to move me in the right direction. He uses his free arm to push the women out of the way as they shuffle forward, desperately trying to get my attention. They're hardly dressed, pushing their tits in my direction, but I barely pay them any attention, letting Dec guide me to the dressing room. Once I'm at the door, I turn to my best friend. "Go and find your girl. I'm going to wind down and I'll be out soon. Okay?"

I know he spent most of the fight looking up at the balcony to make sure Belle was okay, his gaze merely flicking to the fight to cheer me on. I don't mind—in fact; I think it's kinda sweet. I can understand the draw because I feel it too. When I was celebrating my win, I couldn't help but look up at Freya. In a crowd full of people cheering my name, you would think that would satisfy my over-inflated ego, but it didn't. I needed to know she was cheering for me, and when I saw she was, my heart beat faster than it had all night. That was the moment I truly felt like a winner.

"Okay, brother. Come and find us up on the balcony when you're ready. You did well tonight. Proud of you, like always." It's not often we do the whole sentimental bullshit routine, but right now, I really needed to hear that. I've never had anyone on my side, cheering for me in life, except Dec. But he's always been there.

Every fight, every fucked up mistake I've made, and every life accomplishment. He's been there standing by my side through it all, and even though I know how he feels, hearing it aloud—when I've never heard it from anyone else before—it makes my heart ache.

I pull him in for a hug, and after a short squeeze we pull away, tapping each other on the back like that somehow makes our hug a bit more masculine. He walks away without any further discussion, which is good because I'm not sure I can take any more emotions. I'm just about to open the dressing room door with the key fob Donny gave to me, when I feel a pair of tits pressing against my back as long fingernails scrape across my abs. As she whispers into my ear, all I hear is an annoying, high-pitched noise. "Hey, baby. Shall I come in and show you a good time?"

I turn slightly to see a girl with platinum blonde hair, heavy makeup covering her face with blood-red lips that should look sexy but really don't. She's wearing the skimpiest bikini top that barely covers her nipples, never mind the rest of her tits. They're obviously fake, because they're so big and hard, they look like they're almost standing up on their own. She's wearing a tiny pair of denim shorts with her long legs on display, the five inch high black stilettos adding to her look. She looks completely fake, almost like a Barbie doll, and I remember a time when I would have pulled her into my dressing room for some fun, but those days ended weeks ago when I got my first taste of Freya.

I know she's dating someone else, and I'm probably fighting a losing battle chasing after her, but I honestly don't care. I can't in all good conscience fuck around while my head is thinking about someone else. I may be a dick, but messing with women like that just seems cruel. Besides, my cock only springs into action for one girl, and this isn't her.

"I'm not interested. So take your hands off me." I try to keep my voice soft but firm. I'm trying to let her down gently, but sadly, I don't think she takes the hint.

"Come on, baby. I can show you a real good time." Her hand tries to snake down to the front of my shorts, but I grab a hold of her hands and turn around, pushing her away gently as I do.

Fixing my gaze with her, I'm firmer this time in my approach. "I said, I'm not interested. So, unless you'd like me to call security, I suggest you leave now."

Her face falls, and she sticks her bottom lip out like she's sulking. I know it's supposed to look cute, as she attempts that puppy dog stare she thinks will win me over. It doesn't have the desired effect though, and she looks like a petulant teenager. "If you change your—"

"I won't!" I cut her off before she can finish her sentence, and I gently push her back a step more, so I can open the door to the locker room. I turn my back on her and that seems to work. I hear her release a huff as she goes.

As I walk into the dressing room, I open the latch on the door, so if Declan wants to come in, he can. Nobody else is stupid enough to try getting in the dressing rooms. Donny sets out rules at these types of events, and only idiots are stupid enough to break them. That's why I knew Slutty Barbie wouldn't follow me in here.

As soon as I put my earbuds in and begin my post-fight playlist, I start my usual warm down routine with some easy stretches. I will take care of all the cuts and swelling, as soon as I've done my routine. I learnt the hard way early on that if I don't properly stretch and warm down after a fight, my body tells me about it the next day.

My first few fights I was so high on the adrenaline of the win, I thought I could just celebrate and fuck the routine, but my body soon told me differently. Particularly now I'm older—twenty-five is old in the fighting world—and each fight is a bigger strain on my body; I need to make sure I look after it as best I can.

Which sounds kinda ironic after I climbed in the hexagon voluntarily, knowing I might get my ass beat, and he managed to land a couple of savage blows I wasn't expecting. So, if I want to be able to move properly tomorrow, I need to follow my ordinary routine.

I'm halfway through the stretches when I feel a tap on my shoulder, and I can't help but jump from the shock. Even though I left the door unlocked for Declan, I didn't really think he would show. He usually comes to take care of my wounds, but the pull of Belle was just that little bit stronger tonight. Or,

at least, I thought it was. I turn to tell him this and am shocked to find two men I've never seen before standing in front of me.

The younger guy on the right is tall and lanky, looking to be in his early twenties. His curly blonde hair sits tight against his head, reminding me of a young Justin Timberlake, with his matching baby face. He looks scared shitless as he stares me down, and I wonder why he, of all people, was selected for this particular task.

The big, burly guy on the left, on the other hand, was clearly made for this type of task. He's probably a good half a foot taller than me, and even his muscles have got muscles. His broad shoulders are so pronounced, he barely has any visible neck. His head is so bald the fluorescent lights of the changing room are reflecting off his skin, making it look like a crystal ball. I can also see that he's got a very large hunting knife in his hand, putting me on edge instantly. Fighting both guys at once would be easy, but give them weapons and it really is an unfair fight. I would still win, but it wouldn't be as easy as I first thought.

Questions flood my mind as I motion to them, showing I can't hear what they're saying, and I'm going to remove my earbuds. The lanky one nods. Who the hell are these guys? Does the lanky one have a knife too that I can't see? How the fuck did they get weapons into this building? I would need to have a serious fucking chat with Donny after this because I was promised a lot more fucking security than this.

As the surrounding noises return after I've removed the earbuds and turned off my music, I push all the thoughts and questions out of my mind and focus on the immediate threat in front of me. My heart racing, and I can feel my blood bubbling away under the surface, combining with the adrenaline from the fight, and my rage is building. How fucking dare these guys break into my changing room and threaten me!

"Who the fuck are you guys?" I ask casually, as I lean back against the lockers, trying to make it look like I'm bored by their very presence. I've spent years perfecting the art of winding someone up, and guys like these want to be seen as

hard, intimidating threats. To appear so completely unfazed by them will annoy them from the start, which will benefit me.

“We are here to deliver a message,” says the young, lanky kid, his voice sounding more shaky than it should for someone who is trying to be intimidating.

I wait, and the awkward silence stretches between us as I look between the idiots in front of me. I try to wait it out, but growing impatient, I snap at them. “Are you going to tell me what the damn message is, or do I need to guess? It’s been a while since I played charades, but if you make your gestures big enough, I might be able to work it out.”

The bigger guy’s eyes scrunch together as he glares at me, hatred spread across his face as he twirls the knife in his hand around. He looks almost uncomfortable holding it, but I’m assuming that’s all he managed to sneak in. I have no idea how he was able to get the thing past security, but I’m guessing there’s no chance Donny—or his equally incompetent security staff—would let a gun onsite. But this guy is holding the knife handle like you would a gun, showing his preference easily.

The young guy just looks scared, and my mention of the fact he clearly forgot the message he was supposed to pass along to me causes a blush to spread across his cheeks. I don’t think this kid wants to be here at all, which makes me wonder why he is. He’s clearly the wrong choice for the job, and unless his boss doesn’t have a fucking clue how to properly threaten someone, he was chosen for another reason. Maybe his boss thinks that by sending a young, scared kid, I won’t hurt him, but he’s wrong. If this kid tries anything, I won’t hesitate to retaliate. I just won’t make the first move.

Big nudges his elbow into Small’s side, which is the prompt he needs. He holds his head up and tries to seem taller and more confident, but sadly, he can’t hide the quiver in his voice. “We’re the family that owns your ass.”

I can’t help but chuckle. “I have no idea what or who you’re talking about. I’m not owned by anyone.”

Small glowers at me, clearly not happy that I’m laughing at him, so I try my best to school my features and take him

seriously. His gaze locks with mine and I have to admit I'm a little surprised by him suddenly growing a pair of balls. "We run the fight scene in Ireland, and Mulligan works for us. Pretty soon Donny will work for us and we will own all the UK fight scenes, too. You owe us money, and despite several offers, which our boss believes are more than reasonable, you have turned us down repeatedly. This is not something we can allow to stand. You owe us a debt and you will pay it."

As I lean back on the locker, trying to appear as casual as I can, my mind races as I try to think of who the fuck these guys work for. I also try to give off my usual I don't give a shit attitude, so they can see their thinly-veiled threats mean fuck all to me. "Is there a reason you are talking about them in the third person? Like when you say 'we', do you mean the royal 'we', where it's just one important person whose head is too big for their body? Do I get a clue in this ridiculous guessing game?"

The big guy is the first to fall prey to my tactic, and he snaps at me. "You really are an obnoxious little turd."

I can't help but chuckle. "I've been told that before, but from you, I will take it as a compliment."

I can see he's scrunching his hands into fists, desperate to attack, but, for some reason, he doesn't. This just got a whole lot more interesting. I think I know why these two were sent now. The aim isn't to threaten or hurt me, just to get the message to me. The person obviously knows I'm capable of kicking the asses of whoever they send, so by sending the scared kid, they can get the message across without risk of me lashing out—or them trying to hurt me when I wind them up enough. Though there's still a chance of that happening with the big guy, since he looks like the blood vessel in his neck is about to pop. You can see it pulsating from here.

"Listen, our boss would like to meet with you, but before he does, he wants to make a few things very clear, and the first is that he owns you from now on. He won't ever make you throw a fight—which is him compromising, by the way—but by doing that, it means it will take longer for you to pay off your debt to him. He doesn't want any trouble from you, but

he did say to make it very clear that participation is not voluntary. You will pay back your debt, or the people you love will suffer. We know you don't give a shit if we harm you. Chances are you could fight your way out of it, so we have decided that the best way to punish you would be to hurt the people you love.

“You see... we did our research on you. We know you work for Brianna O’Keenan, and we know you’re close with her. We also know your best friend is Declan Reilly. He’s got a pretty little girlfriend, Issy, or should we call her Belle? You are close with her, too. We also know you live with a big family, including Liam, Kellan, Freya, and Mia, who all seem to be close to you. Not to mention little baby Hallie—”

“Enough!” I shout, cutting him off before he can say anything more. I push myself off the lockers, stalking towards the pair with venom in my eyes. How fucking dare they threaten the people I love?

Small tries to take a step back as I stalk towards them, but Big puts his hand behind his back, telling him to hold firm, while he raises his other hand—the one containing the hunting knife—making the threat very clear. Though I can barely see anything through the red mist that’s descended over my vision, the echo of my heart beating in my ears.

“You can tell your boss from me he just made the biggest mistake. Nobody threatens the people I love and gets away with it. Besides, they aren’t ordinary people you’re threatening. In case your dickhead of a boss has been living under a rock for the past year, I work for the biggest crime family in the UK. We got where we are by proving we are good enough. We’ve battled every enemy and have won each and every time. So I can guaran-fucking-tee that you and your boss are not a problem for us!”

I add as much of my cocky smugness in as I can. Not only to wind them both up, but also to show I really don’t give a shit what they have to say. If they want to come for me, I know my family will stand by my side even if I ask them not to. I’ve never had that kind of family or support before, and I

have to admit, I kinda like it. So for these pricks to try and take that from me, they can fuck all the way off.

Big raises his knife in my direction, clearly hoping that would be enough to cause me to back off, but it's not. I step forward until the tip of the blade is pressing into my neck, right beside my carotid artery. One minor step, or a slip up on Big's side and the tip of the hunting blade will cut me in a way I have no doubt will cause me to bleed out instantly, but I stay strong, my eyes fixed with his. It's like we're playing a game of chicken and I feel certain he's going to cave first.

"You don't even know who our boss is," Big says, with a growl, and I can't help but chuckle—though I have to stop quickly as the movement presses the knife into my neck a little more, and if the warmth trickling down my skin is any indication, I'm guessing the knife has pierced the flesh a little causing me to bleed.

"That's exactly my point. Your boss can't be that fucking badass if he has to hide behind you two douchebros. If he was as big and bad as you seem to think he is, surely knowing his name would help...you know, add to the fear and all that."

They look at each other, and I have to hold back the eye roll I can feel coming. These two idiots have no fucking clue that I'm playing them for information, and by the looks of it, they're ready to spill.

"He will tell you when he's ready. But if you want to know how powerful he is, then that we can help with. I'm sure you've heard of the Marcushio family?" Small says, as my ears prick up at the mention of Vinnie's—or Shane as he's now called—family.

After they helped with the kidnapping of Bree, the Marcushio family went into hiding. They were one of the biggest families here in the UK, and worked closely alongside Vernon O'Keenan when he was in power. Until it all went to shit when he hired Liam to kill the leader of the Marcushio family. It wasn't until after Liam had killed his target did Vernon realise he had the wrong man. He thought Leo Marcushio was stealing from him, and he wasn't.

When Bree was kidnapped, they made it look like the Marcushios, under the leadership of Leon's teenage son, Vinnie, were getting their revenge. But it was all a ruse by Vernon. Vinnie was as much a victim as Bree was, which is why they helped him get free of his family to live a normal life. They wanted him to lead, to rule the family as his father did, but Vinnie craved a normal teenage life. So we faked his death and the newest member of our family, Shane, was born.

We never heard from the Marcushios after that. We thought with no leader; they had disbanded, so I'm a little in shock to hear them being mentioned now. "The Marcushios disbanded after we defeated them and their heir, Vinnie, died." I try to keep my voice as neutral as possible, hoping they can't read anything more on my face.

Thankfully, these two aren't the brightest bulbs, and Small continues his explanation. "The Marcushios may have had no leader, but they had no intention of backing down. They wanted revenge for the murders of Leon and Vinnie. So, when our boss stepped in and asked them to join us, they were happy to side with us. Our boss is very familiar with the family and so it seemed like a natural alliance. After all, we share a common enemy."

"Why do I get the feeling this little thing we have between us is about more than just illegal underground cage fighting?" I ask, suddenly feeling like I'm in a lot more trouble than I thought.

Small actually has the audacity to laugh, and I try to not to chuckle myself when I hear his ridiculously high-pitched laugh, that sounds just like a teenage girl giggling. "You would be right. You're a pawn, but now you are our pawn. Our family has big plans, and we plan on using you to help us execute these big plans."

This time I can't hold back the eye roll. "Well, if that's your plan, you're shit out of luck. Nothing in this world will ever make me move against my family. So, you can tell your boss he needs to come up with a better plan. Not meaning to be harsh, but it's hardly well thought out. Maybe he should spend more time coming up with a better plan, and less time

on all this cloak and dagger shit. So you can tell him...thank you for his kind, albeit fucking dumb offer, but I would like to politely decline. Now, if you will excuse me, I need to change and I'd rather not do it in front of you two perverts."

Clearly I went a little overboard on the cockiness, because it sends Big into a rage. Before I have a chance to react, he slams the fist that's not holding a knife into my face. "How fucking dare you? This is not open for debate, you cocky twat. You will do as you are told, or we will make you. But, next time it won't be you I punch. Maybe it will be your pretty redhead boss. I could make her bleed the same colour as her hair."

I pull my fist back to retaliate, but Big presses the knife into my neck, causing the cut to widen as I feel a sharp stabbing pain shooting across my throat. It won't take much for him to hit the carotid now. Small leans over so that he's whispering in my ear, and he suddenly gains a confidence I didn't think he was capable of.

"We will find every person you care about and we'll make you watch as we slice them up, piece by piece. Nobody will be safe. All you have to do is agree to cooperate. We will tell you when we need you, and you will do as we tell you. Who knows, there may even be a job for you when this is all over."

I turn to look at him, trying not to wince as the stinging pain in my neck worsens as the blade slices more of my skin as I move my head. But I'm a firm believer in looking your enemy in the eye, and what I see looking back is a different person than the one that walked in.

This young kid played me like a fucking violin. He made me think he was stupid, shy, and that he didn't want to be here or be part of all this shit. But the guy threatening me now, he's full of confidence, and the idea of violence excites him. If I were a betting man, I would say this guy is high up in the family, and he likes this lifestyle. There's something about the way his personality switches that reminds me of a psychopath, and now I'm suddenly a lot more worried about how I'm going to deal with this.

Before I have a chance to say anything, the door to the locker room slams closed, causing us all to jump. I didn't even hear it open. As I look around Big and Small to see who it is, my stomach bottoms out and I feel overwhelmed with fear when I see my beautiful Freya standing in the middle of the lion's den. I know she can see Big holding a knife to my throat, and blood pouring down the side of my neck. I expect fear to be written all over her face, but it isn't. Instead, her face is the perfect mask of indifference, and for the first time, I can see Liam in her features.

"I've already called for backup and security. They will be here in a matter of minutes. So I suggest you put the knife down and walk the fuck out of here while you still have the chance. If our people catch you, you won't be able to walk away."

Fuck! Where the hell did this Freya come from? There's not a hint of fear in her voice and the shy girl I know is nowhere to be found. This girl has her back straight, her head held high, and the fierce look in her eyes says she won't be messed with. Big lowers the knife from my neck, and both of them are transfixed looking at Freya. I don't fucking blame them. I would have got hard looking at her sexy curves in that dress, but after seeing her threaten these assholes for me, I don't think my cock will ever go down again.

I know she obviously hasn't called for reinforcements as Liam, Dec and Kellan would be barrelling in here like bulls in a china shop before she even had the chance. Which means she voluntarily stepped into the lion's den for me. Whilst a part of me is so fucking turned on by that, the other part of me wants to spank her ass until it's red raw for putting herself in danger like this.

Before these two turds even have a chance to think about threatening Freya, I punch Big in the face, hard enough to enable me to wrestle the knife out of his hand. While his hands are up trying to protect his already ugly face, I waste no time slamming my knee into his balls with such power it even makes my eyes water. Big drops to the floor, howling in pain as I press the knife against Small's throat. The sadistic grin

that spreads across his face tells me I was right earlier when I pegged him as a psychopath.

“You will regret this, Kian,” Small says, that annoying high-pitched tone he used earlier is now long gone, replaced with a deep, evil tone that would make lesser men crumble.

“No, you’re the ones who will regret it if you don’t get the fuck out of here right now,” shouts Freya, as she gestures to the door with her arm. If she keeps acting all tough as nails, my cock will never be soft again.

Small turns to face Freya, and I want to slice his eyes out for even daring to look at her, but I’m not stupid. Whoever this guy is, he’s high up in their establishment, and hurting him, no matter how fucking amazing it would feel, it could bring down a war on all our heads that we aren’t prepared for. I can’t risk the lives of my family. Though, when his lips turn up into a sneer aimed at Freya, I seriously reconsider gutting this cunt alive.

“Well, if it isn’t Freya Doughty. We had you down as a nobody. Just a stupid little mafia princess living with her brother so she doesn’t have to go out and get a job in the real world. Who knew you were secretly fucking the help. I bet you’re a nasty little slut, the quiet ones always are,” he sneers.

Before I have the chance to slice his balls off, Freya takes a step forward, her lips tilted up on one side into the sexiest smirk I’ve ever seen. Her eyes never leave his and she doesn’t show even a fraction of weakness. “Even if I am the dirtiest slut going, I still wouldn’t touch you. So you can stop looking at me like that, or I will let Kian here slice your cock off.”

The psycho actually laughs as he casts his eyes from me to Freya and back again. He looks like he’s trying to decide what to do. “I’m going to give you one chance, Freya. Swap sides and come and work for us. We will take down Brianna O’Keenan and the whole of your family, but I’ve been looking for a new pet, and I think you will do nicely. I can guarantee that I’m a whole lot better than this dipshit.” He angles his head towards me, and I grip the blade tighter, trying to take several deep breaths as I remind myself why slaughtering this

guy where he stands is a bad idea. My rationale is decreasing, and the urge to kill him grows every time he looks at Frey.

Freya, surprisingly, doesn't seem fazed by his threats at all. In fact, she chuckles before leaning in closer to him than I would like. "I highly doubt that. You see, Kian not only has a massive cock, but he knows how to use it. He knows exactly how to fuck me just the way I like it. I call out his name like he's the only fucking God I worship while I'm cumming. He knows my body in a way that no man ever has before, and no man ever will.

"So, thank you for your kind offer, but it's unnecessary. If we are going to be beaten, then I would prefer to go down with Kian's cock between my legs instead of your little chipolata. Now, before my guy really does cut your balls off, I suggest you fuck off, and take that piece of shit with you," Frey says, before walking around the two men, to stand by my side. As she walks, her hips sway as though she were wearing five-inch heels instead of Converse—which she somehow manages to look even fucking sexier in.

As she reaches my side, she takes a hold of my hand and I will my brain to record that conversation and mark it permanently in my memory. I want to dream about her calling me a God. I want to fall asleep hearing her say only I can make her cum. Then I want to wank off at every fucking opportunity to her saying she'd rather die with my monster cock between her legs than anyone else's. That only I know how to get her body going. Fuck, if that wasn't the biggest ego boost in the world, I don't know what is!

It also appears to have had the desired effect on the two idiots in front of us. Small reaches over and starts dragging Big towards the door. He's managed to find his feet, but he's still hunched over, clutching his balls—well, he is if they've descended yet. The evil smirk on the psycho's face lets me know this is far from over, and I hate the idea Freya may have just painted a target on her back.

She basically just told them she's my girl, and if they want to get to me, she's the way to go. I've waited a long fucking time to hear her say those words and I want more than

anything for her to mean them, but it's the worst possible thing she could have said.

“We will be seeing you, *both*.” His nose wrinkles like he's looking at something that disgusts him, and I notice he's glaring at where Freya's hand is clasped with mine. I try to open my hand, not wanting her to be any more of a target, but she squeezes, making it clear I'm not going anywhere.

Psycho opens the door and pushes Big through it, and as he turns to leave, Freya calls after him. “Are you ever going to grow a set of balls and tell us who you work for?”

I want to curse her out for dragging him back; the asshole had almost left. But, I can't deny I would like to know the answer too. He smirks, realising he has the upper hand with this one. He has something we want, and he sure as fuck won't be giving it to us now. He chuckles, and it's the type of manic laugh you would expect from a deranged clown in a haunted house.

“Oh, don't you worry about that. You'll find out very soon. But, I will tell you one thing... you've already met our boss, and he's gonna be really unhappy about this.”

Fuck, we've met the boss? My brain is whirling, but there's no fucking point. I've met so many people, it's hard to tell who could be our enemy. I have a pretty hard rule not to trust anyone until they've earned my trust, and Kellan has done an extensive background check. Even then, trusting someone isn't something that comes easily. So, for me, it's easy to come up with a long list of people who could be our enemy. Looks like Kellan's task just became that bit more important.

We need to know who this fucker is so that we can prepare. As much as I love the fact Freya stood up for me like this, she painted a target on her back and I need to do everything I can to keep her out of harm's way. She's said to me, since the moment I met her, that she wants out of this life, that she can't be with me because she can't handle the stress of living with a sword hanging over our heads.

I told her it wouldn't be like that. Yet here we are, not even gone on our first date and I'm worried I'm gonna get her killed. Fuck, if I was a better man, I would let her go. Let her be with Mr Boring, where nobody ever threatens her and she will be safe. But I'm not a better man. I'm a selfish fucker who knows exactly what he wants.

"You can tell your boss, he knows where to find us. Now fuck off." Freya sounds like she's full of fucking fire, and the psycho lets out what sounds strangely like a hiss, before whipping around and storming out of the room.

As soon as the door slams shut, I release Freya's hand—reluctantly—and slam the lock closed, making sure no more assholes can get in. I turn back to see Freya leaning against the lockers, her head downcast as she concentrates on her breathing. The strong, confident girl who stood beside me not a minute ago appears to have deflated and my beautiful, shy Freya is back. I hate the idea that she's scared and I move without thinking.

I stride over to her, and without hesitating, I press my body firmly against hers, as she hisses in surprise. She can't go anywhere as there are lockers behind her and my body is caging her in. She slowly lifts her head, and her bright eyes sparkle as the slightest hint of a smile crosses her lips.

One hand on her hip, I pull her closer, so she can no doubt feel how hard she makes me. My other hand moves up to her face and I gently trace a line up her cheek before tucking a stray strand of hair behind her ear. She leans her cheek into the palm of my hand as she throws her arms around my neck. It's the only encouragement I need. I, not so gently, press my lips against Freya's and from the minute she opens her mouth and lets me taste her on my tongue, I know I'm truly a goner for this girl.

CHAPTER TEN



Freya

As Kian's tongue devours mine, his lips pressing hard against mine, I'm so fucking lost for him. His hand on my hip burns so hot, I wish he would move it under my skirt. I can feel his hard length pressing against my stomach, and that only makes me want him more. I know I'm running on fear and adrenaline, and they are probably causing me not to think rationally, but at this moment in time, I really don't fucking care.

When I tormented that psychopath, telling him that Kian was not just my guy, but the only guy I will ever want. That he makes me feel things no man ever has or probably ever will, I meant every single fucking word. I just didn't realise how much I meant them until they came out. Obviously, I don't know if he has a monster cock that can make my body sing, but I really need to find out.

My body is calling out for him, and for once, I won't ignore the call. We kiss each other like we frantically need to be close to each other, to not let the other go. And it's true. Listening with the door open ajar for a long time before I made my presence known. I also recorded a lot of it for the guys to listen to when we get back home. I thought it might come in useful. But the more I listened to them threaten Kian,

threaten to use the people he loves against him, the more I wanted to rip their eyes out.

I've never had a violent streak, which I know is quite rare, given my DNA. I mean, even little Ryleigh has a fierce streak that's enough to scare most people, but I've never been like that. Nothing has ever made my blood boil enough to bring out that rage—until I heard them threaten Kian. I can't even explain what came over me. It was like a red mist descended, and I wanted to protect him, to fight for him, to be with him.

Snaking my fingers through his hair, I pull slightly and the beautiful hiss I feel from Kian against my lips is like music to my ears. The hand on my hip grips with such intensity that I feel sure it will leave a bruise, and yet it still doesn't feel like he's grabbing me hard enough, pulling me close enough.

So, as his other hand tracks up my body, skimming the edges of my breasts, before trailing his fingers over my nipple, I'm suddenly very aware I'm wearing far too many clothes, and I want to feel the roughness of his fingers against my naked flesh.

I'm about to tell him to take off my dress when his lips kiss along my jaw and down my neck. Fuck, Kian knows that the spot just below my ear is sensitive. I've often joked before that it's got a direct line to my pussy, and every time he sucks and nibbles on the sweet spot, I feel buzzes of heat deep down in my core, and I can feel myself growing wetter for him.

My loud, guttural moans sound far too loud and wanton given we're in a very public place, but I don't care. Even if there was no music playing to drown out my noises, and I didn't know Kian had locked the door, it wouldn't have mattered. I would still need Kian, and when I'm with him, I can't hold back how he makes me feel.

I feel his breath against my ear, causing a shudder to ripple down my spine, and I hear him chuckle at how responsive my body is to his touch. I want to be annoyed at him for being such a cocky twat, but I can't. All the fight I usually have for him has left the building, and what's left is a girl who just wants to feel. "Obviously I'm beyond fucking turned on right

now, and some of the stuff you said will go in my permanent spank bank from now on,” he growls, tilting his pelvis just in case I couldn’t feel his enormous length pressing against my stomach. “But I’m also so angry with you. Why the hell did you put yourself in danger like that, Beautiful? You’ve painted a target on your back, and I know you never wanted that.”

I can hear the pain and anguish in his voice, making it clear he hates the idea of anyone threatening me. But, the thing is, I know exactly how that feels because it’s what motivated me to protect him. “I know it’s not what I wanted, and if I could change it, I would. But, if this scenario were to happen again, I would do the same every fucking time. Do you know why?” I ask, my eyes fixed with his as he shakes his head, and for the first time since I met him, Kian seems lost for words. “When I heard those guys threatening you, I just saw red. I didn’t even think about myself. All I thought about was protecting and standing up for you.”

My voice is barely above a whisper, and I can see the fire in Kian’s gaze as he looks down at me through hooded eyes. We stand there together, frozen in the moment, just staring at each other as I wait for him to say something. The air around us seems to vibrate with energy, and my body is calling out for more. “Nobody but Dec has ever stood up for me the way you just did. I don’t know whether to fuck you hard right here against the lockers, spank you until your ass is raw, or take you home and treat you like the queen I know you are.”

He kisses along my neck, all around the sweet spot while he’s talking, and I can hear myself panting desperately. When he tells me he wants to treat me like a queen, he sucks on my sweet spot, and my cries of pleasure echo around the small dressing room as I hitch one of my legs up around his hip, trying to grind my panty-covered pussy against his thigh to help ease some of the intense desire.

Kian’s hand that was on my hip travels down the front of my thigh, and when he reaches the hem of my skirt, his hand snakes underneath. The rough pads of his fingertips scrape along the back of my leg, right up until he’s cupping my bare

ass in his big hand. As he squeezes my ass, he pushes my body down so that my sensitive pussy grinds against his hip.

Trying to stand as tall as I can, I reach up so that my lips are against his ear, and I love the way he tries not to shiver the way I did, when my breath touches his lobe. Payback is a bitch... but a really good one. I whisper in his ear while I continue to stroke my hand across the hard muscles of his back. “What if I want you to do all three?”

He groans before pressing his lips to mine, harder and more frantic this time, and it’s something I’m only too happy to match. Our tongues battle for dominance, both desperate for more, and with each flick of his tongue against mine, my need for him grows.

He pulls his lips from mine, and I can’t help but grumble at the loss. That signature dimpled smile appears and this time it only makes me hotter. His crystal blue eyes bore into mine, and they appear a lot darker than normal, as lust has expanded his pupils, making his eyes look almost black, and I feel sure mine will look the same. With the hand that’s not currently squeezing my ass, he reaches up and cups my cheek to make sure I don’t avert my eyes from him.

“Don’t say things like that, Freya. If you let me have you, I won’t accept it’s just a one-time thing. I can already tell that once with you will never be enough. And we both know that you don’t want whatever this is between us. As much as it fucking kills me for you to walk away, I’d rather you do it now than give me a taste of something I can’t ever have. I don’t know how I would survive that.”

I can see not only the passion, but the pain reflected in his beautiful blue eyes, and I know he really means that. I don’t know what I’ve done to deserve to have a guy like Kian look at me the way he is doing right now, but I feel so fucking lucky. Suddenly, all the reasons I have for staying away from him fall away. I don’t know why I couldn’t see it before the way I do now. I’m a Doughty, and no matter what I do or where I go, danger will follow me. Unless I cut off my family and have nothing to do with them ever again—which I can’t do—then I will always be a part of this life. I might be able to

bullshit my brain for a little bit, telling myself I'm away from it, but I won't ever be. So why the hell should I deny what I want—or who I want—in search of a pipe dream that will never be?

Admitting that the life I've craved since a child is nothing but a fantasy is hard. I've always wanted to get away from all the drama, but I realise now that the only way to do that would be to abandon my family, and even then there are no guarantees that someone wouldn't find out my last name and use me against my family, the way those assholes just did with Kian. Don't get me wrong, this sudden change of heart doesn't mean I'm going to be taking up arms and jumping into the fray, gun and dagger raised the way Bree would. But I'm also not going to stand back and watch the people I love be targeted.

This interaction with those dicks is the first time I've ever really been part of my family's business. And to hear how flippantly that psycho was willing to use me and my family—including little baby Hallie—it was sickening. I hate that I could be used as a weapon just because of the love my family has for me.

I refuse to be used in that way though. I may be shy and quiet, but I'm no fucking push over. So if I'm staying in this life, staying with my family despite my fears, then there's no reason for me to deny the way I feel anymore. Kian's the guy I want. My body has craved him since the first time I met him, and that feeling has only grown stronger since he first kissed me. I dream about the feel of his hand on my body, the way I burn up just for him. I have imagined being with him in so many different ways—he consumes my dreams every night. Now, I'm done denying it. I want Kian, and if he wants me, I'm all his.

Leaning forward, my voice coming out a lot huskier than I've ever heard before, I whisper against his lips. "I'm done denying it. I can't ever leave this life because I can't ever leave my family. No matter where I go, I would still be in danger because I'm a Doughty. I can't ever leave this life, so I'm done trying. And I lied to you before."

He pulls his lips away slightly so he can look down at me, his brows furrowed as he no doubt tries to think why I would lie to him. “What about?”

“Every time I said I didn’t want you. Every time I pulled away and said we couldn’t be together, or that I didn’t want to. It was all a lie. My body craves you, and I’m done denying it. I have no idea what the future holds for us, or if this could ever be something real, but I’m prepared to find out. So, what do you say, Caveman? Am I your girl?”

The grip he has on my body tightens, and I swear the hard length pressing against my stomach grows as he tries to close the already miniscule gap between us. It’s like no matter what he does, he can’t get me close enough, and I know that feeling. “You’ve been my girl since the moment I first kissed you. You just didn’t realise it.”

My laughter is drowned out as he captures my lips with his once more, and the moment becomes frantic and desperate. His lips devour mine, our tongues battling for dominance as I become intoxicated by his taste. My nails rake across his muscular back, and his responding groan and shiver are like music to my ears. It also seems to trigger a desperation in Kian, as his hands explore my body more forcefully than before.

The hand cupping my ass travels higher, lifting my dress up in the process. The tips of his fingers sweep across the side of my bra, and I arch my back, desperate to feel more from him. He seems to realise at the same time I do that my dress is in the way, and he quickly pulls it up over my head.

Kian takes a step back, and without his body pressed against mine, holding me up against the wall, I feel a little unsteady on my feet, like my legs might give way at any moment. I watch as his eyes rake over my body, and even though I’m wearing a black lace bra with matching panties, I feel nude under his fiery gaze. As he licks his lips, his eyes blaze with lust and I suddenly feel like prey, trapped in a net by a hunter. Kian is looking at me like he can’t quite believe what he’s seeing, and like he wants to consume me at the same time.

Stepping towards me, he reaches out and captures my cheek with his hand before swiping his thumb across my lip, which I didn't realise I was chewing on. His thumb seems to leave a trail of fire wherever he touches, and I need more. His other hand traces down over my stomach, causing a laugh to burst from my lips as he finds the ticklish area in the middle of my abdomen. He smiles like he's just found his secret weapon, and I give him the sternest look I can manage, making it clear I hate being tickled.

"You are without a doubt the most beautiful fucking woman I've ever seen, Freya Doughty," he growls, and the deep husky way he says it seems to have a direct link to my pussy as I can feel myself growing more desperate for him.

I want to shy away, because a guy like Kian has obviously been with his fair share of women—something I very much do not like to think about. So for him to think I even rank high on that list is amazing, but there's no way I top it. I mean, I'm literally the definition of a plain Jane. I blend into the background, making sure I don't stick out. "There's nothing special about me."

I thought I'd said that last part in my head, but as Kian's face morphs into a hard, firm glare, I realise I must have spoken aloud. "Whoever has made you feel that way most definitely doesn't deserve you. Trust me when I tell you, you are the epitome of special, and I'm the luckiest guy in the whole fucking world because you've finally chosen me."

I step forward and capture his lips with mine, wrapping my arms around his neck before lifting my leg to make my intentions clear. Kian works out what I'm trying to do and scoops his hands underneath my ass, lifting me so I can wrap my legs around his ass. He presses my back against the cool locker behind me, and I moan as I feel his cock sliding against my pussy, the fabric of our underwear the only thing stopping us.

As he pulls his lips from mine, and begins kissing down to that sweet spot on my neck, I roll my pelvis as best I can, rubbing myself against his hard length. The resulting groan vibrates against my throat and the grip on my ass tightens as

he smashes our bodies together harder, heightening the bliss we feel from rubbing against each other. With his ear against my lips, I waste no time telling him exactly what I want, my voice barely a whisper, but I know he hears me clearly. “I want you to fuck me. Right here against this locker.”

Kian groans as a shiver rips down his spine and his hard length twitches against my core. He removes one hand from my ass, now just holding me with one, but I can't move as his body keeps me against the locker. I know he won't ever let me fall. His free hand moves across the front of my bra as he cups my breast, and the feel of the lace rubbing against my nipples causes me to groan with pleasure.

Kian obviously wants nothing separating him from his target, and so he pulls down the cup and rubs his thumb across my nipple, sending shivers through my body. My back arches as best I can in this position, pressing myself further into Kian's hard body. As he takes my nipple between his thumb and finger, pulling gently, his lips nibble along my collarbone until I'm a panting mess.

“Take off your bra,” Kian growls, while he continues to gently tug on my nipple. I reach around to unclasp it, and as I pull it from my body and it drops to the floor, Kian wastes no time moving his head down to my breast. His tongue flicks across my nipple, the hot, wet feeling making my stiff peak harden even more than it did before.

I gasp for breath as he takes the whole of my nipple into his mouth, sucking gently, flicking his tongue across the tip, before delicately nibbling with his teeth. The combination of this alongside his hand tugging on my other nipple drives me crazy, and I can feel my core heating. My nerve endings feel as though they're electric and I'm on fire. My fingers rake down Kian's back, desperate to pull us even closer together. He hisses against my flesh, and the cool air on my already sensitive skin has me moaning in pleasure.

Kian wastes no time swapping sides, making sure to give my other nipple the same treatment, his mouth devours it while I moan and pant, desperately craving more. Each time he pulls my peak into his mouth, he not only makes my body

sing, but my pelvis tilts and grinds further into his hard length. All that separates us is his shorts and my panties—and I’m so wet right now, I’m surprised they’re still intact.

I’m desperate to feel more of him, but in this position, it’s not easy. I reach my hand between our bodies as best I can, trailing my fingers over his hard abs, loving the way he trembles slightly beneath my touch. As I scrape across the top of his shorts, I try to push them down. Bear in mind, at this moment in time, my legs are wrapped around Kian’s waist like a damn spider monkey, our hips are smashed so tightly together it’s a miracle my hand can even fit, and he’s destroying all my concentration by sucking on my nipples, or rolling the other between in his fingers. Making my task more than difficult, but I’m determined.

Kian lets me struggle for a couple of minutes before he chuckles and carefully guides me to the floor until I’m standing upright, leaning against the lockers again. I think if I weren’t leaning, I would be falling over already.

He takes a couple of steps back, that cocky grin lighting up his beautiful—albeit battered and bruised—face. Those cheeky dimples are very much on display, but it’s the lust filled stare that keeps me rooted in place. He’s too far away now for my liking, and I move to go pull him back, but a stern expression crosses his face as he holds his arm out, indicating for me to stop.

“Don’t move, Beautiful,” he growls, his deep voice sounding more gravelly than usual, making his accent clearer. I lower my arm with a pout that makes him chuckle. He moves so slow it’s like torture, and his hands slide down his body until they reach the hem of his bright pink shorts.

They should look ridiculous on him, but I barely notice what colour they are, since I’m too busy staring at the V that hooks over his hips and slides below the waistband. There’s a small trail of hair dipping into his shorts, and I want to kneel down like this is the only altar I will ever worship.

Slowly, he drops his shorts to the floor and I can’t help the hiss of breath that escapes as I catch sight of the bulge in his

tight black boxers. If he gets any harder, the tip will pop out of the waistband, as they can barely contain him as it is. I can't help but lick my lips, and I go to move, but he clicks his tongue to get my attention before shaking his head.

Bossy asshole. I'm not good at following orders, particularly from him. But when he looks at me like that, with his body almost completely on display for me, I can't help but think I would do anything he asks right now.

As he pulls down his boxers, I try to quell the delicious ache building between my legs by trying to press them together as much as I can, desperate to feel even a little friction. When that doesn't work, I move my fingers to my already sensitive, hard nipples, and I repeat what Kian was doing only a few minutes before, alternating between rolling them between my thumb and forefinger, and gently pulling on them. My back arches as I bite down on my lower lip, and a groan rips from my lips as I catch my first glimpse of Kian's package.

Long, hard, and smooth. I'm shocked by how big he is. I should have known he's a cocky twat for a reason. He steps out of his shorts, kicking them out of the way, before taking his cock in the palm of his hand and fisting the shaft. Throwing his head back, he moans as he slowly pulls his hand to the head, pre-cum pooling on the tip.

I watch, mesmerised, as he uses his thumb to spread the liquid across the head, before moving his hand back down to the bottom of his shaft. He repeats this process a couple of times, trying to hold back a groan each time he does it.

"Stop teasing and fuck me," I growl, staying rooted to the spot, as I know he won't give in so easily if I don't do as I'm told.

His smile turns to a smirk, and he stalks towards me, a hunter capturing his prey. I want to feel his skin against mine, to feel his hard ridges beneath my touch. His eyes rake over my body, and I normally would feel embarrassed over something like this. I mean, I'm naked except for my panties,

in a rather public place, and Kian is looking at me like he's about to consume me.

I've never had anyone stare and assess my body the way he does, but he never makes me feel uncomfortable. If anything, he makes me feel sexy and more confident than I ever have before. To see this fucking gorgeous man, who has been with more women than I care to think about, getting hard and turned on just by looking at me, I'm in awe of the power I have over him.

As soon as he's within arm's reach, I try to touch him, but he playfully pushes my hand away. My loud groan of frustration fills the room as I glare at Kian. He simply rolls his eyes, tutting at me. "It's only fair we even up the score."

At first I have no idea what the hell he's talking about, and I rack my brain trying to think what he could mean. While I'm thinking, he steps up, and before I even realise what he's doing, he uses both hands to tear the thong away from my pussy. The ripping sound of the fabric hits my ears, and my mouth opens and closes as I blink at Kian in shock. "Did you just rip my panties?"

His chuckle hits the side of my face as he closes the last bit of distance between us. His bare chest presses against my sensitive nipples, and I can feel the silky warmth of his hard length against my stomach. His breath hits my ear as his voice sends a shiver down my spine. "Don't worry, Beautiful. What I have planned for you, you won't need them."

As soon as the words are out, he presses his lips to my neck and I feel his finger slide through my slit. Kian groans loudly against my lips. "Fuck, you're so wet. Is it all for me?"

He doesn't give me a chance to answer before pressing his lips against mine, as his finger travels up and down my slit, swirling my entrance before grazing around my clit. His tongue explores mine as my hands wrap around his neck, my fingers sliding into his dirty blonde locks, grabbing hold as tight as I can. The pull against his scalp causes him to move away from my lips with a hiss, and I lean forward to whisper

in his ear, hoping it will have the same effect on him as he does on me.

“I’m always wet for you,” I growl as I nibble lightly on his earlobe.

As Kian groans, he presses hard against my clit, until we are both crying out in a mix of pleasure and frustration. Before I have a chance to say or do anything else, my head somewhere else thanks to the amazing sensations he pulls from my body every time he flicks over my sensitive nub, Kian leaves my clit alone and pulls his hand away. I’m about to complain until he places the two fingers that are glistening with my juices into his mouth, and starts to suck on them.

Holy fuck, if that isn’t one of the hottest things I’ve ever seen. My legs are turning to jelly and he’s not even touching me anymore. I’m just entranced, watching as he sucks and licks on his two fingers before slowly lowering them back down to my waiting hole.

Gently, he presses the tip of his first finger against my tight hole, massaging around the entrance to make sure I’m ready for him, before slowly pushing his finger inside. I can feel every slow, agonising second as all my nerve endings begin to light up and my body feels even more alive. But, it’s not until he pulls back out and pushes in again, together with his second finger, does that delicious sting appear as he stretches me.

His lips capture my moans as he presses both fingers in deep, waiting to give me a couple of seconds to adjust to the feeling before he moves them. He’s slow at first... agonisingly slow, and every time I try tilting my hips to match, he uses his other hand to stop me. My body is burning up, and all my nerve endings feel as though they’re crackling just below the surface. I try to alleviate the feeling by moving my fingers to my nipples, and as I twist to the brink of pain, that adds to the beautiful ecstasy I can feel bubbling away under the surface. But I need more.

“Kian,” I groan, as he presses his lips against mine, but I don’t stop, his mouth swallowing my pleas. “Please, I need more.”

“Whatever my girl wants, she gets.” Kian’s possessive growl as he calls me his girl causes his cock to twitch against my stomach and it’s exactly the boost he needs. He starts moving his fingers faster, pressing them in and out, going as deep as possible while his thumb presses against my sensitive nub.

I can feel that delicious ecstasy bubbling away beneath the surface, that heat threatening to engulf my body, but it’s still not quite enough. I pull my lips from Kian’s and hope he really meant it when he said I could have whatever I want. “What I want is your cock. I need it inside me, now. I need to feel all of you.” As I say the words, I reach down to grasp his hard length in my hand, loving the soft, silky feel of the shaft as I lower my fist.

Once I have my hand encircling the base, I’m surprised by how small my hand looks. I repeat the movement I saw him doing to himself just a few minutes before. I move my hand slowly to the tip before using my thumb to swipe across the pre-cum, getting his cock as wet as possible.

I notice Kian pull away from me slightly, though he doesn’t stop his torturous fingers from exploring me. He looks around the locker room, his brows furrowed, almost like he’s distracted searching for something.

“I’m sorry, am I boring you?” I ask, trying and failing to keep the sarcasm from my tone. In retaliation, he bangs his fingers in and out of me a couple of times, faster each time, causing my legs to go weak to the knees as cries of pleasure rip from my throat.

“Don’t be mouthy, Beautiful. Or I can find a much better use for your mouth. I’m looking around to see if there’s anywhere in here that might have a condom. I really want to fuck you, but I know I don’t have any on me.” He looks deflated but doesn’t stop the slow, torturous movements of his fingers, determined to still make this good for me.

I know I need to reply, but my brain is away in another land thinking about how fucking intense this all feels, and how the slow, teasing pace Kian’s using right now may actually be

the death of me. So, I'm not surprised when my voice comes out sounding breathy and husky, mumbling as I try desperately to form coherent sentences. "I-I'm clean... and o-on the pill. I-I haven't... urgh... been with anyone in a long time."

Kian's fingers freeze their movements inside me, and the loud, frustrated groan that rips from my body startles him. I look at him, and his cocky grin is wider than before. If I had the energy to hit him right now, I would. But then I hear the fun-loving tone I've missed and I can forgive him... well, I can if he starts moving his damn fingers again. "So, you never slept with Mr Boring?"

I can tell he's asking to confirm as more a bragging thing than anything else, and God knows this guy doesn't need his ego stroked by anyone, but that doesn't mean he doesn't deserve to hear it. "I've never slept with anyone since I met you. I can't deny we kissed a bit, but I think more than anything, I wanted to feel someone. I wanted to feel even just a fraction of the way you make me feel because I was so desperate to have that life. The plain, boring life where I never see another gun again and none of my family are ever in danger. Brandon can give me that life, but he could never make me feel the way you do."

Kian growls when I say Brandon's name, and he pulls his fingers out of my pussy so he can lazily swirl them around my clit, before sliding them through my slit. As he spreads my juices around, I can't help but moan. His touch reignites that fire I thought was dwindling when he stopped moving. "Maybe you should refrain from saying another man's name while my fingers are in your cunt, Beautiful. Are you saying you want to have sex without a condom?"

Even though he's slowly stroking the flames back to life, his eyes never leave mine. Normally I can read what Kian's thinking as it's written all over his face. He doesn't try to hide how he feels; he owns it. Yet, in this moment, I can't tell if he's disgusted and appalled by my suggestion, or if he's pleased and is just trying to hold back to tease me some more. "I mean... I-I don't know if you've been with people. But... i-if you're clean too... and you want to..." I trail off, before

quickly adding, “But, only if you want to, because we don’t have—”

Kian cuts off my ramblings by pressing his lips firmly to mine, and I waste no time giving his tongue entry, deepening the kiss. I get so lost in the taste that’s all consumingly Kian, that I almost forget what we were talking about, until Kian pulls away from my mouth. “You have no idea how much I fucking want to, but I need to make sure you are sure. So... here’s what you need to know to make a proper decision. I did used to sleep around when I was in Ireland, and I was a regular at Shades, which I now know is your dad’s sex club. But, and I know this sounds like a really shitty excuse, the truth is, I haven’t slept with another girl since I met you. I’ve barely noticed other girls exist. I tried once after we first kissed and you made it clear nothing could happen between us, but I couldn’t go through with it. All I could think about was you, and so I threw all my efforts into convincing you we’re meant to be together.

“I got tested when I moved here as part of the physical Paddy insisted on before I started working with Boss Lady. So, I’m clean. But I also want you to know that I’ve never had sex without a condom... ever... nor have I wanted to. Wrapping up has always been a hard and fast rule since I learnt how to do it. The idea of knocking up a girl really is that terrifying. But with you, I would throw out the rulebook in a heartbeat.”

My breath hitches as he tells me all the words I didn’t know I was waiting to hear. Hearing that Kian was a man whore before I met him didn’t shock me, because I already knew. Hell, you only have to look at him to know women are going to throw themselves at him. I mean, hearing he used to go to my dad’s sex club was a bit of an odd one. I didn’t know whether to be repulsed since it’s my dad, or very fucking turned on at the idea of Kian in a sex club. But all those thoughts fell out of my brain as soon as he said he hadn’t been with anyone since he met me. That I’m all he thinks about.

I can’t help the drop in my stomach as guilt over Brandon overwhelms me. I knew how I felt about Kian, and that I couldn’t possibly feel that way about anyone else, but that

didn't stop me from trying. I feel like I've let him down somehow, and he can obviously see the moment my expression changes as he squeezes hard enough on my clit to cause me to yelp.

“Well, that worked to get your attention back on me,” he chuckles as I scowl at him. “Get out of your pretty little head, Beautiful. Focus on the here and now. Are we throwing the rulebook out of the window, or shall I just focus on making you feel good and we can get a condom at home and continue back there?”

Pulling my hand up to his cheek, careful where I place it as the skin around his eye is already starting to bruise. Luckily, it's stopped bleeding. I push a stray strand of hair off his face before cupping his cheek in my hand, the roughness of his very slight stubble scratching my palm. “I will throw away all the rule books for you. I don't want to wait. Fuck me right here, right now.” I try to make my words sound as sincere and heartfelt as he did, but as I got to the end, my craving took over and I sounded deep and possessive. I want this man to take me, to own me, and I'm through waiting.

The words are like a trigger for Kian, and he wastes no time picking up where he left off. Gone are the slow, torturous strokes around my clit or across my slit. He presses his fingers back into my pussy and begins to thrust them in quicker and harder than before. The heat I felt earlier quickly builds back up, and my heart races as my breath comes out in short, sharp pants as I try to keep up. The muscles in my lower abdomen are tightening, coiling, getting ready to snap, and my nerves crackle as though they're alive. My breathy moans are intermingled with cries of pleasure as Kian's fingers take ownership of my body, and all I can do is keep my arms wrapped around his neck, desperately clutching him in the hope he doesn't let me fall.

I can feel the crescendo building, and it won't be long before I fall over the edge. With each deep thrust of his fingers, as he curves them slightly, I can feel him touching that sweet spot no guy before has ever found. My whole body feels on edge, tingling, aching, waiting for something more. I'm

babbling incoherently at this point, begging Kian for more, telling him what I need, and he just kisses my neck, whispering in my ear, telling me he knows exactly what I need.

Suddenly, Kian pulls his fingers out and spins me around so my breasts are pressed against the cool metal locker. I quieten my frustrated groan at the loss of his fingers as he slaps his palm down on my ass. A surprised yelp escapes, and I look back over my shoulder, glaring at Kian. Surprise, surprise, he's wearing a cocky grin that looks so devilishly sexy as he rubs the spot he just spanked. He uses his other hand to guide me into position. My breasts pushed against the lockers, my cheek against the cool metal too. He spreads my legs slightly before arching my back enough that I can feel the cool air hitting my now very exposed lips.

Once he has me in position, he drags the tip of his cock along my slit, teasing me whilst also getting his shaft wet with my juices. I can't hold back the moan as I tilt my hips more to try and press his hard length into me. With one hand firmly on my hip, Kian lands another stinging blow to my ass, making it clear he's in charge and I'm not allowed to rush things.

The more I glare at him, the more he chuckles, and otherwise ignores me, continuing to tease me with the tip of his dick. "You can look at me like that all you want, Beautiful. We are doing this my way. And don't even pretend you don't like me spanking you. I can feel how wet you get every time my hand slaps against your fucking delicious ass."

"Kian..." I don't know if I'm moaning because I don't want him to tease me any more, or because I do. All I know is I want more. The sensations I'm feeling right now are too much and not enough all at the same time.

"If I fuck you fast and hard now, do you promise that when we get home, I can take my time with you? That I can explore your body, find all your sweet spots, and taste every last bit of you?" he growls as his hands trail across my stinging ass cheek that is no doubt glowing red from the slap.

"Yes, I promise."

Fuck, like there's anything else I could say at that moment. We both knew that this isn't the time or the place to take things slow, to explore each other's bodies. This is what we've both been waiting for, and it will be as frantic as the need we have for each other.

This time when Kian swipes the tip of his cock down my slit, he pauses at the entrance, one hand gripping my hip as the other traces along the curve of my spine, until he presses gently between my shoulder blades. He's holding me in position, so I don't move when he presses his tip further into my heat. He's moving agonisingly slowly, but he has to do it that way. At this speed, the delicious burn of him spreading me open is not just manageable, it actually feels fucking amazing. If he were to move quicker before I'm ready, I can imagine, given his size, it could be quite painful. Thankfully, Kian takes his time, giving me a chance to adjust to his size, making sure my juices keep his cock wet enough.

Once the tip and a little of his length is in, Kian pauses slightly to give me more time, but I don't need it. I'm dripping wet for him, my nerve endings are on fire, and I crave him in an almost desperate way. I don't want to wait anymore. So, I tilt my pelvis slightly and push back against him, his cock slipping in deeper. Our moans tangle together in a song that fills the air, and Kian doesn't hesitate to plunge the last remaining couple of inches into my pussy.

Leaning over me so that I can feel his chest against my back, my ass pressed against his thighs as his balls hang low against my pussy, he grabs hold of my hair, fisting it in his hand before pulling back slightly. The delicious sting on my scalp adds to all the other overwhelming sensations, and I hiss as he pulls again, causing my back to arch further. His breath hits my ear as his deep, husky voice sends shivers down my spine. "Fuck, Beautiful. Your pussy is so tight. It feels so fucking good. Like your cunt was made just for my dick."

Hearing Kian talk dirty, and say all those naughty things, adds to the erotic nature of the situation, as my pussy gets used to being spread by him. I'm about to reply and tell him I don't need time, that I need to feel him more.

Luckily, he seems to read my mind, as he pulls his cock out until just the tip remains. Then he wastes no time plunging back in as deep as possible, hitting a spot that causes me to see flashes behind my eyelids. I cry out with pleasure as Kian repeats the motion, increasing his speed with each thrust. One hand grips onto my hip and he uses that to pull me hard against him, while the other remains fisted in my hair, pulling back to keep me in the perfectly arched position with my sensitive breasts rubbing against the cool metal of the lockers. All the sensations heighten, and I can feel that crescendo building as all my muscles start to coil and it feels like lightning is ricocheting around beneath my skin. I can barely catch my breath as my throat is full of moans and incoherent mumbling.

Kian's loud grunts and occasional groan mix with mine, the sound of our wanton behaviour filling the room. The only other noise is the sound of our skin slapping together as Kian pulls my ass against his thighs. Even though he's controlling the motion, I make sure to tilt my pelvis and slam my hips back at just the right moment to make it more intense. I also work out just the right time to squeeze my vaginal walls tightly, clamping them down around Kian's cock until he's crying out with pleasure just as loudly as me.

As we both lose ourselves in the pleasure of one another, our joint moans echoing around the room, our movements become more frantic and desperate. With each deep thrust I feel him hitting that spot deep inside, and each time my muscles coil further, I see stars behind my closed eyes. I'm so close to falling over that edge, and given the uncoordinated thrusts, it feels like Kian might be too.

As if sensing that I need a little more to help me get there, he releases the hand fisted in my hair and snakes it down the front of my body. His fingernails rake over my stomach, creating shivers that ripple along my skin. He reaches my folds and gently moves his fingers until they're sliding across my clit. At first he barely touches me and he's just teasing me, which has my stomach tightening in anticipation.

“Please, Kian. P-Please... I-I need... more.” My voice is deep and husky, full of lust and desperation as I struggle to form coherent sentences. I expect him to reply with his usual cocky tone, or to chuckle at me in that way he does when he knows he’s driving me crazy. But instead he just grunts and continues with his movement. I revel in the fact this gorgeous guy is too far gone to be his usual sarcastic self, he’s too lost in me.

As Kian pushes his cock in deep, he presses down hard on my clit, my cry bounces off the ceiling as I throw my head back. Kian doesn’t let up, he continues to drive his cock in and out, harder and faster, while the whole time he rubs his finger over my sensitive nub. I thrust my hips back to meet his, my hands spread out on the lockers in front of me, as I ignore the jelly-like feeling spreading down my legs.

My muscles coil, my heart races, and a thin layer of sweat develops as we both chase that sweet oblivion. My breath comes in desperate pants that match Kian’s and our moans and groans bounce off each other. I feel Kian lean over, his chest touching my back as he kisses that sweet spot just below my neck. All the sensations are too much and my body begins to shake. I can feel my pussy clamping down on Kian’s cock as I reach the edge of the cliff.

“Come for me, Beautiful.” Kian can barely complete his instructions as I fall apart, his dirty words helping to push me over into ecstasy.

My body spasms, as my cries become louder than ever before as I beg and plead, not really knowing what for. Kian keeps moving his fingers, although he’s not as rough as before, stimulating my clit throughout my orgasm. His dick is clamped between my thighs, unable to move as my muscles clench uncontrollably. His hand on my hip digs in, almost painfully, but that just adds to all the other amazing sensations.

The feel of me falling apart on his cock seems to be all Kian needs to push him over that edge, too. He cries out, his lips against my ear as his hard length pulses deep inside. When the sensations become too much, he pulls his fingers away

from my clit, and places his hand on my other hip, which is good because I'm not sure I can stand up on my own.

We ride the last of the orgasm together, my pussy spasming slightly as Kian's cock slowly goes down. I reach back with one hand, clinging to Kian's hand that's on my hip, and we hold each other as we gasp desperately to catch our breaths. Kian presses little kisses along my neck and I can't help but smile.

Fuck, that was amazing.

Obviously, I'm not going to tell him that. His head is big enough as it is, but that was by a long shot the best sex I've ever had. Now all I can think about is the promise we made. We need to get dressed and get out of here because after getting this sample of how things could be with Kian, it only makes me want more.

Once we've both recovered enough from our earth shattering orgasm, Kian gently pulls his cock out of my sore pussy. It stings slightly, but I'm more concerned by the empty feeling. I've never had that before, where I feel like I can't wait for him to put his cock back inside me. Like he was made for me. I can feel the mix of our juices running down my leg, but I don't care. I'm so drunk on sex I can't even think about that right now.

Kian turns me around gently, his hand swiping a sweaty strand of hair off my forehead and tucking it behind my ear. He looks at me, those beautiful crystal blue eyes staring at me like I'm one of the wonders of the world, or the most stunning piece of art ever created. He gently presses a kiss at the corner of my mouth, a sweet, chaste kiss that says so much.

"Fuck, that was amazing. You're amazing. I hope you meant what you said in here, Freya, because now that I've had a taste of you, I don't think I can ever let you go. I have no idea where the future will lead, but I know I want you by my side. I've never had a real girlfriend before, but maybe I was just saving myself for you."

Holy fuck. Seriously, where has this guy been all my life, and why have I waited so long for this? I have been writing

book boyfriends in secret for years now, and I've written some pretty special guys. But even I couldn't have wrote a moment as fucking perfect as this.

“I meant what I said. I want to be with you. But I think just for a little while, until we know what this is between us, we should keep it hidden. I don't want my brothers to castrate you since I quite like your dick. I'm not saying we should keep it secret forever, just for now. Just until we know where this is going,” I explain, hoping he doesn't take that the wrong way. He said such beautiful words, and I want to tell him how I feel, but it's scary. I don't really know what I feel.

Obviously, I'm incredibly fucking attracted to Kian, and the heat we share between us is amazing, but do I feel more? I think I could very easily fall in love with Kian. He's just that kind of a guy, and that scares the shit out of me. But, if he's brave enough to try after everything he's been through in life, then so am I. Kian has been raised alone, has had no one to show him love, and he's always been worried whether he could love someone else. He told me that quite early on, and I told him that when the right girl came along, he would know he was capable of falling in love. He smiled that cocky smile and said he agreed. Now I can't help but wonder if he knew then that he could fall for me?

Taking hold of my hand in his, I watch as he clasps our fingers together, and the bubble of electricity that sizzles where our palms meet has my heart racing. “We can keep it a secret... for now. But I'm not scared of your brothers. Boss lady, on the other hand...Bree scares the shit out of me.” He visibly shudders as he mentions Bree's name, and I can't help but chuckle. He's absolutely correct to be terrified of her. My brothers are pussy cats compared to a pissed off Bree.

Realising how much time we've been together in our own little bubble, it quickly occurs to us that our family may be looking for us, and we won't be able to keep it a secret if they find us in here. We quickly get dressed, and Kian pulls the sweats he was wearing before his fight out of his bag. There's no shower facilities here—since it is an abandoned warehouse that doesn't surprise me. Luckily, there is a toilet where I can

go and clean myself up as much as possible. I'm almost dressed when it dawns on me that I'm wearing a short dress, and I no longer have any underwear.

“Kian! I don't have any fucking underwear since you went all caveman and ripped the damn thing off. What the hell am I going to do?” I ask incredulously, as I try to pull my dress down as much as possible. Even though it's just slightly above the knee, I suddenly feel very exposed. I've never been anywhere without panties on before.

Kian chuckles, as he tries to stop his lip from lifting into a smile. He looks up at me from on the bench he's sat on while tying the laces on his trainers, his eyes sparkling. “I like that. I now have easy access.”

I reach over and playfully smack him on the arm, trying to keep my face as stern as possible—which is very difficult when he looks cute and mischievous. “Kian, I have cum dripping down my leg.”

Standing from the bench, he stalks over to me, causing me to take a few steps back until my back is once again pressed against the cold, hard lockers. Flashbacks of just a few minutes ago, the utter bliss I felt, flash through my mind, and as my core heats, I realise this is doing nothing to help my situation. Getting wetter with no panties is a disaster waiting to happen. Though, if Kian's dark predatory gaze is anything to go by, he definitely doesn't see it as a problem.

“If you want to leave this room, Beautiful, I suggest you stop talking dirty to me,” he growls, an arm on each side of my head as he cages me in with his muscular frame.

Naked Kian is most definitely a sight to behold, since he looks like an Adonis, but Kian in a pair of low slung grey sweats and a white T-shirt that clings to every muscle is also quite something. I almost want to moan, wondering how the hell it's possible to be so gorgeous all the damn time.

My heart races at the thought of being captured by him, and of all the things I want to do to him and have him do to me. I feel so exposed under his penetrating stare, so I do the only thing I can think of to try and even the scales—I want

him to be as affected by me as I am him. I lean forward and place a bruising kiss on his lips. It's hot, deep, and so fucking good that it makes my toes curl. It's over far too fucking quickly, as we both pull apart, panting to try and catch our breaths.

"We need to get home... now! I have so much I want to do to you," I growl, surprising myself by how seductive I sound. Kian's low mewl hits me deep in my core.

Kian wastes no time gathering all his things in his bag, and he places a quick kiss on my cheek before heading to the door. He tells me to keep hold of his hand so he doesn't lose me. I try to protest, in case anyone sees us, but thankfully he dismisses my concerns. It's just the same as me holding Liam's hand while he leads me through a crowded place. Well... apart from the fact Kian's fingers that are now clasped with mine were deep in my pussy not too long ago. That's different.

Focus, Freya! All I have to do is get home without anyone suspecting anything. Then we can spend all night together. I keep repeating that to myself in my head, and it's what spurs me on to move through the crowd of fight fans quicker than before.

As soon as we leave the locker room, Kian is mobbed by lots of fans who came to watch the fight. Using his left hand, he signs anything that's placed in front of him. He poses for selfies, and he hugs anyone who asks him. But never once does his right hand ever let go of mine.

When people ask for pictures, I try to pull away, or offer to take them, but Kian makes it clear that won't be happening. He doesn't let go of me for anything, and I can't help but feel a little gooey over that. I've never had anyone—other than my family—be so protective and possessive of me. I know I should be mad at his domineering ass, and I need to clarify that just because I let him boss me about during sex, it doesn't mean he can do it outside of the bedroom. But we can argue later, for now I'm just going to enjoy the fact he cares so much.

We made it to the bottom of the stairs, having pushed through the big group of supporters that had been waiting to meet Kian. I'm just about to lead him up to our group on the balcony when I hear my name being called behind me. I turn and am shocked to find Brandon standing beside a tall, muscular man.

Brandon is dressed smart in a navy suit; the navy trousers pressed perfectly, with a matching jacket over a crisp white shirt. Paired with shiny shoes, and cufflinks that look expensive, he looks incredibly smart. You would think he looks over-dressed for an event like this, but he isn't. There are a lot of high-powered businessmen who are here in suits, to show off their position within the establishment. They're usually the people invited up onto the balcony. I'm a bit surprised by how comfortable Brandon looks here, given he told me he'd never been to a fight before. He even asked me to get him in here tonight. I never expected someone who is here for the first time to have already made it into the VIP section. Maybe Brandon really is as rich as I suspected?

The muscular guy with Brandon must be over six-foot-six tall. He towers over me and is even taller than Kian. His broad shoulders and bulging biceps make him look even bigger. He clearly lifts weights regularly, as all his muscles appear to be disproportionately wide, with bulging blue veins trying to pop out from under the surface. He's also dressed in smart black slacks, pressed to perfection, with a crisp white shirt with short sleeves. He doesn't have a jacket on, and I suspect it maybe they don't make one to fit someone of his size. His arms are almost bulging out of the short sleeves of his shirt, the arm hem is so tight it's digging into his biceps.

Brandon's gaze travels over my body, his eyes assessing me more than he's ever done before, and I see the moment his eyes land on Kian and my clasped hands. His lips tip up into a sneer and he looks at me like I'm the most disgusting thing he's ever seen. I could never imagine such an ugly look on Brandon's face. Kian steps closer, his hand tightening in mine as he's obviously seen the way Brandon is looking at me, but his proximity really isn't helping the matter.

“What are you doing here?” I blurt out, not really sure if I should say anything, but I am genuinely curious, even if I have no right to be.

“My friend here got a last-minute invite and brought me. I didn’t think you would be here, since you told me you wouldn’t be. I can see that wasn’t the truth.” His voice had taken on a hard tone as he looks between Kian and me, a look of disgust on his face. I really don’t know what to say. The truth is, I did lie to him, and I do have to tell him we won’t be going on any more dates, but in a situation like this, it’s harder to do than I thought.

I stick with trying to be friendly, to downplay the situation. I also try to discreetly drop Kian’s hand, but he doesn’t relinquish it. “It was actually a really last minute decision for me to come. My brothers and their partners are here upstairs. We all came as a big group to watch Kian fight. He was being mobbed as he came out of the dressing room, so I grabbed him to show him where we’re all standing.”

I cast a sideways glance at Kian and I see his face fall as he stares daggers at Brandon, also keeping an eye on his muscular friend to make sure he doesn’t turn out to be a danger. I can feel how tense he is beside me, and I know he’s pissed at me for downplaying this, but what the hell am I supposed to say? It’s not like I can tell the guy I’m dating that I just fucked my roommate in a public locker room and I’m currently not wearing any panties, so his cum can drip down my legs. Actually, now I think about it, knowing Kian, that’s the exact type of caveman behaviour I would expect from him.

Brandon continues to glare at me, not even slightly affected by my explanation. “That’s fair enough, but what’s your excuse for not inviting me?”

I fumble, struggling to come up with a good explanation, because there isn’t one. The truth is, I didn’t think of him at all. I know that speaks volumes and I should have let him down long before this, but I guess I was a little deluded, hoping for a future I never stood a chance of getting.

I'm trying desperately to come up with some words to explain myself, when I hear Kian reply. "I told her she couldn't invite you. Security here is really strict, and we were told not to invite any extras. We're a big party as it is, and security needs to confirm too many people aren't attending the fight. It was nothing personal, man."

I'm actually impressed, not only by how neutral Kian can make his voice, but also by how well he's able to bullshit on the spot under pressure. He actually sounds convincing, but Brandon's nose wrinkles like he's just smelled something bad as he glares at Kian.

"Feels a bit personal," Brandon gripes, and I can feel Kian tense beside me. The tension in the air is palpable, and I need to do something quickly before this shit show escalates.

Luckily, my family must have seen what was going on from up on the balcony because before I know it, Bree comes waddling down the stairs shouting our names.

"Kian, congratulations!" Bree shouts, pulling Kian in for a hug at the same time. Bree pushes her way between us, purposefully causing us to pull our hands apart, and I can hear Kian's resulting growl. Bree turns and whispers something in his ear that none of us can hear over the music, but Kian seems to visibly relax the longer Bree speaks.

While they're distracted, I take advantage of the situation and take a step towards Brandon. I feel terrible; I never intended to hurt him, and even though I was honest about where I am in my life and what I'm looking for in a relationship, it doesn't make this whole thing any easier.

Laying a hand on Brandon's arm, I hate the way he flinches and the cold stare that is laser focused on me. "Brandon, I'm so sorry if I've upset you. That was never my intention. I should have texted you."

Brandon shakes his head. "No, Freya, what you should have done is be honest with me from the start. Don't tell me you want to go on a second date and then ignore every effort I make to arrange one. It would have been so much better if you just said you didn't want to see me again. That I could have

handled, but we kissed and I liked you. I thought we actually stood a chance together. Clearly not.” As he says the last part, his eyes flick between me and Kian, making it clear he knows there’s something going on between us. My stomach sinks as I realise he’s right. I may have told him we aren’t exclusive, but in a way, I led him on.

“Bran, I’m really sorry. I never intended to lead you on or hurt you. The truth is, you are the perfect guy for me, on paper. I want a nice normal guy, who cares about me for who I am, not my family name. I thought I wanted a life free from drama, but I realised recently that the only way for that to happen is if I drop my family, and I can’t do that. I really wanted to like you, and to make things work between us, but I think I would have been lying to not just you, but myself. I’m sure none of this makes any sense to you, but you have to trust when I say, I’m doing what’s best. I’m following my heart, and unfortunately, that isn’t you. I am sorry.”

Brandon shrugs his shoulder so I’m no longer touching him, and he steps back with a growl, his face scrunched up in anger. “You’re making a very big mistake, Freya. You should have got away from your family while you had the chance.”

His voice is low, too quiet for Bree or Kian to hear, but the threat rings loud in my ear. Before I have a chance to ask what he means, or why the hell he’s threatening me? He walks away, his dutiful muscleman following behind. As soon as he’s out of sight, I feel myself deflate and my stomach bottoms out while my heart races. I’ve never had someone look at me with such disgust and contempt before.

Bree and Kian both turn to face me, matching looks of concern on their faces. I give them a small smile as I shrug my shoulders. There’s not much else I can say or do. This was a situation I created and I have to live with that.

Bree turns to find the rest of our group, and Kian’s smile morphs into that cocky smirk he seems to have just for me. With a devious wink, he reminds me of all the good that’s come out of tonight, and I can’t wait to get him home. I seem to have made a lot of big decisions tonight, and although I never wanted to hurt Brandon, I don’t regret a single one of

them. I plan on going home, falling into Kian's arms, and being happy, for as long as that lasts.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



Kian

It's been almost two weeks since my big fight, and I'm still reliving every single memory from that night. It's hard to believe that one night can change your life so much, and for once I think it's for the better. Obviously, suddenly flying onto the radar of some pretty bad guys was not top of my agenda, and having Freya on their shit list is the last thing I would ever want. But, having her go to bat for me like that, to put all her fears aside and stand up for me, I was a goner then.

I've had feelings for Freya since I first laid eyes on her. I was in a room full of Doughty's, and as much as I love Boss Lady and Liam's crazy family, they are all such big personalities. So when they're all in a room together, it's loud and it's utter madness. Everyone is talking over each other, everyone has an opinion about something. And it's like they are all fighting to be heard.

That's when I saw this beautiful, shy girl standing on the edge of the room, close enough to be part of the conversation, but far enough away to block it out if needed. I watched her for far longer than I would like to admit, and there was just this classic, elegant beauty about her. She would listen to all the people talking to her, laughing and replying in just the

right way at the right time. Yet never once did she try to lead the conversation or take over. I watched as she quite happily allowed herself to fall into the background.

I remember thinking that a girl as stunning as her should never fade into the background. She should be front and centre, where everyone can appreciate her beauty. But the more I got to know Freya, the more I know that's not her. She's quite happy to go unnoticed and unseen, just living her own life as drama free as possible. I guess that's why I wasn't all that surprised when she said she couldn't be with me. After all, I'm a senior member of one of the biggest crime families in the world. Not to mention the notoriety I have in the underground fight scene. People know who I am, and they know not to mess with me. I'm the exact opposite of Freya, but that didn't stop me from chasing her.

From the moment she told me she wanted a different life, and that I didn't fit into that life, I knew she would have to date someone else, but that didn't mean seeing it in person didn't hurt like a bitch. I've never been the jealous type before, but seeing her with that Brandon asshole set my blood boiling. The green-eyed monster consumed me to the point I couldn't even be around Frey. I couldn't watch her be happy with someone else, and I knew if I was alone with her, I would have made a move on her. I couldn't stop myself. I'm drawn to her like a moth to a flame, but I have only ever really had one moral in life, and that is to never get involved with people who are taken. The idea of getting in the middle of a relationship or a marriage has always left a bad taste in my mouth, so I don't even entertain it. I can't. So I kept my distance, hoping like hell that everything would change, and now it has.

“Are you awake?” Freya asks, her head resting in the crook of my shoulder while the rest of her very naked body is pressed against me, her leg thrown over mine. Her delicate whisper is enough to drag me out of my own head—although imagining all the ways I've taken Frey in the last two weeks is hardly a hardship. No matter how many times I get to have her, to taste her on my tongue, it's never enough.

“You are grinding that sweet little pussy of yours against my leg, so of course I’m awake. I’m hard as fucking nails,” I grumble, as her tinkling laughter ripples across my bare chest.

This is how it’s been every night since the fight. We always end up wrapped in each other’s arms after another steamy session, even hotter than the last. I literally can’t get enough of this girl, but I surprise even myself when I realise this part right here is probably my favourite. Obviously, I’m never saying no to the sex, and it’s up there as pretty fucking memorable, but I’ve never had anything like this. Having her soft, delicate skin nuzzled up against me, her head resting on my chest listening to my heart beat just for her. These are the moments that make my heart soar.

I know it’s only been a couple of weeks, and honestly, we’ve spent most of them in the bedroom, but I can already feel myself falling for her. I have to admit though, without sounding like a teenage girl, I always hoped I would find love. Having never experienced it before, other than with Declan—which is a very different kind of love—I didn’t think I would ever know what it feels like. I was terrified I was incapable of love. But what scared me more is the possibility that I might be unlovable.

Everyone in my life who is supposed to have loved me either left or didn’t give a shit about me. My mum preferred her crack pipe to me, and my dad didn’t give a shit. Some days, they barely remembered I existed, or that they had to feed me.

I have always taken care of myself, even from a young age. Though the idea of going into foster care scared the shit out of me, the social workers constantly told me that a blonde-haired, blue-eyed boy with dimples like mine would do great in foster care and would be adopted straight away. The only problem is, I was so fucking angry; I made it hard to love me.

That’s when I met Declan, and gained my first real family member. A brother who would stand by my side through anything. I started a fight and no matter what, Dec would be there to jump into the fray with me. If I got kicked out of a

foster home, he would run away with me. We refused to be parted, and that got us labelled as 'difficult'.

Very few people want to adopt two boys, let alone ones they know cause problems. So we just got on with our lives, comfortable in the knowledge that all we needed was each other. Declan became far more closed off than me, and I used to tell him regularly that some girl would come along and thaw out his cold black heart, but he wouldn't hear it.

He never wanted love... and now look at him. The soft sap is living with Belle, supporting her dreams of becoming a doctor while he runs his nightclub. They've made a life for each other, and I couldn't be happier for them. I know he's got a massive fucking diamond tucked away in the club's safe, just waiting for the right time to give it to Belle.

For a while I was crazy jealous of my brother. I obviously didn't want to be, and I was thrilled for him. It was just a selfish moment where I cursed the universe for its irony. Declan didn't believe in love, nor did he ever want it, and then his dream girl literally fell into his lap. I'd been waiting, hoping for a girl to show me what love really is, and nothing. Until I met Freya, and the universe shit on me again by giving me the slightest taste of what it could be like, before she broke a small piece of my heart by dating that turd, Brandon.

So now, as I lay here with her curled up in my arms, I can't help but worry I'm living on borrowed time. That one day soon she's going to realise she made a mistake and leave. They always leave me in the end.

Freya's hand reaches up to my cheek, pulling me out of my dark, morbid thoughts, as she turns my head slightly so I'm looking at her. Her gorgeous, sparkling green eyes look straight at me with that small smile of hers. Her lips are so close to mine, I can almost taste her. Her gaze focuses on my lips and I can't help but sweep my tongue over mine, letting her know my intentions. In response, she pulls her lower lip between her teeth and her leg, that's wrapped around my thigh, pulls her body closer. I can feel the heat between her legs crushing against my skin, desperately trying to create some friction.

“You’re always hard. Stop looking at me like that. I’m trying to have a non-sex conversation. You can’t ever just be serious,” Freya groans, but she makes no effort to move away from me.

I school my features, trying to look as serious as I can without bursting out laughing as I mock her. “I can do serious. See, look, I have my serious face on.”

She tries her hardest not to laugh, but the hint of a smile tips up on the corner of her lips and I can see the wrinkle lines forming around her eyes. “Uh huh, you look real serious.”

I can’t help but smile as she rolls her eyes at me. I can tell she’s going to say something more, but at this point she’s trying to change the subject she started, and I’m intrigued. So, without hesitation, I slap my hand down on her ass cheek. Her responding yelp is loud and high pitched, as her eyes glare at me. Gently rubbing the area, I give her my cheekiest wink. “I can be serious. Now, stop changing the subject. Ask me whatever you were going to ask me.”

A blush spreads across her cheeks, and now I’m really interested. I love seeing Freya looking shy or reserved; I guess it makes me feel like I’m corrupting her in some way. “So, I know I said we should keep this thing between us a secret... and I still think we should. Which is why this sounds really stupid. But, I wondered if you ever plan on taking me on like a real date? One that requires us to wear clothes and actually leave the house.”

My brows furrow the more she talks, and I’m actually a little pissed at myself. Why the hell didn’t I think of asking her on a real date? I think it’s because we started off as friends, and we already do things like get food together or curl up in each other’s arms while we watch cheesy movies. I’ve always thought of dates as something you do to get to know the other person, but I don’t need to get to know Freya. I already know everything I need to about her, but clearly Freya doesn’t. I’m such an idiot.

“Shit, I’m sorry, Beautiful. I guess with us trying to keep this a secret, and the fact we spend so much time together

anyway, I never even thought about taking you out on a real date. But I am absolutely going to make this right. How about we spend the day together on Saturday? I need to clear the day with Bree, but I can do that today and then I have one day, Friday, to plan the perfect date.” The words are out before I can take them back. I have today and tomorrow, just two days to plan the perfect date, all without asking for anyone’s help because we still aren’t telling people we’re together. I’m so screwed.

“Yeah? You really mean that?” she asks, her voice raised with a tinge of hope that’s evident in her bright eyes and raised brows. It pisses me off that she was actually nervous about asking me for something that simple. But I’m more annoyed that I didn’t think of it. My girl is a fucking queen, and she deserves to be treated like one.

“Yes, Beautiful, I mean it. You never have to be nervous or worry about asking for anything with me. You want me to take you to the top of the Eiffel Tower, just name a time. Want to go on an African safari, I will get it booked. You name it and I will do it. So, don’t ever feel like you can’t tell me what you want. Okay?” I stroke my free hand down her cheek, pushing the stray strand of hair off her forehead and behind her ears. I want her to look in my eyes and know I mean every word I say.

Her bright smile warms my heart, but it’s the softness to her voice that really melts me. “Thank you. I don’t think we’re quite ready for a big holiday just yet. But it’s good to know you would do those things with me. Don’t take this as me saying I’m not happy with the way things are between us. I know I asked for secrecy. I just would like to do the whole dating thing, if it’s okay with you?”

“Of course it’s okay. You can have anything you want.”



Pacing up and down the corridor outside our bedrooms, I must look like a crazy person. I keep sweeping my hands over my dark T-shirt, then pulling down the hem on the flannel long-sleeved shirt I threw on over the top, making sure they both look perfect. I've picked at the fraying of my dark ripped jeans so much I'm not sure which was the fraying that came with the jeans and which I've created through picking. The holes are certainly a lot bigger than they were when I first put the jeans on. Don't even get me started on how many times I've looked in the mirror and tweaked my hair. My hair looks absolutely no different from if I'd just rolled out of bed after spending the whole night fucking my girl, yet it must have taken me around thirty minutes and far too much product to get it to this state.

I'm a mess. I have no idea why I'm so nervous about going on this date. I guess it's because I've never really been on a date before. Not a real one. I've had the odd drink with a woman before sleeping with her, but I'm fairly sure that doesn't count. I've never had a proper girlfriend. I mean, I went out with two girls when I was a teenager, but we never went on dates. We just hooked up and went to parties together. It was never anything serious. What I feel for Freya is stronger than anything I've ever felt before, and it scares the shit out of me.

I'm so busy pacing, I don't hear Kellan approach until I hear Hallie babbling near me. I turn to find Kellan staring at me, his eyes narrowed like he's trying to work out what's wrong with me. "What's wrong with you?" he asks, as Hallie babbles in her special brand of baby language, holding her hands out for me to take her from her dad. Normally, I would grab her and have a morning cuddle and play, but I can't risk her throwing up or getting drool on my outfit.

"Nothing," I snap, shooting daggers at Kellan for being so damn nosey.

"No need to snap, asshole. Anyway, I think I may have found some information about the family we're digging dirt on. I'm running a last deep dive now, it should be ready in about an hour or two. Shall we have a business meeting then?"

Kellan asks, taking hold of Hallie's hand to stop her from trying to reach for me again. She smacks his hand out of the way before pushing her other hand in between his eyes as she tries to break free from him. He grumbles, telling her to behave and I can't help but chuckle when I see they are both wearing matching pouts as they glare at each other. There's no doubt at all that she is Kellan's kid.

"Sorry, man. No can do. I'm not working today, remember? I lost a bet and have to take Freya out for the day now," I groan, trying to make it sound like this is the last thing in the world I really want to do.

We spent some time on Thursday, while we were laying in each other's arms, coming up with a plan to explain why we would be spending the day together, just the two of us. Whilst I suspect our family knows what's going on between us, Freya still wants to give us some more time to ourselves before announcing it to everyone, and I don't blame her. I'm quite liking all the sneaking around, stealing stolen moments together. It is thrilling, but I'm ready for more.

I want to kiss her in the morning when she hands me the cup of coffee she's made for me. I want to pull her onto my knee when we're sitting watching television all together. And most importantly, I want to tell her brothers and the rest of her family that my intentions towards Freya are completely genuine. This isn't about sex and sneaking around for me.

Don't get me wrong, the sex is fucking fantastic, but I'm here for more. I don't think they will believe me when I say that though, and why should they? My history speaks for itself, and sneaking around behind their backs isn't helping anything. I'd walk through fire for my girl, so if this is what she wants, then this is what we're doing.

We finally came up with a plan to tell everyone we had a bet, and I lost. Since I lost, I have to spend the day taking Freya out and treating her like a Queen. I have to pay for everything, and I have to show her a good time. Everything I planned on doing anyway, I just have to make it sound like it's the last thing in the world I want to be doing with my day.

“Oh yeah, I forgot about that. Where exactly are you taking Freya?” Kellan’s eyes narrow, and I can tell he doesn’t believe our bullshit story. But he doesn’t have to believe it, he just has to shut up about it—which isn’t something this asshole is good at.

“If I told you, it wouldn’t be a surprise. Why don’t we arrange the meeting for tomorrow, first thing?” I ask, trying to distract him from any talk about our date.

“Sure, we can do that. Listen, man... about this date—”

I cut him off abruptly, trying to keep my voice as firm as possible. “It is not a date, and no, we are not discussing it right now.”

He rolls his eyes in that sarcastic way that he seems to have perfected. “Fine, but we will talk about it soon. Understood?”

There’s a lot of unspoken words that he seems to be portraying with his fierce gaze. I can see the threat there and the love he feels for Freya. It’s a warning without words, and honestly, I don’t need to hear them. I care a lot about Freya, and if I could tell him that, I would. So for now, I have to reassure him as best I can.

“I will look after her. I promise!” I push all the things I can’t say into that one vow, a promise that I won’t hurt her. He knows I’m talking about more than just this date, and as his face returns to his normal mask of indifference, I know he’s satisfied with my answer. Maybe now he will keep Liam in check, because that asshole won’t back down anywhere near as quickly.

I saw Bree, on at least five occasions over the last two days, shut him down after he continued to ask us questions. He wanted to know about the bet, why we were betting, what Freya wins, why she would want to spend the day being pampered by me? You name it, Liam tried to ask it. Thank fuck Bree put him in his place, so we didn’t have to answer. And to think, Bree is the interrogator out of the two of them. I think they need to switch roles because Liam is like a fucking dog with a bone. He just doesn’t give up. But I can’t blame

him. She's his little sister, and in their family, protecting each other is vital.

“Good, now stop wearing out the carpet and come and wait downstairs. It looks slightly stalkery if you wait here,” Kellan mumbles, before walking towards the stairs with Hallie pulling on his hair shouting “Dada,” as loud as she can.

With one final glance at Freya's door, I know Kellan is right—just this once—so I head downstairs. I'm worried about running into Liam and Bree, as he will definitely start with more questions, but luckily the room is empty except for Hallie, who is now happily rolling around in her playpen, and Mia, who is making coffee with Kellan.

I watch as Hallie cheerfully log-rolls in a circle around her playpen, giggling every chance she gets. Even though she can walk quite well, she loves rolling everywhere. I have to admit; it makes me laugh watching her. I can't wait until she's older and I get to embarrass her with all these stories. She won't remember all this when she's older, but I will.

I watch as Mia and Kellan dance around each other in the kitchen, both working together like a well-oiled machine. They each have their roles and between them, they manage to get everyone's coffee and breakfast ready, along with something for Hallie.

Every morning they treat us and have breakfast waiting, and I couldn't be more fucking grateful—usually. Today, my stomach is flipping so badly, I'm worried whatever I eat will make a very spectacular reappearance.

Mia turns and hands me my coffee mug, made exactly how I always have it, and I mutter my thanks. Even if I can't stomach food, this delicious nectar is a necessity. As the hot liquid travels down my throat, and the caffeine hits my system, I can't help but moan. Mia looks at me, her brows raised as she listens to me making sex noises over a coffee, but still I don't care. Everyone knows I have a deep, loving relationship with my caffeine addiction, and I don't plan on changing that anytime soon.

“So, do I get to know where you’re taking her?” Mia whispers, so only I can hear her.

I can’t help rolling my eyes as I groan. “Not you too. I promised Freya it would be a surprise, and it definitely won’t be if I tell you lot. Besides, you only have a few hours until we will be home and Freya can tell you what she thought, herself.”

Mia freezes, her eyes widening in shock as she leans in to whisper in my ear. “I would have thought if the date goes well, we won’t see either of you until tomorrow morning. Or, at least, that’s what you should be hoping for.”

I fumble, lost over how to reply to that without giving things away. I mean, this is an almost certainty that Mia knows about us, which means she will have told Bree at the very least. And if Bree knows, then it won’t be long before Liam is trampling in here to give me my warning.

Mia can obviously tell I’m struggling to find the right answer, so she takes pity on me. “Relax. Bree and I suspect, but since we don’t know anything concrete, we’ve left it at that. Freya’s brothers are in denial, which is a good thing for you. But don’t think that means you can get out of here without a warning. I may be the tamest of everyone in this house, and yes, I am including Hallie in that, but let me make this very clear. If you hurt Freya, I will let Bree unleash all her pregnant fury on you, and you know she will. She will terrorise you and your cock until you’re the one crying. Treat her right and everything will be alright between us. Understand?”

I almost want to laugh at this beautiful, shy girl lecturing and threatening me. She’s right when she says she’s the least brutal out of everyone in the house and if I’m going to be threatened by any of them, she’s the best option. But we both know that if I hurt Freya, I will feel the full Doughty force. What happens if she hurts me?

I didn’t realise I said that last part aloud until Mia smiles at me, gently placing her hand on my arm. “You are our family, too, Kian. If Freya hurts you, she will hear about it from us,

too. This is why it's never a good idea for people inside the family to date, because if things go wrong, people will have to choose sides and none of us want to. We love you both," Mia explains, and I can't help but chuckle.

"You're one to talk. You and that asshole would destroy this family if anything were to happen between you. Bree would side with you, Liam with Kellan. Then that's the family ripped apart, yet you still risked it."

A big smile spreads across Mia's face as she looks over at Kellan, who is now sitting in the playpen with Hallie, taking part in what looks to be a teddy bear picnic. Hallie is bossing him around, and he just lets her, doing whatever she tells him to. "We got to know each other in secret a bit, too. Dividing the family was something I worried about massively. I knew Kellan and Liam were inseparable, and the Doughty's follow Liam. So that just left Bree, and I would never want her to choose between me and her family, particularly now she's got a baby on the way.

"I believe she would choose me, but I wouldn't ever ask her to. Not that it will ever come to that. I believe Kellan and I have had our fair share of tests, and we've passed them all. We are end game, and nothing life throws at us will change that."

I can't help but nod as she speaks, because the amount of shit that has been thrown their way is ridiculous. They have survived more than most people are capable of surviving, and they have come out of the other side stronger than ever. That's something for Freya and I to aspire towards.

"Despite Kellan being a sarcastic asshole, and you can do a million times better, you two are really good together. You've been through so much... I hope that's the end of it. Freya and I are just taking our time for now. When we're sure what we have, we will announce it. Until then, we want to get to know each other properly. To be sure we feel strongly enough to risk everything," I explain, before taking a gulp of my coffee, enjoying it slightly more now it's not burning my throat as I swallow.

“I get the impression you already know how you feel.” Mia looks at me through hooded eyes, a cheeky smile on herself, like she knows she’s saying something she shouldn’t be. I roll my eyes, which causes her to chuckle. “Okay, I won’t say anymore. But, make sure this is a date to remember. Freya likes to have her limits pushed. She wants a normal life, but that’s a pipe dream from when she was a kid. Show her what it’s like to love the adrenaline rush, and that if she’s brave enough to push herself, great things will happen.”

“That’s exactly the plan I had for today. But, thank you for your advice.”

Before we have a chance to say anything more, Freya walks down the stairs, appearing in the doorway looking just as fucking stunning as she always does. Her dark jeans are fitted and cling to her legs, making them look longer, and are paired with black and white Converse hi-tops. She’s wearing a baggy white T-shirt that hangs off, leaving one shoulder bare, and I can’t see any hint of a bra strap in sight, which causes me to salivate so much I’m close to drooling. Her T-shirt is thick enough you can’t see anything inappropriate, but just the knowledge that she might be braless under there has me all kinds of hot. I’m going to pretend she’s naked under there, completely ignoring how well I know Freya, and the chances are she just has a strapless bra on. She’s not the type of girl to go without a bra, no matter how hot that idea makes me.

She has the perfect body, lean but curvy in all the right places. The swimming lengths she does every morning add to her perfect physique. But it’s that gorgeous smile on her face that gets my heart racing. I was lying in bed with her just an hour ago, but she’s smiling at me in that shy way of hers, like she hasn’t seen me in forever, and fuck, I’m blown away.

My heart is about to beat right out of my chest, and if my cock could burst out of my jeans, it would have done it by now. I feel like a hormonal teenager in front of her, my dick standing to attention, hard as a rock whenever she so much as looks in my direction. I think it’s the direction my mind takes. That shy little smile looks even sexier when she’s about to climb on top to ride my cock into oblivion.

She's not wearing a lot of make-up, but she doesn't need to either. She likes a bit of eyeliner and mascara to make her beautiful green eyes pop even more, and the subtle red shade she's wearing makes her lips look lovely and plump. I try not to think about what that shade would look like smeared across my dick.

Focus, asshole. This is a date, nothing sexual. It's the least I can do for her. She deserves the world, and so if she wants a date, then a fucking date is what she will get.

I realise I'm staring, and a blush spreads across her cheeks as Mia walks towards her with what I'm sure is a coffee in a takeout cup we keep on hand. So many days we're getting ready to run out of the door before we've even had breakfast. We bought a big supply of takeaway cups, since so many of us have a terrible coffee addiction and can't function without it. Freya takes the drink with thanks and as she turns to me, she tries to school her face.

"So, are you going to tell me what to expect? I have no idea if I'm dressed appropriately, Caveman. You could have at least told me where we're going so I can make sure I'm prepared," she snaps, the same argument she's been having with me over the last two days. I told her to dress casually with comfortable shoes, which she's done. So that argument was thrown out of the window, and she's been pouting ever since. Apparently, my girl doesn't like surprises.

"I told you to dress casually, and you've nailed that, Beautiful. The rest is still a surprise. But, don't worry, I promised you the day would be all about you, and it will be," I say, throwing her a wink too.

Before Freya replies, Kellan walks over carrying Hallie, who is still babbling to herself. "Remind me again why you want to spend the day with this asshole?"

Kellan glares at Freya, who simply rolls her eyes at her brother before reaching over to grab Hallie's hand, which causes her to giggle loudly. "Look, this is a day where he has to treat me and make it all about me. Why would I not want that? Yes, the company could be better, but I intend to make

him regret making this bet. His wallet will be bleeding by the end of the day.”

Freya looks at me, that mischievous glint in her eyes, as she tries to play down the day and make Kellan believe this is really nothing more than a bet gone wrong. I’m not sure he believes it, but he plays along anyway. “Fine. Make sure you have a good day, and if you need me, call me. I will come and get you, no matter where you are.”

I know he’s just looking out for his sister, but hearing him say that gets my blood boiling. Why the hell does he think she will need rescuing? I try to keep the rage out of my tone, but fail miserably. “Fuck off, asshole. You know me, it’s not like she’s spending the day with a stranger. She won’t need to be rescued.”

Kellan tuts, as Hallie starts smacking his face with one hand while calling out for Mia. She’s started calling her Mama, and it melts all our hearts. Mia has never asked Hallie to call her that, and I know it’s something her and Kellan have talked about a lot, but they decided to let Hallie choose.

Shayla, who has started spending a little more time here, has actually been great about it. She sees the love Hallie has for Mia, and vice versa, and is supportive of Mia being her mum.

Once Hallie is settled in Mia’s arms, tugging on her long brunette hair, Kellan turns to no doubt give us more of a lecture, but Mia cuts him off. “Why don’t you two get going while you can? No doubt Liam will be up soon. I can keep this asshole in check.” She points towards Kellan before continuing, “But, I don’t think I can handle them both.”

Kellan turns to argue with her, until he sees her stern glare. I take Mia’s advice and turn to Freya. “Grab a coat, Beautiful. You are in for one hell of a day, if you’re brave enough.” I try not to laugh as I give her a little clue that I know she won’t pick up on. Today is about showing my girl a good time, but it’s also about pushing her boundaries. She thinks she wants a nice quiet life, so I plan on showing her that she actually craves the adrenaline rush.

“Is that a dare?” she asks, her brows raised in question, as she tries to hide her smile.

“Today is going to be all about dares, Beautiful. So, let’s get going. I dare you.”

CHAPTER TWELVE



Freya

“I dare you.”

As soon as the words leave Kian’s mouth, he knows he has me hooked. It’s only been a couple of weeks since we started fooling around together, but we’ve been hanging out for a lot longer than that. One thing he’s learnt about me since he met me is that I never back down from a dare. I grew up surrounded by brothers, and Ryleigh, who is just as fierce—if not more so—than all my brothers combined. If you want to survive in the Doughty family, you have to be tough enough to be willing to take on any dare they throw your way.

Growing up, pulling pranks and doing dares with each other was something that united us. From a young age, we were forced to grow up a lot quicker than we should have. We were trained to take our place in my father’s business as soon as we could be. We were all taught to fire guns before we were ten years old, along with fighting lessons.

Initially, Desmond didn’t want Ryleigh and me to be taught to fight or fire guns. We were just supposed to be silent and as beautiful as we could be so he could marry us off to the right people. Evan and Liam were the ones who persuaded him

to teach us. At first, I was pissed. Ryleigh wanted to be as tough as she could, but I didn't. I didn't want to know how to hold a gun or how to fight. But actually, the more I trained, the more I realised that being in this family means I have to know these things. It's part of the reason I was so keen to get out of this lifestyle, but now I have one very good reason to stay. It's still something I'm coming to terms with. But each day I spend with Kian, he manages to make my decision just that little easier.

The whole car journey, I've done nothing but look at road signs and throw guesses at Kian, as I try to work out where he's taking me. But never once does he let up, or give me any kind of clue. "Today is a day of dares. I want to push you to have the most fun you can. So, do you trust me, Beautiful?"

His voice is joking and playful, but that's a crazy big question. I don't trust anyone other than my brothers and Ry. It took a while to trust Bree and Mia, too. It's just not something that comes easy for me. After all, my parents let me down in the worst way possible.

Not only did Ry and I find out we're not really his children, but that he planned on fucking selling us off to one of his business partners, to strengthen his position of power. Liam saved us, and I can't even imagine the life we would have had if that wasn't the case. We've never really talked about what happened, or the fact Desmond isn't really our father. Even Mum refuses to talk to us about who our real father is. Trust isn't something that comes easily to me. But, I don't need any time to think about how to answer that question; it comes naturally and I know I mean it. "I trust you."

"Will you let me blindfold you?" he asks, wagging his eyebrows seductively and I can't help but chuckle.

"Are you talking about right now or in the bedroom?" I ask, trying my best to sound as seductive as I possibly can. I am getting better at being confident and knowing what turns Kian on, but it still doesn't come easy to me. I can't hide the blush spreading across my cheeks, and I can't deny the heat I feel between my legs when I think about what it would be like to have him use a blindfold on me in the bedroom. I know

Kian has a bit of an adventurous side when it comes to sex, spending a lot of time in my father's sex club—which is in itself a weird sentence.

It's not something we've ever talked about, and since the sex is pretty fucking mind-blowing—at least it is for me—I've never brought up the subject of if Kian needs more. But now it's all I can think about. Maybe I want to do a bit of experimenting. The guys I've been with before have all been the epitome of boring, and until Kian I'd never had an orgasm that I didn't give to myself. He's helped me explore my sexual side, and I'm more than happy to try more. I'm just not sure now is the right time for it. What with him driving down the middle of a motorway.

“What if I'm talking about both?” he chuckles.

“Well, I'm not sure while you're driving is the time for us to be experimenting. But I have to admit, I've been meaning to talk to you about when you used to visit Shades. I know you had a pretty provocative sex life before you met me, and believe me, I have no interest in learning more about any of the girls you were with before. But I do want to learn about what you like and see if we can try some kinky stuff together.” I hate how shaky my voice sounds as I pluck up the courage to admit that to him.

Kian's brows shoot up, his eyes wide as his head flits between looking at me and looking back out at the traffic as he tries to drive. “You better not be kidding with me here, Beautiful. My cock is so hard right now, I think it's about to demolish the zip on my jeans. I just wanted to blindfold you so you wouldn't know where we're going, but this is a much better idea.”

Shit, I can't believe my mind went to a dirty, sexual place at the mere mention of a blindfold, when Kian was actually just being innocent for once. Fuck, I'm never going to live this down. But I have to admit the hungry look in his gaze, the fire in his eyes, it lights up my core in the most exciting way.

My mind is somewhere else, caught between thinking of hot, sweaty, kinky sex, and being so fucking embarrassed that

the rouge in my cheeks will never go down, that I miss Kian pulling the car over. We're in a lay-by at the side of the motorway, shielded only by the trees that separate the road from this rest stop. No other cars are here, but that doesn't mean one won't pull up any minute.

Kian turns to me, that intense, fiery gaze sending my stomach flipping as it feels as though a procession of butterflies is fluttering around in there. "Sorry, I thought you had turned the conversation sexual. I didn't know you meant blindfold now."

Kian gulps, his throat bobbing like he's struggling to find the word as he shifts in his seat. I try not to look at the bulge in his jeans, but frankly, it's hard to miss, and we were talking about it, which gave me permission to stare. Well... that's the story I'm sticking with.

"We haven't talked about any of that, and to be perfectly honest, our sex is so fucking phenomenal, I haven't even thought about it," Kian explains as his gaze flicks away from me, like he's struggling to keep eye contact with me.

"Kian, I'm not saying that there's anything wrong with our sex life. Quite the opposite, actually. And it's good to know you think it's as amazing as I do." His eyes flick to meet mine, and that bright, cocky smile is back, so I continue. "I just know that you have had a more adventurous past than me, and you probably have needs and fantasies that I'm not fulfilling. So this is just me letting you know that within reason, I'm willing to experiment." I hate how fucking shy I sound. I might not be as sexually experienced or confident as Kian, but that doesn't mean I'm a virgin. Still, it's difficult to admit my boyfriend—shit, is that what he is?—likes stuff I've never tried. But I'm willing to embrace the kinky side, if that's what he needs.

Kian reaches over and cups my cheek with his hand, rubbing the pad of his thumb across my blush as he smiles at me. Not his cocky smile, but the sweet one he seems to reserve just for me. "You have no idea how fucking hot it is to know you want to experiment with me, Beautiful, and I will definitely take you up on that offer. But let me make

something very clear right now. You are the perfect fucking fantasy. I've dreamt of fucking you so many times since I met you, and every time we have done it has been better than anything I could dream up. So, if you want to try some kinky things, I'm down for that, but honestly, my tastes aren't that wild. I like to get a bit dominant, throw you around, spank you a bit, and push you out of your comfort zone, but that's all. I'm not into tying girls up or pain. I like a bit of risk, and the public aspect of the club was a massive turn on, but if you're expecting my tastes to rival *Fifty Shades*, you're sadly mistaken."

I can't help but chuckle as I press my cheek further into his hand. "That's good to know, because I don't think I'm into pain. But I would like to try all of what you just said. I trust you to push my body just enough that I'm crying out your name as I fall apart. And I have to confess, the public aspect and the risk-taking sounds super fucking hot. I've never thought about any of that before, but in all honesty, the guys I've been with in the past have been pure and simple vanilla."

Kian growls as his hand scrapes over my scalp to grasp my hair into his fist. There's a stinging pull, but it doesn't hurt. He doesn't tug hard enough to cause me pain, but it's enough that he can control the direction of my head. He pulls it back slightly to make sure I'm looking straight at him. "Do not talk about another guy while my dick is as hard as this. I hate the idea that any other has ever laid his hands on you."

The fierce look tells me he really means it, and although I don't condone his jealous, possessive behaviour, I can't deny that when he looks at me like this, I have to wiggle around a little to try to alleviate the delicious ache between my legs. "Calm down, Caveman. We both had lives before each other. You don't see me going all green-eyed monster on you. But I don't like the idea of you being adventurous with them and not me," I grumble, sounding a little more petty than I would have liked at the end. The hint of a smile on his face tells me he quite likes the idea of me being jealous over him though.

"Okay, so this is definitely not what I had planned for today. I literally spent all day giving myself a pep talk about

how first dates should not include anything sexual and how I needed to be on my best behaviour, and now you're ruining it. But, this is definitely a topic I want to revisit as soon as the date is over. I want to hear all about your fantasies, and I'll tell you mine. How's that sound?" Kian asks, looking at me through hooded eyes that do stupid things to my insides.

I can't help but grin at him like a fucking cheshire cat. I knew he had put a lot of thought into what our date should look like and what we could do together, but I did not know it meant so much to him, that getting it right meant this much.

"As long as you promise we can revisit it, then definitely."

His laughter rings out around the car. "Beautiful, do you think there's any chance of me forgetting that you want to talk about acting out all my fantasies? I'm already worried my dick will not go down for the whole day now," Kian grumbles, although he doesn't really sound bothered. In fact, the low, deep tone of his voice is just dripping with sex.

"Well, here's a pretty secluded place. Why don't you let me take care of it?"

Fuck, where the hell did that come from? I think I was thinking about it in my head, and I voiced the words aloud before my brain could even keep up. Kian's eyes widen, as the bright blue that is normally so evident darkens and his eyes look almost black, his pupils dilated with desire. The way Kian looks at me, like he's a dying man in the middle of the desert and I'm the drop of water he needs to survive, his oasis. He looks like he wants to consume me whole, and I want to let him.

I don't know who started to move first, or if either of us really made a conscious decision, but we had both turned to face each other while we talked, and now we were leaning towards each other, only the gearstick standing in our way. His face is so close I can feel his breath against my cheek. Just as I'm about to close the distance between us, a faint buzzing noise startles us both, as Kian looks down to see an alert buzzing on his watch.

“Shit. As much as I would very much like to see where this goes, we are going to be late. Now, are you going to let me blindfold you?” he asks, as he pulls a black eye mask out of his jeans pocket.

I pout, not happy about my sexy plans being cancelled. As much as I really want to find out what this date is, even more so now I know Kian has planned it down to the timings, too. But, my body is on fire, my pussy no doubt dripping, as I crave to have Kian touch me. I’ve never wanted someone so much that I would risk experimenting in a public place. But Kian turns me on in a way nobody else ever has. Where he’s concerned, the rule book has gone out of the window.

“Yeah, okay. But, promise me we can add risky outdoor sex to the fantasy list, please,” I mutter, as I reach to take the blindfold out of Kian’s hand, but he doesn’t let it go.

His eyes bore into mine, that cocky smirk on his face. “You have no idea how much I want to watch those pretty red lips of yours devour my cock, Beautiful. I promise you, we can have sex anywhere and everywhere. But you deserve the best first date I can give you, and someone told me you shouldn’t put out on a first date,” Kian laughs, remembering the lecture I gave him a couple of days ago when I asked him for the date.

To be honest, when I brought up the mention of us never having a first date, I had no idea he would go to these lengths to plan something for me. But I also didn’t know I would react this way. Obviously, I know how my body craves him, and how whenever we’re together, it always ends in sex, but I thought I could go a day without wanting to jump him. I guess if I’m being totally honest; I wanted to prove we are more than just the sex, that we can get together and be happy in each other’s company with our clothes on. It’s a stupid thought, now I think about it, because we were friends long before we started sleeping together.

We already knew we loved hanging out with each other, watching true crime documentaries or bad horror movies. We laugh together and have a good time in each other’s company,

yet we'd never been out of the house with just the two of us—until now.

Kian reaches over, gently pushing stray strands of blonde hair out of my eyes before tucking them behind my ears. The soft feel of his finger against my skin causes my pulse to race and my breathing to become ragged. It's such a simple, sweet gesture, yet it heats me from the inside out. That's when I see him moving the blindfold into position, and my breath catches.

Once the mask is in place, and he's confirmed I can't see anything, my world descends completely into darkness and I wait for the car to start up again. I'm trying to focus on my other senses, to see what I can hear more than anything, and it's a little overwhelming to start with. All I can hear is the pounding of my own heart ringing loudly in my ears, and I'm so focused on that, I miss all the other signs until I feel Kian's lips press against mine.

Once his soft lips make contact with mine, my other senses spring to life. I can smell the peppermint smell that's so distinctly Kian, and his warm breath against my face. His body is so close to me I can feel his warmth radiating across to me. I missed all this before, just because I was panicking. Now, it's the most soothing feeling, and I totally allow Kian's kiss to consume me. His tongue sweeping into my mouth as he deepens the kiss, pulling a groan from deep within my core. I reach out to try and touch him, but he takes hold of my hand, lacing our fingers together before resting it on his knee.

The kiss is over far too soon, but it was hot enough to have my body heating until I'm squirming in my chair, desperately trying to alleviate some of the ache between my thighs. My breathing is erratic, as I pant trying to catch my breath. It was only a kiss, not even the longest or most sexual, but it was definitely the most sensual we've ever had. Kian lit up my body like a Christmas tree, and I wanted to burn just for him.

“Fuck, as much as I would love to devour you whole right now, we have somewhere we have to be.”

Before he even gives me a chance to reply, the deep rumble of the car engine starts up and I feel him pulling away.

I'm actually quite glad because I have no idea what I would say. I mean, the obvious statement would be to tell him to forget all about the damn date and let's spend the day fucking like animals on the side of the road. But that didn't really feel like an option. So, silence, as they say, is golden. Though, I definitely think we may have to save this blindfold for next time we're in the bedroom, because the way it heightens all my other senses, leaving me completely at his mercy—I didn't think I would like it, but I think I do.

No, I take that back; I know I will fucking love it. Our sex bucket list just got started, and I can't wait to not only keep adding to it, but also to start ticking them off.

Sex in public.

Blindfolded sex.

I wonder what we will add to the list next?



I don't know how much longer we drive for, but I feel the car slowing down, and I realise we've reached our destination. I try to listen out for any sounds, but Kian has cleverly turned the radio up a little just as we were slowing down, so I still have no idea where we are. At this point, I can't even begin to think how long we have travelled for, to try and work out where we could be.

Who am I kidding? Geography is my biggest weakness, and I haven't lived in London for too long. So even if I knew we'd travelled an hour, I still don't know where we could be. Nevertheless, it doesn't hurt to try and guess. But I'm coming up empty. The only clue Kian has given me is that I need comfy shoes, and must be willing to engage in dares. Though, I could engage in a dare anywhere.

Now that we're here, I'm a mix of excited and anxious to get answers. I want this date to go well so badly. I feel like this is going to be the day that cements whether we are capable of doing the real boyfriend and girlfriend thing. That we are more than just sex. That we can have fun and be together. I guess maybe I'm viewing this as a way of testing Kian. How committed is he to this being a real relationship? And does he know enough about me that he can pull off the perfect first date?

Once the car is completely at a stop, Kian turns the engine off, but before I can reach up to remove the blindfold, he takes my hands in his. I don't miss the way my skin prickles with excitement as he touches me, the hairs on my arms standing to attention as heat fills my body. How is he able to do that just from an innocent touch of his hand?

"Give me a minute, Beautiful. I want to give you a rundown of the day," Kian says, his voice a lot closer than I was expecting. His breath warms the side of my cheek, and now that I'm thinking about it, I can feel the warmth emanating from his body, telling me he's closer than I think he is.

I hate how breathy I sound as I reply. "Why do we need a rundown?"

I try to focus on his words, not on how fucking distracting it is having his breath against my ear, wondering if his lips will touch me next. I can feel they're almost touching me, and a shiver ripples down my spine as he whispers to me. "Because today is about pushing you. I know you aren't one to back down from a dare, and so today will be full of dares. You have spent months telling me you want a nice, boring life, but I'm going to show you today that you crave excitement. Your body hums just with the mere thought of it. I'm going to prove to you that you crave adrenaline, just like the rest of us. You're a Doughty, and you should be damn proud of how strong you are. Today is the day you learn to embrace your wild side. Today you are going to live like the girls you write about in your books," Kian explains, my heart racing the more he talks.

I finally opened up to Kian last week about the fact I publish books. He was shocked I'd been doing it so long in secret, and that none of my family had a clue I could write. But, since I told him, he's been nothing but supportive. He even bought all my books on Kindle, and has started reading one of them. I didn't even know he knew what Kindle was, let alone read a book.

Kian's definitely more of a film guy, but for me, he wanted to at least try. I have to admit, I'm a little nervous about having him read some of the sex scenes I've written. I also don't want him to read my latest book and find I based most of my male character on him. At the time I started writing it, Kian was nothing more than a fantasy, a dream I couldn't have, so I wrote about it.

I wrote the story we should have had together, creating the perfect book boyfriend based on Kian. I had no idea I'd ever be in a position to tell him about my books, or that he would be my real boyfriend. It's like my two worlds are crashing together and I don't know what will happen.

The more Kian talks about pushing me out of my comfort zone, showing me how much I crave adrenaline over the normal life I thought I wanted, I can't help but smile. We've never really discussed my decision, as there was never really one to make in the end. I feel very strongly about Kian—maybe even that four letter word that's so hard to say—and so it was never really a hard decision. I wanted him, and the rest would have to fall into place. But I know the choice fell heavily on Kian.

He's mentioned a few times about me giving up the dream life I thought I wanted, and if I'm okay, giving it up for him. I've always said I'm happy with my decision, but Kian never seemed to take that as my real answer. Maybe today will show him how serious I am about my choices.

“Kian, you know I will never back down from a dare, but you have nothing to prove to me. I already know that I like you, I choose you. But even if I didn't choose you, you made me realise that the only way I could have a normal life would be to give up my family. To separate myself from them and

never see them again. Even just being associated with Bree and my family makes me a target. The guys at the fight made that very fucking clear. And as much as I would like to live a normal life free of death and guns, I can't live without my family. So, it really wasn't a choice to make at all." I try to clarify that I haven't given anything up for him. He just helped me realise what I would lose if I went after that life, and I'm not prepared to give up my family. I just couldn't do it. They made the decision for me... getting Kian was a happy by-product!

"I know all that. But let's pretend none of that happened, and you were still torn between life with me, or normal life with the next Mr Boring. I'm going to show you why life with me will always be the better choice." It's not hard to miss the cocky edge in his voice, and I can't help but smile. Kian is such a competitive asshole, even though he's already won, he has to prove why he should win.

"Fine. Can I remove the blindfold now?" I ask, but before I've even finished the sentence, Kian is gently removing it from my face.

It takes a few seconds for my eyes to adjust, the light suddenly too bright and I have to blink a few times for them to adjust. Once my vision returns to normal, I see Kian's face right next to mine, so close I can almost taste his lips on mine. At first he's all I see—who the hell am I kidding? Since the first moment I met him, he's been all I've seen. I could close this gap between us now and feel his lips. That's exactly what I'm about to do until a flashing light behind Kian's head catches my eyes. That's when I really look around, noting the fact I'm in a giant car park, surrounded by other cars. I notice the huge sign in front of us and I can't help but squeal.

"You brought me to Thorpe Park?" I ask, a mix of excitement and fear lacing my words.

Over the past couple of weeks, Kian and I have had many conversations where we've been trying to get to know each other a bit better. Granted, we're usually naked, and it's after a heavy sex session, but we're still talking. And I remember one particular conversation we had about theme parks.

Kian's an adrenaline junkie, and he loves to go on rides. Declan is a moody asshole, and he hates rides, but he would do anything for Kian. So he would let Kian drag him on ride after ride, just to make him happy. I barely know Declan. He's a hard guy to get a read on, but after hearing that story, it's hard not to like the guy.

It outraged Kian that I'd never been to a theme park before, and had never ridden a roller coaster. My family isn't really the type to do days out, and when I finally moved away for school, I was so focused on just finishing my school year; I didn't even consider what other fun things I could be doing. Ryleigh was the one who would quite happily ditch school and ride roller coasters so much that she threw up. I was the one who worried about ditching class five minutes before the end for a dentist appointment.

I'd always been the good girl, but obviously that meant I'd missed out on a lot. Now, here with Kian, is my chance to push my boundaries. To find out what I've been missing out on, and my heart is racing at the idea. The fact Kian knew me well enough to pull this off, it makes my soul soar.

Kian pulls my attention back when he replies to my question. I'd actually got so distracted thinking over my life, I forgot I'd spoken. Now, as my gaze rakes over him, I can see he looks unsure of himself. His bright blue eyes are downcast, and the hand that isn't currently laced through mine is wringing circles around his neck with his fingers. "Sorry, I thought you'd like it here. I know you've never been on a roller coaster, but I thought maybe you'd want to try. But if you don't like it, or you think it's a stupid idea, we can go somewhere else."

The words tumble out of Kian's mouth faster than normal, and I'm not used to hearing the uncertainty in his voice. Normally Kian is confident in everything he does, and even if he isn't, he fakes it rather well. But I think getting this date right means a lot to him. So, with my free hand, I reach over and grab his cheek, cupping it gently whilst also directing his head so he's facing me. He has no choice but to raise his gaze and make eye contact with me. I just hope he can see how

much I mean what I'm about to say. "Kian, this is the best first date ever. You listened to something I told you a while ago, and you remembered. Obviously, I know why I never went to a theme park as a kid, but I don't know why I never thought of organising something once I was free of Desmond. I guess some of the training he did with us is hard to undo."

Kian's eyebrow raises in confusion. "What do you mean, training?"

I take a deep breath, unsure if I should tell him all about my childhood. I mean, it's not that I plan to ever keep anything from Kian, it's just not really first date talk. "I know you know I had a bad childhood, but there was a lot more to it. I will tell you one day, but on a first date is hardly the time to tell you about how messed up my family really is. I want you to like me, and talking about how fucked up I am is not the way to go. I mean, you would think when I found out Desmond isn't really my father that it would be the answer to a lot of my prayers, but it just made things even fucking worse."

The words tumble out of me, and I don't realise that I've over-shared until I look at Kian and see the look of bewilderment on his face. He's our head of security, and has done full checks on everyone who even steps within a metre of Bree, so I just assumed he knew that Ryleigh and I weren't Desmond's real daughters.

I still remember the day we found out like it was yesterday. I never really had a loving bond with Desmond. Ry was always a lot closer to him. Since she's the baby, everyone had an overwhelming sense of love and adoration for her. She also got away without having to be part of most of our training sessions.

All the Doughty children were assigned a role when we were kids, and we were trained based on that. Evan, as the oldest, was always going to be father's clone, and take over the family business. Finn was always the cute kid, but he was also incredibly sweet and caring. Desmond realised he could use his looks and ability to get people to trust him to his advantage. They trained him to be a scam artist from then on.

Liam was always the tough one, the one who looked after us all. He would be the first to dive into a fight if any of us needed him. But he could also turn his emotions off at the drop of a hat, letting none of the training Desmond inflicted on us bother him. That's when Desmond decided Liam would be the muscle, and he trained him to be an assassin. What he didn't anticipate is Liam's moral compass, and whilst Liam is probably the best hitman in the world, if he doesn't think the target really deserves to die, then no amount of money in the world will sway him.

Even though Kellan had an absolute fucking gift when it came to computers, thankfully, Desmond never paid enough attention to notice that. He just knew Liam and Kellan had such a strong bond, and so he assigned Kellan to be his bodyguard. He knew no matter what, Kellan would protect Liam, and vice versa. Though, I bet knowing now how good a hacker Kellan is, I'm sure Desmond would have made use of his skills, had he known. It's probably a good thing he didn't.

That just left Ry and me. Typically, in mafia families, the women are of no importance. Their only role is to marry conveniently to help strengthen the family's position, and Desmond made it clear quite early on that's what we would be trained for.

We were taught to be the perfect housewife. To be seen and not heard, to do all the cooking and cleaning, and to look our best at all times. We fucking hated it, and Ry, in particular, wanted to rebel. She got away with a lot of it given her baby status, but that just meant Desmond had to find new ways to punish her, and he did that by punishing me.

The night he got drunk and told us all that we weren't his kids, we knew he was building up to something big. Finn overheard him talking in his office with some bigshot partner from London, who was willing to give Desmond the backing he needed to make a move for London, but he expected a lot in response. That was all Finn heard, but Desmond's mood worsened after that. The whole day got worse with him banging around, getting more and more wound up, until finally he told us we weren't his kids, and that he was selling us to his

business partner. He was looking for girls to work in his club, and at just fifteen and sixteen, Ry and I were the perfect age.

As soon as he told us, all hell broke loose. Mother sobbed hysterically, but wouldn't tell us anything. She wouldn't even confirm the story was true, or tell us who our real father was. She just wailed. Even Desmond refused to give us more information, and he wouldn't even look at us. He kept looking at Liam, like he was expecting him to do something. Sure enough, Liam, always our protector, refused to allow it to happen, and that night he took us away.

He registered us at a boarding school under a fake name and told us we would never have to see Desmond again. Little did we know Liam had made a pact with Des, something he had to agree to if he wanted us to be able to leave with him. He agreed we would all return to the family should any of us get married. We all thought that was so far in the future we would worry about it when the time came. Liam, Kellan, Ry, and I left that day, and until the day he introduced Bree to our family, we never looked back.

No matter how much I looked into things, I found out no information about my past. Desmond is named on our birth certificates, and no matter who I spoke to, there was no word of Mum being associated with anyone other than Desmond. I know most people are possibly scared of talking out against him, or not wanting to ruin Mum's name, but that didn't help me. I wanted answers. Or at least I did when it first happened. I searched for such a long time, but then it became obvious I wasn't going to get anywhere, so I stopped looking.

I thought it would affect the way my brothers viewed us, knowing we're only half related, but it didn't matter to any of them. They still treated Ry and I the same. But I think not belonging to the family in the same way affected us both more than we ever wanted to admit. Desmond might have been an asshole, who raised us under shit circumstances, but he was still our dad. He had rare moments where he showed us how much he cared for us. Knowing they were all a lie made things so much harder.

I don't realise tears are filling in my eyes until I feel the heat of Kian's thumb rubbing along the side of my cheek, wiping away a stray tear. I don't know why I'm letting this shit bother me. I thought I'd put it to bed, but obviously not. Instead, I'm sitting here crying like a lunatic on a first date.

Kian lightly strokes my cheek, and the soft, loving words that come out of his mouth cause my heart to swell. "Please, don't cry, Freya. I know your father lying to you was a shit thing to do, but he did it for the right reasons. I'm not saying the way he treated you was right, but in the end, he probably saved your lives. I know it messed up your childhood, and he will have to answer for that, but the life he saved you from would have been far worse."

My brow furrows in confusion as I listen to what he's saying, but the words don't quite make sense. It's like we're talking about two different situations. Maybe I said something that confused him, and he's thinking about the wrong thing? "What are you talking about, Kian? I don't think we're talking about the same thing."

Kian's bewildered gaze mirrors mine, as we both try to work out what the other person is talking about. "I'm talking about the fact your dad lied to you. Telling you that you weren't his daughter. He knew of his business partner's shady plans for you, and he couldn't see a way to protect you and Ryleigh. He needed to keep you off the guy's radar, and so he told him you meant nothing to him as you weren't really his kids. He told the man he could have you knowing full well Liam would step in and save you.

"It really hurt Desmond, and your mum, to tear up your family like that, which is why Desmond added the stipulation that you must all return to the family if ever you planned on marrying. He wanted you all to be a family again, but only when the heat was off. He didn't want anyone using you or Ryleigh as a weapon against him, which is why he said you weren't his real daughters."

I can tell with each word Kian says that he's telling the truth. The guy is an open book with me, and whenever he's trying to lie or hide something from me, he has the same tell.

His left eye twitches just ever so slightly. Most people probably wouldn't even be able to tell, but I've studied this guy's face for weeks now. I know him better than most other people, which is why I know he's telling the truth—or he thinks he is. I just don't understand why my father would lie to him like this. It's so fucking messed up.

I pull away slightly, anger bubbling away under the surface as I think about the way Desmond lies and manipulates the people around him. I don't know what angle he's playing, or how this new lie he's told Kian benefits him, but you can be damn sure he's got a reason. "Why the fuck would he say that to you? I don't know what game he's playing by lying to you, Kian. But you can be damn sure he's after something," I snap, not meaning to take my anger out on Kian, but I can't help it. I'm furious, and he's here.

His eyes widen, almost like he's having a lightbulb moment, and he tries to reach out to touch my cheek again, but I pull away. I'm so angry right now, I can't have him touch me. "Freya, Desmond never told me this. I'm so sorry, I thought you knew. Desmond told Declan when they worked together at the club. In fact, Declan was the one who helped Des work out a way to keep you and Ry safe. He was worried his business partner could always use you, that you would never be safe if people saw that you girls were his weakness. His boys knew how to take care of themselves, but you didn't. He wanted to keep you safe. Declan said that the only way to truly make you safe was to spread word that you weren't really Doughty's, and that Desmond wanted nothing to do with you now he learnt you weren't his biological children. And actually, the more the news spread, the safer you became. Liam got you away from here, but it was your father's sacrifice that prevented anyone from looking for you."

My eyes widen as my mouth hangs open—hell, it feels as though my jaw is about to hit the fucking floor. Could Kian be telling the truth? Has Desmond had our best interests in mind all along?

I know there's been a few times where Ry and I have tried to talk to him about this bullshit situation and he's just shot us

down pointblank. He's always said that he will tell us the full story when the time is right, and I always assumed that meant he would tell us who our real dad is, and how Mum had an affair without anyone noticing. That's the story we wanted, but if what Kian's saying is correct, he had a much different truth to tell us.

It's quite ironic that the only thing I've ever wanted in life is to live a normal life, free from my family name, and it turns out, I've been living that life for the last couple of years since I left home. Desmond—or maybe I should start calling him Dad again now?—he has been keeping us safe, keeping enemies off our backs without us even realising.

My voice comes out so timid and quiet, almost like I'm afraid to voice my thoughts aloud. “Are you sure? How do you know he isn't lying?”

Kian reaches out again, but this time I let him cup my cheek. The feel of his soft skin against mine comforts me in a way I really need right now. I look up at him expectantly, unsure of what answer I want him to give me. Do I want to be Desmond's daughter again, dealing with all the shit that goes with it? I guess it doesn't matter what I want, I just need to know the truth.

“Declan wouldn't lie to me. And he told me not to tell anyone. He only told me because he said I would need to know for security reasons. He basically wanted to make sure you had the right security.” His thumb sweeps under my eye, wiping away more stray tears that are threatening to fall as he continues. “I'm sorry to be the one to tell you this, Frey. If you want to call your dad and confirm it, we can do that. Or, I can take you into the theme park and make you ride every single roller coaster until your brain is so fuzzy you forget your own name. I never wanted to ruin our date, Beautiful. I'm sorry.”

The heartbreaking look on Kian's face is enough to snap me out of my melancholy thoughts. My head is all over the place, thinking about whether or not Desmond really is my father. And if he is, he sacrificed a lot to make sure Ry and I were safe, even to the detriment of himself. We've all grown up thinking he's nothing but selfish and self-centred. Only

thinking about what's best for Desmond Doughty, and we are just casualties in his games. But what if all we've ever known about him isn't true, and he really does care about us?

I can't think about Desmond right now. This is a problem for another day. One I need to deal with alongside Ryleigh, because if he lied to me, he lied to her too. My brothers will also want to know. So we can have a family meeting another day, but for now, there's no reason at all that I can't push all this out of my mind. When I left the house this morning, I had one thought on my mind: spending the day with Kian. He already wears an expression that tells me he thinks he's ruined our date. I need to get this back on track, and quickly. Not ten minutes ago, we were flirting and considering fucking in a public lay-by. I've already experienced more emotions on this damn date than I ever want to, but I guess that's just life.

I need to get this date back to where it should be. No anger and, sadly, no sex. Just Kian and me, getting to know each other, and having fun together. Everything else we can deal with when we get home—including the many different sexual experiments we now have planned. But for now, I asked for a normal first date, and Kian has gone out of his way to plan what I'm already sure is going to be an amazing first date. So, I'm gonna dive in headfirst and not ruin it.

“Right then, Caveman. Lead the way.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Kian

Well, I thought the date was pretty much fucked after I accidentally dropped that bomb in the car. I mean, I thought she knew Desmond was lying to her. I assumed he'd told her the truth, and that's why she craved the normal life so much, as she'd had a little taste of it while at boarding school. But when she was forced back into the family, I thought that was why she knew she wanted out.

Long story short, I fucked up. I mean, I made my girl cry on our first fucking date. It's difficult to recover after that. And we started the date so fucking well. I really thought we were going to end up fucking in that damn lay-by with her blindfolded while riding my cock. But I promised her no sexy stuff, just a good, plain first date.

It seems I'm just not capable of doing a simple first date, but that's okay. Nothing about Freya and my relationship will ever be simple, plain, or boring. So, I just have to work a little harder to move past the anger she clearly feels towards Desmond, and side-step any sexy times that might crop up and just have some fun together. I had a plan for if Freya wasn't onboard with the whole theme park idea. The fact she is though, made me so happy, but now is the time to remind her exactly what this date is all about.

“Okay, first dare. Here’s the map of the park. Choose which ride you think will terrify you the most, and I dare you to go on that first,” I say, as I hand over the theme park map I had stashed in the door well of the car next to me.

Freya takes the map, opens it fully, and looks over all the different rides. I’ve done all my research before, so I know what rides will be most scary for her and which she might want to avoid. Part of the reason I chose Thorpe Park is because, despite my love of theme parks, this is one I’ve never been to.

I’ve always wanted to, but we usually ended up going to others like Alton Towers. I’m not sure why we never came here, but I saw a post on social media advertising some of their bigger coasters, and I was all in.

Freya’s brows pull together as she takes in the map, before her eyes widen, and I know she’s picked one. I also know, if it’s the one I’m thinking of, then the thought scares the shit out of her. Because there’s one thing I know Freya hates, and that’s horror films. So, I’m not in the least bit surprised by her response. “It has to be the *Saw* roller coaster, then. How the fuck did they manage to turn a horror movie into a ride?” she gasps, struggling to hide the confusion in her voice.

I can’t help but chuckle as her adorable button nose scrunches with distaste. “Let’s get going then.”

We climb out of the car and enter via the upgraded entrance I paid for. I bought all the fast pass options, wanting to make sure we could cram as much in as we can, without having to queue. Besides, I’m incredibly impatient, and I wasn’t made for queuing—I get bored far too easily. Even in the supermarket, when there’s a long line to be served, Freya laughs at me because I huff and grumble constantly. She’s even taken to carrying treats in her handbag, and she distracts me with sweets or chocolate, just so I don’t moan. I’m very aware I sound childish, but I can’t help it if I get bored quickly.

We practically run across the park, our fingers interlaced, and I love watching Freya’s eyes widen as she takes in all the

sights, lights, and sounds around her. Her face lights up, and she looks like a kid for the first time. I can't deny the flips that look does to my stomach, and my heart literally doubles in size at the knowledge I made her this happy. Though that look soon fades when we reach the *Saw* ride.

Her face drops as the screams of the people currently riding fill the air around us. We watch as the ride climbs the almost vertical hundred foot track, before tipping over the edge and plummeting the riders back down at over a hundred miles per hour. Their screams trailing behind them, and I can't help but smile.

I'm an adrenaline junkie, so this right here is my crack. I have a sneaky suspicion that Freya will be the same, but right now, I can see her fear is getting the better of her. She's frozen to the spot, her gaze trailing the car as it zooms around the twists and turns. When it finally stops, she turns to me, her eyes wide as saucers, and shakes her head. "Nope. No. No way. Not happening."

She continues to babble, telling me why she can't go on the ride, and I just chuckle. As soon as she hears me laughing, she playfully hits my arm with her hand. "Why are you laughing? I can't go on that. I will die!" She sounds so fucking serious, and that causes me to laugh harder, earning me another slap. I barely feel it, but I watch as she rubs her palm, obviously having hit my muscular bicep too hard.

"Look at all the people walking off the ride, Frey. Do they look dead?" I ask, pointing at the group of people leaving the ride. Admittedly, they looked a little pale, and a young girl at the back heaves over the closest bin like she might be about to throw up. She really is not helping me with this.

"Well, they may not be dead, but they don't look well. She's puking in a bin, for fuck's sake," Freya snaps, pointing over at the girl who has now lost her breakfast into the bin. Thankfully, she didn't throw up whilst on the ride. That would have been unfortunate.

"Look, she's the exception. Besides, she probably ate far too much food before riding, and I made sure you only had

your morning coffee—and we both know you love coffee too much to ever let it come back up,” I joke. Freya rolls her eyes, so I go in for the kill. “I mean, if you’re too chicken, we can choose something a little less scary. It will mean you lose this dare, though.”

Freya groans, and I fight to hold back my smile. She’s far too competitive for her own good, and I can see the internal war going on behind her eyes. “What happens if I lose the dare?”

We both know she’s not going to back down from a dare, but I need to be certain. I never really thought about what her punishment for breaking a dare would be, as I just assumed she would do them. So now I need to think up something on the spot, something so bad that she has no choice but to do the dare. “You will be punished, and have to complete a forfeit of my choosing. Each time you don’t do a dare, you will face a very public punishment. They will get worse the more you let me down. Don’t even think that I will make the punishment into something pleasurable that you will like. I will make them bad.”

She gulps, looking up at the ride as it sets off on its next journey, before flitting her eyes back to me. “What would this punishment be?”

An evil grin spreads across my cheek as I think of the punishment, and the more I think about it, the more I might quite like her to back out of the dare. “We will go into that cafe over there for some breakfast. We will sit in a booth at the back and look over the menu. Then, while you’re deciding what you want, I’ll start rubbing that sensitive clit of yours. I will keep going, pressing hard while you try to stay quiet so that the people in the cafe don’t hear what you’re doing. Then, when you are ready to orgasm, I’ll stop. I will keep doing that, over and over, taking you to the edge but refusing to allow you to finish. Until we complete our breakfast, and call the server over to clear our table. While he’s cleaning it, that’s when I will allow you to come. I will make you come so hard, right in front of him, and you will have to do your best to hide it.”

Her eyes darken, glazing over with lust as she listens to her punishment. My cock is hard as nails now, and I'm starting to think I might punish her this way even if she goes on the roller coaster. It would be very fucking hot. Her breath is coming in pants as she nibbles on her lower lip. Her eyes flick to the ride again before settling back on me. "We both know I'm not going to back down from the dare, but I do quite like the sound of the punishment. It's embarrassing, and the risk of getting caught is high, but that doesn't change the fact that it's a massive fucking turn on. Maybe we can do the punishment some other time?"

Her cheeks flush a delicious shade of pink, and once again I have to remind myself, this date is not supposed to contain any sex. Well... I've been told that you should never put out on a first date, but our situation differs slightly from that. So, maybe after we've done the date stuff, and she believes we can have a fun day out together, then I will fuck her. But, until then, I need to focus.

I can't stop my voice from cracking as I lust over her words. "Oh, we will definitely be doing that punishment somewhere another time. But, right now, I need to know if we're joining this *Saw* ride?"

Freya's eyes once again flit between me and the roller coaster, but now we're able to push their screams into the background, so much so that we can barely hear them. Unless we're focusing in on them, which I'm trying not to do as I actually want to get Frey on this ride. I know she'll enjoy it. She just has to give it a chance.

"Okay." Just one word, her eyes wide with a mix of excitement and fear. Despite confirming she will go on the ride, her feet appear to be frozen to the floor.

I take hold of her hand, clasping our fingers together as I give her a reassuring smile. "You've got this, Frey. Come on, let's go and have some fun."

I start walking, pulling on her arm a bit as at first she doesn't move, but after I've done a couple of steps, she starts to join me. She walks towards the main queue, but I pull her

towards the VIP entrance, explaining about the fast passes I bought. I expected her to be happy about not having to queue, not giving the anticipation a chance to overwhelm her, but apparently she wanted the queue time to psyche herself up. I can't help but chuckle as I drag her to the front of the line.

Once we're both seated in the front row, the young lad operating the ride comes over and secures the safety harness that is pulled over our heads, as well as the seatbelts that are wrapped around our waist. As he walks away, I try to look over at Freya, my vision slightly hindered by the safety features. But I watch as she tugs on both the overhead protection and her seatbelt, to be sure they're both secure and not going anywhere. When she does, she takes hold of the handrails on the overhead protection, and grips them so tight her knuckles start to go white. We haven't even started to move yet.

Freya leans forward slightly so she can look at me, and I do the same so she can clearly see me. Her eyes are wide as saucers and she's nibbling at her lower lip with her tooth. "I'm not sure I can do this." Her voice cracks and she sounds genuinely scared.

Fuck, what do I do? Should I tell the ride attendant we need to get off?

Before I have a chance to even think about what I should do, I hear the sound of the ride clicking into action, and the car begins to move. Freya's eyes widen further, and she looks terrified. As the roller coaster car chugs along the track, that familiar clicking sound as the track helps the car get started rings out around us.

"I don't think I can do this," Freya mutters, more to herself than to me, as her eyes are now firmly locked in front of her as she watches the car make its way up the track.

I'm about to reassure her, to let her know it will be over soon and she will love it, but unfortunately, I don't get that chance. The asshole teenager next to her beats me to it. "Ha, it's too late for that, love. This ride ain't stopping until the end. Make sure you don't scream too loud."

I look over at the kid, trying to give him my best glare, but with all the safety features, I can barely make him out. Other than the long, greasy brown hair that's sticking up above the safety harness, and the bright blue tracksuit he's wearing, I can't see anything else. Thankfully, Freya's not too terrified to let him get away with such a cocky ass comment. "Don't worry about me, *love*. Just focus on yourself, making sure you don't sound like a little girl when you scream."

Before any of us have a chance to engage in a mud-slinging match, the ride is plunged into darkness, and the *Saw* experience begins. The further into the ride we go, the more the tension is building. My eyes flick from left to right, trying to take in as much of the ride as I can. I can feel my heart pounding in my chest as the ride climbs and dips, embracing the dark horror film.

When we finally emerge into the sunlight, it takes a few seconds for my eyes to adjust, and the sound of the metal wheels chugging and pulling the roller coaster cart rings out around us once more. We're thrown backwards, almost like we're laying flat on the floor, and slowly the car starts to climb. It feels like this goes on for ages, and as I look out around me, the park dwindles before my very eyes. Everything gets smaller, and the view from way up high becomes even more amazing.

Freya gasps from beside me, and I know she's just seen how high up we are. Finally, the car reaches the top and the car rights itself so we're sitting back upright again. We only have around a second to take in our surroundings and allow the anticipation to build. My heart races a little quicker, and I try my best to take a breath, knowing what's about to happen. I grip onto the hand rails just that little bit tighter. I'm about to say something to Freya, to tell her to take it all in and enjoy it, but the words freeze in my mouth and the roller coaster car suddenly starts to move, only this time it feels like we're hanging from the ceiling, looking down at the world below.

For just a fraction of a second, it seems like my heart stops beating as I hold my breath, then I hear the telltale clicking of the roller coaster gears, and then we're falling. It's a vertical

drop as we plummet from a hundred feet in the air, hurtling down the track towards the ground. I can't stop the whoops and laughter that escapes my lips as I embrace the feeling of my stomach flipping. I try as best I can to focus on Frey, but it's almost impossible when my body is being propelled from side to side, upside down, and my head clatters against the sides of the overhead safety harness. But I can hear her little scream as we first plummet turns to laughter as she whoops and hollers the more we turn. I also don't miss the way tracksuit boy is definitely screaming at the top of his lungs in the most high-pitched female squeal I've ever heard. If I could laugh at him, I would.

When the ride finally draws to a close and the car stops, the safety harness above our heads pings upwards, finally allowing me to look over at Freya. We're both panting as we try to catch our breaths. Her face is flushed, and her silky blonde hair is a crumpled mess, reminding me of how it looks after I've spent the night ravishing her.

After unclipping my seatbelt, I reach over and do the same for her before taking her hand and helping her climb out of the car. I'm very aware she could do it all herself, but since this is technically our first date, I'm trying to be chivalrous.

Once we get out of the ride, and we're standing in the exact spot we were not ten minutes ago as we were debating going on the ride at all, we look over at each other and as the biggest smile crosses Freya's face, we both start to laugh. She laughs so hard she ends up bending over, putting her hands on her knees while she tries to get her breathing back on track.

Once I'm sure her breathing is back to normal, I pull her into my arms and gently press my lips against hers. Her lips are cold and slightly dry from the g-force air as we zoomed around the coaster, but it doesn't bother me. I kiss her with passion, my tongue sweeping along her lower lip, but not entering when she gives me permission. Instead, I pull away, and I can see the confused look in her eyes.

"I'm so fucking proud of you, Beautiful. If I keep kissing you like that, I won't ever want to stop, and that's not part of

today's plan. So, what did you think?" Even though I have a pretty good idea, I still need to hear from her.

That smile I love so much spreads wide across her face, and her eyes twinkle with excitement. "Oh my God, I loved it so much. What's next?"

That hopeful, excited look sends a shiver straight to my dick. I knew my girl would be an adrenaline junkie. I just needed for her to realise it. "So, you liked the adrenaline rush, then?" I probe, wanting her to admit it, not only to me but to herself too.

One hand reaches up to cup behind my neck, while the other snakes around my back, sitting low enough that she's almost touching my ass. Her breath is so close, I can feel it tickling my lips. All I have to do is lean forward, and I can taste her. But, before I get the chance, Freya speaks. "I loved the rush. The feel of my heart racing as I struggled to catch my breath," she says, as she moves my hand until it's resting on her chest and I can feel her heart racing. "My heart is still beating like the drum of a marching band, and I'm struggling to breathe normally, yet it doesn't feel scary. For a fraction of a second, the feeling of falling was terrifying, but it was soon replaced by excitement, and I couldn't help but laugh and cheer. It was an amazing feeling, and I need more."

She sounds like an addict, desperately craving her next fix, and I'm just the person to give it to her. I focus on my hand, the warm sensation that seems to sizzle between us whenever our skin touches. She's right, I can feel her heart, it's like it's trying to beat out of her chest, and as she pants, her chest wall is rising and falling, my hand along for the ride. I'm very aware of how close I am to touching her tits. I try not to look at how hard her nipples are, and how they're poking out of her T-shirt. Fuck, she really is beautiful and looks so sexy as the blush on her cheeks spreads down across her chest.

Freya's breath hitches. Now it has nothing to do with the adrenaline from the roller coaster, and everything to do with her attraction to me. It will never get old for me, the way I can get her body to react to mine so easily. It's like we were made for each other.

“If my girl wants more, then more she will have,” I say, as I bend down ever so slightly and gently press my lips to hers. I pull away, leaving it at a short, sweet kiss, that’s also a promise of so much more to come.

We spend the rest of the day rushing around the park, riding all the big, adrenaline rush roller coasters, but also having lots of fun on the quieter rides. I loved hearing her little yelps as we rode the ghost train, and it managed to shock her. The way she squealed as we both got drenched on the log flume—thankfully they have some big life sized dryers. You put a couple of pounds in, and it’s like lots and lots of hair dryers are all blasting warm air on you, front and back, drying us out as best we can.

The day flew by, and it’s not until a loud announcement rang over the park announcing that rides were closing in half an hour that we realised we had been at the park the whole day. We had a few drinks along the way, but neither of us wanted to eat anything.

Food and rides that twist and turn as you spin upside down, they don’t exactly match with a stomach full of food. Yet, neither of us seemed to mind, and we didn’t want to stop. Though, as the announcement rang out, I have to admit I’m starting to feel tired and hungry.

“Why don’t we do one more ride, then I will take you for some food in Staines-Upon-Thames? There’s some nice little places people online recommended,” I ask, hoping she wants to keep the date going. I’m not quite ready for this day to end just yet.

“That sounds amazing,” she replies with a smile.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



Kian

When we finally get parked in Staines-Upon-Thames, I can tell we both are getting tired from such a long day. But we're both wearing matching grins. I can't even begin to express how fucking proud I am of my girl today, and how she dived headfirst into each and every dare I gave her. Even the one where I dared her to shout, "I'm an adrenaline whore," at the top of her voice. She did it, and neither of us could stop laughing afterwards.

She keeps telling me this is the most fun she's ever had, and that makes me an equal mix of happy and sad. I'm beyond fucking thrilled that I'm capable of giving her such an amazing, happy day. I wanted our first date together to be memorable, and it sounds like it will be.

We're walking hand in hand down the street, heading towards the little Mexican restaurant I know she will love, when I turn to her and ask, "So, since our date is nearly over, I have to ask... the day has been full of dares and you have done them all without hesitation, but there must be something that you've always wanted to do but you're scared of?"

Freya purses her lips, and she's looking at me like this might be a trick question. "Are you asking me this so you can

dare me to do it?”

I give her my best mischievous, crooked smile, and I know as one side of my mouth moves up, my dimple will appear. What she doesn't know is I already know the answer. After she told me about the books she writes, and the fact she publishes in secret under a pen name, I started doing a little bit of research. Her books are doing really well, and people love them. She's hit the USA Today bestseller list with some of her author friends, and she's hit Amazon bestseller lists by herself. She's got thousands of followers on her social media, and it's clear she works fucking hard at it. She says it's a hobby, but I don't think she realises she's found her passion. This is what she's supposed to be doing with her life—I just need for her to see that.

After reading one of her books, I read a scene where the male character dares the female character repeatedly, and it's how they fall in love. I'm actually surprised Freya hasn't realised that today is loosely based on her book. But there's one dare I know is all Freya, and I'm going to bring her book to life. I just hope she's on board.

“It depends, are you brave enough?” That's all I need to say and Freya pops her chin out, hand on her hip, and she gives me her best defiant glare. She's not backed down from a dare yet, and I don't think she's starting here.

“Why do I get the feeling you already know what my ultimate dare would be?” she asks, glaring at me suspiciously, like my face might give something away. Of course, I crack easily under her gaze, my smile widening.

“I read your book,” I confess, and she gasps in shock. “There are a few dares in there, but only one of them I've heard you mention a few times before in stories your family has told.”

Her eyes narrow, her chin tipped up defiantly. “Which dare?”

She's testing me to see if I really know. “You have always wanted to get your nose pierced. You wanted to when you were a teenager, but your father forbade it. Then Ryleigh went

through her rebellion phase and started getting tattoos and piercings, yet nobody said a word. Ever since, you've always wanted to do it, but it would be the ultimate rebellion against your father and your brothers' wishes. Apparently, as a good girl, you need to have an innocent look—although I have no idea why.”

Freya laughs, but it's fake and forced, and I can see the pain written across her face. “I know it sounds stupid, after everything my father has put me through, and now with all that we talked about in the car. I was raised to be a good girl, and my sole purpose was to marry whoever my father told me to. I never wanted to do it, obviously, but that overwhelming urge to make my father proud was always there. Fuck, it's still there. My brothers, they all excel at the tasks he gave them.

“Dad idolises Liam, even with all the rebellion, because he makes him proud that his skills are second to none, and he's in such a position of power. Evan will always be in his good books, since he's like a mini-version of my father, moulded in his image. Finn, although he's quiet and shy, he always does as he's told. No matter what shit task he's given, even if it breaks him a little more each time, he still does it, and I think it's because, like me, he craves my father's acceptance. Ry is the only one who gets away with anything. She never had any rules or expectations.

“As the baby of the family, he treated her like his little princess—well, in the best way, Dad was capable of doing. She got tattoos and piercings, and he said they looked nice. I pierced my ears, for fuck's sake, and he warned me that the type of earrings I wear can make me look like a whore, and he doesn't want any girl of his looking like that. I was held to a different standard than Ry, and I guess I hated the fact she got all the praise and acceptance, when I could have got just a little.”

Her head drops, her cheeks tinged red, and I can tell she's embarrassed by her admission. But she has no reason to be. I had no family, but for a while, that's exactly what I wanted. I wanted people to walk into the children's home, take one look at my floppy blonde hair, my bright blue eyes, and my

dimpled smile and fall in love with me. And many did, until they spoke to the social worker and found out they classed me as a troubled child, and that I refused to be placed without the grumpy, miserable kid sat next to me, with messy brown hair, and a fuck off glare. Still, I wanted for us to be chosen, for us to be loved. Freya may have had the family, but she still wanted the same thing I did. Acceptance and love.

“So, why not do it now? I’m not going to dare you on this because it has to be your decision. But, why don’t we go and get your nose pierced? I know you are always going to want Desmond’s love and acceptance, especially once you are sure my story is correct, and he really is your dad. But that desire to be accepted can’t rule who you are, Beautiful. You have a family, one who loves and adores you, and who would stand by your side, no matter what. If you told them about your books, they would be there throwing a party to celebrate every release. You have to stop hiding who you really are from your family. Take it from me, there’s nothing for them to not love about you.”

I know I’m only a few short steps from saying those three magic words, but I can’t just yet. I’m not entirely sure if I feel it or not. I mean, I think I do. I mean what I just said, it’s impossible not to love Freya. But I want to be sure that when I do say those words to her for the first time, I have no doubts at all. It’s the least my beautiful girl deserves.

“I know you’re right, and maybe one day I’ll tell them everything. But for now, I need to keep that side of my life just for me,” she explains, and my heart stutters in my chest.

“But you’re okay sharing it with me?”

With a smile, Freya breaks down the last of the walls I had protecting my heart. I think she’s always meant to own a part of it, and I know that by handing over a piece of my heart, I risk getting it broken. But I don’t have a choice. She holds my heart in her tiny, delicate little hands, and I just have to hope like hell she fights for it instead of crushing it.

“There’s something about you, Caveman. I can’t help but tell you all my secrets. You make me braver.”

She says the words I was hoping she would, and just in the nick of time. I stop walking, and Frey looks around at why we've stopped here. That's when she sees we're outside of a tattoo parlour. It just so happens I've done my research, and this is the best in the area. I even contacted the manager, and he's tentatively expecting us. I knew I couldn't dare Freya to do this, but I wanted to make sure she was confident enough in herself to make the decision for herself.

So, I told him to expect us, and even if she didn't take the appointment, I would pay him. He, thankfully, agreed. I suspect he agreed when he heard either my name or Doughty. Even though we're just outside London, we're near enough that people know who we are. In fact, Bree and the Doughty's are getting quite a name for themselves across the UK. Bree has plans to branch out and run the whole of the UK.

She thinks it's the only way she can truly protect people, and make sure that the criminal underworld stays in line. She's okay with drugs and violence, but she doesn't want any kind of trafficking, particularly kids. Bree and Liam are determined to put a stop to that, even if it means taking on all the ruling families across the country. Bree made it clear they can all continue to rule their own districts, but they will answer to her overall. Some will willingly submit to her, others won't go down without a fight.

"Let's do this," Freya says suddenly, pulling me from my thoughts. I don't want her to know any of the drama going on with the family. Freya wants a normal life, and while I won't ever be able to give her that, I don't want to make things harder for her. I don't want her to be terrified every time I walk out of the door because we're at war with someone new. I know she would agree that our reason for ruffling feathers is good and valid, but that doesn't alleviate the fear.

Freya sits in the chair, her face a mask of indifference that I know she's perfected over the years. But since I have come to know her pretty well over the last couple of months, I notice the way her fingers are picking at the hem of her T-shirt, and the way her foot is tapping gently against the floor. She's nervous, but she's trying her best not to show it. Her

movements are so minute, people probably wouldn't even notice, even the foot tapping is so slight you could miss it, but I don't.

I ask her if she's sure about this, and she just gives me a nod of her head, and the tiniest smile. She may be scared, but she's determined. This is about more than just getting a nose ring. This is about her rebelling against her family and their rules for the first time. Sure, she ran away, but that was under Liam's instructions. She's never rebelled in any way, and has always done as she's told—and where's that got her?

She's scared to live the life she's always wanted because it goes against everything her family has ever taught her. I'm here to teach her that she can follow her own path in life, choosing which parts of her family to celebrate, and choosing her own path for the rest.

The tattooist, Nix, who owns the store, is a complete professional. The same cannot be said for one of his colleagues, who I hear being called Knox, as he can't keep his eyes off Freya's tits and ass. Even the other tattooist, Drake, tells him to pack it in. I'm sure he can tell I'm only a second or two away from punching Knox on his nose. Freya can obviously tell too, as she takes my hand in hers and squeezes. To anyone else, it might look like I'm supporting her as the needle passes through her nose, but in reality, she doesn't need me for that. She's trying to stop me from going full caveman on their asses. I've never been jealous or possessive, but I've also never had someone so precious they're worth fighting for.

Once she's got the ring in her nose, she moves over to the mirror to inspect her new piercing. The smile on her face when she sees it makes my heart skip. I love how happy she is, and that I'm just a little bit responsible for putting the smile there. I give her a few minutes in the mirror while I move over to the till to pay Nix.

“Thanks, man. I know I was a bit vague about today. But the fact you kept the slot open and could be flexible means a lot,” I say with a smile.

Nix is probably only a couple of years older than me, but he looks young. He's got dark hair that curls slightly on the ends, and chocolate coloured eyes that have a weird shine to them. To say he's covered in tattoos would be an understatement, and he's got a piercing on the right side of his lower lip.

He looks stern, not even the hint of a smile, but I don't get the impression he's being rude. He reminds me a lot of Dec. He's got a 'get the fuck away from me' face, but he's actually a nice guy. He's just a moody asshole, and I suspect Nix may be cut from the same cloth.

"No problem. I have another studio in central London. It was actually my first shop before I started opening others around the country. I occasionally do slots in each studio, depending on if a customer asks for me. I work here because it's peaceful and out of the way from the hustle and bustle of the city. But I have a couple of regular customers that I go back to London for. One of them being Liam Doughty."

I can't hide the surprised look on my face when Nix tells me he knows Liam. "Wow, what a small world," I add.

"At first I thought that's how you found me, that Liam had recommended me. I've tattooed a few members of his family. Drake even travels to Ireland to tattoo Mr Doughty. So we know all about your family. Whilst we are not openly members or supporters, we're also not against you. If that makes sense?" His voice cracks a little, and it sounds like this is a difficult conversation that he's had many times before.

I turn to look at Drake, taking in the guy who only looks to be about my age. His hair is shaved at the sides, but the dirty blonde locks on top are longer, giving him a faux-hawk type of look. He's also covered in tattoos, and is wearing a very serious expression as he sketches a design onto a piece of paper in front of him. He's nibbling on his lip as he does it. His baggy ripped jeans and T-shirt that look far too big, adds to the skater-boi vibe he's clearly going for. I can just imagine Desmond's face when he met Drake for the first time. The guy must have balls of steel to permanently ink Desmond. He must

also be fucking amazing because I've seen some of Desmond's designs, and they're very good.

I give Nix a reassuring smile. "Relax, we're not here as part of the Doughty family. Actually, I would appreciate it if you don't mention to any of them that we're together. They don't know."

Upon hearing that I'm asking him to keep our secret, his whole body seems to relax. "Sorry, Desmond has been asking us to declare ourselves as his ally. But we don't want to be part of your world. I run respectable, honest businesses, and I've worked my ass off to build up this brand. I have worked to make each store a success before moving on to start up the next. I will not risk those businesses by running illegal activities. I agree to continue tattooing them, but we will never do anything illegal, and if the Doughty's force us to decide, we will always choose the business."

He gets more passionate as he talks, and the end comes out almost as a growl. I hold my hand up, palms facing him, in the universal sign of surrender. I'm trying to show him I mean no harm. "Me and Freya are not here as Doughty's. We're on a date that we're not supposed to be on. Your silence is essential for us today, and in return, we will make sure your wishes are respected."

"You can do that?" he asks, the sceptical look on his face obvious for all to see.

"Yes, I work alongside Bree O'Keenan-Doughty. I will make her aware of this situation and Desmond will be told to leave you alone. I'm guessing Liam isn't forcing you in any way?" I ask, and he nods.

Before Nix speaks, Drake talks from the other side of the room. Thankfully, the tattoo parlour appears to be closing. Knox is cleaning, while Drake sketches. It's clear Knox is the junior one in the group, not just because of his age, but also because he's the one mopping while the others are doing the actual work. "Desmond Doughty does not take the word no."

Drake practically shouting across the studio captures Freya's attention from the back room, and she comes through,

a look of confusion on her beautiful face. “Did I hear you say Desmond Doughty? How do you know him?”

Her eyes flick from me to the boys in the studio, becoming more and more suspicious, and by the time her gaze settles on me, she looks angry. “Relax, Beautiful. I had no idea they knew your dad. It turns out they tattoo Liam, and then they branched out to the rest of the family. But they were just telling me they are not allies of your family, or part of the life. They just want to run an honest business, not be known as a go to tattooist for the mafia. I’ve just agreed we will make sure that they can continue to run an independent business, not part of our life, in exchange for them keeping quiet about us.”

Her eyes widened further when it dawned on her that they knew about us being together, and we are at risk of her family finding out about us. Before she has a chance to say anything, the cocky asshole holding the mop, who is looking at my girl with hunger in his eyes, making me want to scoop them out with a spoon and feed them to him, speaks. “Wait, so you’re a Doughty, and you’re secretly fucking the help?”

I turn quickly, ready to pounce on the asshole, but Freya grabs hold of my shoulder to prevent me from moving. She turns to Knox, her eyes narrowed as she gives him a glare that she’s clearly learnt from Boss Lady. “Kian is not the help. He’s part of the family, and it’s not like we aren’t allowed to date, we just haven’t had a chance to tell anyone we’re dating yet. We want a little bit longer, where it can be just us, before my family finds out. That is all. So don’t even think about trying to use this against us,” she snaps.

Knox holds the mop up, trying to look like he’s not threatening. “Woah, I wasn’t even implying that, babe.”

“If you call her babe again, I will take that mop and shove it so far up your ass that it will pop out of that stupid mouth of yours, and you will literally be talking shit then.”

Drake chuckles from the corner, his attention finally being dragged away from his sketch. “Now that I would pay good money to see.”

Knox's face crinkles as he turns to face his friend, his hands clenching so tight around the mop handle that I can see the white on his knuckles. He looks like he's about to talk back, but Nix stops him. "Don't pay any attention to Knox. He has a tendency to speak before he thinks. We're working on that. Do you really have the power to prevent us from having to choose our allegiance? We honestly don't want to start anything with the Doughty's, and it's not like we're declining because we want to start working for a different family. It's just... I've worked hard my whole life to build up the Inked Imagination brand. It was just me in a small shop in London ten years ago. I was eighteen and used the money I inherited to start my own shop. I'd been training with my mentor for years, but I wanted my own studio, and I worked my ass off to get it. The main London studio grew, and I now have six main tattooists, not to mention the special limited edition slots I have where artists come from all over the world to do small slots in my studio. They might stay for a day or a week, some even do a month. I also have six other studios, not including this one, all over the UK. I don't want to risk the Inked Imagination brand, my tattoo artist's jobs, and my livelihood, all because I tattooed the wrong guy once."

The way Nix talks about his studios, there's a pride there that is so amazing to see. I really get the impression that he cares about each and every person who works for him, and to be honest, I can't blame him for wanting to not be known as a Doughty ally. I have no idea where his other stores are, but there's a good chance at least one of them will be in a rival family's territories.

If that family then finds out Nix has aligned with us, they may kick Nix out of their territory. Or, if they don't want to do that, they can put limitations on who can use his shop, or make him charge an extra protection fee. There are a lot of ways aligning with one particular group can be harmful, so if they can stay neutral, that's for the best.

I want to promise that I will sit down with Bree, Liam, and Desmond, and that I will make sure they don't force the issue with Nix. Or maybe even declare them and their tattoo shops as neutral, meaning that we use their shops and that other

rivals can use them too, but that no family can try to take ownership of them. No matter what happens, they can continue to tattoo whoever, even if they are rivals, and no harm will come to them. But most importantly, no family is ever allowed to try to gain control over them. It also means that even if Nix changes his mind in the future and decides he needs Bree's protection and wants to align with us, he can't.

All the cards are off the table when this is offered. It's not something that is used frequently. It's mostly used for things like doctors' surgeries, hospitals, and schools. So two warring families can send their child to the same high class training school, if they want, and neither of them can try to persuade the school to show favouritism. The children will all be treated the same. There's no hierarchy or rivalry. But this kind of anonymity and neutrality isn't usually offered to companies like Nix's, but I think it's what he's looking for. The problem is, only Bree has the right to declare them neutral. It's not a promise I can make, but I can promise to talk to her about it.

I explain the process of being declared neutral to the team, letting them know this is by far the best option for them, but also making it clear that it's not an easy thing to get granted. I also made them aware that there's no option to change their mind at a later date. I watched as Nix's face showed just a slither of emotion, and the hint of a smile turned up on his face.

Even Drake and the dick with the mop looked pleased by my suggestion. In fact, Nix couldn't stop nodding his head and asking how he can sign up. This is the part where I tell them that although this is the best option for them, it's not something I can make happen. I feel like complete shit as I watch Nix's face fall. It's like I dangled this big juicy carrot in front of them, then dropped it on the floor and stood on it. That's honestly how down-crested he looked.

Freya, who has been standing to the other side of the counter, listening to us talking, steps forward so that Nix can see her. "Kian may not be able to make you any promises, but I can. I can't give you the neutral status Kian just talked about, but I can make sure it's discussed at the family meeting this

weekend. But, what I can promise is to make sure my family leaves you alone and stops asking you to choose. Until Bree makes a decision about whether or not you are neutral, I will make you a promise that my family will not pester you to join our family, or to declare your loyalty.”

My eyes snap to Freya. That’s not something she can promise. I mean, she stands a great chance of keeping her brothers in line, but we all know Desmond has a fucking mind of his own, and I don’t think he would take too kindly to being told what to do, particularly by Freya. I try to tell her all this with my eyes, and I know she can tell what I’m thinking about. She simply rolls her eyes at me, and smiles at Nix as he talks directly to Freya. “Are you sure that’s something you can promise?”

I contemplate interrupting her, to tell her not to make a promise she can’t be sure she can keep, but I don’t want to question her in front of the team. “I’m a Doughty, which means I have the same say as everyone else in my family does,” Freya replies, trying to keep her voice as confident as possible. I have to admit, she looks pretty badass right now, and I’m loving this confident, decisive side, but I don’t like the idea of her making promises that could be broken. Even Bree and Liam are reluctant to make promises that involve Desmond, because he’s a force of fucking nature, and quite simply, he can’t be controlled.

“Then we have an agreement. But just so you know, we would have kept your secret, anyway. Love is love in our eyes, and you guys look like a great couple. I hope your family takes it well when you tell them,” Nix says, as he smiles properly for the first time since we arrived here.

Freya thanks all three boys, and I give Knox a threatening glance when he reaches out to shake Freya’s hand. He quickly withdraws it and settles on a wave, much to the amusement of Drake. I think I like him. We all say goodbye as we leave the quiet little tattoo parlour and head towards the restaurant we talked about stopping at before our little piercing detour.

Freya clasps her hand in mine, lacing our fingers together, before giving them a squeeze. I turn to look at her, and find the

biggest smile spread across her face, her beautiful emerald eyes sparking. The new white gold ring sitting on one side of her nose seems to twinkle in the moonlight, and I have to admit, it looks hot. Freya catches me looking at it. “Thank you,” she whispers, and I pull my eyes to meet her gaze.

“What for?”

“Everything. Today has been one of the best days of my life, and you’ve pushed me so far out of my comfort zone, but in the best possible way. We have done stuff today that I’ve always wanted to do, but never had the balls to. I don’t know what it is about you, Kian, but you make me stronger. You make me believe in myself, and give me a confidence I didn’t know I was capable of having. So, for that, I owe you a million thank you’s, and I will have to come up with a pretty good way to thank you.” Her words are like music to my fucking soul. How the hell did I get so lucky to have a girl like her?

“Not that I’m not all in for this special way you want to thank me,” I joke, throwing her my best sexy wink. “But you don’t have to thank me, Beautiful. I’m just helping you see what has been there all along. It’s what I saw the first time I met you. Stood in the corner, trying to shy away while your whole family was talking over each other. You stood off to the side, much preferring to let them do all the talking, so you could fade away. But to me, you were the brightest light in that whole room. You deserve to shine, and it’s about time you saw that about yourself.”

Catching me completely off guard, she stops moving and quickly throws herself into my arms. It’s totally unexpected, but of course I still catch her. I will always catch her. The minute I scoop my arms under her ass to make sure she’s not going to fall, she wraps her legs around my back and her arms around my neck, then presses her lips hard against mine. I don’t care that we’re in the middle of the street, taking up all of the footpath, and that people might be able to see us. I don’t give a shit; I hold on for dear life and let Freya’s mouth consume mine.

She kisses me with a force she's never used before, her tongue sweeping along my lips to claim my mouth. As soon as I taste her on my tongue, a deep moan escapes me, and I can feel Freya shiver beneath my touch. The kiss is deep, passionate, and all-consuming, and fuck, I can feel it all over my body. My dick is standing to attention, straining to burst free from its denim confines, and I know she must be able to feel how hard I am.

Freya shuffles slightly in my arms, and at first I worry she might think I'm going to drop her, but as she tilts her pelvis causing a moan of pleasure to rip from her lips, I realise she's getting herself into a better position so she can rub my hard dick against her core. Although both our jeans are separating us, dulling the sensations somewhat, it's still having the desired effect on Freya, as she cries out every time she grinds hard against my length.

BEEP!

The loud noise of a car horn beeping as it drives past us causes us to jump, and we pull apart. A small, blue Ford Fiesta is driving towards us at a crawling pace, and I can't help but laugh at the state of the car. It must be almost as old as me, and there's more rust on the car than anything else. Also, the owner has clearly had a little accident, because the passenger side door is a completely different shade of blue to the rest of the car, implying this is a replacement door, and they couldn't afford to get colours that match.

Inside the car is what looks to be three teenage boys. They have their windows open and are jeering and shouting obscenities our way, telling me to fuck her where everyone can see. That's when we're pulled out of the little bubble we seem to always fall into when we're alone together and realise we are practically dry humping each other in the middle of the street.

Slowly, I lower Freya to her feet, and she hides her head in my chest, no doubt to hide the embarrassment I know will be spread across her cheeks. I lift my hand and flip them the bird before shouting for them to fuck off, and they zoom away as fast as their shitty little car will carry them. When we hear

their car screech around the corner, Freya finally lifts her head to meet mine.

I'm right that she's got a bright red blush all across her cheeks and down her neck, but it's her eyes that capture my attention. Not only do they have their usual sparkle, but her pupils almost look like they've blown, they're so dilated as she's overcome with lust. It makes me want to pull her back into my arms and continue where we just left off.

"Sorry, I think I got a bit too excited," Freya mutters, as we walk again towards the restaurant. I can't help but chuckle over the tone in Freya's voice. She sounds like a naughty school kid who's apologising for doing something wrong because they know they should, but deep down, they're thinking about how they can do it again, but get away with it this time.

"Never apologise for kissing me like that." Freya giggles in response, and before either of us have a chance to say anything, we arrive at the restaurant.

From the outside, this place doesn't look like much. It's a small, family-owned Mexican restaurant, but you wouldn't necessarily be able to tell that from the appearance. The building seriously needs a lick of paint and complete modernisation, but there's something about this place that gives it a homely feel. None of them match, and it looks like it's all just thrown together. The low lighting helps add to the atmosphere, and I can tell from the moment we enter, Freya loves this place. Her face lights up and a smile spreads across her face. She loves small, undiscovered gems. Much preferring to eat somewhere like this than at a big chain restaurant.

An older man with a large, bushy grey beard and long grey hair rushes to where we're standing in the door. "Hello, and welcome to Carmelita's. Table for two?" he asks, as he gathers up two menus from the podium in front of him.

"Yes, please. Would it be possible to request one of the booths over in the corner?" I ask, pointing to the row of booths over on the back wall. I had already taken a few minutes to scan around, looking for the best seats. Working in security

has taught me to always think about where's the ideal place to sit, and the booths at the back, while offering you a greater degree of privacy than the more open tables do, they're also facing the door, where you can be aware of whoever comes in.

The fact they're against the wall also means nobody can surprise you by coming up behind you. These types of seats are always my first choice for security reasons, but I also like the fact I can kiss Freya in these booths, and only people who were openly staring at us would be able to see us. And even then, with the low lighting, it would be hard to view us fully.

Once we are seated and he hands us the menu, it's not long before I hear a groan escape from Freya's mouth as she licks her lips whilst reading. I know she loves Mexican food, and not only does this place have a great selection, it's also a hidden gem.

The reviews for this place are amazing, barely anyone had a bad word to say about them. I'm actually quite surprised they aren't busier. I guess that's one thing good about it not being on people's radar, it's not too busy. Declan actually recommended this place. Apparently, Belle's a fan of Mexican food too, and they've been here a few times. He says it's worth the drive from Oxford just to see the look of bliss on her face when she eats their food.

We place our order, and after the server has brought us our drinks, we sit together just talking about our day. We discuss which rides we enjoyed best, and how funny it was whenever Freya had to do a dare involving other people. She laughs and jokes about how blind she was to have not seen her own book being brought to life in front of her very eyes, and how embarrassed she is knowing I've actually read her book.

Now that we've got into the discussion of her books, I seize the moment to ask her some questions I've had since I first found out she writes spicy romance. But when she first told me about her hobby—which I'm convinced is actually the job she's supposed to be doing, I just have to make her see that—she refused to answer any questions about it. So, now's my chance.

“So, I gotta ask... the sex scenes you write... where do you get your inspiration? I’m guessing—and hoping—they aren’t things you’ve done with other guys?” I ask tentatively, unsure I want the answer now I’ve asked the question aloud. I don’t think I could handle any stories about guys she’s been with before me. I know there’s nothing to be jealous over, and that we all have a past—hell, I have a massive past that she’s been willing to overlook, and so I know I should be willing to do the same. But I’m not. The idea of anyone laying a hand on my girl gets my blood boiling and to say the green-eyed monster makes an appearance is a massive fucking understatement.

Freya looks at me, her eyes hooded slightly, and that blush I love so much is lighting up her usually pale skin. “Erm... honestly, it’s all my imagination. I mean, obviously there have been guys before you, but nothing memorable or quite like my books. Hell, I’d never had an orgasm at another person’s hand before I met you.”

If I hadn’t just swallowed the mouthful of Coke, I just took a gulp from, I would have just spit the liquid all over the table. I knew she had done nothing exciting with her previous partners, but I had no idea I was the first person to ever give her an orgasm. I can’t help but puff my chest out a little, embracing my inner caveman as my cocky smile returns. Freya just rolls her eyes before taking a drink of her own Coke.

“Like, none at all? I mean, I don’t enjoy hearing about the fact you have even been near another guy before me, but it makes me pissed to hear they didn’t show you a fucking good time. Even when I was sleeping around and couldn’t remember the name of the girl I was fucking, the least I could do was make her come,” I mutter, feeling shame for my gender right about now.

Freya’s eyes narrow as she glares at me. “I don’t enjoy hearing about you with other women either,” she grumbles, and once again I can’t help but chuckle.

“I didn’t know you were the jealous kind, Beautiful.”

Shaking her head, Freya agrees. “Neither did I. But the thought of you sleeping around and making other women come, I hate it. I know neither of us can change our past, and I like the fact we can talk about it, but it still bothers me.”

I reach over and place my hand over hers that is resting on the table between us, giving it a small squeeze as I meet her gaze. “You are the only girl I even see anymore. Seriously, I could be surrounded by women, and I would barely notice them. Yet with you, I can describe every inch of you. I know every curve of your body, every freckle on your skin. I know which spots to kiss if I want to see your toes curl. I know exactly where to blow air if I want to watch a ripple shoot down your spine. I know that when I whisper in your ear, or get too close to you, it makes you bite down on your lips to hold in the groan you’re desperate to release. I know exactly what I need to do to have your panties flooded and you panting for more. So, don’t ever worry about the girls in my past. They don’t matter. You are what matters.”

The more I talk, the more her chest rises and falls, as she pants for breath, her pulse no doubt raised. She’s biting her lower lip just like I knew she would be, and I bet she’s soaking wet right now. “You can’t say stuff like that to me here. It makes me want to do very bad things.”

“Well, didn’t one of the characters in your book like public sex? Is that a fantasy of yours that you wrote into the book?” I ask, and she nods.

“Yes. Not all of what I write are things I want to try, but some things are. The book you’re referring to, my sexiest book, that has a lot of the things I have on my sexual bucket list in it,” she explains, and I can’t help but groan.

“When we get home tonight, I want to see this sexual bucket list. I plan on doing every single thing on your list with you,” I promise, and even though it seems impossible, the blush on her cheeks worsens, and she tries to avoid making eye contact with me. But, I don’t allow it.

Reaching over, I take Freya’s chin into my hand, and I move until she’s looking at me, unable to break free from the

eye contact. I wait, and I know she can tell what I'm waiting for. With a groan and a roll of her eyes, she explains why she was embarrassed. "Don't promise to do things on the list before you've even seen it. There are some very kinky things on that list, and they might not be to everyone's tastes. Hell, I'm not even sure some of them are mine. It was more that I was doing research for the book, and I learnt about all these different sex acts, and I realised how much I don't know about sex. Most would describe my tastes as vanilla, but I am turned on by thoughts of experimenting. So the list is exactly that—an experiment. I do not know if I will do all the things on the list, and even if I do, I don't know if I'll like them. But I'd still like to give them a go. In saying that, there are some very specific things that involve another partner, and they may not be your cup of tea."

Now I'm very fucking intrigued. I like to think I'm an open guy, happy to experiment with everything at least once. But it sounds like whatever Freya has planned on that list. I may not like some of them. "I need an example."

Freya groans. "Can't you just wait to see the list?"

I shake my head. "No. Tell me." My voice is firm and authoritative, and although Freya rolls her eyes at my bossy attitude, she begins to reply when the waiter disrupts us by bringing us our food.

As soon as he leaves, and Freya starts chewing on her food, I make it clear I expect her to continue talking while she eats. I can tell she's close to rolling her eyes again, but she continues anyway.

"Well, I obviously would like to try anal, to see what it feels like. But, I'd also like to be the one fucking someone's ass. Just to see how they react."

My mouth flops open. What the fuck? "Nope! I will help you with a lot, and I'm all for fucking your ass, Beautiful. You just name the time and place. But I can tell you now, nothing is ever going in my ass. Not a finger and certainly not a cock. And since I will never agree to you fucking another guy, you will have to cross that one off your list, I'm afraid."

My voice becomes high pitched as the thought of my ass being violated disturbs me greatly. Don't get me wrong, I've heard that having something up your ass can be quite pleasurable for some men, but I have no interest in that. Freya obviously knew her comment would terrify me, as she struggles to keep in a laugh.

“Relax, Caveman. I'm joking with you.” As soon as she finishes, she struggles to keep control of the laughter. Chuckles erupt from her lips and it's so loud it drags the attention of people near us in the restaurant.

She smacks her hand over her mouth and tries to quieten her laughter, resulting in a snort that only makes her laugh harder. Using her other hand, she clutches her stomach, trying her best to remain quiet—trying and failing.

I fight to hold back a smile at seeing her so carefree; she looks even more beautiful—if that's even possible. I narrow my eyes, trying to make it look like I'm not happy with her teasing me, but she just ignores me and continues to laugh. I know a way to show her that teasing isn't nice. I just have to wait until we've finished eating.

As we're sitting in a booth, we are both next to each other, but far enough apart we could eat our food without getting in each other's way. But, as soon as we've finished, I close the distance until I'm sitting right beside her, the warmth from her arm spreading to mine as they touch. I watch as she gulps, her laughter dulling as she feels me place my hand on her thigh.

I drag my hand along her thigh, painfully slow, until my fingers are skimming her denim covered pussy. Her breathing hitches, and she looks at me with wide eyes, all thoughts of laughter now long gone. When she speaks, her voice is deep and gravelly, and her words splutter out, displaying her obvious nervousness. “Wh-what are y-you doing?”

Her eyes flick between mine and my hand that is hidden beneath the table. To anyone who looks over at us right now, all they would see is a couple, sitting close enough to each other to be flirting or kissing. A bloody good date, I'm sure

they would be thinking. The more I drag my eyes along Freya's sexy body, the more I realise how lucky I am.

"I'm showing you that it's not nice to tease people." I try to ignore how deep and raspy I sound, like even my voice is dripping sex. She looks like prey that's just been caught by the hunter, and she's not sure if I'm going to consume her. I'm not—I like to play with my food.

Inching higher, I use my wrist to nudge her knees apart and press my hand over her most sensitive area. She jumps slightly, clearly shocked by the way my fingers skim across her body. I move up farther, dragging my hand up to the button on her jeans. Before she even realises what I've done, the button is undone, and I'm sliding her zip down.

Freya's hand quickly jumps to mine as she wraps her hand around my wrist, trying to stop my movements. Her eyes widen in panic. "What are you doing? People can see," she screeches as her gaze flickers around the room to see if anyone can witness what I'm doing. Not only is the lighting too low for people to see anything, the table is also blocking their view. Surely she should know by now that I wouldn't do anything that could result in another person seeing what's mine. That doesn't mean I can't tease her a little, though.

"Nobody can see. But you have been teasing me all day. Now it's my turn to tease you." Before I've even had a chance to finish the sentence, I push my hand into her jeans, shimmying them down a little. Freya looks alarmed, but she still moves the way I instruct so I can pull her jeans down far enough.

Taking a quick peek, I see she's wearing a pair of black, lacey panties, and the dark colour contrasts against her milky thighs perfectly. I wish I could devour her, but that really would draw attention to us. Instead, I slide my finger down through her slit, pushing the material further into her pussy lips. I can feel her wetness as my finger glides through her warmth.

Freya's gasp fills the air, and I lean down to press a kiss to her lips, one that captures her moan just in time. My finger

pressing against her sensitive nub is all it takes for a cry of pleasure to escape her lips, but luckily I was there in time to capture it. As I pull away from her kiss, I lean in close to whisper in her ear. “Don’t be too loud, Beautiful. You will attract attention, and I’m not nearly done with you yet.”

Pushing her panties to one side, I run my finger through her slit again, this time circling her clit rather than press it directly. As I stroke up and down, I can feel my finger getting coated in her juices. One of Freya’s hands grips the edge of the table, her knuckles white as she clutches tightly, while her other hand wraps around my wrist. She isn’t pulling or controlling me in any way, I just think she needs to have her hand over mine, just in case.

Once I’m sure my finger is thoroughly coated, I pull my hand away, bringing it to my lips. I circle my tongue around the tip, before sucking the whole of the finger into my mouth, making sure to devour as much of her as possible. I can’t help the groan that escapes onto my finger as I taste her sweet nectar. “Fuck, Beautiful. This is the best dessert a guy could ask for,” I growl as I remove my finger from my mouth and swipe it through her clit again.

I pull my finger up so that it’s visible between us, and the tip glistens with her juices. The urge to lick my finger again, to devour her sweet taste, is overwhelming, but I have a better idea. “Taste how sweet you are, Beautiful.”

I push my finger towards her lips, but she doesn’t open them, and shakes her head from side to side. “I-I... erm... I’ve never...” She stutters and stumbles, leaving her sentence unfinished, but the meaning is very clear.

Looking her in the eye, my mouth turns up one side in a mischievous grin before I place the tip of my finger on her lips. “Try it. You might like it,” I say with a wink, and I watch as she tentatively sticks out her tongue to meet the tip of my finger.

At first she looks unsure, until she sees the heat in my eyes, and that spurs her on enough to take the whole of the tip into her mouth. I see the look of surprise on her face as she

realises her juices taste quite nice, and she wastes no time drawing my finger to her lips. She sucks on my finger the way she would a cock, drawing it deep into her mouth as she circles her tongue around it. My hard length grows as I picture what she would look like on her knees under the table, replacing my finger with my shaft.

Realising she's quickly trying to take the upper-hand, I pull my finger out of her mouth, tutting my tongue at the same time. I move it back down to her wet sex, running my finger through her slit, getting it good and wet again. This time when I reach her clit, I flick my thumb over her sensitive nub. Freya's breath catches and a light moan ripples across her lips, just quiet enough to not be heard by the people around us. One of her hands goes straight back to grab my wrists, like she stands a chance at being able to control me—she doesn't.

As I continue to drag my finger up and down her slit, whenever I reach her clit, I take my time, giving it the attention she desires, and she has to bite the inside of her cheek to stop everyone from hearing how much she's enjoying herself.

Her breathing quickens, her chest rising and falling rapidly, which no doubt means her heart is practically beating out of her chest. I can see she's climbing closer to that edge, and she moves one of her hands to her mouth to try and muffle the sounds. She looks at me, but I'm not sure what her wide, pleading eyes are asking. Is she asking for more? To be able to come? Or does she want me to stop? I ask her, and just as she's about to answer, I gently slide one finger into her wet, dripping sex.

She bites down on her hand hard, her teeth marks evident on her bare skin, but still the cries of pleasure ring out around us. As I slowly move my finger in and out, her eyes clamp shut and she whimpers into her hand. The sound is like fucking music to my ears, and as I look out at the rest of the restaurant, I'm pleased to see we haven't captured anyone's attention.

Luckily, the server is busy with a big table that just came in because as soon as he's taken their order and got their

drinks, he's coming back to us with our bill. So, my girl has to have finished before then. As much as I enjoy playing with her in public, the idea of another guy seeing what's mine, it boils my blood.

In an attempt to get her over that finish line quicker, I add a second finger, stretching her tight pussy out in the process. Her walls clamp down on me like my fingers are in a vise. I can only imagine how tight it would feel if they were my cock. She gasps and twists her pelvis, rocking until my hand presses against her clit.

“Oh... fuck. Kian... I-I n-need mo-more. Please,” she begs, her voice stumbling as she has to keep stopping to clamp her teeth around her fist as she moans into her hand.

Sweat is beginning to pool on her brow, and the wetness between her legs is growing. Her breaths are coming out in desperate pants as she tries to grab air while she can. My fingers move faster, in and out of her wet pussy, and each time I thrust my fingers deep inside, the heel of my hand grinds against her sensitive nub. All the sensations together are enough to drive Freya wild. She continues to mumble incoherently, behind her fist, and I can't work out if she's asking me to stop, or telling me to never stop.

Not that it matters—I have no fucking intention of stopping. In fact, if I could get away with it, I would bend her little body over this table and fuck her hard, like she clearly wants. Sadly, that would gain just a bit too much attention, so I will have to settle for this. As much as I'm loving it, I don't think my dick has ever been so painfully hard. The head is rubbing against the denim fabric of my jeans, and I can feel how angry and swollen it is, no doubt dripping with pre-cum. I will have to take care of it as soon as we get home, but this is for Freya.

“Do you want me to make you come, Beautiful?” I whisper into Freya's ear, loving the shiver that ripples down her spine when my breath hits her face.

She nods her head before throwing it back with her eyes squeezed tightly shut as she moans loudly. Fuck, for a second I

was sure people could hear that, but luckily nobody looks our way. With my free hand, I reach up underneath her top and bra, taking her nipple between my thumb and forefinger and tugging on it lightly, just the way I know she likes. I know I can't do this too much, as it's not exactly something I can hide, but I love the way her responsive nipples cause her to writhe beneath my touch. Her back arches as she tilts her pelvis up to meet my hand each time I push my fingers in deep.

I repeat the process with her other nipple, tugging on it until her moans sound out around us. Then I take that hand and grab hold of her chin before tugging on her head until she's facing me. Her eyes open, and I love the fact her normally green eyes look almost black with lust, as they widen, silently begging me for more. She moves her hand away from her mouth as I lean in closer. My fingers continue to work in and out of her dripping pussy, and I can feel she's not far, her walls starting to tighten around me.

My lips are right next to hers, but I hold off from closing the gap. I can feel her breath panting against my face, and I can almost taste her, she's so close. "Tell me what you want, Beautiful." My words are deep and raspy, the demanding tone seems to have the desired effect on Freya. She bites down on her lower lip as a small whimper escapes.

"Please, Kian... Please." She looks at me, her eyes wide as she begs me silently, but I'm not looking for silence. I want her words.

"Tell me, or I will take my fingers out right now," I snap, my voice hard and authoritative. I see the moment my words have the desired effect. At first she looks furious that I would talk to her in such a demanding way, that I would be so bossy, but I watch as she resigns herself to the fact she will have to do as she's told if she wants to come—which we both know she desperately does.

My girl isn't a natural submissive, which is quite surprising given how shy and quiet she is. But she does know how to do as she's told from time to time. I enjoy pushing her out of her comfort zone, making her do things she wouldn't

normally do. I think I could get Freya to submit to me some time, if I really wanted her to. But we will have to see another time, see if she's in the mood to play. All I can think about is tying her up, spanking her ass until it's bright red, forcing her to come over and over again until she's a writhing mess, begging for my cock.

Fuck, if I keep thinking like that, I'm going to come in my pants—something I haven't done since I was a teenager learning about wanking.

Her words pull me out of my thoughts, and she says what I've been waiting to hear. "Fuck, you are such a caveman sometimes," she snaps, before a loud moan rips from her lips as I flick my thumb over her clit. That seems to be exactly what she needed to continue speaking in a nicer tone to me. "Please, Kian. I need you. Please... please make me come."

Holy shit, hearing the words from her beautiful lips sounds even better than what I was imagining in my head. I give her what she wants, thrusting my fingers in faster, making sure to curl them slightly on the way out, dragging the tip over her G-Spot.

"Are you sure you want to come here? In the middle of the restaurant? In front of all these people?" I whisper, as I plant short, soft little kisses on her lips.

"Yes!" she snaps. "Please, I need to come. I will do anything."

Oh, now that's music to my ears. Now is the time I can really push Frey. She's on the edge, and the desperate need to feel more is causing her to act irrationally. Everything is more frantic, as she chases that high she knows is coming.

"Anything, huh? What if I want to take your ass when we get home?" I whisper, and her breath catches in her throat as her eyes widen. I have had some pretty fucking intense dreams, thinking about what it would be like to take her anal virginity. Something that is all mine, that no guy will ever get to touch. Fuck, if I'm not careful, I'm definitely going to come in my pants.

Her eyes widen, and she nods her head frantically. “Yes, please. Anything.”

I can't help the cocky smirk that spreads across my face, and even in the throes of pleasure, she rolls her eyes at me. “Roll your eyes again, Beautiful, and as soon as we're out of this restaurant, I will spank your ass until it's red raw,” I growl, and much to my annoyance, she lets out a little chuckle.

“You like treating me like I'm a little slut, don't you?” She tilts her pelvis, driving her clit into my hand as a soft moan escapes her.

“I like you being *my* little slut. Do you like it?” I ask, although given the way she's twisting her body, desperately trying to meet my thrusts, and to gain any kind of friction that will help her reach her orgasm, I think it's a stupid question, really.

“I didn't think I would, but I do. I want to fall apart on your hand in front of all these people. I don't care if they hear me. I just want you to make me come.” Her words rush out in between pants as she desperately tries to chase that orgasm.

Since she's told me exactly what I want to hear—and more—I twist my fingers against her G-spot, and I press my thumb against her clit. Her body starts to tremble, and I quickly press my mouth against hers. Luckily, I get there just in time as my lips swallow the deep, guttural moan that spills out as she falls over that cliff. I can feel her walls clenching my fingers, as her juices flood my fingers more. Her body seems to go rigid before she shakes a little, and finally flops as she rides out her orgasm.

Fuck if that wasn't the hottest thing I've ever seen!

I gently pull my fingers from her swollen pussy, before pulling my fingers to my lips, and I try to hold back the groan as I taste her juices. She tastes incredible, and I already know I want more from the source when we get out of here.

Once my fingers are clean, I help her get dressed again, and as she sags slightly against my shoulder, she chuckles

lightly. My brow lifts, silently asking her what's so funny. "So much for no sex on the first date," she jokes.

Shit, it didn't even cross my mind that I was breaking my own promise. Oh well... It was more than worth it. I tell Freya this, as I shrug my shoulders, unable to keep the smile off my face.

"I have no idea where any of that came from. I mean, obviously I've fantasised about doing something as crazy as that, but I never thought I would. I have to admit, when you got all bossy and domineering, at first I wanted to smack you, but then when I realised how much pleasure you could give me, that's all I thought about. I think, at that moment, I really would have let you do anything. And don't even get me started on how hot it was being called your little slut. I know as a woman I should be firmly against being called a slut, but with you, it felt right. Does that make sense?" A blush spreads across her cheeks, as she averts her eyes to look at the table. I take one hand and place it on her chin to make sure she looks at me.

"Freya, you are the most incredible fucking girl I've ever met. The fact you're willing to let go of your control, to embrace your slutty side... that's so fucking hot. It doesn't make you a whore, or any other slut shaming word. It means you're comfortable enough in your sexuality that you can play and have fun. Don't ever overthink things. Just do what feels good." I hate the idea she's overthinking things.

I despise guys who call girls' sluts. If a guy fucks two girls in one day, he's a hero, a girl does it, and she's a whore. I have no fucking interest in that. If a girl wants to embrace her sexy side and let loose with her guy, to me, that just means she's comfortable in her own sexuality, and she trusts the guy enough to hand over control. I'm fucking honoured that Freya trusts me enough to show me her sexy side.

That smile spreads across her face, and my dick twitches. "Well, I guess we better eat and head home then. I promised you my ass, and since we've already broken the no sex on the first date rule, we may as well go out with a bang," she jokes, her hooded eyes glancing at me through her long lashes.

Now my cock really is painful, and as I discreetly try to adjust myself in my jeans, I see that knowing look on her face. She's getting her own back, teasing me in her own way, and I could not be more fucking proud. "Fuck, yes. Does this mean there's going to be a second date? Because if there is, I have no idea how I'm going to top this one."

Freya's delicate laughter rings out around me, and my stomach flips as my heart starts to race. "I'm sure you will think of something." She winks at me before sliding out of the booth, heading for the door.

I run over to the server, hand over a few bills—more than our meal comes to by a long shot—and tell him to keep the change. The smile that lights up his face is worth it, and I tell him to expect a five star review, as we had an amazing time. The food was only part of the experience, and it pales into comparison when it comes to watching my girl fall apart on my fingers. But it's hardly the server's fault he can't compete with that. So a five star review it is. Now I need to focus, to ensure I make the whole drive home without pulling over and fucking Freya at the side of the road. She deserves better than that, but I'm just not sure my cock will last the whole way home.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



Freya

It's been a few weeks since Kian and I went on our first date, and things have only gone from strength to strength.

We have fallen into this easy routine, where we work around each other in perfect harmony. We fall asleep in each other's arms, and he's all I think about as the day goes on. We've been seeing each other for over two months now, and I can't get enough of him. In fact, whenever we're apart, I crave him.

We still haven't told our family, but I'm almost positive the girls know. They've stopped asking me if there's anything going on, or asking me if I'm going to be seeing anyone else anytime soon? Their silence speaks volumes. Surprisingly, I don't think my brothers have any idea. They aren't the kind of people who stay quiet, even if their women tell them to. No, if Liam or Kellan had any idea we were together, they would feel the need to give Kian their usual brotherly warning, and they would no doubt huff and stomp around the house for a bit since I'm clearly disobeying their order.

Kian and I have decided we're comfortable enough with each other, confident our relationship is rock solid, and we can handle them finding out about us. We are going to tell them

this evening. I have no idea how it will go—predicting my brothers' behaviour is a no-go. They are laws unto themselves.

Walking into the kitchen, everyone is already present, having their breakfast, and before they realise I'm there, it gives me a chance to look at the chaos that is my family. Mia and Bree are sitting on the stools at the breakfast bar, watching the craziness on the other side of the room while slurping on their morning coffee.

On the other side, Kian and Kellan are covered in porridge, while Hallie—who is secured in her high chair—alternates between munching on handfuls of porridge before throwing the other at the boys. Kellan is shouting at her firmly, whilst hiding behind a box of Coco Pops. Naturally, Hallie isn't even bothered that her dad is shouting at her, something Kian seems only too happy to tell him. "Come on, man. Do something. She's your daughter. Shouldn't you be able to control her in some way?" Kian snaps at Kellan.

Kellan looks over at Kian, then smacks him around the shoulder with the Coco Pops box, snapping at him. "Fuck right off, you asshole. Does she look like she listens to me?" Kellan's eyes are wide as he watches his daughter munching on the porridge in her hand, grateful for the reprieve from being pelted with the food.

"I'm just saying we have the same damn issue every morning. At what age should she be using a spoon? I thought when kids turn one, they grow up. She was one like three months ago... that's all I'm saying," Kian mumbles, ducking down behind the island as Hallie throws some more food in the boys' direction. I love the fact the girls are sitting on the other side of the island, watching the whole thing unfold, and don't have any porridge on them at all.

Hallie only takes on the people who she sees as a threat, but I don't think the boys have realised that. If you leave her alone, she just gets on with eating. But the boys make the stupid mistake of getting too close, or trying to get her to eat with a spoon. That's a losing battle, she fucking hates cutlery.

“I don’t think there’s a rule that says when she hits one she’s suddenly supposed to become an adult, you dickhead,” Kellan snaps, and I watch as both Bree and Mia laugh at the absurd situation before them.

Just as I’m about to enter, I hear footsteps coming, and Liam stops just behind me. “Are they arguing again?” he whispers in my ear.

I turn and give my brother a smile. “Aren’t they always?” I chuckle. As much as Kellan and Kian get on, and we all know they really do like each other, they are like an old married couple at times. Constantly bickering with each other, snapping at the other one for absolutely no reason. They have become the morning’s entertainment.

Liam walks into the kitchen, announcing both our presence. As he does every morning, he walks over to Bree and gives her a gentle kiss on her lips, before rubbing his hand on her growing belly. He then walks over to Hallie, and as soon as she sees him, she instantly stops throwing food. In fact, it looks like she even tries to sit up a bit straighter, like she’s trying to behave properly in his presence, and she gives him that smile she reserves just for him. Her new baby teeth shine as her mouth widens, and she giggles like butter wouldn’t melt. I can almost hear Kellan rolling his eyes at his daughter.

Hallie holds out her porridge covered hands to Liam, a cheerful giggle pulling from her lips as she looks at him like he hung the moon. “Lee-lee. Powidge,” Hallie mutters in her high-pitched baby voice, using the nickname she has been using for Liam since she first learnt to talk.

Much to everyone’s amazement, she picks up the spoon and starts scooping up her breakfast before putting it in her mouth, like that’s what she’s been doing all along. She looks at him with the cutest dimpled smile, hoping he hasn’t noticed the porridge coating her, her dad, Kian, or the rest of the kitchen.

“Fucking typical,” Kian mutters, before he walks over to the coffeepot, and pours the delicious nectar into my mug. He

walks over to me, handing it over with that signature cocky smirk of his. I take it with a thanks, and while everyone else watches Liam interacting with Hallie, Kian grabs my ass while whispering in my ear. “Morning, Beautiful.”

I give him a small smile before moving away from him in a very deliberate fashion. Everyone may have their attention elsewhere right now, but that doesn’t mean they won’t turn to us at any moment. And we are so close to having a discussion with them tonight.

“Urgh,” Bree shouts, catching us all unaware, and we all shoot around to face her. She’s sitting at the breakfast bar, exactly where she was a moment before, only now she’s bent over, her hands clasp the counter so hard they’re turning white.

Less than a second later, both Kian and Liam are at her side. Kian is looking around for danger while Liam crouches beside his wife, his eyes wide with fear and concern. “Bree, princess. What is it?”

Bree’s face has gone white and all her features are scrunched together, like she’s in pain. Her other arm is protectively wrapped around her growing baby bump, and as the pain eases and she relaxes, she looks up at Liam, fear etched across her beautiful face.

“I’ve been having these tightenings on and off for a couple of days, but they’ve not been too bad. I read online that they’re probably just Braxton Hicks. Since I’m just over thirty-two weeks, it could be them. But today they’ve started becoming painful, and that last one really hurt,” Bree mutters, panting, and she gently strokes both her hands over her growing bump. It’s hard to think that in around eight weeks there will be a little baby in the house.

Liam looks around at us, his face a mask of sheer desperation as he stands there, not knowing what to do or how to help. I mean, I think maybe the best thing to suggest would be going to the hospital, and I’m just about to suggest that when Kellan steps forward. “How often are you getting the pains, Bree?”

Just as she's about to speak, a howl rips from her lips as Liam grabs hold of her hand, and given his grimace, she must be squeezing it really tight. I look over at Mia, and we both have the same concerned look etched across our faces. It's too early. The baby shouldn't be coming out for at least another four or five weeks, so I really hope this isn't labour, and I know my brother shares the same hope as his eyes stay trained on his wife.

When her pain subsides, Bree takes in some slow, deep breaths. "Damn, does that hurt like a motherfucker," Bree snaps at anyone who will listen, before turning to Kellan. "I guess they're coming about every ten minutes. Maybe a bit more often. But they're really starting to hurt."

Kellan nods, like he understands. "And is little peanut still moving, okay?"

Bree nods. "Yeah, I can feel baby moving fine. It's just me that's not okay," Bree grumbles, rubbing her belly at the same time.

"Apologies for the personal questions here, but have you had any bleeding or a show yet?" Kellan asks, and we all turn to look at him, equal looks of confusion on our faces.

"How the hell do you know all this?" Kian asks.

"When Shayla was pregnant with Hallie, I was terrified. My brain kept going over all the things that could go wrong, and I felt so fucking helpless. So, I read a lot of pregnancy books, and I mean a lot. I wanted to learn about anything and everything that was going to happen or could go wrong. That way I could be prepared, and I could at least be the tiniest bit helpful. As it happens, Hallie's birth was pretty smooth sailing. Shay had Braxton Hicks, and they became so painful we thought she was in early labour around thirty-six weeks, but nothing came of it. They settled down on their own. Having said that, I still think it would be a good idea to get you checked out at the hospital. You shouldn't be having tightenings this painful at your gestation."

I have to admit, Kellan really does sound like he knows what he's talking about, and I think that helps Bree a lot, as

she looks a little more relaxed. I love the fact Kellan wanted to be a part of the pregnancy as much as possible. When he first found out he was going to be a dad, he was less than impressed—or ready. In fact, he was terrified. It didn't help that Hallie was conceived in a less than ideal situation. But despite his initial reservations over if he could be a dad, Kellan had thrown himself in head first. And up until Mia came into his life, he was doing this completely alone, which I think speaks volumes about the kind of guy he is.

“So we take her to the hospital?” Liam asks, looking between Kellan and Bree.

Kellan nods his head but before he can answer, Bree groans again, grabbing onto both of Liam's hands for support. She cries out in pain for around half a minute, though it seemed like much longer—if it felt like longer to me, I can only imagine how it felt for Bree. She lets out a few choice swear words before Liam helps her to her feet. He takes hold of one of her arms, and Kian doesn't hesitate to take the other. She looks at him, like she's going to say something, but he cuts her off.

“Don't even think about it, Boss Lady. I am getting you all to the hospital, and making sure you are all okay. That's the very definition of my job,” Kian says, and I couldn't be more fucking proud of him. He says he's doing this because it's his job, but we both know it's not. The relationship he and Bree have formed is great to see.

It's like they're brother and sister, or at the very least, best friends. They have a banter with each other unlike anything they share with other people, and for a while I was jealous that Bree could connect with Kian on a level that I simply can't, but now I am just happy for them. Neither of them have any real family, only the people they chose for themselves. I can't even imagine what that's like, as I'm always surrounded by my siblings. I speak to at least one of them every day, and I would be lost if I didn't. So for them to have no one, I actually feel bad for them.

But the trust they have for each other is undeniable. Bree literally puts her life in Kian's hands every day, and that shows

how much she trusts him. And just by the way he looks at Bree, and then down to her bump, as he tries to hide the concern on his face, it's obvious how much he cares.

Liam, Bree, and Kian travel to the hospital, while the rest of us wait behind for news. There are far too many of us all to head to the hospital with them, but that doesn't mean we can just go on with our day. We all sit together in the living room, not really speaking, just waiting to hear from them.

I don't think it will be long before we hear what's going on though. Paddy O'Keenan, Bree's grandfather, the minute he found out his granddaughter was pregnant, he donated a shitload of money to the local maternity hospital. He made it clear that whilst the money was a donation; he expected his granddaughter to get the best care. The best midwife on shift, ready and waiting in her own private room whenever Bree needs to be seen, and the best obstetrician on call whenever needed. He made it clear that if Bree is satisfied with the level of care, and his great-grandchild is brought into this world safely, then they can expect a donation even more sizable than the last. So I feel sure we will have some answers soon.

It feels like forever, but it's maybe an hour and a half later when my phone rings and on the caller ID I see Kian's picture. I answer instantly. "Hey, Kian. You're on speaker and everyone is here." I figure it's safer to let him know other people are listening, just in case he's about to say something he shouldn't.

"Hey, guys. Bree and Liam told me to call you to update you. So the doctors think she's at risk of preterm labour. Luckily, she's not actually in labour at the moment. They're going to keep an eye on her today, and once the tightenings have settled down, she can come home. But he wants her to basically rest for the next couple of weeks; no drama and no stress that could risk peanut coming early," Kian explains.

"Fuck, it's like the doctor doesn't know Bree at all. Getting her to rest and avoid drama is going to be harder than teaching Hallie to eat with cutlery," Kellan grumbles, and I can't help but chuckle. He has a very good point. My sister-in-law has no idea how to take it easy, and she is definitely not good at

delegating or letting others look after her. She will see taking time to rest as a sign of weakness, and in our world, people attack at the first sign of weakness.

“Yeah... Well, Liam is standing guard. I’m gonna come home and give them some privacy, then I’ll come back and pick them up later, I hope,” Kian says, and I hear him start the car in the background.

“Okay, we will see you when you get home,” I say, and we both say goodbye as we disconnect the call. We all look a little relieved after the phone call, but we all still have the same look of dread on our face.

“Ryleigh texted, checking how Bree is. She’s worried that her and Shane coming to live here for the summer might be too much,” Mia explains, looking at her phone. I’m confused as to why my sister is messaging Mia asking questions like that, when she usually asks me.

It was decided a couple of months ago that when Ry and Shane finish high school in July, that they would come and live here for the summer before moving to Oxford for University. They both got accepted, they just have to wait to make sure they got the necessary grades on their exams. They already have a flat all lined up in Oxford, and they’re going to share it, but they wanted to spend the summer with us.

Then, obviously, Bree found out that peanut was due on the twenty-fourth of August, and Ry has been worried ever since. I mean, this house is definitely big enough for them to move in, and for Bree to bring home a new baby, but I know what she means. It’s something we’ve all been worried about, talking about behind Bree and Liam’s back. We’re worried they will want the house for themselves, so they can be a family.

I know that’s not what they have said, and they’ve made it quite clear we are welcome to stay, but I think we’re all worried that will change when they actually become parents. The only person who disagrees is Kellan. He thinks that not only will Liam stay true to his word, they will be grateful for all the extra help. He speaks from experience when he says

raising a baby is not easy. I guess we'll just have to see when the time comes.

“Text her back and tell her everything is fine. Liam and Bree wouldn't have invited them if they didn't want them here,” says Kellan, and I agree with him. Mia takes out her phone to text Ry back, and I look down at my own phone, a bit annoyed to see my sister hasn't texted me.

Mia obviously can tell I'm a bit upset, and she explains. “I was texting Ryleigh already, talking about a part of her psychology assignment that she needed my help with. I know we didn't discuss if we were telling people, but I figured she would want to know. I spoke to her and Shane earlier. They wanted to come home, but I reassured them and told them to stay put. That Bree would want them concentrating on their school stuff. I'm sorry if I overstepped or something,” Mia mutters, blush spreading across her face as she looks down at her hands that are wringing together on her knee.

Mia has always been a shy, quiet girl, which is quite something coming from me. She hates having all eyes on her. But I had thought we'd helped her come out of her shell enough to be comfortable around us. She must have been picking up a confrontational vibe from me, and I hate that. My stupid jealousy has made Mia uncomfortable, and that was never my intention.

Kellan looks like he's about to comfort Mia, but I shake my head at him before shuffling over on the sofa until I'm sitting right beside her. I take her hand in mine and give her a small smile. This is my mess, and I'm going to fix it. “I'm sorry, Mia. You don't ever have to feel like you've overstepped. You are a part of this family, and you can do whatever you think is best. You're right, we didn't discuss if we were telling people or not. I think you're right that Ry and Shane would want to know, and I'm pleased you told them. What you were picking up on with me had absolutely nothing to do with you or what you did, and it has everything to do with my own insecurities. I was jealous that Ry is texting you instead of me. I know that sounds stupid and irrational, but that's how I felt. Now I know you were already texting, it

makes me feel a bit better. I'm sorry for making you feel that way," I say, hating how fucking sad I sound as I lay my insecurities bare for all to see.

Mia clasps our hands together and gives me a bright smile. "Thank you for being honest with me. I promise, I'm not trying to take your sister from you, or replace you in any way. It's weird because I've never had a sibling. I've never had anyone to talk to like this other than Bree. I still don't really know all the rules."

Shaking my head, I release a sigh. "There are no rules, Mia. I'm sorry I made you feel like there is. I know you're not replacing me. Hell, there are times when I would gladly give you Ryleigh. Please don't let my insecurities affect you."

Mia releases my hand before opening her arms wide and pulling me into a hug. We've obviously hung out a lot, since we live in the same house, but I realise this is the first time we've ever hung out without Bree. She's the bond that draws us both together, but I think it's time we get to know each other without her. I have a strong suspicion we will turn into good friends. I tell Mia this, and she agrees.

Not long after our conversation ends, Kian bursts through the door, and all our eyes snap to him. "Are they okay?" Kellan snaps, striding towards Kian.

"Yes, chill out, man. They are fine. When I left she was settled in a bed and the pains had started to calm down. They are confident she will be home this evening, or at the very latest, in the morning. But they said she must rest if she wants to avoid going into early labour. I told Liam that me and you would come up with a plan so that Bree can start her maternity leave now, without letting people know about it." Kian points to Kellan, his finger flicking between the two of them as he explains what Liam has asked them to do. Kellan nods and agrees instantly.

"Right, well if you are going to do that, I'm going to take Hallie to her baby group, if that's okay?" Mia asks, looking over at Hallie, who is playing nicely in her baby pen. She

loves it in there, surrounded by her toys. It's a nightmare getting her to leave.

"Yeah, that's okay with me. I will come with you and get her ready," Kellan says, as he walks towards his daughter, no doubt trying to come up with the best way to get her out of the playpen without her scream bursting our eardrums.

"I will meet you in your office in ten," Kian says, giving me a sexy wink that thankfully nobody else caught before he sprang up the stairs.

"I'm going to clear out before Hallie starts screaming. If you hear anything from Liam or Bree, please come and get me. I will be in my room." I take off just as I hear Kellan negotiating with Hallie, who sounds like she's one step away from a meltdown.

Thankfully, I close my bedroom door and it drowns out the screams. As I turn around, making sure the door is firmly shut and locked, I'm shocked to see Kian sitting on my bed. I mean, I'm not that shocked, given he's practically moved into my room. What I mean is, I had no idea he would be in here now. He came upstairs to prepare for work. Sitting on my bed, no shirt, his hard, ripped muscles clearly on display for all to see, wearing just the grey sweatpants he had on when he went out this morning, he definitely doesn't look like he's preparing for work.

I can't help but lick my lips as I take in his beautiful, god-like body. He looks fucking edible, and despite everything going on, I can feel my pulse racing and my core heating. The more I stare, the more I can see the tent in his sweats grow.

"Get over here. We only have ten minutes, and I need to get rid of all my stress," Kian grumbles, his voice deep and laced with sex. There's a deep rumble to his tone that speaks directly to my core.

I saunter over to him, making sure to sway my hips as I go, trying to look as sexy as I can. "I thought it was Bree who needed to de-stress. Not you."

Kian shakes his head, his dirty blond hair flopping from side to side—it's got a bit longer recently, and I can't say I mind. I love running my fingers through it, and grabbing a hold of it when I need to. Just the thought of that makes my core burn and I can't help but bite my bottom lip. Kian doesn't miss it. "Whatever dirty thing you just thought about, I want to do it. Right now."

"How do you know I was thinking something dirty?" I tease, as I stand in front of him. He's sitting on the bed, his legs wide so that I can stand between them.

Reaching up, he puts his hands on my ass, squeezing as he looks up at me, his blue eyes sparkling with lust. "I can always tell when you're thinking naughty thoughts. So tell me what it was," he growls, as he pulls my body so that he can rest his forehead against my stomach. His head isn't far from where it was in my fantasy, and I run my fingers through Kian's hair, just like in my thoughts.

"Well, in my thoughts I was imagining you kneeling between my legs, while I gripped hold of your hair and felt the delicious scratch of your stubble between my legs. But... if you're the one with stress, then surely, I should be helping you," I whisper seductively as I drop to my knees between Kian's legs.

I waste no time reaching up to his sweatpants, stroking along his hard length as I make my way to the waistband. Before I can take his cock out of his pants, his hand grabs a hold of my arm, stopping me in my tracks. I look up at Kian, and he looks conflicted. My brow raised, I silently ask him to tell me what's wrong.

"Fuck, we are carrying on with this in a second, but before we do, I just wanted to say that I think it's a bad idea telling the family about us tonight. I want to keep Bree and Liam stress free, and I'm not sure how they will take the news. I can't handle being the reason something goes wrong for them." I can hear the concern and genuine fear in Kian's voice. He cares about Bree a lot, and I know he spent a lot of time with her when she was in the hospital after she was kidnapped.

Bree was mourning the loss of a baby she didn't even know she was going to have, and Kian lived through that pain with her each and every day. It's probably what bonded them together so much. So I know exactly why he's saying this now. He's been pestering me to tell my family from the beginning, so if he's asking me to delay, it's for the right reasons—even if I think my family will be fine with it, it's not worth the risk.

“Okay, we can give it another week or two. Just until Bree is settled and not at risk of going into labour any time soon. How does that sound?” I ask, and Kian gives me one of those genuine, dimpled smiles that he seems to have just for me. He's known for his big, cheesy, cocky smirk, but this is different. He looks so young and beautiful, like the cheeky boy-next-door, when he smiles at me like that, and it fucking destroys my heart.

“That sounds good, but it would sound even better with my cock in your mouth,” he jokes, fisting his hand into my hair to guide my head towards his crotch.

I let him push my head towards his hard length, and once I free it from the sweatpants, it springs out, hard and standing tall. The smooth, hard length looks silky, and I can't resist running my fingertip along the vein that runs all the way up the shaft. Kian shudders at the gentle touch and it spurs me on to continue.

My fingers trace all the way up the long length, right to the swollen purple head. I grasp the shaft just below the tip, and a generous amount of pre-cum oozes out as Kian groans. Spurred on by the noise, I wrap my fingers around his cock as best I can, given his size, and I slowly pull my fist down the shaft. His skin feels so soft against my hand, but I can feel some resistance given it's just skin-on-skin. I know just how to rectify that.

Leaning forward, I stick my tongue out and swirl it around the tip of Kian's cock, making sure to taste every drop of pre-cum on there, before pulling my tongue down the shaft. I continue to lick up and down like I'm demolishing my favourite ice lolly.

“Holy motherfucking shit does that feel good,” Kian groans, one hand gripping my hair tightly while the other fists into the bed sheet beside him. I chuckle around the tip of his cock, and the vibrations make him practically purr.

Slowly, I close my mouth over the tip before taking as much of his hard length into my mouth as I can. He throws his head back as his eyes roll and a groan echoes around the bedroom. Spurred on by his pleasure, I start by sucking up and down, just on the top of his cock, getting it nice and wet. Then, each time I press the head into my mouth, I lower it further and further.

I feel the moment it hits the back of my throat, and I pull away slightly so that I can get control of my gag reflex before pushing down again. This time when I hit the back, I swallow, my throat relaxing so that his cock can slip in further. We both know when it’s gone past that spot, as my throat feels beyond full, my air supply cut off, and Kian’s cries of pleasure grow.

His hand on the back of my head holds me there, but the second I pull away, he allows me to lift my head off. I splutter and cough, desperate to pull in some air. I take in a few sharp, quick breaths, and Kian guides my head back onto his cock. Pushing my head, this time I don’t even hesitate to take him fully into the back of my throat, and my nose touches the top of Kian’s pubic bone as I take all of him in my mouth.

Suddenly, I remember a tip I heard about in porn, and I slowly begin to swallow as best I can. The tightening and movement of my throat milks Kian’s cock, gripping it harder, and the grasp he has on my hair tightens as he cries out, a mixture of words that I can’t even begin to decipher. The tight pull of his hand on my hair, the slight painful tugging adds to the pleasure I’m feeling. Every time Kian moans or cries out, it’s like he’s got a direct line to my pussy, as it tingles and grows wetter.

Tapping on his thigh, I make it clear I need to pull back, and he releases the hold on my head, allowing me to pull off his cock, a trail of spit following behind. I cough and splutter as I pull in more breaths. Kian is looking at me like this is the hottest thing he’s ever seen, and I can’t resist anymore. I push

my hand into my leggings, sliding my finger between my lips, and I'm not surprised to find how incredibly wet I am.

As I take Kian back into my mouth, I circle my finger lazily around my clit, and it's not long before it becomes sensitive and drives me crazy. With my thumb on my clit, I move my fingers to my entrance and waste no time pushing two fingers inside. Moans of pleasure rip from my body, and I cry out as best I can with Kian's cock in my mouth, and the vibrations around his dick drive him crazy.

"Fuck, Beautiful. Are you playing with your tight little pussy?" he groans, and I don't pull off his dick, I just nod my head.

He leans forward slightly so he can watch me, and I know he will be frustrated that my leggings are blocking him from seeing anything. Still, I continue bobbing my head up and down on his cock, making sure to twirl my tongue around the tip, tasting more of his salty pre-cum that oozes out with each pump. As I get faster, my fingers thrust in and out of my pussy at a matching speed as my thumb grinds against my overly sensitive clit.

My movements become more frantic and less coordinated, and Kian begins thrusting his hips when my movements slow. Now he's taking what he wants from me, fucking his hips up, forcing his cock into my mouth, and I fucking love it. The way he takes charge, and takes what he wants from me, it feels fucking amazing. I can feel myself getting wetter, my walls clenching down on my fingers as I climb higher and higher towards the edge of the cliff.

I feel Kian's cock start to pulse, and it's almost like it gets impossibly bigger in my mouth. His whole body feels tense, his muscles tightening, and I know he's chasing his orgasm, too. It only takes one final swirl around the tip with my tongue, and as I drag his cock deep into my throat, Kian's body goes rigid. "Fuck, Frey. I'm going to come. Where do you want it?"

I don't bother to answer him. I love that he always gives me a choice, but usually the answer is the same—wherever he

wants. And today, it looks like he wants to come in my throat, and I'm more than happy to oblige. I suck hard, and as I thrust my fingers deep into my pussy, I feel them drag over that sensitive spot just as my thumb presses against my clit.

That's all my body needs. My muscles tighten, my body going rigid before shaking as pleasure ripples through all of my nerve endings. I cry out as much as I can with a cock in my mouth, and the vibration is just what Kian needs to tip him over the edge right alongside me.

His cock begins to pulse as he shoots the first rope of cum down the back of my throat. As he does, he pulls back, so that I can swallow and breathe. I'm gasping frantically as my pleasure takes over. Ropes of cum land on my tongue, and I can taste his salty liquid as it coats my mouth. My fingers are flooded with my own juices, and I take my thumb off my overly sensitive clit, but keep my fingers in my pussy as I ride out the waves of my release.

Kian pulls his cock out of my mouth, but leaves it sitting on my lips, and he watches through hooded eyes as I use my cum-covered tongue to clean all around the head. When he pulls back slightly, I make a display of showing him the cum sitting on my tongue, before swallowing it all, and showing that it's gone. The smile that spreads across his face makes me feel incredibly fucking sexy.

He leans towards me, but I shake my head, unable to find my voice yet. His brow raises, and he looks at me in confusion. I pull my fingers from my tender pussy, whimpering slightly at how empty I feel once they are gone. I move my hand until it's in front of my face, and you can clearly see my juices glistening on the fingers. They are coated, and it looks so hot.

At first I was going to bring my fingers to my lips, having developed a taste for my own juices, thanks to Kian's experiment at the restaurant. But when I see his hooded gaze, I move my fingers towards his lips. As soon as they're close enough, he sticks his tongue out and runs it along the underside of one of my fingers. The sensation of his wet tongue against my cool finger causes my hand to tingle. He

then wastes no time at all pulling my fingers into his mouth, sucking on them the way I just sucked on his cock. Once they're clean, and I pull them back out, he smiles that smile that makes my heart race and my stomach flip.

Leaning forward, he picks me up by my hips like I weigh nothing at all and he sits me on his lap. I can feel his semi-hard cock pressing against my soaking wet leggings as he forces me to straddle his lap. Without hesitation, he presses his lips to mine, and we can both taste each other on our tongues. As our tongues battle for dominance, and we taste each other in an all-consuming kiss, I can't get over the feelings that wash over me.

I don't know if it's all the sex hormones, or if it's just Kian, but it hits me like a tonne of bricks. I'm in love with Kian. Not just in love, I'm so fucking head over heels, crazy in love that my heart aches for him. I know now's not the right time to tell him. He's never had anyone love him before, and I don't ever want him to doubt my reasons for saying it. I don't want him to think it's just some sex drunk reaction. When I say those three special words to him, I want him to know how much I mean them. So I will wait. I will make sure I'm certain of how I feel. Though I think I already am sure.

I love Kian O'Shay, and there's no turning back now.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



Freya

The next couple of days pass by reasonably quiet. Bree is back home from the hospital, and everyone is in charge of making sure she literally just sits on her ass all day, doing nothing except cooking her baby until it's fully ready to come out. Bree and Liam had another check up scan just yesterday, and of course that led to another argument over whether or not they should find out the gender. Needless to say, we still don't know, and I quite like that. Not that I'm stupid enough to ever pick sides when a pregnant lady is involved, but I quite like the idea of finding out for the first time when you hold them.

Since we have been trying to keep Bree stress free, we haven't told them about our relationship. But, that seems to be the last thing on Kian's mind. He's been getting a few threats recently, after all the shit that went down at the fight. We knew in the immediate aftermath that things were too quiet, and it seems they were just biding their time.

Kian won't tell me about the threats, I just know he's getting them. He says the less I know the better, and I want to agree with him, but it's hard. Hell, the very reason I didn't want a relationship with Kian in the first place is because I didn't want this exact scenario. I didn't want to spend all my

time worrying about when the day will come that Kian gets killed.

The threats must be serious though, as he's assigned me a security detail. If I leave the house, I have to be accompanied by a bodyguard. While I'm in the house, I'm safe, but outside, they can't protect me unless I have security. I agreed to it, not just so that Kian has peace of mind, but also for my own.

Yes, my father trained me in combat, and I was even taught what to do if I am kidnapped, but that doesn't mean I want it to happen. I've never thrown a punch outside of training, unless, of course, you include the times I punched my brothers growing up.

I have to admit, all the threats hanging over my head have made me turn a bit reclusive. Don't get me wrong, I always preferred curling up in the comfy chair by the window in my room with my laptop while I tap out my next book. I'm not someone who enjoys going out and socialising. But, recently I've been too scared to even go to the supermarket. I know Kian picked up on it, too.

As we lay in bed together, curled up in each other's arms, the minutes tick by bringing us closer to the moment where Kian will have to get up. He has some meetings today, and he likes to get in his early morning run before them. The last couple of days, I've managed to talk him into doing a different form of exercise, but I know this morning I'm out of luck. If he's working here at the house, he doesn't mind missing it. But when he's going out, attending meetings in other locations, he likes to make sure he gets his run in first so he can get rid of some of the excess energy that bundles up. Besides, he can't exactly attend meetings smelling like sex with a semi that just won't go down because it remembers the feel of my tight pussy swallowing him whole.

"I really don't want to get out of bed today," I confess, as my finger draws lazy circles around the inked design on his arms. He has so many beautiful designs, all interwoven, I could stare at them for hours.

His hand lazily trails down my arm, his fingers lighting a path as they travel, heating up my skin, making me want to cuddle into him closer. When Kian speaks, the rumble underneath my cheek reminds me I can hear his heart beating. I've grown so used to being lulled to sleep, or simply just listening to the soothing beat, I almost forget about it. His heartbeat is like an extension of mine. Two hearts, beating as one, like we were always meant to be together in this moment.

"I wish I didn't have meetings, too. But I promise, I will rush back to you. Besides, I know you have the rest of that dirty sex scene to write today. I want to hear some of it when I come home tonight. That will really get me in the mood," he says, his voice turning into a growl at the end. He doesn't need any help at all, getting in the mood around me. But recently, he's been asking me about my books, and every time I write a sex scene, he likes me to tell him all about it. You have no idea how fucking self-conscious I get reading my own work out loud to someone, and for it to be a sex scene makes it even worse.

But the look on his face, the way his cheeks heat and his breath quickens as the scene takes hold of him, it blows me away. I love that I'm able to turn him on so much with just my words. Some of our hottest sex has happened after I've read one of my scenes to him. It's like he's trying to prove to me that he's a million times better than one of my book boyfriends, and I can't deny he proves it every time.

While the sex has always been amazing, it's these moments that I've come to cherish. The times when we just curl up with each other talking about random things, getting to know all about each other's pasts, or even just binge watching a crime documentary on Netflix. Being with each other is easy, and even though it's only been a few months, I'm struggling to remember what my life was like before Kian came steamrolling in. The more time we spend together, the more certain I am about how I feel.

I've known I've been in love with Kian for a couple of weeks now, and at first I just wanted to be sure before I said something, but I knew as soon as I woke up the next day. I

wasn't love or sex drunk; the feelings were real, and the more I'm with him, the more sure I am of that. But now the problem is that when I do tell him, I want it to be perfect. I want him to be sure I mean it, and I want it to be memorable. I don't just want it to slip out while we're falling asleep in each other's arms. I mean, there's nothing wrong with that, but I've been building this moment up in my head, and I know I need it to be good. I just need to come up with a great plan.

"I will make sure the scene is extra spicy for you. I've also been thinking, now that Bree is doing okay, I think we should tell them about us. I want to go out to dinner with you, kiss you when you give me my morning coffee, sit on your lap in the living room when there's no room anywhere else. I want to be able to do all the boyfriend and girlfriend things that people can do when they live together. I know I get to have all of you in here, but I'm sick of looking over my shoulder. We need to tell them... tonight." I leave no room for discussion, and I'm a little alarmed when I don't hear any noise coming from Kian.

Looking up tentatively, I see him smiling down at me. "I think that's a great idea. I want people to know that you're mine, Beautiful." He leans down and presses a kiss to my lips. I almost blurt out how I feel... those three words... all because of the sweetest of kisses. I know he needs to know, and so after we tell my family tonight, I am telling Kian how I really feel. I'm all in on this relationship, and it's time he knew that.



Kian left for his meetings this morning, but not before he brought me to orgasm with his tongue. He wouldn't let me return the favour, saying that this was all about me, and he wanted me to think of him while I'm writing my scene. Like I could think of anyone but him. He consumes all my thoughts.

Time seemed to drag today, and even though the words flew out of me easily, the day seemed to take forever. I think it's because I had built up in my head how big tonight would be. Kian told me he would be home by five, and all of us are going to order pizza and have a movie night together. It's been a while since we did the last one, and it seemed like the perfect way to get everyone together. Kian is under the impression my brothers will take the news better if I supply them with pizza and beer. He may be right, I guess we'll find out.

Then, after the movie, once our family knows about us, I am going to take Kian up to our room—yes, my room is going to become our room because he's never leaving it—and I will tell him how I feel. No big grand gesture, or a grand plan. Just me, him, and the three words I've been desperate for him to hear from me.

At about a quarter to five, I finally emerge from my writing cave and head downstairs. I've been stuck up in my room all day, desperate to get a couple of chapters done, as I was falling behind. Kian was going for his run and then straight on to his meetings, and I haven't seen him since he left.

As I walk into the living room, I'm shocked to see Kellan and Liam are already back from the meeting. It's strange he didn't come and see me when he got home. I'm usually the first person he comes to see.

"Where's Kian? Didn't you come back from the meeting together?" I ask, and both Kellan and Liam look at each other, confusion evident on their faces.

"Kian's sick. He texted this morning to say he couldn't make the meeting but he would see us tonight," Liam explains, and now it's my turn to look confused.

"Kian's not sick. I saw him this morning when he left for his run, and he was perfectly fine," I snap.

Kellan holds out his hands, sensing I'm getting more wound up. I don't know what it is, but something doesn't feel right. As soon as Liam said Kian had texted to say he was sick, I knew something was very wrong. I've had this impending

feeling of doom in my stomach all day, but I thought it was nerves about having to tell our family about us, or because I'm finally telling him how I really feel. Now, I'm not so sure. Maybe there's a different reason for me feeling this way?

"Maybe after his run he came over not feeling well. He's probably in his room right now, moaning like a girl about how poorly he feels," Kellan jokes, but everything about that statement feels wrong.

Kian hasn't slept in his own bed for over two months now. If he was ill, he would have crawled into my bed. Even if he didn't want me to look after him, or he was rolling about, moaning like a little girl, he would have done it in our room. I don't even need to check to know he's not in there.

"Go and check... Now! I know he's not in there," I shout, and both my brothers take a step back, like I'm a wild animal and they are scared to get that little bit too close to me.

Kellan edges out of the room and runs up the stairs, while everyone remains frozen in the living room. The only noise comes from Hallie, who is muttering in her own language as she plays with two of her dolls. Nobody even dares to move, but I can see the suspicious look in Liam's eyes. It's a good job we're telling everyone tonight, as this behaviour is hardly doing much to hide the fact we're together.

As soon as Kellan returns, his face pale, a tight mask over his features, it's like my worst fears are playing out in front of me, and I'm living the very nightmare I never wanted any part in. I don't even need to hear him say it, but when he does, my heart breaks. "He's not there."

Everyone snaps into action, all talking at once as Kellan and Liam brainstorm about what they need to do, and Mia tries to get Bree to keep calm. I take my phone out of my pocket and dial his number. It goes to voicemail after only a couple of rings, and as soon as his voice echoes through the phone, tears begin to fall.

I crumple to the floor, but keep dialling his number over and over, getting nowhere. I don't bother leaving him a message—who knows if he will ever get to hear it? Those

kinds of thoughts are exactly what are breaking my heart in two. But it's a real fear. I've only just found him, and now I might have lost him. Can someone even continue living with a piece of their heart missing?

It's not until a small sob escapes my lips that everyone realises I'm a crumpled mess on the floor. Bree tries to kneel down on the floor to sit beside me, but she's far too big for that. She might never get up again, and so it's a good thing Liam stops her. Kellan and Mia drop down to sit on either side of me, and they both take one of my hands in theirs.

"He's more to you than just a friend, isn't he?" Kellan asks, no hint of judgement or anger in his tone. If anything, it sounds like pity, and I think that's so much worse.

Nodding my head, I try to ignore the sinking feeling in my stomach, but as the tears track down my face, fear overwhelms me. "We were planning on telling you tonight. Well... actually, we were initially going to tell you on the day Bree got admitted to hospital, but decided she couldn't deal with the stress."

I hear a grumble coming from Bree. "I'm so sick of people treating me like I need to be covered in fucking bubble-wrap. I'm pregnant, not ill. I could have handled it. Damn, I pretty much knew anyway."

Liam's eyes snap around to his wife. "What do you mean you knew? Why the hell didn't you tell me?"

Bree and Mia both groan at the same time, and I can see Bree rolling her eyes from down here on the floor. "Because we have eyes, you turnip. You only have to spend half an hour in their presence and it's fucking obvious they're together, and have been for a while."

"Have you?" Liam challenges, his gaze fixed on me.

"We have been together for a couple of months. Please, Liam... Kian is missing. Can we have this discussion later, when we have him back?" I plead, looking into the eyes of my big brother, letting him know how much I care for Kian, and how desperate I am for his help. "I never ask for anything, but

right now, I need to look for Kian, and I will take all the help I can get.” I pour my heart out in front of the people who matter the most to me in the world. It almost seems stupid that we would ever hide how we feel from them, but we did and this is where we are at now.

Bree and Mia didn’t seem bothered, and they confirmed they had their suspicions all along. My brothers, on the other hand, were either blind or stupid. They just thought we liked to flirt with each other. They were so confident that I wanted out of this life. They were sure I would never end up with someone like Kian. All I can say to them is that you can’t help who you fall in love with. I don’t miss the look of shock on their faces when I imply how I feel about Kian, but they don’t say a word.

“Okay, I will start by tracing his phone. I’ll go and get my tracking systems up and running. Liam can go and talk to his security team, see if we can nail down when he was last seen,” Kellan says, giving my hand a squeeze as he stands.

“It’s obvious someone sent a fake text to throw us off, giving them a very sizable head start. But, if they used his phone, we would at least be able to see where they were when they sent the message. Can’t we, Kel?” Bree asks, and Kellan nods his head.

“It will give us a last known location, for sure. Then we at least have somewhere we can start to look. I’m also going to go through all the info I’ve collected on Miller and the fight scene. We know there’s someone behind the scenes, we just don’t know who or what they really want with Kian. If this was about him owing money for a fight, they would let him fight to work off his debt. This seems like more,” Kellan muses, saying aloud something I’ve been thinking for a while.

“Why don’t I come with you? I can look at the fight stuff you’ve already collected. A fresh set of eyes can’t hurt. Besides, I’ve spent a lot of time with Kian recently, getting to know each other. Something might be in there that I know about,” I explain, wiping the tears from my cheek as I allow Kel to pull me from the floor with one arm. He reaches out

with the other and does the same for Mia, before pulling her into a hug.

Liam steps forward, so that his gaze meets mine, and I can see the concern in his emerald green eyes. “Are you sure you want to do that, Frey? It’s raw, unfiltered information, and I can’t guarantee there won’t be something there that might upset you.”

I know he doesn’t mean to piss me off, and that’s he’s acting in my best interests, but he can fuck right off if he thinks I’m going to stand on the sidelines and do nothing while Kian is missing. My heart will crack if I don’t help in some way. Yes, I might see something terrible that I can’t unsee. But if there’s information in there that holds the key to finding him, and I didn’t find it because I was too scared to look—I’d never forgive myself.

Kian is out there, in God knows what kind of situation. He could be hurt, being tortured, even killed—though I refuse to think that—and I need to do something to help him. This may be the exact situation I’ve always dreaded, and the very reason I didn’t want any part of this lifestyle, but now we’re here and it’s happening, there’s no way I could walk away. I would walk through hell, tearing down the world around me piece by piece, until I got to Kian.

“It doesn’t matter what’s in the files. Nothing will hurt me more than losing Kian. Now, can we get on and find my boyfriend, please,” I snap, pointing to the door as I do.

Bree starts to chuckle. “Kian has clearly been a bad influence on you. A couple of months ago you wanted nothing to do with our world, now you’re ready to kick down doors and run into fire for him. You must really like him.” She smiles at me, but it doesn’t meet her eyes. It’s one of those sad smiles, full of pity. But I can also see the pain in her eyes.

Kian is like her best friend, her brother, and she feels the pain of his disappearance just as much as I do. In fact, as I look around the room, I can see how much my cocky asshole means to all these guys. He’s our family, and nobody messes

with our family and lives to tell the tale. I'm getting my Kian back, if it's the last thing I do.



Kellan's office begins to shroud in darkness as the sun sets off in the distance, a harsh reminder of how much time has gone by. We managed to get a location when Kian's fake text was sent, and we called Declan to go and check it out, since he was closer. I could hear the anguish in his voice when we told him his best friend was missing. He was only too happy to help in any way he could. But the spot was in the middle of nowhere, and we have no leads on what to do next.

Kellan is still trying to get more location details from his phone, but I think it's turned off. He's also scanning CCTV near to where the fake text was sent, but when that yielded no results, he had to go back even farther and look at when we know for sure Kian was last seen, and see if we can trace his movements from there.

It was at that point I had to leave the room. I grab all the paperwork I'm trawling through, and I head for my bedroom. I can't sit in Kellan's office, watching picture after picture on multiple screens of Kian. Watching him with his cocky, dimpled grin, thinking maybe he was thinking about me and that caused him to smile. My heart aches for him, and I miss him already. I'm also pissed at myself for not realising he was missing. I should have known.

I know logically there's no way in hell I could have known, but that doesn't stop me from feeling like I should have in some way. If the roles were reversed, he would be moving heaven and earth to find me. He'd be kicking down every door he could think of, threatening every asshole who has ever even looked at me the wrong way. Yet all I can do is

sit here, staring at these pages, hoping that one of them will give me some kind of clue.

I can feel the tears welling up again, misting over my eyes, and I try not to let them fall. As I'm taking some deep breaths to try and gain control of my emotions, I feel my phone beginning to vibrate in my pocket. I fumble around, desperately trying to get it out, all whilst praying to whoever the fuck is listening that it's Kian on the other end.

When I finally get the phone out of my pocket, I'm shocked to see it's a video call from Brandon. We haven't spoken since the night of the fight. I called him when I got home and broke things off with him. He knew something had happened between Kian and I, and I didn't exactly deny it—there was no point. I know it's a technicality to say I didn't break any rules; I didn't cheat, because we agreed we weren't exclusive. But I still hated how hurt and mad Brandon sounded.

It's been a couple of months now since we last spoke, so I'm more than confused as to why he's ringing. I look at the time in the corner of the screen, and note it's well after eleven at night. I'm really hoping this isn't a drunken attempt at phone sex, or a real life booty call. I'm not in the mood for that, right now. But after everything I put him through, it feels kinda wrong to ignore his call.

As soon as I press accept, his face appears on my screen. He's really close to the screen and I can't see where he is, but at least he looks fully clothed and isn't going to surprise me with a dick shot. I may not be feeling in the mood for this, but the least I can do is be nice, so I can get him off the phone quicker. I have things to do, and I ideally need to keep this line clear in case Kian needs to get ahold of me.

Smiling at Brandon, I give him a small wave. “Hey, Bran. I wasn't expecting to hear from you, particularly this late. How are you doing?”

I'm shocked when Brandon's face crinkles in disgust, like he's appalled that I would be so nice to him. He literally looks

as though he's talking to dog shit on the end of his shoe, and I've never felt so awful. Did I really hurt this guy so badly?

"I had hoped that you would be cleverer than I gave you credit for. I thought you'd know it was me, or that I'd at least have made the suspect list. But I can tell by the look on your face that I haven't. You have no fucking clue what's going on, do you?" he sneers, a strong Italian accent appearing the madder he gets.

I know we only hung out a couple of times, but we talked a lot on the phone, and never once did I notice an Italian accent. My brain feels overloaded right now, as there's so much going on. Why the hell is Brandon calling me now, out of the blue, to tell me I never really got to know him... the real him?

It hits me like a lightbulb moment. That instance where all the words fit together in my head, and it suddenly makes sense why he's calling. "You have Kian, don't you?" I ask, struggling to hide the disbelief in my voice.

Brandon said that I have no idea what's going on, and that I would never have suspected him, and he's right. He was such an insignificant part of my history, I never even considered he was capable of being involved in this mess. But apparently, I don't know Brandon as well as I thought I did.

A deep, sadistic chuckle echoes through the phone and his eyes widen as a smile that can only be described as evil spreads across his face. He takes a couple of steps to the side, and then moves the camera slightly so it's no longer just focused on his face. In the background, I can see Kian, and my heart breaks as a sob escapes me. I'm so fucking relieved that he's alive, but only just.

He's tied to a chair in the middle of a large room with white-tiled walls. His head is slumped to the side, and if it wasn't for the fact I can see his chest rising and falling, I would be worried that he's dead. There's so much blood dripping from cuts and wounds all over his body.

His dirty blonde hair is now almost as red as Bree's as it's coated with blood. He's not wearing a shirt, and for once I can't even concentrate on his ink or his muscles. Instead, all I

see are the cuts oozing blood all over his body. He's wearing the same grey sweatpants he pulled on this morning before his run.

That means he was abducted during his run, which definitely helps to narrow the timeline down. It also means they've had him for over twelve hours now, and have clearly been torturing him for that time. Which tells me they don't want money, or even revenge. They want something, and whatever it is, Kian is holding out, refusing to give them what they want. I'm guessing that's why they're coming to me. Brandon knows how much I didn't want this, and how I will do anything to make sure the people I love stay safe.

Even though I'm completely overcome with emotion, and I'm freaking the fuck out, I still remember all the training I went through with Desmond as a kid. I quickly reach up and take a couple of screenshots of our video call. They can be analysed, and may give people an idea of where Kian is being held. I know I need to extract every bit of information that I can from Brandon, if I'm going to work out what the hell is going on here.

"Why do you have Kian?" I ask, trying to keep my voice as calm and controlled as possible.

"I'm not in the mood to repeat myself again. Gather your family in the living room. You have five minutes and then I will call back and we can all have a nice chat. How does that sound?" he asks casually, like he's inviting us over for a friendly cup of tea. The urge to punch him is growing more and more the longer we talk.

Before I have a chance to reply, he ends the call, and I find myself screaming Kian's name. I know he can't hear me and that the call has gone, but just being able to see him, knowing that for those few minutes, they weren't hurting him. Now I have no idea what they're doing, and a sob catches in my throat.

No! I can break down later, but right now I have a job to do. I quickly run from my room, heading straight for Kellan's office. I tell them to come down to the living room

immediately. They look shocked, but they follow me straight away. I don't have time to explain to everyone until they're all gathered in the living room.

Just as I enter the living room, the doorbell sounds, scaring the shit out of everyone. Bree starts trying to get up from the sofa, but Liam, who had just entered the room, gives her a stern look as he shouts, "I'll get it."

Seconds later, Declan and Belle burst into the room, and if I didn't know Dec, I would be terrified of him right now. His eyes are wide, filled with rage, and his hands are clenched into fists. It's only Belle's reassuring caress of his arm that seems to keep him calm.

Where Declan looks angry, Belle looks scared and sad, the tear tracks down her face are obvious to everyone. I realise that Kian means something to her too, more than just her boyfriend's best friend. I'm not surprised. Kian is just one of those people, he's easy to love.

I indicate for everyone to sit down, and despite clearly not wanting to, Dec and my brothers do as they're told—after their girls tell them to, I should note—and I'm able to fill them in on exactly what happened when Brandon called. I watch as their faces all morph into the same expression—confusion. None of us even considered Brandon as a suspect. As far as I'm concerned, he was a guy I went on one date with, and it ended because I didn't like him in that way.

I mean, he never stood a chance, really. I wanted to like him, I really did. And I think I liked the idea of him more than I did him. He stood no chance next to Kian. But that's not reason enough to kidnap him. Honestly, I didn't even really get the feeling Brandon liked me this much. There must be more to this. That's what Bree muses aloud too when I finish my story.

Before any of us get a chance to voice our suspicions, my phone rings again. I sit on the sofa with Bree on one side, Liam on the other, and the rest of our family and friends surrounding me. Kellan takes my phone so he can hold it far enough away that everyone will be in the shot. I also watch

him press some buttons before answering, and I realise he's started a tracker in the hopes we can find out where Brandon is calling from.

Brandon's face appears on the screen, and Kian's lifeless body remains in the background. Once again my breathing hitches, and my heart stops, just for a fraction of a second while I stare at the tiny screen to make sure he's still breathing. I can't help the sigh that escapes when I see his chest wall rise. Thankfully, he doesn't look in any worse condition than he did a few minutes ago.

"I did what you asked, my family is here. Now, what do you want?" I snap, pulling on my big girl pants enough to seem like I'm in control of this situation. In reality, I feel as though I'm about to crumble at any moment.

"It's not your whole family though, is it, Freya?" he asks, his voice taking on a weird almost sing-song sound. It's like when you're a kid and someone sings "I know something you don't know". That's what this feels like. Brandon is clearly bragging that he knows something I don't, and it's winding me the fuck up. I can see it's having the same effect on everyone in the room, but nobody says anything. It was decided before we answered the phone that I would do all the talking. Bree thinks that, even though he clearly wants something from the whole family, he called me—which means it's me he's directing all this at.

"Obviously not. Most of my family are in Ireland, and I don't have magic powers that will make them appear here in five minutes," I snap, trying as best I can not to lose my cool. I know he's trying to wind me up for a reason, and I need to not play into his hands.

"I never got a chance to meet most of your family, did I? But you still told me all about them on our dates and our late night chats. There was always one person who you never mentioned, not once, wasn't there?" He pans the camera over to Kian, zooming in slightly so I can see his beautiful face. Even unconscious, with blood oozing out of cuts all over his body, and one of his eyes swollen shut, he still looks gorgeous. He still makes my heart skip a beat.

“I never talked about Kian with you,” I reply, telling him what he already knows.

He smiles at my confession, but I don’t know why. “That’s how I knew there was something going on between you, and that he was your weak spot.”

“But that would mean you knew enough about my family before our date to know who I didn’t talk about?” I’m musing aloud more than actually asking Brandon, but he still replies.

“Bingo! I knew you weren’t a complete idiot. You may be a dirty fucking slut, but I knew you weren’t stupid,” he shouts, a sneer on his lips as he calls me such disregarding terms.

I should have known my brother wouldn’t sit by and allow him to call me a slut, no matter how many lectures Bree gave him. “Shut the fuck up. If you call my sister another name, when I find you—and we will find you—I will break every bone in your face so you can’t ever say anything insulting about another woman again. Understand?” Liam snaps, leaning forward towards the camera, so Bran can see exactly how serious he is.

Bree reaches over my legs and takes hold of Liam’s hand in hers. I’m not sure if she’s doing it to comfort him, or as a warning. Either way, I feel my brother relax by my side, as he leans back on the sofa again. Brandon doesn’t seem the least bit phased by the insults, and instead his sneer widens.

“Oh, I understand. I also know that if you make any move against me, Kian will be dead. I don’t make that threat lightly. As you can see, he’s of no use to me at all, as he won’t talk. So, I had to find another way to get you guys talking. That’s when I remembered Freya basically saying that the Doughty family’s biggest weakness is the love they share for each other.” His eyes widened, like I gave him a Doughty secret.

Bree laughs beside me, and I look over at her in shock. I expected her to be mad at me. I mean, I shouldn’t exactly be giving away our secrets to someone I only shared a couple of dates with. Not that I remember saying anything like this. I think he’s just put together things I have said, and has come to

this conclusion on his own. The problem is, he's right. Which is why I'm shocked Bree is laughing.

Despite being the one who told everyone to keep quiet and let me do all the talking on the call, she didn't hold back, the authority evident in every word she speaks. "You are a fucking idiot if you think our love for each other makes us weak. It makes us stronger, and believe me, you do not want to test our bond. You do not want to see the lengths we will go to in order to get Kian back. So, why don't you stop with all the cryptic shit and tell us what the hell's going on? You obviously aren't who we think you are, and you clearly targeted Freya for a reason. So, now's your chance to explain." Bree doesn't leave any room for discussion.

Brandon's nose turns up, and it's clear he hates the idea of a woman giving instructions, but he listens to her all the same. "You're right. I didn't meet Freya by accident. It was a carefully orchestrated plan, and I chose her."

I can tell he has more to say, but I can't help interrupting him. "Why me?"

He chuckles lightly, in a very sarcastic way, and my fists clench and unclench as fury ripples beneath the surface of my skin. I never knew I was capable of feeling so much anger, but I am. The hate I feel for Brandon right now, which is doubled every time I look at Kian's crumpled body, is enough to send me into a murderous tailspin I never thought I was capable of.

"I picked you because you were the easiest mark. All alone, no friends, no boyfriend—that I knew of. I hoped that your loneliness, and your desire to be free from this life would work in my favour. If I became exactly what you were looking for, a nice boring boy with no ties to this life, then you'd never suspect me. It was surprisingly easy to get you talking, telling me all about your family," he gloats, and I can feel everyone's eyes drifting over me, and I suddenly feel extremely judged.

I think back, not just to our date but to our conversations too. I know I wouldn't have said anything too incriminating. I mean, I was raised by Desmond fucking Doughty. I know all

about security and safety, and there's no way I would have told him anything. Or at least, I don't think I would have.

I school my face and respond with a confident sneer. "And what exactly is it that you think I told you?"

"Oh, getting straight to the point, are we? Maybe I want to drag this out a bit more. I'm actually quite enjoying torturing your big, strong fighter over here. I was thinking of removing all of his fingernails next. What do you think? Will he sing then?" Brandon sings, and a sob escapes as I struggle to hold it together. He catches my pain and the smile that spreads across his face as he gloats irritates me. I can't give him any advantage over me.

I'm about to reply when Declan leans in front of me from behind the sofa and snaps, his voice so angry he sounds almost feral. "Listen here, you fucked up little cunt. You can pull every fingernail and every toenail, you can torture Kian every way you can think of, and there's no way in hell he will talk. All it will do is make me that little bit madder, and when we find you, not only will I replicated every cut, every bruise, every wound you inflict on my brother, I will find new and exciting ways to torture you for twice as long. I'll let every person in this room have a shot at you, and that's a lot of pissed off people. Then I will drain every drop of blood from your body until you die a slow and painful death. And we will sit there, for every single second, eating popcorn and celebrating the death of a worthless cunt."

He doesn't wait for a reply. He stomps out of the room, clearly a lot more rattled by seeing Kian injured in the background. Belle runs after him, and I'm glad she has. Nobody should be alone feeling the way he does. I know that because I feel the same way. I feel like he has a piece of my heart taped to that chair, and every time he tortures him, I feel it.

"Well, he's a cheerful guy, isn't he? Now we've got the threats out of the way. Shall we have a grown up conversation?" Brandon sounds even more cocky than before, and my desire to punch him is growing stronger. I've never known rage like this.

“Instead of all these threats, why don’t you be the grown up and tell us exactly what it is you want from Kian? You know there are people in this room who would do anything for him, who don’t want to see him hurt anymore. I think that’s why you took him in the first place. I think this is the moment you have been building up to. The ultimatum. Either Freya gives you the information you need, or you hurt Kian. You already know she won’t let you hurt Kian. I’m thinking you gathered us all together so we would have to watch as Freya betrays us for him. Am I getting warm?” Bree asks, and as Brandon’s eyes light up, I can tell she’s hit the nail on the head.

“See, this is why you are the leader of the family and not the bullheaded men. You are exactly right. Are you ready, Freya? It’s time to choose between the love you have for your family and the love you feel for Kian. Which one are you going to betray?” My heart sinks with every word he speaks, and I try not to look at my family. I have a feeling this is going to be hard enough as it is.

Defeated, my shoulders slump. I ask the question I’m dreading to hear the answer to. “I’m ready. What do you want to know?”

The whole room falls silent, and you could hear a pin drop as we all wait to hear what Brandon has to say. “I know Vinnie Marcushio is alive. Don’t bother to deny it. I have done my research, and the body they found at Bree’s failed kidnapping had no identifiable features. The only way he was identified was because the body was wearing the Marcushio family ring. But I know it wasn’t Vinnie. I know he’s alive, and I know your family helped to hide him. I want to know where he—”

“Why?” I snap, interrupting him. I know my question confirms Vinnie is alive, but he clearly already knows that, anyway. We need to gather as much information about this as we can.

“A couple of reasons, actually. When Leo died, Vin was supposed to take over as leader of the family, but as he was only seventeen at the time, his eldest next of kin could step in and lead with him until he finishes full time education. Those

are the rules. I'm his first cousin, and his next of kin, making me the rightful leader of the Marcushio family. So, here's where the problems started. When Vin died, the leadership role is open to a vote, since no official next in line was ever declared. Obviously I want to rule, but there are parts of the family that want to go in a different direction, and are voting for my enemy. This is why I need Vin. All I need him to do is declare me as his successor, then he can fuck off and die again for all I care."

I shake my head, questioning if this guy is for real. "Are you fucking kidding me? All of this, the big grand plan, it's all because you want to run the Marcushio family, but you're losing in the fucking polls? Why don't you just try a better campaign strategy, or better yet, admit you're a fucking loser and move on," I snap, anger no longer simmering under the surface. I can feel it burning bright against my skin. I'm so fucking angry. Not only did this guy play me, dated me just to gather information on my family, used me, but he also kidnapped my boyfriend for the most fucked up reason. It's almost unbelievable.

Brandon takes out a gun, cocks it and aims it at Kian, before turning back to face the camera with his nose crinkled and his eyes glaring at me. "You might want to talk to me a bit nicer, Freya. Or I will not hesitate to shoot Kian. Will you still love him when he's riddled with bullet holes?"

"Yes, I will," I say without hesitation, ignoring the gasps I hear from my family, I continue. "Every scar, every bruise, every swollen part, it won't matter to me. Kian is a fighter, and he's spent his whole life fighting for what he wants. You could take a leaf out of his book. Instead of all this drama, just fight for the family the right way. Since you're too much of a coward to do that, then let's get down to business. Kian spent ages fighting for me, and now it's my turn. I'm going to fight for him. We will be fighting to be free from all this crap and to be together. So, tell me, what exactly do you want from me? Can I get Vinnie to film something handing over the family to you? If you have no interest in hurting him, then surely that will work?" I know I'm testing my luck, but I have to try. Over the last year, I've got to know Shane, and he's so sweet, kind,

and caring. I love him like he's a little brother. He's a Doughty, just like Kian is. But, if he makes me choose, I know which choice I'd make. I know a lot of my family, Ryleigh and Bree, in particular, may not like my decision, but they aren't the ones who have to make it.

“Nice try, Freya. But we both know that won't work. I know Vinnie will finish school this month, which means he's officially supposed to take over the role of leader. He needs to do that. He can do the role for a couple of months, enough time to get everyone back in line and on side, then he can announce he's leaving and name me as his next in line. But let me make this very clear. He has to be a full-time leader for a minimum of two months, and during that time, he has to appoint me his second in command. He has to do everything in his power to get everyone on side, to reunite the family the way Leo would have wanted. Then, he has to name me as next in line. As long as he does all these things, and there's no Doughty interference during that time, then I will let Vin walk away with his life.

“Most people don't get the luxury of walking away from our lifestyle, but in exchange for him giving me power, I will allow it. However, if at any point I feel Vin isn't making an effort, if the family doesn't follow him, or if any Doughty interferes in our family business, I will kill him and anyone else attached to him. So, it's a straight swap. You hand over Vinnie, and I will hand over Kian.” He zooms the camera in on Kian at that moment, and my heart races when I see Kian has his eyes open. He still can't hold his head up, but I can tell by the smile on his face that he's been listening.

I'm about to reply, to speak to Kian, something, when I hear Kian's croaky voice in the background. “No deal, Beautiful. Tell this twatwaffle that he doesn't have a deal. I promise I will be fine. I can take whatever this dick can throw. He's a psycho and we don't deal with nutters,” Kian shouts, loud enough for us all to hear.

Before he's even had a chance to finish what he was saying, Brandon strides over to Kian and as hard as he can, he smashes the handle of the gun into his temple. Blood spurts

out of a new wound as Kian's head springs backwards and his eyes roll into the back of his head as he loses consciousness again. My scream rings loud, and I feel both Liam and Bree grab hold of my hands, squeezing them in support.

“Stop! Please, don't hurt him,” I beg, sobs wracking my body as tears roll down my cheeks. How the fuck am I supposed to stay strong when my heart is stripped bare before me, bleeding out?

“We're going to need some time to get this sorted for you. In the meantime, we need your reassurance that you will not lay another finger on Kian. If he has even the slightest new cut or bruise when we get him back, the deal will be off. Do I make myself clear?” Bree snaps, and I feel her tense up beside me, as she discreetly tries to move her hand to her belly. If it wasn't for the fact that she's tucked up so close to me, that I can feel her rigid posture. There's no way I would know she's not okay. I don't know if it's the stress or anguish of having to choose between Kian and Shane, or if all this drama has started up her tightenings again.

She's done really well de-stressing and resting for the last couple of weeks. But the baby is still only thirty-four weeks, and although the baby would probably be okay if born now, peanut would be too small. Bree needs to keep cooking for at least another three weeks, but this situation is not going to be doing her or the baby any good.

“Fine, you have two hours and I will call you with a meeting place. If you decide not to do the swap, I won't need Kian any longer and I'll let you know where you can collect his body.” Before either of us has any chance to reply, Brandon ends the call. I just keep staring at the space where Kellan was holding up my phone, Kian's bloody, unconscious body scarred into my brain.

Bree takes out her phone, presumably to call Shane, but Kellan snaps at everyone. “Put your phones away. Until I have done full sweeps of them all, we are going to act as though everything is bugged. I know the house isn't as I've swept it since he was last here. But he could have hacked Freya or Kian's phone to get to ours. All he needs is for one of us to

call Vinnie. He has his location, and he no longer needs Kian to do a deal.”

Everyone reaches into their pockets and hands them over to Kellan. Even Declan and Belle, who have only just come back into the room, hand theirs over too. I can't help myself. I sit there and silently cry as my brain repeats over and over that this is all my fault.

I must have voiced my thoughts out loud because Bree squeezes my hand to get my attention. “This is not your fault, Frey. I don't for a second think you gave him any information, he just wants us to think you did. Honestly, I don't think he knows where Vinnie is. He knows we faked his death, but that's all. He would have mentioned his new name if he knew anything.”

I wrack my brain, trying to think of all our conversations. “I can't be sure I didn't mention Shane in any of our conversations,” I admit, blush spreading across my cheeks as shame overwhelms me.

“He didn't even mention the name Shane, Frey. Even if you mentioned him, Brandon hadn't put two and two together yet. That's why he's been torturing Kian, to get the info he needs. And just like you didn't tell him anything, neither will Kian,” reassures Liam, as he places his hand over mine and Bree's, squeezing us both in reassurance.

I feel Bree go rigid against my side again, and when I discreetly look over at her, she's gritting her teeth and her jaw is clenched. I would bet money that she's having contractions again. I turn to face her. All the other drama going on around us will have to wait while we make sure Bree and this baby are safe, but as I turn to face her, she shakes her head.

“So, what's the plan?” Bree asks, her gaze flitting around the room as she manages to hide any sign of what's going on with her. She looks specifically at Liam, hoping like hell he's got a good plan.

“I guess the first thing we have to do is call Shane. Maybe he can give us some insight into his cousin. He may also recognise the room where they're keeping Kian. Ideally, the

plan is to move and rescue Kian and keep Vinnie's new identity a secret. But for now, let's just get Shane here and we can go from there."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



Freya

I can't stop looking at my watch as I pace around the living room. My brain is all over the place, and all I can see whenever I close my eyes is Kian's crumpled, bleeding body. My heart breaks as I think about the horrendous decision I'm supposed to make. Shane is such a lovely guy, and he's been living out his second chance at life at his new school alongside Ryleigh. They're due to sit their final exams this week, and then they are coming here for the summer. If things go according to their plan, they will both be moving into an apartment together when they both start at Oxford University in September. Well... this is if they both get the qualifications they need to attend.

I hate the idea that I have to ruin his plans, his chance at a new life. After all the drama that went down when Bree was kidnapped, Shane's worked hard to build up his new persona, and he's worked hard to leave his other life behind. But, with Kian's life on the line, none of us really have a choice.

Bree's grandfather has already arranged for Shane, and of course, Ryleigh, to fly over from Ireland. All they know is that Kian has been kidnapped. We thought it was best to tell them everything when they arrive. I already know Ry will be pissed.

She may not realise it yet, but her and Shane are more than just best friends.

“Frey, why don’t you sit down, love,” asks Mia, as she gently rocks a sleeping Hallie in her arms. She’s been asleep for about ten minutes, but I don’t think Mia is quite ready to put her down yet.

I look around my family, who are all wearing matching looks of concern on their faces. Mia is pulling strength from the beautiful baby in her arms. Kellan is sitting in the armchair, and he’s pulled the coffee table over to him where he’s placed two computers. He’s working on tracking the call and analysing the video to see if he can find anything that will give away Kian’s location.

Bree and Liam are sitting together on the sofa. They have a stack of papers in their hands, the ones I was going through earlier before I got the call from Brandon, and they’re trying to find anything I may have missed. Now that we know Brandon’s name is fake, and that he’s actually a Marcushio, that’s changed our search parameters.

I have spent the last hour writing down all I can remember from the date we went on and the calls we had. His car, the restaurant he took me to, the people he mentioned. I’ve written it all down, as every piece of information could be a clue that we desperately need.

Even though I know we’re all doing whatever we can to help, I’ve never felt so helpless in my whole life. My brain is filled with images of Kian’s lifeless body, and how when I first saw him like that, I thought he was dead. I’ve never felt so much pain as I did for those seconds before I saw his chest move. My heart felt as though it was cracking right down the middle, and I know losing Kian isn’t something I can survive.

That’s why Brandon chose me, because he knew I was the weak member of the family. The one most likely to give up juicy details, and the one most likely to cave under pressure. He’s probably right about all that—at least, that’s how the old me would have dealt with things. The new me, the one with a crack right down the centre of my heart; she’s ruled by pain.

I suddenly remember every bit of training Desmond ever made me do; every shooting lesson, every combat class, every way he taught me to close off my emotions. Even though I was a girl, Desmond wanted all his children to be able to fight, to stand up for themselves if needed. He would never stand for having a weak child, and I need to make fucking certain nobody ever sees me as the weak link again.

“Frey?” Bree asks, her voice strained, as she pulls me back from my thoughts, prompting me to answer Mia’s earlier question.

“Fuck, sorry. I wasn’t meaning to ignore you. My head’s a bit of a mess right now,” I mutter, giving them a small smile.

As I watch Bree, I realise she’s behaving a bit strangely. At first I thought she was just anxious, shuffling around in her seat, like she doesn’t quite know what to do with herself. And everyone is too busy with their own tasks, they have no time to look at Bree. But now that I am looking, it’s clear she’s not okay. Her usually pale face is flushed red, and her nose and eyes are wrinkled, as she tries to keep the grimace off her face. The hand holding the paperwork trembles slightly, but her other hand is hidden at the side of the sofa, so only someone in my position would be able to see it.

I can tell she’s grabbing hold of the nearest cushion so tightly her knuckles have turned white. There’s no question in my mind, Bree’s having tightenings—no doubt brought on by all the stress. I know she won’t forgive me for doing this, but I already have one lot of blood on my hands, I refuse to add to it.

“Bree, are you okay? You’re having tightenings again, aren’t you?” I ask, and everyone drops what they’re doing, all eyes flying to Bree. She looks at me, her eyes narrowing into a glare as she makes her annoyance clear. I stand tall, not giving a shit if she’s mad at me. I already have to deal with the fact both Kian and Shane’s lives are on the line because of me. I won’t risk Bree and Peanut’s lives too.

“I’m fine. Let’s just concentrate on getting Kian back,” Bree snaps, but nobody is on board with that answer.

Liam looks at his wife, his eyes narrowed as he tries to assess how she's really feeling, taking in everything she's trying to hide from us. I wait for that moment of recognition, when he realises exactly how much she's been hiding from him, and as her face scrunches up again in pain, my brother snaps. "You are not fine. We are going to the hospital."

Bree shakes her head, but doesn't say anything—I don't think she can as the tightening appears to be taking her breath away. They're obviously more painful than they should be. When her grip on the sofa cushion relaxes, and she takes in a few deep breaths, then she finally speaks. "I'm not going anywhere. Yes, I'm having tightenings. But they're the same Braxton Hicks things I was having the other week. It's just from the stress, so I promise to try to keep calm, but I'm not going anywhere. Kian and Shane are like brothers to me. I am staying." Bree leaves no room for discussion, and Liam's groan fills the room.

"Princess, you're killing me," my brother moans, as he takes hold of Bree's hands. "I know they're important to you, but nothing is more important than you and this baby. Please, don't risk it."

I watch Bree's shoulders slump, and it's obvious to everyone that Liam got through to her. "Look, let me make you a deal. If the tightenings become more painful, closer together, or if I in any way become worried, we will go to the hospital straight away. If things stay the same, I wait just long enough to talk to Shane when he gets here. He has to hear what's going on from me. When we have a plan of action, then we can go to the hospital. Okay?" Bree looks to Liam for an answer, but he simply grimaces, like he knows there's no room to argue, but she's giving him a choice. Before he can reply, she adds, "I promise, I will never risk the life of this baby, Liam. You should know that."

I watch my brother sag, and with a single nod of his head, Bree wins—as always. "Okay, but I mean it, Princess, if I even so much as think the pain is too bad, or you aren't being honest, I will pick your ass up and drag you to the hospital."

Bree looks furious, but before she has a chance to rip Liam a new asshole, Kellan interrupts. “The front gate has just let me know that Shane and Ryleigh are here.”

I freeze, looking over to the door, before flicking my eyes back to my watch. It’s taken them longer to get here than we thought. Even though we impressed on them the urgency to get here, we couldn’t exactly tell them they’re on a clock, without exposing the real reason we needed Shane here. So, naturally, Ryleigh took fucking ages getting her shit together, and the flight was delayed. It wasn’t until Liam actually threatened her, telling her Shane would leave without her that she hurried. I can’t blame her. She doesn’t really know what’s going on, but it doesn’t stop me from being a little pissed.

Now we only have around eight minutes before Brandon is ringing back, and we need to have a plan in place before he does, or Kian’s life is severely in danger.

As soon as Shane and Ryleigh enter the room, I’m sure they can tell something isn’t right. The sombre feeling literally permeates the air, and all eyes fall on Shane. The shy, beautiful boy seems to shrink, as he hates all eyes on him. Ry has often told him that if he was more confident, and knew how to rock the same swagger Kian has, he would be an instant hit with the ladies. He’s good looking enough to turn heads.

Dark, floppy hair that curls slightly on the ends, beautiful piercing green eyes, and a light tan to his skin that screams of his Italian heritage—there’s no denying Shane is a good-looking lad, but he has no interest in playing the field. He doesn’t want to sleep around, or be a player. He’s quite happy fading into the background, and just enjoying the life he never thought he’d have. Besides, he only has eyes for one girl. It’s just a shame she has no idea how he feels.

Ryleigh, true to herself, ignores the atmosphere in the room and barges in, throwing her arms around my neck, catching me completely off guard. Her bright purple hair is flying in all directions, her beautiful blue eyes are wide with concern, and my heart breaks over what I’m about to do to her. She may not know how she feels about Shane yet, but he’s still her best friend.

I pull back slightly, giving her a small smile as I point to the sofa. “Why don’t you both have a seat? We don’t have long to get you both caught up,” I say, and they both look at me, apprehension clear on their faces.

“What’s going on, Frey?” Ryleigh asks, as she sits down on the sofa next to Mia, gently stroking Hallie’s head, making sure not to disturb her as she says hello to her niece.

Shane takes a seat next to Bree, who takes his hand in hers, and in that moment, I know Shane can tell there’s more going on than we’re telling them. He nods at Bree, silently asking her to explain. Bree, in turn, looks over at Kellan, who switches on the main TV that’s on the wall in front of us. He’s connected it to his laptop, so he can share the necessary images with everyone.

Bree looks like she gives Shane’s hand a squeeze before she begins to explain. “As we told you before you set off, Kian has been kidnapped. What we didn’t tell you is that the kidnapper has made contact, and he’s made his terms perfectly clear. Shane, do you recognise this man?” Bree asks, as Kellan puts a picture of Brandon up on the television. As soon as his image appears, all the colour drains from Shane’s face, and he looks terrified.

“Wh-what... why? Why d-do you have a picture o-of my cousin, Brandon?” Shane stutters, looking around the room before fixing his gaze on Bree. Her face is full of anguish, and I can tell she’s struggling to tell him.

I know I should let Bree do this, give Shane time to adapt, but we don’t have time. “I don’t know if Ryleigh told you, but a couple of months ago, I went on a date with a guy. Nothing came of it, and I ended things. It turns out the guy was lying to me all along. Brandon, your cousin, planted himself in my life, and dated me to get information from me. Unfortunately, his plan went tits up when I dumped him because I fell for Kian. So, Brandon changed his plan. He knows I have the information he needs. He just needed to find the perfect way to get me to give him it. He took Kian and tortured him, but of course Kian didn’t say a word. So now he’s blackmailing me. Either I give him what he wants, or he kills Kian. He found my

weak spot, and he's exploiting it," I explain, not able to hold back the tear that falls over my cheek when I mention them torturing Kian.

Shane's face looks ashen, and I watch as he gulps, trying to find the right words. I can see it in his eyes when he looks at me. He knows the price Brandon is asking, and he knows I'm willing to pay it. I don't know if he's just resigning himself to that, or if he's genuinely speechless. Ryleigh, on the other hand, doesn't seem to have worked out what's going on.

"We will need to talk later about the fact you've been dating Kian in secret without telling your favourite sister," Ryleigh jokes, trying to lighten the mood in the room, but sadly the sombre atmosphere is here to stay. So, instead, she asks what everyone is too scared to say aloud. "What's the price he's asking for, Frey?"

I don't look at my sister; I don't think I will ever be able to look her in the eyes again after this. Instead, I turn my gaze to Shane. "Brandon wants to take over ruling the Marcushio family. But, after Vinnie's death, there's been a battle for the leadership role, and it's tearing the family apart. Initially, Brandon thought he could benefit from your death, given he's legally your next of kin, and should have been given the leadership position, out right. But, apparently, some of your family don't want him to rule, and they're staging a coup."

Shane interrupts me by laughing, something which shocks us all. The normally quiet boy is quick to voice his opinion. "They don't want him to rule because he's a fucking psycho. My dad made it very clear that Brandon was to go nowhere near the leadership role. If he were to be assessed by professionals, he would be categorised as a psychopath, for sure. He kills with no remorse, and his vision for the family is all based on power. I know it sounds stupid, but when Vinnie died and I became Shane, I didn't even think of who would take over from me. I just left them in my rear-view mirror without a second thought."

Ryleigh strides towards the sofa and leans down to place her hand on Shane's shoulder for support. "Too fucking right you did. Shane, you were seventeen years old, and you had

already been through more than any kid should have. You deserved to live a normal life, and you still do. Whatever your cousin's problem is, it's nothing to do with you," Ryleigh snaps. She throws herself down next to him, causing him to shuffle closer to Bree on his other side. Ryleigh takes his hand in hers, a stubborn look on her face. I think she knows where this is going, but doesn't want to admit it.

We are all looking around at each other, waiting to see who will be the one to break this poor, broken boy even further. Bree takes a deep breath, and as Liam strokes her arm in support, she tells Shane everything. "Brandon has come up with a plan. Apparently, he's known all along that you're alive, or at the very least, he suspected, but he had no reason to look for you before. But now, the only way the family will ever follow Brandon is if he's officially appointed the next ruler. And since it looks like he would lose an open vote, he needs the current ruler to name him as his successor. That's where you come in. Since you inherited the role from your father, you are officially the leader of the Marcushio family. Brandon wants you to return, claim your leadership spot for a couple of months, and then abdicate, passing the baton to him."

I watch as Shane's face crumples, his beautiful eyes turn lifeless, and my heart breaks for him. Shane is a good guy, too good to be caught up in this world, but we all know he won't let Kian die for him. While Shane looks distraught, Ry looks angry. Her cheeks flush red as her eyes turn to a glare, aimed directly at Bree. "No! No fucking way! Vinnie is dead, and he's not coming back. You can't possibly be serious, Bree. You actually want Shane to go and run a fucking mafia family. Why can't he just say he's alive and that he doesn't want to be part of the family and name Brandon as his successor? Why does he actually have to go back and rule?" I know Ryleigh only has Shane's best interests at heart, but the more she talks, the more she sounds like a whiny teenager who's pissed she can't get her own way. I feel awful thinking that, but she's not seeing the big picture, and it's causing the anger bubbling away under the surface to rise.

"It doesn't work like that, Ryleigh. Shane has to go back and do a minimum of two months to win over the family that

thought he died. If he agrees to that, and appoints Brandon as his second in command during those months, before naming him as his successor, then Brandon has promised Shane can walk away. We all know that walking away from mafia families isn't something that happens. But, if Shane refuses to do this, Brandon will kill Kian. I'm sorry I sound like a bitch right now, Shane, but Brandon is going to be calling back any minute, and we need an answer from you. I need you to help me save Kian. Please, I can't lose him," I beg, a sob catching in my throat as I plead with him to help me save Kian's life. A small smile spreads across his lips, as he realises he doesn't have a choice. He looks over at Ryleigh, who looks devastated.

"Ry—"

She cuts him off, refusing to let him explain. My rebellious sister, who shows no weakness, now has a small tear tracking down her cheek. "No. Please, Shane. Don't do this."

He reaches up, wiping the stray tear away with his thumb before gently cupping her cheek. Ry presses in further, and my heart breaks for them. This moment feels too intimate, too personal for them to be sharing it in front of us all, and I notice a few of us try to at least avert our eyes to give them some privacy. But, at the same time, we're all waiting with bated breath to hear what Shane's going to do.

"Ry, you know I would do anything for you, and you have no idea how hard this decision is. But, it's only for two months. Get the apartment all ready, and I promise I will join you. The last thing I want to do is leave you, but I won't let Kian die for me. I can't, so don't ask me to. We will still talk as much as we can, and I'll try to see you when I can. Two months is nothing, Ry. Okay?" Shane pleads with my sister, but she's got the biggest stubborn streak of anyone I've ever met.

Ryleigh wants to stay strong, to ask him to stay with her. I can see it in her eyes. But she won't. She looks over at me, and I can see her anguish. I can feel her pain. In that moment, my sister realises we both share the same dilemma. She has to lose her best friend for two months, or I have to lose the love of my

life forever. I need her to know how much Kian means to me, to help her with this decision.

Taking a deep breath, I tell my family something I've never said aloud before. "I know this is a hard decision, but I have to say this. Stupidly, I've never told Kian how I really feel about him. With us hiding it from everyone, we've just been going with the flow and having fun. When I finally realised how I felt, I'd been waiting for the right time, our perfect moment, for me to tell him. But the more I built up the moment in my head, the more I struggled. Now, all I want is a few seconds to tell him how I really feel. Kian is the love of my life, and I hate the idea that he's tied to that chair, fighting for his life, and he doesn't know how I feel. He doesn't know how devastated I would be without his cocky smirk in my life. He makes my heart beat just that little bit faster, and gives me butterflies in my stomach when he looks my way. He makes me feel more than anyone else ever has, and he gives me the confidence I need to be myself. I need Kian in my life, and I know you could put yourself in danger by going back into this life, Shane. Of all the people, I'm the one who can relate to that the most. After all, nobody wanted to live a normal life more than I did. But, I would give up all chances of normal, just to have Kian. So, please, I'm begging you, bring him back to me. I don't know if I can live without him."

I pour my heart out to my family, confessing my love for the beautiful boy with the sexy smirk, and I feel so broken. Sobs wrack my body and I struggle to hold myself up as the possibility of losing him floods my senses. I don't know what happens, but I feel myself starting to crumble to the floor. Before I hit a hard surface, strong arms circle around me, and I feel Kellan pulling me against his body as we both collapse to the floor. I'm sure others would have rushed to catch me, but Kellan was the closest, and probably the only one able to on time.

As Kel wraps his arms tightly around me, I sob—we're talking ugly crying, with snot and all—as I think about all the times I should have told him. I cry for our missed opportunities, and I cry because I'm so fucking angry at myself. Why didn't I realise Brandon was a spy? Yes, he asked

me questions about my family, but I just thought he was a nice guy who was taking an interest in me and my life. It's not often guys want to chat as opposed to sharing dick pics. I hate that Kian and Shane are in this situation because of me.

I must have said that last part aloud because Kellan, as he strokes my hair out of my eyes, tries to reassure me. "Shush, Frey. Calm down, sweetheart. I promise you, this isn't your fault. I did the security checks on Brandon, and I didn't find out who he really is. So I'm just as much to blame."

I want to tell him he's not, but I guess, in a way, he is. He's the best hacker in the world. He should have realised Brandon's identity was all a plant, but he saw a nice normal guy and didn't look any deeper. Why would he? He had no reason at all to suspect the guy had a secret; we were all just pleased I found Mr Normal, Mr Boring.

A soft hand takes hold of one of mine, giving it a gentle squeeze to get my attention. Kellan wipes away the tears clogging up my eyes, and I see Shane sitting on the floor in front of me. "Freya, please don't cry. This isn't your fault. This is my family, my business. You are not forcing me to do anything. I like Kian, he's a good guy. Even if you weren't in love with him, I would never let him die for me. Whatever happens to me while I'm back with my family, I will deal with it. But you will have your chance to tell Kian how you feel. Take it from someone who knows, don't wait. You might miss your moment all together. The time is now, so take it, grab hold, and never let go. Okay?"

I watch his eyes flit over to Ryleigh as he mentions about his own missed opportunities, and I want to tell him to take his own advice. But I know he would never tell Ry how he feels, only to abandon her for two months. Who knows, maybe when Shane returns, they will get their chance?

"Thank you." It's all I can say, and even though it comes out as barely above a whisper, I know he hears me.

We sit together, both thinking about the love we have for people that don't know how we feel. I'm sure Kian has an inkling, though neither of us has said those words to each

other. Shane, on the other hand, Ry has no idea how he feels, or if she does, she doesn't want to acknowledge it.

Our shared moment is ruined by my phone ringing from on the coffee table beside me. I quickly scramble out of Kellan's arms, so he can set up his computer system and I can answer it. He's set up the webcam beside our television, and has somehow rigged it so Brandon's video call will appear on the big television screen, so everyone will be able to see him, and in return, he will be able to see everyone in the room.

I notice that before I answer, Mia quickly puts Hallie in the crib in the corner of the room, so she isn't in the shot. Even though I'm sure he knows we have a baby in the house, we don't want to give Brandon any more ammo than he already has.

Kellan gives me a nod, and I answer the phone, Brandon's face appearing on the big screen. I frantically try to see behind his head, but he's too close to the camera. I can't see Kian. Anger bubbles again, and my blood starts to boil as my nerve endings prickle with rage. "Where's Kian?" I snap, not bothering with pleasantries.

Brandon gives me that sadistic laugh of his. "I think we need to discuss our deal first," he sings. That's when I realise, given the position of the webcam, Shane's not in view, as he's directly underneath the television. I'm not sure if he moved there on purpose, or if it was an accident.

"You made your deal very clear. We will give you Vinnie, but only if Kian has no more cuts or bruises on his body. Now, show him to me, or the deal will be off before it's even started," I snap, finding a confidence I didn't know I had.

The camera pans out and my heart races as soon as Kian comes into view. Thankfully, I don't need to examine his lifeless body again, searching desperately for the rise and fall of his chest, letting me know he's still alive. This time, he's awake, and even though he looks like shit, and like it's taking up all his energy, he holds his head high.

The blood that was pouring from the wounds across his head and bare chest is now crusted over, giving Kian's

beautiful ink a crimson tone. His normally dirty blonde hair is tinged pink, and it's plastered to his forehead. One of his usually bright blue eyes is swollen shut, and the other looks dull, almost like keeping it open is a struggle. There's a cut across his top lip, causing it to swell bigger than his lower lip, which results in his face looking lopsided.

As I take in his battered and bruised appearance, my heart hurts and the rage I felt before continues to simmer under the surface. I have never been an angry or revengeful person, but when I see the pain and suffering Kian's had to endure, it makes me want to burn the world down.

"Kian. Kian, babe, can you hear me? Are you okay? Has that bastard hurt you?" I shout, trying to get Kian's attention.

I watch Kian's expression closely, and I see the moment he hears my voice. I don't know how he manages it given his face is all kinds of swollen, battered, and bruised, but he manages to cock one side of his mouth up into that sexy smirk I love, and I'm shocked when a little dimple appears. It's not as obvious as normal, thanks to the swelling, but that right there is my smile. The one he uses for me, and I can't help but smile back.

"I can hear you, Beautiful. I promise, I'm fine. Whatever this cocksucker has asked for, you tell him no," Kian shouts, which causes Brandon to turn to face him. He's obviously stood his phone up, as he's no longer holding it, and he stalks towards Kian, his face twisted into a sneer.

Without warning, he slams the back of his hand hard across Kian's cheek, and the sound of skin slapping together can be heard echoing all the way around our living room. The ugly-ass big ring Brandon's wearing connects with Kian's old wounds, just underneath his eye, splitting them open in an instant. Blood spurts out of the wound, spraying outwards over Brandon's hand before continuing to trickle down Kian's face.

"Son of a bitch. If you hit him one more time, I swear to God, pregnant or not, I will find you and I will slice the skin from your body, piece by fucking piece," Bree growls from on the sofa, and I watch as she shuffles to the edge to try and get

up, but Liam just holds on to her, making sure she stays sat down. I can hear him whispering in her ear, trying to tell her to breathe, but she just smacks his hand away, grumbling about being fine. Though, if her continued grimaces are any indication, her tightenings have continued, and they might actually be a little closer together.

“You can threaten me all you want, Queen Bee, but I don’t answer to you. Now, where’s Vinnie?”

I get ready to speak, but before I can, Shane shuffles away from the corner and moves to sit beside Bree. He doesn’t say a word, but I watch as he tries to discreetly grab hold of Bree’s other hand. I’m not sure if he’s pulling strength from her, or if he’s trying to comfort Bree. Either way, their friendship, formed under the worst possible circumstances when Bree was kidnapped, is obvious for all to see. They share a bond, having been united in their shared trauma, and it’s created the foundation for a solid friendship. The same type of friendship she has with her left-hand man, Kian. I can tell this is proving particularly painful for Bree.

“Vinnie! Cousin... It’s great to see you. You look good for a dead kid,” Brandon sings manically, his eyes fixated on Shane. The more he talks, the more psychotic he seems.

“Well, I would look even better if I was allowed to stay dead. But clearly that won’t be happening. So, tell me exactly what you want from me.” My eyes snap over to Shane, and I’m just as shocked as everyone else in the room is, by the way Shane just spoke. His words were strong and determined, speaking with conviction and a confidence that leaves no room for negotiation. Our shy, broken boy who just wants a chance at living a normal life, all of a sudden sounds like the ruthless mafia leader he’s supposed to be.

“Look at you finding your balls all of a sudden,” Brandon jokes, before continuing. “There’s a leadership battle happening at the moment. That dirty cunt, Enrico, has made a play for my leadership spot. As you know, since you left no known heir, the spot should pass to your next-of-kin—me. But, anyone is able to challenge me, if they have good reason, and that’s what Enrico did. The whole democracy thing is

bullshit, and allowing any family member the right to vote for a leader is not how we do things.

“It’s like it’s just a popularity contest, and I’m not winning. So, I need a new tactic. I need you to claim your position, appoint me as your second in command, name me as your next in line, and then after a reasonable amount of time that doesn’t look suspicious, you will abdicate your power, passing it all over to me. If you do all of this, I will let you leave this life. You can walk away and never look back. I promise nobody will ever call on you again. Whatever life you’ve created for yourself over there, you can live it once more,” Brandon explains, and I watch as Shane simply nods his head.

“And how long is a respectable length of time, exactly?” Ryleigh snaps from beside Liam. He reaches over to take her hand, giving her a small squeeze that I’m sure is indicating for her to stop talking, but in true Ryleigh fashion, she doesn’t want to listen. Always the rebel.

“As I discussed with Freya earlier, two months will be acceptable. However, if the family doesn’t accept the handover the way they should, then Vinnie will need to stick around long enough to convince them. The second I take over power of the family, without any unrest or talk of fighting against me, then he can go free. Understood?” Brandon asks, and before any of us have the chance to speak, my beautiful Kian in the background begins to shout, his voice croaky and hoarse, cracking at the end.

“Don’t do this, Kid. You have earned your new life, and I won’t have you give that up for me,” Kian shouts to Shane, before turning his head slightly, looking directly at me. Even though we’re in completely separate places, and there’s other people surrounding us, it feels as though Kian and I are in our own little bubble, just the two of us as we silently tell each other how we feel. It’s only a look, but it speaks volumes.

“Frey, beautiful girl, please know if things were different, I would fight to get home to you in a heartbeat. But the kid has already been through more in his life than he ever should. He’s finally living a nice normal life. He needs to sit his exams and go to university. All the things he didn’t dare to dream about. I

know you hate this decision, but please understand why I'm telling Vinnie not to make this deal." He sounds so serious and sure of himself that my heart breaks. Fresh tears stroll down my cheeks as I start to argue with him, but Shane cuts me off.

"Kian, I appreciate what you're doing, but it's not happening. You are coming home to us, today. Brandon, we need to discuss the terms. I have two more exams left next week, and I need to finish those. So I need eight more days. I believe there's a leadership clause my father put in place saying I can't rule while I'm still in full-time education. Isn't that true?" Shane asks, and I think suddenly we all start to perk up. This could be the perfect way to buy us some time. Get Kian back and try to delay Shane making his reappearance in the Marcushio life.

Brandon sneers, clearly catching on to Shane's plan. "That is very true. You can finish your education. But I will need to keep Kian here with me while you do, so I can ensure you follow through with your deal. You will report to me the day after your final exam, and when you do, then Kian will be released. But, in the meantime, we will spread the news you are alive."

"No. You can't keep Kian for that long. Look at him, he needs medical attention. If you keep him in this state for another eight days, he could die," Bree snaps, her voice cracking at the end as the reality of the situation starts to sink in for us all.

"I promise not to hurt him any more than I already have," Brandon barks.

I can't take any more. My heartbreak causes me to speak before thinking it through. "No. Take me instead. We can do a swap. Kian can get the medical attention he needs, and I will stay with you for eight days. You can be sure then that my family won't try anything funny. They will have to come and free me," I say, without even hesitating. I would do anything for Kian, even if I have to sacrifice myself.

A chorus of "no" rings out around me, and from Kian on the screen. I don't think there's a single person happy with my

suggestion, which I hope is why Brandon will go for it. But sadly, he shakes his head. “Nice of you to offer yourself on a platter, Freya, but I think we will stick with Kian. You are all so desperate to get him back, that I know nobody will try to doublecross me.”

Bree clears her throat to get everyone’s attention, before using her best leadership voice. “We need to lay down a few ground rules, and these are non-negotiable. First, you may keep Kian, but he goes unharmed. He gets three meals a day, and access to a toilet, shower, and a bed. He is a guest, not a prisoner. If I see one extra mark on him, I will rain hell down on you. And if his injuries cause him issues, he must see a doctor. I have a private one who can attend if you can’t find someone. Second, when Vinnie takes over, he will run the business for no more than three months—two is preferable. Also, he will align the Marcushios with my family. Failure to do so will result in you starting a war with the Doughty clan, one you will never win. You will be our ally, or our enemy. And when Vinnie is done, he’s out of the family for good. No exceptions. Finally, if you do anything to endanger the lives of any of my family, and that includes Kian and Vinnie, I will personally hunt you down, cut your cock off, and shove it so far up your ass you will be able to taste your own pre-cum. Then I will slice you to pieces, slowly. Do you have any questions about my terms?” Bree presents her case like she’s in the middle of a business meeting, and suddenly, I can see how my sister-in-law runs the biggest crime family in the UK. Gone is the small, feisty girl who blushes when my brother looks at her. This is a fierce, confident woman who knows her own strength. There’s a reason grown, tough men fall to their knees and follow her blindly. She’s a true leader.

Brandon looks down his nose at Bree, and I know he’s one of the people who doesn’t agree with a woman running the family. When Bree announced she was taking over running London, many couldn’t believe it. Most men in mafia families hold misogynistic views that women are not important, and are just there to make their man look better. Nobody had ever heard of a female being part of the business side of the family, let alone running one, before Bree came along. While most

came around when they saw how serious Bree was, and how good a leader she can really be. Whereas others struggled to change decades worth of conditioning telling them women can't rule. Women should be arm candy, standing quietly beside their men in their best clothes, just waiting for him to knock her up. That's all women were good for in our world—someone to marry and produce heirs—but all that changed with Bree.

“I agree to your terms. Though I'm not sure how the rest of the Marcushio family will feel about being aligned with you. Liam killed our leader, Leon, on the instructions of your father, after all,” Brandon growls, his disgust for our family evident with each word.

Bree looks like she's about to argue back, but Shane interrupts her. “If I'm in charge, my decisions are what will matter. And my first decision as ruler will be to align with Bree. I will make my feelings on the situation very clear. Now, do we have a deal?”

Brandon mutters his agreement, and I hear Kian shout from the background. “Only eight more days, Beautiful. Then you're all mine.”

My heart skips a beat and I can't help leaning towards the television, desperate to be closer to him. “Eight days, Caveman. Then I'm never letting you out of my sight again.” I want to tell him I love him, but he deserves better than this moment. Yet, as he stares into my eyes, I just know he feels the same way. It's like we're both silently saying it to each other, promising that the first chance we get in person, we will do it properly. I meant what I said. I'm never letting him go.

The call disconnects and I flop back down onto the floor. I don't know how I'm going to cope with Kian being gone for the next eight days. I'm going to worry about him every minute of every day, wondering if they're mistreating him, or if he's in pain from his injuries. I just want to hold him, feel his arms wrap around me. It sounds stupid given he's the one in danger, but I need him to make me feel safe. I don't feel safe without him here.

Kellan drops back down onto the floor and wraps his arms around me. It's not the warm, muscular arms I'm craving, but it's a start. I'm about to sink into the darkness, to let it consume me as I wonder how I'm going to survive the next eight days, when I hear Kellan say something that shocks me back into the moment. "So, what's the plan? I'm assuming we're not going to sit here with our thumbs up our asses while Kian's out there? We are rescuing him, aren't we?"

I hear Bree and Liam laughing, and I look over at them with big smiles on their faces. "Too fucking right we are rescuing him. Shane, did you recognise anything from the video? Any clue where they could be?"

"Yeah, I have a couple of ideas. Are we really doing this? Risking the deal by going to look for him? I honestly don't mind sacrificing two months to save his life." I could kiss the sweet boy in front of me for being so willing to risk it all, but I like the idea that we're going to fight. I don't want to sit around waiting for him. If the tables were turned, he wouldn't just sit here. Kian would move heaven and earth to find me, and now I will do the same for him.

"We will call that Plan B, but Plan A is to find where they're keeping Kian, and storm every fucking place it could be until we find him. We are bringing Kian home," states Bree, and for the first time since I found out Kian was missing, I feel hope. We will find him, and we will bring him home to me.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



Freya

Over the last couple of hours, I've paced so much I'm pretty sure I've worn out a section of our living room carpet. Ever since we decided to go after Brandon, to rescue Kian, I've been on edge. I want to do what Kian would do for me, which is dive in head first, shoot first and ask questions later. Well... that's what I like to think he would do. In reality, this is exactly what he would be doing... planning.

Shane has spent hours going over everything he can remember about his family, and how unstable Brandon is. Kellan fills us in on some of the warnings Kian received after the fight and didn't share with us. The more digging we've done, the more we think it must have all been Brandon's bullshit. Obviously the people threatening Kian were really the Marcushios, hidden behind a fake identity. It was never about Kian's fight, it was all just to get at Shane. It's always been about them needing him to make a play for power. The Marcushios are already a sizable organisation, and in the right hands, they, of course, could be powerful. That's why Bree's dad, Vernon, always kept them onside. He knew they would be a serious threat if they ever took up arms against him.

At the moment, with the leadership race causing a split, and essentially a civil war within their family, they're no threat

at all. They couldn't organise a piss up in a brewery at this stage. But, with the right leader, or Shane to reunite them, they could be dangerous. There's also word on the street that they have a major financial backer who is helping them get things back up and running. This has to be someone with a plan, who not only has a grudge against us, but that doesn't need or want to be in the spotlight.

"I'm not the only one thinking this smells like my father's handiwork, am I?" whispers Mia, as she cuddles a very sleepy Hallie. It's almost four in the morning, and none of us have got any sleep yet.

Hallie seems to know there's something going on, and she refuses to settle in her cot, waking up shortly after our call ended, and has instead been passed around and cuddled all night, much to her dad's dismay. Kellan thinks she will get used to it, and he will struggle to get her back into her bed. But, when it came to his turn, he cuddled the little girl tightly, and even nodded off for a few seconds as she lay on his chest, the soft snores coming from her tiny body helping to lure him into sleep, just for a few minutes. In some small way, Hallie has offered us all a bit of comfort we all desperately craved.

As soon as Mia voices a concern that I'm sure we were all thinking, I notice Kellan and Liam, silently talking to each other with their eyes, in a way they've been practising since they were kids. Kellan rolls his eyes, as Liam no doubt tells him he has to be the one to speak. "We've been thinking the same thing. We need to find out what's going on with your father. If he's taking on more families, and arming them, then we have a pretty good idea what he's up to. He's going to make a move against us, and once he controls London, I suspect he will step out of the shadows and call in all his favours, until suddenly he's in charge of the entire UK criminal organisation. Bree is obviously making moves to do this through allegiances, whereas we suspect Whitlock is using his money to achieve power."

Mia nods, like that's exactly what she's been thinking. Ryleigh, who has been sitting in the corner of the room, staring daggers at anyone and everyone, jumps into the

conversation. “So, if we know he’s a threat, why the fuck have we allowed him to live this long? All these people we know are threats to us, I just don’t understand why we allow them to keep breathing.”

Shane, who’s sitting on the floor in front of her, turns to try and take her hand, but my stubborn sister yanks it away, and his face falls. Liam turns to our sister, trying not to disturb Bree, who finally fell asleep about an hour ago. When she stopped getting worked up, her tightenings settled down, and Liam persuaded her to take some painkillers and to try and get some sleep. They compromised by agreeing she could sleep on the sofa, with her head on his lap, and Liam would wake her if there was any progress.

“Because, Ryleigh, killing people should never be anyone’s first plan. You have no idea how deep their allegiances run, and by killing one person, you could start a war you are not able to win. This whole damn mess started because I assassinated Shane’s dad. I have my theory that Vernon did it on purpose because, as much as Leon was loyal to Vernon, his true loyalty was to his family. And should an opportunity have presented itself where Leon was able to take on the O’Keenan’s, to take power for themselves, of course he would take it. Everyone in our world is power mad, but we don’t know the lengths people will go to in order to get more power. Besides, even if we knew all that information, taking a life should never be a flippant thing, Ry.”

The more Liam chastises our sister, I watch as a blush spreads across her cheeks, and she looks thoroughly told off. Not that she’s happy about it, but she accepts his answer. “I just don’t like the idea. We may have to give Shane over to these people for two months. I mean, even if everything goes to plan and we rescue Kian, that’s not going to stop Brandon from coming after Shane. He needs him, and we have no idea what he’s capable of, or who he has backing him. So, do you expect me to just let you throw my best friend to the wolves?” Even though Ry is trying to sound as angry as she can, her voice breaks at the end, showing us all how much pain she’s truly in.

“Ry...” Shane turns and tries to take hold of Ryleigh’s hand once more, but again she pulls away. With a small sigh, he continues. “I know you’re mad, Ry. And I hope like hell we can pull off this plan, so that I never have to go back to my family. But we both know that even if we save Kian, my family, now they know I’m not dead, will never stop coming for me. At least if I take Bran up on his offer, I can get out of there in a couple of months, leaving the life behind, no questions asked. If I don’t do this, they can insist I never leave the family. It’s not common for people to get out of our lifestyle, other than if they die. I could even agree to go now, to do my exams later when this is all over, and we could get Kian back quicker.”

Ryleigh just shakes her head, like she’s disgusted Shane would even suggest that idea. He’s already made it clear he will give himself up now, if it helps, and will sit his exams when it’s all over. But both Bree and Liam refuse to even hear it. They’ve worked hard to give Shane the life he never had before, and they brought him into this family.

I try to think of how Kian would handle this. I guess he would tell everyone that handing Shane over to a rival family, armed with the inside knowledge that could potentially lead to our downfall, is a stupid idea. He’s been part of our family for a while, and we’ve never censored ourselves in front of him. We never even considered he would go back to them. I know everyone trusts Shane, but it needs to be said. He might not want to tell them our secrets, they might make him. I will wait until I get Liam alone to mention it, then he can be the one who makes the decision. Well...him and Bree.

A loud knock sounds at the door, pulling us all from our thoughts, and causes Hallie to grumble from Mia’s arms. Liam looks over at Kellan, since he’s trapped with Bree on his lap, and Kellan’s sat nearest the door. But before he can get up to answer it, the door opens and in walks our father, Desmond Doughty.

In true Desmond fashion, he walks in like he owns the place, that smug look plastered across his face like always. What does surprise me is that he walks over to me, sinks onto

the floor beside me, and gives me a hug. He pulls me into his strong arms, and I can't help but sag. I can't remember the last time he hugged me, and I'm shocked by how much I needed this. I've been surrounded by my family, who have been the biggest support, but, for some reason, getting a hug from the man whose attention I've craved my entire life feels important.

This is the first time I've spoken to him since my first date with Kian, and I've never had a chance to ask him about what Kian told me about. To ask him if he really is mine and Ryleigh's dad. It's something we really need to know, but right now, nothing is more important than finding Kian.

"Oh, beautiful Freya. How are you doing?" Dad asks, as he pulls back slightly to look me in the eye. Normally, my dad has his traditional psychopathic smirk on his face, the one that makes everyone question just how sane he really is. But right now, all I see is concern, and possibly a bit of love and admiration, as he looks around at his family.

"Did you find him?" I ask, trying not to sound too hopeful.

Shane whittled down the information we had all collated, and there are two possible locations where Brandon could be keeping Kian. We were going to go ourselves, but it would have been difficult. At the time, Liam was worried about Bree, and was considering taking her to the hospital. Nobody wants to mount an attack without Bree or Liam to back them up. And Kian won't be able to help if he's tied to the chair. They're the fighters of the family, and going in without them on side leaves us weaker.

That's when, after a family discussion, we all bit the bullet and let Declan call Desmond to tell him about the situation. It wasn't a unanimous vote, and some thought getting him involved was a terrible idea. But Declan spoke up for him. It's clear Dec means something to my father, and they are close in a way none of us can understand. So when Dec called Dad and told him about Kian being missing, he was only too happy to help. I don't know when he found out about me and Kian, but he seems to be happy about it.

“I’m just waiting for feedback. Both teams are in position and are gathering the information as we speak,” Desmond states, kissing me on the forehead, in a weird show of affection, before moving over to where Mia is holding Hallie. He crouches down and lightly kisses his baby granddaughter on the forehead, gently enough to make sure she doesn’t wake up.

We all watch him with bated breath, and I have to admit, on the inside, I’m freaking out a little about how nice he’s being. It’s a strange thing to see. Bree, who must have woken up when Desmond arrived, is sitting on Liam’s lap, cuddling into him while he cradles her swollen belly, as she addresses our father.

“Do you have anything else to report?” she asks, her eyes narrowing as she glares at Desmond. Bree may have only been part of our family for a little over a year, but she can read Desmond better than most.

“I think Kellan and Mia’s assumption that Whitlock is behind this somehow may be correct. The Marcushios definitely have a financial backer, but it’s unclear at the moment who that is. Given the way the Marcushios are heading; arming themselves and gaining background information about the family, their backer has to be someone who wants us gone. Whitlock is top of that list. But, as for proof, I have none, sadly. Just my gut,” Desmond explains, before wandering into the attached kitchen, opening the fridge and helping himself to a can of Coke. He makes it a few steps back into the kitchen, catches the fact all eyes are suddenly on him and his brow furrows like he’s confused. Not really knowing why we were all staring at him. “Sorry, would anyone else like a drink?”

I don’t know if we’re more shocked by him just walking in and helping himself to stuff in the kitchen, or the fact he showed he has manners and was considerate of others. I mean, it took for all of us to glare at him for him to do so, but still... I can’t help but shudder—it freaks me out when he’s being nice.

We all shake our heads and Desmond makes his way back over to where I'm sitting on the floor. There's room for him on the sofa, since Bree seems perfectly happy to use my brother's lap as a cushion, but Dad ignores that space and comes to sit beside me. He takes my hand in his, giving it a small squeeze. The coldness of his palm as it touches my skin causes my nerve endings to prickle, but in a nice way. Even though his touch is cold—the same as his black heart—it's strange because it's actually more of a comfort than I was expecting.

“We will get him back, you know. Why didn't you tell any of us you were dating him?” Dad asks, his eyes boring into mine, like he's genuinely curious. It's such a strange thing for him to say. I can't remember the last time I had a conversation with him, let alone a heart to heart. I was never going to call him to tell him I was with Kian, or any guy for that matter. Yet, he's sitting here now like he's upset with me about that.

“Are you asking why I didn't tell my siblings, or why I didn't tell you?”

His eyes narrow, but he still looks upset, and I don't know what's going on. Psychotic, sadistic Desmond I can handle. I grew up around him. But, this version, he scares me because I have no idea what his motives are.

“I guess I would have liked to have known,” Desmond states, giving me a small smile at the same time. I'm so fucking confused, and despite knowing that this isn't the time, and that I think he's only trying to be nice, I can't help but snap at him. I guess this is a couple of years worth of anger and hostility.

“Why the fuck would I tell you anything? You made it clear when Ryleigh and I left that you wanted nothing to do with us. That we weren't your children, and so you were done with us. You have spent our whole lives being a heartless bastard, and now you want to come in, playing the good, kind, loving dad, all of a sudden. No fucking way. You have an agenda, you always do. So you can drop the nice act and just tell me what the fuck you really want.”

As the words are tumbling out of my mouth, I just can't stop them. I've never so much as sneezed in the wrong direction of my father before, as the fear of his wrath was too great. But being with Kian has made me see that I can't live my life shrouded by fear. I have to be myself, and be the confident version of me that I see in my own head. And I guess the first step to becoming her is to tell my father how much he fucking drives me insane.

I can see by the look on Desmond's face, he's shocked. I'm the shy, quiet child, so I'm the last person he would've ever envisaged shouting at him like this. I expect him to get angry, but he doesn't. If anything, his eyes look sadder. Maybe Kian was right. Is he really my dad?

"Freya... there's so much that you don't understand. I wish I could tell you, but please know that I'm keeping you all in the dark for your own safety."

With each word, anger that has been bubbling away under the surface etches closer. My skin prickles and I can't help the fury that bursts out. "Bullshit. It's always the same old bullshit story with you. Why don't you fucking man up and tell us the truth? We are all adults now, and just in case you hadn't noticed, we can all take care of ourselves. We've been getting on just fine without you. But you owe us the truth. I think I already know one truth, but I need to hear it from your own lips."

As soon as I tell him I know one of his secrets, I see his eyes flick over to Declan. If I hadn't been watching for it, I probably would have missed it. Dec gives him a tiny shake of his head, as if to say he didn't spill the beans. But then it dawns on him who did, and his face shifts back into his usual grumpy asshole look. The change was enough for Desmond to pick up on, and he must now realise that I know. I watch as he takes a small breath, like he's plucking up the courage to tell us everything.

"I'm guessing Kian told you. I'm sorry you heard it from someone else," Desmond starts, but before he can continue, Ryleigh interrupts him.

“Sorry about what? What are you talking about?” she shouts, sitting on the edge of her seat.

“I have been lying to you girls. But, please, before you yell at me or get upset, you have to know that I was doing it for the right reasons. Back when everything kicked off, I was in deep working for Whitlock. He had lent me a lot of money, bought me more men to join my team, and helped me arm everyone ready to take London. But we were just never ready enough to make our move. At the time Vernon was strong, but we knew that Bree was on the horizon, getting ready to take over, and we saw that as our perfect time to strike. We just needed to wait it out. The only problem was that Whitlock wanted to see a return on his investment straight away, which we obviously couldn’t give him. So he made it clear we would need to do other things instead to earn back his money. Stuff I’m still involved in now. Again, before you shout at me, I haven’t broken ties with Whitlock because Bree asked me not to.”

All eyes fly over to Bree, who shifts about uncomfortably on Liam’s knee. “It’s true. The best way to find out what Whitlock is up to is to have someone on the inside. He thinks Desmond is playing us. That he’s playing nice so that he can learn all our deepest secrets, pass them to Whitlock, and when the time is right, they will strike against me.”

“How do you know he won’t do that? He could be playing us, not Whitlock?” I snap.

“Freya, I know I’ve done nothing to earn any of your trust, but on this one, you will have to trust me. I have always acted in your best interests. It’s important that the face I present to the world is one of someone who shouldn’t be messed with. It’s the reason I announced to the world that you weren’t my daughters, and that I didn’t give a shit about you. If you were nothing to me, you weren’t in danger. It’s why people think your mother and I hate each other, and that we are only together because we have to be, and because people in our world don’t divorce. But that’s just the act we put on. I love your mother with all my heart. I have since the moment I first laid eyes on her. It’s the same with you two girls.

“You are one hundred percent my daughters, and I know this because Von would never cheat on me. It hurt her so much to say that she did. But it was a decision we both made to ensure your safety. The boys are strong enough to handle if they’re targets, but with you girls, you were at risk of so much more. Whitlock is evil, and he uses and abuses young girls. I didn’t ever want you to be a target to him.”

The room is silent. We’re all stunned by my father’s confession. I mean, he’s basically telling us that our entire lives, the man he’s portrayed to the world, is just a front. That we never really knew him, or our mother. If you had asked me a couple of minutes ago, I would have told you my parents had an awful relationship, that Mum was terrified of Dad. But now he’s claiming our entire childhood has been a lie. You could literally hear a penny drop.

The person I least expected to say anything clears her throat nervously, and once all eyes are on her, Mia begins to talk. “I know most of you know bits about my past, but I’ve never shared it all with anyone except Kellan and Bree. I’m never going to, but I’m sure you can connect the dots when I tell you this. My father is a monster. No girl is off limits for him. If he sees something he wants, or a way to make some money, he will take it. He has no moral compass. I will not comment on Desmond’s decisions, but I will say, if my father saw you girls as potential pawns, something he could use against your father in any way, he wouldn’t hesitate to take you. He’s the worst kind of monster. He sells girls as sex slaves in underage auctions. He prostitutes girls and women out as a way for him to make more money. If he can use and manipulate you for his own gain, he will. So, from an outsider’s perspective—and again, I’m not commenting on Desmond’s decision—I think Desmond did you both a favour by getting you off my father’s radar.”

As soon as Mia has finished talking, she seems to shrink back down, almost like those few moments in the spotlight were too much for her to deal with, and she wants to escape back into the background. That I really can relate to. I watch as Kellan takes her hand, giving it a squeeze as he throws a small smile her way. I can’t even imagine what this beautiful

girl has been through at the hands of her father. I don't blame her for not wanting us all to know the full story. I can already feel bile rising in my throat from what she just told me. I definitely didn't need to know any more.

"I am sorry for everything he put you through, Mia. I promise you, when the time comes—and it will come soon—we will take your father out once and for all," Desmond states firmly.

"I'm confused. So, you really are our dad?" asks Ryleigh, her brows pulled together as she looks at him suspiciously, like this could be another one of his plans. But if it was, he would have been quick to tell us about it. He didn't want to tell us this. He's only discussing it now because Kian let it slip to me.

Declan clears his throat, and he looks almost sheepish, and it soon becomes clear, he's been on my father's side all along. "He is really your dad. I was there when he decided to lie to you. We made it look like he didn't care about you, like he would quite happily have sold you to Whitlock, as you meant that little to him. But we did it knowing that Liam would never let that happen. Desmond made sure Liam knew all the details. He didn't overhear it by accident. Desmond was counting on Liam saving you girls. He knew it would split up the family, but it was a risk he had to take. Still, Von was heartbroken, and so was he. That's when I advised him to add in the marriage clause. Obviously, none of you would be able to get married until you were adults, and once you reached adulthood, your appeal to Whitlock drops significantly.

"So, Desmond said you could all leave the family, but you had to return if anyone got married. Desmond always planned to bring the family back together again. It's just not been the right time to have this conversation. Plus, Des has spent his whole life putting on a show, portraying this psychopath that doesn't care about anyone. He's a master at shutting off his emotions, but that doesn't mean they aren't there."

"Thank you for that, Declan. They didn't need to know quite everything," Dad snaps, but Declan just rolls his eyes. I don't know how to feel that Dec has seen a side to my father

that none of us have ever been allowed to see. Did he not trust us enough to tell us?

“Yes, they do. If you want a chance of uniting your family again, you have to tell them everything. You have lied to them their entire lives, and have never given any of them a chance to get to know the real you. I only know because I saw through your bullshit. This shitshow isn’t going to be fixed overnight, but the only way to work on it is to be open and honest. The best place to start is to make everyone here believe you aren’t ever going to move against Bree. They still believe that at some point, you’re going to be sick of playing a background role, and will want to overthrow them.”

Desmond violently shakes his head. “No, I would never do that. I thought I made it clear that I don’t want to overthrow you, Bree?”

“You did, but you’ve also spent your entire life trying to overthrow my family,” Bree replies.

“Bree, you have my last name now. That baby you’re carrying will take over from you, and it will be a Doughty. All I ever wanted is to have a strong family, one that could rule. It was never about me ruling, it was about the Doughty family ruling.” He sounds so sincere with each and every word, and I feel as though my head is about to explode. Like, this completely goes against everything I know about my dad, and I can see all my siblings have matching looks of surprise on their faces, too.

Before any of us can discuss this further, Desmond’s phone rings. He takes it out of his pocket, and as soon as he reads the name on the caller display, I watch him shift before my very eyes. Even though it’s a voice call and nobody can see him, my father straightens his back, holds his head up high, and twists his face into the psychopathic sneer we’re so used to seeing. I quickly glance around the room and see my siblings are also looking at him like he just grew a new head, which I guess in a way he did.

“What?!” he bellows at the person on the other end of the phone, and the soft-spoken grandad who was baring his soul to

us just a second ago is long gone, replaced with the man we all know very well.

There's silence while he listens to the person on the other end of the phone, and Desmond just grunts in acknowledgement every now and again. Before finally saying, "Fine, text me the details. Do not take your eyes off the target. Is that clear?"

He doesn't even give the person on the other end of the phone a chance to reply, not that he needed to. Desmond's threat was clear for all to hear. As soon as he puts his phone away, he addresses us all. "I've found Kian. They're keeping him in a warehouse around half an hour from here. There's a decent level of security, which shouldn't be too hard to bypass. The only problem is that to make a good attack from all angles, you will need at least five people to breach. I can't get your brothers over here in time, so they are out. Obviously, me, Declan, and Liam will go in. Shane, I'm assuming you will want to?"

Shane starts to reply, but Ryleigh cuts him off. "Hell no. Shane, what the hell are you thinking? You know nothing about fighting or shooting."

"Actually, Ry, I was trained to take over this business. I may not want to do any of those things, but I sure as shit know how to. This is my family, this is my fault. I will not stand by and let people risk their lives if I'm not willing to."

Ryleigh's face falls, and I can tell she's not happy she's not getting her own way. "But—"

"No, Ry. This isn't up for discussion," Shane snaps, cutting her off again, before turning to face Desmond. "I'm in."

"Well, with me, that makes five," adds Kellan, but Desmond shakes his head.

"No, Son. We will need you to watch our backs over the security cameras. Apparently they have a next level system, and if you were to bring the whole thing down, they would know we're attacking and we would lose our element of surprise. So we need you to take out small sections just before

we enter them, and get them back up and running once we're through, quick enough that nobody notices. Only you are capable of hacking that quickly," Desmond adds.

"I'm assuming you misogynistic pigs are ruling me out too?" Bree mutters, which causes Desmond to laugh.

"If caring about you and this baby makes us misogynistic, then yes, we are. And no, we aren't even going to debate you coming. You are staying at home. You're supposed to have lots of rest and no stress," Des replies, and for once, he and Liam are actually on the same page. Bree, however, does not look happy.

"I don't like this. I want to be there with you. But, as a compromise, I'll be with Kellan. I promise not to get stressed, and at the first sign of tightenings, I will back away. But I need to do something." Bree's face is set, and I can already tell she has that assertive, do not argue with me expression.

Liam groans. "Please, Princess, can we discuss you staying here?"

"We can, but it will be a waste of time."

Before they get into another of their bickering matches, I talk over them. "I will be the fifth."

All eyes spin to me, and I suddenly feel very exposed. Desmond is looking at me like that's exactly what he expected me to say, and he's maybe even a little... proud? No, that can't be right, can it? He's never been proud of me before, that I know of. New Desmond is freaking me the fuck out, and I don't like it.

"No!" shouts Liam, Kellan, Declan, and Bree, all at the same time. I think this might be the first time so many members of my family have all agreed on something. I just roll my eyes.

"This isn't open for discussion. It's the man I love in there, and if the tables were turned, he would run through fire to get to me. So, I will do the same for him. My heart won't beat without him. I can't lose him."

Dad smiles. “I trained her to be able to do just this. I’m happy for her to come.” I don’t know why, but hearing that he believes in me, it actually makes me feel a bit more confident. I hate the fact that even after all these years, I’m still craving his approval.

“Kian will cut our balls off if we let Freya do this,” Kellan mutters, and Liam agrees.

“He will, and I don’t like it. We will all be too busy watching you. It could leave us vulnerable.”

“Oh, don’t talk out your ass. If you get your ass kicked, it’s because you weren’t doing your job properly, not because Freya is there. If I thought you would let me come, I would be there too. But, the person she loves is on the other side. If it was a non-pregnant Bree saying she was coming to free Liam, not one of you would object. Freya is tougher than you give her credit for. And people find a strength they didn’t know they have when the ones they love are at risk,” Ryleigh shouts, and I’m shocked my little sister is standing up for me. I’m not surprised by her declaration that she wants to dive in headfirst. My stubborn sister has always been the more rebellious of the two of us. But I am surprised she’s on my side. I thought she would have wanted the place.

“If you come, Freya, you have to promise not to put yourself in any extra danger. Kian will not thank us if you get hurt or killed in the process,” Declan states, his eyes fixed on mine, and I almost cower under the weight of his glare.

“That’s settled then. Let’s gear up. We leave in twenty minutes. Kellan, I will brief you while everyone else gets ready. We will all come back in one piece, and we will come back with Kian too,” states Desmond, and for a second, we all just sit and look at each other, firmly in agreement that we will succeed on this mission. I know that no matter what happens, I will not be a handicap for this team, and I’ll make sure that Kian and I walk out of there together. I meant what I said. I don’t think my heart can beat without him. My heart beats only for him, and I need him to know that. I need him to come back to me.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



Kian

From the minute I wake up, I can tell something isn't right. My whole body feels stiff—in fact, not just stiff. In some areas, it's fucking painful. My head in particular is throbbing and pounding so loud it feels as though a large marching band is drumming its way through my skull. I try to blink open my eyes, but even that hurts, and so I try to think back to what the hell happened to me. What's the last thing I remember?

Freya. It's always Freya. I remember falling asleep in her arms, waking up and losing myself in her. I remember us talking about when we would tell her family. It's something I've been pushing her to do for a while. At first I could understand why she wanted to keep things a secret. She had no idea if I was capable of being a boyfriend, or that we could even work together. Even though I had no previous history to support my claim, I just knew that with her, I wanted to be the best damn boyfriend there is. Which is why I didn't want to lie to the people we love any longer.

Obviously, I know that Mia knows, and if she knows, there's a very good chance Boss Lady does too, which makes me feel better. I hate the idea they think Freya means so little to me, that I'd insist on her being a secret. So, having Mia

know that I want to tell people, that's useful. I imagine when Freya's brothers find out, they will very much want to tear me a new one. When that day comes, I need all the support I can get. Even knowing all this, I still want to tell them. She's not some dirty little secret. She's my girl... and I feel so strongly for her. I think maybe I even love her.

Why is it so hard for me to admit that I love her? I think I've been in love with her from the first time we met, and every day we spend together, I just fall deeper and harder. The problem is, other than Dec—which is a very different kind of love—I've never been in love, and I've never had anyone love me. I've had girls be infatuated with me, and even a girl in high school that seemed very sure she loved me after a few times in bed together, but I felt nothing in return.

At first I worried that all the mental trauma I went through as a child had stunted my emotional development. I mean, my dad cheated on my mum and left us for his new girl. After that, Mum threw herself into her heroin habit, before finally choosing to end her own life as she missed him so much. I sat alone with my mum's dead body for a couple of days before my school sent the police to look for me.

After experiencing something like that, I didn't think I could feel anything, let alone love. But from the minute I met Freya, it's like my heart started beating for the first time. She woke me up and made me realise I can feel. I've just never had a reason to before. She's my reason. The reason I get up in the morning, the reason I work so damn hard. To be good enough for her.

As my thoughts run away from me, and all I can think about is Freya, I start trying to work out what's wrong with my body and where I am. Because, unless some kinky sex game with Freya has gone really wrong, I'm in a really shit situation. I try to focus specifically on areas of my body that hurt, in an attempt to remember what the hell happened to me.

The pounding in my head worsens, but I can move my neck, which means the pain in my head was most likely caused by a few blows to my skull, resulting in a concussion at best. The more I try to open my eyes, the more I realise the

right one won't open at all—most likely because it's swollen shut. Further evidence that I was in one hell of a fight. The left eye feels as though it can open, but the more I try, the more the bright lights on the other side hurt me.

So, the room I'm in is bright, no doubt with fluorescent lighting, as I can almost see it shining through the back of my eyelids. I can't hear any noise, telling me I'm not in a hospital. If I was, they would have given me something for this fucking awful pain, and I would be able to hear the incessant beeping that usually accompanies a hospital stay. Their monitors, not to mention the busy hustle and bustle of a hospital ward, usually makes them a loud place to be.

I try to move my arms next, and when I do, the pain that shoots through my shoulders is fucking excruciating. I have to bite my lip to prevent myself from calling out in pain. My arms are pulled behind my back, and I can feel rope around my wrists. I know it's rope because the more I struggle against it, the more I feel it scratching and burning the sensitive skin along my wrists.

It's obvious my arms have been in this position for longer than they should have been because my shoulders are beyond achy, they're now painful. The throbbing sensation is coupled with pins and needles that prick so sharply it feels as though I'm being stabbed by a million tiny little needles.

As I finish checking my body for injuries, I realise two things. First, I'm tied to a chair with ropes securing my hands and both legs. Second, I've taken one hell of a beating, and I will be lucky if I walk away from this with everything intact. I'm sure I have some broken ribs, possibly even some internal bleeding. I can only just take full deep breaths, and when I breathe too deep or too quickly, the sharp rasping pain in my lungs indicates I really shouldn't do that. I know I said two things, but I have a third to add... I'm fucked. I have no idea where I am, but even if I knew that, I'd still have no idea how I'm getting out of here.

Naturally, I think of Freya, and the promise I made to her. I promised to never leave her, and to always be there for her. No matter how fucking painful it is, I have to fight. I know for a

fact my family, as soon as they work out which asshole has me, they will be in here in a flash.

“I can tell you’re awake, asshole. You snore quite badly. Or at least you do when your nose is blocked with dry blood. Is it that you don’t want to open your eyes, or that you can’t? I know we did quite a number on you, but you wouldn’t fucking stop fighting. You will be pleased to know you took a few of my men out in the process.”

I recognise the voice. It sends a shiver down my spine as all the memories come flooding back. Brandon... fucking Brandon is the guy behind it all. I knew I hated that guy. I mean, I mostly hated him because he dated my girl, but I knew there was something off about him. He lured Freya in with his fake Mr Normal, Mr Boring routine, and she fell for it. In fact, he lied to us all. Kellan did a full background check, and the whole family met him the day he took Freya on a date. Yet none of them suspected anything.

I allow the flashes of what happened before to fill my brain, wincing as even thinking fucking hurts. He’s the guy that’s been behind everything. He’s making a play for the underground fight scene. He’s the one who claims I work for him and owe him because of the fight I missed in Ireland. He’s been trying to get a hold of me, but I have no idea why. He has to realise I’m the worst person to capture. I’m one of the people least likely to break and give him the information he needs.

Shit, that’s when it all comes back to me. He didn’t take me because he wanted me to give up the information. This has always been about Freya. He identified Freya as the weakest link in the family, the one most likely to tell all our secrets under duress. He tried the easy way, getting her to trust him through dates, but she didn’t fall for that, or for him. So, when she dumped him for me, he saw a better way to get to Freya. He kidnapped me because he knows she won’t be able to stand by and watch me get tortured, or risk me getting killed.

Shane. That’s what all this is about. How the fuck did we not know that Brandon’s real name is Marcushio, and that he wants to not just bring the family back to their former glory, he

wants to take it further? He wants the Marcushio family to take all the power. One day, he will make his play for the London throne, but to do that he needs backing from the whole family, and at the moment, since they have no real heir, they're in the middle of a very ugly battle for leadership. Brandon needs Shane to officially hand over to him.

I remember begging Freya not to give the kid up, but the more they hit me, the more she broke down. I should have known it doesn't matter what Freya says. Shane is too good a guy to stand by and let me take the fall for him. When he agreed to be swapped for me, my heart broke. Me, Kellan, Liam, and Bree worked so hard killing off Vinnie Marcushio. We created Shane, and we were determined to help the kid live a normal life, just the way he's always wanted. I hate the fact he has to give it all up for me.

Despite the immense pain, I manage to get my left eye open, and I try to hide my wince when the fluorescent light hits my eye. I blink a couple of times, trying to get used to the brightness, whilst also ignoring the pounding in my head. Not wanting to give this asshole any satisfaction, I put on my best disinterested cocky persona, the one I know winds people up, and I reply with a lazy drawl. "I can open my eyes, thank you. I just don't want to, in case I have to look at your ugly ass. I thought you made a deal with Bree that you would untie me. Treat me like your guest instead of a prisoner. I mean, if this is how you treat your guests, it's no wonder you had to lie to get women to date you."

Brandon strides towards me as soon as he hears me hint about Freya. I think he really thought he was a Casanova and that he could get her to spill all our secrets just by charming her. He saw Freya as weak and desperate for male company, but he read her all wrong. Not only does she have all the male company she will ever need with me, she's also not the weak link.

Grabbing hold of my hair, he roughly pulls my head back until I'm looking up at him, and I try not to groan as the tugging on my scalp makes my headache worse. He's so angry, when he talks he sounds almost feral, spit flying from

his mouth. “You think you’re so fucking funny? Let me tell you this... no matter what deal we have in place, you are a dead man. Freya thinks she can just walk away from me, that she can choose you. No chance. I’m going to kill you in front of her, and then I’m going to make her my wife to strengthen the partnership between my family and hers. As soon as Vinnie comes back, you are done for.”

I can’t help but chuckle, and his eyes darken when he hears me laughing after such a serious speech. “You can kill me all you want, but Freya will never marry you. Even if her family says she has to, she won’t. Freya Doughty is a lot stronger than anyone has ever given her credit for, and I can’t wait to watch her destroy you. Besides, Vinnie has eight days to finish his exams, which means my family has eight days to find you and kill you. That way, none of us have to listen to you or your shitty blackmail deals.”

I watch his face change, and I realise I’ve just made a terrible fucking mistake. I know my family all too well. I’ve worked alongside Boss Lady long enough to know she’s not going to sit around on her ass for the next eight days, just waiting and hoping psycho Brandon will hand me over in exchange for Shane.

There’s no way she’s going to let him hand himself over willingly, which means they are coming up with a plan as we speak to locate us and come rescue me. I’m absolutely certain of this. The problem is, Brandon is a cocky motherfucker, and he hadn’t even considered the possibility they may try to break the deal, or that they could move on him at any moment. Which means I’ve just alerted him to what I’m sure will be their plan.

Getting so close to my face I can feel his rancid breath, mixed with that sweet tinge of hard liquor. He smells as though he hasn’t showered for a while, and his pupils are like pinpoints, which indicates he’s on some kind of illegal substance. To be fair, a man doesn’t get as nutty as him without some serious drug usage.

His eyes narrow as he pulls back my hair, the sharp tug causing me to groan. I try to clamp my mouth shut, not

wanting to give him the satisfaction of hearing that he can still cause me pain, but sometimes, pain just can't be ignored. "What do you know? How do you know they're going to attack? That just makes little sense. They've already made a deal for you. If they stick to the deal, we can all walk away with what we want, without anyone getting hurt. So what the hell makes you think they will risk all that just to rescue you?" he sneers, and I can't help but chuckle.

"Because, you asshole, we do not negotiate with twatwaffles. They can take you out, let Vinnie carry on living a normal life away from all this bullshit, and they get to rescue me in the process as an added bonus. Why the hell would you think they wouldn't?" I don't know why I keep talking. I guess while he's talking to me about how unfair the whole thing is, he's not preparing any kind of defence. If I know my family, they won't wait around. As soon as they work out where I'm being held, they will strike. I just hope this moron isn't prepared for it because of me and my big mouth. The only thing I can think to do is to try and keep him talking.

"What makes you think that the family will follow you, even if Vinnie backs you? I don't mean this to sound too offensive, but there are a lot of families up and down the country vying for more power. What makes you think you can get it over all the others?"

His eyes narrow, and I know I have his full attention now. Let's just hope he falls into my trap and opens his big mouth a bit too much the way I just did. I can see by the way he sneers at me, he's pissed. "They will follow me. They will not have a choice in the matter, and when the time is right, I will take down the entire Doughty clan, if they choose not to align with me. A marriage between me and Freya is the ideal option, as it would unite the families. If that doesn't happen, I will have no option but to wipe the whole family out."

A sarcastic chuckle rips from my battered lips. "What on earth makes you think you have the manpower, or the firepower, to take out Bree and the Doughty family? There's a reason both families have been in power for so fucking long, and why nobody is stupid enough to mess with them."

I'm shocked when Brandon turns to me, his eyes wide like he knows something I don't. But this guy's so smug, I feel super confident he's about to share his big secret, anyway. "Oh, we have the manpower, and the firepower. In fact, thanks to our backer, we have everything we will ever need to take on the Doughty's. We are just waiting for the right time, then the leadership role is officially mine."

Clicking my tongue, I bait him further. "Bullshit! You don't have a backer."

He nods his head rapidly, his sneer growing into a wide, almost crazy looking grin. "That's where you're wrong. We have a backer, and he's fucking loaded. But most of all, he wants to see the destruction of the Doughty-O'Keenan family. That's the thing about people looking for revenge, you see. There's nothing they won't do to get what they want."

My eyes narrow and, as my brow raises, I try not to wince. I wrack my brain, mentally running through all the security threats I can think of, analysing which one could potentially be this mystery backer. My initial money was on Mortimer Whitlock. Not only did Kellan steal his daughter—in his eyes—but he's always secretly coveted Paddy's power. Every time Paddy expands, Whitlock makes a move to secure allegiance with low-level families in our territory. We see what he's doing.

Whitlock thinks if he gets enough people on board, he can take us down from within. But he's an idiot, because we are watching him. We know every move he makes, and we also know his weaknesses. We have plans to take him off the playing field, and if he really is involved in this, we need to make our move quicker than we had planned.

Initially, we talked about kidnapping him, and dragging all the information out of him, but Mia pointed out that although he may not look like it, he's tough. He won't crack under pressure, so there's no real point trying unless we have to. We have to get the people around him to crack, so we can learn enough information to piece together the puzzle without him even realising what we're doing.

At the moment, all we know is he's planning on taking us out, and he's got a couple of rival families on board to help him. But I know that's not everything. There's something major we're missing here... I just need to work out what exactly that is.

Brandon looks like he's waiting for me to ask him some questions, and I'm tempted. I want to lure him into giving me more information, but at the moment, he's very aware that's what I want to do, and he's not going to give me anything useful. So, I stay quiet, and he continues to glare at me, pulling on my hair to get some kind of reaction from me. I know it's pointless, but I test the ropes around my hands again, hoping like hell they might have loosened slightly. They haven't.

A loud creaking noise from over in the corner of the room indicates the large metal door is being pushed open, and a young lad who looks to be no more than eighteen comes running in. His trousers are baggy and hanging so low on his ass I can almost see his boxers, and his baggy T-shirt looks like it's about three sizes too big. He's wearing a backwards baseball cap, and he's got a couple of tattoos visible on his forearms, but nothing I can get a proper read on from here. His eyes are wide and his cheeks are flushed. If I didn't know any better, I'd say this kid looks scared.

Brandon lets go of my hair and spins around to face the young lad, and I can't help but smile as I realise what he's about to say. "Sir, I'm sorry to disturb you, but I think we have a problem."

"What kind of problem?" Brandon asks, his voice low and menacing as he stalks towards the young lad.

"I'm not sure exactly. Bishop from the security room told me to come and find you. He's having trouble locating several members of his security team. We aren't sure if it's a malfunction with the two-way radio, or if it's something else," the young boy adds, his eyes flicking over to me at the end.

I don't even try to hold the cocky grin back. It's about damn time they got here.

CHAPTER TWENTY



Freya

The drive to Kian's location only took about thirty minutes with *Dad* driving. Do I call him Dad again now?

I've spent the last couple of years trying to hate Desmond, dissociating him from the title of Dad, calling him Father, at best. But now it would appear he really is my dad. Everything he's done, even down to acting like an asshole my whole life, it's all been because of his love for us. It's all been an act.

It's hard to associate Desmond with the word love. He's never shown it before, but I guess that just means he's done a pretty damn good job of playing the role he created. I mean, he's been with my mum for over twenty-five years, and I was sure they hated each other. Who knew they really were soulmates, who had to hide their love from the world to avoid Mum becoming a target?

Desmond Doughty is a character, one my dad has been playing for so long, it's hard to now try and see behind the mask. I'm not sure how my siblings feel about it, but I know what I think. Yes, he's done bad things in the past, but he had a good reason. He's always put us first, even when we didn't realise it. The least I can do is give him a small chance to show

me what he's really like. Show me who the real Desmond Doughty is. But he will only get one second chance with me, so he better not blow it.

"Is everyone clear on the plan?" Liam says, repeating the same phrase he used just a few minutes before. We have run through the plan so many times, I fear it will be permanently etched into my brain.

"Yes, we know the plan," I groan at the same time everyone else in the car agrees with me. I'm sitting in the middle of the backseat, with Shane on one side of me and Kellan on the other. Liam is up front with Desmond. Declan's in the van following us, along with Bree and all the security equipment and armoury we may need. I'm not entirely sure Bree's tightenings have gone away, but there's no arguing with her when her mind's made up.

When we set off, Ryleigh was arguing about why she wanted to come along, and when we left, they still hadn't decided on whether or not to take her. Desmond was quite happy for her to come, but I don't think anyone else was. Belle and Mia both agreed they wanted to stay home with Hallie.

"Freya and I will breach through the front along with Shane, and we will then divert off as discussed," Desmond states, before turning to address Liam directly. "Whilst you and Dec come through the back. Nobody moves through their section until Kellan gives them the green light, and they stop exactly where he tells them to. We don't want security to be alerted to our presence before we're ready. With just five of us, we need the element of surprise."

We listen as both Desmond and Liam quiz us about the plan. Then we connect with the second team over the radio, and they run through the plan with us from their perspective.

"Did Ryleigh end up getting in the van?" Liam asks, though I think we all know the answer.

"Yes," she mumbles, and everyone in the car surrounding me curses.

“Fucking hell, Ryleigh. Why, for once, couldn’t you do as you were told and stay home? Now, when we’re supposed to be concentrating on the plan, we’re going to be worried about whether you’re going to go rogue and get yourself killed. You are putting us all in danger,” snaps Shane, surprising us all since he’s usually so mild and quiet.

He lets her get away with murder, and always stands up for her whenever she acts wild or rebellious. No matter what mistakes my rogue sister makes, Shane has always been there to support her and help her through. So, to hear him snap at her, we’re all surprised—even if we agree with what he’s saying.

“No, it won’t be like that, I promise. I’ve already promised Bree that I will stick to her side like glue. Kellan’s been talking me and Bree through his system, showing us how we can both watch over you. I promise, having me here will be a good thing, an extra set of eyes watching your back.”

“I swear to God, Ryleigh Paige, if you so much as think about stepping out of that van, I give permission for Bree to taser you,” snaps Liam, making us all laugh. Well, all apart from Ryleigh, who has a few choice words to say.

It’s actually quite nice to be able to have a laugh and joke together, to try and lighten the mood before we all jump into the fray. And, as soon as we are in reach of the warehouse, we change radio channels, even though we were on a secure line already, and we follow Kellan as he instructs us on where to park. We will have to approach on foot to avoid suspicion. Kellan may be able to get his van closer, but as long as his signal is strong enough to interfere with their security, he won’t risk it.

As soon as Kellan gives us the word, we climb out before running to grab what we need from the boot of the car. I’m wearing some baggy cargo pants with several pockets, and although they aren’t exactly a big fashion accessory, I can fill my pockets with all manner of items for that ‘just in case’ moment. I can’t exactly carry around a handbag, and all the guys wear these types of trousers, so Bree lent me a pair she uses for this very purpose.

I threw Kian's black hoodie over my off the shoulder black top, and even though I saw my brothers give me that look—the pity look—nobody said a word. I need to wear his hoodie, to be enveloped by his peppermint scent, hoping some of his strength will pass over to me. All I keep thinking is that he would run into a burning building or risk his life without even a second thought if the roles were reversed, and now I will do the same. Because a world where Kian isn't there to throw his cocky smile my way, or a world deprived of his beautiful dimples—that's a world I never want to live in. So, I'm being brave, not just for him, but because I have no choice. We both survive this, or neither of us does. I don't think I could ever go on without him.

Once we've all got ourselves loaded up with weapons and ammo, as well as other little things we might need, we begin the short walk to the warehouse. Kellan tests our communication devices are working as we go. The little bud is so small, it's weird that I barely even notice when it's tucked into my ear. You can't even tell I have it in.

Kellan calls it the next generation of security. If people can't see you wearing a two-way communication device, they can't take it off you. When he first showed it to me, I joked that I was expecting the big ear plug you see in movies that hooks over your ear, connecting through a spiral wire. Not the most inconspicuous of devices, but iconic. Kellan just laughed at me and told me this was the future.

Once we reach the entrance to the perimeter of the warehouse, we say goodbye to Liam and Declan. But, before they move, Liam pulls me in for a hug. "Don't do anything reckless. We will save him, but you will not put yourself in any danger to do it. Please, promise me you will stay safe." I can hear the pain in my big brother's voice, and I know he hates the idea of me coming on this mission.

It's been a long time since I last did any training, but it's a bit like riding a bike. You never forget how to fire a weapon. Just because I've never shot anyone before except for in training, doesn't mean I won't. These are the people that are

trying to rip Kian from me, so as far as I'm concerned, they will only get what they deserve.

"I promise I will try to stay safe." That's the best I can do. Because we both know that if I have to put my life on the line in order to save Kian, I'm going to do it. I know Kian will be pissed, and that he will feel the same way I do, that he can't live without me, but this is all my fault. I invited Brandon into our lives, and I'm going to do everything in my fucking power to make sure he's punished for the hell he's caused us.

Liam's eyes narrow, but before he can say anything, Declan places a hand on his shoulder. A warning that time isn't on our side. We have no idea if or when they will change staff, but we know we need to make our move now before the sun rises fully. Darkness is an advantage we can't afford to lose.

We watch as Liam and Declan rush off in the opposite direction, getting into position behind the warehouse. I turn around and see Shane and Dad deep in conversation. I indicate I'm ready to go, and we all start towards our breach point. I don't miss the odd look on Shane's face, even if I can't get a read on it. I don't know if Dad is just scaring the shit out of him, or if there was something more there. But we don't have time to find out.

"Team one, do you copy?" Kellan's voice sounds as though he's actually in my head, and it's the weirdest sensation.

"Team one, in position," Dad replies for us.

Kellan goes on to explain where the initial security guards are, giving us a moment between us to work out who will take out which guard. When we get inside, there are three corridors. One to the left, one to the right, and one straight on—which is why they needed three to enter from the front.

"Are you ready?" Dad asks, both Shane and myself.

I nod, taking in a deep breath to try and calm my nerves. My heart is racing, sweat is pooling inside my fists, and I can almost hear the blood whooshing through my head as it

pounds. Clearly, adrenaline is getting the better of me, and I need to take hold of all that energy and use it.

Out of nowhere, Dad pulls me into a hug. It's over so quickly I don't even have time to wrap my arms around him and return the squeeze. But it still means a lot to me, and I give him a smile. "You've got this, Frey. I'm so proud of you. I knew training you up would come in handy one day."

I can't help but laugh, but before I can say anything, Shane pulls me in for a hug, too. Only he doesn't pull away. He holds me there for a few seconds and even though it's a little awkward, given we've never been this close before, I return the hug. Once my arms are around his neck, he lowers his lips to the ear that doesn't contain my communications device, and he whispers so quietly, I can barely hear him. "If things don't go our way, promise me you will take care of Ryleigh for me. Tell her how much she means to me, and that I will come back to her as soon as I can."

His words register and my gaze widens. I pull away to look him in the eye, and he puts his finger over his lips, telling me not to say anything. Shane still plans on sacrificing himself to Brandon if needed, and my heart breaks for this beautiful, kind guy. He doesn't even look scared like I was expecting; he looks determined, and a little scary. He's definitely pulled on his big boy pants, and suddenly, years of training to rule his family business has come into fruition, and the quiet boy I just hugged is long gone. Standing in front of me is a tall, confident man who knows exactly what his plan is, and how he's going to execute said plan.

Before I can say anything, Kellan indicates it's time for us to move, and so we waste no time. Once Kellan gives the word that he's shut down the fence, we begin cutting through the once electric barrier. When we have a gap big enough, Dad leads us inside. From there, we each follow Kellan's instructions, and we stay perfectly still while he's giving orders to the others.

We make it to the side of the building, and that's when the first sign of trouble approaches. A guard appears from the corner, walking straight into my path, and despite my heart

racing so fast I feel like it's going to burst out of my chest, I don't hesitate to act. My brain is screaming at me, but I push all thoughts to the back of my mind and just respond on instinct.

Reaching into my pocket, I pull out my taser, and I crouch down slightly as I turn the shock level up a little bit, as he's a big guy. Once he's in reaching distance, I shoot. The prongs hit him centre mass and his body convulses until he falls to the ground, his eyes rolling into the back of his head. As soon as he's down, I run to him and begin tying him up.

I zip-tie his hands behind his back and his feet together. I then tear the taser prongs from his chest, ripping some of his T-shirt at the same time. I stuff the material into his mouth before taping over it a couple of times to make sure it's secure. With the voltage I hit him with, I'd be surprised if this guy wakes up anytime soon, but even if he does, he can't say or do anything.

My father lightly jogs up behind me, his proximity shocking me for a second. "Frey, we don't have time for you to do that to every guard. You are going to have to shoot them."

I feel so stupid. It's not like I don't want to kill anyone. I just thought it was the best thing to do, if we can. Who knows if we might need to capture him and use him for information? Okay, I'm bullshitting my brain right now. I acted with leniency, which is stupid because none of these men would be lenient with me or Kian.

Fuck. Okay, Freya. You need to get your big girl pants on, push those emotions away, and remember that every asshole you take out could be someone who threw a punch or a kick at the man you love. The beating Kian has sustained couldn't have come from just one man. I would imagine the majority of them threw at least one punch his way. I need to hold on to that as I make my way to Kian. I'm simply settling a score.

Telling Desmond I understand, and that I won't let him down this time, I follow his lead. When the next guy comes towards us, I don't hesitate. I pull out my gun, making sure the

silencer is fully attached, and line the barrel up. I think back to all the training sessions about how to stand, how to aim, how to pull the trigger. They flood back to me like it was only yesterday that I took the class. Remembering it all, I take aim and gently squeeze the trigger.

The bullet hits my target in the centre of his chest, and he hits the ground straight away. A loud whoop echoes through my head as both Kellan and Bree celebrate my shot. But as quickly as it happens, we move on. I keep the smile on my face and my hand on the trigger as we reach our crossroads.

Dad goes straight on, I go right, and Shane goes left, just like we decided before. As I follow Kellan's instructions, I take out three more security guards, not even hesitating to take the shot by the third one. It's not that I don't feel remorse for the lives I'm taking, and I feel sure when the adrenaline is gone and all this is over, that will hit me like a tonne of bricks. But for now, a different Freya is running the show, and she doesn't hesitate to pull that trigger. She's hard, confident, and determined, and best of all, ruthless. But only for this one mission. Then I'm going back to my quiet life.

When I reach the end of the corridor, Kellan tells me to freeze. I press my back up against the wall, making sure I can see in all directions, and aren't just focused on the path ahead. Even though I trust my family to do their job, all it takes is for one guard to slip past and for me not to be paying attention, and it's over.

I listen over the radio as Kellan gets everyone into position so that we're all close enough to break into the large room where Kian's being held. From what I can hear, Liam and Declan have encountered the most problems, and they're running behind schedule. Both Liam and Dad are in agreement that when we have our opportunity, we should go in without Liam and Dec, knowing they will catch up as soon as they can.

As I wait for Kellan's signal, I listen to the voices I can hear in the next room. The voice is low, and I miss quite a few bits, but I focus as much as I can, knowing the information I manage to collect could be useful later on.

“Yes, Sir... Will tell him... good plan... kill him soon... Thanks, Sir. Yes, V. Will do.” With that, the voice dims completely, and I assume the guy taking the phone call has gone back into the large main room of the warehouse. I try to focus on what he was saying, as he obviously was talking to his boss. That much was evident from the tone, the respect shown, and just the way he spoke to him. It’s obvious it wasn’t Brandon, as I can hear his voice in the other room. This is the man who has been pulling the strings.

I store all the information away for later, and I listen for anything else, whilst also listening to what Kellan says. “Frey, you have two guys heading your way. When I tell you, then you move. Once you’re through the door, there’s only Brandon in there with Kian, that I can see.”

“Received,” I reply, letting him know I’ve taken everything onboard, and I’m mentally planning what I’m going to do.

I have it all ready in my head and am just anxiously waiting to move when I hear noises and movement up ahead. I keep my back plastered against the wall, making sure to stay as still as possible so that nobody hears or sees me. It sounds like the stampede of a small army heading into the large room, and I feel as though my throat crashes into my stomach. One or two people I could take on easily, but this is something else.

“Fuck! I don’t know where they’ve all come from, Frey, but it looks like Brandon called in reinforcements. I don’t think he knows we’re here, as nobody is looking for us. But he must have suspected we would come, as everyone—including the two goons heading your way—is heading to the main room to guard Kian—or protect that slimy cunt, Brandon,” Kellan snaps, his language becoming more colourful the longer he talks.

Kellan continues to swear in my ear, and Dad snaps at him, telling him to focus. We need a way in without getting killed. “What’s the best approach, Kellan? You have the advantage. We don’t.”

“There is no good play here, only risk. But that doesn’t mean it isn’t doable. All the men seem to be congregated on the left side of the room. If Desmond or Shane enter now, it will be almost impossible for them. The only chance is if Freya goes in first and draws their attention, you two could slip in behind,” Kellan explains, and my heart races. They want to use me as bait.

“No!”

“No way!”

“Not happening!”

I can’t tell who shouts what, but Liam, Declan, and Shane all make it clear they don’t like the plan, nor do they support it. The problem is, we don’t have time to sit around and debate a new plan. We need to act now, or Kian is in real danger. If Brandon thinks we’re making a move for him, he will kill him out of spite.

“This isn’t open for debate. I’m going. Kellan, tell me when or I will do it on my own. Before you all start shouting, shut the fuck up and let me concentrate. I’m doing this, so you may as well let Kellan help me, so I stand less chance of dying,” I snap in an angry whisper. I’m trying to keep my voice down as much as I can, but they wind me up so much. If Bree was standing here instead of me, there would have been no discussion. She would have gone in and everyone would have supported her. Now I need that same support.

“You can do this, Freya. We will be right behind you, love,” Desmond says, silencing everyone else.

Once Kellan is happy we’re going ahead, he lays out the plan for me, and I try to push away all my fears and anxiety to concentrate. This is the last little hurdle, and once we get over it, Kian can come home. We are all getting out of this alive! “Okay, Freya. Get ready. When you get into the room, turn to your right and just keep shooting. Kian is in the centre of the room towards the back wall. When you run in, he will be straight in front of you. Don’t focus on him, turn and shoot. Desmond and Shane will come from behind you, so don’t mind the gunshots when they do. Understand?”

“Yep, got it,” I mutter in reply, taking a step towards the door in preparation for Kellan to give me the go ahead.

“Go now!” Kellan shouts, and I don’t hesitate.

Banging through the door, I take a microsecond to make sure everyone is still where Kellan told me they would all be. Kian is in the chair in front of me, and I don’t miss the look of sheer shock upon seeing its me bursting through the door. I watch it turn to a mix of anger and fear for me as I turn to my right, where there’s a collection of around ten men. I try to focus on Brandon, but amongst the crowd, I can’t see him. So, I do as I was told and I hold my gun up and take aim.

I fire the first shot, hitting a guy in the centre of his head, and as he falls to the floor, the room erupts into chaos. The people around him all disperse, running around like headless chickens while they think about what to do. One guy pulls out a gun, but I fire straight at him, and the bullet passes through his hand, forcing him to drop the gun as he screams out in pain.

My eyes flick around the scene, looking for any immediate signs of danger. I know I’m like a sitting duck here. I’m standing in the middle of the room, nothing to shield me from anyone who starts shooting, but that’s the point. I’m supposed to draw their attention so that they don’t see Dad and Shane coming.

As the men stop screaming like little girls and start to get their shit together, they take out their guns, and I have to act fast. I shoot one after the other, making sure to keep count. I’ve already replaced my magazine once. I don’t have many bullets left. I try counting how many men are left, and think there’s around six. I quickly glance around the big, open plan room, looking for where I could run to if I need to take cover. There’s a sofa behind me, but that would mean either running backwards or turning my back on the enemy. None of which I like the sound of. Running backwards will no doubt result in me falling ass over tit, and turning my back will no doubt end with a bullet in my back. Neither plan works for me, but there’s no other shelter.

I watch as all six men pull out their weapons, and I have to make a decision now. Kellan is shouting something in my ear that I can't hear over all the adrenaline. Kian is shouting at me from the chair to the side of me, his beautiful face turning red as he thrashes against his bindings to try to get to me. I make an on-the-spot decision, and I turn and run. I run as quickly as I can, and when I'm close enough to the sofa, I throw myself to the floor, legs first, hoping to slide behind the sofa like when I would play baseball as a kid.

Gunshots sound all around me, and I thank my lucky stars none of them hit me. I realise the shooting is coming from all around me, and I take a second to peep out from behind the sofa. A few more men have joined the fray, replacing those I killed, but Desmond and Shane are standing behind me, using a turned over a table as a shield as they take aim at the men opposite.

I look over at Kian. His eyes are fixed on me, and he's still thrashing around trying to get free, no doubt to get to me. I give him a smile to let him know I'm okay, and his body physically deflates a little. His eyes say so much, and my heart races for him. I need to get across to him, to free him. I glance between both sides, looking at what my best option is. Kian obviously realises what I'm thinking and shakes his head, his eyes firm when he tells me not to even think about running across gunfire for him.

"Where's Liam and Dec?" I ask Kellan, and I'm shocked when I don't get a reply back. I repeat the question, calling out to Kellan through my device. But, still no answer. I look over at Desmond, and he looks just as concerned.

"We have a problem—" Kellan finally shouts into our ears, but before he can finish, he's cut off by the back door in the far corner of the room slamming open.

The gunfire seizes for a moment, as we all take a second to re-evaluate the situation. I expect it to be Liam and Dec that come bursting through, so I don't even hesitate. While the shooting stops and everyone's distracted, I run to Kian's side. I slide down beside him and throw my arms around him just to make sure he's real.

“Fuck!” Kian mutters, and at first I worry I’ve hurt him, but then I see where he’s looking. His eyes are trained on the corner of the room, at what brought the gunfire to a halt. Instead of seeing Liam and Declan standing there like I expected, Brandon is there, with Ryleigh standing in front of him. He has one arm wrapped around her body, and in that hand is a knife that’s pressing against her abdomen. While his other hand holds a gun to her temple.

My normally confident, rebellious sister has tears trickling down her face, and her bright blue eyes are wide with fear. She’s trembling, and I don’t blame her. Her eyes are fixed on Shane, as she mouths the words, ‘I’m sorry’.

Instantly, Shane holds his hands up, as though he’s surrendering, his gun relaxing, though he doesn’t drop it. He takes a couple of steps forwards whilst shouting that he’s giving in.

I watch the shit show play out in front of me, and I have to admit, I’m frozen. I’m trying to listen to what Shane’s saying to Brandon, but I hear Dad whispering to us all. “Kellan. Liam. Bree. Anyone! Please, just let me know you’re all okay.” I’m shocked by the sentiment in his voice. He really sounds like he cares.

A very out of breath Kellan responds. “Sorry, me and Bree are safe. When that cunt Brandon attacked, I had to get Bree away to safety. I’m so sorry, I couldn’t protect them both. Liam has just arrived, and he’s with Bree. I’m with Dec trying to get back to my computers. Though I suspect they’ve damaged them all beyond repair. Me and Dec can come and help if needed.”

“It’s too late. They’re using Ryleigh as a hostage. None of us can move or he will shoot her,” Desmond growls, his protectiveness obvious in the way he talks about Ry. I’ve never heard him care about any of us this way—it’s actually quite a shock, albeit a nice one. I never knew he was capable of caring. He really has played his part well.

“Frey, Beautiful. Hey, look at me. It’s going to be alright. Can you get me free, baby?” Kian asks, his voice soft and

delicate, like he's talking to someone so fragile they might shatter at any moment. I guess that's how I probably look right now.

I don't hesitate. I pull out one of the knives I have in my pocket and start slicing through the ropes. Once his feet are free, he keeps them there so as to not draw attention to us. As soon as his hands are free, I place the knife I used to cut the ropes into it. I only have two blades left since I'm out of bullets, but I will happily give one to Kian. He takes it, but keeps his hands behind his back, so he doesn't look like a threat.

Trying to focus in on what's happening, I hear Brandon's ugly, spiteful sneer. "I can't believe you thought you could try to beat me, little cousin. We had a deal, Vinnie. Give me one good reason why I shouldn't blow this beautiful purple head to smithereens."

"If you even think about it, you cunt, I will—" snaps Desmond, but before he can finish what would no doubt be a very colourful warning, Shane holds his hand out to silence him.

"If you kill her, you will never get what you want. Given the pile of bodies in the corner, I would now say you are short on men. You will never be a successful leader until the whole of the family is on your side, and the only way that will happen is thanks to me. So, if you want my help, then I suggest you let her go. In fact, if you let every person in here go, I will stay with you now," Shane counters, his voice shows no hint of fear. He really would do anything for Ryleigh. I know the feeling because I just ran into a wall of bullets for Kian, and no matter how fucking terrified I am, I would do it all over again.

My sister starts to struggle in Brandon's arms. "No, you can't," she shouts, followed by a loud, blood curdling scream. I notice blood seeping through her white T-shirt. The knife in Brandon's hand, the one held beside Ryleigh's abdomen to keep her in line, is soaked in bright red blood. When Ryleigh was twisting and trying to get free, she threw herself into Brandon's knife.

Her face pales and her eyes widen, as she looks at Shane with tears in her eyes. Both of her hands are clamped over her wound and she's pressing down hard. Desmond and Shane both go to take a step toward her, but the three men flanking Brandon raise their guns, making it clear if they take another step, they will shoot.

"See, now look what you've done, you dumb bitch. I never wanted to hurt you. You aren't very good leverage if you're dead," Brandon shouts at Ryleigh, who just continues to sob, suddenly looking a lot younger than she normally does. I'm so used to Ry dressing and acting older. I often forget she's just eighteen years old. But right now, as she looks between our dad and Shane, desperately pleading for help with her tear-stained eyes, she looks every bit the teenager she really is, and my heart breaks for her.

"If you don't give me my daughter back this second so I can take her to the hospital, I will burn this place to the ground with all of you in it," Desmond threatens.

Brandon just shakes his head, that ugly, vindictive sneer ever present. "Shut up, old man. I don't need anything from you. It's Vinnie I want," he says, before turning his attention back to Vinnie. "So, you want me to let everyone in this room go, and you will stay with me? You'll do everything I tell you to?"

"If you let everyone go, and nobody else gets hurt, then I will stay with you now. I will do as you instruct and get the family back together. I will name you as my second in command, and after a short time of building up the family, then I will announce you as my successor. After a period of no more than three months, ideally two, then you have to let me go. No threats, no calls to return, and no harm. I want to leave without fear of retribution or death. I want to start a new life and pretend I've never even heard the word Marcushio before. So, do we have a deal?"

Ryleigh gently shakes her head, and I know she's pleading with Shane not to do this, but there really is no other way. We are all out of ammo, Ryleigh's injured, Liam won't leave

Bree's side, and Kian's not well enough to fight. The odds of surviving are severely stacked against us.

Desmond, ignoring Shane's request to stay silent, takes a step forward, completely ignoring the three guns that are now trained directly on him. "If he stays now, there's one addendum we need to add on. Vinnie only has two exams left at school over the next eight days. You have to let him attend both. He has to graduate. You can send armed guards with him while he sits his exams, making sure he never leaves. I can guarantee that you will have no interference from any of my family. If she's well enough, I believe my daughter is in one of Vinnie's exams, but they won't communicate, and she certainly won't make any kind of move against you. But you have to let him finish school. It's what his father would have wanted." I almost want to laugh at the solemn tone Desmond has managed to pull out. I don't think he ever met Leon Marcushio, and he certainly never knew what his wishes were in regards to his son. I mean, there's a good chance he's correct. What dad doesn't want their son to graduate and do their best at everything?

I watch as Brandon mulls it over, confusion causing his brow to wrinkle, like he's struggling to decide what to do. Every time he moves, more blood trickles out of Ryleigh, and she whimpers a little. She's already becoming very pale. I whisper into my communications device to Kellan. "Ryleigh's hurt real badly. I think he's going to let us bring her out soon. We're negotiating. Make sure you have an ambulance waiting. She will need the fastest route into a hospital theatre. But no sirens. That will freak them out, for sure."

"Fuck, are you sure she's okay? What the hell happened?" Liam snaps, as Kellan tells us they can't see anything, as all the monitoring devices are smashed. I also hear them muttering in the background about Bree having bad tightenings again. Looks like we're going to need two ambulances at this rate.

"She's being held hostage by Brandon. When she was wriggling, trying to get free, she threw herself onto the blade he had in his hand. By the looks of all the blood, it's a big stab

wound to her lower abdomen. Everything is in hand here. Do not barge in, you will get someone killed. We're handling it," I reply, and I see Kian looking at me like I've gone a little crazy, talking to myself. I turn so he can see the earbud in my ear and he gives me a slight nod. That's when I feel his cold, calloused hand read out and touch mine. It's the smallest of gestures, just our pinky fingers are interlocked, but feeling his skin against mine is like heaven. Kian feels like home.

"I don't think that's an unreasonable request. But, before I release my two hostages, I want you all to disarm so I know none of you are a danger," explains Brandon, and I quickly take the knife off Kian and slide both of them back into my secret trouser pocket on the inside of the leg. God, I love how baggy these are. You can hide blades in them and nobody would ever know.

I drop my gun and slide it into the middle of the room. No point keeping it. I'm out of ammo. Desmond does the same, but I can see the small gun he's got strapped to his ankle. He's always carried one there, for as long as I can remember. Brandon looks us over, like we might possibly have another weapon.

"Right, the old man and Freya can leave first. I will send out the others when I know there's no threat—"

"No!" I shout, cutting off whatever bollocks Brandon was about to say. "I'm not leaving here without Kian. Dad can take Ryleigh, and I will stay with Kian. We've given up all our weapons, none of us are threats to you right now. So, let us go."

Brandon's sadistic smile is back, but I can see the anger flaring in his eyes. He clearly hates when people stand up against him, particularly women. "Fine. You and Kian can leave first. If either of you tries anything, I will shoot Ryleigh and your dad. Then I will go find Liam and Bree and shoot them and the baby, too."

Desmond takes a step forward, a deep rumbling growl coming from his upturned lip. Shane steps over to him, telling Desmond to calm down. They whisper something that none of

us can hear, and it's the second time today they've had little secret chats without the rest of us. Who knew Desmond and Shane had developed a friendship? Whatever Shane said, it works as Dad takes a step back.

"Fine, let Kian and Frey go. But we can't wait too much longer before we let Ry go. She's really hurt, and I can't let anything happen to her. Please," Shane begs, as he takes a couple of slow steps towards Ry, his hands raised in surrender.

"Freya and Kian, go now!" Brandon yells, and I don't need to be told twice. I stumble to my feet, and reaching down, I drag Kian's arm over my shoulder. He has wounds all over his body, and I'd be very surprised if he doesn't have a couple of broken bones too. Despite him putting most of his weight onto my tiny frame, he still winces with each step. I'm in pain dragging his bulky frame, but I would do it again and again.

As soon as we open the main warehouse door and fresh air hits our faces, I'm met by Declan and Kellan, and I collapse into their arms, Kian by my side. Kellan grabs me, while Declan grabs Kian, and they carry us to the van. Bree is sitting in the back, her face bright red as she squeezes Liam's hand, and he keeps reminding her to breathe.

"Holy shit, are you in labour?" I ask, wondering why the hell she's puffing and panting in the back of a stake-out van, instead of getting her ass to a hospital. Particularly since the baby isn't quite ready to be born yet.

"It's just those damn Braxton Hicks things again, brought on by stress. Get my whole family home and I will be fine," Bree explains, as she pants to catch her breath once her tightening is over.

Kellan jumps out of the van, and I watch him greet three ambulances, who have all arrived quietly, so as not to draw attention to us. Declan, who still has one arm around Kian, lifts him. "Come on, let's get you into one of those ambulances."

Kian shakes his head and tries to unsuccessfully dig in his heels. "No, Ry needs to get the first one."

“There’s plenty to go around, you stubborn asshole. Now, attempt to walk to the ambulance like a man, or I will carry you,” Declan threatens, but Kian’s lip just tilts up as he attempts his cocky smile. The ghost of a dimple tries to appear through all the swelling, but it’s a no go, and I can tell Kian’s trying not to wince. I’m not surprised given how battered his face is.

“Actually, I think I might quite enjoy you carrying me.”

Declan lets out a soft laugh, and I’m shocked. I’ve never seen the dark, brooding man with anything but a face of steel. Yet now he’s looking at the man he considers a brother, with a bright smile on his face. He suddenly looks a lot younger and more playful, and my heart hurts for the two broken boys who were forced to grow up quicker than they should have.

Once we get Kian settled in the ambulance, I hear Desmond shouting. He’s carrying Ryleigh, a trail of blood following behind him, and Ry’s head is dipped back, like she can’t even hold her own head up. “She just passed out when I picked her up to move her,” Desmond shouts, as he runs into the ambulance, cradling his little girl in his arms. For the first time, I see tears in his eyes, and I think we may be seeing the real Desmond right now.

The ambulance man pushes us all out of the way, rips her top open, and starts applying the heart monitor, while the other paramedic packs her wound. We’re all silent as we wait for the heart machine to turn on. My heart is aching as I look over at my sister. I refuse to admit that she looks dead. Her body is lifeless, and no matter what they do, she doesn’t open her eyes.

“Is she alive?” Bree asks, having got out of her own ambulance, much to the dismay of the paramedic beside her. Bree’s always been a law unto herself, and I should have known she wouldn’t stay put. I also see Kian standing beside her, Declan practically holding him up. But this is what you do for family.

We stand beside each other through thick and thin. Together, we can survive anything. Or at least that’s what I

thought before today. Because I'm not sure we can survive losing our beautiful, rebellious little Ryleigh.

The paramedic doesn't lie, instead they continue doing their job. The heart machine begins to make a noise, that's when the paramedic shouts, "she's in asystole. We need to shock. Stand clear," he shouts, before looking around to make sure the surrounding area is clear, and then he presses the button.

Electricity shoots into my little sister's chest, causing her back to arch as she spasms slightly, and a sob catches in my throat. I keep my eyes fixed on the flat line on the monitor, analysing it for the tiniest hint of a blip that would indicate her heart is working. But it remains flat. That's when the paramedic that shocked her begins performing CPR. One of the paramedics that was supporting Bree pushes us all out of the way and grabs a bag and mask to provide Ry with the oxygen she desperately needs.

"Right, everyone. Please, step back. The paramedics need room to work, and we need to look at our other patients. There's nothing you can do for your sister at this moment. My colleague is going to drive them to the hospital now. It's important she gets medical assistance straight away. And before you ask, there's no room in the ambulance, as the extra paramedics will work on her as they drive. I will be with Bree, and my colleague here will be with Kian. You can travel with us."

The doors to the ambulance are closed, and the sirens light up the street as they fly down the road, the noise getting quieter the further they travel. We're all standing here, a bit battered, bruised, and broken. Our hearts are aching as we contemplate the beautiful sister we could have to say goodbye to today.

"Wait!"

Shane comes running across the road, and three men follow behind him, their guns trained on him. But he doesn't appear to care. "I'm coming back. I just need to know if she's alive." Tears are pouring down Shane's face and the pain is

written all across it. He blames himself, but he wasn't to blame. Nobody was. Ryleigh made the decision to be here, and yes, we could have tried to stop her, but if I know my sister as much as I think I do, there would have been no stopping her.

Bree steps forward and wraps her arms around Shane. Even though he's almost half a foot taller than her, he sinks into her comfort like a child getting a hug from his mum. He lets her hold him while he cries on her shoulder. "Shane, Ryleigh's really poorly. She lost a lot of blood, and while Desmond was transferring her to the ambulance, she collapsed. Her heart stopped beating. When they left, they had shocked her heart, but that hadn't worked, so they started CPR. Last we know, her heart still wasn't beating. We are being transferred to the same hospital, so as soon as we get there, we will find out how she is. You can travel with me."

Shane steps back, shaking his head. "I can't, Bree. I made Brandon a promise. In exchange for him letting everyone go, I stay. My three months start now. He will allow me to sit my exams, but they will guard me the whole time. Any sign of you guys and the guard is instructed to shoot me. I'm sorry. But I'm allowed to keep my phone, so please, keep in touch. And when Ryleigh wakes up, please have her call me."

Shane walks away, but Bree grabs hold of his hand. "No, Shane. You can't go. You can't run a mafia family. You want a normal life. Besides, there's no guarantee Ryleigh will ever wake up." Bree stumbles as she says the last part, her voice cracking as she verbalises what we're all thinking. What if she doesn't wake up? What if her heart stops beating for too long and she ends up oxygen deprived and on a ventilator?

Okay, I can't keep thinking of worst-case scenarios as I'm going to burst.

"Look, Shane has made his choice, and I, for one, am very fucking grateful. Your sacrifice is the reason Ry stands a chance. But we need to get to the hospital now. So either get in or get the fuck out of the way," I snap, and Bree turns to glare at me. I don't want to start anything with my sister-in-law, and it's obvious that tensions are frayed right now, but I need to get to my sister, and I need a medical professional to look over

Kian and make sure he's okay, too. He's very good at hiding how he really feels, so I need to know he's not going to drop dead any minute from internal bleeding.

Shane takes a few steps back, and the pain in Bree's eyes is clear. She loves Shane like a brother, and leaving him behind goes against her very nature. "We will come for you," she promises, and he just nods his head, tears rolling down his cheeks. I know more than anything he wants to be beside Ry's hospital bed. He wants to hold her hand until she wakes up. He wants to hold her while she cries and screams over everything she's been through today. But he can't do any of that. We all promise to look after her for him, and to keep in touch.

Brandon stands behind him, his hand on Shane's shoulder, possessively letting him know he can't come with us. Anger bubbles under the surface and after everything I've been through today, I can't help but snap at him. "It won't be today, or the next few months, but one day—and I mean one day soon—I will come for you. I have a bullet with your name on it, and I intend to gift it to you, straight between your eyes. You have messed with me and my family for the last time."

Brandon just cackles, like the demented asshole he is, but I see the look in his eyes. He's worried that I might be serious. "You can't move against me. Not now I have Vinnie and my secret backer behind me."

I see that piques the interest of everyone in my family, as they all freeze to hear more about this secret backer. Obviously, I know very little, but I've been playing my brothers at poker since I was a kid. I know how to bluff. "It's hardly a secret. Some of your men have a very loose tongue. When do we get to meet V?" I ask, and I see Brandon's eyes widen in shock. I also don't miss the way he tries to discreetly look over at Bree. Does she know this V person? She doesn't say anything.

"You will meet him when the time is right. He has big plans to get his revenge."

"Oh, fuck!" Bree shouts, as she holds her stomach, clearly having a contraction. We all move towards her slightly, but the

growl she lets out has us all freezing on the spot.

When her contraction finally dies down, before the paramedic can move her into the ambulance, her eyes widen in shock as she puts together the pieces of the puzzle only she can see. “At first I thought Mortimer Whitlock was your backer, and I still think he is, but the secret backer you’re talking about...it’s my father, Vernon. Isn’t it?”

Brandon’s eyes widen, and Bree has somehow managed to wipe the smug smile off his face. “Congratulations on your guess. Don’t worry, he’s not in the country just yet. But I know he’s looking forward to a very cosy family reunion when he returns. As for Whitlock, he always backs people he sees potential in.”

Before Bree gets the chance to answer, and to get herself even more wound up, Liam answers for her. “You can tell Vernon, the minute he steps foot on British soil, a kill order will be issued for him, and we will tell people to shoot on sight. For now, I won’t threaten Whitlock, or you. But let me make something very clear, if my sister dies, I will personally remove your head from your body and stick it on a spike. If by some miracle she pulls through, I will keep an eye on you. If this boy here gets so much as a cut or a bruise, I will kill you. Do I make myself very clear?” Liam threatens, his voice a low growl that scares even me, and I know he’d never hurt me. But I can hear the pain in his tone. He’s spent his entire life trying to keep Ryleigh and me safe, and so for her to get injured like this, of course he will blame himself. But I don’t blame him for prioritising his wife and unborn baby. That’s a choice nobody should ever have to make, and I think Liam picked correctly. I know Ry would agree with that, too.

“Great, now all that’s out of the way, can we all get in the fucking ambulances, please?” shouts Kellan, as he herds us into them like cattle. I notice the paramedics are hiding behind their rigs, terrified thanks to the guns being pointed at us.

Once everyone is in, Shane leads Brandon and his men back inside, realising that the paramedics won’t come out of hiding until the weapons are gone. Once they are sure they’re

safe, they climb in and start driving. I have a feeling we're going to have to give these nice people a very large tip.

My brain feels like it's about to explode as I struggle to take in everything that happened today. That's when I feel Kian slide his fingers between mine, clasping our hands together. I relax, sagging against him as I lay my head on his shoulder. I'm suddenly very fucking exhausted. But I made a promise. If I got Kian back, I had something important to tell him, no matter the situation.

I'm just about to start speaking, when he beats me to it. "Beautiful, you have no idea how terrified I was when you burst in through that door and they started shooting at you. I was equal parts terrified, and so fucking turned on. You pulled that trigger like a skilled warrior, and it was so hot to see. I mean, I never want to see it again, but as a one off, it was amazing. I can't believe you would risk your life to try and save me."

I shift in my seat so I'm facing him, and I take his cheek in my hand, loving the feeling of his stubble against my skin as he presses into my touch. "Why is it so hard to believe? You'd have done it for me."

"Yeah, but that's different. I dive headfirst into fights all the time, but you don't," he counters, and I can't help but smile.

"Kian, I will always fight for you. When I found out you were gone, I felt like I couldn't breathe. I genuinely worried that if anything happened to you, my heart wouldn't know how to start beating again. From the moment I met you, my heart has been beating for you. We were made for each other, and I'm so fucking sorry I didn't get a chance to tell you this before. I was waiting for the perfect moment, but now I know there's no such thing. All that matters is the perfect person and the perfect words. I love you, Kian O'Shay. I love you with all my heart. Even when you're being a cocky asshole that I want to punch, I still love you. I think I will always love you. My heart was made for you, to beat with yours."

Kian's smile widens so much a small crack of blood appears in the corner, but he doesn't care. His stunning blue eyes sparkle as he leans closer to me. "My heart was made for yours, too. I've loved you since the moment I first laid eyes on you. You are so beautiful inside and out, and I am never letting you go."

Kian leans forward and presses his lips to mine. I can taste the slight copper as his blood seeps onto my lips, but I don't care. All that matters is I have my guy back. My Kian.

He pulls away far too quickly for my liking, and looks around at the fact Declan and my dad are both trying not to look at us, but it's obvious they can hear us. I chuckle as a blush spreads across my cheeks. Kian leans in and whispers in my ear, so only I can hear. "When I'm all better, I'm going to take you back to our bedroom, and I'm going to spend a long fucking time showing you how much I love you."

"I will hold you to that," I whisper in reply, loving the way he shivers when my breath hits his ear.

Just as I lean in to cuddle Kian, the paramedic driving opens the window so he can talk to us. "I've just had an update from my colleagues. They managed to get the girl's heart started again, and they rushed her into the operating theatre. She's still in a lot of danger, but I thought you would want the update."

"Thank you," Desmond replies, his voice a croak as he tries to hold back the emotions I can see flickering in his eyes. He's trying not to cry from the pain of almost losing his little girl. "Can you get an update on my daughter-in-law, too, please? She left before we did."

"Yes, of course. She's been admitted to labour and delivery. She's in labour, but they're giving her some medicine to try and stop it. They're also giving her some medicine to help the baby breathe if it is born now. You won't be able to go up to the delivery suite, but your son will be able to use his phone to update you when he can."

"Fuck, Beautiful, this has been one hell of a day. I'm just glad I get to end it back in your arms. For a long time, I didn't

think I would ever get that again,” Kian says, as he strokes my hair off my face, so he can look into my tear-stained eyes.

“Everything’s gone to shit. Bree might have her baby early. Ryleigh might die. Shane is living with the enemy. Bree and Mia’s fathers are working together to plot our demise. And don’t even get me started on your injuries. But do you know what I feel worse about? I feel bad that I’m actually happy because nothing too bad happened to you. I convinced myself that I’d lost you, and now that I know I haven’t, I’m over the fucking moon. Don’t get me wrong, I’m gutted for all the other shit, but I’m happy that I get to tell you how much I love you. It’s something I didn’t think I’d get a chance to do.”

“You can tell me you love me any time you want. I plan on telling you all the time. Yes, there’s a lot of bad shit happening, but we will pull our family back together. We will fight all our battles as a family. I’m so proud to be part of the Doughty family because, as well as being a little crazy and ruthless, they’re fighters. These are mere hiccups on the road. We’ll skate past them and get our family back to normal. I promise, no matter the enemy, I will stand by your side. You are stuck with me from now on.”

“Good, because I never want to lose you. I love you, Caveman.”

“I love you too, Beautiful.”



What did you think? It's only a little cliffhanger! I'm sure you can all wait patiently for book six! Can't you?

If you enjoyed reading **Fighting To Be Free**, and you want more, then you need to pre-order the next book now.

The Time Is Now is Ryleigh and Shane's story. It follows what happens when Shane has to leave the new life he's created for himself, to become the man he was always supposed to be.

When their friendship is put to the ultimate test, and they find themselves on opposite sides of the battlefield, can they survive?

This is a friends to lovers, dark mafia romance that will pull on your heartstrings and leave you desperate for more.

Pre-order here: <https://geni.us/TTIN-BB>



My BETAs - Zoe-Amelia, Amanda, Kerrie, and Anna - I am so lucky to have you girls by my side. You always work so hard to read my stuff in such a short time frame, and you always get my characters. Thank you for all your support.

Nikki - I'm very lucky to have you as my PA, working hard to get me organised. Thank you for all your help and support.

Daisie - Thank you for coming on board to help me as my social media assistant. You are so lovely, and I wish you all the best in your book journey.

Amber - Thank you for helping me edit my book. I'm so pleased you enjoyed Kian and Freya's story.

Dez at Pretty In Ink Creations - You are amazing, and as always you've done a stunning job of bringing Freya and Kian to life. I can't wait to see what you do with the rest of the series.

The Luna's - thank you to all my family for your love and support. Especially Mr Luna who always stands by my side and pushes me when imposter syndrome is hitting me hard. I love you all.

LUNAtics - You guys are the reason I get to live my dream every day. Thank you for picking up my books, reading, and loving my characters as much as I do. I wouldn't be able to do this without you, and I will always be grateful and humbled by your support!



Emma Luna is a USA Today Bestselling dark romance author from the UK. In a previous life she was a Midwife and a Lecturer, but now she listens to the voices in her head and puts pen to paper to bring their stories to life. In her spare time, when she should be sleeping, she also loves to edit, proofread, and format books for other amazing authors.

Emma's books are dark, dangerous, and devilishly sexy. She loves writing about strong, feisty, but underestimated women, and the cocky, dirty-mouthed men they bring to their knees.

When Emma isn't writing, promoting, or editing books she can be found napping, colouring in adult colouring books, and collecting novelty notebooks. She also enjoys coffee and gossiping with her mum, playing or having hugs with her gorgeous nephew, who is the light of her life, and curling up on the sofa to watch a film with Mr Luna. Oh and for those of you that don't know, Emma is a hardcore Harry Potter fan—Team Ravenclaw!!

Thank you for taking a chance on a crazy Brit and the voices inside her head. That makes you a true LUNATIC now too!



I absolutely love chatting and catching up with readers. I love letting you know what books I'm working on, what I have coming up next, and my new releases. So, don't be afraid to come and say hi, or drop me an email. If you love my characters, tell me!!

If you want to find out all things Emma Luna before anyone else, you can join my newsletter here:

<https://www.emmalunaauthor.com>

If you have facebook, you can join my reader group for exclusive news and giveaways:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/emmaslunatics>

If you would like to check out any of Emma's other books or stalk her in more places, you can find everything you need here:

<https://www.linktr.ee/emmaluna>



ALSO BY EMMA LUNNA



SINS OF OUR FATHERS SERIES

Book One - [Broken](#)

MANAGING MISCHIEF

Book One - [Piper](#)

BEAUTIFULLY BRUTAL SERIES

[Black Wedding](#) - Bree and Liam's Story

[Dangerously Deceptive](#) - Kellan's Prequel

[Trust In Me](#) - Kellan and Mia's Story

[The Ties We Break](#) - Declan and Belle's Prequel

[Fighting To Be Free](#) - Kian and Freya's Story

[The Time Is Now](#) - Ryleigh and Shane's Story

WILLOWMEAD ACADEMY - CO- WRITE WITH MADDISON COLE

[Life Lessons](#)

TWISTED LEGENDS COLLECTION

[Under the Cover of Darkness](#)

STANDALONES

[I Was Always Yours](#)

ANTHOLOGIES

[Ours To Keep: A Why Choose \(RH\) Anthology.](#)