

A romantic couple is shown in a close embrace, kissing. The man is on the left, shirtless, with a beard and dark hair. The woman is on the right, with long brown hair, wearing a light-colored top and a ring. They are both smiling and looking at each other. The background is a soft, out-of-focus bokeh of warm colors, including pinks, oranges, and yellows, suggesting a festive or romantic atmosphere.

# KEENAN

LUCKY IRISH BOOK FIVE

ANNA CASTOR

**KEENAN**

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LUCKY IRISH 5

ANNA CASTOR

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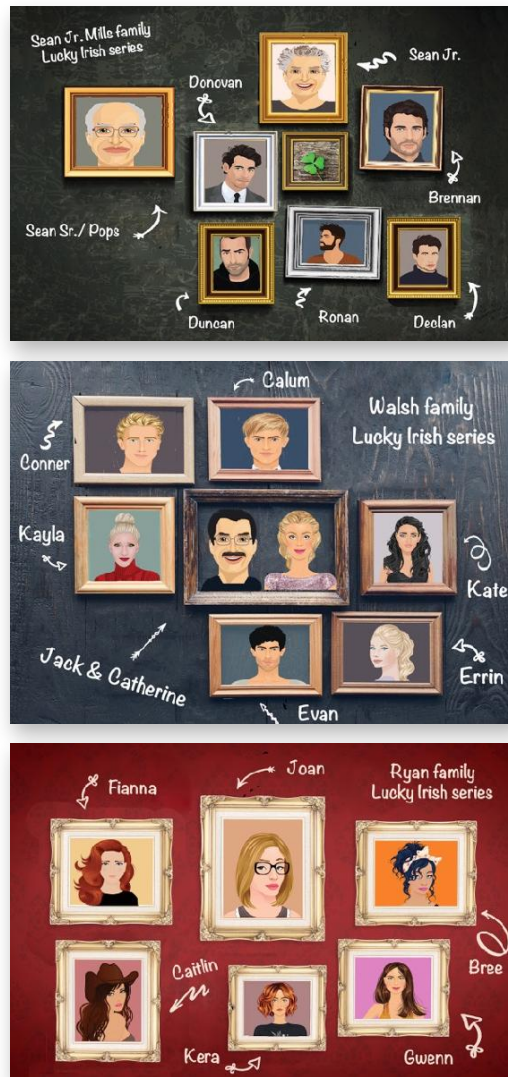
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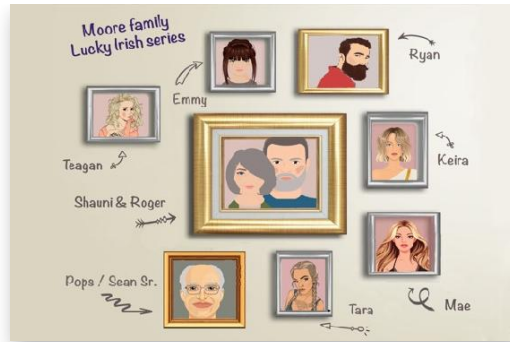
About the Author

# INTRODUCTIONS TO THE LUCKY IRISH SERIES - AUSTIN

Families in book 1 - 2:



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Rod Walker family  
Lucky Irish series

Ross & Abigail



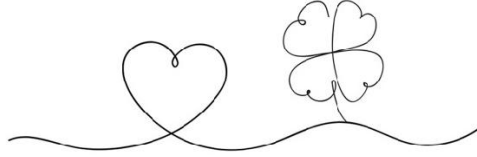
Rod & Ellis  
+ 01.01.2003



Mia



Noah

**KEENAN**

**K**eenan Mills tightened his grip on the iron wire fence in front of him. His eyes zeroed in on his cousin Ronan dodging the roundhouse kick from his opponent by just a hair.

With only asphalt under his feet and iron wire fences surrounding him, Ronan was in his element in this makeshift cage fight.

As a muscular guy himself who often trained in the gym with his brothers and cousins, Keenan wasn't intimidated easily. But these underground fights in deserted warehouses gave him the creeps as they attracted the craziest fuckers in Austin, Texas.

Keenan knew if the action in the cage didn't do it for the spectators, these maniacs would sniff out the weakest in the crowd to taste some blood on their own.

"Another one bites the dust," Keenan's brother Aiden said after Ronan knocked his opponent out.

A guy next to Aiden snorted white powder from the tip of a key and a fight broke out on the other end of the warehouse.

"Okay, where are Dunc and Ro? We need to get the hell out of here," Keenan said. He wouldn't hang around this dump a minute longer.

"They'll be here in a sec," Aiden said, unfazed. He'd probably seen plenty of craziness since he'd never missed a fight of Ronan.

“I need to get back to Tommy.”

As a responsible, single dad to a five-year-old son, he had no business being here.

“Tommy is fine. You know our sis has everything under control.”

Keenan took a deep breath while pinching the bridge of his nose. Sure, his sister Deirdre would have everything under control. But Keenan had a responsibility to his son.

If something would happen to him, his son would become an orphan because Tommy’s mother was out of the picture.

The howling sound of a microphone held too close to the speaker echoed from the bare walls of the warehouse. “Listen up, fuckers. Now that our main fight is done, we have a little treat for ya’ll before we head out.”

Hoots and hollers shifted the energy of the crowd. Nasty comments about snatches and other degrading words had Keenan clenching his fists.

A woman entered the makeshift cage. She matched Keenan’s six-foot height and with muscles upon muscles, a crooked nose and a masculine jawline, she met his stereotype of a female fighter.

“With three K.O.’s under her belt and seventeen wins... welcome Paula the Plower.”

Aiden laughed beside Keenan and said, “Whoever picked out that name for her did a banged up job.” He fake shuddered and said, “Normally I’m all for women on top, but damn... I think she’d break my dick if she sat on it.”

Just when Keenan wanted to say something in Paula the Plower’s defense, a young woman with a fresh spring in her step entered the cage. Bouncing on her feet, the tight braid on her back tapped the spot right above her firm butt.

Even in the dim light of the warehouse, her carrot red hair stood out from everyone else. Her porcelain skin almost matched the white tape on her knuckles.

The referee announced the new girl but his words got lost in the crowd as the men went berserk at the sight of this sexy woman in tight spandex. His dick twitched at the sight of her curves, but her wide blue eyes took his breath away.

While staring at her, the uproar of the shouting men in the crestfallen warehouse faded into a dull background noise. He glanced over to the fences on the opposite side and wondered if he resembled any of these horny bastards drooling over her.

She seemed in a trance and didn't acknowledge the assholes calling out to her. She moved gracefully to get away from a grabby pair of hands sticking through the fence.

Paula the Plower went in for the kill the moment the fight started. Her nickname instantly made sense to him when she tried to plow the redhead to the ground. A cold sweat broke out on his skin. He wanted to protect the intriguing young woman that captivated him from the moment she'd stepped into the cage.

A guy behind Keenan cheered, "Luria... Luria..." when the redhead simply jabbed Paula the Plower as if she wasn't almost a foot taller and forty pounds heavier.

This Luria girl danced upon her feet, distracting the Plower long enough so she could deliver another jab to her jaw.

"Damn, that Luria fighter is good," Aiden said.

"And hot as fuck," he continued.

Keenan bit the inside of his cheek to prevent him lashing out at his brother for checking out Luria.

"Nice round ass..."

Keenan shoulder checked his brother and said, "Shut the fuck up."

The surprise on Aiden's face almost made Keenan chuckle. Yeah. Ever since Tommy, Keenan rarely swore anymore. There was something about this feminine, sexy woman who fought the giant and, against all odds, seemed to win.

"It's like that, eh?" Aiden's knowing smirk irritated Keenan, but he ignored his brother. A sudden hush fell over

the crowd when Ronan and his brother and coach Duncan made their way over. Several men slapped Ronan on his back, congratulating him on his win.

Keenan gave his cousin a quick hug. "I'm proud of you, Ro. You really are the best out there, man."

"Thanks for coming to see me fight, Keen. I know it's not your thing. Means a lot."

Ronan whistled through his teeth when his focus shifted to the women fighting in the makeshift cage. "Ah, fuck. You know I'm a sucker for redheads... What's that hot little number doin' there against that fightin' machine? Should I go get her before—"

He stopped talking when that same fighting machine got the wind knocked out of her by this smaller Luria girl. With a preciseness of a trained fighter, Luria slammed Paula against their side of the fence.

They were close enough to touch, and Keenan now understood the need to reach out his hands through the fence like those other spectators did. He clenched his fists by his side. She had the bluest eyes he'd ever seen, making her even more beautiful up close and personal.

Loose strands of carrot hair fell before her eyes. She blinked and ended their staring contest. She moved closer to his side to kick Paula in her gut, and a hint of apples mixed with clean sweat filled his nostrils. The scent of apples surprised him.

As did her whole appearance. When she held his gaze, she seemed so sweet. But on the other hand, she'd just knocked a woman on her ass with the finesse of a professional boxer.

"It's a good thing she already beat that Plover down. She shouldn't be looking into the crowd like that," Duncan mumbled next to Keenan.

The referee took Luria's hand and held it up in the air. "And the winner is.... Luria!"

Droplets of sweat hurried their way down from her heaving cleavage, under her sports bra and over her bare and

toned belly. He groaned at the thought of licking his way up from her damp inner thighs.

Fuck. He'd never been in instant lust before.

Never.

Not even with Tommy's mom.

A man came into the cage and congratulated Luria on her win by picking her up and swirling her around. Keenan placed a hand on his chest, rubbing the pang of jealousy away.

"Hey, Devlin," Ronan greeted the guy walking up to them. The man's raven hair came to his jaw on one side while the other side was shaved close to his head. The haircut and his fighter's physique gave him a badass look, making him fit right in at this place.

Devlin connected his knuckles with Ronan and said, "Congratulations on another win, Ro."

"Did you see the hot redhead?" Ronan asked Devlin. Keenan searched the cage for her, finding it empty.

Devlin spat, "That's my cousin Ryleigh. If I catch you sniffing around, better prepare to eat your dinners through a straw for the rest of your life."

Ronan chuckled but didn't respond. Although Devlin and Ronan had acted friendly toward each other earlier, Keenan understood how any man would try to scare Ronan off since he was a known manwhore.

"Ryleigh? Don't you mean Luria?" Aiden asked Devlin.

"Would any of you fuckers let your cousin fight under her actual name in a place like this?"

Keenan whispered her real name, testing it out. Even though he knew two shits about her, he figured the name Ryleigh suited her better.

"I wouldn't have let her come here at all," Ronan said and cocked his head.

"You obviously don't know Ryleigh, man. There's no holding her back. She's had a taste and now she's hooked. You

know the feeling, Ro. All I can do is keep her safe at these fights and be there for her.”

“You training her?” Duncan sounded eager to work with her as her coach.

“Yeah, along with my brother Kieran. He’s with her now.” Not a second passed before Ryleigh walked up to them with her cousin’s hand on her lower back. Dressed in oversized black sweatpants and a hoodie, she still had every man around her eyeing her up and down.

Ryleigh kept her head down amongst the catcalls on her way over, while her cousin made sure nobody got too close to her.

“You can hit me any time, sexy,” some drunk said while walking up to them, grabbing his junk.

Keenan shoved the man back and said, “Get lost.”

The guy stumbled away, and Keenan held still before Ryleigh. What was it about her? He couldn’t remember the last time he studied a woman so carefully, like he wanted to ingrain every little detail into his memory.

Ryleigh blushed when she looked up from the ground and met Keenan’s eyes. Her upper lip pulled, and Keenan wished to see her full on smile, so he could add it to his memory of her.

Devlin slung his arm around Ryleigh and said, “Let’s get out of here.”

“Yeah, the crowd is getting restless,” Kieran said.

“I know a place we can go,” Ronan said. The twinkling in his eye made Keenan groan. He had no interest in a club with loud pumping music. What he really wanted was sweeping Ryleigh up into his arms. Take her some place quiet and get to know the person behind the fighter.

Damn. Not even fifteen minutes ago, he’d wanted to go home to Tommy.

He followed his cousins and brother out of the warehouse into the darkness of the deserted parking lot. Aiden’s truck was

parked two blocks away in case the cops would show up and write down their plates. It seemed like the others were headed in the same direction, so they talked along the way.

While the rest discussed their next stop of the night, Keenan couldn't get those corn blue eyes out of his mind. Would she join her cousins tonight at some club where even more men would drool over her?

Keenan had fallen behind the rest of the group, and Ryleigh held her step to walk next to him.

“Thank you for pushing that guy away earlier...”

She obviously had a wild streak in her, but the way she'd thanked him, let him believe she also had a sweet side to her.

“No problem.”

He searched for his next words, but he didn't know what to say. Other than being madly attracted to her, what could they possibly have in common? He's a single dad, a construction worker who liked to cook for family and friends on the weekends.

She was a gorgeous young woman who liked to kick ass during illegal fights in deserted warehouses.

Luckily, she filled the silence.

“I've never seen you around these fights before.”

He paused his step for a moment and she adjusted her tempo, while the rest walked on.

“It's not my scene.” It came out harsher than he'd intended. She winced and turned around to walk away from him, but he shot out his hand and held her arm.

“Sorry. I didn't mean any disrespect. I appreciate the sport. But most of these guys out there are—”

“Dumb pricks?”

He smiled at her choice of words. “Yeah.”

They stood in a comfortable silence for a moment before he asked, “Why the name Luria?”



“My dad came up with it and I guess it stuck.”

Devlin shouted for Ryleigh to get into Kieran’s truck. Keenan knew their time was up, but he wanted to keep her with him for a moment longer. He knew he needed to let her go, but her feet also didn’t seem to want to move.

“I’m coming!” she shouted to her cousin, her eyes never leaving his. She took a step closer and placed her hand on his chest.

Ryleigh got on her tiptoes and whispered in his ear, “Luria stands for ‘brave lioness’.”

She shocked the hell out of him when she nipped his earlobe. He felt himself harden for a woman for the first time in years, and he knew he was in trouble.

“Fuck...” he whispered while rubbing his earlobe between his thumb and index finger.

“See you around,” she said with a smile in her voice. He watched her walk away from him before she hopped into her cousin’s truck.

“Man, it’s good seeing you back in the saddle again.”

Keenan didn’t respond to his brother and got into the truck. There was no point in acknowledging him. Aiden would yap on about Ryleigh, anyway.

“Yeah, I like her for you, man,” Duncan said from the back of the truck.

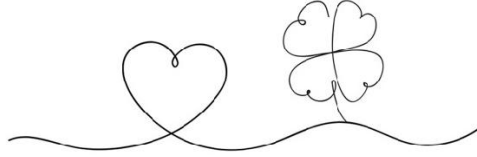
“She’s a fighter, so you already know you got my blessing,” Ronan said.

Keenan shifted in the passenger seat and said to Ronan, “I don’t need anyone’s blessing. I’m not dating her. And never will.”

Why did he tempt himself tonight with something he could never have? No matter how attracted he was to her, it wasn’t like he would bring a girl like Ryleigh around Tommy.

He didn’t know shit about her other than she seemed to enjoy extreme violence in an underground fight. Call him

judgmental, but he had a five-year-old at home, sleeping in his racecar pajamas to think about.

**RYLEIGH**

**R**yleigh Walker stepped out of the bus and started her short walk home. It was official. Not only did she flunk this semester in her bachelor of Social Work, she'd now also lost her job.

Alessio, her boss at the Italian restaurant, warned her he would look for another waitress if she missed one more shift. She wished she'd possessed the superpower of being in two places at the same time.

When her sister Jessie had called her three nights ago to help with her daughter Liv, Ryleigh had grabbed her overnight bag and stayed with her niece so Jessie could work overtime at the hotel.

It wasn't a secret Jessie had been only a paycheck away from getting kicked out of her home. Between the two of them, Jessie's job mattered the most because she also had Liv to care for.

Not that Ryleigh missing her shift and getting fired had helped a thing, since Jessie and Liv ended up homeless regardless and moved back home yesterday.

Ryleigh walked up the driveway and unlocked the front door. Her mother Emily immediately pulled her in for a hug in the hallway. "Did you return your stuff at the restaurant?"

"Yeah."

Emily closed the front door behind Ryleigh. "I'm so sorry, sweetheart. I wish I could've done more to help you girls out."

With a shake of her head, Ryleigh said, “Mom. You’re already doing so much. You take care of all eight of us in this house on top of working at the diner.”

“That’s what moms do, sweetheart.”

“Nah, you’re special, Mom.”

Emily’s frown disappeared when her husband Ron wheeled into the hallway.

“What’s up with the teary eyes?” Ron Walker asked.

Ryleigh leaned down and smacked a big kiss on her dad’s cheek. “I’ve just returned my work clothes.”

“Ah, I’m sure that pompous ass had something to say for himself?”

“Dad... it’s not his fault. If it were my restaurant, I would fire me too.”

“I’m never ordering a damn pizza from his place again.” Ron pushed on the rims surrounding the large wheels of his wheelchair and entered the small kitchen. “They taste like ass, anyway.”

“Dad!”

“It’s true, Ry. We only ordered from Alessio’s because you worked there. I’m sure if we didn’t order there, the place would have been out of business months ago.”

Ryleigh grinned. Like her family ordering pizza once a month on her employee discount was the one thing keeping Alessio’s afloat. She sat down next to her father, who rolled up to his empty spot at the head of the dinner table.

“I know how you love those breadsticks, Dad. It wouldn’t offend me if you’d still—”

“I don’t think ordering from that dump would put family \_\_\_”

She finished their family motto for him, “Family first... yeah, I know, Dad.”

“Okay, enough about that weasel. What are you going to do now, my sweet lioness?”

Ryleigh smiled up at her father. She loved his nickname for her and even used the unusual name Luria during her fights because of its meaning ‘brave lioness’.

Thinking back on her fight a few months ago, the handsome stranger popped into her head. Whenever she closed her eyes, his raven hair with the matching close shaved beard and emerald eyes appeared.

She hadn’t seen him since that night. It shouldn’t disappoint her because he’d already told her the underground fights weren’t his scene.

Remembering his penetrating gaze gave her goose bumps, even now. She loved how his eyes never left her from the moment she’d stepped into the cage till the moment she drove away in her cousin Kieran’s truck.

How she’d been brave enough to take the stranger’s earlobe between her teeth, she would never know. It had all been so out of character for her.

Ryleigh groaned and rubbed her forehead with her palm. He probably figured she was the type of girl who hung around these brutes and criminals, giving it up to whoever, whenever. It couldn’t be any further from the truth. But then again, he didn’t know that.

“You’ll find a new job, Ry. I know you will,” her dad said, thinking she’d been depressed about losing her job.

Although losing her job sucked some huge monkey balls, the real reason she’d felt unbalanced was she couldn’t stop thinking about a man she would never see again.

She’d asked her cousin about him once, but Devlin had immediately shut her down. He warned her that even though he didn’t know the guy; he knew his friends were all players.

After talking to Devlin, she did what her friends often accused her of; she’d gone milling every single detail of that night over and over in her head. She’d even imagined seeing

in his soulful green eyes that he'd been through something so significant, he felt the need to keep his guard up around her.

Ugh. Devlin was probably right about him. But she didn't get that fuckboy vibe from her mystery man at all. Why couldn't she just get over him?

Ryleigh's niece Liv barreled into the kitchen, followed by her mother Jessie.

"Hey, little koala bear. How was it?" Ron asked and wheeled from the table so she could sit on his lap. Because she'd always clung to her grandfather, Ron had nicknamed the six-year-old koala.

Liv beamed and said, "It was so cool, Grandpa. There was a tree house, and I played with a boy."

Ron arched a brow over Liv's head and Jessie stroked her daughter's long blonde hair that matched her own. "Liv made a new friend, didn't you, sweetheart?"

Jessie eyed Ryleigh for a moment and said, "What's wrong?"

"I told you this morning, Jess," their mother said before she joined them at the table.

"You'll find a new job, Ry. I know you will."

Ryleigh gave her sister a lackluster smile. "I really need a job soon, sis. I still have some tuition bills left."

"I wish I could help you with that, Ry."

"It will be okay, Dad."

Jessie's ex Joe was sent to prison after holding Jessie and Liv hostage. With an enormous debt to pay off, Jessie worked two jobs. She did the best she could but often needed help with Liv.

With their father in a wheelchair, their younger sister Billie still in high school and the rest of the family working full time, Ryleigh knew she had to step up and help her sister with Liv so Jessie could go to work.

But by doing so, Ryleigh had missed a lot of classes, which resulted in flunking an entire semester and even dropping out. She already had her doubts about studying Social Work; maybe during this forced break from college she could figure out what to do with her life. Thinking about having no money left for tuition anyway, Ryleigh clonked her forehead on the kitchen table.

Her mother snickered and said, “She’s got that dramatic flair from you, Ron.”

Jessie shoved a white business card over the table and stuck it right under Ryleigh’s nose.

*Keenan Mills*

*Mills Construction Company*

Ryleigh tilted her head. “What’s this?”

“You’ve done so much for me—dropping everything to help me out with Liv... maybe this can be my way to help you out for once.”

“You don’t need to—”

Jessie dismissed her objections and said, “I’ve met Keenan at Bree’s house today. He’s her husband Declan’s cousin.”

Jessie wanted to meet up with Bree after finding out they were related. It had actually been Declan and Bree’s sister Caitlin, who got the call as police officers and saved Jessie and Liv from Jessie’s ex.

On that awful day, Caitlin and Jessie discovered their connection. Ryleigh’s uncle Rob had been absent from his family for years on end. Nobody knew where he’d been. Well, now they knew. It devastated Ryleigh’s family when they found out Rob had fathered Bree and her four sisters with another woman.

Ryleigh and her father shared a look before he said, “When we meet our long-lost cousins, you’ll have to help me out with all the names...”

“I’ve just met up with Declan and Bree today, Dad. I know it’s been a shock to all of us that uncle Rob had five daughters

outside of his marriage. But I really like Bree.”

Before her dad could go on about his brother being a disloyal cheat for having a secret family, Ryleigh waved the business card in the air.

“What does this Keenan guy has to do with me being unemployed?”

“He’s looking for a nanny. Tommy’s around the same age as Liv.”

Liv jumped over from her grandfather’s lap to Ryleigh’s and said, “I don’t want you to work for Tommy.”

“Why?”

“Because I’ll miss you. I don’t want you to live with Tommy,” Liv’s bottom lip wobbled as she spoke.

“I’m not going anywhere—”

“Ry, if you’d take this job, you’re supposed to live with Keenan and Tommy full time,” Jessie said.

“No way I’m letting my daughter live with a complete stranger.”

Ryleigh expelled a sigh. “Dad, he’s not a complete stranger. He’s related to—”

“He could be family of the queen of England for all I care. I’m not having it.”

“I think Ry should do it,” her mother said, surprising Ryleigh.

“I mean it. It’s about time Ry does something for herself. With us all now living under the same roof, Liv will be home with one of us whenever Jessie works the night shift.”

Liv giggled when Ryleigh wiggled her knees, shaking Liv on her lap.

“Thanks, Mom. I think this job would be good for me. I love children. You know I’ve been a babysitter throughout high school. This job would give me time to figure out my life and I could save up some money...”



Last night, she'd slept in one of the two bunk beds in the room she shared with her two sisters and niece. She would never admit this to her family, but the idea of spending some time away from this crowded house sounded not so bad.

“Hmm. I know you'd be a great nanny.”

“Not great, Dad. The best.”

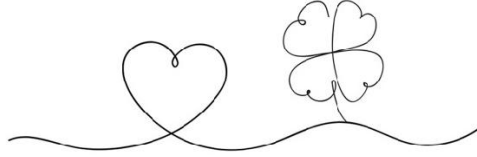
Her father smiled at the spunk she reserved for bantering with her family.

“That's my girl. So you're really doing this?”

“He still has to hire me, Dad...”

Ryleigh smiled at her father as he waved her objection away. The idea of helping this Keenan guy and putting herself first for once excited her. She stood from the table in search of her phone.

## KEENAN



**K**eenan closed his eyes under the shower spray and his thoughts immediately went back to a certain red-haired enigma. It blew him away that after months of thinking about Ryleigh, he'd actually met her sister at his cousin's house yesterday.

Jessie suggested her sister could help Keenan out with Tommy after he'd mentioned he couldn't find a trustworthy nanny. At the mere mention of the name Ryleigh, his palms got sweaty. When she showed him a picture of *his* Ryleigh, he didn't want to let go of the picture and insisted Jessie that she should have her sister call him about the job.

Although his cousin Declan and his wife Bree suspected something weird was going on with him when he kept staring at her picture like a lunatic, they didn't press him about it—for which he was grateful.

Tommy couldn't adjust at his daycare after his mom left them. When Keenan picked up an inconsolable child for three weeks straight, he'd agreed with his mother that he should let her and his sisters help him with Tommy.

A full-time nanny would give Tommy more structure, especially now Keenan was about to take over his dad's construction company.

He had no idea what in the hell possessed him to ask Ryleigh of all people to work for him. She hadn't recognized his voice when they talked about the nanny job over the phone yesterday.

He'd been nothing but professional and it hadn't felt right to bring up meeting her at fight night. He'd asked all the right questions one should ask a potential nanny. Ryleigh had impressed him with her answers on his extensive list of 'what would you do if...'-questions.

After contacting all four favorable references of other families she'd babysat when she'd been younger, he'd invited her over to meet his son today.

The doorbell rang, and he panicked for a moment before he realized it couldn't be Ryleigh because she would come over this afternoon.

Keenan slammed the frosted shower door shut behind his naked ass with unnecessary force. Was it too much to ask to enjoy a three-minute shower?

How sad had his life become if standing a few minutes under a scalding spray with his eyes closed, matched the feeling of a three-day spa retreat? He snatched a soft towel from the towel radiator and slung one end over his shoulder, making quick work to dry his back.

The doorbell rang a second time, and a giddy laugh from his son Tommy traveled up the stairs.

Keenan stuck his head through the bathroom door into the hallway. "I'm coming!"

At least his son wouldn't open the door. Not because he would listen to his father for once. No. It had everything to do with Keenan locking the doors downstairs before showering.

"Dad! She's not going away. And I gave her my scary face..."

A soft smile tugged at Keenan's lips. He had a direct visual of his son sticking two fingers on his upper eyelids and pulling the skin to his eyebrows. He would make his eyes turn white while peering down his nose. And to compliment the look, Tommy often stuck out his tongue to reach the tip of his button nose.

"Tommy Aiden Mills," Keenan used his dad voice in a half-assed attempt to stop his son from scaring the caller at

their front door.

“She’s laughing, Dad.”

Keenan folded the towel around his hips and tucked the end in at his waist. He didn’t bother putting something on for a random door-to-door salesperson.

If she hadn’t annoyed him by ringing the door multiple times, he would have taken the courtesy to produce some jeans before opening the door. He let his chest air-dry since the Texas morning sun had already warmed his two-story house.

He descended the stairs two at a time and ruffled Tommy’s golden hair when he passed him on his way to the front door.

“Did you clean up your plate?”

Keenan didn’t need to glance around the corner to know Tommy’s plate still laid on the kitchen table.

“Oh, eh, I forgot...” Tommy turned on his heel and fled into the kitchen.

Keenan finally opened the door, and his hand flew to the knot in his towel so his jaw would be the only thing dropping to the floor.

“Ryleigh...” he said after a sharp intake of breath.

Shit. She’s already here.

The same piercing eyes that had haunted him these past months traveled from his bare feet up to his hairy legs, over the fluffy towel that now seemed miraculously shorter than when he’d folded it a minute ago. Did her stare linger on his groin before she eyed his slightly damp chest? He shifted his weight and cleared his throat.

Ryleigh shot her head up and said, “Hi, Mr. Mills.”

It shocked Keenan she didn’t seem to recognize him. Damn if that didn’t hurt his ego. Her calling him Mr. also didn’t help. Being a single dad for the past three years might have aged him, but he still had two years left in his twenties.

“Please, call me Keenan.”

She stared at him for a moment, and her cheeks turned crimson. “I’m supposed to meet Tommy today?” her full lips moved, but it took him a few extra seconds to process her words.

He took a step back and said, “I’m sorry I’m not dressed. I thought you’d come by this afternoon? But please, come in.”

She passed him in the doorway and seemed unsure for a moment before she righted her shoulders and said, “I’m sorry, but didn’t you ask me to come over in the morning?”

Had he said that? His mind had been all over the place during their phone call. She was probably right. “I’m sorry, my bad.”

A minty scent followed her inside his home. And a lingering smell of... cigarettes.

“You’re a smoker?” he said with a scrunched up nose.

She whirled around in the middle of his hallway and her lime green sundress swished. Ryleigh met his eyes. “Not anymore. I put out my last one,” she glanced at her watch, “Five minutes and forty-five seconds ago.”

Uh-huh. One brow rose to his inky, damp strands of hair.

She waved her hand in the air and said, “You don’t believe me. It’s written all over your face.”

“I just didn’t expect you to smoke, that’s all. But if you don’t smoke around my son, or in the house, I’ve got no problem with it.”

“I knew you didn’t believe that I’ve quit,” she said with a smile that lit up her face, like she prided herself in already reading him like an open book.

He closed the front door behind him and took a step in the kitchen’s direction, where he heard Tommy mimicking racecar sounds. He tightened his already firm grip on the knot in his towel when he passed her on his way to his son.

“Come, let’s introduce you to Tommy so I can put some clothes on.”

Had he imagined that cute blush creeping up her cheeks following his words? Okay, opening the door half naked hadn't been the most professional way to welcome his new nanny into his home.

If he'd known it was Ryleigh, he'd made sure to be dressed before answering the door. He took a deep breath through his nose and suddenly worried if it had been a great idea to offer Ryleigh this job. She would live full time with them. Will he be walking on eggshells from now on? Trying to go out of his way to ignore his attraction to her?

"Tommy, can you come out here, please? I want you to meet someone."

His son shouted from the kitchen, "I don't want to."

Inwardly rolling his eyes, Keenan stomped over to the kitchen doorway. His laser eyes brooked no argument as he said, "Now."

At moments like this, Keenan wondered if Tommy's attitude got worse the longer his mother was out of the picture or if it simply was a normal five-year-old way of communicating. His family and friends all knew the score with Tommy. Although sometimes willful, he was a great kid with a big heart. A heart that'd been broken by the one person who was supposed to always be there for him. Guilt twisted Keenan's insides. Maybe if he'd tried harder, watched the signs better... Evangeline wouldn't have felt she needed to leave.

Keenan wasn't sure how and *if* Tommy's heart could ever fully mend again. Much like his own lump of cardiac muscle beating in his chest.

A whirlwind of golden hair ran past Keenan into the hallway where Ryleigh had waited on them. Tommy skidded to a complete standstill and stared at the woman.

"Hi, you're Tommy, right?"

Ryleigh waved at his son, flashing her matching vivid green fingernails.

With Ryleigh's attention on Tommy, Keenan took a moment to admire her animated chatter with his son. Her bright eyes transfixed on Tommy, whose posture relaxed the more the conversation went on. He really should put some clothes on, but the idea of leaving Tommy alone for a few minutes agitated him. Funny how the tables had turned. Tommy was usually the one who didn't like Keenan going anywhere, terrified he'd leave just like his mom.

"Yuck, I hate green."

Keenan opened his mouth to scold Tommy, but Ryleigh laughed and jumped in with a question, without looking at Keenan for guidance.

"Oh, and is green the only color you hate?" she said, smiling and not the least bothered by Tommy's obvious dig at her green nails and dress.

"Orange." Tommy scrunched up his nose.

"Aw, that's my favorite color."

Ryleigh pointed her index finger to her hair. "I wouldn't change my hair color, not even for a million bucks."

"Oh, yeah?" Tommy stepped closer to Ryleigh and lifted his hand in the air as if he wanted to touch her hair. "It looks like auntie Deirdre's hair."

"It does?"

Ryleigh picked up on his peace offering and squatted down to his height. She captured some coppery strands hanging over her shoulder and extended her hair towards him. "If you can guess the smell of my hair, I'm going to make a special treat for you today. Something yummy and I'll promise you it isn't green or orange. Okay?"

His son jutted his chin at Keenan with wide eyes. Yeah, Keenan hadn't expected that either. The brown bag Ryleigh fisted at her side had his cousin's logo and name on it. *Moore Farm*

Ryleigh scored another few points for shopping at his aunt Shauni's farm so she could make his son a healthy treat.

“You’ve got three guesses,” Ryleigh said, and Tommy returned his focus to her. Keenan couldn’t understand what this was all about, but it seemed to break the ice between them.

Keenan snickered when she added, “And don’t say smoke, like your dad. That’s not the right answer.”

She winked at Keenan, and he stopped mid-snicker. Had that been a flirtatious wink? Did she finally remember him? Or was that wink just Ryleigh being Ryleigh?

Tommy stuck out his tongue. “Ew. Smoking is bad for you.”

“I know, Tommy. I was a little nervous before meeting you today. And I used to think I needed a cigarette to calm my nerves. Pretty stupid, right? Because smoking *is* bad for you and I’m glad that I’ve quit. And besides, I had nothing to worry about. You’re cool.”

Ryleigh tickled Tommy’s nose with the same strand of hair.

Tommy beamed at Ryleigh and giggled.

After she nodded at him to go through with this absurdness, Tommy gravitated forwards and stuck his nose in the strands, smelling loudly while closing his eyes. He immediately said, “I know what this smells like.”

“You do?” Ryleigh asked.

Keenan wondered what his son would come up with. He had the sudden urge to run his nose through her inviting wavy locks. Damn. Not a good idea.

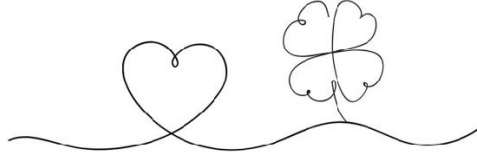
After a few envious seconds, his son opened his eyes and said, “Grandma’s apple pie.”

Ryleigh chuckled. “Is that good or bad?”

“Good.” Tommy and Keenan said in unison.



## RYLEIGH



**T**he upper steps creaked when Keenan walked upstairs, and finally, Ryleigh felt like she could breathe again. When she'd arrived here half an hour ago, never in her wildest dreams did she expect to come eye to eye again with her mystery man.

*Keenan Mills.*

Even his name was sexy.

She hadn't recognized his voice on the phone yesterday since they hadn't spoken all that much during that night months ago.

Oh my, God. How was she supposed to work for him?

To *live* with him?

Would she ever be able to rid the sight of his accentuated ripples heading towards his V from her retinas? To top it all off, the man had a bulge under his towel that'd put other men ugly-crying in a corner somewhere.

What a way to meet your new employer. She laughed without humor and shook her head.

"What's so funny?" Tommy stood on top of a chair in the kitchen, next to Ryleigh. They'd started preparing the special treat of fresh fruit from Ryleigh's go to farm for a shot of vitamins.

Instead of coming clean about lusting over his father, she said, "I was thinking about the expression on your face when I

told you the scent of my shampoo.”

*Cinnamon apple.*

Tommy took another strand of long hair from Ryleigh’s back and stuck it against his nostrils. “It’s the same smell, I swear.”

“Stop smelling Ryleigh’s hair, Tommy.”

He’d changed already? Just when she’d felt more at ease, Keenan entered the kitchen making her stomach drop. She couldn’t seem to get the tremble out of her hand while slicing a pear.

He had said nothing about that night they’d met before. Didn’t he recognize her? Had their chemistry been a figment of her imagination? Or perhaps he didn’t want to talk about it in front of Tommy?

Not knowing where his mind was at, brought out her old insecurities. She closed her eyes for a moment to gather her thoughts. She needed to keep breathing. Just keep slicing and everything would be all right.

“Are you okay?” Tommy asked.

“Sure, everything’s fine.”

Great. Now she was scaring Tommy with her weird behavior. Ryleigh glanced up from the slicing board littered with grapes, bananas and pears, and froze for a second.

Just like she’d thought. Even in a simple white T-shirt and a dark washed blue jeans, the man came across just as hot as without his clothes on.

On his way to the refrigerator, Keenan ruffled Tommy’s hair. Tommy clucked his tongue and let go of Ryleigh’s hair to weave his hand through his blonde hair.

Keenan rested his arm on the open refrigerator door and rolled his eyes, smiling at Ryleigh. She ducked her head and focused on slicing the fruit so Tommy could fill their bowls.

“Can I offer you something to drink?”

Ryleigh gave a side-glance at Keenan, whose emerald green eyes awaited her response. A flutter in her chest had her stumbling over her words. “Wine. Water. Erm, water, please.”

If he’d recognized her, there was no way he would let her nanny Tommy.

Maybe it was for the best. She probably couldn’t stop lusting after her new employer and would make a total fool out of herself.

But then again, after she’d dropped out of college, this job opportunity couldn’t have come at a better time. She would have a steady income for the foreseeable future, a bedroom for herself, and time to figure out what to do with her life.

No. She was not about to fuck it all up. She loved working with kids. Winning Tommy over was a fun challenge. The boy spoke his mind, and she appreciated his honesty.

She had to suck it up. Get over this insane attraction and focus on the reason she stood in this kitchen in the first place—to take care of Tommy.

She smiled at Tommy as he stared at her. His inquisitive eyes traveled over her high cheekbones, and she could take a guess what sparked his interest.

“Do you hate your freckles?”

Questions like these made her day; an honest question with a genuine interest in her.

“When I was your age—definitely. I once took my Mom’s white paint and splashed it all over my face because I wanted to look like the other kids in my class.”

Tommy seemed sad and said, “You did?”

She nodded and filled the last bowl with fruit. Keenan took a seat on a bar stool on the other side of the kitchen counter and set a water bottle in front of Ryleigh. He took the bowl Ryleigh handed him and thanked her.

“Did you go to school with the paint on your face?” Tommy asked.

After a warm chuckle, Ryleigh shook her head. “No, my mom wouldn’t let me. She wiped it off and said I should be proud of my freckles. That they are special.”

“There sure are a lot of them...” Tommy inspected her cheekbones like he was trying to count freckle to freckle.

“There’s more of them in the summer, like now, when I sit out in the sun. But I don’t hate them anymore.”

His eyes widened. “You don’t?”

Ryleigh smiled. “No. I agree with my mom. It makes me different from others, but I think in a good way. Now that I’m older, I see a lot of people trying to look alike, you know? Dress the same, talk the same. And it’s okay if you do. People picked on me for being different so I would never judge someone else. But I like to spice things up a bit. And I’d rather stand out if it means I can be myself.”

For a moment, Ryleigh let her words sink in, more so for herself than Tommy. She’d really come a long way since high school.

Being a gangly, red-haired, freckled girl made her an easy target. The hand-me-down shirts from her sister Jessie were also a hoot for some of her classmates. Money had been tight since Ryleigh’s father lost the ability to walk in a car accident and lost his job as a construction worker.

Tommy didn’t need to know she’d not only been picked on but also lived with the memory of an incident so traumatic, it still messed with her head.

Taking self-defense classes from her cousin Devlin had helped her a lot to gain confidence. Devlin still trained with her once a week and he even let her fight on a few fight nights. It took a lot of whining and persuasion, but when she finally stood up there in the ring, nothing else mattered but her and her opponent. Being able to stand her own against some of the most aggressive female fighters had done wonders for her self-esteem.

Now and then thoughts of not being good enough, or the feeling of shame for being different reared its ugly head again.

On those days, she would call her cousin and work up a sweat on the mat.

With his shoulders hunched, Tommy said, “I’m glad you’re not at school anymore. I think you’d be bullied in my class.”

It pained Ryleigh to hear this. She wanted to go to Tommy’s school and have a word with those little fuckers.

Keenan shifted on his bar stool and brought himself closer to Tommy. “Are there bullies in your class, son?”

Tommy shook his head but couldn’t meet his dad’s eyes. “No, Dad. Everything’s fine.”

Across the counter, Ryleigh caught Keenan’s pained expression. He opened his mouth to say something, but closed it again.

“I can help you learn some moves—”

She stopped talking when Keenan clanked his fork on the kitchen counter. “No. You’re not teaching my son how to fight. Fighting isn’t the solution, Ryleigh.”

She liked hearing her name fall from his lips but suddenly was aware he waited for her response.

“I didn’t say he should beat the crap out of his bullies.”

“I want to do that! I hate them.” Tommy’s enthusiasm for beating kids up didn’t go well with his father. Oh, shit. Now she’d done it. This was it.

“Tommy! Ryleigh will not teach you how to fight, and that’s final.”

With a hard edge to his voice, Tommy said, “I don’t want to learn how to fight from a girl, anyway. Forget it.”

She stuck out her hand to caress his back, but Tommy dodged her hand and stepped away from her. He avoided eye contact at first, but when their eyes met, his stare lacked any warmth.

“Tommy, I just remembered that I left my hammer at uncle Declan’s place. Can you please go over there and get it for

me?”

“But—”

“Watch the street before you cross it. I’ll be watching to check if you do. You know what happens if you don’t...”

“Yes, Dad,” Tommy said with the exhaustion clear in his voice, like Keenan had warned him thousands of times. He probably had.

When Tommy didn’t acknowledge her when she said goodbye, and left the kitchen in silence, he took a little part of her heart with her. He’d acted like it had been her fault his dad was mad at him.

Keenan’s stiff posture and avoidance of any eye contact made her aware she now had to fight to keep this job.

The front door slammed shut and Keenan stood from his seat to peer through the shutters of the kitchen window above the sink. She grabbed their empty fruit bowls and started rinsing them.

Tommy ran like his bum caught fire until he reached the street. He quickly shot a glance to the kitchen window and then made a show of watching the streets both ways before crossing it.

When Tommy had been safely let inside the two-story house across the street, Keenan turned toward her and rested his hip against the dishwasher.

“Threats of reduced tablet time always work like a charm.”

“I should remember that.” She tried to joke, but it fell flat when Keenan rubbed his forehead and opened his mouth.

Before he could get any word in and tell her to take a hike, she said, “I’ve been bullied for most of my life, Keenan. I know that violence is never the answer. Believe me... I know.”

He gave her an understanding nod, and she continued, “The only reason I suggested showing him some moves is because it has helped me enormously to gain confidence. Sparring strengthened me not only physically,” she tapped the

side of her head, “But up here as well. Would it be so bad if I showed him a few things to defend himself?”

“Only to defend himself?”

“Well, the goal is to get him to open up while sparring. It’s not good to let these things fester. I talk about my experiences and in the meantime, he’s learning how to defend himself.”

Keenan stared out of the kitchen window. “I should’ve known something was up. He’s been asking his uncles to teach him how to fight for quite some time now.”

“Oh, right. I’m sure his uncles would love to—”

He placed a hand on her arm and immediately retracted his hand like she’d burned him at the touch. “I’d rather have you do it. I know how my brothers and cousins get. Ronan would go all Rambo on him.”

They both chuckled and quickly diverted their gazes.

“Maybe a female touch is just what he needs...”

She wondered in the back of her mind if it wasn’t exactly what Keenan needed as well. They hadn’t talked about Tommy’s mother, other than he’d told her on the phone that she wasn’t in the picture.

“Would you be all right living here with us? I know we’ve both ignored the elephant in the room...”

Ryleigh shifted on her feet. “Elephant?”

His damn smirk made her stumble her hip against the counter. He shot out a hand to her bicep, steadying her. This time his touch lingered.

“Yeah, you do remember me, don’t you?”

She studied the floor to come up with something smart to say. He lifted her chin with his knuckle and scrutinized her expression.

While he waited her out, she suddenly felt too hot. As if in slow motion, he slowly brought his lips to her ear.

“I remember *everything* about that night...”

He tugged her earlobe between his teeth. Oh, my... talk about a taste of your own medicine. She steadied herself with her palm flat on the kitchen counter.

“G-good. I-I mean... All righty then.”

She cringed at her own words. All righty? Oh, come on. Where was that strong, sexy fighter side of her when she needed it?

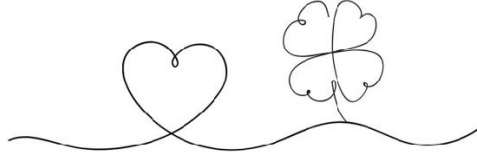
An amused smile formed on his lips. “Can you start today?”

“Sure. N-no problem.”

Keenan winked. “All righty then.”



## KEENAN



**N**ot even a hot minute inside the arcade and Ryleigh and Tommy already left Keenan standing on his own as they ran towards the pinball machines. Apparently Ryleigh also had a favorite game she'd wanted to get her hands on first.

Hysterical music sounded from different machines and other loud video games. He passed several kids with their backs turned towards the dark entertainment hall, too engrossed in their game to notice anything around them.

It hadn't been Keenan's idea to visit the arcade on Ryleigh's first day as Tommy's nanny. He'd taken this day off to introduce her to his son, and he'd wanted to show her around the house today—let her settle in before he would go back to work tomorrow.

But when she'd heard Tommy's sixth birthday was coming up this weekend, she insisted on taking them to this arcade for a pre-birthday celebration.

"Dad! Come look at this one, it's a classic."

Keenan held still next to the pinball machine, opposite of Ryleigh. She kept her head down, pretending to follow the pinball even though Tommy already deserted them for another game.

He wanted to break this sudden awkward tension between them and said the first thing that came to mind, "So, do you come here often?"

She guffawed and finally locked her gaze on him.

“Do you use that pickup line often?”

He hadn't meant it like a cheesy line and was truly interested where her enthusiasm for arcade games came from.

“Never. I don't do the whole dating thing.”

Why would he tell her that? He groaned inwardly. But instead of reacting on his slip of the tongue, Ryleigh moved over to the spot Tommy deserted and plunged the ball into the playfield. He was glad she didn't call him out on never dating. Why on earth would he open the door to that conversation with Tommy's nanny?

But she wasn't just Tommy's nanny, now was she? He couldn't believe he'd already crossed a line between them when he'd nibbled on her earlobe earlier today in the kitchen. Day one and he'd already been inappropriate. Just because she'd done it to him months ago, didn't mean he could tease her back. Certainly not now, after he'd hired her.

Keenan stuck his thumb up in the air at Tommy, who'd taken a spot behind a machine three spots down the long row of machines.

Ryleigh's upper body jerked when she attempted to launch a ball to hit a certain target. He quickly brought his attention back to her pinball and watched her losing the game.

“Ah, shit. Do you want to have a go?”

He shrugged before he got behind the machine. “Sure, might as well play.”

“Ryleigh, you'll have to go next!” Tommy shouted from behind a video game two seats away from them, not waiting on her response before he rushed over to another game.

“Let's make this game more interesting. I've got 121 points. If I win, I'm not only showing Tommy some defensive moves, but you'll also let me spar with you.”

Stunned, she'd actually propose something like that, he laughed. He remembered her moves in that makeshift cage fight. He would never fight a woman—of course. But would

he miss out on the chance of reenacting his fantasy? Ever since he'd seen her in that tight spandex, all sweaty and panting for her next breath—

She playfully pushed his shoulder. “Come on, old man. Don't be such a spoilsport.”

“I'm not old. We only have seven years between us.”

She struggled to stop smiling, and the sudden urge to tickle her made him take a step back. How was it he'd felt more carefree in these past hours than he'd felt in years?

This couldn't be good. Time to put the brakes on whatever the hell this was between them. He couldn't flirt with Tommy's nanny. If things escalated, he'd be searching for a new nanny and breaking his son's heart all over again. All because he had this crazy attraction for the first time in years, and couldn't keep his cool.

Better keep things professional between them. A perfectly normal business relationship where he would spend the foreseeable future jerking off to thoughts of a certain hot nanny.

“You know I'm not one of your friends but your boss, right?”

She fisted her hips and said, “Pff. Are you always this grumpy?”

Keenan denied it while Tommy said, “Yes.”

“Take the bet, Dad. I want to spar with Ryleigh. Don't be a chicken.”

Keenan stepped aside for Ryleigh to use the plunger and propel a new ball into the playfield.

After assuring Tommy was out of earshot, Keenan said, “He's more excited about sparring with you than he's about his birthday this Saturday.”

“Why is that?”

“I think he doesn't feel like celebrating because it also reminds him another year has passed without his mother.”

Ryleigh lost her eye on the prize and let the ball go. Keenan wasn't in the habit of opening up about this painful subject, so he tried to focus on the bet and said, "My turn."

She didn't move from behind the pinball machine, and they ended up almost toe-to-toe.

"I'm sorry, Keenan."

He winced. He didn't want her pity. And he certainly didn't want to think about Evangeline while he was out with Ryleigh—and Tommy, of course.

"It's okay. It's not your fault."

"I know. But I wished I could do something for you."

He took a step back and said, "You already do. You're helping me with Tommy."

A cute smile curved her lips, and she slung her ponytail over her shoulder. In her green sundress, she'd turned a lot of heads at this arcade. Keenan already gave two dads and a teenager the stink eye when they'd checked out Ryleigh's jiggling breasts while running across the room to get to this machine.

"You're twenty points behind... better step up your game."

"I will, no problem," he said.

After a few minutes of her silently watching him play, he knew she was brooding on something. He could just sense it. He dropped his hands from the sides of the machine and whirled on his feet.

"Okay, just come out and ask me."

She opened her mouth and closed it. Ryleigh shook her head and said, "No. Not like this. If you'd wanted me to know, or if it wasn't painful for you to talk about, you would have told me what happened with Tommy's mom during our phone call or even this morning."

For a twenty-one-year-old, she'd acted more mature than he did.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to be such an asshole."

“It’s okay…”

He took a deep breath and righted his shoulders. Although Tommy had never opened up about his mom to anyone before, maybe Ryleigh could give him some kind of support if she knew what he was dealing with.

For Tommy’s sake, he said, “She walked out on him—on us, three years ago. Never seen her again. She packed up all her shit and just left, without a damn note. I know that around every birthday Tommy gets his hopes up and wonders if, on that one special day of the year, his mother would contact him. But there’s been nothing. Not even a damn card.”

The reason he never talked about Evangeline flashed in the beautiful eyes of Ryleigh. Shock, replaced by sadness and pity, stared back at him. This time, she didn’t give him the obligatory ‘I’m sorry’ speech.

She surprised him by putting her arms around his waist and resting her cheek against his chest. He was a selfish bastard because he took her comfort even though it wasn’t smart for them to get close again.

His next breath filled his lungs with the scent of her hair; caramelized apples, pollinated with cinnamon. With no control over his next movements, he embraced her. His hands slid over her back and he held her even closer.

Damn. It felt good to have his arms around a woman for the first time in over three years. Her soft curves molded against his hard muscled body. He couldn’t stop his physical reaction to her, no matter how hard he tried.

Her sharp inhale made her breath hitch, and she stiffened in his embrace. Yep. She’d felt his hardness, all right.

The way her eyes dilated and her pink tongue swept over her bottom lip, showed how she reciprocated his desire.

Infuriating. That’s the best description of this temptress standing before him. It’s been years and years since he last had sex. He’d compared everyone to Evangeline. And nobody ever came close.

But this puzzling woman in his arms? She had him tied up in knots for these past months after only seeing her just once. And now she would stay in his home, taking care of his son. Ryleigh had been the only one who Tommy took a liking to as his nanny so he couldn't fire her to keep his distance from her.

“Shall we go see if we can get something to eat?”

He nodded and said, “You go ahead with Tommy. I'm heading to the bathroom. Be out in a sec.” He needed to catch his breath for a moment, get his head on straight.

He watched as his son's eyes lit up when Ryleigh walked over to him. She held out her hand and without hesitation, Tommy took it. They walked hand-in-hand to the restaurant part of the event hall.

“Come, let's get some grub, sweetheart,” he overheard Ryleigh say to Tommy.

*Sweetheart.*

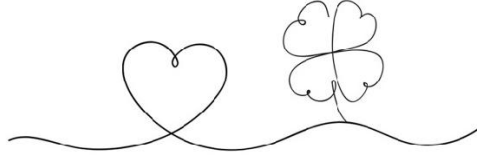
Evangeline used to call their son that. Not like it was some overly special pet name. But it hurt anyway.

Ryleigh and Tommy looked the part of a cheerful mother and son, searching for something greasy to munch on after playing stupid video games for the past hour. He struggled to steel his emotions because in a perfect world it would be his ex walking hand-in-hand with Tommy.

But a perfect world didn't exist, now did it?

Even after three years of zero contact, he still pictured her as the sweet, angelic Evangeline. A petite woman with long golden hair. How could he not think about her when his son is the spitting image of her?

Damn her for creeping back into his mind—a mind that already overflowed with thoughts about Ryleigh.

**RYLEIGH**

**R**yleigh startled awake to a dark room, searching for anything to tell her the time. Something stirred her from her deep sleep and she couldn't make sense of it. A bang echoed throughout the house.

That must have been it.

She patted around the bed for her phone; she remembered she'd been reading an eBook and fell asleep.

Another bang emitted again, this time a clatter accompanied it. What on earth was going on?

On her hands and knees, she moved across the bed and fumbled out of bed, trying to recall where the light switch was.

Having an entire room to herself, with a queen-sized-bed at that, still felt strange even after a few nights. Until this loud bang, she'd slept remarkably well. No snoring siblings, or Liv calling out in the middle of the night after another nightmare about her father.

Another muffled clang sounded from downstairs.

Ever since she'd started training with Devlin, Ryleigh felt confident about protecting herself. But she wasn't cocky by any means. If she went downstairs and found three intruders, she still stood no chance. Crap. What was she to do now?

Keenan's bedroom door was opposite of hers. She should check his room first; see if he could be her back up before she'd check on Tommy in his room next to hers.

She reached the door and opened up at the same time as Keenan opened his across the hallway. Shirtless and his lower half modestly covered with sweatpants; the second viewing of his almost naked body didn't disappoint.

Did this man know a normal dad bod looked nothing like his?

Ryleigh urged her eyes to meet his green orbs and willed them to stay there. No way was she about to check out his shape and the outline of his length in those gray sweatpants. Shit. Keenan probably never heard about a dick print.

She needed to find her tongue to speak. How stupid she must look, gawking like a fish with her mouth wide open?

"I guess you heard it too?"

She brought her gaze up and nodded, still unable to form a sentence.

"I think it's Tommy."

"Oh, right. He probably couldn't sleep because it's his birthday tomorrow," she said.

His warm chuckle made her smile. "It's been a long time since he's been this hyped about his birthday. I think we have you to thank for that."

His kind words surprised her. Keenan has been a man of a few words these past days. After what he'd shared about his ex at the arcade, he'd put distance between them by making sure they weren't alone again. He even stayed in his room after tucking Tommy in at night.

Although Keenan avoided her, she'd loved spending time with Tommy this week. From soccer practice or playing video games; this job didn't feel like an actual job, thanks to Tommy. She couldn't believe how fast she fell for the blonde whirlwind, but she already loved the little guy.

"I'm excited too. I'm finally meeting the rest of your family," she said.

A small tattoo showed on the inside of his arm as he scratched the back of his head.



## *E*

The single letter had been gracefully calligraphed. She wanted to know all about this letter. Where did it come from? Who or what had been special enough for this man to be reminded of, daily? To ink into his skin? Had it been the first letter of Tommy's mom?

As if he'd read her mind, he dropped his arm.

"Come, let's see what Blondie's been up to."

She loved his nickname for his honey blonde son. Tommy must take after his mother since Keenan and Tommy looked nothing alike.

Ryleigh followed Keenan down the hallway. Her insecurities came to join them as she realized she hadn't put on a robe. Strutting down the hall in her white satin pajama shorts and frill-hemmed camisole was not provocative. They covered her up, but she continued to struggle to own her body. Nothing like a midnight stroll in her pjs with the guy she was crushing on to shake that confidence.

Stupid insecurities. Like he would even give her a second glance if she passed him on the street. A man looking like he does? He probably has more than enough women flocking to him.

At the arcade, he'd said that he never dated. But that could mean anything, right? Her cousins never dated, but they had one-night-stands whenever the mood struck them. Who said Keenan didn't do the same? Just because he hadn't this week, maybe he would fall back into old habits after she'd settled in?

The idea of Keenan with another woman made her see red. And knowing she had no claim on him, she got irritated with herself. She righted her shoulders and continued down the stairs like she couldn't be bothered what anyone thought of her and her pjs.

When she rounded the corner, she gasped at the sight in front of her. Tommy stood on top of a chair with flour stuck in his hair. It also was plastered on his pajamas, on his arms and in a four-foot radius from his chair.

“... And you know you’re not allowed to cook without an adult present.”

Tommy stepped down from the chair, dejected. Keenan put his hand on Tommy’s chest, “No, not yet. First, I want you to promise me you’re not doing this ever again. Okay?”

Tommy gave his father a forlorn nod. “Yes, Dad. I’m sorry.”

Outside the kitchen window, the world was covered in darkness. Ryleigh glanced at the oven and read the time.

*03:14 am*

“Wow, you’ve been quite busy. I can’t wait to see what you’re going to make us in the morning, Tommy.”

The shy smile on his face instantly dropped when Keenan cleared his throat. “I’ll take you upstairs and don’t come out before I call you in the morning. Okay?”

“See you tomorrow, Tommy.”

Tommy gave a quick jerk of the head and led the way out of the kitchen with Keenan at his heels. Ryleigh grabbed the vacuum cleaner from the walk-in pantry next to the kitchen and got to work.

After everything had been cleaned, Keenan walked back in.

“Everything okay?”

“Yeah. He wanted to bake cupcakes for the party tomorrow and surprise us.”

She rolled the vacuum cleaner into the pantry and said, “Ahh, that’s sweet.”

“Thanks for helping me out—and for helping me tomorrow with the party. I know you have the weekends off and—”

She walked around the corner, and he’d stopped talking. His eyes went from her face, down to her chest. Her hardened nipples poked against her silky camisole. Why couldn’t they just stay in place and not draw his eyes to them?

Keenan's gaze moved on to her shorts and wandered over her naked thighs. Is it even possible for her skin to prickle where his eyes touched her?

"It's no problem..." her voice came out breathy.

No. She had to stop imagining he was interested in her like that. He's only being nice, thanking her for hanging around tomorrow on her day off.

"Good..." he rasped.

The silence was killing her. She wanted to say something so bad but couldn't think of anything. So she stood stock-still when he came up to her and brushed his thumb over the pebbled skin on top of her shoulder, "You've got some flour on you."

His pinky connected to her camisole strap, and it tumbled down, drooping below her elbow. The cooler night air tickled her bare breast and had her already hard nipple throbbing in its need to be touched.

He took a sharp breath and said, "Oh, shit. Sorry."

When he reached for her strap to pull it back up, the side of his hand connected to the swell of her breast. She gasped, and he instantly retreated his hand.

"I... I'm sorry. I didn't mean—"

"To touch my boob?" She giggled at the absurdness of their situation. His deer-caught-in-headlights- face morphed into an ear-to-ear smile.

"Yeah. Sorry."

She loved how his stubble rasped against his touch when he palmed his jawline.

"It's okay. I know you were only trying to help." She crossed her arm and lifted her strap with her index finger. The white silk covered her breast again, and she backed away from him. He furrowed his brows as if he didn't like their newfound distance.

“All right... I better get to bed,” she said, glancing at her feet.

The heat in his eyes when he'd said, “Fuck” while sweetly stroking her arm with his thumb blazed their initial spark into a class B fire.

Her cousin Kieran, a firefighter, had said once that class B fires with flammable liquids might seem harmless, as they only account for 2% of all fires. But they're even more deadly with a massive 20% of all fatalities.

She thought back to her cousin's words when she realized that her rare connection with Keenan might seem harmless at first glance, but that it's most dangerous after a closer inspection.

Something about this situation made her feel powerful. This handsome man wanted her. He may not like or approved his attraction, but the proof of it was right in front of her. His tented gray sweatpants called out to her like a cool glass of fresh lemonade in the hot dessert.

Her hand connected with his chest and he closed his eyes when she went on her tiptoes. Her lips hovered over his, but when his nostrils flared, Ryleigh halted her movements, realizing his breathing turned heavy from panicking instead of arousal.

Was it painful for him to have her kiss him? Because she wasn't his ex? Or was he fighting to keep his restraint because he didn't want to be attracted to his son's nanny?

She hated to be the reason for his discomfort. She didn't like to see this loving father—this sweet, yet grumpy man off balance because of her.

He probably was too damn kind to stop her when she obviously had been about to kiss his full lips.

With a ninja move, she hurried from the kitchen without saying goodnight. After clicking her bedside light on, she turned and closed her bedroom door. She leaned with her back against the door and her hand splayed over her heaving chest.

What was she thinking in throwing herself at her boss? She didn't want to know what he must have thought of her. She'd misread him completely. He most likely would fire her first thing in the morning. Who wants a floozy to watch their child? Ryleigh sniffed and buried her face in her knees.

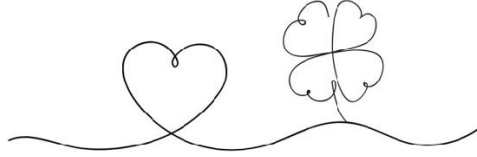
The top of the stairs creaked, and she held her breath. Soft footsteps padded over the hallway floor, and when they stopped right behind her door, her heart skipped a few beats.

A soft thud sounded on the other side of her bedroom door. Like he'd placed his hand there or something harder, like his forehead.

"I'm sorry, beautiful," his voice filtered softly through the door.

*He* was sorry? And he thought she was beautiful? Only after the click of his door closing, she could breathe again.

## KEENAN



“**S**top running, Tommy! The grass is slippery.” Keenan sat up on the lounge chair ready to leap into action, only to watch the birthday boy ignore him. Tommy ran and brought his water pistol closer to Ronan, who’d fled to the far end of Keenan’s back yard.

“Geez, you sound like—Fuck. I don’t know anyone else who sounds this old,” Aiden said.

“The grass is soaked over there. If he slips and bangs his head against the steps to the back porch—”

“I’m sure Deirdre can patch him up.” Aiden smiled and took a gulp from his beer bottle.

“I don’t think that’s what Keen wanted to hear, Aide.” Their sister Deirdre shoved Aiden’s shoulder before she picked up her wineglass from the damp grass next to her lounge chair. She crossed her ankles and brought her glass to her lips.

“Kids fall all the time, just let Tommy be a kid,” Aiden said and looked over at a flailing and shrieking Tommy when Ronan picked him up and threw him into the kiddy pool.

Tommy came up for air and busted out laughing along with Ronan. Keenan exhaled and said, “You can make fun of me all you want, but he’s my boy and I’ll protect him with my life. Even from stupid bumps and bruises. Yeah, I’m that kind of dad. Never knew that side of me existed, but ever since I stood on my own with a three-year-old boy, it may have gotten worse.”

The following silence was deafening. It hadn't been Keenan's intention to kill the mood at his son's birthday party. Deirdre took her ginger hair into her hands and started braiding. She glanced up from her handiwork and said, "It's okay, Keen. You know I see a lot of stuff in the ER and I always hate it whenever they bring a kid in. I can only applaud you for being so loving."

She paused for a moment and said, "We just don't want it to take away from your ability to sit out in the sun and spend a carefree day with us."

"Yeah. Take a load off. Like, I don't know... with your nanny."

Keenan attempted to kick Aiden's leg, but he shifted out of the way in time and laughed. "I know there's something going on. The tension between you and Ryleigh is ridiculous. I noticed what you did earlier when she and Tommy blew out the candles... You were eyeing down her sh—"

With a playful smack to the back of his brother's head, Keenan shut him up. "Don't talk like that in front of Dee."

Deirdre swallowed a sip of her wine and said, "Oh, please. I'm twenty-four. I know how guys talk."

When Aiden stopped laughing at Keenan's irritated expression, he said, "I don't even know why our brother is denying it, Dee. He even took a day off from work this week."

This newsworthy turn of event got her attention. His sister smirked at Keenan. "Oh, is that so?"

"He probably played hooky with the nanny," Aiden supplied helpfully.

If only his brother knew how badly Keenan wanted to play with his nanny. "It was on her first day so I could introduce her to Tommy and show her around. And you know her name, so use it, dickface." Keenan spat.

Deirdre said in a stage whisper, "Can you two please shush? She's right there..."

He'd felt her presence before he'd even seen her. Her joyous laughter followed his grandfather's boisterous laugh as they walked out of the house into the backyard.

He must have known Pops would hoard her attention today. The old man didn't hide his intentions in finding a love match for his boyos.

Standing on the other side of the yard, surrounded by his parents and his other two brothers and sister, Ryleigh seemed to fit right in with his family.

A soaking wet Tommy ran from the other end of the backyard to the three lounge chairs. The late August Texas air made a perfect temperature for horsing around with a bit of water. Not too much water, because of the water restrictions.

"Dee-Dee, help me get back at Uncle Ronan!"

Keenan warmed at how Tommy still called his sister 'Dee-Dee', even after he'd learned to pronounce the 'r'. A few days after Evangeline had left, Deirdre had been the only one—outside of Keenan—Tommy had wanted to see.

Tommy had pushed his aunt Briana away and even his grandmother when they wanted to take him into their arms and comfort him.

Deirdre shared a rare connection with Tommy, and it shamed Keenan to admit, he envied them sometimes. Tommy sought Dee-Dee for guidance whenever he felt like Keenan wouldn't understand him.

And it happened more often lately he'd talked with Deirdre instead of Keenan. Like something bothered Tommy and he couldn't talk about it with his dad. Keenan scratched his beard as he watched Deirdre running on bare feet across the backyard to soak the big oaf that is Ronan.

Tommy flew past them inside the house, and Keenan tilted his head in question at Ronan.

"Bathroom break," Ronan explained before he plunked down on the grass in his wet trunks.



“Tommy’s having a great time, Cuz. You and Ry did a great job. Do you think Ry would join me in the kiddie pool?”

While grounding his teeth, Keenan remembered all the reasons he shouldn’t take the bait from the smirking Ronan. But hearing Ronan shortening her name to Ry, like they were more than acquaintances, rubbed him entirely the wrong way. Not to mention him wanting to lurk at Ryleigh in a bathing suit.

Keenan closed his eyes to count to ten, and her beautiful pink nipple flashed before his eyes. Ryleigh would rock her C-cup breasts in any bikini. And her long porcelain legs could easily wrap around him on this lounge chair while he would nudge her bikini bottom to the side so he could put his finger through her wetness.

“Thinking about something in particular?” Ronan pointed his beer bottle toward Keenan’s crotch, covered in loose swimwear, and laughed with his head back to his neck.

“Fuck off.”

“With Dee still in the house, I want you to spill the beans before she comes back. You’re acting weird every time we mention Ryleigh.” Aiden said while rummaging around in the cooler next to his chair. He slammed the lid closed and handed Keenan his second and last beer for today.

Keenan thanked Aiden and took a long gulp of his cool brew. He shifted in his seat and willed his dick to go down again.

“There’s nothing going on, Aide.”

His brother didn’t rest before having a crack at him. “Yeah, do you know where you can take that lie and shove it?”

Keenan snorted. “My ass?”

Ronan smirked and lowered his voice. “Did you ever had anal play during a blowjob?”

“What the fuck, man. Stop talking.”

“You should try it, Keen. I swear... I had this one girl... she always tickled me down there while she took me into her

mouth. It made me come like a fuckin' geyser."

Ronan laughed at Keenan's discomfort and his eyes lit up even more when he noticed his twin Declan walking into Keenan's backyard.

"Hey, Dec. You're right on time. At least he'll talk to you about what's been going on with Ry."

Ronan didn't exaggerate. Declan and Keenan were indeed best friends who'd normally tell each other everything.

Keenan and Declan shared a look. Declan raised a brow that usually stood for, 'I hope my twin is behaving himself?' Which upon Keenan nodded.

"What's up guys?" Declan said. He startled when Tommy hugged him from the side and said, "Hey, uncle Dec!"

"Hey, Blondie. Happy birthday."

Tommy glanced up at Declan and said, "I'm sorry the twins are sick."

"Thanks, Tommy. They'll be okay."

Declan handed Tommy his wrapped present and said, "Bree hates that she's missing out. She made me promise to swap places in an hour so she can tell you happy birthday herself."

Tommy's eyes lit up, and he nodded. "Cool."

"You can take the present to the table with the rest of your presents, and unwrap it later, okay?"

"Okay, Dad."

He made a beeline for Ryleigh and said, "This is the best birthday ever! Thank you, Ry." When Tommy hugged her, Keenan and Ryleigh shared a moment over Tommy's head when her bright smile mirrored his.

His heart skipped a beat before it pounded against his chest again. For anyone else, these words may seem a polite way of thanking his nanny.

But for Keenan, Tommy's words pained his heart. Ryleigh already showed more interest in Tommy's wellbeing than his own mother had these past years.

"Hmm... kind of a big deal, having a woman caring about our Blondie, right?" Declan said before he settled down in Deirdre's vacated seat. His detective cousin hit the jackpot with his observation. Ronan and Aiden stopped talking and openly stared at Keenan. He felt the sudden need to take off the imaginary tie around his neck, cutting off his air supply.

"She..." Keenan swallowed the lump in his throat and continued, "She's sweet and sassy. Can't cook to save her life, but she puts up a good fight in the ring. She's different from any woman I've ever met. And absolutely fuckin' stunnin'."

Ronan didn't stop chuckling when Keenan shot him a glare.

"And she's so good with Tommy. She only moved in this week, and they already formed a bond."

Keenan huffed a breath and said, "It scares the shit out of me. You all know why..."

What if Ryleigh decides this nanny gig isn't her thing after all? Where would it leave Tommy? Or what if they would start a relationship and she would leave them? He can't have his son's heart broken again. Or his own.

They were spiraling from nibbling at each other's earlobes; him opening up about his ex at the arcade, to almost kissing in the kitchen last night.

Even though none of this was shocking, it still freaked him the fuck out, as it had been years since he'd let someone in.

"We understand, Keen. I would probably react the same," Declan said.

Keenan placed his sunglasses next to his thigh. He took the bridge of his nose between his thumb and index finger and took a deep breath. "He's already fallen for her, man. She hangs the moon in Tommy's eyes. And fuck if that ain't a blessing and a curse rolled up into one big mess."

“For what it’s worth; I think it’s good to see Tommy opening up to a woman. We know he has his issues after...” After expelling a sigh, Declan continued, “I know you don’t want him to get hurt. But think about this for a moment; what if you two are meant to be? Tommy deserves to be happy, and maybe if you’d let her, she could make you both pretty damn happy.”

Keenan let Declan’s word sink in for a moment. Declan nudged his knee with his knuckles and said, “You don’t have to dive right in... Take it slow. See where it goes.”

Keenan shot out of his seat to get away from the stares of his brother and cousins. “I’m going to get some drinks.”

He didn’t wait for their replies; he needed to think for a moment. In the past three years it had been just him and Tommy. And now Ryleigh was chipping away at their walls, getting dangerously close to their hearts.

He stomped into the kitchen and stormed into the walk-in pantry to get away from everyone. He skidded to a halt at the sight of Ryleigh reaching for the top shelf while standing on a step stool. His gaze roamed over her firm legs to where her thighs slid under the hem of her purple skirt.

“Oh. Eh, where do you keep the sprinkles for the cupcakes? Your mother said it’s here somewhere, but I can’t find it.”

Without an afterthought, he closed the door behind his back and locked it.

For once in his life, he was about to let his heart rule his actions. Maybe after tasting her lips, their attraction would fizzle out and he could finally get over his stupid crush and let things go back to normal.

Her cheeks reddened with each step he took. She stepped down to the lowest step and gripped a shelf behind her to hold her balance.

“W-what are you doing?”

Her eyes widened even more when he cupped her face in his hands.

“I wanted to kiss you from the moment you stepped into that cage to fight...”

He kissed her softly; testing if she was on board. But one sweet kiss wasn't nearly enough to satisfy his need. Years without any physical contact from the opposite sex threatened to erupt in the narrow walk-in pantry.

He kissed her jaw, her neck and back up again. She cradled the back of his head with one hand and deepened their kiss. He could tell she loved kissing. The sensual way of their tongues sliding over each other made him moan into her mouth.

Her other hand must have slipped from the shelf because the next thing he knew, boxes of cornflakes tumbled down.

She giggled against his lips and hooked her legs around his waist. “What are we doing, Keen?”

He loved how she shortened his name like his family and friends did. It sounded right. He rocked his erection against her core and she arched her back. She bumped her head against the top shelf, and another batch of cans and boxes fell to the ground.

“Are you okay?”

“Don't stop kissing me... please...” She rocked against him, searching for the right friction.

When she started kissing his neck he said, “Fuck. You drive me crazy.”

“Yes... same....”

His hands slid from her outer thighs under her skirt and rested on her naked globes. His finger slid under her thong and she lifted her hips in time for him to slip into her wetness. He pushed his finger deeper and faster, and erotic moans spilled from her lips.

She was so damn sexy without even trying. He should care that only a door stood between them and the rest of his family. Someone was about to notice that they were away for too long. But nothing else mattered than witnessing her fall apart in total ecstasy.

He added two more fingers.

“Ahh, I... need...” She panted while she rode his fingers.

“You need more?”

“Yes!”

He turned them around and sat down on the stepping stool.  
“Hang on to me.”

She did as he asked and straddled him while gripping his shirt at his biceps.

“I want you to look at me as I make you come.”

She shuddered in his arms. “Oh, yes...”

With her sexy ass resting on his thighs, he pushed her skirt up and slid her thong to the side. A perfect pink pussy peeped from under her skirt.

“So damn pretty.”

“Keen... touch me...”

He didn't need to be told twice. He circled her clit with his thumb and quickly covered her cry of passion with his mouth. She clamped down on his fingers and shuddered as her orgasm hit her.

The aftershocks rippled through her and after a few moments of silence; he slid his fingers out of her to bring them to his lips. After tasting her sweet juice, his dick wept in his jeans. Making her come had been a dream come true. Literally.

He had to put a stop to this before he would do something stupid. Their first time should be in his bedroom where he could lazily explore her body. And without a house full of people threatening to disturb them.

Pounding on the pantry door made them hold their breath, sitting stock-still. He didn't dare to move, and neither did Ryleigh. Unsure who was on the other side of the door, they stared at each other in silence.

“I came to get some dinner in the kitchen, but I didn't know I would find dinner and a show,” Ronan said with a

damn smile in his voice.

The man just couldn't leave well enough alone and added, "Ryleigh, did you make these corn cobs? They're to die for." He just had to make it clear he knew exactly who was hiding in the pantry.

Before Keenan could send his annoying ass on his way, Ryleigh said loud enough for Ronan to hear, "I hope you choke on your corn and a kernel gets stuck in your nose."

"Now that fire is exactly why I like you for my boys, Ry. Although I'm disappointed. You know we fighters have to stick together. You can't do me like that."

She rolled her eyes, and Keenan chuckled.

"I must inform you two lovebirds that the rest is coming in soon to get their hands on the salads and plates in the kitchen. You'd better step out if you don't want to get caught."

"Not a word, Ro." Keenan said while still taking in Ryleigh, searching for signs if she needed his comfort after being busted. Although her cheeks were heated, she didn't seem too embarrassed as she smiled at him.

What was this woman doing to him? He felt like a damn teenager again. Getting frisky at his son's birthday party. He couldn't remember the last time he'd done something like this—if ever. It hadn't been Evangeline's style to take things out of the bedroom.

"I promise not to give you any shit, Cuz." His footsteps became distant and Ryleigh exhaled a deep breath.

"Are you ready to go out there?" He asked her while putting her thong back in place.

Her bottom lip escaped from between her teeth and she nodded. She glanced from the door and back at him again. She whispered, "Whatever happens, I want you to know that I've never done something like this before. There's something about you that makes me forget all reason."

He knew exactly the feeling. His chest ached at her words 'whatever happens'. He needed to be worthy of her trust and

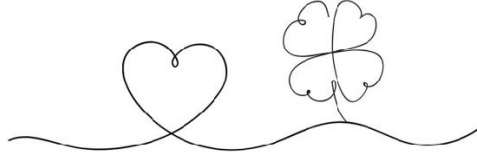
open up to her. She deserved nothing but the truth. His eyes turned serious when he said, “It’s the same for me. And I know we haven’t had the chance to talk about this, but I think we need to take a step back and not rush into things.”

She flinched and said, “Oh.”

“It’s just to see if we can make things work, before we’ll tell Tommy. Okay? I don’t want to hurt him. But I also want to see where things could go between us.”

Her face softened, and she said, “Sure. I know we need to put Tommy first. I understand.”



**RYLEIGH**

**R**yleigh came out of the bathroom in her grandparent's home and stopped dead in her tracks when she overheard her cousin Catriona talking about her in the living room.

"I can't believe Ry is actually living with this guy. He's related to that cop who's married to our half-sister Bree."

Her twin, Nora said in a much softer voice, "The Ryan sisters also didn't ask for any of this, Cat."

"I mean, she even went to the kid's birthday party yesterday and met Bree."

Ryleigh knew her cousin wouldn't be happy she'd met her half-sister yesterday. But Bree and her husband Declan had both been really kind to her. Nobody had brought up her uncle or even asked her anything about Catriona's family.

Keenan's entire family had been lovely. She'd laughed her socks off when Pops told her stories about young Keenan. Even meeting his parents hadn't been awkward like she'd feared.

As always, old insecurities came surfacing at the start of the birthday party. But Keenan's mom had involved her with prepping the food, and after half an hour she'd felt enough at ease to talk to the rest of his family.

Her other cousin, Mia, said, "Stop being so dramatic. She's Tommy's nanny. He's related to Bree. What did you expect Ry to do?"

“Easy for you to say, Mia. You didn’t find out your asshole dad has been with another woman and secretly stayed with her and their five daughters. You can’t tell me how to feel about any of this, because you don’t know how I feel.”

“Guys, come on. Let’s talk about something else,” Nora said.

Ryleigh startled next to the living room doorway when her grandmother Abigail placed a hand on her shoulder. “Since when do we eavesdrop in my home?”

If Ryleigh had been in a better mood, she’d reminded her grandmother that she’d inherited her nosiness from her. After releasing a huge breath, Ryleigh’s shoulders drooped. “I’m sorry, Nanna.”

Nanna gave her a soft smile and said, “Come, let’s join the girls.”

“Were you spying on us?” Catriona shifted to the edge of the sofa, her feet poised to leap to action, always ready for a fight. As her sparring partner, she could read Catriona’s body language like no other.

Ryleigh plonked herself next to Catriona and crossed her arms. “You did gossip about me the moment I went for a bathroom break—”

“Girls, can we enjoy a nice evening after dinner? I don’t like all this bickering. Aren’t you supposed to be best friends next to cousins?”

Nanna sat down in her armchair and picked up her crossword puzzle from the small table next to her seat. She liked to pretend not to listen in on their conversations, but at the end of the night, she wouldn’t have finished a single word of that puzzle. Ryleigh checked it once when she’d been eight-years-old.

“Nanna, you know I don’t want to meet any of them. And now Ryleigh has jumped ship and is working for a man who’s related to one of them. She even went to the kid’s birthday party and met my half-sister.”

“Do you even know how childish you sound right now?” Ryleigh rolled her eyes. She loved their group of four cousins when they weren’t ganging up on her. Ryleigh didn’t have any real friends outside of her family. It might seem sad to others; the poor red, freckled girl who couldn’t make any friends in high school.

She loved her siblings, but her brothers and sisters had their own friends growing up. Amazingly enough Ryleigh found her best friends in her two nineteen-year-old cousins Catriona and Nora, and her other cousin Mia, who’d just turned twenty-two. The four formed a pack of misfits, as they’d called it.

Mia and Ryleigh had forged an unbreakable bond eighteen years ago after the car accident that paralyzed Ryleigh’s father and killed Mia’s parents. The four-year-old Mia and her seven-year-old brother Noah came to live for a while with Ryleigh’s parents until their grandparents took over.

With Ryleigh’s dad needing to focus on his recovery, their grandmother Abigail had insisted on taking in Mia and Noah.

“Cat, you know how I feel about this whole situation. I’ll always love my son, but I’m ashamed to say he’s been a rotten father.” Nanna’s hand shook as she reached for her tea.

Mia stood from her spot next to Ryleigh and crouched next to her grandmother’s chair. She placed a hand on Nanna’s knee and said, “We’re all still in shock. But I can’t imagine how you must feel about all of this.”

“You’re a sweetheart, but I think your cousins are the ones who he’s hurt the most. And when I say this, I mean not only your family, Catriona...” Nanna’s attention drifted over to her youngest grandchild. “I’m also thinking about those five girls Rob fathered and left after you and Nora were born.”

“Oh, so you think he should have stayed with that woman and leave our mother to deal with newborn twins on her own? To raise all five of us without him?” Catriona gripped the sofa next to her thighs and her knuckles turned white.

“That’s not what Nanna means, Cat,” Nora said.

“Isn’t that exactly what he did to that other woman? He left Joan Ryan to take care of five daughters on her own. You don’t want me to wish it on you, but he did exactly that to them.” Nanna’s voice cracked, and she brought her fragile hand to her mouth.

Finding out what her son has been up to had aged her grandmother. It has been no secret they all figured Rob Walker had strayed in the years he’d left his family. He never answered his children’s questions. Aunt Brenda also never spoke about the years Rob had been absent. She’d stuck by her husband and said they all should forgive and forget.

Ryleigh’s grandfather Ross came down from his study and entered the living room. “Girls, I’m going to take your Nanna out for a walk. When we come back, we’ll eat that ice cream Ryleigh brought, okay?”

The four friends all mumbled in agreement. When their grandparents went out for a stroll, it usually meant they would walk three minutes and visit their friends Coby and Merv only a few houses over to enjoy a brandy after dinner.

“Okay, let’s talk about something fun. Mia, how are things at the tattoo parlor?” Nora asked right after the front door closed behind their grandparents.

Ryleigh remembered Mia starting her first day as an apprentice in a tattoo parlor downtown last week.

“Yeah, it’s been so much fun. I learn so much from everyone. There’s this one chick Tara, she’s really cool. She’s got this big tattoo right here,” Mia brought her hand to her chest, “And she has a gorgeous lone wolf on her side. Total badass. She’s also one of the newer members of the staff. I think she likes not being the new girl anymore.”

Mia smiled, and her face lit up.

“It’s so cool you finally work at a tattoo parlor. I can’t wait to have my first tat. I’ve been waiting for over a year to have you ink me, Mia.”

“I’m still apprenticing. But it would be awesome, Cat. I would be honored.”

“I know it’s the enormous elephant in the room, but how is your new job turning out?” Mia said and bumped her shoulder to Ryleigh.

Ryleigh glanced over at Catriona, who chose that moment to pick up all of their drinks to refill them in the kitchen.

“I... yeah, it’s good.” Ryleigh cleared her throat and said in a false cheer, “Great! Actually!”

“Oh, that bad, is it?” Mia furrowed her brows.

“Lemme guess, the kid’s a nightmare,” Catriona shouted as she rummaged around in the kitchen next to the living room.

Nora rolled her eyes and said, “Ignore her. I always do.”

“No, Tommy is an absolute sweetheart. His dad warned me Tommy likes to test the waters before trusting someone new, so I really didn’t know what to expect. But he’s been great.”

Catriona walked back into the room with their drinks and said, “He sounds like a smart kid. Wouldn’t trust a stranger, either.”

“Okay, so the kid is great. You have a steady income. And you have a room all to yourself for once in your life.” Mia counted these points on her fingers.

“There’s only one thing left. The guy’s an ass.” Catriona raised her arm in the air and waved her hand. “Hello, don’t tell me I’m the only one thinking it.”

Ryleigh chuckled at her cousin, who couldn’t help saying exactly whatever came to mind. Most of the times, she loved Catriona’s blunt honesty.

“He’s not an ass. He’s... confusing.” Ryleigh said. She picked on a loose thread on her ripped jeans. She was still grateful ripped jeans with holes everywhere were a fashion statement nowadays. Her mother always patched the holes in the knees of her jeans with hideous floral patches. It gave the bullies another round of ammo to pick on her.

“Confusing how?” Catriona and Nora asked in unison.

“I don’t know,” Ryleigh stood from the sofa and walked over to the walnut display cabinet of her grandmother. Behind the tempered glass doors, Nanna displayed her collection of food shaped erasers on the top shelf.

On the rest of the shelves, Nanna collected her winter village scenes. In the winter, this shelf would be lit up and Ryleigh remembered fondly of being a young girl and sitting before this cabinet and making up all kinds of stories about the tiny dolls that strolled in the snow.

“Nanna and Granddad are coming home in twenty minutes, we all can set the timer on them coming home after their brandy. So you better spill it now, if you don’t want Nanna to spill the beans later to your dad. You know how the two of them get.”

Her cousin Mia had a point there.

“Okay, we kissed.” She ducked her head between her pulled up shoulders when her three cousins hollered at once.

Mia jumped on the sofa and shouted, “I knew it!”

“Come off the damn sofa before Nanna sees you,” Ryleigh grumbled.

With a beaming face, Mia jumped down and walked over to Ryleigh and said, “I just knew when you didn’t call me back this morning something was up.”

Mia’s face fell when Ryleigh nodded and tried to give her cousin a smile.

“Come, let’s talk about it. A kiss is not so bad, is it?” Mia slung her arm around her, directing her to the sofa.

With Mia and Nora next to her on the sofa, and Catriona on the coffee table in front of her, she took a deep breath and said, “We also may have crossed second base in the walk-in pantry during his son’s birthday party.”

She covered her ears with the two nearest throw pillows to block out the second round of whoops and hollers.

“Ah, come on. Talk. Don’t leave us hanging like that,” Catriona said.

Ryleigh lowered the pillows against her stomach and said, “I just want to leave it at that.”

“I know you’re not the kiss and tell type, Ry. But I can tell something is bothering you.” Mia said.

Nora padded Ryleigh’s knee. “It’s okay if you don’t want to share—”

Catriona interrupted her twin. “I need all the graphic details. I live vicariously through you all, remember?”

“There’s not much to tell, Cat. Directly after our eh,... encounter, he said that we needed to take a step back for Tommy’s sake. Just to give it some time and see where things would go between us before telling him.”

After an awful night’s sleep, she had woken up with the need to talk things through with him. Her old insecurities had resurfaced, and she’d milled everything over and over in her head, lying awake in bed.

Apparently, she wasn’t suited for the whole ‘see where it goes’ type of thing.

“I don’t want any of you to judge me for what I’m about to say,” Ryleigh made a show out of tilting her head and eying Catriona in front of her.

Catriona fake-zipped her mouth after she’d said, “Sure.”

“He’s everything I’ve ever wanted in a man. And girls... he’s such a man. How he’s with Tommy... How he makes me feel with a single touch.”

A giddy giggle from her left drew Raleigh’s attention. Nora bit her lip. “Sorry. Please continue.”

“The man is gorgeous. And the way he’s with Tommy would totally melt your heart. These two love each other so much. And I know it’s crazy, but I want to be a part of that. He’s absolutely right to ask me to take things slow between us because of Tommy. But I’m scared to put my heart on the line if his end goal isn’t the same as mine.”

“I think you should open up to him and put it out there that if you continue this hanky-panky, you’ll expect to be working

towards a relationship.” Mia said.

Before she could think Mia’s words over in her head, Catriona already said, “We’ve obviously never met the guy, so I don’t know if he’s the type to string you along. What happened to the baby momma?”

“I... I don’t know...” Ryleigh rubbed the palms of her hands on her jeans.

“I hope for his sake, he’s not married.” Catriona’s lips curled in disgust.

“He told me she left them three years ago, without a single word of goodbye. She’s not in the picture anymore.”

“Hmm. Okay. But is she in Austin?”

“I don’t know, Cat. All I know is that she left them, okay?”

She calmed herself by taking a deep breath through her nose. “You all know about my past and what I had to go through before I was brave enough to say ‘this is me, deal with it’. I saw a picture of his ex on Tommy’s nightstand. She’s like an angel with long blonde hair, a perfect face and a body to die for. And I know I’m not the prettiest—”

“Shut the fuck up,” Catriona said and took Ryleigh’s hands in hers.

“I can’t handle seeing you tearing yourself down. You’re gorgeous, Ry. I mean it. And you know I always mean everything I say. I can’t tell a lie to save my life.”

A tear rolled over Ryleigh’s cheek, and she gave Catriona a grateful smile.

Mia bumped her shoulder. “She’s right, you know. You’re striking. You turn heads everywhere we go.”

Ryleigh shook her head and tugged a hand free from Catriona to wipe her tears from her face.

Nora added, “You don’t even know how beautiful you are, inside and out. You put everyone’s needs before your own and even dropped out of college to help your sister. We all love you, no matter what.”



With a laugh Ryleigh said, “Okay, okay. That’s enough. Thank you all for this ego boost.”

“I can’t wait to come over and have a talk with this Keenan guy,” Catriona said after she stood from the coffee table.

“Hell no. You’re officially uninvited to come over,” she said.

“Don’t care. The man better proves to us he’s worthy of you.”

The front door lock turned, and they knew that would be all about this topic for tonight.

“I’ll be right back with some ice cream,” Nanna said as she bypassed the living room on her way to the kitchen.

Ryleigh’s grandfather Ross passed the sofa and first padded Nora’s hair, then Ryleigh’s and followed the row by lovingly patting the top of Mia’s head.

“Hey girls. Did we give you enough time to share juicy gossip?” He said sitting down next to Catriona on the other sofa.

“Yeah. Lots of boy talk,” Catriona said.

He laughed. “Good. Glad to have missed it.”

“You don’t mean that, dear.” Nanna walked into the room with a tray filled with ice cream bowls.

“I love you, Abby, but I mean it. I’m seventy-three years old. I always thought I’d seen it all, but with our son turning out to be a two-timing—”

“Ross!”

Catriona waved a hand in the air. “No, it’s okay, Nanna. We can all agree about my dad—”

“Can we please not talk about this again?” Nora said before she quickly scooped a full spoon of chocolate ice cream and brought it to her lips.

“The last thing I’ll say about this is that I want to see my granddaughters. These five girls are just as much my blood as

you are. You may not like it, Cat, but they're your blood, too. That's the truth, and I'm not resting before I meet them."

"Jessie said she's working on arranging a meeting with them soon," Nanna said.

Ryleigh gave her grandmother a smile and said, "Yes. She met up with Bree, who lives across the street from Keenan."

"Keenan?" Ross asked and furrowed his gray brows.

"He's Ryleigh's boss," Catriona dragged the word 'boss' out like he has been anything but a boss to her. Ryleigh sighed. It seemed high school all over again, with Catriona outing Keenan as her love interest.

"Hmm. Maybe I'll have to come over sometime next week, Ry. Check this fellow out."

"Ha, poor Keenan. He'll not know what'll hit him when he meets granddad and Cat."

Ryleigh shut Mia up by slamming a throw pillow against her head.

"Stop it, girls. Can we enjoy a little peace for once?"

"Yes, Nanna," Mia and Ryleigh said in unison.

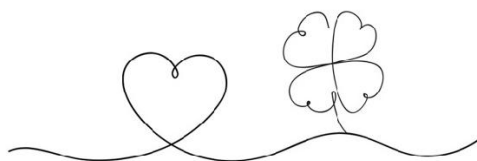
Ryleigh smiled as she watched her family enjoy their ice cream. Coming over tonight had done wonders for her spirit.

Too bad she had to go home soon. She wondered if Keenan would still be up now that he had his place all to himself. What would she do if she found him downstairs? Should she go to her room and turn to fantasizing about him once again? Or should she try to talk with him?

She took another bite of chocolate ice cream and watched the cuckoo clock tick the seconds away. It was time. Time to go home and see where she stood with him.



## KEENAN



**W**ith a sigh, Keenan plopped down on the sofa. He brought his beer bottle to his lips and stared at the television, barely registering the flickering lights bouncing off of him in the dark living room. He'd felt off all evening.

While cooking pasta for two instead of three, he realized that in only a matter of a week, Ryleigh had become a vital part of his family. During tonight's dinner Keenan and Tommy had acted like two ships drifting at sea, calling out to each other on an entirely different wavelength.

Keenan had sent a sulking Tommy to bed early, because he couldn't stand being around his son's constant moping. Was this how it was going to be if he'd messed things up with Ryleigh and she'd leave them?

"Fuck."

He scratched his beard and stared at the television without registering what's been said.

Not only his son had been out of sorts tonight. He'd missed her too. Keenan loved how she joked during dinner and brought out the best in his son. He loved seeing her sitting at his dinner table, period.

He'd missed her stolen glances at him. Her lingering stare whenever she figured he'd been too busy cooking to notice. It made him feel wanted again. Desired.

While it might be the right thing to do, putting the breaks on them as a couple, for Tommy's sake, hadn't felt so right today. He wondered if he wasn't hiding behind his son when in reality *he* needed to slow down things between them.

Because the big question is; could he give her what she deserved? What if in the end he wasn't ready to open up his heart again? What if he'd never be ready?

Would it be fair for him to ask Ryleigh to settle for less? And why should she? She deserved so much better than a seven years older, single father who had nothing left to offer because someone had already damaged him too much.

The sound of the lock in his front door turning made him sit up straight in his seat. His eyes burned from peering into the darkness. Rapidly flickering images of the television danced around the room, lighting Ryleigh up as she entered the living room.

"Hey..." he offered lamely when she said, "Hi."

"I hoped you'd be sitting downstairs tonight."

"Oh?" He tried to act nonchalant, not willing to let her know she unnerved him just by standing so close to him. He took another sip from his beer and placed the bottle back on the coffee table.

Ryleigh stood before him in a white tank top above tight-fitting jeans that showed off all her curves. With the television being the only source of light in the room, the backlighting gave him a perfect view of her silhouette.

The memory of her orgasm in the pantry popped up, and he licked his lips. The vision of her perky tits in that damn tank top tortured him. Oh, how sweet her hardened pink nipple must feel against his tongue.

Ryleigh picked up the remote control from the sofa's arm and turned down the volume of a channel that dedicated all its airtime to cooking programs.

His breath became audible when she took a step in his direction and held still in between his legs. He reached his hand out to her hip but let it fall back on his thigh.

He struggled to find the right words. What should he say?

‘Please stop?’

Or,

‘Don’t you dare to ever fuckin’ stop?’

Her small hands touched his knees, and she softly nudged them to open for her. She stepped in between his legs and her hands traveled up his jeans. When she rested them mid thigh, she leaned in and demanded him to meet her eyes.

“I want this, Keenan. And it may sound cocky, but I know you want this too.”

His gaze ping-ponged from her corn blue eyes to her cleavage that she’d no doubt purposely offered on display as she still leaned forward.

She lowered herself, oh so slowly, on her knees in between his legs. He shook his head softly, not knowing if he could control himself any longer.

“Do you want me to stop?”

Damn.

“Ry...”

“It’s a simple question, Keen.”

He closed his eyes and his shortened name echoed in his mind. She slid both hands up his thighs until they reached his zipper. She held still for a few moments. With his eyes still closed, he nodded and damn if she didn’t immediately pulled down his zipper. She lazily undid his top button to slip her small hand into his jeans with expert precision.

He helped her out by lifting his ass on the sofa, so she could jerk his jeans down with her free hand.

He wasn’t sure if he should open his eyes to ingrain the vision of Ryleigh kneeling in between his legs with her hand on his dick. He was afraid he’d blow his load at the mere sight.

Her fingers enveloped him, and the first stroke made him shudder. Her warm fist could almost engulf his girth

completely. He fisted the sofa next to his thighs as he tried to keep it together.

Her hot breath tickled the crown of his hard length and like it had a mind of his own, his dick jerked in her hand at the feeling. He opened one eye and peeked just in time to see her open her full lips and slip his tip inside.

The sensation of wetness, warmth and suction had him moaning out her name.

“Ry...”

With a pop, he escaped her lips. But not for long as she placed her underarms on top of his thighs and brought her head down. She took him further into her mouth and flattened her tongue against him.

Her tongue followed the veins and ridges of his length. She moaned around him as she took him back against the back of her throat. The sweet vibrations turned bittersweet when he already felt the need to come.

With one hand gliding through her carrot red hair, he said, “Ry... look at me.”

She sat on her knees on the floor between his legs and glanced up from beneath her lashes at him. What a fucking magnificent sight.

He let go of her hair and jerked his jeans down to his ankles.

With his movements, Ryleigh had let him slip from between her lips. Just when she'd been ready to continue, he picked her up with his calloused hands, so she stood in front of him.

She giggled when he opened her jeans and unceremoniously pushed them down her legs. She slipped out of her sandals and kicked the jeans to the side. He kicked his jeans on top of hers and with both hands on her ass; he pulled her on top of him. She straddled his lap and immediately brought her lips to his.

He opened up for her, and their tongues entwined. She moved her lower body against his and moaned when he'd hit the right spot.

He slid his hand between her legs while she lowered herself to give him better access to her slick warmth. He slipped a finger under her underwear and didn't hesitate to slide right through her pussy lips on his conquest to prepare her for him.

“Oh, yes.”

She bucked against his finger as she placed her hands on his shoulder. He added a second finger and a third, giving her more to ride on.

“I want you to tell me what made you come up to me just now. Why did you start this?”

He figured he'd chased her away yesterday by asking her to not rush into anything, or at least had created some distance between them. But he should have already known that his fighter girl wouldn't give up on him without a fight.

“I missed you.”

He couldn't ignore the sincerity of her tone of voice. He needed to put his trust in her. Even though all his experiences of the past screamed at him to not take his guard down. But with her simple answer, she'd sealed her fate.

He retreated his fingers, and she swiveled her hips.

“I'm safe. I've been tested and haven't been with anyone in years.”

Something lit up in her eyes at his confession, and she took her palms to his face. She kissed his lips with even more intensity. Like she'd been starved for his kiss.

“I'm clean and protected,” she whispered against his lips. That was all he needed to know. His fingers held her hips in a firm grip, probably leaving fingerprints on her porcelain skin. He held her hip with one hand and lined himself up with his other hand. The tip of his dick slipped inside of her.

“Ah! Oh, yes.”



He leaned in and swiped his tongue over her lips. “Shh. We can’t be too loud.”

She moaned again and lifted herself up from his dick. When she dropped back down again, all bets were off. He followed her lead in seeking pleasure at connecting their bodies with him as deep inside her as possible.

“You feel so good...”

“Yes! Fuckin’ ride me, Ry.”

He was about ready to blow but he figured she wasn’t there yet when she suddenly grabbed his hand from her hip and directed it to her pussy.

“I’m almost there...” she said before she kissed him again.

Like a magnet, his thumb flew to her clit and circled the bundle of nerves.

They stared into each other’s eyes and needed no words. He came inside of her the moment she arched her back and let out an erotic moan. She shuddered in his arms and clamped down on him when he got down from his high long enough to pinch her clit.

He started at the cusp of her shoulder, grazing his beard across to the base of her neck. He licked the column of her throat on his way up to the side of her neck. There he sucked on her skin.

“Oh....”

Ryleigh weaved her fingers through his hair and tugged on the ends.

She brought her upper body upright again and leveled her eyes with his.

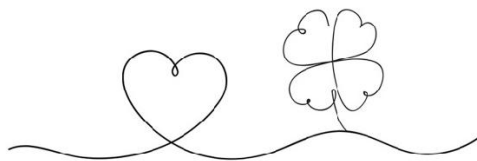
A lazy smile tugged on his lips, and he wanted another taste of her. He tugged her closer, but she held him in place with a hand against his chest.

“I need to know if you feel only half of what I’m feeling, Keen. I need to know where you’re head is at.”

“It feels like you’ve reanimated me and not only gave me back a beating heart but also my spirit.”



## RYLEIGH



**W**aking up in the dark, Ryleigh knew from the touch of the silk sheets surrounding her that she wasn't lying in her bunk bed at home.

Calloused fingers roamed over her naked body, and she gasped. She remembered coming home from her grandparent's house and seducing Keenan.

Earthy and woodsy. She wanted to bottle the unique 'Keenan-scent' that wafted over her when he leaned in and whispered in her ear, "Shh, it's me."

He was definitely all man as his erection poked between her bottom cheeks. Without giving her any time to truly wake up, he said, "I'm in over my fuckin' head with you. I don't know how to handle any of this, Ry. I know I need you. Not only to be here for Tommy, but *I* need you..."

She blinked away her sleep. His words filled her with hope. She turned in his embrace and traced her hands until they rested on the sides of his neck, just under his jaw.

He continued, "Even though I'm all in with you—Tommy's been through hell and we need to put him first. We need to give him some time before we spring this upon him."

Ryleigh nodded in understanding. Of course she was willing to give it time. Because of the darkness, she didn't know if he'd caught her nod, so she added, "I understand."

"I don't know if I can ask any of this from you. You can have anyone you set your beautiful eyes on..."

She couldn't believe this man. Wasn't he aware that it was the other way around? She still had the urge to pinch her arm and see if she wasn't dreaming this all up.

"I can give us time if you'll promise to give us a real chance. Give me a chance to open up your heart to me. To trust me."

He let go of her with one hand and suddenly the small lamp at his bedside table turned on.

"I do trust you."

She gave him a knowing smile. "No, not completely. Not yet. But that's okay. Because I'm giving you time, remember?"

His body moved when he chuckled. "Always so damn quick."

"Do you think you can handle it?"

He squeezed her bum and nipped her bottom lip. "I can handle you just fine."

"I love it when you talk like that."

With a sexy smugness, he said, "I know. You're movin' your slick pussy all over me." She swiveled her hips, searching for the right friction to awaken the lingering tingles in her core. His lopsided grin gave her goose bumps.

"I'll have to give you credit for surprising me earlier, darlin'. But you're not always having the upper hand with me. I'm calling the shots now."

It was fine with her. It made her hot when she took the initiative after coming home, but going down on a guy without first being asked for a blowjob had never happened before.

He rolled them over so he was on top of her. She tried to buck free from him, and he laughed. "That's right. Show me that fire."

"Don't you dare say anything about redheads and fire..." She scrunched up her nose.

He laughed before he nuzzled her nose. “I love your hair, but I’ll keep my thoughts to myself.”

By sitting back on his haunches, he created enough room between them to lick her inner thigh. She grounded her teeth in the corner of her bottom lip, trying to keep quiet.

“I can’t wait to have the house to ourselves so I can see just how loud I can make you scream,” he whispered.

She closed her eyes and thought about all the rooms of this house and where they could do it in. She would start with the kitchen and let him eat her out on the dinner table.

He raised her arms over her head, threaded their fingers together and pushed his hips forward. He slid through her folds and bumped against her clit, causing a deep groan to escape her.

His tongue swirled around her nipple before he engulfed her areola with his mouth. Her nipple puckered by his suction, driving her crazy with lust.

“Oh, Keen...”

“Yes.” He whispered in her ear when he entered her. With his cum still deep inside her from a few hours ago, it took him almost no effort to slide right back inside of her.

Without waiting for Keenan to move, she crossed her ankles behind his back to pull him in further. She lifted her hips to meet his thrusts.

“Do you know what I’ve dreamt about last night?” She blurted.

He held still inside of her.

“I’ve dreamt about you,” she said and his dick jerked, growing even harder if possible and she continued, “About you and all the things we could do...”

“Fuck, Ry. If you keep talkin’ like that...”

With a trace of her tongue, she licked a line over the spot where his neck dipped to his shoulder and whispered, “I

wanted you so bad when I saw you standing in nothing but a towel...”

He had her so far gone she had no inhibitions around this man. He moved and said, “Mmm, that’s... fuck, keep talking, darlin’,” he pleaded.

Ripples of pleasure shot over her body when his hands palmed her breasts. His strokes slowed down, dragging his cock out inch-by-inch and filling her at the same leisurely pace.

“I... I’ve never talked dirty, Keen. I just say what I feel.”

“I know, that’s exactly what’s driving me crazy.”

She loved how his nostrils flared and he kissed her like he was punishing her.

He pushed forward in long, deep thrusts. Spurred on by his intense stare, she scratched his back with her nails.

“Ry!” Keenan hissed above her. His demanding thrusts suddenly halted at the same time her legs trembled and stars appeared before her eyes. The aching pressure overflowed, leaving Ryleigh lax in his arms. He burrowed his head in the crook of her neck and exhaled a deep breath.

After he softly connected his forehead to hers, his warm sigh tickled her chin.

“You take my breath away every time I look at you.”

A jittery feeling of excitement took over her body. It had been the same for her when the handsome man with the soulful eyes stood out in the crowd and demanded her attention from afar.

He’d dominated her thoughts and dreams these past months and now she was a part of his home, and hopefully she’d become a part of his heart as he already held a piece of hers.

“Who would’ve guessed that I would end up as your son’s nanny? What were the odds?”

He slipped to the side of her, trickling seed over her inner thigh. He pulled the covers over them and caged her onto the bed under his heavy arm.

“I couldn’t believe it when I saw you on that damn picture.”

While blinking the post-orgasm fog from her mind, she tilted her head. “Picture?”

“Yeah, your sister showed it to me when we met at Declan’s. It was a picture of you and your sister, and I couldn’t believe it. It had to be fate, I guess.”

“Are you even real?” She couldn’t believe from the two of them he’d been drawn to her. Not her sister, who could easily pass for his ex’s twin. She willed the thought of his ex away.

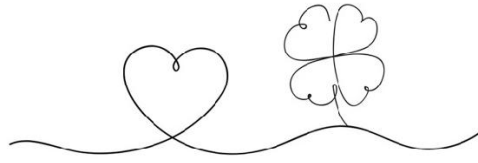
He mumbled while nuzzling her neck. “Stay with me...”

He’d probably meant staying with him this night, in his bed, but she pretended he’d asked her to stay with him and his son, forever. Not just as Tommy’s nanny. Sleep pulled her under before she could even reply.





## KEENAN



**T**he soft click of his bedroom door closing woke Keenan up from his sleep. He opened one eye and felt the bed. Even though it had been empty, Ryleigh's spot felt still warm. It must have been her sneaking out of his bedroom.

With his head back on his pillow, he thought back to last night. The way she initiated the whole thing. He'd never been with a woman who took control like that.

With Evangeline, his high school sweetheart where he'd been with for over eight years, things had been very different. Evangeline hardly took any initiative, but he never minded. He always thought he liked to be the one in control.

Sure, their lovemaking had been passionate. But Evangeline would have never walked up to him, spread his knees and lowered herself between his legs to go to town. His dick twitched at the memory of Ryleigh looking up from her kneeling position as she slipped him in between her luscious lips.

It was probably a good thing she'd fled from his bedroom because if she'd been within hand reach, he would start round three. And with Tommy across the hall, waking up at any moment, that would have been a bad idea.

Keenan let himself fall back on to the bed and rubbed his face to wake up. Tommy clambered onto the empty side of the bed and started his futile pushing of him out of the bed.

"Dad, come on!" Tommy whined.

“You promised to wake me. I wanted to make Ryleigh breakfast. But she’s already in the kitchen.”

After a few minutes of pleading from Tommy, who moved to trying to tickle him out of bed, Keenan turned the tables on him and attacked his son’s sides with his fingers.

“Stoh-pp,” Tommy shrieked before he busted out in a fit of giggles. “I’m going to pee!”

“Oh, no, buddy. You’re not using my own lines against me. It’s payback time.” Keenan laughed along with his son and almost missed the knock on the wide-open door.

“Hi, guys.”

Keenan immediately stopped tickling Tommy when he admired Ryleigh in the doorway. She took his breath away with her mussed up hair and long porcelain legs. At least she’d put on a robe this morning. Not that the flimsy silky material really covered her up more since it stopped just over those too damn short pajama shorts.

“Come help me, Ryleigh, Dad needs to be taught a lesson!”

Heat traveled up Keenan’s cheeks at the thought of Ryleigh putting her hands on him again. Luckily, his beard masked most of his embarrassment.

After clearing his throat real quick, he said, “Let’s get out of bed, buddy. I’m already running late as it is.”

“Breakfast is ready for you boys. I’ll meet you downstairs.” With a bright smile and a lingering contemplation on Keenan holding Tommy in his arms, she turned around and retreated from the bedroom.

Tommy jumped off the bed and raced out of the room. Keenan heard Tommy’s excited voice carry down the hall, “I’ll race you downstairs!” A squeal from Ryleigh, and a thundering of two sets of feet down the stairs, drew a chuckle from Keenan.

Ryleigh’s presence in the home brought something he’d missed. Her calling him and his son, ‘boys’ came with a

familiarity he craved. A sense of belonging.

Keenan reached for his phone next to his bed and shot a text to his brother.

*KEENAN: Hey, I'm running an hour late. Sorry. I'll stay late so you can go home early today.*

*AIDEN: WTF? You're never late.*

*AIDEN: Did your nanny keep you up all night? ;-)*

*KEENAN: Fuck off.*

Keenan accepted the incoming call from his brother with a sigh. "What?"

"Fuck staying late today. Why don't you take the day off for once? After we've taken over the company from Dad there will be enough time for us to work our ass off."

Keenan brought a hand through his tousled raven hair and thought about their latest project, a high scale home improvement and said, "Nah, I need to—"

"I've already informed the crew. You're not coming in today, and that's an order," Aiden said and hung up the phone.

With astonishment, Keenan observed his stupid grin in the floor-length mirror door of his bedroom closet. Who was this happy guy sitting in the middle of his ruffled bed? He just let his brother strong-arm him in taking a day off. Okay, maybe he hadn't really protested.

"Dad..."

Keenan startled at the conspicuous sound of Tommy's voice. He'd slunk into the bedroom and closed the door without him noticing it. "What is it?"

After shushing his dad by putting a small hand over his mouth, he leaned in and whispered, "Ryleigh made omelets."

One brow arched while Keenan moved his lips against his son's hand and mumbled, "And...?"

"The undersides are all black. But don't tell her they taste bad. She'll cry."

He engulfed his son's hand in his and freed his lips. "Are they burned?"

Tommy nodded. "Yeah, and she threw six strips of bacon in the trash."

"Ouch, I really like my bacon in the morning." Keenan tried to joke and chuckled, but stopped when Tommy's lip wobbled.

"Please, don't get mad at her. She really tried."

"Hey, come here." He picked up his son and held him in his arms. He lifted his son's chin and said to his teary eyes, "I'm not mad at Ryleigh, son. I'm not that bad, am I?"

A tear fell down Tommy's cheek, and another tear replaced its spot, ready to follow the wet trail threatening to cascade. "No. But don't fight with Ryleigh. I don't want her to go."

How much could a heart take before it shattered in so many pieces it stopped beating? It physically pained Keenan he didn't know how to heal his son's broken soul.

"What's taking you guys so — Oh..."

Keenan looked over his son's head where Ryleigh stood with a burned omelet on top of one of Keenan's finer dishes he kept for dinner parties. A hint of a smile tugged at his lips at the idea of Ryleigh rummaging around in his kitchen, searching for the right plate to serve up this mess.

The scent of charcoal mixed up with egg wafted into his bedroom and he wondered how bad the smell in the kitchen would be like.

"What's wrong? Oh, no... don't tell me you don't like omelets?" She hurried into his bedroom, clanked his fine china on top of his bedside table and got on her knees next to his king-sized-bed so she could sit eye-level with Tommy.

She rested her arm on Keenan's thigh and padded Tommy's knee. It sparked yet another familiarity between them. How could she feel so right?

He's seven years her senior. A single dad who'd been heartbroken by the love of his life. A woman that threw his

love in his face when she'd left him and their son. A woman that had nothing on this clumsy, sassy and gorgeous young woman, sitting on her knees, soothing his son because he'd panicked that yet another mother figure would walk out of his life.

"Please talk to me, Tommy. Is it something I said?" She looked up with panicked eyes.

"He's scared I'd be mad at you."

Her blue eyes went wide, "Mad? What for?"

Keenan nudged his head at the mayhem on his plate. She mouthed 'oh' and he nodded.

A sly smile formed on Ryleigh's lips and she said, "Oh, but this was all a part of my Master Plan, Tommy."

Tommy stopped his hiccups and wiped his nose with his pajama sleeve. "Plan?"

She patted Tommy's knee and said, "Yeah... I figured that if I messed up breakfast one more time, your dad would promise to take over cooking from now on."

"You're lying," Tommy said, assessing her.

"Okay, you're right. I'm an awful cook." Ryleigh bit her bottom lip, trying to hold in her laughter.

Keenan wanted to have no part of eating that cremated omelet and said, "Okay, I'm taking you both out for breakfast."

She considered the plate and busted out laughing. "Fair enough."

"Should we drive separately?" she asked.

"Not necessary, I've taken the day off and—"

Before he could finish his sentence, Tommy plowed him over by hugging him. "Yes! Can we go to the arcade?"

He groaned at the idea, but luckily Ryleigh said, "Thinking about the arcade, I know what we can do, Tommy. Your dad lost a bet at the pinball machine, didn't he?"

“Yes!” His son giggled and reciprocated Ryleigh’s high five.

“What am I missing here?”

“Dad... You lost the bet with Ryleigh and now she’s going to spar with us.”

Keenan playfully nudged Tommy’s side and said, “I was hoping you’d forget that little bet.”

Tommy sniffed and said, “Don’t be a scary cat.”

He laughed and said, “I think you mean a scaredy-cat.”

Tommy shrugged. “Whatever.”

“Okay, I’ll call uncle Duncan and ask him if we can use his dojo today.”

While Tommy cheered and ran from Keenan’s room, he slid his arm around Ryleigh’s waist and tugged her to him so she stood in between his legs while he sat on his bed.

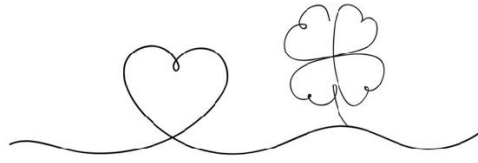
“Take it easy on this old man, okay?”

She shot him a devious smile. “I’m not making any promises, Keen. All is fair in love and war. And this sparring session? This is war.”





## RYLEIGH



**R**yleigh held one of her boxing gloves low enough for Tommy to kick the padding. In the background, she heard Keenan and Ronan end their sparring session in the other ring at Duncan's Dojo.

"That's right. Two more..." she said, focusing on Tommy again.

He nodded and blew his honey blonde hair from his face for the umpteenth time.

"And the last one... give it your all..."

His brows furrowed in concentration while his kick blasted against her glove.

"Yes! That's it, Tommy. Well done."

They tapped their gloves against each other, and her chest warmed when Tommy beamed at her. "Thank you, Ry."

Somewhere during the day, he'd picked up on his dad shortening her name. He blinked a few times when a strand of hair pricked his eye again.

"Maybe next time you'd like a hair clip from me to pull your hair out of your face?"

His scrunched up nose at the mere suggestion made her laugh.

Behind the ropes of their boxing ring, Ronan laughed along with her. "I'll give you a haircut, Tommy. Get you a fighter's trim."

Keenan uncrossed his arms over the rope and said while stepping into the ring, “All right, leave my boy alone. Or he’s going to practice on you what Ry taught him.” He ruffled Tommy’s bewildered hair and said with a loving smile, “I saw you got some moves, son.”

“Ryleigh showed me what to do when somebody comes at me.”

It pained her that the first thing he’d asked was if she could show him how to get out of a headlock while someone else is holding your legs down. A six-year-old shouldn’t have to even think about stuff like that. Unfortunately, she knew all too well about the harsh reality.

“I know I sound like a broken record here, but remember what we talked about, okay? You’ll only defend yourself with the moves Ry showed you, understood?” Keenan sternly said.

With a quick jerk of his head Tommy said, “Yes, Dad. When they try to get a rise out of me again, I’ll try to ignore them. And if that doesn’t help, I’ll go to my teacher.”

“Yes, and you can always talk to me.”

Ryleigh bumped into Keenan’s hip and said, “He has me in his corner too, Keen.”

He slid his arm around her waist and pulled her closer. Tommy used that moment to get away from his father’s lecture and hopped through the ropes right into his uncle Ronan’s arms.

Keenan whispered in her ear, “I know you’ve got his back. I can’t thank you enough for everything you do for us, Ry. I mean it. You’re the best thing that ever happened to him.” With a sweet kiss to her temple, he added, “And me.”

She swallowed a few times, trying to get rid of the thickness of her throat.

“I-I don’t know what to say, Keen. Half of the time I don’t know what the hell I’m doing.”

He chuckled. “Welcome to parenthood, Ry.”

He could be so damn sweet. Not willing to get ahead of herself, she let his comment about parenthood go. Time for some action. Nothing like a good sparring to get her head straight.

“Hey, Ryleigh, can we talk for a moment?”

She turned around to the ropes where Duncan stood. Of course she knew of Duncan Mills, the MMA fighter champion who’d stopped fighting after a shoulder injury.

“Thank you for having us here today.”

“No need to thank me, Ry. I love having my family and friends around. That includes you.”

Heat traveled over her cheeks when she nodded.

“I saw you fighting that night against the Plower. Great fight.”

It meant a lot for her that a former champion would take the time to compliment her. She knew he trained and coached Ronan, the next Mills champion, so she asked, “Got any tips?”

He laughed and shook his head, “Nah, I think Dev is doing a great job coaching you. I’m not sticking my nose where it doesn’t belong. But I will say that you’ve got nothing to worry about, Ry. Just keep your eyes on your opponent instead of my cousin at your next fight.”

His wink let her know he’d meant it to tease her.

“Will do. You wanted to talk to me about something?”

“Yes. I know it’s your first time at my dojo, but you may have heard about the defense classes we provide for abuse victims?”

Her stance transformed from open to rigid and Duncan shot out his hand. He tapped her glove on top of the rope. “I shouldn’t have brought it up like that. Sorry, Ry.”

She blinked the memory away from when she was sixteen and knocked down near the locker room by two guys from her high school. They’d touched her and laughed like it all had been a big fat joke.

Keenan stepped up to them and said, “Everything okay here?”

“Yeah, it’s okay.” She swallowed the lump in her throat and continued, “I’ve been through some stuff in high school, but you didn’t know that, Dunc. But I guess you heard about what happened to my sister from your brother?”

“Nah, Declan never talks about his cases. But since you’re a cousin of the Ryan sisters, I heard about your sister from them. I’m sorry. I heard the bastard is in prison?”

“Yeah. I hope he rots in that hellhole.”

Ryleigh wanted to visit Liv’s sorry excuse for a father in prison to kick his ass. Her sister Jessie married Joe within three months she’d met him, even though her family had begged her to take things slow. But after her first date with Joe, Jessie had gotten pregnant with Liv and she had this romantic notion about kismet. Convinced Joe was it for her because of Liv, she’d married Joe. She ignored all signs that Joe was an utter asshole who did everything in his power to isolate his wife from her family.

He couldn’t keep Ryleigh away, though. When Joe had lost his job and started drinking all day, every day, home became unbearable for Jessie. Ryleigh noticed little things like her sister walking funny one day, like she’d bumped her hip. After she’d asked Jessie about it, her sister stormed off and didn’t reach out for a week.

There was this one time Jessie had worn an ugly scarf in the middle of the summer and refused to take it off. Or how she’d changed her make-up style, often caking her beautiful face with foundation so much it could pass for a mask.

There were more signs Ryleigh hadn’t picked up on. But now that Joe had held Jessie and Liv hostage last Christmas Eve, Ryleigh lived every day with the guilt of not stepping in when her gut told her something wasn’t right.

She—of all people, should have picked up on the signs. She had been bullied and knocked around for years in school. She should have recognized the signs and helped her sister.

The guilt ate away at her. Even now. Even after doing whatever she could to help Jessie with Liv and even after dropping out of college and losing her job. She still felt it wasn't enough to make up for all the pain and hurt Jessie and Liv went through.

"I know of a way to do something constructive with the sadness and underlying anger that is simmering in your eyes."

He shocked her by being so blunt. But she guessed that his experience as a trainer and coach demanded him to see through anyone's bullshit and to cut right to the chase. She liked people who'll give it to you straight. Good or bad, at least she knew where she stood with them.

"Dunc..." Keenan said in a warning voice.

"No, it's okay," she said to Keenan, who probably didn't appreciate the route this conversation was going.

Duncan held up a hand and said, "Chill, Cuz. I'm not suggesting she should work out her anger in the underground fights. Although that's exactly what she's doing right now."

"*She's* standing right here..." Ryleigh already had enough of these male chauvinistic talks with her family. She would not stand here and go over the same crap with these macho Mills men. It had taken her years to persuade Devlin to let her fight.

"Right. Just trying to ease my cousin's mind. Sorry," Duncan said before he continued, "I respect how you live and breathe the sport. Anyone with a bit of fighting knowledge can spot one of their own from a mile away. I've seen you up in that cage fight and I've noticed how great you are at teaching your craft here with Tommy. That's why I wanted to talk to you. I would like to offer you a job here at my dojo."

"A job?"

Duncan smiled. "Yeah. My brother Donovan and I work with a women's shelter and we provide defense classes. I've been teaching some classes, but I know I can come across a bit intimidating."

"I wonder why," Keenan snorted.

Ryleigh laughed and elbowed him. She let her gaze wander over Duncan's broad shoulders, his pumped arms, and his fighter's nose. In front of her stood a six-foot fighting machine. No doubt that he could teach the women the right moves, but she had to agree that any woman with her kind of background would think twice about letting him close enough to teach them anything.

"Thank you for considering me, Dunc. But I already have a job with Keenan. I'm sorry. It sounds like an awesome opportunity."

"I think you should do it, Ry."

She whirled on her feet; surprised that Keenan would encourage her.

"I mean it. Tommy is going back to school next week. During school hours, you can work for Dunc, if you'd like? And maybe even a few evenings during the week? I know we'd miss you like crazy, but I think you should do it, Ry."

"I don't know, Keen. You've hired me full time and I don't want to keep you in a bind when you're working late. It doesn't feel right to—"

"Can you give us a sec, Dunc?"

Duncan nodded and said, "I'll leave you to it. I just want to say one last thing, Ry; you were born to teach your craft. It would be an honor to have you on our team at Duncan's Dojo."

She instantly had the urge to follow him and take over his class when the waif-like women huddled together the moment Duncan walked up to them.

Keenan broke her thoughts when he said, "You know I want you living with us, right?"

She furrowed her brows and said, "Yeah. That's part of our arrangement."

He rolled his eyes and smiled. "I mean as my girlfriend. Not as Tommy's nanny. But as a part of us three with you, me and Tommy."

Her heart stopped a beat. She took a step backwards and rested her bum against the ropes.

“What about taking things slow?”

“I know. But think about it. We’re already living together. It would make no sense for you to move out and for me to find another nanny.”

She narrowed her eyes and said, “Don’t you dare.”

He laughed and took her face in between his palms. “Never. It’s you. I only want you.”

“Good.” She grumbled.

He leaned back and dropped his hands to her waist. “How about this; you’ll live with us and only help with Tommy as my girlfriend and not as my nanny. You’ll work for Duncan and when one of us can’t pick up Tommy, we’ll ask my mom.”

“But I want to take care of Tommy. I don’t want to miss out on anything from him. I would love picking him up from school and talk about his day. And reading stories at night is my favorite time of the day.”

Keenan stared at her for what felt like hours before he squeezed her waist and softly said, “I don’t know what I’ve done to deserve you. But I’m not letting you go, Ry.”

“Good. You’re not getting rid of me that easily. Although I’d like to work for Duncan, you and Tommy come first.”

This big guy standing in front of her swallowed back his emotions. It was tearing her up inside to think about all the hurt he and Tommy had been through. She added, “I’m not going anywhere. I’ll always be there for you.”

Keenan swiped at the corner of his eye and put a smile on his face when Tommy emerged from the locker room with Ronan hot on his heels.

“Are you ready for our session?”

When he took a moment too long to respond, she fisted her hips. “Don’t tell me you forgot to go for a round with me?”

“I’ve tired him out, Ry. He’s just scared you’re going to whoop his ass.”

Keenan huffed a breath at Ronan’s words. She smirked at Keenan while answering his cousin, “Didn’t need you to tire him so I can whoop his ass, Ro.”

Although she knew trash talk came with the sport, it took her a lot of getting used to. It brought back memories of her bullies. Only with family and friends, when she’d felt safe enough, she would join in on the ribbing. Never at an actual fight with strangers though.

Not like Paula the Plower who’d said during their cage fight, “I’m going to tear your ugly red braid from your head and whip your ass with it.”

She saw him coming from a mile away and smiled when Keenan came at her. She danced in place before she avoided his second dive at her waist. He had a smart fighter’s instinct—she would give him that. The moment he could turn this into a ground fight, it would be game over for her.

Her grin couldn’t be contained when she connected her glove to his jaw.

“Ouch. That must hurt,” Ronan commentated.

Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed several men and women milling around their boxing ring. Although having spectators during her matches didn’t unnerve her anymore, it didn’t feel right to continue sparring like some show-off against an unofficial fighter like Keenan.

She stepped closer to Keenan, letting her guard down for a moment and asked him, “Shall we call it a day?”

“Are you giving me an out to save face, darlin’?”

She ducked her head slightly, but he wouldn’t let her. With his glove softly lifting her chin, he waited for their eyes to connect before he said, “So strong... but oh, so sweet. Like I said: the best thing that ever happened to me.”

After blinking the stinging prickle away from her eye, she said, “If you’ll keep this up, I’ll not be able to stop falling for



you, Keen.”

While standing in the ring, her adrenaline had never spiked as high as after her admission. She would rather simultaneously take on three Paula the Plower’s instead of confessing to Keenan she was falling in love with him.

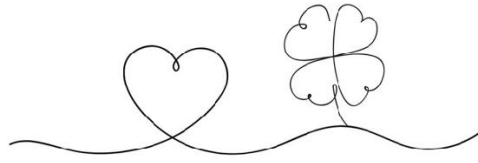
She wanted to kiss the man stupid when he swooped her up in his arms, in front of everyone—but most importantly in front of his son. Because this was his call to make, she waited him out.

“Kiss her, Dad!”

He softly connected his full lips to hers. Over the cheering around them he said, “You heard him, Ry. Better brace yourself... with Tommy on board, I’m going to move heaven and earth to make us a family.”



## KEENAN



**R**yleigh opened the passenger door to his truck and said, “Okay, boys. Ready to meet my parents?”

Two weeks after that day at the dojo, they were about to meet Ryleigh’s family. The last weeks had been a crazy ride so far where Tommy seemed euphoric at one point but confused at the next.

His son didn’t know how to handle the shift from Ryleigh being his nanny at first, and now his father’s girlfriend. And truthfully, he couldn’t blame him.

Even though he knew his son already loved Ryleigh, Tommy had acted out more in these past weeks than he’d ever done before. It pained him he couldn’t seem to help Tommy. Maybe they should talk to a professional.

The slamming of Tommy’s door brought him back to the next step into his relationship with Ryleigh. Meeting her parents.

She’d already met his family at Tommy’s birthday party, and although he really wanted to meet her family, he also had his reservations about this next step. Tommy already shouted at Ryleigh yesterday that she wasn’t his mom, so she couldn’t tell him to go to bed.

He wasn’t entirely sure Tommy was in the right frame of mind to meet her family. He took a big breath and stepped out of his truck. He righted his shoulders and hoped for the best as he walked up to the front door.

Keenan followed Ryleigh and his son into the crowded kitchen. First thing that caught his attention was the shiny chrome of a wheelchair. The man in the wheelchair folded his newspaper and waved it in the air.

“Ah, the man of the hour has arrived,” he said with a gleam in his eyes.

Next to Keenan, Ryleigh groaned while she rubbed her forehead like she willed her headache to go away.

On the other side of the kitchen that clearly had seen better days, Liv snickered at her grandfather.

“Hi, Liv. Good to see you again. Do you remember Tommy?” he asked in a light tone of voice. He’d heard the story about Liv’s dad from Ryleigh and didn’t want to scare the girl.

Liv nodded at Keenan but didn’t say a word.

Jessie joined Liv and placed her hands on Liv’s dainty shoulders that relaxed a little at her mother’s touch. “Hi Keenan, good to see you again.”

“You too,” he responded to Jessie. He remembered Ryleigh’s sister from meeting her at Declan’s. It still unnerved him how much she resembled his ex.

“Hello, sir. I’m Keenan Mills.” He shook the man’s outstretched hand.

“Good to meet you. I’m Ron Walker. Pretty shitty last name, if you’d ask me.”

Flabbergasted at his reference to his wheelchair, Keenan busted out laughing.

“Dad! There are children present,” Jessie said before she sat down in a chair opposite of Ryleigh and Keenan.

“Ah, please! You should have seen me when my crew worked on a house, and we fell behind schedule. I think your ears would’ve fallen off if you’d heard me then.”

“You worked construction?” Keenan’s voice raised in appreciation because he was glad they had some common

ground to talk about.

“Yes. Before the accident.” Ron looked away, across the table, and met his wife’s gaze. “And that lovely lady sitting over there, is my wife, Emily.”

Emily Walker waved at Keenan and said, “Welcome into our home, Mr. Mills. We’ve heard so much about you and Tommy. She’s already smitten with your boy.”

“She’d better not be the only one smitten,” Ron mumbled under his breath as he picked up his coffee cup.

Keenan gripped the back of the chair in front of him, and said, “Please, call me Keenan. I’m not that old.”

“How old are you, son?” Ron slapped the seat in the chair next to him, indicating Keenan should sit down.

“I’m twenty-eight.”

Ron nodded. “Hmm. A bit old for our Ryleigh.”

“Dad!” Ryleigh stressed, checking the living room where Liv and Tommy had started to play. Her shoulders sagged to see Tommy and Liv didn’t pick up on the banter.

“I’m just messing with you. Him coming over to meet us shows his intentions, sweetie. And the fact that he keeps looking at you like a love-sick puppy also helps his case. Ever since I lost the use of my legs, I gained half a brain with a sixth sense about things.”

“Not this again,” Emily said and stood from her chair, dismissing whatever her husband wanted to add.

“Would you like some coffee? Or something else?”

Keenan looked over from Ron to Emily. “Coffee, please.”

“It’s true. I know you all have your opinions about it.” Ron drawled the word ‘opinions’ like it left a bad taste in his mouth.

“Dad, stop telling everyone you’re some kind of psychic,” Jessie admonished.

Emily cut in before Ron could respond and said, “Cream? Sugar?”

Keenan shook his head, “Black, thanks.”

“I say what I think.” Ron shrugged.

“You sure do, Dad.” Ryleigh stood behind her chair next to Keenan. He couldn’t read her tone of voice. It almost seemed her father had agitated her, but she still admired him for his honesty.

“Well, I better head out; duty calls.” Jessie’s chair scraped over the kitchen tiles, making the hair on the back of his hand rise.

“What do you do for work?”

Jessie grabbed a bottle of water from the refrigerator. “I’m a nail stylist and I also work as a receptionist at the Royale Hotel, downtown.”

“Ah, I know the place.”

“You do?”

“Yeah, we had to fix the rooftop there last week. Some idiot guest had picked the lock to the rooftop garden and used about fifty candles to impress his girl. But when he left the candles to fetch her out of their room, some fell down, something ignited, and a big part of the rooftop almost took up in flames that day.”

“I know! My cousin Kieran called me about that fire when I had the night off. You worked on the repairs?”

Keenan swallowed a sip from his coffee, “Yes.”

“I like you even more now that I know you’re not some pencil pusher.” Ron chimed in.

Keenan chuckled. “Thanks.”

He took the last gulp from his coffee, glanced over his shoulder and listened in on Jessie talking to Liv and Tommy in the living room.

For any outsiders looking in, they made a perfect little family. All three honey blonde... Jessie could appear to be the mother of the both of them. He was glad she wasn't and that he'd met Ryleigh.

After everything he'd been through, this sweet and sassy fighter came into his life and knocked a breath of fresh air into him. She'd brought him back to life and no other woman could ever compare to her.

He placed his hand on Ryleigh's thigh, and she smiled up to him.

Ron wheeled away from the kitchen table and called out to Keenan on his way to the living room, "I can still use a hammer, son. And I'm dead quiet on my wheels if I'd want to be. So no funny business or Imma take you out."

Keenan placed his hand back on top of the table and Ryleigh busted out laughing. "That look on your face," she said.

"What?"

"He's not threatening you because your hand's on my thigh." Ryleigh bit her bottom lip and stopped laughing. With an amused smile, she grabbed his hand and placed it right back and threaded her fingers through his.

"What my husband meant to say was, don't hurt our girl. Just so you know, not only Ryleigh knows how to through a punch and—"

"Mom! You're talking just like Dad,"

"Well, it had to be said, dear. Now that's over with, I'm going to spend some time in the living room with the kids and your father. Can you wash this up for me, please?"

"Yeah, we'll do it."

Ryleigh let go of his hand and stood from her chair. Keenan watched her tight fitted blue jeans as her perky butt swayed.

"Hey, man. I'm Luke."

Keenan startled at this newcomer, not expecting anyone else present. He shook Luke's outstretched hand when he got up from his seat.

"Hey. I'm Keenan."

"Yeah, figured that. I hope you're taking my sister back with you?"

Keenan assessed this strikingly white blonde guy. His hair came down to his shoulders and his powerful physique and height almost took away of his boyish grin. He guessed Luke younger in age as Ryleigh, but not by much.

"Yes, sure am."

"You love having me here, just admit it," Ryleigh said to her brother while she leaned in over the kitchen table to pick up the four coffee cups. Keenan searched the counter for a towel to dry the cups with, but watched how Luke snagged it.

"I'll do it, sis. It's my turn to do the dishes this week."

"Okay. Only if you'll remember I've offered to help you next time, it's my turn to do the dishes," Ryleigh seemed pleased with herself as she smiled at her brother.

"No way. It's only four cups. I'm not counting this as offering help. Where was your help after dinner, eh?"

"He's got you there, Ry."

Ryleigh huffed a breath, "Oh, it's like that already?"

Luke and Keenan shared a smile. The bickering siblings felt like home to Keenan. He had three younger brothers and two younger sisters. It had been a long time ago he'd lived with his parents, but seeing the Walker household brought back all kinds of memories.

His parents' house had also felt cramped, that's why he could relate to Luke's bantering. Especially after his sisters reached puberty, Keenan wanted to leave the nest with lightning speed.

Maybe that's why he moved in so fast with his high school sweetheart? Evangeline and he couldn't wait to get a place for



themselves and have some privacy. It surely sped things up between them when Evangeline got pregnant at age twenty-two.

Not that he'd ever regretted a single thing. He wouldn't dare to think about a life without Tommy.

"Dad! Can I sleep here tonight? Liv has a bunk bed, and I can sleep in Ryleigh's bed on top because she's sleeping at our house."

"We're not having a sleepover tonight, son." The moment he'd said it, he knew what Tommy's reply would be.

"But I never have sleepovers. It's not fair." With his pleading puppy eyes, Tommy added, "Please."

"We brought nothing with us," he held his hand in the air to stop Tommy from interrupting him, and said, "And I already gave you my answer. We can set a date for sometime on a weekend, okay? That way you can come over earlier in the day and even have dinner here. What do you say?"

"Hmm. Okay. But can I sleep here this weekend?"

Ryleigh laughed, and Tommy smiled up to her. On Fridays they had their weekly family dinner at his parents' house, so Keenan said, "We'll have to check with Ryleigh's parents, but perhaps you could stay here this Saturday?"

"Thank you!" Tommy ran out of the kitchen and Keenan overheard him say, "My Dad said I can come sleep here this Saturday!"

Keenan followed his son into the living room and added to Ryleigh's parents, "If that's okay with you, that is?"

"Of course, the more the merrier. I hate how you've snaffled our Ry to stay at your house. It only seems fair you bring your boy here for a night to stay with us."

Ryleigh leaned in and gave the top of her father's gray hair a sweet kiss. Ron grabbed a hold of Ryleigh's arm and pulled her in for a moment longer.

When Ryleigh let go of her father, she connected her eyes with Keenan and for the first time since they'd met, her smile

seemed shy and a tad uneasy. Realization hit him right in the chest.

They would have this Saturday night all to themselves.

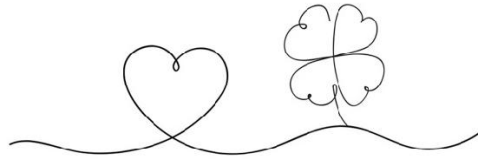
Ryleigh and him.

Home alone.

For an entire night and morning.



## RYLEIGH



**O**n that next Saturday, Keenan started the truck and Ryleigh waved out of her open window at Tommy. “Have fun, sweetheart. See you tomorrow!”

“Don’t come too early to pick me up, okay?”

She smiled and said, “Nah. Your dad and I will come in the afternoon, okay?”

“Yes!” Tommy ran to Liv in the doorway of Ryleigh’s parents’ house.

“I’m so happy he found a new friend in Liv.” Keenan picked up their entwined hands and kissed the back of her hand before he let go to steer them out of the driveway.

“I know. Liv is flourishing before our eyes. I think they both hadn’t had it easy and find camaraderie in that.”

She changed the channel in the truck and hummed along with a pop song. Keenan stopped the truck in front of a red light and said, “I have a surprise for you.”

“You do? Aren’t we picking up some Chinese dinner, so you’re off the hook from cooking once?” She fake fluttered her eyelashes, and he laughed at her silliness.

“While you were out jogging this morning, I arranged something for us.”

She looked down at her flip-flops; her flared yellow sundress and wondered if she was properly dressed for whatever surprise he had in mind.

“Don’t worry, Ry. I know you don’t like to be underdressed, but you’re not. You blow my mind with this sexy dress.”

“It’s just a sundress.”

She tried to play it cool, but she may have worn this dress because of the tight fitted bodice, which encased her breasts and made them even perkier.

“I can’t take my eyes off you, Ry. I’m almost at the point where I’ll have to ask you to take over the wheel from me.”

She giggled and rolled her eyes at him. Another pop song started on the radio and she bellowed along, not caring in the least that Keenan made funny faces at her singing performance.

The past month had gone by in the blink of an eye. She couldn’t believe she was actually in a relationship now with a man who has a six-year-old child. And that she would start a new career as a self-defense teacher at Duncan’s Dojo.

So many changes in so little time, it would spin anyone’s head.

When the news started on the radio, the broadcaster announced the time, letting Ryleigh know it was four pm. “Are we going out for dinner or just drinks?”

“I’m not telling you anything, Ry. You’re mighty impatient, aren’t you?”

“Oh, am I riling you up again?” She slid her hand on his thigh and let it rest on the inside, connecting the back of her hand against his rapidly growing crotch.

“Fuck. I can’t do this, Ry. Safety first.”

Hmm. She retreated her hand and tapped her index finger against her chin. “Are we going to the arcade?”

He guffawed and said, “No.”

“Are we going to a restaurant?”

She watched him shake his head. “Nope.”

What could he have planned for them? “Did you bring me another pair of shoes? I can’t do anything on my flip-flops.”

He didn’t fall for her trap and said, “Maybe I did, and maybe I didn’t.”

With her bottom lip sticking out, she looked over at him. He plucked at her lip with his thumb, letting it plop back up.

“Okay, I’ll give you a hint....”

She perched up in her seat and clasped her hands. “Okay! What is it?”

“The hint is... we’re staying in Austin.”

With a huff, she waved a hand around in the cabin of his truck. “That’s a shitty hint, Keen.”

He laughed, and she slapped his shoulder.

“Give me another.”

“Say please...”

“Okay... Please give me a hint that’s worth a shit.”

“Okay, okay... so the hint is you can roll right up.”

She clapped her hands, excited for where he’d be taking her. “Oh! We’re rollerblading. That’s so cool!”

With a shake of his head he said, “Guessed wrong, Ry.”

When he’d started driving again, she kept guessing but failed miserably. “What are we doing downtown? Are we rolling in a drive-thru for dinner?”

She noticed his hand still for only a split second. “No! Are we going to stuff ourselves with grease? Hmm. I could eat.”

Keenan turned the truck left, and she shrieked. “A drive-in movie theater!”

“Yeah. I can’t believe you couldn’t guess it.”

She scrunched up her nose and said, “Pff. Rolling right up. What kind of hint is that?”

“Ha, a damn good one since you didn’t guess it.”

Keenan paid at the entrance and drove them to a very intimate drive-in in the middle of downtown Austin. He parked the truck in the back row, but they still had an excellent view of the screen in front of them. There were only eleven other cars, and Ryleigh loved the cozy feel of the drive-in.

“And? What do you think?”

She unbuckled and went in for a heated kiss. “I love it! This is so cool.”

“You don’t even know what they’re showing.” He said against her lips. His smile was infectious.

“I don’t care. I’ve never done this before, Keen. It’s already awesome. I love making memories with you.”

He blinked once before he relaxed. “Me too.”

A guy came up to Ryleigh’s side of the truck with a car window tray. Ryleigh opened her window, and he said, “Welcome to our cozy drive-in! I hope you’ll enjoy your meal and the show. If you need anything, you can wave out of your window. We’re here with a team to assist you or get you refills.”

“That’s great. Thank you,” Ryleigh looked the red-white-checked tray over and inhaled deeply to take her fill of the scent of a luscious greasy hamburger with lots of fries on the side.

“Dig in, darlin’.”

Her heart did another flip-flop at Keenan’s nickname for her. She grabbed her hamburger and brought it to his.

“Cheers,” she said, and he laughed.

“Tommy is already rubbing off on you,” he said. It was true. Tommy had toasted his bowl of cereal with hers one morning and it had stuck. They now toasted every little thing before they would drink or eat it.

“I’m amazed you’re not toasting your toothbrushes yet.” Keenan took a huge bite out of his hamburger, dropping lettuce and tomatoes on his lap. Luckily, he’d placed a napkin beforehand.

“Tommy would have a field day if he saw you eating this grub.”

Keenan laughed with his mouth full, and she snorted. “Who is this man next to me? Are you the same man who likes charcuterie boards and perfectly cooked asparagus?”

“You make me sound like a snob.”

“Your words, buddy. Not mine...”

“I’m a snob with a hard on for a dirty girl.” She shrieked when he smeared his ketchup fingers on her cheek.

“Sto-hp! Yuck.”

Keenan wiped his fingers on another napkin, before he leaned in and licked the ketchup smear from her cheek. She pulled her shoulders, first at her repulsion of being smeared in sauce, but when he nibbled her earlobe, she pulled her shoulder because the sensation gave her goose bumps.

“I’m so glad you’re wearing a dress...” he whispered, his words warm against her skin. Keenan’s hand slid up under her dress, going right up to her core. The tray of food wobbled on her lap and she quickly shot out her hand to steady it.

“Do you want to play another game, Ry?”

“It depends...” Her breathing picked up the moment he stroked her inner thigh.

“On what?”

“If you’d let me come,” she said half jokingly. She watched him out of the corner of her eye and was glad he wasn’t laughing at her. She still amazed herself with talking so frankly about sex.

“You hold all the power, darlin’. I’m going to finger you...”

She felt the tingles already in her lower region. Damn. This man could get her worked up with his words alone.

“And I’ll continue to finger you, as long as you look at me.”



She figured that was easy, so she said, “Sure.”

“And while you’re looking at me, you’ll tell me one of your fantasies.”

She moaned but startled at the window being pulled up. Keenan smiled knowingly at her and said, “I figured it best not to interrupt other cars during the movie.”

“Movie?”

He laughed, flashing his pearly whites. “Yeah, I have no idea what’s showing either.”

She giggled and said, “We’re so bad. I haven’t even finished my burger.”

Keenan’s finger slipped under her underwear and he said, “Do you want me to stop so you can finish it?”

“You know damn well I don’t want you to stop.” Ryleigh grabbed the tray from her lap and plunked it unceremoniously on the dashboard in front of her. She gripped the door handle and spread her legs some more, not caring how shamelessly eager she gave him better access.

His finger stilled on top of her clit, but he didn’t use any pressure.

“More... Keen...” She whined and bucked against his hand.

“No. Did you forget the rules?”

Shit. What was she supposed to come up with? Tell him her darkest, sexiest fantasies?

“You’re taking awfully long. I want a real fantasy, darlin’. Don’t make something up.”

After a moment he added, “Please?”

She took a deep breath and turned her head on the backrest of the passenger seat.

“Okay. I-I have this dream that reoccurs every other week.”

“Hmm-mmm. Go on.” Keenan moved his finger and circled her clit.

“I’m living on my own in this dream.”

He drifted his other hand under her dress and ripped yet another thong apart. Not that she cared enough to stop telling her story.

“Keep your eyes on me, Ry.”

She focused on his emerald orbs, feeling the connection through his intense stare.

“I... I’m in my bedroom and when I look out my—oh, yes... right there.”

“Keep talking,” Keenan said while tugging her pubic hair.

He tilted his head, signaling he waited on her to continue and she hastily said, “So, I open my curtains and when I look outside, I see the neighbors across the narrow alley going at it. Their bedroom window is so close, I can see everything...”

Keenan closed his eyes for a second and she did the same. She inhaled another deep breath and said, “He’s taking her from behind, and they’re a beautiful couple. And eh, I...”

“Look at me.”

Keenan stuck a single digit inside of her, and it relieved her only to a point. She needed more. When he stilled, she remembered to lock her eyes on him again.

Knowing he wanted her to continue, she whispered, “In my dream, I pleasure myself...”

With a darkened voice, Keenan said, “How?”

“With my fingers.”

“Like this?” He stuck another finger inside of her and pulled in and out of her. Going faster and faster.

Ryleigh’s knuckles turned white with her firm grip on the overhead hand rest.

With her eyes still boring into his, she moaned.

“What do you do when you play with yourself? Do you like it hard? Like this?” He added another finger; the width of three fingers heightening her sensory overload at her vaginal walls.

“Oh... yes.”

“How does your dream end?”

“I’m caught while I pleasure myself and give them a show with—Ah!” Ryleigh shot out her hands to steady herself, making her drink fall over her half-eaten hamburger. With her nails digging into the dashboard, her ecstasy rolled over in several waves.

Keenan palmed her core as he pushed his fingers further in. He stroked her g-spot, sending another wave of pleasure crashing down. Ryleigh emerged red faced with a shaky breath. “Fuck, Keen. That was....”

Suddenly, she realized she’d just told him her go-to fantasy. Whenever she had a stolen moment in the bathroom and wanted to come quick, she’d think about that sexy couple seeing her masturbate.

Maybe her next go to fantasy should involve Keenan and giving others a show of their own. Nah. Even in her fantasy, she wanted to keep that man all to herself.

“What are ye smilin’ darlin’?”

“You’re going to laugh...”

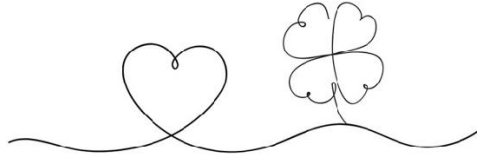
“Maybe, but I’m going to sit here on these huge blue balls until we’re back home, so I deserve a good laugh.”

She laughed and said, “You have a point. Okay. I thought that even in my fantasies I wouldn’t want to share you.”

“Damn right. I’m only yours. In fantasies and real life.”



## KEENAN



**A**fter doing the final round of the day, Keenan met up with his brother Aiden on the first floor of their latest house renovation.

“All good?”

Aiden nodded while pushing his tools back in his belt. “Yeah, although I think we need to keep an eye on that Peter guy.”

The new homeowner, Peter, had been nothing but a pain in their asses. He wanted to make a palace out of a dumpster with minimal funds.

Keenan groaned but was secretly happy that for once his younger brother had dealt with Peter. “What happened?”

“Came storming in and demanded to know why we hadn’t finished the drywall yet.”

“I’ll talk with him, Aide.”

Aiden lifted his chin and said, “No need. I’ve handled it.”

Yesterday, when he protested she couldn’t take Tommy to the park and spar there, Ryleigh said that he needed to show her he trusted her and to give her some slack.

Maybe it was time for him to let Aiden do things in his own way without him butting in or taking over. They would be partners in less than a month when they would take over their dad’s construction company.

Keenan picked up his phone for an incoming text.

*MOM: Hey sweetheart. I hope you had a great day at work. Did you invite Ryleigh like I asked you?*

Melissa Mills wasn't rest assured he'd bring Ryleigh to Friday family dinner and she would never leave things up to fate. Ever since she'd heard they were an item, she'd wanted to come over, but luckily Aiden and Deirdre could convince their mom to give them some room.

*KEENAN: Yes. She's coming with us tonight.*

Even before he had the chance to put his phone back into his back pocket of his work pants, his mother called him.

"Hi, Ma."

"I figured why text if I can call you since you're holding the phone in your hand?"

He snickered and mouthed at Aiden 'Ma'.

His brother waved and said in a hushed tone of voice, "Okay, I'm going home and shower. See you at Ma's?"

Keenan nodded at Aiden and listened to his mother on the other end of the line.

As always, his mother got straight to the point.

"I'm so happy that you're bringing her with you. I don't understand why it took you so long to bring her over."

He locked the door and walked away from the renovation site. With a sigh he said, "Ma, she already met the family at Tommy's birthday. It's not like I'm hiding her from you."

His mother hummed again. When she said nothing, Keenan fell right into her trap and asked, "What?"

"I heard a little birdy say that Tommy has no nanny now that—"

"Well, Ry is my girlfriend now, so I'm not paying her to spend time with my son. That would be weird."

His mother laughed in his ear. "I know. It's just that I always enjoyed looking after Tommy for you. Maybe I can

take Tommy one day a week so that you and Ryleigh can have a weeknight all to yourself?”

He got into his truck and placed his phone in the hands free car kit. He spoke into the cabin, “I’m sure Tommy would love that, Ma. That would be awesome, I love you.”

“I love you. We’ll talk things through tonight.”

He buckled up and said, “Is everyone going to be there?”

“Yes. It’s Friday family dinner.”

He chuckled and shook his head. He started the truck and said, “Okay, Ma. I’m going home now. I’ll see you tonight.”

“You’d better bring us Ryleigh.”

With a laugh he said, “It’s like you don’t even care whether the rest of us shows up.”

“That’s not true. I love each and every one of you. That’s why I’ve spent most of my life parenting and helping you all grow up in the wonderful beings you are. The least all six of you can do is show your face once a week during family dinner. That’s not such a big deal, now is it?”

“Okay. You’re right. I’ll see you tonight.”

They hung up, and Keenan drove back to his house. Feeling dirty from a long day working construction, he walked straight up to his bathroom. He pulled his long-sleeved shirt with the Mills Construction logo from his back and kicked his favorite work pants into the corner.

After a quick, cold shower, he walked into the kitchen and noticed that Ryleigh had curled her hair for the occasion.

He gave her a kiss to her temple and said, “You’re stunning.”

Her face went from beaming to frowning when Tommy said, “Yuck. She looks like a red doll.”

“Tommy Aiden Mills, apologize to Ry.”

“It’s okay, Keen. Let’s just go to your parent’s house.”

He knew Ryleigh wanted to avoid confrontations. But being a parent meant they needed to face this head on. He couldn't have Tommy disrespect Ryleigh like that.

When she was his nanny, she would have never accepted this behavior from Tommy. It seemed like with the lines blurred, not only Tommy was still seeking his footing.

"No, darlin'. Tommy can't speak to you like that. And he knows it." He held his son's stare as he spoke.

"Whatever," Tommy said and stood from the dinner table. "Are we going to grandma or not?"

"I want an apology first, and then we can go."

"Fine. I'm sorry," Tommy said with his head bowed. "Can I still take my tablet with me?"

"Not tonight. I really want you to think about how your words affect others."

"Yes, Dad." With his shoulders hunched, Tommy walked out of the kitchen and into the living room.

"We need to be strict, Ry. I can't have him lash out like that."

She hugged his waist and said against his chest, "I know. I'm sorry. I think I'm better at being a nanny than—"

He took her face into his hands and kissed her lips. He didn't like to hear her talk herself down.

"You're the best. He's just testing you. He'll come around. We've been on our own for three years, and with you starting out as his nanny and now being my girlfriend, I think he has a hard time to place things. A lot has changed for him. But with guidance and time, he'll get there. I'm sure."

"If you say so."

He rocked her in his arms and joked, "I'm always right. Okay, let's go."

"Please give me a straight answer. I hate feeling out of place when I meet new people. What do your sisters wear during these dinners? Or your mom?"



His eyes tracked her fingernails as Ryleigh's teeth attacked them one by one. He remembered she'd said something about needing a smoke when she first met them, to help her cope with her nerves.

“Are you thinking about smoking?”

Her brows rose to her coppery hairline. “How did you know?”

“You told us you had your last one weeks ago...”

She shook her head and held his eyes. “I haven't smoked since.”

Keenan hugged her tight and said, “I'm proud of you.”

With a knowing grin she said, “Thanks.”

“I don't want to sound like some weak and needy girlfriend...”

He gave her a lopsided grin, because she couldn't be anything further from that description. He'd never met such a strong woman before. Sweet, strong and fucking sexy. The way they clicked in the bedroom—and often outside of the bedroom, made his pulse quicken.

He'd never been with such an adventurous lover. But with Ryleigh, all bets were off. He couldn't get enough of her. No matter if they were in the shower, on the couch, in the pantry, or even in the car...

He refocused on her when she said, “Just promise me you'll not let me fend for myself too long by leaving me for hours to go into another room or something. I'm not the best in meeting new people.” Ryleigh turned around to place some bowls into the dishwasher, so he couldn't see her face as she spoke.

He didn't like it one bit and walked over to her.

“What's wrong?” He held her shoulders and made her face him.

“Nothing.” An enormous sigh followed the silence as he waited her out.

“Okay, you know what I’ve been through in high school. Things haven’t always been easy and sometimes, I…” she shrugged.

“I’m sorry, Ry. I wish I could have been there for you.”

Her voice cracked when she said, “Yeah. Me too.”

“You have nothing to worry about, Ry. My family is really cool.”

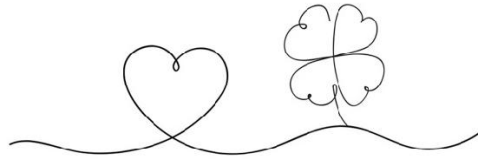
“I know, and it’s stupid because I already met them weeks ago. But it would be nice to have you by my side.”

He kissed her temple. “Of course, Ry. I’ve got you.”

“Okay. Let’s do this.”



## RYLEIGH



**K**eenan padded his full stomach next to her at his parents' dinner table. Ryleigh glanced around, taking his family in as they talked and joked around. Like her own family of five siblings, the Mills family all liked to get a word in.

"I heard you're going to teach some classes for Duncan, Ry. It would be good having you around at the dojo," Aiden said from her other side.

"Thanks, Aide. Maybe I can show you a few moves," she said and grinned when he laughed.

Keenan placed his arm on the back of her chair and said jokingly, "Yeah, a few bumps and bruises would do my brother's face some good."

"Jealous much?" Aiden laughed.

"I see you fit right in, Ryleigh," Keenan's mother had a warm voice and smiled at their bantering.

Keenan's grandfather piped in, "Aye, that's what I say."

Ryleigh blushed. She felt the warmth creeping over her cheeks. "Thanks, Pops."

When Keenan slid his hand down her chair and rested it on her thigh, she released her breath. Why was it that with meeting new people she always needed some time to warm up?

Keenan must have felt she needed his touch to put her more at ease. It was stupid, really. She already met his family weeks ago. She hated how she must come across.

“As you might have noticed, we’ve all been eager to have you here at our Friday dinners,” Keenan’s father, Niall said with a good-natured chuckle.

Keenan’s brother Liam said, “Okay, people. Leave the girl alone.”

Ryleigh remembered what Liam did for work and whispered, “Firefighter.”

“Yeah, how did you know?” Liam said. He and the youngest Mills brother, Roarke, could pass off as twins with their auburn hair. Only Roarke seemed like a total hipster with his man bun, torn jeans and sneakers, where Liam appeared buff with muscles for days, his firm jaw and close-shaved hair.

“Oh, I said it out loud, didn’t I? Keenan told me what you do for work and I remembered because my cousin’s a firefighter.”

Liam swallowed down the last bit of pot roast and said, “Really? What division?”

“Eh...”

Liam laughed and said, “Okay, what does he do? Inspections? Wildfires? Or does he work in the suburbs?”

She looked over the table at Deirdre, who gave her a reassuring smile. A bit of tension left Ryleigh’s shoulders. She hated when a room full of people stared at her.

She returned her focus to Liam and said, “He fights fire downtown. I don’t know what station...”

“What’s his name?”

“Kieran. Kieran—”

Liam clanked his fork on the table. “Get out of here! Kieran Walker? Kieran is your cousin?”

“Relax, bro. Tone it down a bit, will ye?” Keenan said while he squeezed her thigh.

“I-It’s okay. I know Kieran can be wild.” She turned to Keenan and added, “He’s Devlin’s brother,” like that would make perfect sense to Keenan in that making Kieran wild.

Liam laughed and eyed her with renewed appreciation. “I know. He’s one of my best friends.”

“He is?” Her voice raised a few octaves.

“Yeah. We’ve worked side by side for years now and we’ve been through a lot together.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Nah, it’s okay. Kieran is going to bust my balls about my brother. He’s going to want to hear everything about Keenan and know exactly what his intentions are with you. I can’t wait to fuck with him.”

She laughed along with him because she knew he’d spoken the truth.

“Language...” Melissa said before she scooped up the last bit of the mashed potatoes.

“Come with me, boyo. I need a cigar herf.” Pops slapped Keenan’s back with still remarkable force for a seventy-eight-year-old.

“A cigar herf?” she said.

“Aye, lass. It’s when a few cigar lovers meet up and smoke together. Preferably in the yard with some food, hopefully a whiskey...” Pops winked at Melissa and she said, “Coming right up, Pops. No worries.”

“Good. Imma steal ye man for a minute, lass.” Pops stood from the table and lead the way for Keenan to follow.

Keenan stood and gave Ryleigh’s cheek a kiss. “I won’t be long. If I’m not back in half an hour, come and find me outside. It’s no problem at all if you’d join us.”

With a nod, she said, “Sure. Enjoy your cigar.”

“Ah, wishing you could smoke with us, eh?” He grinned, and she stuck out her tongue.

When he put his head back and laughed, the room fell silent. His brother Roarke sat back in his chair with his mouth slack and his coffee cup mid-air. Like Keenan laughing out loud was some kind of big deal.

Keenan's dad, Niall, wiped at the corner of his eye and she felt like she was an outsider looking into this huge family moment.

"Okay, I'm going outside with Pops. Y'all are acting crazy," Keenan said.

"Spoken like a true Texan," Liam joked.

"Can I come with you, Dad?" Tommy asked.

Keenan held out his hand, taking Tommy with him outside to the patio. Ryleigh sighed as Tommy hadn't spoken a single word to her tonight.

When they first met, they'd hit it off almost instantly. She was sure the little guy loved her as much as she loved him.

But ever since she became his dad's girlfriend, it seemed like they both didn't know how to act around each other. As a nanny, things had been very clear; she was there to take care of Tommy, to supervise, guide and help him. She got paid to stand in for Keenan whenever he was at work.

Tommy no longer wanted to listen to her whenever they were alone. And whenever his dad was around, he tried to create as much conflicts possible.

After they closed the patio door behind them, his mother Melissa said, "I wished they'd stop smoking those things..." She filled three glasses with whiskey and placed them on a tray. "I can't believe they really enjoy that chirping."

"Chirping?" Ryleigh said, unsure.

Deirdre had taken Keenan's seat next to her and said, "It's peak season. If you sit outside this time of year, you hear a constant colony chatter of bats chirping."

"Yeah, probably about some million fuckers hunting out there tonight," Liam said.

She remembered something about bats from high school, when her teacher told the class about Austin's bat season. The largest urban bat colony of North America lived right under the Ann W. Richards Congress Avenue Bridge, which was only three miles from Keenan's parent's home.

Melissa went out to the patio and closed the door behind her, leaving Ryleigh alone with Keenan's sisters Deirdre, Briana and his brothers Aiden, Liam and Roarke.

"Okay, enough with the bat talk. Let's talk about you, Ryleigh. We want to know everything about the woman who's making our brother happy again." Liam said.

She swallowed her sip of water and placed her glass in front of her. She pulled one shoulder. "There's not much to tell."

"Leave her alone, bro," Aiden said. She smiled at him in thanks and he gave her a reassuring wink. She took a deep breath and remembered she wasn't that insecure teenager anymore. She was an adult now. And possibly even a stepmother, if all would work out with Tommy.

"It's okay, Aide. I'm twenty-one, I've dropped out of college and then worked as Tommy's nanny and now I'm going to work for your cousin Duncan at his dojo. Eh, yeah..."

She hated these talks. It was like sitting at a job interview with ten eyes scrutinizing her every move and weighing every answer if she'd be worthy of their brother.

Keenan's sister Briana fixed her messy bun on top of her head and said, "I'd like to join your self-defense class sometime."

"Oh, me too." Deirdre waved a hand in the air.

Ryleigh smiled at the Mills sisters and said, "Ah, that's cool of you. Maybe next week? Give me some time to get into the groove of things before I mess things up with you."

Keenan's siblings joined her laugh, but she couldn't help noticing Liam examining her, like she was some kind of puzzle. She shifted in her seat, feeling uncomfortable.



Liam closed his eyes when Aiden slapped the back of his head. “Sorry. I was staring, wasn’t I?”

Aiden said, “Yeah. Not a good move, bro. Don’t think Keen is going to like this. Or your friend Kieran.”

It reminded her that she needed to talk to her cousin Kieran and ask him about Liam. She wanted to know how she never heard of Liam before.

“It’s nothing like that. I was just trying to figure out some things.”

Aiden crossed his arms, and Ryleigh held her breath. She didn’t like to be talked about, like she wasn’t even in the room. But she didn’t feel confident enough in this group to speak up for herself.

“Like what?” Aiden said.

“Well, Ryleigh is so different from Evangeline and—”

The back of Aiden’s chair clanged on the ground when he shot out of it. Keenan’s sisters gasped, and Ryleigh held a hand to her chest. Where was Keenan when she needed him? She wanted to go home.

As if it wasn’t enough to live with the ghost of Evangeline in Keenan’s home, she now had to sit here and be compared to her by Keenan’s brother?

Aiden stood toe-to-toe with Liam and clenched his fists. He raised his voice and said, “You’re damn straight she doesn’t look anythin’ like that good for nothin’ snake. That stuck-up witch has nothin’ on Ryleigh.”

She wanted to thank Aiden for sticking up for her, but she couldn’t find the words. That Liam would even go there stunned her.

Liam took a step back and said, “I know—”

Before Liam could bring another word in, Aiden continued, “She’s been gone for years. Left Blondie without a goodbye. Left our brother heartbroken.”

Of course, she'd figured that Keenan had been heartbroken after Tommy's mother had left them. But it didn't mean she'd enjoyed hearing any of that. In an ideal world Tommy was hers and Keenan had never loved another woman.

"I didn't mean it like that, I swear Ryleigh."

She nodded at Liam, hoping he would leave well enough alone.

"We're all just so stunned to see our brother this happy. I never thought he would ever laugh like that again. And I know we have you to thank for that. I wanted to get to know you better tonight. I've been hoping to talk to you... Fuck. I'm messing this all up."

She walked up from her side of the table, stopping in front of Aiden and Liam. When Liam hung his head, she cleared her throat so he would meet her eyes.

"It's okay, Liam. I guess now I see why you and my cousin are best buds. You're both absolute fuck-ups."

Keenan's siblings busted out in laughter, and a laugh rippled through Liam before he took her in his arms for a hug. Stiff at first, she then hugged him back. "Shit. You're one of a kind. And I mean that, Ry. I had no business in comparing you to her. I hope you can forgive me and my big mouth?"

"It's okay. We're fine."

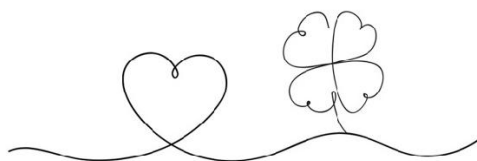
"What's going on here? I leave for a moment and you're already in my brother's arms?" The smile in Keenan's voice calmed her racing heart. She turned around and let Keenan's outstretched arms engulf her.

Tommy came inside and eyed his father as he hugged her. She gave Tommy a smile and for the first time tonight; he smiled back at her. She let out the breath she'd been holding. The ghost of Evangeline was still very much alive. Not only with Keenan's family, but it also hung like a thundercloud above her relationship with Tommy.

Hopefully she could find a way to chase that wretched ghost away.



## KEENAN



“**F**our ball in corner pocket,” Ronan said before he hit the ball with his pool cue stick. Keenan congratulated Ronan with another great shot and joined Pops at his table at his cousin Brennan’s Irish pub, The Lucky Irishman.

“Aye, Keenan. A night on the town with the lads?” Pops said.

Keenan placed his beer bottle on Pops’ table and laughed. “I know you’d rather sit here with Ry. But you’ll have to settle with me.”

Pops’ boisterous laugh ended up in a loud cough.

“Are you okay?” Keenan asked as he slapped Pops’ back, who waved at him to stop.

“Yes, boyo. Just me lungs. I’m fine.”

It reminded him he needed to talk to his mother about Pops’ cough. It didn’t sit right with him.

“Don’t worry, Keen. I’ve been checked out. Nothing serious. I swear.” Pops padded Keenan’s hand on the table and said, “But I would like to talk to ye about somethin’, if ye don’t mind.”

“Sure, Pops.”

Pops rubbed the top of his enormous belly, “I like Ryleigh, I do.”

Keenan kept his voice measured. “But...?”

“But I don’t know if yer ready for her at this time in yer life.”

Keenan rubbed his brow in frustration.

“I mean it, Keen. And Imma gonna go out and say it... Where’s that chancer—our boy’s mother? Have ye heard anythin’ lately?”

Keenan hated Pops thought of Evangeline as a person who exploits any opportunity to further their own ends.

“Don’t call her that. Be nice. She’s still Tommy’s mother.” Keenan always defended Evangeline. Although this time with less grit, and for the first time since she’d left, talking about her even left a bad taste in his mouth.

He’d kept hope for years that Evangeline would come back to Tommy and him. He sighed and watched other patrons in the pub. He thought back to the last time he’d seen her, about three years ago.

When he’d walked into the kitchen that morning, Evangeline stood at the stove, preparing omelets for Tommy and Keenan’s breakfast. She’d looked up at him with glazed eyes. When he’d asked her if something was wrong, she’d denied it.

She’d continued making breakfast and even played with Tommy in the living room. Something she hadn’t done in a long time. In hindsight, she was saying goodbye while neither Tommy nor Keenan knew what was going to hit them.

While at work, his mother called him and said that Evangeline hadn’t picked up Tommy. Alarm bells went off in his head when Evangeline didn’t pick up her phone, even though he’d tried dozens of times to reach her.

He collected Tommy from his mother’s and went home to an empty house. Half of the furniture was missing. She must’ve planned on leaving him because she had to call in help from a moving company to take their sofa, cabinets, dining table and suitcases of clothes with her.

He would never forget the chills running over his spine when realization hit him. She’d left them. She went on and

really left them behind so she could live without them.

She'd faked her way through Friday family dinners, through birthdays and other family events for years. How else could she love them one moment and leave them the next?

Keenan still struggled with the fact that she had blindsided him. He had no idea that Evangeline was secretly planning to escape the life that made her miserable.

He'd failed her by not seeing the signs that he now, years later, recognized. She'd faked her way through life for years and had finally had enough. There was no other explanation for it.

"That's exactly why I think yer not ready for that sweet lass who's sitting at home, carin' for yer son."

"What do you mean?"

"Yer still defendin' her. My guess is that yer still in love with that wagon."

"Pops..."

He sighed. He wasn't in love with Evangeline. Not anymore. He could honestly say that he was over her. But it still stung that she'd left him and their son. He deserved some answers.

Pops swallowed his whiskey and nodded, "I know it's hard to talk about her. But I also know this; the woman came into my family's pub a year before she left you. Sat on a bar stool here in Lucky's and flirted with some guy in front of me. Even went home with the man."

"Pops..." Keenan shook his head, not willing to hear whatever his grandfather would say.

"Ye didn't want to hear me out at the time, but hopefully ye'll listen to me now."

Keenan always had his suspicions, but he never acted upon it to find out for certain if his gut was right.

"Where did ye think she went off to?"

“I don’t know, Pops. It was one dead end after the other. After a year I said to Donovan he should stop his search.”

“Ye know that Don is one of the best, lad. If you’d ask him, he could find her. I’m sure of it.”

Keenan knew his cousin would help him out if he’d ask him. Donovan had his own security company and could hack into any system. But after a while of not being able to find her, he figured she must have grave reasons to disappear into thin air like that.

He didn’t know if any of her reasons would hurt his son, so he decided to let her be and stop his search.

“What does Ryleigh say about all this?”

Keenan swallowed the last gulp of his beer and wiped his lips with the back of his hand. “I’m not sure, Pops. We never talk about Tommy’s mom.”

“Why?”

He fought the urge to roll his eyes at his grandfather because he’d surly get a knock against his head—and rightly so.

“Who wants to talk about his ex with his girlfriend? That’s a minefield I don’t want to step into.”

Pops narrowed his gray, bushy brows. “Yer an arsehole. Ye need to talk to the lass and let her know that she’s the one. And let her know that she’s eventually gonna be the boy’s momma and that ye are doin’ everythin’ in yer power to make that happen. I know that if ye don’t fix this loose end, it’s gonna bite ye in the arse.”

After years of sticking his head in the sand, he knew Pops was right. He needed to make sure Evangeline wouldn’t turn up out of the blue one day.

He wondered what Ryleigh would say if he’d suggest searching for his ex.

“Okay, Pops. I’ll talk to Ry.”

“Good. See ye later.” Pops waved his hand in goodbye.

“What? Now?”

“No time like the present, boyo. Go home and tell yer lass how ye feel. Let her know she’s it for ye. And fix those damn loose ends.” Pops slammed his palm on top of the table, making other patrons jump in their seats.

Errin chose that time to walk over to their table. “Are you scaring our customers again, old man?”

Only Errin could call Pops that and get away with it. Pops beamed at Errin and said, “Ah, there she is, our little troublemaker. How’s my boyo treatin’ ye?”

Errin’s gaze drifted over to Brennan, who’d kept his eyes glued to her at all times. There had been a time that he’d been interested to get to know Errin. The thought had gone through his head before he realized his cousin was already head over heels for her.

He couldn’t see himself with anyone else but Ryleigh now. In a matter of a few months, this playful, sexy, sweet and above all—loyal woman had stolen his heart and became his one true love.

His grandfather was right. Ryleigh deserved the best. He stood from the table and said his goodbyes. When he got home, he’d entered the living room and found Tommy and Ryleigh asleep on the couch. He stepped over the upturned popcorn bowl on the floor.

After clicking off the television, he first carried Tommy to bed and went back for Ryleigh. A cute snore escaped her lips when he hoisted her from the couch. Coming home to find the two of them asleep on the couch filled his heart.

He knew what he needed to do. He placed her in the middle of his bed and undressed her. She opened her eyes and said groggily, “Did you have fun?”

While running his hand through her hair, he said, “Yes, darlin’. I did. Go back to sleep. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Yeah... Morning...”



After exiting his bedroom, he traipsed down the stairs and fetched a beer out of the fridge. He took a long gulp before he took his phone out of his jeans pocket. He dialed the one man who could help him out.

“Keen, what’s up?”

A man of a few words, his cousin Donovan.

“I have an important request. A private request.”

“Everything for family, Keen. No problem,” Donovan said.

“I know you’ve offered me long time ago to search for Evangeline...”

“I’ve already got a file for you.”

Keenan let his beer bottle slip from his fingers. He quickly got out of his chair and returned with a towel. He wiped the spilled beer and said, “Fuck. I should’ve known.”

“You told me to stop searching her, but you know me, man. I wanted to be sure Tommy was safe.”

With his eyes narrowed and a raised voice, Keenan spat, “What do you mean? Why wouldn’t he be?”

“You tell me... Keen. For all you know, she could be a drug addict by now. Someone with a lot of debts and in search of a quick buck.”

“You’re sick, Don.”

His cousin let out a mirthless laugh. “Nah, I’ve just seen too much shit as a private investigator. There’s a reason I keep a close watch on the people I love. And that includes you and Blondie, too.”

Keenan rubbed his forehead and sighed. “I remember telling you explicitly to stop your search. She didn’t want to be found.”

“She could want a pink unicorn and ride downtown Austin, for all I care. I don’t give a fuck what she wants. Like I said, my loyalty lies with you and your son. And when I asked you last year about her, you said to respect her wishes for not

wanting to be found, so I kept the file in my vault and didn't bring it up."

"Fuck."

Donovan sighed. "You called me, remember? Why are you mad at me? Didn't you just call me to do exactly what I've already done?"

"I guess... How bad is it?"

"Give me two days and I'll make sure I have the info updated for you."

"You're not answering my question, Don."

His cousin hesitated and finally said, "I'm not sure how to answer you, Keen. It depends on what you want out of this information. If you'd want to start things again or if you'd want her to sign over her parental rights."

"Geez. That's a whole other issue."

He didn't want to think about Evangeline waltzing back into their lives and mess with Tommy's head. He needed her out of the picture so she could never hurt his son again.

"It might become relevant..."

The hair on the back of his neck stood upright. "Let me know when you're done."

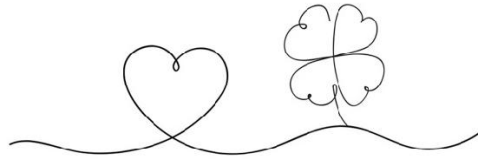
"Okay, I'll let you know, Keen."

"And... thanks, Cuz."

"Like I said, I'm here for you."



## RYLEIGH



**R**yleigh put the detergent in the washer and hummed along with a song playing on her phone. She'd never started her day brighter after Keenan woke her up this morning with his face between her thighs. It was like there was nothing the man couldn't do.

She smiled while dancing on her favorite playlist. Keenan always made a face whenever she bellowed along, and just because of that, she did an extra song for him.

Her music stopped when her phone rang. It was Tommy's school. Her palm got so sweaty, she almost dropped her phone.

"Yes?"

"Ryleigh?"

"Yes, this is Ryleigh Walker...." She recognized the voice from somewhere but couldn't make out whom it belonged to.

"Hi, this is Bree. I'm with Tommy at the principal's office. I tried to call Keenan, but after three times of trying, I figured I should call you instead."

Bree had been Tommy's teacher last year before she gave birth to twins and someone else took over her class. Ryleigh placed a hand over her racing heart. "Is he okay?"

Tears already formed in the corner of her eyes at the mere idea something happened to him. Why else would she call Keenan three times? And now her?

“He’s been in a fight. I need you—or Keenan, to come to school.”

“Ah, shit. Oh, eh, sorry...”

Bree let out a soft chuckle, “That’s okay, Ryleigh. My colleague knew I’m related to Tommy, and he pulled me out of my class. I know this might have come as a shock. But Tommy’s fine. He’s not hurt. But... we need to talk about things. Would you be able to come and pick him up?”

“Thank you for being there for him, Bree.”

She slammed the washing machine door closed and speed walked over to the hallway. “I’m on my way.”

“Take your time, Ryleigh. I don’t want you to get into an accident. Everything is fine, I promise. Please.”

Even though Bree was her cousin, she’d just found out about her recently. At Tommy’s birthday party, they’d agreed to keep in touch, since Bree lived across the street from Keenan.

But even though a month had passed, they never had that cup of coffee. She made a mental note to make more of an effort with Bree.

“Where are my keys?”

Like a headless chicken, she searched the kitchen and the living room.

“Try next to the front door. Doesn’t Keen has a table with a bowl on it where he keeps his keys?”

She was totally unaware of still having Bree on the phone. She said, “Oh, yeah. You’re right. Thanks, Bree.”

“That’s all right. See you in a bit. Drive safely.”

They hung up and Ryleigh snatched her keys from the bowl. Oh, my... If Tommy’s been in a fight...

She could imagine what Keenan would say about all of this. He would surely hold her responsible. It wouldn’t matter if Tommy had only protected himself.

She sighed and locked the front door behind her. She got into her car and drove straight to Tommy's school. When she arrived, she passed Keenan's truck in the parking lot. Wow. He must have flown like a bat out of hell to get here before her.

Should she go inside? It wasn't like she was Tommy's mother. And Keenan had already been there.

No. She wasn't a chicken and she wouldn't shy away from this. If Keenan would throw this in her face, so be it. She could handle him. Maybe she should have a word with the principal about his or her policy about bullying.

Hadn't they figured out that Tommy needed help? She got out of her car and stomped across the schoolyard, ready to take on this fight.

Halfway across the schoolyard, the door opened and Tommy flew into Ryleigh's open arms, making her take a small step backwards to hold her balance.

"Hey, Tommy. What happened?"

Tommy said in a wobbly voice, "I got into a fight..."

Ryleigh hugged Tommy tight and dared a glance over his blonde hair. Worry creased across Keenan's face. Bree gave her a soft smile and said, "Okay, see you next week, Tommy."

"Next week?" She glanced from Bree back to Keenan. His cold eyes staring back at her shocked her.

Tommy hiccupped in her arms and said, "I'm suspended. They don't want me at school. And Jeremy can go to school. A-And he started it."

She caressed his golden hair and kissed his temple. "It's okay, sweetheart. We'll work it out."

"There's nothing to work out, Ry. You showed him how to fight. And this is what happened."

She gasped but refrained from answering him in front of Tommy and Bree. She straightened and said, "Shall we talk about this later?"

“Fine. Bree, thank you for being there for us,” Keenan said.

“Sure, Keen. And please take it easy on both of them.”

Ryleigh stepped into her old beat-up car, and like she needed another setback, the secondhand car she’d recently bought wouldn’t start. She slammed her fists on the steering wheel and shouted, “Aaargh!”

Knocking on her windshield made her bump her head to the car’s ceiling light.

She rubbed the top of her head and opened her door for Keenan.

“Come with me,” he said.

“But I have to call—”

He opened her door even further and said, “We don’t have time to wait for a tow. We have Tommy’s mess to deal with and I’m not leaving you at this parking lot. So please, come with me.”

“Since you asked so nicely.” She couldn’t help being snarky.

She locked up her car and got into the passenger side of Keenan’s truck. She turned in her seat and tried to give Tommy a reassuring smile. He returned it with a watered down smile.

Keenan closed his door and buckled in. He started the truck in silence. She took a few deep breaths and tried to think of anything to say when finally Keenan broke their silence.

“I can’t believe I had to come and pick you up today. Do you realize you’re in a world of trouble?”

Tommy sighed and said, “Yes.”

“I just don’t understand. Is it because you learned how to fight?”

Ryleigh blinked before she realized what he’d implied.

Keenan mumbled, “I knew I should have listened to my gut. This fighting business brings nothing but trouble.”

Her body tensed, and she ground her teeth. She counted to ten before she’d tell him off in front of his son. And wasn’t that exactly the crux?

*His son.*

She had no say in any of this.

Tommy pounded his little fist next to his thigh. “You don’t know what they say to me.”

Keenan shook his head and adjusted his speed before they stopped for a red light.

“We already discussed—“

“They said that my real mom doesn’t want me. That she’s smart and left me.”

Ryleigh leaned over her seat and patted his knee, “I’m sorry, Tommy. That’s awful.”

“I hate Evangeline.”

The truck faltered before Keenan got it back on track again. It was the first time she’d heard Tommy referred to her as Evangeline instead of his mom. It had been weeks, period, that he’d talked about his mother.

Ryleigh turned her focus to the passing view out the window, as she tried to leave Tommy’s mom with Keenan to deal with.

“We’ll talk about it later, son.”

“You always say that. I hate it. And I hate you!” Tommy pushed his feet against the back of Keenan’s seat, testing how far he could go with his tantrum.

“I’ll give you five seconds to apologize. Or you know what happens when we get home. I’ll put the tablet away for the rest of the week.”

Tommy didn’t respond, and the cabin of the truck filled with an awkward silence. After minutes had passed, Keenan



said, “Since when do you call your mother Evangeline?”

“I don’t have a mother!”

Bang.

Another kick to the back of Keenan’s seat.

Ryleigh placed a trembling hand over her mouth, and a tear slipped from the corner of her eye. She still said nothing, but tried to let him deal with his son, who was more heartbroken than she even realized.

“Son...”

In the rearview mirror, she watched Tommy bite his bottom lip and turn his head, keeping his eyes trained out the window.

“I have you and I have Ryleigh,” Tommy whispered before dissolving into sobs.

Keenan parked in the driveway of his home and wasted no time to get out of the truck and opening Tommy’s door.

She hopped out of his truck just in time to witness Keenan pulling Tommy out of the truck and hugging him. Tommy clung to his dad like the little monkey he is, and she overheard Keenan whisper, “I love you, son. I love you, so, so much.”

Tommy hiccupped and buried his head in the crook of Keenan’s neck.

Ryleigh rested her hand on Tommy’s back. She rubbed softly and said, “I know I’m not your mother, Tommy,” She looked up a millisecond to Keenan before she continued, “But I love you with every little piece of my heart. My heart is so full of you and your dad...”

Tommy pulled his head from Keenan’s neck and looked at Ryleigh. “Does it hurt?”

“It only hurts when I think of losing you two.”

“I don’t want to lose you,” Tommy held Keenan even tighter and said, “Or Dad.”

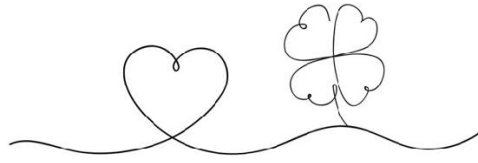
Keenan rubbed Tommy's back and said, "We'll never leave you, son. I promise you. And you know I always keep my promises."

Tommy nodded and arched over Keenan's arm to Ryleigh. The scene that followed in the next few seconds will be forever ingrained in her heart. Tommy placed his hand on the back of her head and brought his little forehead against hers. "Cheers."

Ryleigh's nose ran from the crying, so she sniffed before she said, "Cheers."



## KEENAN



**W**ith a soft snore, Ryleigh turned onto her stomach in Keenan's bed, hugging her pillow tight. He'd been watching her for what felt like hours while he couldn't sleep a wink.

Since Tommy's fight and suspension last month, things had finally settled down at school. Mainly, because Bree got involved and confronted her colleague that he'd better step in and finally make an effort to stop the bullying in his class once and for all.

He hated to admit it, but after Tommy finally fought back that one time and knocked that kid's tooth out, it seemed like Tommy wasn't targeted anymore.

Tommy sparred with Ryleigh every week, and his son was coming out of his shell again. Over the past weeks, the bond between Ryleigh and Tommy became unbreakable. Because Tommy had finally opened up to them about his mother, Keenan had told Donovan he wanted to hold off reading Evangeline's file.

After his suspension at school, Tommy had been his priority, not finding his ex who would probably bring another world of trouble with her.

Lying awake at night, he mulled over the reasons Evangeline could have had for leaving his son heartbroken. Over the last weeks it became clear Tommy needed answers for some kind of closure. And Keenan had to pave the way so his son could deal with their mutual demons.

“If you don’t stop sighing, I’m putting you in a headlock.”

He placed a hand upon his chest, startled by her voice in the middle of the night.

“I thought you were asleep?”

“What’s on your mind, Keen? Can I help you?”

“I’ve been thinking about ways to help Tommy, but it all boils down to getting answers from his mother.”

Even though he’d already shared snippets about what happened with Evangeline, he would never feel comfortable to talk about her with Ryleigh.

“You know you can talk to me, right?”

He knew he had to open up to her. If the tables were turned he would have wanted to know about Ryleigh’s ex. Not in every detail, but he’d liked to know where her head was at.

“I... I’ll start at the beginning.”

“That would be great,” she said with the hint of a smile.

“As you know, I grew up quite similar to you. There were a lot of people and fuss at home. Evangeline and I wanted to have a place for ourselves and because I started working for my dad at a young age, I could rent a one-bedroom apartment.”

She hummed against his chest and placed her leg over his while she curled up to him.

“We were nineteen and playing house, really.” He blinked the memory of their crummy apartment away.

“Things were great between us for a year. I was glad to have more alone time, and Evangeline was glad she got away from home. Her parents were fighting all the time and after she moved out, Evangeline’s parents got a divorce and tried to put her in the middle of their fights.”

“She had broken all contact with both her parents by the time we tried to have a baby. It’s what we both wanted, and I guess we’d been too young to realize what a baby would entail for a young couple.”

It all started out so far so good, but he knew he was getting to the point where she had broken his heart. And Tommy's. His hand on top of her back became clammy, and he wiped it next to her on the bedding.

“Sorry, sweaty palms.”

“It's okay,” she whispered in the dark. He'd intentionally left the light out for this conversation; he didn't want to see her pity him.

“Tommy was born when we were twenty-two, almost twenty-three. We were ecstatic and so was the rest of my family. I thought everything was good between us. Right until Tommy was three years old, and she left us. I swear I didn't see any of this coming. I had no idea she wasn't happy with us... No idea at all.”

“It must have broken your heart...” she whispered.

“Yeah.”

He closed his eyes and said, “I loved her, Ry. And she left us. She just left her son and never looked back.”

A tear fell from his cheek upon her fingers that rested on his chest, and she wiped it away. He cried, remembering the pain his ex had caused his son. She sniffed her own tears away, affected by his words.

Ryleigh kept surprising him with her big heart. She was just so damn selfish—always caring for others. If he didn't love her already, he would have fallen right then and there for her.

“Where is she now?”

He wiped his cheek and said, “I have no idea. She took half the house with her and more than half what was in our bank account.”

Ryleigh sat up straight and a moment later the table lamp on her side of the bed lit up. “She did what?! She knew you had to take care of your son alone and she still took almost everything with her?”

Right now, he wasn't in bed with the sweet Ryleigh who had just offered him her support. No, the woman glaring down at him was Luria, the mixed martial arts fighter who dared anyone to come after one of her boys.

Even though her fierceness was hot as hell, he said, "Clearly she was out of her mind, Ry."

"I would say. If she left you and your beautiful boy... Wait. Do you think she only left you because she'd been out of her mind?"

He narrowed his eyes. "I don't like the way you're heading. I'm not making excuses for her like 'it had to be temporary insanity', Ry. I'm not in love with her anymore. I'm telling you the truth."

She accepted his words and nodded.

"Okay. I think I have enough of talking about the past," he said and shifted to move off the bed.

She placed her hand against his chest and prevented him from getting up. "Just a second. What are your plans?"

"My plans?"

Although Ryleigh blushed and didn't hold his stare at first, she righted her shoulders and said, "I need to know, Keen. I want to know if she's ever coming back. And I need to be sure that book is closed for you."

"I already—"

"Yes, I know what you said. But I don't feel it yet. I can't help how I feel, Keen. I've always been insecure. And this entire issue will drive me crazy if I don't fight this head on. I might lose you if you see her again. But I have to know, before I can give you all of me."

"Fuck, darlin'. I hate seeing you like this. I hate I put that thought into your head."

She hung her head and whispered, "I just know that when you'll see—"

He pulled her up to his chest and wrapped his arms around her.

“Never.”

“But you have a son together and—”

In one swift move, he rolled them over. As he hovered over her and rested on his underarms, she tried to avoid eye contact.

“It doesn’t matter what she comes up with, Ry. I love you. I only want you. And do you know why?”

She shrugged, and a tear fell from her chin.

“Because you are perfect for me. I never want to think about a life without you. It scares the absolute shit out of me. If you think I’ve been heartbroken before? Losing you would shatter me.”

He kissed her on the forehead before he rained kisses all over her cheeks and nose. When their lips finally met, it ignited the blazing fire that he’d only felt with her.

“Only with you, I can be the man I was always meant to be. I’ve never felt as deeply for anyone as I do for you. You, my sweet Ryleigh, you are my forever.”

He soaked in her wide corn blue eyes that brimmed with tears. Although he’d rendered her speechless, the slow smile that spread over her lips put him at ease.

His hands slid under her to cup her firm ass so he could align himself. He loved sleeping naked with her and having easy access in the middle of the night.

With his head tipped back, his breath caught in his chest the moment he’d entered her. She crossed her legs behind his back, pulling him closer to her. His arms strained to hold still just a torturous minute longer.

He started to move, treacherously slow. When her nails bit into his skin on his biceps, a shudder raced through his spine.

Their intense eye contact almost did him in. He wanted to make love to her, to take his time by showing her exactly how



much he wanted to cherish her for the rest of their lives.

“Oh, this is so... ah, Keen.”

The first small orgasm rippled through her, but he kept pushing in and pulling out, making her come again or maybe prolonging her orgasm. With her walls clamping down on him, he was almost there.

But he wanted to taste her body. To claim every inch of her porcelain skin. He pulled out of her, eliciting a groan from her.

“I’m not done, Ry.”

“Oh, my....” She said when he got on his knees and pampered kisses over her chest on his way to her nipple. He suckled and lapped at one hard peak before pushing her breasts together to alternate nipple lick by lick.

On his way down, she grabbed his hair and yanked him closer to her core. He loved she wasn’t afraid to show him what she needed. But he also loved to tease, so he said, “Do you want my tongue, Ry?”

She bucked against him, bumping her core against his nose. “Yes...”

He skimmed kisses on her labia, avoiding the spot where she craved him the most.

“Please...”

When he flattened his tongue against her, she groaned. “Ah, yes. Right there. Don’t stop.”

Her juices were sweet and salty and exactly like Ryleigh. He couldn’t get enough of her and opened her up with his fingers. He put his tongue into her channel and fucked her. When she bucked again, he placed a hand over her waist, holding her down.

With his tongue still inside her, he tried to catch her eye, but she’d been in a totally different world. With her eyes closed, she trashed her head from side to side as she kept encouraging him with soft pleads to keep tonguing her.

He pulled out his tongue and went in for the kill by circling her clit. She moaned her release, and he went up and kissed her.

Before he knew what was happening, she rolled him upon his back and straddled him. With her knees digging into the mattress beside him, she elevated herself just enough to place him where she'd wanted him. With one swift move, she took him inside of her by slamming down on him.

“Aaah, Ry...”

“Hmm. I know, this is... ah, shit. Keen.”

He knew what she'd meant. This was unstoppable. She couldn't do things nice and slow. No. She was going up and down. Hard.

Slamming her wet pussy all over his dick until they were both slick with sweat. He loved how she took control. He could finally let go. He felt the tingles traveling his spine, his balls growing taut and heavy.

“Fuck. You're so hot.”

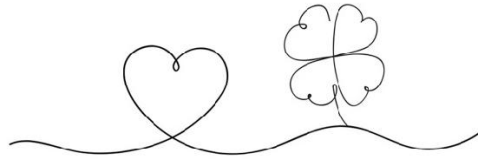
“I love you, Keen,” she said before she lowered her upper body and fucked his mouth with her tongue. She kept riding his dick while he bucked up against her, trying to get as deep inside of her as possible. Their sweaty passion erupted in an orgasm that curled his toes and made him see stars before his eyes.

It took him several long moments to catch his breath. The sweet kiss against his jaw made his softened dick twitch inside of her. She softly giggled against his skin. “You're insatiable.”

He swatted her bum. “Only with my sweet and sexy lioness.”



## RYLEIGH



**K**eenan slammed his truck shut, and Ryleigh had trouble following him with his long strides as he walked on the sidewalk somewhere downtown in Austin. After dropping Tommy off at Keenan’s mother, he’d been withdrawn and stuck in his head.

They’d made love for hours last night, and she hadn’t expected to see this change in him. It all started after the call he received this morning from his cousin Donovan.

Apparently the guy owned a security company, was a private investigator and a skilled hacker. He had news about Keenan’s ex and wanted to have a talk with him. Keenan had invited her to come along for moral support, but by the look of his mood swing, she already regretted she’d agreed.

“Why didn’t you ask your cousin sooner to find Evangeline?”

He stopped his walk mid stride. “Donovan had searched for her, but when even a skilled PI like Don had trouble finding her, it became clear that she did one hell of a job in preparing her disappearance act. We wondered if maybe there was more going on and I didn’t want to endanger Tommy, so I asked Don to stop his search.”

“But if your cousin is as good as you say he is, he may have found out her troubles and—”

With a sigh, he kicked an empty coffee-to-go cup to the side of the curb. “You don’t understand, Ry. I was dealing with a heartbroken three-year-old, and I was struggling with my

own feelings. I guess that over the years I got afraid to find out what really happened.”

He kissed the back of her hand and said; “I realize now that sticking your head in the sand isn’t solving any problems. If I had known about her plan to leave us like a thief in the night, I would have made her sign away her parental rights first and then showed her the door.”

He treaded their fingers, and she followed Keenan inside a building and waited on the elevator to open.

“Is this where Donovan works?”

A grunt had been his reply.

She bit her nail, suddenly craving a cigarette.

“Stop biting your nails. I hope you’re not thinking about smoking again?”

When she looked up, she noticed him eyeing her through the reflection in the elevator doors in front of them.

“Stop being a grumpy asshole whenever things don’t go your way.”

He stiffened. “Excuse me?”

“It’s true. When we picked up Tommy from school that day, you were out for a fight with me. Just like you are doing now.”

She didn’t like to throw it just out there like that, in the middle of an office building while waiting on the elevator to come down. But so be it.

“How am I picking a fight with you?”

With a sardonic laugh she said, “By pointing out my flaws. You just had to bring up smoking, even though you know I’ve quit. Or when we picked up Tommy, you said you knew he got into a fight because I taught him defensive moves.”

He let go of her hand and took a step back. “I can’t believe you are really starting a fight over this right now.”

She normally would have kept the peace, so maybe her nerves also got the best of her. “I’m sorry. Forget I said anything.”

He pushed the button for the elevator for the third time. He sighed and said, “I’m sorry. You’re right. I shouldn’t have snapped at you.”

“Is this our first fight?”

He tugged her into the empty elevator and embraced her with his arms. “Nah. It was our first tiff. I’ll never fight with you; I know you’ll beat my ass, anyway.”

She giggled against his chest. “Damn right I will.”

She startled at the loud ding of the elevator and followed Keenan outside.

“Hey, Kayla. How are you?” Keenan said to the receptionist behind the desk with a *Mills Security* logo.

“Hi, Keen. Hello, I’m Kayla,” the light blonde bombshell said to Ryleigh.

“Hi.”

“This is my girlfriend, Ryleigh.”

Kayla nodded like she’d already heard of her. “Nice to finally meet you, Ryleigh. My man told me a lot about you.”

“Your man?”

She searched Keenan’s face for him to help her out here, but he simply smiled at her.

Kayla also smiled and said, “Yes. I believe you started working for him recently at the dojo?”

“Oh, Duncan. I’m sorry. I didn’t know. It’s great to meet you.”

Like always, she felt super awkward meeting new people. Luckily, Kayla had no problem to break the ice for her. She added, “I’m so psyched we finally have a woman teaching classes at the dojo. I would like to join a class or two in the future.”

“That would be great, Kayla. Thanks.”

Kayla slung her white blonde hair over her shoulder and waved her hand in the air, “No, thank you. I can’t wait to surprise Dunc with some moves.”

“Kayla, what’s going on—oh, hey Keen. Hi, you must be Ryleigh.”

A tall, handsome man in a tailored suit walked out of a corner office. He had the same Mills DNA flowing through his veins by the look of his broad shoulders, wavy raven hair and soulful eyes.

Where Keenan’s eyes were emerald, Donovan’s eyes reminded her of a thundercloud.

She remembered standing in this building for a reason and said, “Hi, Donovan. Nice to meet you.”

“Okay, let’s take this into my office, shall we?”

She followed the Mills cousins and sat down in the other chair in front of Donovan’s oak desk.

Ryleigh felt like she’d been summoned into the principal’s office. Not that she ever came close to detention. She flew under the radar, always trying not to get noticed while walking down the hallway in case the worst group of bullies would target her again.

Donovan handed Keenan a manila file and stood from his chair. He walked over to the painting on the other side of his office. The most beautiful woman Ryleigh had ever seen was staring back at her from that painting. With her chocolate hair cascading over her pillow, and only a silk sheet covering her modesty, Ryleigh almost wanted to look away.

But she couldn’t tear her eyes away from this intimate portrait. By the way Donovan stared at the portrait, she believed the woman must have been important to him.

Ruffling beside her drew her attention back to Keenan, who’d opened the folder. The first few pages were typed paragraphs but she couldn’t read the words while looking over his shoulder.

He mumbled snippets, so she had a few words to hang on to.

“New York...”

“Incarcerated...”

“Derek...”

This was bad. Was Evangeline in jail? Her mind was all scrambled.

She couldn't focus as Keenan took pictures out of the folder. It seemed like they made the pictures from a distance with a zoom lens.

Although blurry, and on some pictures hedges or other obstacles obscured a full few, it revealed someone who resembled the woman from Tommy's picture on his nightstand.

But the woman in this picture seemed sickly. Dirty hair, smeared and heavy make-up, and overall wearing too revealing, too tight and dirty clothes. If she didn't know better, she'd say that Evangeline worked the streets at night.

That couldn't be possible? Could it?

In another picture of Evangeline, a tall man accompanied her. The man seemed not so bulky as Keenan, but certainly not gangly. His blonde hair had been gelled back and his suit had to be tailored to fit him.

Keenan threw another picture upon the desk and Ryleigh gasped when she realized it was Evangeline's mug shot. She wondered what she'd done to get arrested. Ryleigh felt sick to her stomach, realizing what a mess Evangeline seemed to have made of her life. She couldn't imagine what Keenan must be going through right now, seeing the mother of his child in that state.

“I can't believe it...” he said.

Keenan's shoulders hunched forward when he placed another picture on the table... a picture of Evangeline, snorting a white line of powder from a table.



“Shit,” she whispered.

As if he’d just remembered her being there, he shot right up in his chair. He wiped at his cheek and Ryleigh sat rooted in place, unable to move a muscle.

“I... I’m sorry.”

She couldn’t think of anything else to say.

“Don’t be. It’s not your fault,” he said, his voice void of any emotion.

“Is she...”

He kept reading the file, and they both startled at Donovan’s voice from the other side of the office. “You remember Derek, don’t you?”

She wondered if Derek was that sleazy guy in the picture, and what he had to do with Evangeline’s decision to leave Tommy and Keenan.

“Yeah, we should have let Ronan beat the crap out of him when he had the chance.”

Ryleigh’s gaze ping-ponged from Donovan back to Keenan. Since they didn’t seem eager to spill the details voluntarily, she asked, “Who’s that guy?”

Keenan still kept his attention on the file, while Donovan said, “He used to be my brother Ronan’s best friend in the time Ro fucked things up with Fianna—she’s Bree’s sister. Anyway, the guy is a dangerous criminal. There’s no other way around it. And if it weren’t for my oldest brother Brennan intervening, Ro would have followed this guy’s footsteps.”

She pictured the good-natured, always flirting Ronan as a man who would hurt someone else to benefit from it. He might be an MMA fighter, but he’s not a criminal. Sure, at the underground fights there were a lot of people who weren’t law-abiding citizens.

Groups going at each other, drug use and gambling were all a part of that scene. She was sure that Ronan loved to rub it in his twin’s face, that he was the complete opposite of Declan,

who as a detective probably always toed the line. But Ronan never came across to her as some malicious gangster type.

Keenan slapped his palm on top of the pictures littering Donovan's desk.

“Fuck!”

She rubbed circles on his back, trying to soothe him. But it helped little because he turned in his chair and spat, “And that's exactly the reason why you're never going to fight again.”

“Excuse me?”

What in the alpha-male-world was he talking about? He couldn't decide that for her, just like that. As if he'd slapped her, she dropped her hand from his back and straightened in her chair.

“You heard me, Ry. I'm not having you put your life on the line every time you feel the need to bash someone's head in.”

Steam came out of her ears at his degrading description of her need to fight her demons in the ring. He just wouldn't put the effort in to understand her. Why was he being so difficult about her fighting? When they'd first met, she was beating Paula the Plower in a cage fight at some deserted warehouse. Surely he had to know that it was a part of her?

“Why are we even discussing my life instead of your ex? You should be mad at her for fucking up your and your son's life.”

Keenan's eyes were red, veins popped next to his eye, and his hair stood a mess from all his tugs. Didn't he have other things to worry about right now? She looked over at Donovan, ready for him to step in any minute now.

“I think it's because we both know that Evangeline met Derek at one of Ronan's fights, that Keenan is trying to protect you by asking you to reconsider fighting in the underground scene.”

She huffed a breath and said, “You may put a nicer ring to it, but it's asking for the same thing. I don't want to get into

this right now, but I will say this; I will not stand to pay for Evangeline's mistakes. I'm not her. I will not take off with some kind of slick, slimy gangster and I will never leave my boys for anything or anyone."

Keenan groaned. "You're not listening to us, Ry. You're putting yourself in danger every damn time you go out there. Look at what happened to Evangeline. She's a drugged up prostitute, living with her pimp!"

She stood from her chair and said, "And you're clearly not listening to me. I love you, Keen. But you can't put her actions on me and demand me to stop doing the one thing that has helped me become the woman that I am now. I can't even explain how hurt I am right now."

"You would rather keep fighting in front of a group of horny jackasses than stay home with me and Tommy?"

"Guys, I don't think either of you is listening to what the other is saying. I think—"

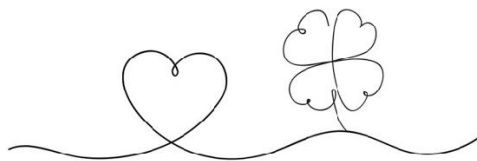
Ryleigh held up her hand, and she got the impression by Donovan's shocked expression that he wasn't shushed that often. "Sorry, Donovan. I appreciate you're only trying to help us with our stupid discussion. But I've had enough for today. I'm going to call my cousins because I need to relieve some stress and work out my anger."

She halted her steps at Keenan's words. "If you go out and fight, don't bother coming back to me and Tommy. I'm only looking out for my boy. If you'd be taken away from him, he would never recover."

She stepped out of Donovan's office and whispered, "But it's *you* who's pushing me away..."



## KEENAN



**K**eenan entered his home, and a familiar eerie silence welcomed him. He'd felt the same shudder travel up his spine as on that day he'd walked into his half empty home and Evangeline had left them.

Keenan had called his mother on his way home from Donovan's office and asked if she'd let Tommy stay over tonight, so he could have time with Ryleigh to explain himself.

After calling out her name, he got no response. He ran up the stairs to check her bedroom. His heart raced when she wasn't there. He yanked her closet open and a sigh of relief escaped him. Her clothes were still there.

He'd acted like a total jerk towards her. Raising his voice like that? Ignoring her obviously hurt feelings when he'd demanded her to quit fighting?

While sitting alone in his cousin's office after Donovan had left, Keenan had time to reflect on his reaction. He'd lashed out at Ryleigh, while he should have saved his anger for the true target of his wrath; Evangeline.

The anger after hearing for what kind of miserable life she'd left him and their son had made him furious before intense sadness washed over him. His son would have to hear the ugly truth at one time in his life.

Keenan would have to tell his son his mother had caught up with the wrong crowd and grew an addiction to drugs. In order to maintain her habit, she'd left with the part of their savings she could access, sold almost half of their furniture for

a quick buck to follow her boyfriend slash drug dealer to New York.

He would leave out the part where her boyfriend turned her into a prostitute and got her arrested for stealing some guy's Rolex at a sleazy hotel.

Keenan paced Ryleigh's bedroom floor while calling her phone again. At first, he'd wanted to give them both some time to cool off, but when she didn't pick up any of his calls; he got worried. It had been two hours since she'd left his cousin's office with tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Fuck!" Keenan kicked his boot against her bedroom door.

When the doorbell rang, he flew over the stairs in his haste to open the front door.

"Oh, it's you..."

Declan and Deirdre shared a look, both pulling one eyebrow.

"Ah, it's true then... You've fucked things up," Deirdre said before she wormed her small body between him and the doorway frame.

"Sure, come in, why don't ye?" Keenan grumbled.

"I'm guessing Ryleigh isn't here?" Declan said.

"That would be correct."

Deirdre walked straight over to the kitchen and grabbed them all a beer. Instead of lounging in the living room, Keenan took a seat on a barstool and rested his elbows on the kitchen counter. This would be a brief visit if he had anything to say about it.

"Ma asked me to check up on you, Keen."

He nodded at his sister. He could not be mad at her for caring about him.

"And Don called me, Cuz. I'm sorry," Declan said.

"Did you know your brother's has tracked down Evangeline almost a year ago?" Keenan asked Declan but got

an immediate response from Deirdre.

“Evangeline? He knows where she is?” She placed a hand on Keenan’s arm, her eyebrows squished together. She glanced over at Declan and back at Keenan.

“Yeah. But when he tried to tell me, I didn’t let him finish and said that she didn’t want to be found for a reason. He decided to tell me when the timing was right.” Keenan took another pull from his beer.

“What? Why didn’t he tell you? He could have helped you get her back, he—”

“Dee...” Keenan looked up to the ceiling and back to her again.

He continued after a beat of silence, “I just knew something big was going on with her. And truthfully, in the beginning after she’d left, I thought she loved us enough to come back to us. But the joke’s on me. She didn’t love us at all.”

“I’m so sorry, Keen. I know we all have been skeptic, cynical even, but now that you know where she is, maybe you can—”

He placed his hand on Deirdre’s hand that still rested on his arm. Her bottom lip wobbled as she spoke, and he couldn’t bear to see another family member cry over Evangeline.

“No, please don’t cry. We’ve done enough crying over her.”

Declan furrowed his brows. “What brought out this sudden change in you? Normally you’re the one defending her.”

“Didn’t your brother tell you what he found when he searched for her?”

Declan grimaced. “I didn’t even know he’d continued looking for her, to be honest. He called me and said I should go check up on you. He wouldn’t tell me why. You know how he is—he said it wasn’t his story to tell.”

Keenan let out a mirthless chuckle. “Yeah, well. I’ll tell you all about it. First, I have something to show you. I’ll be

right back.”

He stood from his barstool and went back to Ryleigh’s room to grab the manila folder from her bed. The familiar Ryleigh scent welcomed him when he reached in to grab the folder. Instead of the papers, he picked up Ryleigh’s pillow and brought it to his nose.

Even though she slept every night in his bed for the past weeks, her scent still lingered on her pillow. He closed his eyes and took such a deep breath, his nostrils flared and his chest expanded. After taking a few minutes to get his fix, he let her pillow down on the bed.

Right. Time to tell the horrible truth.

When he reentered the kitchen, Declan and Deirdre were talking about Declan’s twins. Keenan didn’t follow the conversation, too lost in his head.

When Deirdre waved a hand in front of him, he snapped out of it.

“Right. So, I’ll come right out and say it. Evangeline left us for a guy named Derek. And according to this copy of a police file, he’s a well known criminal.”

Deirdre gasped and her hands flew to her mouth. When her hand went to her breastbone, Keenan noticed Deirdre’s inability to form words by her mouth opening and closing.

“Fuck...”

“Yeah, Dec. Exactly.”

“How? Why...?”

Keenan scratched at the label from his beer bottle. He said, “Do you remember Derek Isaacson?”

“No way. Wasn’t he that guy who tried to get Ro to sell steroids among the fighters?”

Of course Declan reminded his twin’s so-called friend.

“Yes. He moved to New York and apparently, Evangeline and him had been seeing each other and she left us to follow her drug dealer.”



Deirdre's hands flew to her mouth. "She... she was doing drugs?"

Keenan couldn't believe he'd never suspected a thing. Sure, she had been acting weird and jumpy in the last months before she'd left. In hindsight, he'd figured it was because she wasn't sure about leaving them. But with this recent information, he wondered if she'd acted that way because she was looking for her next fix.

"It gets worse, guys. She's still doing drugs, and I believe Derek is pimping her out."

At a loss for words, Deirdre stood from her barstool and walked over to the fridge to grab three more beers. She slammed the door shut with more force Keenan was used from her.

"I can't believe it. She was always so... reserved? So calm and... I don't know? Poised?"

He could see why his sister would describe Evangeline like that. His ex had been all of that. The woman he'd loved wasn't this person who lived in New York.

His headache made him close his eyes for a moment. Shit. After all she'd put them through, he thought about how her life was far from easy. Living with that dirt bag, turning tricks... he wouldn't wish that on anybody. Especially not the mother of his child.

Declan reached for the folder for a better look at the pictures Keenan had pulled out.

"Poor, Tommy...." Deirdre sobbed and Declan pulled her in for a side hug as he put his arm around her shoulders.

"How can she do this to Blondie? What did that sweet guy ever do to deserve this? What are you telling him if he asks about her?" Deirdre asked.

"It's been killing me. I just don't understand..." Keenan was at a lost for words. Everything he thought to be true for the past three years had been wrong. Declan squeezed Keenan's shoulder and said, "What are you going to do?"

“I don’t know. I guess at some point, I’ll have to talk to her.”

“Are you thinking about rescuing her?”

Thinking about his sisters, he knew exactly what he needed to do. If it were one of them, he would take the next flight out to New York. Perhaps he should do the same for the mother of his child, even though he didn’t want her anywhere around Tommy in her current drugged-up state.

“She’s still Tommy’s mother, Dee.”

“What? After all she put you—”

“No, I meant to say, she’s still officially his mother. I don’t want her to bring her troubles on our doorstep. So I’m gonna fix that by giving her papers to sign away her rights. And then I’ll see if I can help her out of this mess.”

“If she’d let you. I’ve seen a lot of cases similar to this, Keen. Oh, man. That’s going to be something else. Let me go with you,” Declan said.

“I can’t ask that of you. You’d have to leave Bree alone with the twins for a few days.”

Declan urged, “At least take Don and Ro with you for back-up. You know who we’re dealing with. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“I don’t like this, Keen.”

He gave his sister a watery smile. “Me neither, Dee. But I can’t sit around and do nothing. I can’t let her rot in the hell she’s been living in. You know that’s not me.”

“What about Ryleigh? Where does she fit into all of this?” Deirdre said.

“I’m not taking her to see Evangeline, Dee.”

“Duh.” Deirdre rolled her eyes at him and he gave her a soft smile.

“I meant, where is she? I figured as your girlfriend she would be here, supporting you and Tommy.”

“We got into a stupid fight.”

Deirdre cocked her head and said, “About...?”

“I just found out that Derek had got to Evangeline and that they’d probably met at one of Ro’s fights. Derek was the one that got her hooked on drugs, so I may have blurted something about not wanting her to go to attend these underground fights.”

As he was retelling their fight, the shame of his earlier outburst crept over his cheeks. She’d accused him of taking out his anger on her, and it was a fair point for her to make. But he also still stood behind his wish to keep her away from that dangerous environment.

Couldn’t she fight in legal fights? In a regular competition? Why put yourself in danger by surrounding yourself with criminals and other lowlives? She must have known he only was looking out for her.

“I guess Ry didn’t share your opinion?”

He nodded at his sister. “I just found out my ex cheated on me, had secretly been doing drugs, and left my son to start a new life with her drug dealer. I thought about how Ry surrounds herself by the same kind of people at her fights. And when I thought about Ry and Tommy... If something would happen to Ry... it would break whatever the fuck’s left of his heart.”

“I know. And I’m sorry. But you never answered my question. Where is she?”

“I tried to call her...”

“How many times?” Dee lifted her obstinate chin, knowing she would have him there.

After clearing his throat, he said, “A couple of times.”

“How did you leave things between you?” Declan asked.

“I kinda gave her the ultimatum that it was us or fighting.”

“Why...?” Deirdre drawled the world with as much condescending possible.

“Because I was having a mental breakdown, that’s why.”

Deirdre swallowed a gulp of beer and waited a beat before she said, “Did she share with you the reason she even started to fight?”

“Yeah. It’s because she has been bullied in high school. Just like Tommy.”

Deirdre dipped her chin and said, “After her attack she needed to feel strong and empowered. I’m so proud of her.”

“What the hell?”

His sister shifted on her stool. “She... she hadn’t told you? Oh, fuck. She talked about it in several classes at the dojo. I figured because she’d told strangers about it, she must have told you.”

Keenan couldn’t believe he had to hear this from his sister. “What happened?”

Deirdre shook her head. “No, I’ll let her decide if she wants to tell you. I’m sorry, Keen. But I only mentioned it because I thought you knew.”

Deirdre blew a few red strands out of her face. Keenan followed the strands as they fell back into the same spot. It made him think of Ryleigh’s spectacular hair color.

Vibrant and different.

Just like Ryleigh.

Keenan picked up the phone, not knowing what he would say to her, but he dialed her number, anyway.

He’d reached her voicemail once again and said, “Ry. I’m sorry. I’ve been an asshole. Please call me.”

“How are you going to make things right?” Declan said.

Keenan finished his beer with a big gulp. He sat the bottle back on the counter and said, “I have no fuckin’ clue.”

“But you want to make it right, do you?” Deirdre asked.

“Yes, of course. I...” Keenan stood from his seat and paced the kitchen. He waved a hand around and said, “Do you

know what's absolutely fuckin' crazy?"

Declan chuckled, "How you start swearin' after two beers?"

"Besides that." Keenan raked a hand through his hair and said, "I've never been happier."

"Huh?" Deirdre blinked a few times.

"I mean it. Ryleigh has made me come back from whatever hellhole I've put myself in, because I've felt guilty..."

He yanked the fridge open and got them another round of beer. He handed Deirdre a bottle and said, "You're stayin' by the way. Can't have you drivin' with all this beer."

Deirdre smiled and accepted the beer. "Okay, big brother."

"Whatever did you feel guilty about, Keen? You weren't the one that left?"

"I know, Dee. But I kept thinkin', what if I said this, or what if I'd done that? Maybe she would've stayed and our son wouldn't have been miserable and heartbroken. But I know now that's all bullshit. She was never going to stay. No matter what I'd said or done."

"Wow. Yeah, I guess you're right."

"I know I'm right, sis. And I have this weight that's been lifted off my chest by knowin' the truth. Tellin' Tommy when he's older is goin' to hurt him all over again, and it's going to be bad. But do you know what else I realized?"

She shook her head and waited for him to continue.

"I've never been as happy with Evangeline as I am with Ryleigh. What I had with Evangeline wasn't real. I romanticized what we had because of Tommy. I wanted to give him a loving family... But I never felt more alive and myself as I do since I've met Ryleigh."

"Aaah." Deirdre's eyes twinkled, and she held a hand to her chest.

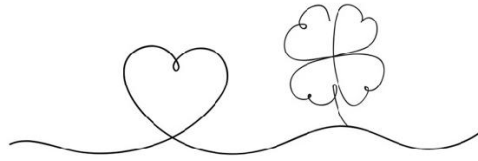
“She brings out the best in me. And in my son. They love each other so much; nobody will ever come between them. And that’s what real family is all about.”

“We have to get you your family back, Cuz.”

Keenan swallowed the lump in his throat. Thinking about losing Ryleigh almost made him cry. “Yeah. Tommy, Ryleigh and I.”



## RYLEIGH



**W**ith a groan, Ryleigh stretched her arms above her head in the locker room of Duncan's Dojo. After picking up her gym clothes at Keenan's, Catriona drove them straight here so Ryleigh could stop thinking about Keenan. She needed to fight to put things into perspective. It had always worked for her, and she needed some clarity on the latest developments with Keenan.

Ryleigh pulled her gaze from the ceiling to Catriona.

"Earth to Ry... Are you ready to get out there?"

"Yeah."

"I can't wait to get into this new ring." Catriona smiled because they both knew from each other they were skilled fighters. Unlike what people may think about them at first glance; both Catriona and Ryleigh didn't go to the gym to prance around in tight yoga pants. They came to get sweaty, to get red in the face and out of breath while taking up an opponent.

Since Ryleigh worked at the dojo, Catriona had recently changed gyms and followed her cousin. Tonight would be her first time at Duncan's dojo, and Ryleigh hoped Catriona was ready for her, because she had a lot of anger and hurt to work out of her system.

Catriona put her raven and pink strands of hair into a tight bun on top of her head. She got up from the bench in the locker room and said, "Okay, since you don't want to talk about Keenan, let's fight."



With a chuckle, Ryleigh said, “Okay, bring it on.”

She closed her locker and followed her cousin out into the dojo. They passed several fighting mats on their way to the two boxing rings in the back. In one of the boxing rings she recognized Ronan by his mere size alone. Like a monkey on hot coals, he traipsed his way around in the ring.

As a fighter, Ryleigh knew how misleading a first glance at your opponent could be. She watched more intently as Ronan waited Duncan out, while he annoyed him by dancing around him.

Forgetting all about her sparring with Catriona to get her mind off Keenan, Ryleigh walked closer to their boxing ring. Watching Ronan and Duncan fight had her mesmerized. She wanted to achieve their precise targeting, their control, even though Ronan masked it all under a big load of egotistical show-off.

Ronan spotted her and stopped fighting without telling his brother, who instantly hit him with a right hook. Ronan spat his mouth guard on the mat and said, “Damn, Dunc. Didn’t ye see me quittin’?”

“You’re still in the ring, aren’t ya?” Duncan laughed.

“Fuck off. It’s time anyway.” Ronan walked over to the ropes closest to Ryleigh and wormed his oversized frame between them.

“Hey, Ry. How are you? Is my cousin drivin’ you crazy already? Ready to spend some time with a real man?”

Oh, if he only knew how crazy Keenan had been driving her. And how he’d just made her cry mere hours ago. When she narrowed her eyes at Ronan, he threw his head back on his neck and laughed.

“That’s why I prefer redheads. Their fuckin’ fire is unmatched. Never bored me in bed, that’s for sure.”

“Hm-mm. Thank you so much for sharing your sexist prejudice about women who belong to the under two percent of the human population. Good to know that even though

we're rare, we're still all wild in the sack. Every single one of us."

His eyes lit up at her response. "Damn. I like you more every day I see you."

Something behind Ryleigh tore Ronan's eyes away from her and his smile fell from his face. Ryleigh had the urge to glance back and find what could bring out such a sudden change in him, but she didn't need to when a syrupy voice behind Ryleigh said, "You couldn't handle my fire when we were love-sick teenagers, there's no way you can handle me now."

A smile tugged at Ryleigh's lips and when she turned around, she came eye to eye with a gorgeous woman. There was no way around her. Fiery, brilliant red hair in long, thick waves cascaded over the woman's shoulder.

Her deep blue eyes scrutinized Ryleigh from top to bottom, but she didn't care, 'cause she'd done the same. "Hi, I'm Ryleigh."

The woman opened her mouth and closed it again. She took a step back in shock with her hand over her chest.

"Yep, Red. Meet your cousin, Ryleigh."

Ronan placed a hand on Ryleigh's shoulder, earning a brief narrowing of eyes from the woman. "Ryleigh, this is your cousin, Fianna."

He leaned in and stage whispered so loud Ryleigh was sure he'd meant for Fianna to overhear him, "My ex from hell."

"Eh, hi. I'm sorry. I didn't expect to bump into you here." Ryleigh's eyes flittered between Fianna and Ronan. She moved to the side so Ronan's hand fell from her shoulder. It was probably best to stay out of their way.

"Are we gonna fight or what?" Catriona said as she strode up to the boxing ring.

Ryleigh shook her head with her eyes wide, sending off signals to Catriona that she needed to go in the opposite direction and not join them. Obviously, Fianna had difficulty

meeting Ryleigh, her newfound cousin. How would she react in meeting her half-sister Catriona?

And Fianna had been the least of Ryleigh's worries. Catriona made it clear to anyone who'd want to listen that she had no intentions to meet her half-sisters.

"What?" Catriona said. She looked past Ryleigh and met Fianna's glare head on.

"Who's that?"

Ronan and Ryleigh regarded each other, willing the other to step in.

The problem with her cousin Catriona was she would appear so sweet at first glance, almost as sweet as her twin Nora. But, oh, the moment she'd opened her mouth...

"You sure you're not a natural redhead?" Ronan said and Ryleigh elbowed him in his abs.

"Who's this fucker?"

Yes. Catriona swore like a sailor. Could drink like one, too. Even though she was still nineteen years old. Devlin and Catriona weren't raised in the same loving circumstances as Ryleigh, with uncle Rob floating in and out of their lives.

Ryleigh stepped up to Catriona. "Cat, I know this might come as a shock... but this is your half-sister Fianna."

"Damn. If I'd known you'd be here, I wouldn't have come."

"Cat..." Ryleigh said with a sigh.

"No, it's okay. I understand. I don't like this either," Fianna said. She'd softened her glare by just a touch. Ryleigh estimated Fianna to be Ronan's age, having almost a decade between her and Catriona.

Let's hope the 'the older; the wiser' phrase would save this encounter, because Ryleigh already knew to expect nothing from Catriona.

"Look. Our joint sperm donor went around town busting a nut everywhere he could lay his hat, but that doesn't make us

family.”

Ryleigh rolled her eyes but Ronan laughed and said under his breath, “Priceless.”

The deep blue eyes of Fianna went wide at her half-sister’s way with words. What Fianna and Ronan didn’t know, was that all this cursing and anger was just a front.

Catriona was the sweetest person one could ever meet, besides her twin Nora. But growing up in their messed-up household had triggered something in Catriona, making sure she always chose for offence instead of defense.

“Hey, Ryleigh. Didn’t know you were teaching tonight?”

Shit. She came to get away from Keenan and his stupid demands and ultimatums. She should have known she would run in with half of the Mills family here.

“Hi, Aide,” she said, her attempt at a smile came out more like a grimace.

“What’s wrong?” Aiden looked over at Fianna and said, “Shit.”

“Yes. That’s the right word; shit. Now, can we get into that ring?” Catriona said and didn’t wait on Ryleigh’s answer but lifted the rope so she could slide into the ring.

With a curt nod, Ryleigh left Fianna and the Mills cousins standing and followed Catriona into the ring. She surely would feel the brunt of her cousin’s wrath in the ring. Nothing she’d be scared about as it only excited Ryleigh.

She’d needed to fight and forget all about Keenan and whatever feelings he had about his ex falling apart or about Ryleigh fighting. If she didn’t keep her attention at this sparring match, Catriona would surely kick her ass.

“Come on, Ry. We haven’t got all night.”

“I know, Catriona.”

The irritated glare of Catriona made Ryleigh giddy. Oh, she would have to step up to her A-game now she’d used her full name.

Behind Ryleigh, Ronan said, “Damn. She looks exactly like Bree.”

Aiden chuckled and said, “Yeah. Bree with a potty mouth.”

Now that she’d seen Bree a few times, she agreed that they indeed looked that much alike.

“Hey, dipshits. Mind taking your tea party somewhere else?”

Ryleigh bit the tape from her hand and hid her smile.

“Man, it’s like watching some alien TV-show where Fianna has taken over Bree’s body and now scares the shit out of everyone with her attitude.”

“Excuse me, but I don’t have an attitude,” Fianna said with her nose up in the air.

“Sorry, Princess, that ain’t flying with us. You know you’re prissy and you’re mighty proud of it,” Ronan said. He walked over to Ryleigh and helped tape her other hand.

“Thanks.”

Ronan gave Ryleigh a wink in reply.

“It’s a matter of perception, really. I know my worth. I can’t help you lower yourself with nameless sluts all the time...”

With a sigh, Ronan stopped taping Ryleigh’s hand. He rested an elbow on the ropes and said, “I remember some—”

“Before you two really get into it, may I ask you to take it outside? Or to the nearest locker room to work off this sexual tension between you two?”

“Sure, Kitty Cat. I’d love to have a little reunion with Red.”

Ryleigh ignored the mumbled insults from Catriona in response to Ronan when she heard Fianna whisper, “I hate you.”

Fianna walked away and even went as far as exiting the dojo. Something about the wobble in her bottom lip led

Ryleigh to believe that it hadn't all been banter for Fianna.

Feeling sorry for Fianna, Ryleigh asked Ronan, "Are you two always like this?"

He shrugged. "Ever since she moved in next-doors to us when we were kids. We fought and not long after, we would make up. Damn... I miss the making up part from when we were teens."

His eyes went wide, and he quickly checked the gym if someone overheard him.

"Enough about me. How's my cousin treating you?"

Before she could answer Ronan, Aiden joined them at the ropes. Ronan watched Ryleigh closely when she hesitated and focused on her shoes for a moment too long.

Ronan said, "We have no secrets between us and Keen. If you're fallen out with him, he'll talk about it with us anyway, so you might as well tell us now."

"That's the oldest trick in the book, don't fall for it, Ry."

Catriona danced around in the ring and smirked at Ronan, who had the grace to blush at her jab.

Ryleigh wasn't about to fall for it and said, "I know. Keenan is too much of a gentleman to blab our business around town."

Aiden eyed Ryleigh and his stare made her duck her head.

"Can we please, fight now?" Catriona said again.

"I have one question for Ryleigh before you start," Aiden said, and Catriona threw her hands in the air.

Something about Aiden's serious tone of voice that's so unlike him, made her jumpy. "What?" she croaked.

Aiden pulled himself up on the ropes and drew into the ring. His face came close to hers, drawing her attention to his green eyes. "Are you in it for the long haul with my brother and Blondie?"

“Damn, Cuz. Keen is not gonna like this,” Ronan said from somewhere below them.

“You’d better ask your brother that same question, Aide.” She narrowed her eyes and nudged his broad chest with her taped up knuckles.

“Why?”

Before she could answer him, Catriona had felt the need to take it up for her and said, “Because he made my cousin cry, that’s why. So what are you two mouth-breathers badgering her for? Go talk to your brother and leave us to the ring.”

She hadn’t told Catriona much about what happened with Keenan. She wouldn’t break his trust and tell others about what happened with his ex. But she told her cousin that they had an argument about her passion for fighting.

Aiden didn’t respond to Catriona, instead he said, “Is this true? Did he make you cry?”

She figured pretending wouldn’t be of any use now, so she opened up to Aiden. “I’ll tell you this; your brother hurt my feelings today. I wanted to be there for him, but he wouldn’t let me and got angry with me.”

Ronan snorted, “He does the same with us. Don’t take it personal. I never do.”

“Okay, well for me things are different. I take things personal. You don’t know me all that well, but I have a past that has left scars on the inside. For me to be even telling you this is a victory.”

Before he could react, she continued, “And with any other man, I would have packed up my things and left him to deal with all his muddy feelings about his past.”

“What did he do, Ry?” Ronan had jumped up to her level, resting his elbows on the ropes.

“He told me I had to choose between fighting underground or having a life with Tommy and him.”

Catriona gasped and said, “Oh, no, he didn’t.”

Ronan said, “Okay. I respect that,” like it was a normal thing to do for his cousin.

“Hello... Aren’t you on my side? What about ‘fighters stick together’ and all that bullshit you threw in my face weeks ago?”

“I agree. So let me give it to you straight. I see the same fire in you I feel whenever I get up there. I know it’s a part of us. And I wouldn’t want you to pretend you’re someone else or deny a part of you. But how about trying regular fights? Or fixing better sparring partners so you can—”

“Excuse me, I happen to win every time we go head-to-head.”

Aiden laughed at Catriona’s interruption. “Such a firecracker...”

Ronan took a spot next to Aiden and like a coach in the ring, he took her shoulders in his hand and practically shouted in her face, “Come on, Ry. Tell us what yer fightin’ for.”

There was something disarming about his pep talk, and she opened up to him. “I fight to forget my demons. To channel my build-up anger and to let go of the hurt.”

Ronan nodded like he knew like no other what she’d meant. “Right. And all the things you’ve mentioned... they are all things of your past. I want you to focus on your future. What do you see?”

Closing her eyes, she said, “I don’t know.”

His hands gently shook her back and forward once again. “Yeah, you do. Who or what is most important for you right now?”

Her voice broke as she tried to hide her inner thoughts from him. “I don’t know...”

“Bullshit. What is more important? Holding on to your anger and pain of the past by knocking some Plover to the ground every now and then? Or being a family with Blondie and my cousin?”



She opened her eyes and met his straight on. “Being a family with my boys.”

“There. You’ll work things out with Keen. I’m sure that if you’d switch to legal fights, he wouldn’t make such a deal out of it. Hell, if you’d really want to, I’ll even spar with you.”

“You would?” Aiden said before Ryleigh had the chance.

“Sure. Ry’s a pro, so that’s cool. And I can make Keenan insanely jealous. You all know how I love razzing our guy.”

She snorted at his plans for Keenan. But the opportunity of sparring with an MMA fighter champion was too good to pass up on. “Thanks, Ro. It really means a lot to me.”

Maybe it was time for her to finally let go completely of her past. It wasn’t until Ronan just confronted her about it; she realized she was still holding on to a lot of pain and anger. She always figured fighting was the only thing that made her deal with her past. But she’d been mistaken.

Fighting had turned into a coping mechanism where every once in a while she would let off steam at an underground fight. But she hadn’t actually dealt with her emotions and with the reasons why she felt the need to put herself in dangerous situations and fight her way out of them.

“I’m going home, Cat. I need to talk to Keenan.”

Catriona stunned her by not arguing her decision. “Finally. You go home, talk to your man. Let me know how things went, okay?”

She hugged her cousin and jumped through the ropes. “Thanks, Ro.”

“No problem, Ry.”

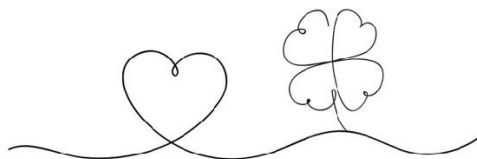
On her way to the locker room, she overheard Catriona say, “Okay, which one of you guys is going to stand in for Ry? We have ten minutes before I need to drive her over to Keenan’s.”

“I’ll stand in for Ry, and Ro can drive your cousin to Keenan. I think we’ll be needing longer than ten minutes,” Aiden said.

Ryleigh hurried inside the locker room to change. Normally, she would give her cousin shit for even considering sparring with Aiden. But not tonight. She needed to go talk to her own Mills man.



## KEENAN



**T**he front door lock turned and Keenan held his breath. What would Ryleigh say to him after he'd behaved like an idiot earlier today? He'd tried to call her several times before his brother Aiden texted him to let him know she was at the dojo with her cousin Catriona.

If he hadn't had six beers, he would have taken his truck to pick her up. He even thought about taking a cab. But when he was about to call one, Ronan texted him he was on his way with Ryleigh.

Keenan looked over Deirdre's head and spotted the time in the oven display. 10 pm.

He attempted to focus his attention on Declan and Deirdre, who were in the middle of some story about a guy that came into the ER with a whole wine bottle up his ass.

Footsteps rounded the corner.

"Hi, guys."

Even more gorgeous with her flushed face, Ryleigh met his eyes head on. He liked that about Ryleigh. He knew she hadn't always had it easy, but one wouldn't know she'd dealt with insecurities if they would meet her just now.

Dressed in her black yoga pants and tight top, she took his breath away. He searched for any cuts and bruises on her hands and face, and he startled when she walked right up to him. He held his breath when she stepped closer and kissed his cheek.

“Hi,” she said.

“I’ve missed you,” he blurted.

“Aaand that’s our cue,” Deirdre said and giggled at her own words.

“Yeah, you’d better stay with us across the street, Dee. Bree and I have a guestroom you can take.” Declan stood from his barstool and wobbled a bit.

“You’re just as a lightweight as my brother,” Deirdre said. Declan mumbled something about being a dad of baby twins, and they both said goodnight and exited the kitchen.

Ryleigh stood frozen in her spot and held his eyes.

“Oh, and know that I’m rooting for you, twoo…” Deirdre laughed and the front door slammed shut.

“I’ve been an absolute ass, Ry. I hope you can forgive me.”

He’d decided to just blurt it out there and see what he could salvage. Her eyes widened in shock. “Oh, eh… I wasn’t expecting you’d say that.”

“I know. I still don’t like you fighting at those damn warehouses, tho.”

She squeezed his hand and said, “I had a talk with Ro about the reasons why I do what I do.”

“And?”

“I like to feel in control in dangerous situations. I think it takes me back to certain times in my life. And do you know what had been an absolute eye-opener?”

“No?”

“I thought I was doing so well and going on with my life… But in fact I was throwing myself back into situations that mirrored my past. But instead of running for my life or getting jumped, I now have the power to stand and fight. I think I need to talk to someone about all of this.”

“Fuck, Ry. I want you to talk to me. I heard Dee say that you’ve mentioned something from your past during a class.

Maybe when you're ready, you can tell me about it?"

"I would like that, Keen. But perhaps on another night? I don't think I can handle that conversation after the day we've had."

He could respect that. He wanted to be there for her and not to force her to share anything she wasn't comfortable with. "That's fine, Ry. Whenever you're ready, I'll be there for you."

"I'm sorry for everything you found out today."

He shifted on the barstool and with his hand around her back; he tugged her to him so she stood in between his legs.

"I know you're sorry. And nothing about this fucked up shit is your fault."

She bit her lip and smiled.

"What?"

"How long have you been sitting out here?"

He laughed, "Oh, you mean how many beers did I drink tonight? Six."

"I thought there was something different about you," she jokingly said.

"I may swear a bit more, but I want you to know my mind's clear enough to have this important conversation with you, darlin'."

"Good." She righted her shoulders and took a deep breath. It almost seemed like she was preparing for a fight. "I came to realize something today, and I wanted to tell you."

His throat tightened and his palms got sweaty. Even though she had kissed his cheek and stood between his legs, he wasn't entirely reassured he'd like what she would tell him.

"With you, Keen, I want to fight for what *I* want. I'm going to be selfish for once and tell you that even though you've got an ex walking around this earth, who you might feel sorry for or even still have feelings for..." she pointed her thumb to her sports tank top, "That I'm still the better choice for you and Tommy."

“I know,” he said.

“You do?”

“Yes. And I want you to know that I don’t have any feelings left for her, Ry. From the moment you first walked into my life, you’ve breathed air into me. You have awakened me from a deep, frost filled sleep where I clung to the wrong things in life. I held on for too long to an untruthful past, and I let life happen to others as I stood watch from the sideline. You pulled me back into the ring and made me see that the future is brighter than my past.”

“Oh, Keen... those beers are really making you philosophical.”

He huffed a breath. “You can make fun all you want. But isn’t there a saying that only children and drunks tell the absolute truth?”

“Let’s get you upstairs and talk tomorrow.”

As they walked up the stairs he said, “I’ve booked a ticket to New York for next week. And I’m going to make sure we’ll have a clean slate soon.”

She paused halfway up the stairs. “What do you mean?”

“I’m going to ask her to waive her parental rights.”

Ryleigh grabbed a hold of the banister and she croaked, “You are?”

“Yeah. I don’t want her to come back five years from now and start trouble for us.”

She started the stairs again, and he followed her into his bedroom. Or rather; their bedroom as they’d slept there together for weeks now.

He watched her as she sat down on the edge of the bed. She blinked the tears from her eyes, and Keenan knew what was running through her head. She loved Tommy as if he were her own. She wanted more, but didn’t feel she could ask for more. Her focus remained fixed on the picture they’d taken a week ago at the ice cream parlor.

He had it framed and proudly hung it on his bedroom wall. The three of them, smiling and eating ice cream. It was the picture of a family. Of *his* family.

He'd say the words for her if she wouldn't. "Tell me. You know you can tell me anything."

"I know. But it's too soon." She cleared her throat.

"We both know what the other is thinking. We're thinking about you adopting Tommy."

She swatted his chest after he'd plunked next to her on the bed. "It's too soon. You can't be serious!"

"The next few months will be rough on all of us. Even though I want to break all legal ties between them to protect him, I don't want his mother to live the life she's been living these past years. I hope we can help her escape that life."

"Who's we?"

"I'm going with Donovan and he's going to talk to Ro about Derek, and maybe we can take Ro with us."

She climbed onto his lap, and he smoothed out her hair from her face.

"I don't like the idea of you going out there. If that guy really is as bad as you say he is—"

"That's why I'm bringing my cousins. Don is a PI, and he has some useful contacts in the city. He already has some feelers out. And Ro grew up with Derek when he mostly hung around on the streets. If anyone can talk to him, hopefully it's Ro."

"Can I go with you?"

He chuckled and said, "No you cannot, lioness. I need you here to protect our cub."

She rolled her eyes and said, "Let's get you in the shower."

"That's the best idea I've heard all night." He wouldn't mind rinsing Ryleigh while sobering up in the shower.

"I bet it is," she said with a smile in her voice.



He stood from the bed and kicked off his shoes. When he tugged at his socks, he wobbled back onto the bed, making her giggle.

He wasn't disturbed and went on undressing himself. He got rid of his shirt and threw it behind his back. "I want to lick you all over in the shower. Kiss your pussy and suck up all your cream."

"Only you can go from philosophical and poetic to dirty talk in the blink of an eye."

He picked her up and walked her over to the shower stall while she laughed and joked some more about him being a caveman.

When they both were fully undressed, he slid into the shower stall behind her, engulfing her with his arms. Ryleigh turned and trailed a path of open mouth kisses from his shoulder blade to his heart, where she lingered on a sweet kiss.

His hands slid down her upper back, following the flair of her hips. He then palmed her ass and held her so close, his erection slid up between them, trapped in between their abdomens.

He lifted her legs, placed them on his hips, opening her up to him. When he slid inside of her, he had to close his eyes for a moment to regain control. His dick wanted to slam home and fuck her fast and hard.

Delaying the orgasm that already started tingling up his spine would ultimately reward him with much more pleasure for the both of them.

Ryleigh bucked against him, seeking more friction as her engorged clit connected with his skin.

"What do you need, darlin'?"

"I need you... ah, I need you to go harder..."

He kept the same pace, demanding even more of her senses to awaken before she'd finally come.

"Keen... I'm so close, but I need..."

His finger slipped between them and her nails dug into his skin on his shoulders.

“Yes. Right there.”

After putting more pressure on her clit, Ryleigh bumped the back of her head against his shower tiles, crying out in ecstasy.

Seeing her come undone was the final straw for him, and his arms and legs shook from the strength it took to hold up Ryleigh throughout his orgasm.

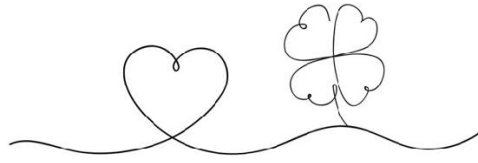
Her head seemed to have found its favorite spot in the crook of his neck.

“Let’s go to bed, darlin’.”

Tomorrow would be a new day. But first, he wanted to hold her close all night. Because who knew what he would come across in New York. He had a bad feeling that the worse was yet to come.



## RYLEIGH



**R**yleigh stacked Tommy's plate upon Keenan's and grabbed their cutlery from the dinner table on her way to the kitchen. Keenan's mom had just picked up Tommy to stay with her.

Keenan would leave for New York later tonight. She dreaded the upcoming week without Keenan at home, but her friends already planned to stay over a few nights, so she wouldn't drive herself crazy.

Even his sister Deirdre had called and said she was picking her up for a girls' night with her sister and some of their friends later this week.

Even though she understood Keenan had a lot on his mind after reading the file on Evangeline last week, she wished he would open up more to her. Like pulling teeth, he only offered bits and pieces about their game plan.

The awkward calm before the storm stretched on after dinner, and the only thing interrupting their silence was the clanking of plates against the sink as she rinsed them.

She jumped when his calloused hands gripped her waist. He rested his chin on her shoulder and whispered, "I'm sorry, Ry. I know I've not been fun to hang around with lately."

She rinsed the last plate and said, "It's okay, Keen. Hopefully, after this week you'll have found some sort of closure."

He turned her around and said, “I hate leaving you and Tommy. After this week, we’ll never be apart—not even for a few days.”

With a smile she said, “I’ll hold you to that.”

She made a move to pass him, but he held her bicep.

“Fuck. I’m going to miss you so much, Ry.”

She gave him a quick kiss and said, “Come, let’s talk while packing your bag.”

“Yeah, okay...”

She knew that he’d wanted to hear how much she would miss him. But she was afraid she would start to cry and would never stop. Trying hard to keep her composure, she said,

“I’m taking a quick shower before bed, I’ll be right out.”

He joined her upstairs in the bathroom where she undressed in front of him. These past months with Keenan had done wonders for her self-esteem. His hungry gaze swept over her body, desire written clearly on his face.

Knowing she pushed his buttons, she fisted her hair to pull it into a ponytail. With her elbows pointing up to the ceiling, her bare breasts caught his eye like she’d intended.

“Five nights...” he said before he dropped on his knees in front of her.

A giddy squeak filled the bathroom when he tugged her to him with his hands on her bum. He whispered against her pussy, “Five nights before I see you again...” and gave her a sweet kiss between her legs.

She laughed at his playfulness and said, “She’s going to miss you, too.”

With the tip of his tongue, he traced a sensual line over her outer lips. She gripped his hair and directed his face against her core.

Wasting no time, he licked and suckled her like he wanted to devour her. Sloppy slurps escaping his lips made her even hotter.

“I need you, Ry. I can’t wait any longer.”

Before she could answer him, he already picked her up and walked them back into the bedroom. Instead of throwing her on the bed and taking her hard and fast from behind like he’d done last night, he lowered her slowly to the mattress.

“We don’t have enough time for everything I want to say to you, but I hope I can show you how much I love you.”

He entered the tip of his dick inside of her, holding still and giving her time to adjust for a moment. “I’m coming back to you. I don’t want to leave, but I’m doing this for us. To make us a family.”

His whispered words ignited the spark of hope that she’d found her home—her family, in Tommy and Keenan. Because he was so sure of it, she let herself believe that they indeed were going to make it work.

She had to trust him, and so she did. She offered him everything she could give the man; her body, her trust, her love...

She met his kiss with every bit of passion inside of her, holding on to him with her arms around his neck. She pulled him deeper inside of her. With him as far as he could go, lying chest to chest, she felt their hearts beating against each other.

They rolled to their sides, and she slid her leg over his hip. Without breaking their connection, he moved inside her. What started out as slow and sensual while lazily exploring his mouth with her tongue, ended up as wild and with a sense of urgency spurring her on.

She whimpered and said, “I love you. I want it all with you.”

He panted as he picked up speed, thrusting inside of her in a punishing rhythm while pulling her even closer. Her nipples rubbed along his chest as she arched her back, heightening her pleasure.

“Oh, Keen. I...”

He kissed her jaw and said, “Almost there, I know... I can feel you gripping me...”

A long groan signaled his upcoming release. Hearing him let go so freely, spurred on her own orgasm. She let the aftershocks take over her body and enjoyed the safeness of his warm body engulfing her.

He emptied himself inside of her, and when he connected his forehead against hers, she lost yet another piece of herself to him. The feeling of never wanting to let go of this man tightened her throat.

Of course, in that moment, her ugly past reared its head again and a little voice in the back of her mind said that she should enjoy this moment while it lasted. It could very well be the last time she held him in her arms.

She closed her eyes and like in a bad movie, she saw Keenan standing in the kitchen, kissing Evangeline and rubbing her pregnant belly. Tommy sat at the dinner table, playing cards with his younger sister who was the spitting image of him.

In her mind, after seeing Evangeline in her poor state, Keenan would do everything in his power to rescue her. He would bring her back home to reunite her with Tommy, who finally had his mother back in his life. It would remind him of the love they shared and he would choose to reunite his family.

Feeling attacked by her own stupid thoughts, she shook her head. She blinked the painful image away and swallowed the bile in her throat. Normally, after feeling so hopeless and down, she would try to push everything as far away as possible. And her number one method had always been escaping her thoughts while standing up for herself in a big fight.

“Are you okay?”

She nodded. “Yeah...”

“Talk to me.”

“I think I need to find another way to cope with my issues, Keen. I want nothing more than to call Dev right now, to find

out if there's an underground fight tonight.”

He stiffened in her arms, but unlike that time in Donovan's office, he didn't lash out. She took it as a good sign and said, “I'm not doing that, of course. I've been thinking a lot about what you've said, and I've also talked with Ro about it.”

He rubbed his thumb over her cheek and said, “I've heard, sweetheart. I think it's a great idea to spar with Ro. He's looking forward to it.”

She remembered what Ro said about trying to razz Keenan, and she smiled. “I bet he is. He's like a big kid sometimes.”

“Do you know why you feel the need to go to those warehouses? I mean... you already spar with Catriona and Devlin. And now you're even working at the dojo to share your craft and help other women. What is it about those cage fights?”

With his soothing back rubs, she felt enough at ease to share with him her darkest secret. The one thing that she told no one she loved before. Not even her three best friends. And not even her family.

Sure, she'd told her experience in little detail during her self-defense classes at the dojo. But that had always been to let her students know she was one of them. She had been attacked and knew from firsthand experience how utterly powerless she'd felt at the time.

How bad as it may sound, her teaching self-defense classes worked as much therapeutic for Ryleigh as for her students. By talking about her experiences in high school on a weekly basis, she'd taken a huge step on her way to the point of making peace with her past.

She wasn't there yet.

Her earlier thoughts about Keenan leaving her for his ex proved that point.

Not being good enough had been ingrained in her on a daily basis for years. But after that one afternoon near the



locker room at school, she'd walked over to Devlin's house and asked him to teach her how to fight.

“When you're in a cage, there's no other way out of there but to fight your way out. You can't rely on others to help you. Every single hit you dish out, you'd better make sure it's on target. Every kick in the gut they give you, you'd better suck it up.”

“I never want to see you fight again, Ry. My heart can't take it. I almost got into the cage that night we met to protect you from the Plover. I really don't think I could take it to see you out there again.”

She understood where he was coming from.

“For a long time, I needed that feeling of being in control in a situation that was so far out of my control, and so scary... I don't know how to explain it. Winning my first fight gave me such a rush. For weeks after that fight, I've craved to have that feeling back. Whenever I would be at my lowest, I would get into the cage, fight for my life and walk out of the cage feeling lighter and on top of the world.”

His eyes searched hers for a moment. He seemed uneasy but still continued, “Does this have to do with the thing you've shared in one of your classes? Deirdre didn't know I—”

That was the thing with family and friends joining her classes at the dojo. The two worlds were finally colliding, and now she'd told his sister about what happened to her before Keenan.

“It's okay.”

“Dee wouldn't tell me anything, Ry. She didn't break your trust.”

She breathed a sigh of relief and said, “I really like your sister. Both of them.”

“I heard about your upcoming girls' night out. I'm so happy that you're becoming friends. I'm so proud to have you as my girlfriend.”

Keenan was just too damn sweet. She didn't know what this handsome man was doing with the likes of her, but she warned the evil whispering voice in the back of her mind, that she would never let it win. She would fight her inner turmoil to keep her man.

“I want you to know that I've never shared my story with anyone before I started teaching at the dojo. But I wanted to reassure my students that I would never pass judgment on them, and that I know from experience what some of them may have been through.”

Keenan's lips briefly touched the tip of her nose. “I'm so proud of you.”

“Thanks.”

“Sorry, please continue,” he said and waited for her to find her words.

“I've told you how I've been bullied as a kid and it got even worse in high school. I would like to say that I was a totally different person back then, but that would be simply untrue. I'm still me. Deep down, I'm still the same freckled, scared kid that has been told she'd better run before they would catch up to her.”

By the way Keenan shifted in the bed, she knew he'd felt angry at hearing her past. She hated to make matters worse, but he needed to hear this from her.

“When I was sixteen, I walked by the locker room one day to join the rest of my class. Before I could go inside, two boys jumped me. They were in my grade and I instantly knew that I was dealing with two of my biggest tormentors.”

Keenan whispered, “Shit...”

“They touched me, Keen.”

His arms tightened around her and by the way he ground his teeth, she guessed he had a hard time controlling his emotions.

“I screamed and kicked, but one held me down and the other touched me. They both groped my breasts and right

when one shoved his hand down my pants, the bell interrupted them. I ran until my lungs burned. I can still hear them laugh behind my back after that day. For them, it had all been a joke. Well, not for me. I asked Dev to train me, to show me how to fight off an attacker.”

“You’re so strong, Ry. And I’m so sorry that happened to you.”

She gave him a soft kiss and said, “Thanks, Keen. I know you think I’m strong, but I’m not. Not really. I should have told someone what happened.”

He shook his head and said, “You survived hell in high school. Nobody should have to fight for the right to be left alone—to not to be touched like that. You help other women protect themselves against attackers like the ones you had to fight off at age sixteen. You were just a young girl, Ry.”

She sniffed, and the first tear broke the seal, with new tears brimming her eyes.

“I think I understand you wanting to fight much better now. And I’m sorry I had my opinions ready before knowing your past.”

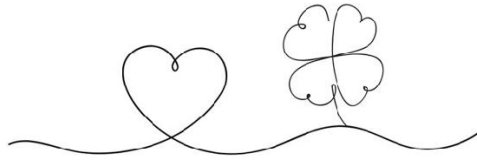
“I hate that you’re leaving. I don’t know if you’re indeed coming back to me.”

Blurting her insecurity like that made her groan.

“Always. I’m never leaving you. And you better believe that if it means that I’ll have to fight you on this; I’ll be the one coming out on top this time. I’m never letting you go.”



## KEENAN



**W**ith a trembling and sweaty hand, Keenan knocked on the door at the end of a motel room nearby Newark airport. He didn't want to be here. But he would do whatever needed to be done to take care of his family. He would do anything for Tommy and Ryleigh.

It shouldn't have shocked him as much as it did, when Ronan tired of waiting and kicked in the door.

Donovan shouted in Keenan's earpiece, "Fuck, Ro. Let Calum take the lead."

Calum Walsh did exactly that by passing Ronan in the narrow doorway. He entered the room and after checking the corners, closets and bathroom, Calum reentered the empty motel room.

"Close the door behind you, Keenan. We don't need any eyes on us while we're here. Don's on the lookout, so we'll know when someone comes up to the room."

Calum started working for Donovan as a PI months ago after quitting his job as a police officer here in Jersey. His contacts had proved themselves, as this was the first genuine lead they had on Evangeline, and it already seemed promising as he found several personal items of her in this room.

The picture of Evangeline with her parents, taken when her parents were still together, lay on the stained carpet in the room. He picked it up and Calum jerked his chin. "That's her, right?"

“Yeah.” He said and stared like the people on this picture would come alive and tell him exactly where the hell his ex was.

Calum talked again, and Keenan realized after a beat that he’d informed Donovan about their finding. “Yes. Will do,” Calum said.

Keenan had been so distracted he’d missed half of the conversation.

“She kept this picture for over three years, so it must have meant something to her. She’ll come back. Let’s go talk to the desk clerk.”

Calum said before he did a final sweep of the place. Keenan wanted to follow Calum on his way to the reception, but he held up his hand and said, “I’ll go with Ro. You go over to Don in the car.”

Without answering the buff Viking lookalike, Keenan joined his cousin in the rental car. After closing the passenger door behind him, he said, “Quite the charmer, your employee. Is he always this short? I know that he’s the expert and all, but damn...”

Donovan laughed. “Kate and Kayla always tell me how much Calum looks like me. I guess that means they think I can be an asshole, too.”

Donovan’s girlfriend Kate was the sweetest woman Keenan ever met. How she ended up with Austin’s most notorious player... Keenan shook his head. With Calum as her brother, Kate probably was used to the whole alpha male thing that Donovan oozed.

The back doors to the car opened and Ronan and Calum stepped in. “We’ve missed them by a hair. My contact is taking over our spot and calls me the moment she comes back. Her stuff is still in the room. Let’s head back to my parents’ house. It’s no use for us all to hang out here.”

Keenan slammed his fist on the dashboard. “Fuck!”

Leaning in from the backseat, Ronan squeezed Keenan’s shoulder. “We’ve found her, Keen. I’m sure this will all be

over soon.”

“Did Derek say anything else when you called him this morning?”

Ronan had finally got a hold on one of Derek’s disposable cell phone numbers via an old friend from the underground fighting scene. The asshole denied seeing Evangeline in the past years. They should have expected as much.

“Nah, he told me he could hook me up with a fight while I’m here.”

Keenan turned in his seat. “You’re not actually thinking about going, are you?”

Ronan shrugged. “Why not? If she’s not coming back for her stuff, we’ll have to do something. Maybe someone at the fight knows about Evangeline and where we can find her.”

Keenan rubbed his forehead. Calling Derek, who’s a well-known drug lord, they’re looking for Evangeline, had been risky enough. No one wants to be on Derek’s radar. Not when they were young and stupid, hanging out on the streets of Austin—but certainly not now that the man had become a certified criminal.

He couldn’t differ any more from Derek. Was that what had attracted Evangeline to him in the first place? Because he could offer her a life full of excitement; underground fights, parties filled with high rollers and drugs?

“Shit. That’s her!”

Keenan shot upright in his seat and narrowed his eyes as he scanned the parking lot, searching for the person Donovan thought was Evangeline. With her head bowed and her arms crossed over her chest, Evangeline scurried to the motel room Keenan had just exited. There was no doubt in his mind that this was his ex.

The once beautiful, angelic cheerleader that had been his first love, his high school sweetheart, was struggling to find her key in the worn-out shoulder bag. She swayed on her stripper heels, flashing them her underwear when she scrambled to pick up her dropped key.

“Damn. This is painful, man. We need to go now and help her. Don’t want Derek to send one of his men,” Ronan said.

“I’ll go. Alone. Don’t want to scare her.”

“Keen, I’m going with you. Even if I have to stay outside, I’m not letting you go without back up. Derek is crazy. If he thinks Evangeline is going to walk and talk...”

Keenan understood what his cousin meant. Her life might be even more in danger now that Derek knew she could leave him and end up talking about his operation.

“Okay, Ro. Let’s go.”

Keenan watched Evangeline enter the room. Although Donovan had advised him on all the legal stuff and even brought along the paperwork, Keenan still had a knot in his stomach.

He would confront Evangeline about not willing to do anything with Tommy. Hopefully get some answers before she’d shut things down. And in his wildest dreams, she would even sign the papers to waive her parental rights.

He had little hope that she would sign them. Not because she’d been a dedicated mother who suddenly had a change of heart. It had more to do with the monumental importance of the outcome of this talk. He didn’t dare to hope she would set them free.

With the papers in one hand, he knocked on the same motel door again. “Keenan... I can’t believe... How did you find me?” Evangeline’s hollow eyes flew past Keenan’s body in search of something. Tommy maybe?

Her hand flew to her chest when Ronan glared at her. “Oh...”

She then took a step back and motioned him to come inside, quickly. Ronan followed along. Keenan didn’t want to argue with him he was meant to stay outside. He wanted to use his time wisely and not bicker with Ronan about once again not listening.



“What are you doing here?” She narrowed her pale blue eyes. They had the same shape and form as Tommy’s and it reminded him of the reason he stood there.

“I’m here for two things.”

Evangeline shifted on her socks that she must have slipped into when he got out of the car. He willed the thought away of her carrying Tommy inside of her belly. She also had liked to walk around on her socks, no matter how hot it was in the summer.

He shook his head. The woman he knew then stood miles apart from the woman standing in front of him. With her gray skin, sunken cheeks and bloodshot eyes shooting daggers at him.

When she put a hand through her dirty hair, she gut stuck in the tangles. “You can’t just show up and—”

“Actually, I can. I’m not here to see you for old times’ sake and catch up. I’m most certainly not here to get you back.”

She pursed her lips and said, “Good.”

His eyes went over her arms, searching for marks. He’d seen the surveillance pictures, she still needed her fix. He hated to indeed find the angry needle marks.

She quickly covered her arm with a shaking hand and spat, “My hourly rate is a hundred bucks, so you and your sidekick better make this quick.”

She smirked like she knew her sneer would shock him.

“I wouldn’t touch you with—”

“Ro, stop.”

Keenan took a few steps closer to the bed from where behind Evangeline stood. Her eyes flitted over the room and she grabbed an ice bucket standing on the bedside table next to her. What did she think, doing with that bucket?

“Get away from me.”

“Eve...” He deliberately used his nickname for her. He wanted to remind her who she used to be. Before the drugs. And before all the deceit.

“No. I’m no longer the dutiful Eve, the perfect mom who’s living in a fixer-upper across the street from family, having Sunday brunches talking about teething. That Eve... she’s gone.”

There was no lie there. And because that Eve was gone, he needed her to sign over her parental rights. He didn’t want this stranger, standing in front of him with fresh needle marks, to have any say in his son’s upbringing. If something happened to him, he wanted Ryleigh to be the one to care for Tommy. Not this woman who seemed ready to scratch his eyes out at any moment now.

“I’m not doing this with you,” she said.

He wanted to bring up her addiction and her life as a prostitute, but he needed to have her signature first. Then, he would try to help her out of this situation.

He wanted her to recover. To make a better life for herself. But as his cousins already warned him, he realized that most of these cases don’t have a happy ending.

“I need to know why. And I don’t want some bullshit story. If you have any love for your son left inside of you, please think about your answer. It’s important for Tommy.”

Evangeline winced when Keenan spoke his name.

“I couldn’t deal with the pressure. I always had to be so damn perfect all the time. Derek hooked me up at one of his fights...” She nodded towards Ronan.

“It blew me away how good I felt after the first hit. And after a few months... I was sick, Keenan. I couldn’t find it in me to deal with you both sober. I know how bad it sounds.”

She clasped a hand to her mouth and said, “Oh, God. I... I know that I’ve hurt him. And you. And I wish somehow that I could make the pain go away.”

“Do you mean go back in time?”

He had to know if she regretted anything. Not because it would make any difference to him, but for Tommy it could mean a world of a difference hearing his mother was sorry or at least regretted her actions.

“Yes. I’m sorry. I wasn’t happy back then, Keen.”

It was his time to wince. She had no right to shorten his name. That right had been revoked.

“I know now, that you weren’t happy with us. I just wondered if you ever think about our son. If you’d wished you had done things differently.”

“Sure... I think about him. I... I know he must hate me.”

For a brief second, he wanted to hurt her just as much as she’d hurt his son and tell her all about the hell she’d put him through. But he thought better of it because he still needed something else from her.

“He’s hurt more than angry.” He wanted to leave it at that. Time to get on with the reason why they stood here in this dump.

“Life is nothing but pain and moving on from that pain. He’ll get over it.”

There was so much wrong with her answer. He didn’t even know where to start. He let her remark slide. He’d promised himself to keep things civil.

“In that case, I’ve brought some papers with me. I don’t mean to waylay you into anything. But I’m going to ask you to sign them.”

Her head already vehemently shook from side to side. “No, no. That’s fine. I’ll sign the papers.”

“What? Really?”

“On one condition.”

There it was. Donovan had warned him she’d try something like this. He wondered how high the amount would be.

“A hundred thousand dollars.”

She picked up a cigarette bud from an overflowing ashtray and lit it up. Her hands shook, but he didn't know if it was because this conversation unnerved her or because she needed her next fix.

Before he could even reply, his stupid ass cousin said, "Twenty-five thousand dollars, and that is our ultimate offer. You get five thousand after you sign those papers, then ten when you check into rehab and the final ten when you finish rehab. We've got an account in your name ready for you to use."

Keenan stared flabbergasted at Ronan, knowing that the wildcard of the family, wouldn't have thought things through like that. It had to be Donovan's work.

"That's not enough. You're loaded... You must be with all those fights you win."

Keenan wanted to interrupt that Ronan wasn't Tommy's father, so he wasn't the one paying her ass anything, but then Ronan said, "I know you're sick. And I'm already countin' to a hundred to stop me from sayin' what I'm really thinkin', but if you don't cooperate than we're goin' to haul your ass in court. And you already know you don't get a dime then."

"I need cash."

Ronan took a step forward, sucking all the oxygen out of the room with his mere size. Evangeline swallowed nervously and croaked, "How do I know your word is good for it?"

"You don't. But I'm not handin' out cash to a drug addict. Forget about it. I will not be responsible for you gettin' ahead of yourself and overdose."

Keenan said, "Eve... think about it. We want you to get better. If you sign this, we follow through with every promise."

She held out her hand, and he handed the papers over. He held his breath while she placed the papers against the wall next to the rumpled bed and signed them.

He couldn't believe it. She signed her parental rights away like she was signing a petition to get the neighbors from three

doors down to do something about their noise disturbance.

Just like that. Who was this woman? Why had he wasted so much time in pining over some kind of dream vision about them being a happy family?

She shoved the papers in his hand, and he quickly checked if she had ticked every box. She'd really done it.

“Thank you for signing the papers. It's the best thing you ever did for him.”

She held out her hand and said, “I want my money.”

Much to Keenan's surprise, Ronan took out his phone and showed her the bank account with the first five thousand dollars on it. He should have known that Donovan already had arranged everything.

How he was supposed to pay his cousin back, he didn't know. Shit. He hated to feel blindsided. Although in this case, it had worked and he should be grateful it made her sign the papers.

Without saying as much as a thank you, a sly smile spread over her face. “So, all I have to do now is check in at some place?”

“Yeah, time to pack your shit. We're taking you now,” Ronan said.

He watched her face going even paler and a cold sweat broke out on her forehead. She shook her head and said, “Now?... I'm not going anywhere with you.”

“We've got a deal, lady. And for the sake of Tommy, I'm willin' to set you down on this bed and pack all your shit for you. Ye don't even have to lift a finger.”

“I'm not going.”

Keenan wanted to have a reasonable talk with her, but he followed Ronan's lead as he said, “The fuck you are. Do it for your son. And if it really is all about the money for you, you better understand that you'll only get access to it when you follow through with rehab.”

With Evangeline cursing and stomping through the room, Keenan slapped his cousin on his back in a silent thanks. It was a good thing he could play bad cop today.

There wasn't much to pack as she only had several things she flung into a shopping bag that had been thrown in the corner.

A knock sounded on the door and Evangeline shrieked before she got up from the bed and hid behind Keenan.

Ronan opened the door where Calum and his buddy stood. "We're here to take Evangeline to rehab."

"I'm not going with you."

Keenan turned around and locked eyes with her. After seeing her for the first time in over three years, he'd expected to feel more overwhelmed with emotions. Like a freight train of sorrow to hit him in his chest at seeing her in this awful state. But as he kept eye contact, he felt nothing but this eerie void.

He realized that their relationship had been over long before she'd left them.

In a calm voice he said, "I'm going with you. No one's going to hurt you. We're here to help you."

"I only want you to take me." She placed her hand on his arm and he retracted it immediately. It didn't feel right to have her touching him.

"Let's go. Ro is going with us and one of these guys. You'll be fine."

He walked her out of her motel room and when they arrived at the rental car, Donovan got out and said, "You did good, Cuz."

"I know I've been a complete mess these past weeks, but did you and Ro discuss anything with me about any money?"

"I don't want you to worry about the money, Keen," Ronan said after escorting Evangeline to the car of Calum's friend.

“We’re talking about twenty-five grand. It’s a lot of money, Ro. I’m about to take over my dad’s company. I don’t have that kind of money—”

“I suggested it to Don, and I’m paying. I brought you into this mess. And I’m making damn sure to take you out of it. I don’t want it back. And I sure as hell don’t want you to bring it up again. The money is well spent. Hopefully, you can make Ry Blondie’s mom officially now. And I hope Evangeline will take this opportunity to work on getting better.”

With his fierce argument, Ronan made him swallow back the emotion that tightened his throat.

“I’m lost for words, Ro. You didn’t cause all this. She’s a grown woman. It’s not on you, man...”

“I brought her in contact with Derek. I didn’t know he would hook her up, but I should have—”

Donovan interrupted and said, “Okay. We’re going now before she changes her mind. Time to break this up.”

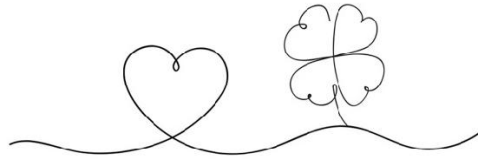
Keenan hugged his cousin and said, “Thanks, Ro.”

“No problem. I’ve got you.”





## RYLEIGH



**W**ith her sister hot on her tail, Ryleigh walked into her parent's kitchen. "What do you mean, he's in New York?"

"What else could I be meaning with that sentence, Jessie?"

With Keenan away these past few days, she'd felt constantly on edge. Sparring with Devlin and Catriona had only helped so much.

Jessie yanked her mother's apron from the side of the fridge and said, "Don't be such a smart ass. I'm just wondering why you'd let your boyfriend go fly across the country to see his ex. Is he flying right back or is he staying overnight?"

Ryleigh didn't care for her oldest sister, putting these thoughts into her head.

"He's been there for a few days." She wanted to add, 'he's with his cousins' but she couldn't find the energy to deal with her sister anymore. Sure, Jessie hadn't been dealt the best of cards with her husband, but she wasn't helping Ryleigh with her remarks.

"You must know that the bond between a man and a woman strengthens when they have a child together..."

She'd tried to be nice but enough was enough. "If you don't stop it right now, I'm going to leave before dinner."

"What? Why?"

“Because you’re bringing negative thoughts to my head. Thoughts that I don’t need.”

“I’m only trying to protect you, sis.”

“Are you? How is any of this about protecting me?”

Jessie fisted the ends of the apron cords and knotted them with much vigor.

“You of all people know what I’ve dealt with, what Joe did to me and Liv. You’ve been my absolute rock in all of it after Joe got sent to prison.”

“Jess, you can be proud of yourself.”

“I am. But I don’t want to see you get hurt. I’ve heard from Bree that day when I met her and Declan that Keenan was still hung up on his ex. I—”

“Jessie, I love you. You’re my sister. But I don’t want you to repeat any of that ever again. It’s simply not true. I know the deal, and Keenan knows the deal between us. What other people say; I don’t give a fuck.”

Keenan had called her several times a day. They had found Evangeline in a sleazy motel. Thankfully, Evangeline had signed the papers. They even had talked her into going to rehab by giving her money.

Ryleigh didn’t know what to think about that, but Keenan had said Ronan insisted on donating the money. They did everything they could to help Evangeline get better and escape her horrible life with Derek.

And she knew that was all there was to it for Keenan. Sure, he hadn’t been as in touch in the past two days as he’d been on the first two days of his stay, but she wasn’t worried. Yet.

“That’s my girl,” her father Ron said when he wheeled into the kitchen. “The guy is absolutely smitten. No way he’s doing you dirty.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

“I say what I think.”

Ryleigh smiled at her father when he repeated his motto.

“Are you expecting anyone?” Jessie said while peering through the window above the sink.

“Nah, I called my mistress an hour ago, said now wasn’t a good time. Full house and all.”

Ryleigh and Jessie rolled their eyes at their father. Ryleigh peered over her sister’s shoulder and dropped the plate she’d been drying. It smashed on the kitchen tiles.

Ron muttered, “Are we having a Greek party?”

“Ron, please stop running your mouth,” her mother said as she entered the kitchen with a dustpan in hand.

Ryleigh ran out the kitchen, leaving her bickering parents in her wake. She opened the front door and ran down the wheelchair ramp. Keenan stopped walking up the driveway and held his arms open for Ryleigh to jump in.

She crossed her legs behind his back and kissed him stupid. Between kisses she said, “I can’t believe it... that’s why you didn’t call... I’ve missed you so much.”

He laughed against her lips. When he cradled her face with his hands, he said, “We’ve got a surprise for you.”

“We?”

She looked around the driveway to find Tommy smiling at her like the cat that got the cream.

“I’ve had a talk with Tommy this morning.”

“You did?”

She furrowed her brows. “Weren’t you in New York this morning?”

“Nope.”

She looked sideways and eyed Tommy. “Weren’t you at your Grandma’s?”

Tommy giggled. “No.”

She wiggled in Keenan’s arms, needing some space. What had he been up to? He let her down this time.

“You boys have some explaining to do.”

Keenan winked at Tommy before he said to her, “We’ll get right to it. But first, we need you to come with us.”

Tommy hugged her waist and said, “Yeah, we have a surprise, Dad is—”

“Tommy Aiden Mills. It’s supposed to stay a surprise.”

Tommy looked down at his tennis shoes and mumbled, “Sorry.”

She felt sorry for Tommy, as he obviously was so excited that he couldn’t help himself. She took his hand in hers and squeezed. “Come on, boys. I can’t wait to see your surprise.”

“Okay, this is for you.” Tommy took out a sleeping mask from his back pocket of his jeans.

“This is getting better and better. I’m definitely going to be surprised now, sweetie.”

Tommy beamed up at her while blindfolding her with the green sleeping mask.

Keenan guided her into the truck and before he closed her door, her dad shouted, “Let me know what the surprise was, Ry. We’re not sleeping tonight until you’ve called us.”

“I will, Dad.”

“Love you!”

She wanted to reply, but she heard the door shut. Tommy said from behind her, “This is awesome. I wanted to tell you so bad, Ryleigh. I can’t believe that I got to see—”

Ryleigh brought her hands to her ears and said, “La-la-la-la”

“Right. Sorry.”

Keenan got behind the wheels if she heard the rustling right.

A big calloused hand engulfed her hand and lifted it over the console. Keenan’s beard tickled the back of her hand before he kissed it.

“I know this all must seem weird, but Tommy and I had a lot of fun planning this, ain’t that right, son?”

“Yep. But I will say nothing more, because Ryleigh is going to interrupt me, anyway.”

She busted out laughing and was a bit bummed out she couldn’t see his little face.

After some time, Ryleigh had no clue how long; Keenan parked the truck and led her outside. Tommy followed them and kept chattering about how he couldn’t wait to reveal their surprise.

They entered a shop of some kind, because when she’d walked over a threshold, the sound of an antique shopkeeper’s bell rang.

“Ah, you’re here!” A warm woman’s voice said.

Keenan still guided Ryleigh, and they weaved left and right before they stepped into another room, since she’d heard a door shut behind them.

“Okay, son. You can lift the mask now.”

“Yes!”

Bright neon lights pained Ryleigh’s eyes, and she blinked vehemently. With teary eyes, she peered through her lashes to take the room in.

“Huh? Mia?”

“Hi, girl. Surprise!”

Ryleigh turned around and noticed Keenan sitting on a dentist chair. Her gaze fluttered over dozens of colorful drawings hanging on the walls. She spotted a folder with pictures of work of art on various bodies.

“Oh! Are we at your work? Are we about to get a tattoo?”

She wasn’t so sure about marking her body permanently. But she also felt bad to decline straight away with Tommy’s excited eyes flittering over her. She searched for any signs in the room that he already had a design for them. She came up empty.

Her cousin wasn't very helpful when she said, "I'm going to let Keenan tell you. Sorry."

She noticed Mia standing with her arm around Tommy's shoulder and blurted, "Is it even legal that Tommy's here?"

Mia laughed and said, "You're seriously asking me that? Girl. Keep your eyes on your man. We know what we're doing. Tommy knows that he's only allowed in this separate room. He's not seeing any piercing and other stuff. Rest assured, mama bear."

Keenan held out his hand for Ryleigh, and when she took it, he directed her closer to him.

"I like the sound of that; mama bear. It's exactly what you are."

"Keen..." She urged him not to say anything else on the matter since Tommy stood in the same room.

"Okay, I have something to show you."

He opened his arm and a plastic wrap covered the spot where the capitalized E used to be. His fingers plucked at the edge and when he had an ear, he pulled the wrap from the tattoo underneath. It didn't dawn on her what it was until he'd fully unwrapped his arm.

A beautiful portrait of Tommy had covered the E of his mother.

"It's beautiful, boys." She sniffed and squeezed Keenan's hand in thanks. She hadn't realized how much she'd wanted him to get rid of the permanent reminder of his ex until it had been done.

And to place such a vivid portrait of his smiling son was extra special in her eyes.

"I... I'm speechless."

"Wait till you see the rest!" Tommy shouted.

She stood glued to the ground, her gaze ping ponged from Tommy to Keenan. What could he have done? A portrait of her?

Keenan used his special dad voice to admonish his son, “Tommy Aiden Mills...”

Ryleigh rolled her eyes and laughed. She leaned in and brought her lips down on Keenan’s. “Thank you, even though you may not have done it for me, I’m still glad you did it. And it’s beautiful.”

He kissed her deeply and when they broke apart he said, “I love you, Ry. And when Tommy and I had our talk this morning, he said he likes us together, ain’t that right, son?”

Tommy hurried his last steps to the chair and nodded.

“I love you, Tommy. You and your father are everything to me.”

With a lot of force for a six-year-old boy, Tommy slammed his body against her for a hug. His body shook from crying. “Shh. It’s okay, sweetie.”

“I love you, too.” Tommy said in between sobs. Her heart swelled with his words. She squeezed him tight and looked over his golden hair, up to his dad. Keenan took off his T-shirt and an even larger plastic wrap sat right on top of his heart.

“Oh, my... what have you done?”

Tommy turned around and wiped his snot with the back of his hand. “I can’t wait to show it.”

“The shadows need a little finishing up, but the guys couldn’t wait to show it to you. It’s an honor to finish it with all three of you here, together,” Mia said.

Ryleigh startled as she’d totally forgotten they stood in the tattoo parlor.

“Show me, Keen.”

Keenan pulled the wrap from over his heart, and her own heart stopped beating for a moment. She came in closer and let her eyes follow the picture of a carrot red haired woman, with a golden-haired boy and a raven-haired man, smiling while toasting their ice cream.

It was a replica of the picture from their bedroom wall.

“This is... I can’t even...”

Lost for words, she could only do one thing. She grabbed her boys for a bear hug.

“Careful! He needs to watch his tattoos, Ry,” Mia said from behind them.

In their huddle of their three heads together, Keenan whispered, “You’re my family. Forever and always.”

Those words made her knees weak. It almost was too much for her. She’d longed to call them her family. Keenan had made sure today that she knew he wanted forever and nothing else.

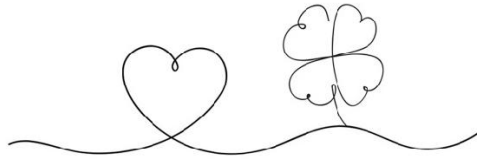
Tommy whispered, “Yes. Forever.”

And with both of her boys’ eyes on her, Ryleigh added, smiling through her tears, “Forever.”





## KEENAN



**S**tanding in the middle of the very crowded Irish pub, The Lucky Irishman, Keenan had only eyes for the gorgeous woman walking up to him in a sexy, tight, ivory dress.

With her carrot hair curled and pinned halfway up, she was like a wet dream taunting him that he should be on his best behavior in front of all of their family and friends. Ryleigh smiled knowingly at him as she walked next to her dad. While he wheeled forward in the makeshift aisle, he said something to his daughter, making her joyous laugh travel across his family's pub.

When they were close enough, he could overhear him say, "I say what I think."

His father-in-law was one special guy, all right. He'd welcomed Keenan into his family from the first moment they'd met and he couldn't be happier with his in-laws.

Ryleigh leaned down and kissed her father's cheek. "I love you, Dad."

"I love you, my sweet lioness. Go get your prey."

Ron winked at him and said, "You'd better remember what I've told you. I'm still good with a hammer."

Several family members who stood close enough to overhear busted out laughing.

With a wide grin on his face, he said, "Yes, sir."

He took Ryleigh's hand in his and during the entire ceremony; he never drew his attention away from her. When Tommy had been summoned to give the rings, his chest expanded at his brave boy stepping forward in his matching groomsman tuxedo.

Instead of giving the rings directly to Keenan, he held still next to Ryleigh and kissed her cheek. Keenan heard his sister Deirdre 'ooh and aah' at witnessing this tender moment.

"Thanks, son. I love you."

Tommy handed over the ring box and hugged his father. "I love you, too."

They exchanged the rings and vows, and after kissing Ryleigh incredulously long in front of all the people they loved, it was time to celebrate.

The party had been in full swing for over two hours when he snagged his wife on the dance floor. He pulled her in close and said over the loud music, "We're going home, darlin'. I'm not torturing myself any longer. I need to make love to my wife."

Before she could answer him, Ronan whisked her away on the dance floor and made a sport out of holding her a little too close for Keenan's liking. Although Ronan had said he didn't want to discuss the money for Evangeline, they'd talked about it six months ago when she had walked out clean from the rehab center and was granted her final ten grand.

She had been clean for three weeks before Calum's friend in Jersey found her doing drugs again and brought her back to rehab for the second time and later on a third and last time. They had decided in a meeting at Donovan's office last week, that they would leave it up to Evangeline now.

They had done everything they could by setting her up with twenty-five thousand dollars and paying for an upstate rehab center for not only one, but three rounds. Keenan had a sinking feeling that she would fall off the wagon again. Although thinking about it pained him, there had to be a time

where he had to say; enough is enough. Today was all about starting his life with Tommy and Ryleigh as a family.

His best man Declan slapped his shoulder once and said, "I'm proud of you, Keen."

He hugged his best friend and said, "Thanks, Dec."

With their loud cackles, they turned a lot of heads when Ryleigh's bridesmaids pulled her into their huddle. Ryleigh had asked her cousin Mia as her maid of honor, and the twins Nora and Catriona as her bridesmaids.

He loved how close Ryleigh was with her best friends. And even though Catriona had taken a lot of warming up to first, she now also came over several times a week just like Mia and Nora.

"This is the first event with all the Ryan sisters and your wife's family in the same room," Declan said.

His wife, Bree, had been the only Ryan sister who'd made an effort with Ry's family today. It didn't surprise him, because Bree and Ryleigh had become friends over the past months. Whenever he got home and Tommy and Ryleigh weren't there, he knew to look for them across the street at Bree and Declan's house.

They hadn't invited Rob and Brenda Walker today. It would have been weird to have his reunion with his five estranged daughters during Keenan and Ryleigh's wedding. Thankfully, the Walker family all understood.

Thinking about the Walker family, he needed to ask his detective cousin something about what he'd seen earlier. "Did you see Ry's cousin? The firefighter?"

"Ah, you mean Kieran?"

He nodded at Declan. "Yeah."

"Emmy walked out of the kitchen with the wedding cake and she'd almost dropped it on the floor when she came face to face with Kieran."

Declan laughed and said, "Yeah. It was so unlike Emmy. I think the whole Mills clan knew something was up with our

cousin. The way the two of them just stood there staring at each other....”

“I’ve heard Aiden say that Kieran walked after her into the kitchen and tried to talk to Emmy about something, but that she’d refused.”

“Our cousin is one hard nut to crack,” Keenan said, thinking about Emmy having no problem leading a team of older men who were used to do things a certain way before she took over as the new chef at Lucky’s.

“Who is?” Ryleigh said before she took Keenan’s hand. He treaded their fingers and kissed the back of her hand.

“Emmy,” Declan said.

“Ah, so you noticed that too, eh? You boys are such gossips.”

Keenan wasted no time and swept her off her feet. He walked through the crowd, ignoring hoots and hollers of congratulations. But he held still for the one person who mattered the most to them both.

Way past his bedtime, Tommy stood next to Liv, listening in on a conversation between Duncan and Pops.

“Tommy, we’re leaving. We’re picking you up from Grandma’s tomorrow, okay?”

Tommy hugged Ryleigh goodbye and said, “I still can’t believe that you’re my mom now.”

“I’m the luckiest woman alive. Who can say that on her wedding day, she ended up with not one but with two boys?”

“That sounds weird, Ry.”

She giggled and slapped his chest. “You know what I mean, Keen. I’m just so damn happy with both of you. I love you.”

Tommy touched his forehead against hers and said, “Cheers, Ry.”



THANK YOU FOR READING KEENAN! Would you please consider leaving a review? It's reviews from fans like you that help spread the word about my books. Thank you so much!

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IF YOU'RE ready for more of the sexy, heartfelt and funny Lucky Irish series, continue with book 6 in the series:

[Book 6 - Ronan \(Fianna & Ronan\)](#)

HAVE you heard of the spin-off series Winter Peaks? Bree's sister, Caitlin Ryan is moving to the mountains of Colorado. You can read book 1 [Adam](#) now and start a whole new series :)

**ALSO BY ANNA CASTOR**

## **Lucky Irish series ~ Austin:**

Book 1 - Duncan (Kayla & Duncan).

Book 2 - Donovan (Kate & Donovan).

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Book 4 - Declan (Bree & Declan).

Book 5 - Keenan (Ryleigh & Keenan).

Book 6 - Ronan (Fianna & Ronan).



## **Winter Peaks series:**

Book 1 - Adam (Caitlin & Adam)

Book 2 - Damian (Chloe & Damian)

## **Audiobooks:**

**Audiobook Duncan (Lucky Irish Book 1)**

## RONAN - LUCKY IRISH 6

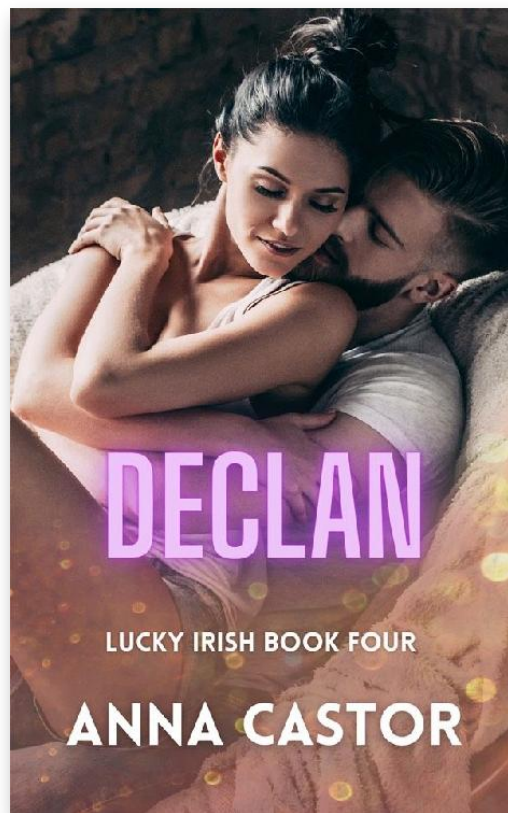


The long-awaited story of Ronan and Fianna is coming out in October, 2021.

In this childhood friends-to lovers-to enemies story we'll read all about our series number one bad boy Ronan Mills and the fiercest Ryan sister, Fianna.

[Book 6 - Ronan \(Fianna & Ronan\)](#)

## DECLAN - LUCKY IRISH 4 - EXCERPT



**“I... yes, I love you. But not in that way, I’m sorry, Squirt.”**

With these words, Declan Mills broke Bree’s heart, and his own. By trying to save their friendship, Declan did something he’d never done before: he lied to Bree.

Bree picked herself up and tried hard to move on from her infatuation that had lasted nearly two decades. About time, right? Wrong. One night, the former best friends gravitate together, binding their lives forever.

Declan made a mistake by choosing friendship over love. But can he win over Bree's heart again?

**Fall in love with the Lucky Irish big family romance families and see why thousands of readers have started binge reading the sassily strong and witty alpha characters in the Lucky Irish series. All Lucky Irish books can be enjoyed as stand-alone novels or as part of the larger series.**

[Book 4 - Declan \(Bree & Declan\)](#)

PROLOGUE - BREE

*March*

Tonight's the night. No more self-doubting and pussyfooting. Bree checked her lipgloss once more in the vanity mirror of the sun visor, flicking her tongue over her pearly whites. She righted her shoulders, took a deep breath and traced her fingers over the car door panel in search of the handle.

The Texas heat engulfed her rich dark curls right after exiting her beat-up purple sedan. After a few short brushes through her bouncy strands with her fingernails, Bree gave up the effort to tame her hair. She'd parked in her usual spot; behind Dec's black Chevy on his impeccably clean drive way. How did he find the time to pull out all those weeds and tackle the overgrown mess since he was still renovating inside?

She'd been here almost every day and most nights for the past three months. At first, she'd helped Dec clean out all the junk left behind by the former owner. The house had been a steal, but not without reason. It had been a dump. A smelly, dingy two-story house in southeast Austin.

Never one to shy away from hard work, Bree even assisted the Mills brothers and cousins wherever she could as they helped Dec in remodeling the two-story house. It had been a lot of fun learning some tricks of the trade from Dec's cousins Keenan and Aiden who worked construction for their father's construction company.

Bree used her hand, shielding her light blue eyes from the lazy evening sun. She glanced up at the freshly white painted house and smiled. Finally, they were entering the stage of making this place beautiful again. They all had enough of tearing down and throwing away the old, rotten elements of the house.

But hold on, what's that? The red paint of the small porch pained her eyes. That damn stubborn ass. After all the color-coding and Bree's efforts in persuading him to go for a more gentle looking pale blue, Declan still went ahead with this God-awful vermillion.

Dec needed his head examined. She righted her little black dress and stomped in her high heels over said ugly red porch when Dec opened the door. "And? What do you think?" he smiled a mile wide and opened his arms, showcasing a job he figured well done.

"You never listen, Dec."

She shook her head as she walked up to him. Because if he would really listen to her—or take notice, he'd known how her stomach flip-flopped at the mere sight of his dimples. How her heart skipped a beat at his smiling gray eyes. Damn, she was a mess. She would even put up with this hideous porch if it meant she'd live here with him, waking up every day in those muscular tanned arms.

"Squirt..." he said, and Bree winced at his nickname for her. She wasn't the six-year-old tomboy following him around anymore. In front of Declan stood a twenty-six-year-old who just had an emergency video chat with her sister Gwenn about her outfit tonight.

She was on a mission. The normal 'one-of-the-guys-Bree' wouldn't cut it. Tonight, she wasn't the girl next door and Dec's best friend in her favorite sweater and jeans. No. In front of Declan stood a WO-MAN.

Yes. She emphasized it out loud in her head and his smile faltered. He could always read her mind. So, how he didn't read the signs of her pining and lusting over his Irish ass was the greatest mystery of all times.

Maybe he didn't want to hurt her feelings by addressing it. Or he was afraid to have the same conversation she was about to have with him. Telling him how she felt might ruin their friendship. They both avoided this topic. Well, either way, tonight would be the start of a new chapter in their relationship. Hopefully, a chapter filled with lots of clothes ripping...

"I know, I know..." he said as he held up his hands, making his black stained T-shirt creep up from the top of his dusty jeans. She bit her bottom lip at the sight of his dusty trail of hair going down beneath his belt buckle. Bree cleared her throat.

"The color is gross, Dec. It's—"

"Yeah, I know. You're right. I should have listened to you. But at least for now, it has a coat of paint." He shrugged before he opened his arms for her to step into. She couldn't remember the time he wouldn't invite her into his arms for a hug.

Even wearing a new dress for this special occasion couldn't hold her from hugging his dirty torso. The smell of clean, manly sweat accompanied by wood dust infiltrated her nostrils. She placed her cheek to his T-shirt clad chest to get her fill. He squeezed her tighter for a moment and stepped back to travel his gray eyes over her.

"You seem different. What did I miss? Didn't we talk this morning? What's up?" Declan said as he took her biceps in his calloused hands. The observant cop side of Dec scrutinized her expression as he narrowed his eyes.

"Geez. I'm wearing make-up? Maybe that's it?" Bree said as she tucked a curl behind her ear.

"No. That's not it. It's something *in* your eyes, not *on* your eyes. Your eyes always speak volumes to me. And they're telling me there's something going on you'd rather not say. What's the matter?"

Bree sighed and shook her head. Why was this so hard? He was her best friend; she usually told him everything. Well, perhaps not that she'd masturbated this morning after hanging

up the phone with Dec. His raspy voice after he'd just woken up had gotten her all hot and bothered. She'd needed some kind of relief before going into work and had made do with the showerhead.

Oh, how she longed to feel the real deal instead of getting off on just the thought of Declan. They stood so close she could almost taste him. Bree took a deep breath, full of his scent, and closed her eyes for a moment.

Okay, let's do this. It's now or never.

"Dec..." she said as she opened her eyes. His name came out in a pained whisper.

"What is it?"

His eyes searched hers for answers. As he cocked his head, his charcoal longer hair on top swished over his frowned forehead.

She swallowed the big lump in her throat and said, "I'm in love with you."

His brows shot up, and he took a step back from her. His hands let go of her upper arms. Losing his warmth and the lack of a verbal response made her involuntarily shiver. She looked up through her eyelashes and winced at his expression.

Dec rubbed his neck, exposing his hard bicep next to his ear. A smear of ugly vermilion paint graced his elbow. He shook his head in disbelief.

"Fuck, Squirt. I..."

She swallowed back the tears threatening to overflow her eyelids. After a few hefty blinks, the first damn tears descended. Declan wasted no time and beat her to it as he wiped them away with his thumb.

"Shit..."

He took her cheeks in between the palm of his hands and for a moment; she was sure he would lean in and kiss her. His stormy eyes locked onto hers, but she couldn't read him. How could he control his emotions like this? Didn't she affect him as he did her?



“Say you feel this too, Dec,” Bree said. The pleading in her voice was clear.

“I... yes, I love you.”

Bree’s heart rate went sky high, but his pained stare demolished all hope. And his next words shattered her heart into a thousand pieces.

“But not in that way. I’m sorry, Squirt.”

## DUNCAN - LUCKY IRISH 1



**“One Kiss. I need to know if you feel this too.”**

Kayla Walsh ran thousands of miles to start her life over in Austin, Texas. Kayla isn't ready for the sexy former MMA fighter Duncan Mills who instantly set his sights on her. Duncan makes her feel alive again and isn't giving up without a fight. Duncan is all in for the first time in his life, but will Kayla let him close enough to win over her heart?

**Fall in love with the Lucky Irish big family romance families and see why thousands of readers have started**

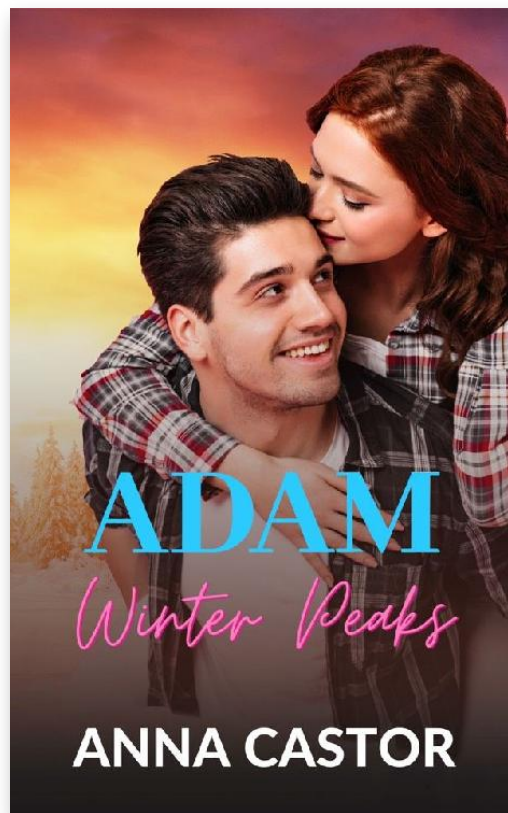
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*Duncan is a laugh out loud sexy and heartfelt big family romance that will have you swoon while reading Kayla and Duncan's happily ever after. Filled with hilarious family banter between brothers and sisters this romance series will make you feel part of their families.*

*In the Lucky Irish series you'll find MMA fighters, bartenders, private investigators, police officers, a hot single dad, bad boy alphas, second chances, surprise babies, friends-to-lovers, enemies-to-lovers, love at work, slowburn and steamy instalove.*

Order Duncan for only \$ 0.99 here: [Book 1 - Duncan \(Kayla & Duncan\)](#)

## ADAM - WINTER PEAKS 1 - EXCERPT



**“I almost hate you as much as I love you.”**

If Caitlin Ryan had known Pops’ grandsons in Colorado were freaking hot with an equal amount of irritating traits, she’d picked another place to overthink her life. Adam Mills, the oldest brother of the family that agreed to take her in, has an unnerving sexy confidence and overall hotness. And the former snowboard star has his eyes set on her.

As an Olympic gold medalist on the half-pipe, Adam Mills has seen and done it all before. He’s finally ready to give his heart

to a woman and settle down. But can Adam win over Caitlin's heart?

**Fall in love with the Winter Peaks big family romance families and see why thousands of readers have started binge reading the sassily strong and luscious alpha characters in Anna Castor's series. All Winter Peaks books can be enjoyed as stand-alone novels or as part of the larger series.**

*Adam is a laugh out loud sexy and heartfelt big family romance that will have you root for Caitlin and Adam's happily ever after. Filled with hilarious family banter between brothers and sisters this romance series will make you feel part of their families.*

*In the Winter Peaks series you'll find bad boy alphas, sports romance, best friends brother, second chances, friends-to-lovers, small town love, enemies-to-lovers, love at work, slowburn and steamy instalove.*

Book 1 - Adam

Book 2 - Damian

Although the heroine, Caitlin, comes from the Lucky Irish series, it's not required to read those books first.

**Winter Peaks series:**

[Adam \(Book 1\)](#)

[Damian \(Book 2\)](#)

## Excerpt Adam

### 1 CAITLIN

Caitlin Ryan handed her suitcase to the bus driver who helped the passengers stow away their luggage in the undercarriage. With a watchful eye, she noted where he'd stuck her gray suitcase and stepped into the bus to Winter Peaks, Colorado.

While working her way through the narrow aisle with dark blue seats on each side, Caitlin's heart pounded against her chest. She swallowed a few times to make her throat less dry.

Being trapped for several hours in a closed-off space with strangers scared the shit out of her. But she needed to go through this. Putting distance between herself and her family in Austin, Texas, gave her much needed room to think.

Caitlin righted her shoulders and plowed her way to the back of the bus. She plopped down in the aisle seat and looked over the back of the heads of the people already seated.

Too preoccupied with untangling her ear buds, she at first missed the guy halting next to her seat, silently asking permission to take a seat next to Caitlin. True, taking the spot at the aisle and leaving the window seat vacant, had been a dick move.

Because she didn't want anybody sitting next to her for the next two hours, she searched for another free spot for this guy.

Nope.

She gave an apologetic smile that didn't reach her eyes and scooted over to the window seat. If she had to go through with this, she'd better keep her eyes glued on the outside. At least then she could try to fade the rest of the bus to the background.

"Hi, I'm Adam."

Caitlin glanced down at his outstretched hand and swallowed. She turned in her seat and looked up at him. "Hi, Adam. I'm Caitlin. I would like to shake your hand, but I'm in the middle of having a panic attack. Sorry."

The guy sat back in his seat and grinned. “I like your honesty.” His coffee-colored eyes smiled with mischief.

He brought the hand, which she didn’t shake, through his wavy raven hair. Caitlin watched his muscular arm move, and she wondered if he got his tanned complexion by a recent sun vacation or if he simply had that deep tanned olive color skin all year round.

“What’s up with the panicking?”

Before she could shoot his attempt down to get her to spill her guts to a total stranger, he grinned again while scratching his dark beard. He had this weirdness about him. Like he had a total lack of secrecy or concealment. Definitely a lack of etiquette, that’s for sure.

Despite Caitlin’s reservations, she had to admit this stranger talking to her distracted her from the second panic attack of the day. Working for several years as a beat cop had ingrained her to be weary of strangers. So, how did he bypass all her usual alarm bells?

She’d play along. At the very least, it would make the trip seem to go faster.

“Sitting two hours trapped in this bus with a complete stranger asking me about my life story. That’s what’s up. Or worse, sitting next to someone who talks non-stop about stuff I don’t give a rats’ ass about,” Caitlin said.

This guy Adam laughed with his head back. Not in the least offended.

“Yeah, that’s probably worse,” he winked as he spoke.

She cocked her head, looking him over once more. He seemed... friendly? He wasn’t pushy, even though he’d asked about her panic attack. Maybe he sized her up. Determine her level of craziness and if he needed to change seats.

Before Caitlin could stop herself, she asked, “So, where are you heading?”

Adam shook his head. Cute dimples popped out on both cheeks when he smirked. Even under his close shaved beard,

those suckers showed.

“Nope. Not doing this.”

“Ah, come on. I’m going to Winter Peaks,” Caitlin offered. Where the hell did that come from?

Normally, whenever she met someone new, she weighed her words. Not with this handsome guy. Nope. She acted as if she knew him already.

Someone she could hang out with and shoot the shit. She grinned at the memory of her ex-partner on the force, Declan, and the rest of his Mills brothers.

They had promoted Declan as a detective after Caitlin quit the force months ago. The two clicked, and Caitlin was glad Declan found love with her sister, Bree.

As the oldest of five sisters, Caitlin had always considered herself a mother hen of the family. Leaving them for a half year had been a big deal.

Bree had called Caitlin right before she got on this bus. Once Caitlin had assured Bree she’d arrived safely in Denver, her sister wasted no time getting into a spiel about their newfound half-siblings.

Caitlin loved her sisters, but they didn’t seem to get the hint that flying into Colorado had been her last resolve.

Getting through her day without flashbacks or panic attacks had been her priority now. Not hearing the latest about random people she coincidentally shared DNA with. Finding out her father had a family on the side, had broken her.

She’d quit her job without a clue what she’d do instead. Preferably something that didn’t involve critical situations and saving lives. Or people in general.

The only individuals she’d never get enough of were her baby niece and nephew, Bree’s twins. Leaving them behind had been the hardest part.

“Whatcha thinking about over there?” Adam waved his hand around the bus and said, “It ain’t that bad after all?”



She parted a wistful smile and shook her head. “Thinking about how you remind me of some Irish brothers I know back home.”

Adam lifted a brow. “Irish, eh? I’m from Irish origin.”

Caitlin whirled in her seat and said, “Shut the fuck up.” She couldn’t believe the coincidence. His eyes widened and then he laughed again.

“No, Panic Girl. You asked me to talk. So now you can’t tell me to shut the fuck up.”

“Panic Girl?”

“Yeah. It was that or ‘Gorgeous Girl’, but I figured you weren’t the type to appreciate being called gorgeous.” Adam brought a hand to his chest, covered by a black T-shirt. He bit his bottom lip, like he found her irritated glare amusing.

“You figured I’d prefer being called Panic Girl over Gorgeous Girl?” She couldn’t believe this. Mostly because he’d been correct. She never knew how to react to a compliment. Certainly not one coming from a hot stranger.

Caitlin crossed her arms. “Why don’t you just call me by my name?”

“I was too busy looking at your chest, I didn’t catch it.” He hid his laugh behind his fist and leaned his body over his armrest at the aisle, as if he expected Caitlin to slap his stupid head.

“I’m trained to knock you on your ass, you know,” she said with a hint of humor in her voice. She couldn’t believe his nerve. Although, she had to admit that his brutal honesty was a big part of his boyish charm.

“How old are you, anyway?” Caitlin asked and jutted her chin at him.

“I’ve had the big 4-0 last month.”

Hmm. Only five years older. Adam pushed his legs out and slid his feet further under the seat in front of him.

Caitlin's eyes went over the small crowfeet next to his eyes to the hint of gray next to his temple. He could still hide the grey under his inky tousled hair, unlike Caitlin, who'd been dyeing her hair since she'd turned eighteen. His longer hair on top looked like he'd skipped a haircut appointment and just rolled out of bed.

"You might be forty, but you're still a little boy." She waited for his wince, but it never came. Instead, he leaned in over the armrest that divided their seats. He may act like a boy, but he smelled like a man. Woodsy.

His hot breath caressed her ear when he whispered, "Why call me little, when there's absolutely nothing little about me?"

## 2 ADAM

Adam Mills knew he pushed his luck, but he had too much fun messing with her. A cute blush crept over the soft contour of her cheek when he'd whispered in her ear. Sitting so close to her, he now had a magnificent view down her shirt.

Damn.

He'd checked out her firm ass when she scooted over to the window seat: a tight apple butt. Ready for a good smack. Just how he liked it.

But her round tits? Double damn.

He shot a last glance at her heaving chest under her tight, white T-shirt and backed away. Adam stared at the bald head leaning against the headrest in front of him and felt her eyes on him.

'Flirting his life away', his mother had said last month, during his birthday dinner.

True. All true.

"Your comment about your dick size only proves my point," the woman next to him said. He busted out laughing and didn't care that the older couple five rows in front of them turned their scowling heads at him.

She got his number and wasn't afraid to set him straight. He liked that. And from what he could see so far... he liked

her.

She had a fire he admired. A fire he wanted to play with. *Play with fire and you'll get burned.* Another word of the wise Lauren Mills a. k. a. his mother.

Adam hadn't lied. He didn't catch her name. Although in his head he'd called her gorgeous, instead of Panic Girl. Her fiery mouth and somewhat unladylike 'taking-no-shit-from-anybody' attitude surprised him. In a good way.

He chuckled. "Yeah. Just messin' with you. Okay, let's start over."

He extended his hand to her. He wasn't entirely sure she would shake his hand this time now that he'd acted like a sixteen-year-old.

"I'm Caitlin."

She slipped her hand in his and squeezed.

*Caitlin.*

The name suited her. She had a firm hold of his hand and it made Adam think back to her words, 'I'm trained to knock you on your ass'. He wondered what that was all about.

Caitlin had smiled when he'd made a fool out of himself. But he sensed that if he would make a serious play for her, she would shoot him down. Immediately.

This woman came with a lot of baggage. And not only the dented gray suitcase he saw her towing behind her earlier while she held a heated conversation on the phone.

That fire in her bright blue eyes had been what caught his eye. Weird. Normally he wouldn't even notice those little things.

It may have been the reason he'd picked a seat next to her. He could have taken several open seats at the front. But he wanted her to scoot over for him.

"Hi, Caitlin. I'm Adam and also on my way to Winter Peaks."

“Oh, so now the introductions are over with, you feel comfortable sharing your destination?” Caitlin winked, and he laughed again.

Who would have thought this stupid bus trip he’d taken over hundreds of times in his life, would turn out so interesting? Normally, he’d try to get some shuteye during the two-hour drive.

“Yeah, you got something about you. You know? Like if there were a madman rigging this bus like in the movie *Speed*, you’d go all-Sandra-Bullock on his ass.” Adam shot her a wink but squished his brows together when Caitlin flinched and gripped the armrest.

“Something I said?” Adam frowned and waited for the color to return on Caitlin’s cheeks. She shook her head, not saying a word.

“Oh, my God!” he said in a loud voice, and Caitlin shifted upright in her seat. He leaned in and stage whispered, “Is this bus gonna blow if we don’t go over fifty miles per hour?”

Caitlin looked over his shoulder and back at him again. She narrowed her eyes and said, “Don’t you know it’s not smart to say this stuff? What if someone overhears you and panics? It’s not funny... Adam.”

He liked his name rolling off her tongue.

Adam nudged her with his elbow and jutted his chin at her, “I know where the bomb’s hidden.”

“Give it a rest. I’m not listening.” She turned her head and made a show out of picking up her ear buds from her lap.

“It has to be that ugly suitcase I saw in the luggage hold. You know, that gray one with all the dents.”

“Stop fucking with me,” Caitlin said while struggling to keep a straight face. She bit her bottom lip and averted her eyes from his. He wanted to say something so bad about fucking with her. But thought better of it.

She turned her head and gazed out of the window. He glanced at his phone.

Already half an hour on the road and the trip still didn't bore him. He leaned forward and let his eyes also wander over the streets of Denver. They were almost out of the city.

"Is it your first time out here?"

He wondered why he'd asked. She'd dismissed him by shifting in her seat and keeping her eyes trained on whatever they passed by in that moment. Adam cleared his throat. Maybe it was for the best. He could catch up on some sleep.

The past week in Denver had been tiring. He would never admit it to anyone, but being forty took its toll on his partying ways. Adam leaned his head back against the headrest. He closed his eyes but already knew he wouldn't sleep.

Adam felt Caitlin's gaze on him. She made him blush, while he didn't want to move a muscle and give away he was on to her; it felt good to have her undivided attention. With his eyes closed, she might figure him oblivious.

How could he feel such a strong connection with her? He knew her first name, her mouthy attitude, and that she's stunning. That's it.

He opened one eye, and Caitlin almost bumped her head against the headrest in front of her.

"You scared the shit out of me!" Caitlin said with a hand against her chest.

"Serves you right, you creep," he winked and enjoyed the way she pursed her lips.

"You started it. Don't for a second think I didn't know what you were looking at when you whispered sweet nothings in my ear," Caitlin said.

A snort on the other side of the aisle made Adam look over his shoulder. Oh well, that's just great. Why didn't he see her sitting two rows behind them before?

"Hi, Mrs. Potman," he said. He tried a friendly wave but let his hand fall down on his lap when Mrs. Potman narrowed her eyes and waved a finger at him.

“Stop harassing that sweet girl, Adam. I’ll tell Lauren all about this when we get home.”

“Lauren? Is that your girlfriend? Why am I not surprised?” Caitlin said before she leaned back in her seat with her arms crossed.

Adam rubbed the back of his neck and cleared his throat. “No. That’s my mom.”

The bald guy in front of Adam snorted while turning the page of his newspaper.

“Mrs. Potman, you’re messin’ up my street cred,” he said, half-joking.

Caitlin’s upper lip pulled.

“So I’m right. You *are* a boy... a momma’s boy, that is.” Caitlin grinned a mile wide while Mrs. Potman cackled at his expense.

“Yes, dear. He sure is. Still living with his mother. At forty...” Mrs. Potman is on a roll now.

Adam turned in his seat and said to Mrs. Potman, “I have my own apartment behind the big house. As do hundreds of people in Winter Peaks. It’s not like I can walk up the mountain and build a house wherever I want.”

“It’s also not like you ever tried to grow up and start a family. You know you’re not getting any younger, Adam.”

He let go of any intention to win this argument with his mom’s bingo friend. Mrs. Potman always had to be right.

He leaned in to Caitlin and said under his breath, “Is this what you’d meant by ‘sitting next to someone who talks non-stop about stuff you don’t give a rats’ ass about?’”

A girly giggle escaped her lips, and Caitlin seemed taken aback by the sound as she traced her lips with her fingers. She grinned and slapped his arm on top of the armrest.

“Oh, but this is priceless. This is highly entertaining,” Caitlin said.

He beamed and observed the spark in her eye. She had those eyes that almost seemed brown with her long strands of brown hair next to them. But no, on closer inspection they were still blue.

“What are you doing?” She became wary and eyed him like she could strike at any second.

He remembered being a complete stranger to her. One that took almost a full minute to stare into her eyes. Now, who was being the creepy one?

He chuckled and said, “Sorry, got lost in your eyes for a moment.”

“Geez, as a forty-year-old player, you really need to step up your game, Adam.”

He wiggled his eyebrows. “Don’t worry, I will. Since you’ll be staying in the same town as me.”

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Anna loves to write heartfelt and steamy romance series. She falls in love with her characters as they go through their ups and downs. Anna often laughs out loud behind her laptop as she writes the banter between siblings. Sometimes, she cries as a result from the real talk that comes with family. There's no hiding from a nosy Pops ;-). Her books are for mature readers only because of their steamy content.

Anna Castor lives in a small town near Amsterdam, The Netherlands, with her husband and their three young daughters. When she's not writing and has some time left between bringing her kids to school and picking them up from play dates or volleyball practice, she's glued to her e-reader.

Anna is a former wedding photographer turned author. While photographing weddings, Anna loved being a part of the couple's special day to tell their (love) story through her pictures. Each wedding had a different story to tell: the histories of the bride and groom, their family dynamics, their challenges in life, and of course, how they met and fell in love.

And now Anna takes her readers through the troubles and hardships her characters may come across on their journey to a happily ever after.

Anna loves to hear from her readers <3. Follow her online to get updates on new releases, ARC opportunities, freebies and more!

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