



THE  
VOICES  
ARE  
*back*



GATOR BAIT MC

USA TODAY & WALL STREET JOURNAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
**LANI LYNN VALE**

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**Aodhan & Morrigan**

**The Voices are Back**

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To the people that deserve a second chance, but didn't get it.

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## **Other titles by Lani Lynn Vale**

### **The Freebirds**

Boomtown

Highway Don't Care

Another One Bites the Dust

Last Day of My Life

Texas Tornado

I Don't Dance

### **The Heroes of The Dixie Wardens MC**

Lights To My Siren

Halligan To My Axe

Kevlar To My Vest

Keys To My Cuffs

Life To My Flight

Charge To My Line

Counter To My Intelligence

Right To My Wrong

### **Code 11- KPD SWAT**

Center Mass

Double Tap

Bang Switch

Execution Style

Charlie Foxtrot

Kill Shot

Coup De Grace

### **The Uncertain Saints**

Whiskey Neat



Jack & Coke

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Dirty Mother

Rusty Nail

**The Kilgore Fire Series**

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Flash Point

Oxygen Deprived

Controlled Burn

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**I Like Big Dragons Series**

I Like Big Dragons and I Cannot Lie

Dragons Need Love, Too

Oh, My Dragon

**The Dixie Warden Rejects**

Beard Mode

Fear the Beard

Son of a Beard

I'm Only Here for the Beard

The Beard Made Me Do It

Beard Up

For the Love of Beard

Law & Beard

**There's No Crying in Baseball**

Pitch Please

Quit Your Pitchin'

Listen, Pitch

### **The Hail Raisers**

Hail No

Go to Hail

Burn in Hail

What the Hail

The Hail You Say

Hail Mary

### **The Simple Man Series**

Kinda Don't Care

Maybe Don't Wanna

Get You Some

Ain't Doin' It

Too Bad So Sad

### **Bear Bottom Guardians MC**

Mess Me Up

Talkin' Trash

How About No

My Bad

One Chance, Fancy

It Happens

Keep It Classy

Snitches Get Stitches

F-Bomb

### **The Southern Gentleman Series**

Hissy Fit

Lord Have Mercy

### **KPD Motorcycle Patrol**

Hide Your Crazy

It Wasn't Me  
I'd Rather Not  
Make Me  
Sinners are Winners  
If You Say So  
**SWAT 2.0**  
Just Kidding  
Fries Before Guys  
Maybe Swearing Will Help  
Ask Me If I Care  
May Contain Wine  
Joke's on You  
Join the Club  
Any Day Now  
Say it Ain't So  
Officially Over It  
Nobody Knows  
Depends Who's Asking  
**Valentine Boys**  
Herd That  
Crazy Heifer  
Chute Yeah  
Get Bucked  
**Souls Chapel Revenants**  
Repeat Offender  
Conjugal Visits  
Jailbait  
Doin' A Dime

Kitty, Kitty

Gen Pop

Inmate of the Month

**Madd CrossFit Series**

No Rep

Jerk It

Chalk Dirty to Me

**Battle Crows MC**

Always Someone's Monster

Make Me Your Villain

Rattle Some Cages

## **Blurb**

Her: Just a word, yet one person came to mind.

Morrigan St. Pete.

The woman that'd been hounding my every step since the day she was born. From the moment we first comforted each other in the hospital, to the day that I left her to follow her dreams, I knew that she was my one.

Through marriage, divorce, and a prison sentence, I had low expectations when it came to her ever coming around.

But then she showed up out of the blue, and that feeling of suffocation slacked off for the first time since I let her go.

The first time I tried to come back to find Aodhan, I found him married with a kid on the way.

The second time I saw him, he was heading to jail.

The third time I saw him, he was divorced, had a kid, and was again with his ex-wife.

# PROLOGUE

*If you have a beard, and no valentine, remember. You still have  
a beard.*

*-Text from Morrigan to Aodhan*

## AODHAN

The first time I met her, I didn't remember.

My parents remembered, though.

That day, the worst thing that could ever happen happened to two different families. My mom and dad, Stella and Abram, were visiting friends and family the week before my mom was due to give birth. Then, while on the way, a car hit them and she went into labor.

Something happened, and during the birth, my twin brother perished before he'd even taken his first breath.

Fast-forward to me in the NICU. I hadn't calmed down one single second since I was born.

I'd gone from a happy little world with my brother right beside me, to a totally different one with no one at my side. My parents were both in rough shape, banged up from the accident.

Meanwhile, I was all alone with no one close to hold me or comfort me but some overworked nurses.

In the cradle right beside mine, there was another baby that had lost her twin sister that very day. Though her mother hadn't been in an accident like mine. Her mother had tried to kill herself and had only accomplished killing her twin sister.

Two overworked nurses had seen the two babies crying their little hearts out and noticed that no one was able to come and comfort either baby.

So one nurse chose to see if putting them together would calm them both down.

Well, it worked.

And from that moment on, I had a soul connection to a girl that would stay with me for the rest of my life.

Her name was Morrigan St. Pete.

## **PROLOGUE II**

*What doesn't kill you makes you stronger. Except for country girls. They'll definitely kill you.*  
*-Text from Aodhan to Morrigan*



## AODHAN

The first time I met her was in a hospital bed. The second time was eight years later in elementary school.

She'd stolen my lunch box because she thought it was hers, and had eaten half the sandwich before I'd corrected her and taken it back.

She'd shared her actual sandwich with me, since she'd eaten half of mine, and from that moment forward, we were inseparable.

For the next ten years, she was a constant for me.

She was my best friend, confidant, and ultimately the one and only person that I could count on forever.

The only problem was, she had a dream.

One that would lead her out of this small town, and into something big.

So the day we graduated college, we agreed that we would go our separate ways. And, if by the age of thirty, if we were still alone, we would make our way back to each other.

But life was funny. It never, ever worked out like we had planned.

# CHAPTER 1

*Without a beard, he's your boyfriend. With a beard, he's your man.*

*-Text from Morrigan to Folsom*

## MORRIGAN

The first time I tried to come back to find Aodhan, I found him married with a kid on the way.

The second time I saw him, he was heading to jail.

The third time I saw him, he was divorced, had a kid, and was again with his ex-wife.

Though, this time, I wasn't sure if he was with her because he was trying to get back together with her, or because he was just meeting up to talk about their son.

Whatever the reason, they were doing it in my coffee shop, so it was okay that I was spying.

At least, that was what I'd told myself.

At first, I'd tried to sit in my office chair—where I found myself a lot on bad days—and not pay attention to the live feed on the screen of my computer.

A couple of years ago, when I'd moved home and used my inheritance money from my grandmother to open my own business, I'd been told that having cameras was a necessity for business owners.

That person was right, and from that point on, I'd always found myself monitoring the comings and goings of the front room when I had nowhere to go and nothing else to do.

That'd been what I was doing today, when he'd walked in.

He'd never been in my shop before.

In fact, I was fairly sure he didn't even know I was back in town.

Mostly because, whenever I saw him, I went the other way. I did my damndest to keep him in the past, where he belonged.

At least, that was what I told myself.

I watched him walk in, take a look around, then go up to the counter and order his drink.

I knew without being told that the drink he'd ordered was a hot chocolate, because Aodhan McBanks didn't drink caffeine. Aodhan had an irregular heartbeat, and anything that exacerbated that for him wasn't a good thing. Such as coffee.

Then, his ex-wife walked in the door, and she walked straight up to the counter and ordered.

My heart hitched at just how beautiful his ex-wife was. She had the most gorgeous hair, tanned skin, and longest legs a woman could ever have. If you could fit a supermodel into a normal person, that would be Danyetta Westfield McBanks.

Aodhan paid for both, and then they went to sit down at a table that was across the room from my early-morning employee, Theresa.

Theresa wasn't my favorite person in the world, but she did her job, showed up on time, and ultimately didn't complain when I left her to deal with everything on her own. Which I had to do a lot because I was infinitely broken.

But, sensing the episode had passed that had brought me to my chair in the first place, I got up.

After making sure that my body did what it was supposed to do—as in it stayed upright—I tiptoed toward the door that separated my office from the main room. My office door was about ten inches from the table that Aodhan had chosen to sit in.

Subconsciously, I hoped that he'd chosen that particular table because it was closer to me. Logically, though, it was likely because it was far away from where Theresa liked to eavesdrop so she had every bit of juicy gossip that she could.

The other problem was, she looked a lot like me.

I was on the shorter side, had long, curly, auburn hair, and was on the too-curvy side of curvy. Well, minus the boobs. I'd had those hacked off last year to a more manageable handful

rather than a “there’s no way you’re gonna button that shirt” lot.

I had a feeling that was also why Aodhan hadn’t recognized me yet.

I’d gained weight, learned how to wear my hair curly and lost my boobs. Hell, not even my own father had noticed that I’d moved back. Why would I expect Aodhan to notice?

Hell, I’d come three times and stayed the third time. One would think that if I’d meant as much to Aodhan as I’d thought, maybe he would have noticed.

But nope.

He hadn’t.

Aodhan, in all his Irish glory, was the literal best thing that ever happened to me. And the worst.

“Listen, Yeti,” Aodhan’s deep, lush voice said. “If we keep doing this, we’re going to have to tell your brother. Our son. And that’s a whole ’nother can of worms that I don’t want to open.”

“There’s no way that my brother doesn’t already suspect,” Danyetta admitted quietly. “I know that you don’t want to keep this under wraps, but...it’s just for a short amount of time longer. Until...”

“Morrigan,” Theresa called. “You have a call on line one, and it’s not allowing me to transfer it! I’m sorry!”

I inwardly cursed my luck.

And I did have bad luck.

All the time.

I mean, who the hell got diagnosed with not one disease, but two? Who nearly got killed before they were even born? Whose father hated her not because of something she’d done, but something someone else had done? Whose boyfriend broke up with her because he wanted her to become a doctor, only for her to not even make it into the school?

And, when you try to come back to him, to tell him that it won't work out, who finds out that the man that they love, and would always love, married another woman because he got her pregnant?

Me. That would be me.

Morrigan "Bad Luck" St. Pete.

Stiffening my spine and putting on my blinders—I could look past Aodhan. I'd been doing it for months since I'd been back—I headed out of my office as if I hadn't just been spying on the two of them.

Heading directly to the office phone hanging on the wall, I said, "Heya."

I didn't know why I said "heya" when I answered the phone. I'd been doing it since I was a kid. It was a habit I just couldn't break, and never would.

"Heya to you, too," Folsom said. "Are we still on for lunch?"

I looked at my watch, the high-tech one that told me my heart rate at all times, and groaned. "I'm so sorry I'm running late. I was feeling a little off."

I felt bad was literally the story of my life.

"If anyone is going to understand that, it's me," Folsom said. "I'll just keep waiting here until you get here."

"K, love you." I hung up after she said, "I love you, too."

I turned to Theresa and smiled. "I forgot I had lunch."

Theresa nodded. "It's Thursday. You do it every Thursday at one religiously. Don't forget the till to drop off at the bank."

I snapped my fingers, totally forgetting that was another thing I liked to do on Thursday. Only because I knew I wouldn't have time on Friday.

That way, the entire weekend, I wouldn't have a week's worth of cash sitting in my store for someone to rob.

I'd learned that lesson the hard way, too.

The doorbell chimed, signaling the arrival, or exit of a customer.

I tried not to look to confirm, and instead asked Theresa to do something for me.

“Will you do me a solid and go get my keys and bag out of my office?” I asked.

I was a coward.

I didn't want to get any closer to Aodhan than I had to. Because there was no way in hell he didn't know I was there anymore.

“Sure,” she chirped. “As long as you tell me who was at lunch when you get in tomorrow.”

Today we were going to a beach front café that was up the coast a ways. But the food, though all fried and bad for you, was excellent. And, from time to time, a member or two of Gator Bait MC—the same motorcycle club that Aodhan was in—would be there.

Theresa loved going, and seeing, everyone that walked through the door.

I wasn't sure why it was a hot spot for attractive people, but it was.

“Deal,” I said.

I was just pulling the money out of the till, packaging it up in a bank envelope, when I felt it.

The telltale signs of my body shutting down on me.

I had a few seconds at most, then I knew that I'd be passing out cold.

Customers that came here were used to me going out like a light at any given moment.

Sure, I could counteract some of the episodes by sitting down, but there were others, like this one, that I knew I

wouldn't make it.

The lights started to dim, and before I could even drop the money in my hand back into the drawer, I passed out.

Luckily, I was out before I hit the ground, because it was never fun to experience a fall.

I wondered what new and exciting bruise I'd wake up with.

And I did wake up. I always woke up.

The first thing to register was my muscles twitching. At first, a lot of the doctors and EMS workers thought I was having a seizure when I passed out. But, more appropriately, it was my muscles twitching because my brain wasn't giving them the oxygen that they needed.

"I see you're still doing that passing out thing," a dangerously sweet, sexy voice said.

The next thing to register was I wasn't laid out on the floor. At least not completely.

And someone was stroking my hair so reverently, so sweetly, that I felt like crying.

Aodhan.

When we'd parted ways, I'd been just exhibiting symptoms of my POTS.

Now, I was fully into the symptoms, and there wasn't an end in sight.

That's why I'd never gone to medical school. Why I was back in my hometown. Why I was not doing what I wanted to be doing, where I wanted to be doing it.

Because this diagnosis had put a full and complete stop to my every single dream, all in one fell swoop.

But the universe wasn't done laughing at my hopes and dreams.

Not only did I have POTS—Postural Orthostatic Tachycardia Syndrome—I also had neurocardiogenic syncope.



One gave me light-headedness, difficulty thinking and concentrating—also known as brain fog—fatigue, intolerance to exercise, a fuck load of headaches, occasionally blurry vision, and an always there, mild case of nausea.

The other caused me to faint all the damn time because my body overreacted to things. Such as intense emotion—Aodhan being in my coffee shop would definitely be a trigger—the sight of blood, extreme heat, dehydration, or standing for a long period of time.

Separately, they were absolutely horrible. Together, they were a goddamn nightmare.

I couldn't tell you how many times I'd woken up with someone else touching me.

At least, this time, I was being touched by someone that I knew.

Or at least, had known.

Sometimes, the memories of Aodhan would sneak up and suffocate me, like right now.

Just the idea of him so close...it brought tears to my eyes.

And this time, the crying when I woke up wasn't just the stupid shit I had to deal with on a daily basis. I couldn't tell you how many times I'd woken up from passing out, crying my eyes out, because this stupid disease was a freakin' horror show.

But this time, it was because I smelled Aodhan.

The woody, pine-and-cedar scent was enough to make my heart physically ache.

I hadn't smelled him in so long...

"Come on, gorgeous, wake up."

His deep, dark, sensual voice woke up even memories.

*Are you awake, baby?*

How many times had he uttered those words?

When we were younger, I used to sneak into his house, and he used to sneak into mine. One or the other would have to wake up before school the next day and go home, so we weren't caught.

God, those were the days.

"She's okay," I heard Theresa say. "She has a disease and everything. This is totally normal for her. You can go."

Please don't.

But also, please leave so I don't have to make eye contact with you, and make this any harder than it has to be.

A long time ago, I'd found out that my brain came back online faster than the rest of my body did.

So I'd hear the conversations going on around me. Meanwhile, I was useless to do anything about said conversations.

"No way am I leaving her here," I heard Aodhan say.

"I think Theresa can probably handle it," I heard another female say. His ex-wife, maybe. "Are y'all sisters?"

I heard Theresa snort. "No, we're not. Just colleagues."

Theresa wasn't a bad person. Honestly, she was a good, hard worker. She didn't have the best bedside manner, however. Likely, had she been alone and I'd passed out—like many times before that—she'd have probably given me a pillow of some sort after making sure I wasn't bleeding, and leave me to it.

"I'll stay," Aodhan said. "You can head out. You'll be late to pick Bowie up."

Bowie.

His son.

"Shoot, shoot, shoot," Danyetta replied. "Shoot."

I felt my lips twitch despite being unable to move the rest of my body.

“Her heart rate is through the roof,” Aodhan said after a while. “One thirty just lying here.”

“Another one of her deals,” I heard Theresa say. “She has some sort of irregular heart rate or something. There’s a name for it. But it causes her heart to overreact to certain stimuli.”

I opened my eyes, and my breath caught.

Gray eyes filled with so much emotion stared back at me.

Aodhan was an anomaly. He had gray eyes the color of smoke, full, dark lashes, auburn-red hair, and dark-red beard stubble. He was the very definition of “tall, dark and handsome.”

When he was younger, he was breathtaking.

Him in his thirties? My God, he was debilitating.

I blinked at him, trying to get my eyes into focus.

“You’ve changed,” he said softly, running his fingers along my hair by my ear.

I had. A lot.

“She had a breast reduction last year,” Theresa offered up, even though Aodhan hadn’t asked. “She’s much happier now.”

I felt my face flame.

Dammit, Theresa!

It was as if she was trying to embarrass me or something!

“Interesting,” he said. “Can you sit up?”

My face was a mask of flames as I tried to sit up myself. He ignored the “trying to do it myself” part and sat me up, using the side of his solid, muscular chest to help prop me up.

I breathed deep at the change in position, thankful that this particular episode was over. Now if I could only get rid of Aodhan...

“I see you’re still doing that passing out thing,” he said.

I sighed, unable to look him in the eyes.

That was always the painful part.

Looking at him and knowing that we didn't have the same relationship anymore. Knowing that I didn't have him to rely on, or call, in case of emergency.

It was always a kick in the proverbial heart to know I was all alone in this world.

And I certainly wouldn't try to get to know anyone better, knowing that they'd have so much to deal with when it came to me.

"Yeah," I grumbled, looking at my hands. I'd broken a nail on my way down. "I'm doing it a lot. Once every three to four days if I'm lucky. Less if I can catch it before I get started. Keep the stress levels down. Today was a combination of things."

Not that I would be telling him that him being in my coffee shop had been one of the triggers. He didn't need that on his conscience.

"You're passing out that much?" he asked, sounding horrified.

I shrugged. It was just part of my life at this point.

"Yeah," I confirmed, getting my bearings.

Instead of saying anything more about my afflictions, he chose to change the subject to an even more uncomfortable one.

"Your hair is different, too," he said, his fingers going to the soft curls around my ears and smoothing them away from my face once again. "What happened to you?"

What happened to me? I grew up. Got rid of the boobs, and started doing my hair. All of which would be things you knew if you cared to check in on me. Which you didn't.

Not to mention, the one letter I'd written him while he was in prison had come back with a single comment written across the top. 'Don't write me anymore.'

That was it.

And that was the final straw in my “you’re never going to have Aodhan back” cup.

With that horrible reminder running through my brain, I twisted away from his body and slowly stood.

I took stock of all my injuries, and was happy to find that there weren’t any. Other than a bruised hand.

He helped me to my feet, and instead of staying close, like I wanted to, I backed away, putting as much distance between us as I could possibly get.

He didn’t miss the move and didn’t like the distance I’d created between our two bodies.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

I shrugged. “I’ll be fine.”

My head hurt like a bitch, and I didn’t know if it was because I’d hit it on the way down, or because I just had a headache like usual.

I’d have to go back and look at the camera feed to make sure that I shouldn’t be giving myself concussion protocols. Those were zero fun, sir.

“When did you move back?” he asked, his eyes taking everything in. “You own this place?”

I smiled weakly and said, “I’ve been here a year and a half now. And yes, I own this place.”

I bought it from an owner that had cancer and was about to pass away at any moment. I guess his diseased soul recognized mine, because he’d welcomed me into his life, taught me the ropes, and had sold it to me for all of seventeen dollars. Seventeen dollars of which had been the only cash to my name at the time.

Being sick cost money, and let’s just say, I never had an overabundance of that.

“Are you a doctor?” he asked, sounding hopeful.

That’s when I laughed. The laugh sounded wrong, even to my own ears.

The frown on Aodhan’s face told me so.

“Morrigan isn’t a doctor. She’s a college dropout, right?” Theresa added oh so helpfully.

The shit.

I had no doubt she knew exactly what she was saying and making me appear unflattering was her intention.

Though, I sensed that was more because she could tell I was uncomfortable, and not because she was a complete bitch.

Theresa showed her love in weird ways. That’s why we worked so well.

“And the bank closes in like, ten minutes. You might want to go and get that done before they do.” Theresa handed me my bank zipper pouch stuffed with money.

I took it, nodded at her in thanks, and then said, “Thank you.”

With a small smile toward Aodhan, I headed out, and hoped that Folsom was still waiting on me, and the bank wouldn’t close early like they were known to do.

I was super-duper proud of myself, too. I didn’t once look back. Not even when my soul screamed at me to.

## CHAPTER 2

*Stay in drugs, eat your school, and don't do vegetables. Or  
however that saying goes.*

*-Text from Aodhan to Bowie*

## AODHAN

I rubbed my chest where the ache for Morrigan St. Pete always resided. Sometimes it was more evident than others, but at that moment in time? It was there, and it was fierce, and it was likely going to stay that way for a while, based solely on the way she'd left without a backward glance in my direction.

Ever since the moment that we'd broken up, I'd wanted to take the moral high ground I'd been able to scrounge up back.

I wanted to pull her into my arms and hold on tight, never letting her go.

Yet, I'd persevered.

And after all this time, she'd dropped out of college? Where had she been? Why hadn't she come back sooner?

"What the hell just happened?" I asked more to myself than the woman that was still serving customers, customers who were acting exactly the same, as if the owner of this establishment hadn't just passed the fuck out in front of them.

If I hadn't been following her, unable to help myself at the sight of her, she would've hit the floor so hard that her body could've broken.

Yet, I'd been there. I'd caught her. I'd missed the holy hell out of her.

Having her in my arms, even passed out, had been like a dream come true.

My phone beeped, signaling it was time for me to leave.

Today was my day to take Bowie to practice, and to get him there on time, that meant that I would have to grab my dinner now, or I'd be late.

But my heart was still physically aching, and I couldn't make myself leave.

"She does this all the time," the woman, Theresa, as Morr had called her, said. "And to be completely honest, I could tell



she was severely uncomfortable being in your arms. She doesn't like it when strangers touch her when she can't do anything to stop them."

That was a fuckin' kick to the gut.

"I'm not a stranger," I said.

She looked at me with raised eyebrows as she said, "Aren't you?"

I opened my mouth to deny it, but quickly closed it. Because she was right. Morr was a stranger to me now. We didn't know each other anymore like we used to. Had we, I would've known that her hair was changed, and that she couldn't function like a normal adult because she had diseases.

Hell, when she first started showing signs and symptoms of the diseases when she was younger, her dad hadn't cared. Her mother, who had been fresh out of prison for trying to kill herself, and accomplishing killing one of her unborn children in the process, hadn't cared either.

The only person to worry about her had been me.

But she'd said that they'd gotten better.

She'd said that she...

I trailed off as I realized she'd given me what she thought I needed to hear. Because I'd been letting her go, and she knew I'd be guilted into keeping her if she informed me she wasn't okay.

I would've never left her side.

But what she didn't realize was, I hadn't wanted to let her go. All I'd needed was that little kick to allow me to keep her. To let me know that I wasn't going to ruin her dreams by keeping her.

Had I had that...

Well, then I wouldn't have my son.

And what did that make me when I wasn't sure what the tradeoff would be? Where I couldn't say that I would've chosen my kid all day long and twice on Sunday over Morrigan?

Fuck, I was a piece of shit.

It wasn't like I could fix it, either.

Hell, I was the undesirable one now.

I was the one that had gone to prison. I was the one that didn't have a steady job. I was the one that my son didn't really like hanging out with.

And definitely not for lack of trying on my part. I did everything I could to relate to the kid, but it was as if he just couldn't wrap his head around who I was to him.

Which fuckin' sucked, because he was the reason I'd gone to prison. Why I hadn't been around.

Not that he knew that.

He was a boy. He saw me leaving as a betrayal.

I'd never been a part of his life, even if, at the time, my doing what I did had been because of him.

How, you say, was it because of him? How could I blame my kid for what had happened?

The truthful answer was, I couldn't.

I'd done something stupid. I'd allowed my temper to get the best of me.

I should've handled the entire thing a hell of a lot differently, and I hadn't.

When Bowie was still a newborn in the hospital, a male nurse had tried to switch him with another newborn. Danyetta, at the time, had been dead to the world after a traumatic birth. I'd walked in with food in my hand for the two of us after a long as fuck day, expecting to find my newborn.

Yet, he hadn't been there.

When I'd woken up Danyetta to ask, she'd said that the nurse had taken him for testing.

That'd been my first real clue that something was wrong. Before I'd left, I'd specifically asked if there would be any more testing done, and the nurses had assured me that he was done, and wouldn't need anything additional done to him until he was at the pediatrician's office.

After that, I'd left thinking Danyetta could hold down the fort while I grabbed food. So when I got back and he was gone, my radar had been pinging.

I'd gone looking for him and the nurse, only to find a different person's kid in my kid's rolling bassinet.

When I'd confronted the male nurse about it, he'd assured me that it was my child.

But he couldn't have been more wrong, and just remembering it made me slip back into that fog-induced rage.

•••

"That's not my kid," I said stiffly, looking at the baby. "It's a baby, sure. But that one is definitely not mine."

The nurses in the station all exchanged a look.

One of which I could tell was a "he's paranoid, what the fuck?" look.

I wasn't paranoid.

In fact, I was so dead sure that I pulled out my phone, pulled up the last photo I'd taken of my son, and showed it to the closest nurse.

"That's my son," I said. "He has a birthmark on his neck. And, correct me if I'm wrong, but that kid doesn't."

The nurse's eyes widened as she looked at the photo, then at the kid in the bassinet, then back at me.

She got me.

“What did you do?” I snarled. “Where’s my son?”

Some parent heard the commotion and came out into the hallway.

“Sir, I’m going to have to ask you to leave, or I’ll call security.” The male nurse looked nervous.

I crossed my arms, letting him know without words that I wouldn’t be going anywhere.

“Call them,” I suggested. “And while you’re at it, call every single supervisor above you, and them, until we get to the head of the hospital. Because I’m not leaving until you’re fired, and we find out how many other babies you’ve switched at birth.”

“What?” I heard the parent behind me say. “You think he switched a baby?”

“I do,” I said. “Because I walked up to find a baby in the bassinet of my son, that’s most definitely not my son. My son has a birthmark on his neck. And this one, though similar to my own, is definitely not my son. And doesn’t have that birthmark. Correct me if I’m wrong, but those don’t just disappear out of the blue in an hour.”

The nurse’s expression, the female one at least, had a look of absolute horror on her face, as if shit was dawning on her that definitely shouldn’t be.

“Oh, shit,” I heard another parent say. “Oh, fuck.”

“This baby I’m holding right now has a birthmark on his neck,” I heard another say. “Oh, God. How did I not know?”

I whipped around, not expecting to find a parent there holding a child that was mine.

I knew that baby was mine based solely on the fact that I could see the birthmark from here.

“He’s mine,” I said.

He walked over to me and placed the baby in my arms.

That’s about the time the male nurse chose to take off.

“Oh, fuckin’ no you aren’t.” I heard an outraged woman’s voice.

I turned just in time to see a woman wearing a hospital gown heading down the hall as fast as her nonslip socks could take her.

She was on the man in about half a second flat, and before the male nurse could brace or prepare for impact, the mom was tackling him as if he was a running back going for the winning touchdown.

“My wife is an Olympic sprinter,” the man who’d just given me my baby said. “I thought he looked a little too white, too. But I wasn’t here for the birth. I was in Columbia for a photo shoot.”

I looked down at my son, then looked toward the one that they’d tried to pass off as my son.

The one in the bassinet definitely had more of an olive-toned complexion, denoting him of mixed race.

“He’s cute,” I said, “but yeah, definitely looks more yours than mine.”

Seeing as both Danyetta and I were both pale in complexion, with barely any melanin in our skin whatsoever.

That’s when Danyetta walked into the hallway, looking around warily.

She saw the male nurse on the floor that’d been tackled, then saw the woman sitting on him.

Danyetta’s eyes met mine, and she raised her brows as if I had the answers.

I did, and that felt good that she believed in me.

She walked over with a frown and said, “What the heck happened?”

That’s when I saw her lose control.

•••

The only problem was, there was no way to tell which kids he'd switched.

I mean, obviously, we'd been able to figure out the two that'd been switched in that moment in time.

However, he'd been working at that place for years, and the only way was for DNA tests to be taken of every single baby that'd been through the doors when he'd been at work.

It'd taken them eighteen long months to figure out that not only had he switched my son with another lady's on the unit, but he'd also switched thirty-two other children. Thirty. Two.

And his reasoning for doing it when he had his day in court? He'd thought it would be funny.

Funny.

He'd thought it would be fucking funny.

Those words, coming out of his mouth, had been the last thing I could take.

Without thought, I'd hopped over that fuckin' excuse of a divider between him and me, and I'd taken him down to the floor. Funny enough, it'd been one of the other parents that had their children switched—something in which they'd found out two years after the deed—that had blocked everyone from reaching me and stopping me from beating the absolute shit out of the ex-nurse.

When I was finally pulled off, he'd been beaten within an inch of his life.

He would've been completely dead had I had thirty more seconds.

In that time, though, another nurse that I hadn't realized had been involved in the "switching" as we liked to call it, had tried to sneak out of the fray and disappear, only to be knocked down in the scuffle. In that fall, she'd hit her head on the way down.

In a freak accident that would be harder than fuck to ever re-create, she'd fallen just perfectly and broken her neck. Killing her instantly.

The sad fact after that was, while I'd gotten eight to ten years for my assault and one count of murder for the stupid piece of shit, the still-living nurse had gotten six.

In total, he'd changed the life of thirty-two children and their families. Meanwhile, I'd done the whole damn world a favor by beating the hell out of him. And we'd both practically gotten the same sentence, since I'd been released six years early.

Sadly, since the appeal process had taken so long to process, I'd gotten Bowie for way too short a time period before I'd had to start serving my time in prison.

Even getting out early hadn't saved our relationship.

It'd also given Danyetta and I the push to realize that we just weren't meant for each other.

In the years leading up to the day I'd had to go to jail, Danyetta and I had come to be more like roommates than lovers. We'd realized rather quickly that, although we made damn fine children together, we didn't make good spouses. We started spending more time apart.

She wanted everything that I didn't, and in the end, we'd chosen to actually separate, and finally divorce, after I'd spent a year in prison.

When I'd gotten out, I hadn't expected her to launch into her begging me to play her fake boyfriend again. In fact, I'd been adamantly against it, but it'd gotten me some one-on-one time with my son, which I'd pounced on.

However, it became very clear, very soon after we started "fake dating" to make this new guy she wanted jealous, that we couldn't even do that without getting on each other's nerves.

Today, after about four months of fake dating on our part, and months of ‘fighting’—something that she’d asked me to do with her also—it became very apparent that I couldn’t do it anymore.

She’d all but begged me to meet her at Morrigan’s coffee shop—again, a place I hadn’t been to since I’d gotten out of jail—to plead with me to “keep going” because it was “working.”

However...with Morrigan back, though...there would be no more pretending with Danyetta. It wouldn’t work. Not now, and not ever again.

Because Morrigan was life changing.

Morrigan being back was the answer to a prayer I hadn’t realized I’d been praying for.

Morrigan being back was the kick in the ass that I needed.

Morrigan being back was the one and only thing I hadn’t allowed myself to ever think about.

I closed my eyes, and once again, Theresa was there with a snide comment.

“If you’re going to stand there all day, at least do me a favor and refill those cups.”

I did her a favor and refilled the cups.



## CHAPTER 3

*I see your inner snot-nosed child is throwing another whiny little shit fit. I'd be happy to feed her a nice cuppa shut the fuck up.*

*-Morrigan to Aodhan*

## MORRIGAN

I'd had a good day.

In fact, I'd had a great day.

I'd had a good three days, if I was being completely honest.

Why?

Because I hadn't passed out once.

I hadn't even needed to pass out once.

But, as they say, all good things must come to an end.

I'd made a good run.

Now it was time for my life to remind me who was a bitch. Spoiler alert, it was me.

And not in a "she's rude and I hate her" bitch way, but in a "you'll never accomplish living a good life" kind of way.

How was the world going to ensure that I lived a bad life today?

Well, by throwing three people into my day that were sure to send my stress levels through the roof.

One, Aodhan.

Two, my stepmother and my dad.

Aodhan, I knew would never send my stress levels out of whack on purpose. My father and stepmother, though? Yeah, they were more than willing to make my life hell if they felt the need to.

But there was always the option to avoid them if I could... so that was what I was currently trying to do.

I'd seen them the moment that I walked into the grocery store.

Sadly, I really needed the damn milk, or I couldn't run my business. And, since my milk order was running late due to an accident on the interstate, there was no way in hell I could

avoid heading to the one and only store in Accident, Florida without having to drive an hour out of the way.

An hour I didn't have today seeing as I'd waited until the last minute to get out of bed, which had been a mistake.

Now, I was left scrambling for milk, and had no other choice but to go into the store even when I knew two of the four vehicles in the store belonged to people that were known triggers for me.

All I had to do was avoid them, however.

I could do it.

I could walk in the door and go the opposite way of where I heard their voices.

Because I knew they would be talking.

There was no way that Aodhan would be rude enough not to say hi to my father if he saw him, and my father loved Aodhan. Always had.

When Aodhan and I first started dating, my dad was truly surprised that I was "actually able to pull a guy like Aodhan."

I guess maybe I had been surprised, too.

I mean, obviously, Aodhan had been gorgeous. If it hadn't been for the fact that we'd been connected since birth, I'm fairly sure that my dad would've thought I'd paid him to be something to me just to get my father off my back.

See, my father had grand disillusion. He felt that a woman's place was in the kitchen, with babies on her hip and at her feet, with very little life experience and the knowledge that her husband was king.

If I was being completely honest, that was why my mother had tried to kill herself.

My father.

Or, my father's ideals.

I didn't think that my mom had any clue what she was marrying into until she'd been forced to have her fifth child, which turned out to be a set of twins.

Though, my parents were very unlucky when it came to children.

My first brother was stillborn. My second and third died of childhood illnesses because my father refused to allow my mom to take them to the hospital for fevers that could've been handled with antipyretics that he refused to allow them to have. My fourth sister, though she'd made it through the home birth, had Down syndrome. Upon seeing that, my father had decided that she would need to be put up for adoption because no St. Pete could be seen as anything less than perfect.

Then, my mother taking matters into her own hands, had decided that everything needed to end.

Including mine and my sister's lives.

Only, she hadn't succeeded. My mother and I had survived her suicide attempt.

And I'd had to live with my father for the rest of my informative years.

Luckily, early on, I'd learned that I needed to take care of myself because my father wouldn't.

He saw anything modern medicine as the devil, and even went as far as to shun teeth cleanings.

At the age of nine, I'd had to make my own dentist appointments, doctor appointments, and go to them without my father's help.

The one saving grace was my grandmother.

My mom's mom was the best person in the world, and it'd ruined my life when she'd died.

Luckily, that was at the age of sixteen when I could make my own life choices.

Unluckily, that'd been when my issues stemming from my diseases started popping up.

I'd hidden them the best I could, which had been why Aodhan hadn't realized they'd gotten as bad as they had when he'd broken it off with me.

My father refused to admit that anything was wrong with me, and even went as far as to say that I faked it.

I didn't fake it.

Not even close.

Who the hell would wish to be vulnerable in her lowest of lows in the world that we were now living in? Certainly not me.

I entered the doors and intended to make a wide turn to the right, but came to a stuttering halt when right inside the front door stood Aodhan, my dad, and my stepmother, Lizzie.

I knew without my eyes even adjusting to the darkened room that they'd marked me even before I'd made it inside.

However, I decided to play dumb and continue straight ahead, my goal to get past the checkout lanes and head into the cold section for my milk.

But my stepmother, who I decided was absolutely clueless when she wanted to be, called my name. Loudly.

“Morrigan!”

And I had no choice but to stop and turn.

“Come here!” she called, acting all friendly.

I was convinced that it was because we were in public that she was being so welcoming—she was rarely ever welcoming, because she fed off my father's vibes—otherwise she would've ignored me just like I'd ignored her.

Or tried to, anyway.

I waved, trying to get out of getting closer to her, and said, “I'm sorry, but I'm very late this morning. I need milk, and I

need to get back.”

I needed a cart, which they were standing next to, but I’d rather break all of my fingers and arms, completely dislocating my shoulders, and wonder if I was going to make it to the checkout, than walk next to them to get a buggy.

I was able to grab three milks per hand—I needed eight really, but I could send Theresa out after I was opened—and walk back toward the front.

The first sign that something wasn’t going to end well for me was the little niggle that signaled an impending episode.

My heart started to race, my watch alerting me that it was damn close to red-line territory.

Then the sweat started to pop out over my brow.

If I could just check out and get to my car, get seated, I would be okay.

I’d done it plenty of times before.

I just needed to sit. Once I could sit, things would regulate.

But my life never went the way that I wanted it to.

Aodhan and my dad were crowding the checkout line—with absolutely no items to be seen in either one of their hands—and my stepmother was standing near the door, her eyes taking me in as I walked toward them.

I could feel my anxiety ratchet up ten degrees just looking at them.

I dropped my head and powered through the rest of the fifty-foot walk toward the checkout line, then cleared my throat at Aodhan when he didn’t move for me to place my items on the belt.

“Scuse me,” I said quietly.

Aodhan jerked, moved toward the side, then cursed when he saw everything in my hands.

I shook my head and said, “Don’t worry about it. I got it. Just move. You take one and they’re all going to drop.”

Aodhan dropped his hands that were already reaching out to help, and I heaved my left arm up just to miss the checkout belt completely.

“Maybe if you worked out more, you could make it up onto the belt,” my father said.

I knew that to others, it would likely sound teasing.

But to me, I knew the real reason he said it.

He wanted me to work out. He wanted me to be involved in a gym, and be a normal human being.

The only problem was, I couldn’t.

I physically couldn’t go to the gym. Going to the gym caused me to throw my heart rate out of whack, and I couldn’t fucking do that and not pay the consequences.

Meaning, no gym. No running. No physical activity of any kind whatsoever, unless I wanted to pass out afterward.

Though, my father didn’t understand that.

He thought I was just a little bitch about the gym.

I wasn’t.

But with his inability to trust modern medicine, and his lack of trust in me, well, I was doomed to fail in his eyes.

I set my left-handed milks on the ground, ignored his rude words, and then used my free hand to help lift my right hand up. Once I had those on the belt, I bent over just in time to see Aodhan lifting the two milk jugs up with two fingers.

The show-off.

“Have you lost weight?” Lizzie asked.

I nearly glared at her.

She damn well knew I hadn’t lost weight.

“Thank you,” I said stiffly, feeling my face heat.

Oh, shit.

“No problem,” Aodhan smiled. “Your dad and I were just catching up.”

I shrugged and smiled at the lady behind the checkout. She was checking Aodhan out.

I cleared my throat and said, “I’m so sorry, but I’m in a bit of a bind. I’ll have a full-on riot at the coffee shop if I don’t hurry.”

She jumped, then smiled at me apologetically as she rang me up.

The total came up to twice what I would’ve paid with my supplier, but I ignored that and held my watch up to the panel, paying wirelessly.

“What have I told you about using that method of payment?” my dad growled.

I ignored him, smiled, then reached for my milks.

“Thank you,” I said as I did.

Only, when I went to reach for my milks, the only ones that weren’t in Aodhan’s clutches were two.

“Uhh,” I said, feeling the sweat break out even more.

“You look a little flushed, dear,” Lizzie said as I got close to her.

I knew I did.

Actually, my heart was racing, my head was pounding, and I knew I had a very limited time to sit down.

In fact, I had about two minutes to calm myself down, or I’d be out on the parking lot asphalt.

I hurried to my car, feeling the knowledge start to creep into my veins.

My vision started to go black when I got the trunk open.



I swallowed hard past the bile, dropped the two milks unceremoniously into the back of my car, and then promptly passed out.

Dammit. Wrong again.

“We’ve got to stop meeting like this.”

That deep, rumbly voice was like music to my soul.

I opened my eyes to find Aodhan staring at me with concern in his smoky-gray eyes.

I blinked at him, feeling my muscles twitch underneath me.

“She’s faking,” I heard my father say.

“All due respect, sir,” Aodhan said stiffly, “she’s not.”

I wasn’t.

I never was.

But my father didn’t like to admit that he’d created an imperfect child.

“She is,” my dad argued.

“She’s not,” Aodhan replied back. “How about you go? Give us some space.”

God, I hoped that we weren’t on the ground.

I was wearing white pants.

I blinked, trying to get a gauge on my surroundings.

“We’re on the bench outside the superstore,” he informed me, guessing as to what I was thinking.

Since my brain wasn’t all the way online yet, I didn’t nod or reply, but he understood my reaction anyway.

“The only people to see you pass out were me and your parents,” he explained.

I felt an irrational surge of anger at the thought of my so-called “parents.”

“Still not getting along with them, I see,” he drawled.

Biggest understatement of the year.

He twirled his fingers around a long lock of hair, wrapping it around his finger like he used to do.

A memory assaulted me out of nowhere.

•••

*“I just want to touch your hair,” Aodhan whispered.*

*I felt the butterflies once again take flight in my belly.*

*Aodhan and I were new.*

*As in, a few days new.*

*He’d asked me to be his girlfriend just two days ago, and I’d immediately doubted his sincerity.*

*At first, I’d thought he was playing a joke on me.*

*I mean, why would Aodhan want to date me? I was nothing special.*

*But he was persistent, and it’d taken him a week to finally get me to say yes.*

*Now, we were official, and I guess if he wanted to touch my hair, he could.*

*I leaned my head slightly to the left, allowing my long, silken locks to trail over his fingers, and he wasted no time burying said fingers into my hair.*

*At first, all he did was run his fingers through it.*

*But then, he started to wind a perfect curl around his finger, twirling and twirling and twirling.*

*He played with my hair for the entire movie, and the longer the movie went on, the more he’d wind his finger, reeling me in closer and closer until eventually I was pressed fully against his side.*

*It was the best day of my life.*

•••

“Let go of my hair,” I rasped.

His eyes looked stricken after I asked, and I closed them as I tried to struggle to sit up.

He helped me, once again using his big body to help prop me up.

But this time, I struggled straight to my feet, feeling my limbs come back online one by one.

“Whoa,” he said as he stood with me. “You shouldn’t be moving so fast just yet.”

I avoided his fingers and his attempt to get me to stay, and said, “I really have to go.”

I looked at my watch and groaned.

I had five minutes to get to the shop before the morning rush started.

“Are you sure you should be leaving?” Aodhan asked, sounding off.

I took a few tester steps, knowing that if I stayed, things would get bad again.

That was just the way it was with me. There was no limit to how many episodes I could have.

But if I could get to my shop, deliver the milk, and get a seat...well then I might be able to make it through the rest of the day.

I smiled at him sadly as I said, “Thank you again, Aodhan.”

With that, I pulled my keys out of my pocket, got into my car that was only a few steps away, and prayed that I was recovered enough to drive.

How does one like me drive, you ask?

Because when I’m sitting down, I don’t pass out.

Ever.

Which is really freakin’ weird, but it is what it is.

That's how I warranted getting a driver's license and staying on the road.

I could also read that question on Aodhan's face, as if he wasn't quite sure he should let me go.

Well, before he could answer that question rolling around in his brain, I started my car and backed out of my spot.

I didn't look back.

There was no point.

My past was my past, and it needed to stay there for my sanity.

# CHAPTER 4

*We go together like fuck and you.  
-Aodhan to Morrigan*

## AODHAN

“What are you doing?”

I looked up to find my son opening the door to his mother’s place with a look of confusion on his face.

There was no excitement to see me.

There was no “hey, Dad!” that ever came out of his lips.

Instead, his intelligent eyes took me in as an intruder on his property.

“I’ve come to speak to your mom,” I said, unsure how to address my own son.

It freakin’ killed that he wouldn’t look at my unexpected arrival at his house as a good thing. Instead, I was met with suspicion and not even a little bit of anger.

Would it kill him to give me a damn hug? Because, just sayin’, I’d kill for one of those right then.

“She’s busy,” Bowie lied.

I crossed my arms over my chest, then stared at my son until he started to squirm.

Eventually, he threw up his hands and stalked back inside, slamming the door closed behind him and locking it for good measure.

The little shit.

I waited for two whole minutes with my bulk leaned up against the header for their porch stairs before I texted her and told her to come outside.

She did within two seconds.

“How long have you been here?” she asked.

“Long enough to wonder what kind of manners you instilled in our son while I’ve been gone,” I grumbled.

She shot me a roll of her eyes.

We both knew that she'd done really well with what she'd been given. With her brother and me both being in prison at the same time, well, you got what you got.

"We need to talk," I said. "And not about my son's lack of manners."

Danyetta smiled.

"It's her, isn't it?" Danyetta asked. "The girl at the coffee shop. She's your one."

Danyetta and I, when we'd first started talking to each other, had talked about our "one that got away."

Danyetta's was a guy she'd graduated high school with that had recently been divorced. A guy that she was trying to get to notice her by using me as her instigator.

Danyetta knew all about Morrigan and my relationship. Why I'd let her go.

"Mom, I'm going to Uncle Wake's house," Bowie said, coming out of the front door with his bike helmet on and his phone in his hand.

A phone that I'd insisted we buy him that he still hadn't thanked me for. If his mother had had it her way, he wouldn't have a phone until well into his teens. But, as the world changed, I knew that not letting him have a phone would be a disservice to him. Especially when his genius-level IQ meant that he could be doing things with it like hacking into the world.

"You're not going to say hi to your dad?" Danyetta asked in confusion.

"I already did," Bowie grumbled.

A purring car pulled into the driveway, and I looked back to see Wake's daughter, Lolo, get out.

She took one look at me and grinned wide.

Lolo was a teenager now, and had changed so much from when I'd been put in prison.

“Uncle Aodhan!” she cried out.

Then I had her sweet self in my arms as she wrapped me up in a hug that I yearned for from my own kid.

“Hey, kiddo,” I said as I hugged her tight. “How are you? How’s Dayd?”

Dayd was her boyfriend, and a thorn in Wake’s side. Dayd was protective of her, and great for Lolo. But in the meantime, he was still a boy that was dating his daughter.

Lolo leaned her head into my shoulder, then turned slightly so she was addressing Danyetta, Bowie and me when she said, “He asked me to prom. I’m going to go. Now I need to tell my dad.”

I chuckled. “Sweetheart, your dad loves you. You telling him you’re going to prom with your boyfriend isn’t going to break him.”

“It will when I tell him that it’s out of state.” She scrunched up her nose. “We decided to do something different as a class this year. We booked a place in Alabama. But, mostly it was because we knew that it would piss off our rival football team, because that’s the date and time that they would usually hold theirs.”

I shook my head, knowing that probably wouldn’t sit well with Wake.

But it was actually somewhat funny.

“You’re gonna get him to say yes regardless,” I murmured, dropping a kiss to the top of her head. “You mind keeping Bowie company for a minute? I need to talk to Danyetta.”

I looked over to see Bowie glaring at my arm around Lolo’s shoulders.

Lolo hugged me tight just as Bowie said, “I’m leaving, remember?”

“You’re not going anywhere with that attitude,” Danyetta snapped. “Head to your room and get it picked up. Then we



can talk about why you're so rude to your father lately."

Bowie grumbled something dark beneath his breath, then stomped his way into the house.

I waited until the door closed behind him and Lolo before saying, "I'm not quite sure what I'm supposed to do with that."

"You don't do anything, because he's being a little shithead," Danyetta grumbled. "Just ride it out. He'll get over it. It's the age."

"It's been a bit since I've been out," I pointed out. "I don't think things are going to get any better anytime soon. Not with the attitude he's been throwing me lately."

Danyetta scrubbed her hands over her face as she sighed. "I think he's confused. He sees us as together, but we're not actually together."

I barely restrained myself from saying, "and whose fault is that?"

I might as well have voiced my words aloud, though, because she sighed. "I'll fix it. I know that it's my fault. Hell, even my brother is thinking we're together."

"Yeah," I said. "But, Yeti, this isn't going to work anymore."

"Because of the woman at the coffee shop?" she asked.

Danyetta always saw way more than she should have.

"Because of her," I confirmed. "I wasn't aware that she was back."

"She's gorgeous," she said. "And she's the one."

"She's the one. I need to talk to Wake."

"I'll talk to him first. Explain," she looked at the window. "And I'll talk to Bowie. I don't know what's going on with him lately, but I'll fix it. I promise."

I hoped she did.

Because it was starting to fuckin' hurt when he went out of his way to ignore me, and refused to see me on my weekends.

Though it fuckin' sucked not having him, it was giving me time to figure out what I wanted to do with my life.

At first, I'd thought about doing quite a few things that I'd done before heading to prison—like being a freight dockworker that unloaded freighters. Or, even buying a pizza joint from Alice, Cassius's girl's dad. But, as I gave it time, and thought about what I wanted to do with the rest of my life, I'd given a lot of thought to what I didn't want to do.

And what I didn't want to do was do something that made me unhappy.

Which was why, for the last four months, I'd been taking people out on guided fishing tours for a buddy. I was piloting his boat as he recovered from open heart surgery where he'd had multiple near-complete blockages.

That was actually where I was headed soon. I'd told him that I would take over for him completely until I could figure out what I really wanted to do with my life.

And that included the overnight fishing trip that would hopefully land the paying customers their dream fish.

“About this weekend,” I said. “I'm going to guess he doesn't want to come?”

Danyetta sighed. “No, he doesn't.”

“Then I'm going to say yes to an overnigher.” I tried to hide the hurt. “That okay?”

She nodded, looking just as forlorn as me. “That's good. I'll tell him if he asks.”

We both knew he wouldn't.

He never did.

“About the woman,” I scratched the back of my neck with my blunt fingernails. “I like her. A lot.”

She nodded.

“Can you start talking to Bowie about us? Make sure he knows that we were never a thing after we divorced? I think that might help him when he notices that I’m dating her,” I murmured.

Danyetta grinned. “Quite confident that she’ll agree to have you?”

“Very,” I said. “We had an understanding.”

“What kind of understanding?” she smiled.

“The kind that said, if we both turned thirty and were alone, we would agree to start dating again.”

And I was gonna damn well hold her to it.

## CHAPTER 5

*How many animals can you fit into a pair of pantyhose? Two calves, an ass, a beaver, a shitload of hares, one camel toe, and a fish nobody can find.*

*-Text from Folsom to Morrigan*

## MORRIGAN

It'd been a good two days again.

In fact, it'd been so good with my health that I got cocky, and decided to give a walk a try.

Well, a walk through the air-conditioned grocery store, but still a walk.

Normally, I saved myself the time and the hassle by ordering my groceries for pickup, but today, I wanted to get out. Experience life. And not stare at my four bare walls on a Saturday morning.

It was early. Way earlier than I would've liked to be up on a Saturday, but with my opening the coffee shop so early, it was downright impossible for me to sleep in past six in the morning anymore.

Grabbing my ride-on scooter from the front of the store with its basket, I ignored the ugly looks I got. Everyone saw a young woman with no visible ailments when they saw me on the motorized carts. They automatically assumed that I wasn't going to need the cart.

Well, joke was on them, because I did.

If I did any sort of shopping that was going to keep me on my feet for a long time, I rode in the cart. It was easier that way than to admit at the back of the store that I really did need the cart, and wish I had it.

I was thirty minutes into my shopping trip when I heard his voice.

I paused with my finger poised to press the throttle, and listened to the rough velvet of his voice say, "Where are the black trash bags located?"

I felt a delicious shiver roll down my spine.

Instinctively, I hunched down, bending over the front of the cart and leaning forward to ensure that he didn't see me.

Except, I didn't realize that by leaning forward and bending close, I was practically waving a red damn flag at him to get him to notice me.

But I was.

And he did.

"Hey, Mama," I heard him say.

Hey, Mama.

Every single thing inside of me lit up like the Fourth of July with those words.

I hadn't heard that stupid name in so long.

Hey, Mama.

Hey, Mama.

Jesus. H. Christ.

Years ago, in what I thought was then a deep voice, Aodhan had first called me "mama" and I'd thought it was the best thing ever.

Why did he call me "mama"?

Because he said that I was a mama bear. All growly and protective.

I couldn't even remember what I'd been protecting at the time.

What I did know, was now—with his rumbly, deep voice that was most definitely deep now, but wasn't actually so deep then—I couldn't resist him anymore.

I couldn't actively ignore him without hurting my heart anymore.

"H-hey," I said, still tongue-tied at the way he called me "mama."

His eyes warmed at my attention, and I felt like my world had just imploded.

“Where ya zoomin’ off to?” he asked. “You looked like you were ready to break land speed records.”

I rolled my eyes, unable to stop the smile that was forming on my face.

“I have to use the stupid cart, or I risk having an episode,” I said. “Being in our small town is bad enough, but being here, at this Walmart, where lots and lots of people could potentially have access to me? Yeah, I can’t do that to myself.”

His eyes clouded at the thoughts that started brewing in his brain. The idea of me being vulnerable had never sat well with him. But the idea of me being completely unable to protect myself in any way? Yeah, I could see that thought killed him.

His eyes looked like a thunderstorm.

I kind of liked it.

“That wouldn’t be good,” he admitted. “What are you doing here so early?”

I looked down at my cart filled with two packages of cotton panties, and winced.

His eyes went there, too, and they lost the edginess to them.

All I could see was amusement when he looked back up at me and said, “See you still wear the same kind.”

I burst out laughing.

Once I was sobered again, I said, “I’m not used to being idle on my days off. When I woke up so early, I thought I’d go run a few errands when there were fewer people here to watch me make a spectacle of myself. It’s my first day in forever not having anything to do.”

“Hmm,” he murmured. “Sounds like a pain in the ass.”

It was a pain in the ass.

“What about you?” I asked. “You look like you’re heading somewhere on a mission.”

He actually looked like the typical Floridian guy about to head out for a day on the water.

“About to grab some stuff to make sandwiches for lunch, a bag of Little Debbie powdered donuts, and head out on the boat.” His eyes went electric then. “You want to go with me?”

I opened my mouth to deny him, then closed it.

He already knew I wasn't doing anything.

I'd set my own self up.

And he knew that I loved it.

“There's an air-conditioned room,” Aodhan sang. “If you start to feel bad, we can put you in there. There's a bunk and everything.”

Being out on a boat again with Aodhan, fishing our hearts out, sounded like the best damn day of my life.

I flashed back to our first fishing trip and nearly cried.

•••

*“Come on, it'll be fun,” Aodhan promised. “I swear to you. It'll be so fun.”*

*I'd never fished before.*

*In fact, I'd never even been on a boat before, let alone fished.*

*But the excitement in Aodhan's face when I told him I'd never been fishing, and that he could take me out on his dad's best friend's boat, was one that I could never say no to.*

*“Okay,” I said. “Let's go.”*

*We were out the door within an hour.*

*I was wearing short shorts that showed off a lot of leg, a wide-brimmed hat that tied to the underside of my chin to keep it on, and a bikini top.*



*“We’ll catch some bait fish right here,” he explained as he stopped near a bridge.*

*We were one of twelve other boats catching bait fish.*

*He handed me a fishing pole with a small bait on it and said, “Just throw it out there.”*

*Sure enough, that was all it took.*

*With zero background in fishing, he showed me exactly what to do to “throw it out there.”*

*Once I got the hang—somewhat—of casting the pole, I caught fish after fish after fish.*

*I did that over and over again until Aodhan said, “Okay, that’s enough.”*

*I looked down into the tank holding the fish at the back of the boat, then looked up as Aodhan once again started moving the boat out.*

*Farther and farther we went from shore until there was nothing but a dot on the horizon where land used to be.*

*I sat in a seat facing his back, watching the muscles play in his shoulders behind his faded gray t-shirt. After today, I was going to make it my mission to steal that t-shirt.*

*All too soon, my own private show stopped, and he turned around to stare at me.*

*I looked at him with raised brows as I said, “Yes?”*

*“Ready to fish for the big boys?”*

*The only answer I had was “of course.”*

*It was literally the best day of my life.*

*•••*

*“Come on, it’ll be fun,” Aodhan promised. “I’ll take care of you.”*

This was Aodhan. With those pleading eyes, and that pouty bottom lip rolled over, how could I ever say no?

I couldn't.

There was no way I could ever say no to Aodhan, even when he was a full-grown adult male doing the pouting thing.

"All right," I groaned. "How long will you be out?"

"For twelve hours," he answered, his eyes getting excited at the prospect of me going.

Could it be that he'd missed me as much as I'd missed him?

Sure, we may not ever be able to have a relationship again, him dating his wife and all, but we could be friends. I could be platonic friends with Aodhan McBanks, right?

At least, I deluded myself into thinking I could.

"And you're sure that the man coming to fish with you won't mind?" I confirmed.

"Sure, sure," he promised. "He already told me that he may even have to come back into port. He changed from the overnight to the twelve-hour one, but still paid us for the overnight one. I think he's just doing this so he can say he did it while he was here."

That was weird.

"And this guy's not a complete creep?" I asked. "I'm not really dressed for this."

I looked down at my t-shirt, short shorts, and flip-flops.

"I have a hat you can wear, and some sunscreen." He caught my hand in his. "Let's go."

I left my buggy full of nonperishables right there in the middle of the food aisle.

We made it out to the car just as my heart started to race.

"Grab whatever you think you'll need," he said. "I'll bring the bike over here and pick you up."

His bike.

God, I remembered the first time I'd gotten on that bike, too.

•••

*"Come on, nobody will even know it's you," he said, wiggling his eyebrows. "Please?"*

*I was nervous as hell.*

*And I knew that if my dad found out that I'd gotten on the back of a motorcycle, he might very well kill me.*

*But how the hell would I be expected to ever say no to a man like Aodhan?*

*"Okay," I said. "Let's do this."*

*He helped me onto his bike, and though it was stupid as hell, we took off with no helmets, protective gear, or cares.*

*We rode around for hours, wasting gas and enjoying the wind in our hair.*

*I would never be able to look at a motorcycle the same way again.*

•••

"You know," he said, "no one has ever been on the back of my bike besides you."

I blinked, surprised.

Turning to him, I said, "You have a wife!"

"Had, past tense," he shrugged. "She didn't like bikes. And I never really cared enough to get her on the back of it." He winced. "That sounds callous, but the bike was always my escape."

He didn't say that "you were my escape."

I read it loud and clear through his stormy eyes.

“Aodhan...” I started, but he held his hand up and said, “No. Today is about having fun and fishing. Let’s go.”

Aodhan failed to mention that the man going on the boat by himself for a twelve-hour guided fishing tour was a man in a wheelchair. A man that had absolutely no desire to actually fish, or even interact with anyone.

When I got there, I expected it to be all awkward.

But all he really wanted to do was sit there and enjoy the sights, so that was what we left him to do.

I climbed up the tower thing and sat in the seat next to Aodhan, smiling to myself when I watched the familiar movement of his fingers tapping on the wheel.

## CHAPTER 6

*Thank goodness my book arrived. I almost had to start  
cleaning the house.*

*-Text from Aodhan to Morrigan*

## AODHAN

“What are you over there smiling about?” I asked, tapping my fingers against the wheel as I navigated myself out of the inlet.

The inlet was tough. People that weren't used to navigating it every day tended to want a pilot to guide them out. A pilot would board the boat, drive them out into calm waters, then disembark for another boat.

A good friend, Cassius, did that for a living. Funny enough, we'd never run into each other much despite us living in the same area and being in the same waters.

However, the area that I navigated out and the area he navigated out were two different areas, and mine was far less dangerous than his was.

He'd grown up and lived in Blue Ridge, while I'd grown up and lived in Accident, thirty minutes away.

“I'm smiling because you still do that tapping thing.” She pointed to my fingers that were still tapping away at the steering wheel. “I know you'll stop right about...”

I stopped the moment we made it past the point of jagged rocks that jutted out.

“Now.” She smiled, finally finishing her sentence.

I winked at her and started navigating us toward the biggest fishing hole that I had, but would also be within an hour of land in case our guest didn't want to be out here as long as he'd originally said.

The time passed in companionable silence until she blurted, “Where's your first mate?”

My first mate was actually a twenty-five-year-old woman.

“Cassidy is at a doctor's appointment in Sarasota,” I explained. “Her grandfather has cancer, and she takes him to his appointments. Most of the time, it's scheduled on a day that I usually don't work. But there was something that

happened with his medication or something, and they had to go in sooner.”

She bumped me with her shoulder. “A girl as a first mate?”

I grinned. “It’s my boss’s daughter. Otherwise, I hate to say it, she wouldn’t be my first choice.”

She looked at me curiously as she said, “Why’s that? You don’t think she can do as good of a job?”

“I think that she doesn’t really want to do as good of a job,” I corrected. “I think Cassidy has a passion for fishing, but that doesn’t extend to her fueling someone else’s passion for fishing.”

“That’s understandable,” Morrigan nodded as if that made complete sense. “I like to shop, but I certainly don’t want to do it for a living.”

I flashed her a grin, then pulled up my mapping system, because I knew we were getting close.

After finding our spot, I went down to the bottom deck and talked with our guest.

After assuring us that he was just enjoying the views at the front of the boat, and would like to be left alone, I took us to the back and started getting our poles set up.

Surprisingly, Morrigan didn’t forget a single thing, and helped me get set up. Only when everything was ready did I go back and get us back into our spot thanks to the waves pushing us off of it.

When I came back, Morrigan already had her hook baited and the line heading down into the water.

I watched from the doorway, frozen in action, and wondered how I’d let this go.

Danyetta hated fishing. As in, the very last thing she ever wanted to do was get onto a boat and head offshore to fish.

Meanwhile, there Morrigan was, not only agreeing with me, but getting her own pole out into the water before I’d even

had time to set her up.

The sun glinted off her hair, and I cursed before heading back inside the cabin to grab the hat that I'd told her about. The same one that she'd worn all those years ago.

Coming back out, I placed it on her head, and she turned to me with a huge-ass smile on her face.

It was one of those core memories that would become ingrained in my head, and would never be forgotten. The feeling in my chest tightened, and I touched the tip of her nose with my finger before asking, "Let me know if you need a chair, okay?"

She shot me a wink. "I can usually feel it coming on. If I feel it, I'll have a seat right there."

She pointed to the chair that was in the middle of the deck that we used for the big fish.

Grinning, I trusted her to let me know when it got to the point where she needed a break, and went to the other side of the boat just as she shrieked and started reeling in the fish.

I put my pole against the side of the boat, then grabbed the net to get the fish out of the water.

The shiny orange scales of a red snapper made me smile.

"Keeper," I said as I pulled it out of the water, got him off the hook, then dropped him down into the ice.

Before I could get my own bait in the water, she had another one on the line. A kingfish.

Again, before I could cast my own line in the water, her eyes came to me.

That's when I saw her start to blink, her eyes going far away for a few seconds.

She grimaced, then handed the pole to me and said, "I have one coming on."

Before she could say or do anything, she started to sway.



With one arm going out to catch her before she could hit the ground, the other went to the side of the boat, and then to the fishing pole holder.

Once the pole was put in the holder, I twisted, placed her into a chair, then reeled her fish in.

This time, I grinned.

Because she'd caught yet another snapper. This one a white snapper.

Her eyes slowly opened, and she stared into my own, letting me know that she was okay.

"You really have the worst timing," I teased as she started to come to.

She blinked, and a ghost of a smile formed on her lips.

A few years ago when she'd first started exhibiting the signs of POTS, I'd had absolutely no clue about anything related to the disease. But over the last few days, I'd had a lot of time on my hands, and I'd done a hell of a lot of research into how it would affect her.

What I'd found was kind of horrible. Not in a "it's going to kill you" way but in a "this is really going to disrupt your life" kind of way. There was no surprise she hadn't been able to go to medical school. If she couldn't stand up for long periods of time without passing out, there was no way in hell she could make it through the grueling years of medical training, and the long-as-fuck shifts they would have to endure.

Not only couldn't she stand for long periods of time, she couldn't exercise without possibly overheating. She couldn't go anywhere, or do anything, without first planning out what she would and wouldn't do in case she passed out. Not to mention, sometimes passing out just happened with no warning. At times, she couldn't even plan for the inevitable.

"I looked into POTS over the last couple of days," I said conversationally. "I wish you'd have come back to tell me."

She grimaced.

“I tried,” she rasped.

My head tilted. “You tried?”

She nodded, not saying anything, as she slowly started to take more and more of her weight back. “I did.”

“When?” I asked, feeling my heart rate start to skyrocket.

“Right before you...” she grimaced. “Got married. I came.”

My stomach sank.

“I...” I didn’t know what to say.

She lifted her hand and placed it on my chin, her fingers going through my beard for a few seconds before the strength to hold her hand up left her. “Let me watch you fish.”

So that was what I did until she was able to stand more.

I fished.

And didn’t catch a single damn thing.

Every single bite I got was taken by the sharks, and eventually I said, “Let’s move.”

She patted the chair. “I’ll stay right here.”

I didn’t go up to the tower.

I went to the lower area and steered us to another of my favorite spots.

And this time, I caught a fish.

“Pretty,” she said as she saw my catch. “But how do you get that off?”

“That” was a shark, and I grinned.

Then I cut the line. “Like that.”

She giggled, and it was the most beautiful sound I’d ever heard.

I’d forgotten how much that sound had meant to me.

With both of us being quiet as I fished, catching a few keepers, I thought a lot about what I would’ve done had she

shown up before I'd married Danyetta.

I would've still had my baby.

But I don't think I would've gone through with the marriage to her.

I would've realized what a mistake it was, and I wouldn't have allowed myself to stay away from Morrigan any longer.

I would've been happier.

I would've had a completely different life.

I would've never gone to prison, I'd imagine.

"I've been to prison," I said suddenly.

Her eyes dilated as I turned, placed the reel into the holder between her legs, and gestured at her to reel it in.

She leaned over and did as I said, but still said, "I know."

"I'm not a bad person," I promised.

She looked at me, a bead of sweat popping out over her brow. "You think that I'd judge you for what you did?"

I didn't know anything at this point. The woman I thought I knew would've told me that she hadn't gone to school. She would've told me that she was back in town. She would've stopped me before I'd married Danyetta.

Not that I regretted anything about Danyetta, or Bowie. But I loved Morrigan. I'd never stopped loving her.

Loving Morrigan was a way of life for me.

I knew that it made me sort of a bad person, me having married Danyetta when I loved someone else. But Morrigan had been so certain in her path to becoming a doctor. And that path hadn't included me. Maybe it was me punishing her in a way. Maybe it was just me and Danyetta making do the only way we knew how.

I didn't know.

What I did know was that I cared what Morrigan thought of me. And, even though she'd let me marry someone else, that didn't hurt me enough to ever force her to stay away.

"I think that you're entitled to your opinions of me," I hedged.

Morrigan started to reel, her brows pinching in concentration.

She took so long to say anything, I'd thought the subject had been dropped.

But, as she reeled, she finally turned to look at me.

And what I saw there made my stomach ache.

"I didn't want you to be beholden to take care of me," she finally said. "I'm okay being alone. I don't want to have to force anyone to stay when they deserve something way better than what they'd get when it came to me."

I felt my stomach clench. "Wouldn't that have been my choice, though?"

She stopped reeling and the rod damn near bent in half as whatever fish we had on the line sensed freedom.

"Wouldn't it have been my choice on whether we broke up or not in the first place?" she asked. "Shouldn't it have been my choice on whether to go or not?"

I looked away.

But it didn't matter.

All I could see was the anger in her brown eyes.

They'd always been captivating.

Swirling swaths of brown caramel and whiskey, they made my heart physically ache.

"You wouldn't have gone," I finally settled on.

"I wouldn't have," she agreed.

I still remembered that day like it was yesterday. The day that my life changed forever, because I'd made it change.

Our separation had been amicable, but it'd been heartbreaking at the same time.

I'd thought we'd both settled on the choice, but maybe she'd agreed because she knew that I wouldn't take no for an answer...

•••

*"I want you to go to school."*

*She looked at me, her beautiful brown eyes, my brown-eyed girl, with such hope, that it made my heart physically ache.*

*"I want to stay with you," she countered.*

*"No, you don't," I said. "Don't you want to become a doctor? Be able to help all those people that need you? You can't do that here. You won't be who you want to be by staying in Accident. And, baby, it's not forever. If you get to thirty, and you have that doctorate in your hand, and you want to still be with me, I'm here. For you. I'm always here. And I'll be going away to school, too. So I won't be here moping and crying, waiting for you to come back."*

*"I..." she trailed off. "Is that what you want?"*

*I could see the moment she decided to give in. The moment that she knew that I wanted this for her, even if she hadn't wanted it enough for herself.*

*"Do you really want to go to school?" she asked, sounding tired.*

*"I need to find something to do with my life," I said. "I can't just be a deckhand, or a fish cleaner, forever."*

*She looked at her fingernails. She was a nail-biter, I could tell that she wanted to bring that left pointer finger to her mouth and nibble away.*

*God, I loved her. I loved every single thing there was about her.*

*“You promise you’ll be here when I get back? What if I move on?” she challenged.*

*Just the thought of her moving on? God, that felt like an ice pick straight to the heart.*

*“Then, we’ll find our way back to each other if it’s meant to be,” I said.*

*God, it was hard saying those words.*

*But I really needed her to follow her dreams. She wouldn’t do that if she stayed with me.*

*That made me feel like such an ass, watching her deflate at my words. But I’d do just about anything to see her become the one thing that she’d always wanted to be.*

*Just yesterday, I’d watched her speak so animatedly about her hopes and dreams, her wants and desires, that I knew this was the step that I needed to take.*

*That didn’t make that step any easier for me to process, however.*

*It made me feel like utter shit.*

*“You promise?” she said. “You’ll be here?”*

*“If at age thirty, we’re both not married, then we’ll get married. No matter what’s happened since we parted, I’d be proud to call you mine,” I said.*

•••

*“I hated you for letting me go,” she whispered. “I felt like you ripped my heart out and stomped on it. It took me years to get over you.”*

*Get over you.*

*Was she over me?*

Because I'd been married, had a kid, spent years in prison, and yet every single fucking night, I thought about nothing but her.

She started reeling again, her eyes leaving mine, and I knew that was the end of the conversation.

For now, anyway.

I'd make sure that it wasn't the last, however.

Because, as of last week, we were now both in our thirties and unmarried.

If she thought I was going to forget that fact, she was delusional.

## CHAPTER 7

*My ex was like, "I know a spot," and took me to the lowest  
point in my life.*

*-Morrigan's secret thoughts*



## MORRIGAN

I'd been hurt before, of course.

I mean, when you had disabilities like mine, you ended up on the floor a lot.

In fact, I'd had so many concussions, it'd been discussed that maybe I should possibly start wearing a helmet.

Which was laughable, because there was no way in hell I'd ever willingly walk around with one of those in my everyday life.

However, it was at that moment in time that I was thinking that concussions, and being strangled, were two very different things.

Why, you ask, was I being strangled?

I didn't have any earthly idea.

What I did know was that I'd walked into a situation that I couldn't get myself out of.

All I'd been doing was intending to go to the grocery store. However, when I'd gotten halfway there, like the idiot I was, I'd left my getting gas until the last second, and I was desperately in need of some.

Since there were only two gas stations in Accident, I'd had zero choice but to go to the closest one, seeing as the other was notorious for allowing water to get into their gas, and blaming everyone and anything but themselves and their lack of due diligence.

And seeing as I liked my car, and couldn't really afford a new motor for it at the moment, I chose to go to the one that was on the seedier side of town that was closest to the interstate's path. Which also meant more people that weren't part of our community.

Like today.

When I'd arrived at the gas station, the overhead light had been flickering.

Like every single woman in this day and age, I actually contemplated getting out of my car or not. I mean, I could probably make it to the grocery store and to work—my stupid milk supplier was seriously getting on my nerves—but I definitely couldn't get from work to the gas station.

Not without doing the walk of shame with a gas can, of which I was about ninety-four percent certain I wouldn't be able to do without overexerting myself.

That was my first mistake.

Getting out at the gas station without ample lighting.

My second was the shady-looking guy smoking the cigarette filling up his motorcycle.

I clocked him the moment that I pulled into the station. He was casually holding one hand to the gas pump that was dumping gas into the top tank of his motorcycle. Meanwhile, his other hand was holding a cigarette to his lips.

The third signal that I ignored was when I got out and put my card into the card reader and it said "see cashier."

It would be at this point that I'd normally leave. I didn't, under any circumstances, go to a place where I had to see the cashier. If I could've afforded to leave in that moment, I would have. Even if I had to pay the extra gas prices for somewhere else.

That was the first way to lose my business. Forcing me to go inside and see a cashier. I didn't know why, but that was the biggest pet peeve I had.

Locking my car up, I put the keys into my pocket, wrapped my hand around my credit card, and then got halfway across the parking lot when I realized that I'd forgotten my phone.

I hesitated there in the middle of the dark lot before deciding that I would go all the way inside and see the cashier.

Luckily, the inside of the gas station had more light than the outside.

I walked up to the attendant that looked like he'd rather be anywhere but where he was at, and smiled. "Hello. I need to fill up the car at pump four."

He didn't bother looking out the window to see which car, just took me at my word as he started typing in numbers. "Can't fill it up without leaving your card in here. You'll have to leave it and come back for it."

I gritted my teeth.

"Okay," I said. "Then put fifty dollars into it."

That should get me all the way to full.

But I wasn't certain, so I didn't add any more, even though my car was really empty.

"Okay," he said. "Here."

He gave me my card back.

I took it with a small smile, then walked back out the door, my eyes on my car, and not my surroundings.

Had they been on my surroundings, I was fairly sure I would've seen the man coming at me from the shadows.

But even if I had seen, it wasn't like I could've stopped him.

The arm wrapped around my throat and whirled me like a doll, forcing me straight up against the side of the building right outside the door.

"Saw you with Gator Bait," he hissed, squeezing hard, his fingers so tight around my throat that I couldn't draw a breath.

I didn't know what to say, and even if I did know, I wouldn't be able to get the words out. He was squeezing that hard.

"Since you like to do bad boys, I figure you won't mind doing me," he rasped, squeezing harder.

That's when I started to fight.

But even I could feel how useless the fight in me was.

The man was large, had strong hands, and I was half his size and didn't work out even a little bit. Not to mention, the fear and adrenaline coursing through my body were causing me to feel the impending blackout that was inevitable.

Any sort of adrenaline spike was enough to cause me to pass out. Plain and simple.

"Bet your pussy is sweet." He shook me a bit, causing my elbows to scrape against the rough brick at my back.

I fought.

Oh, boy did I fight.

I gave it everything I had.

But with the oxygen deprivation, as well as the impending pass out, it wasn't all that much in the grand scheme of things.

The last thing I heard as my world went dark around the edges was the rasp of tailpipes.

## CHAPTER 8

*Maybe I'm the problem. Never mind. That doesn't even sound right.*

*-Text from Aodhan to Wake*

## AODHAN

“Son of a bitch,” I grumbled out.

“What?” Kyle Davis, better known as KD among our club, Gator Bait, asked.

“I need gas. Like now,” I said. “I forgot that I needed to get it last night in my haste to get Bowie from soccer practice.”

Bowie was in club soccer, as well as club baseball. Both seasons overlapped, and with Danyetta having an emergency at her restaurant that she owned, Bowie was sadly left with me as a chauffeur.

The only problem was, by the time I picked him up, it was already nine fifteen. Then he needed fed, and a new pair of baseball cleats, which then pushed us into ten thirty.

By the time I got him showered, made sure he was in bed and not fucking around on his phone, I didn't get out of Yeti's house until around eleven thirty.

When I got on my bike, the last damn thing I wanted to do was fuel up.

So I'd gone home with the promise that I would leave early and get it on my own before we were set to ride out, which ended up not happening when I'd spent the majority of the night thinking about a certain brown-eyed girl.

“I could go for a Dr Pepper anyway,” KD said as he pulled off at the only gas station I'd trust in this town. “And a Snickers.”

I pulled right up to a pump and got off. KD kept going until he was parked around the side of the building.

Just as I shut my bike off, there was a loud shout from KD that had me all but sprinting toward him.

When I got to his side it was to see him holding a limp body in his hands, with his anger and wrath directed at someone that was running away.

I didn't think, let alone question my instincts to pursue him. Taking off at a sprint, I dashed toward the retreating person, and caught him easily between his smaller build and heavier set.

Tackling him to the ground, I made sure that every single bit of my body weight landed on the guy's chest, knocking the breath out of him long enough that he wouldn't fight back.

Then I took the zip tie—thank God that I'd had to fix the saddlebag on my bike all quick like before we left—and wrapped it solidly around the guy's two wrists.

Without further ado, I lifted the cursing man's body up onto his tiptoes, then marched him toward where I heard KD on the phone with the girl practically in his lap.

At first, the person he was holding didn't quite ring any alarm bells in my head.

Then I saw the shoes.

I knew of two people in this world that wore those kinds of shoes.

They were rather blah and uncomfortable in my opinion, always looking quite stiff when I'd seen her wearing them.

But Morrigan had assured me that the brown Timberlands were stylish and comfortable.

She'd also insisted that she wear them everywhere. The one time I'd seen her without them on was this last week when we'd gone on the boat.

But literally last week when she'd fallen into my arms, she'd had them on.

The other person that I'd seen wear them? My eighty-five-year-old grandmother, because Morrigan had bought her a pair for her birthday the month before I'd broken it off with her.

And those shapely legs definitely didn't belong to any eighty-five-year-old I knew.

“Oh, fuck,” I heard the man I was directing toward the light say. “Don’t hurt me.”

I moved so that I could see the side of the woman’s face that was pressed against KD’s chest, and felt things inside me freeze up in utter horror.

Without putting much forethought into what I was about to do, I kicked the man I was leading in the back of his knee and he collapsed to the ground. Seconds later, I followed that up with a not-so-nice shove to his back, forcing him onto the ground face down.

The man hit with a solid thunk and groaned. Seconds later he was trying to get to his knees to stand up, but I kicked him hard in the side of the head, stunning him.

Then I was on my knees next to KD, my hand going to the swath of curls covering the unconscious form.

When I moved her hair, I had my suspicions confirmed.

Morrigan.

“Oh, Mama. What did you do?” I whispered, moving her curls to behind her ear.

To give him credit, KD didn’t comment on the “mama” that I’d called her. Nor did he wonder why he could tell she was important to me.

He just went straight to the facts. Of which I needed right then.

“When I pulled around to the side, I saw him with her pressed to the brick of the building, holding her up just by the hands around her neck,” KD offered, moving as best as he could so that he was giving me better access to her face.

“It’s Morrigan,” I said. “The one I told y’all about yesterday.”

Everybody knew but Wake, who hadn’t come over due to his daughter’s awards ceremony, that Danyetta and I were not



only through, but hadn't ever been back together as she made it seem.

I knew that I was about to get my ass kicked, so I hadn't made any fuss about what was going on.

But I did know that I needed to tell Wake. And him finding out like this wasn't the best decision. But whatever.

There was no way in hell I was leaving Morrigan right then.

None.

"Call an ambulance yet?" I asked.

"Done when you took off after that dumbass." He jerked his head toward the man who still lay on the ground, passed out cold. "Why does he look familiar?"

I didn't know. The fucker's face was still in shadow, and I hadn't taken my gaze off of Morrigan since I got to her.

"We need to see what's going on," I said in frustration. "Where's the fuckin' light here? This station is usually lit up like the crack of dawn."

"I'll go ask," KD said as he gently transferred Morrigan over into my arms. Where she belonged. "You want me to take him?"

I'd kicked him hard. There was no way in hell that he was waking up.

"No," I said. "I'll keep an eye on him."

*Kick him again if he starts to wake up.*

"K," KD said as he moved away.

I didn't look at him, again my gaze still on Morrigan's face. Or what little I could see of it. The shadows of the building, as well as the very early hour, meant that I could barely see.

What I could wasn't good. She had a small dollop of blood that was running down her temple. But she was breathing. God fucking damnit, she was breathing.

Morrigan's breathing started to change, but that was the only outward sign that whatever had caused her to pass out—whether it be the man hurting her, or her POTS—finally let her out of its grasp.

Irrational anger was starting to sing through my blood. Why would anyone try to harm her? What had she done to cause that kind of ire?

What had he done to her?

My hands automatically went to her lower half, and I couldn't tell you how fucking relieved I was to feel that she was still wearing pants.

My god, if that had happened, I'd be spending some time in the penitentiary again. Willingly.

Just as that thought occurred to me, the lights outside flared brightly.

I blinked, allowing my vision to adjust, and didn't miss the way those sparkly brown eyes looked back at me.

She smiled sorrowfully at me, then my eyes caught on the bruising on her neck.

How long had she been awake? Could she even talk?

I tilted her chin up with my thumb and said, "You can't talk, can you?"

She blinked at me twice. The 'universal' sign for 'no.'

"You tried?" I asked.

She blinked once.

Yes. She'd tried. Of course, she'd tried.

When she woke up from passing out, she could usually talk just fine once all of her systems came back online.

But if there was something wrong with her throat keeping her unable to do that...

The man at my side started to stir, but before I had to kick him again, a cop car rolled up and a familiar face got out of it.

Karen, Cassius's girl's brother's girl—say that three times fast—was a female sheriff's deputy that was a complete and utter badass.

She took everything in all at once, and her eyes narrowed on the man trying to push to his feet.

“I think it's best if you stay on the ground where you're located at this moment,” Karen said seriously. “She okay?”

“She needs an ambulance,” I said as I took her in.

“Okay.” Karen didn't argue. “What happened?”

KD answered that, giving her the same details as he'd given me a few minutes before.

“So she was getting attacked in the dark, you pulled up. He dropped her and you”—she turned to face me—“chased after him?”

“That's right,” I said. “I also subdued him when I saw who it was that KD had in his arms.”

She nodded, as if that little tidbit didn't affect her at all.

“And who are you, sir?” Karen asked, looking at the man at her feet.

“I'm Wallace.” He sounded nasally, as if maybe I'd broken his nose with that kick.

Good.

“Wallace what?” Karen pushed.

I could tell she was getting irritated with him.

However, I missed whatever else she said when the ambulance pulled up and two medics got out, both headed straight toward us.

With barely a glance at the man who lay on the ground and Karen leaning over him, talking to him quietly, they moved toward me and said, “What happened?”

I looked down at Morrigan.

Morrigan had bruising around her neck, indicating she'd been strangled. Or at least he'd tried.

She also had a cut on her forehead which indicated she'd fallen and hit her head.

I explained everything to the medics, and they helped her onto the gurney, though sitting up instead of reclined like I thought maybe she should be. But I wasn't a paramedic, and had zero leeway in how she got treated.

What I did do was follow her onto the ambulance despite the medic in charge asking me to wait outside.

"Sorry, but no," I said. "She's alone, and she won't stay alone seeing as I'll be with her."

The medic grumbled under his breath, and I couldn't figure out why.

It was only when he kept swinging me wary glances that I realized that maybe he thought I'd done this.

"I didn't do this," I said. "Also, she has POTS." I then explained everything that she had going on with her that might've exacerbated the issue of her passing out.

"Oh." The medic looked as if he was breathing easier now, as if he wasn't quite so scared.

I leaned onto my knees as we started to move, the last thing on my mind was the ride that we were supposed to be going on today. Morrigan, since she'd gotten helped into the ambulance, hadn't looked at me, as if she was mad that I'd made her go to the hospital.

I knew she hadn't wanted to.

But I also knew her aversion to going to the hospital stemmed from her desire not to be there alone, and not because she thought she didn't need to go.

A while ago, for her first hospital visit with me when she'd fallen and broken her arm, she'd told me her fear of being alone in a hospital with no visitors. At the time, I'd thought

that maybe it was just her being a little extra—because Morrigan was known to be that way—but now I realized it was truly a fear of hers.

But, why wouldn't it be? She'd spent the last few years completely alone with no one to be here when she needed them.

I know that I hadn't been there.

"Vitals look good except for her heart rate," the medic said. "That's really high."

"It stays high," I found myself saying. "That's part of POTS. Her body overreacts. Sends her heart rate skyrocketing well past when it should've calmed down. But it'll get there."

"It will," Morrigan croaked.

She sounded bloody awful.

"Oh, Mama," I said. "You don't sound good."

"I need to get milk to the store," she croaked.

I pulled out my phone and texted KD, telling him what I needed. I also asked him to make sure that my bike was moved to the store for when I took her there later. Then I thought better of it and asked him to look for her car as well. I hadn't seen it, but that didn't mean that it wasn't there.

"Did you get a new car?" I asked.

She shook her head. "No. Just parked in the dark spot."

She really did sound bad.

"Don't speak," the medic said. "You might have some damage to your throat area, and until we can rule out anything, let's not exacerbate it."

Morrigan nodded her head.

Then winced and closed her eyes.

"There anything that you can give her?" I asked.

“Until I know how what she has can be affected by drugs, I don’t feel comfortable giving her anything,” he admitted. “We’re almost there, and then the doctors can give her something for pain.”

Fuck.

Well, it made complete sense. I wouldn’t want to give her anything that might kill her either.

“Okay,” I grumbled.

But then we were there.

The ambulance turned, then started to back up to the bay.

All the while, Morrigan lay rigid on the gurney.

I caught her hand in mine, and she didn’t squeeze it back.

Yeah, she was definitely mad at me.

“Do you want me to call anyone?” I asked. “Your friend Folsom?”

“Folsom is busy,” she croaked.

So that was a no.

Got it.

I got out when the doors opened, but kept pace with the two medics as they transferred care to the nurses and doctors that looked bored as hell until we walked in the doors.

Things happened fast after that. X-rays were taken, an MRI was done, blood was drawn, and pain meds were administered. It was only after she was back in her room, an IV dripping into her arm, that I said, “I wouldn’t have brought you here had you not scared the crap out of me.”

She shrugged, back to not speaking.

The doctor had reiterated her need to remain mute until he could get a look at everything.

Which thankfully, he did early thanks to the utter deadness inside the hospital.

“Everything looks really good, considering,” the doc said as he walked into the room unannounced. “Other than swelling which will go down in a few days, I think you’re good to go. However, her memory loss does concern me that she has a concussion.”

She couldn’t remember anything that happened after she pulled up to get gas. Not why she’d gone in the store. How she’d ended up on the side of the building, and not the trauma itself.

“It’s normal for her to have some cognitive problems after a trauma such as what she sustained,” the doctor said. “Her memory of the incident may or may not come back. Only time will tell.”

I nodded, my face going soft when I caught Morrigan looking at me.

“She’ll need to stay with someone tonight so we can follow concussion protocol,” the doctor continued. “Or we can keep her overnight.”

Morr started to wave her hands in the air as if that was completely unacceptable, her eyes serious.

“You can speak, but I think it might still be good to give your vocal cords some time,” he said as he handed her a pen and a piece of paper. “Here, write on this.”

She did, then flipped it around for us all to see. “I don’t have a concussion.”

My lips quirked. “You hit the ground pretty hard according to KD. With your head. That’s why you have that cut on your hairline. You banged it on the ground.”

She clenched the board, frustrated.

I could tell she didn’t want to be left here.

“I’ll watch over her,” I suggested, feeling Wake get more and more angry behind me.

Wake was a new addition.

He'd appeared sometime after the doctor had walked in telling us what all was wrong with Morr. I could tell that he wanted to talk to me, but until I'd heard that Morr was okay, I wouldn't be taking her anywhere.

"That's perfect," the doc said. "The nurse can help you get dressed in some hospital scrubs. That okay with you?"

Could he read the tension, too?

I definitely could feel it.

Said nurse walked into the room with the scrubs in her hand, and I gave one last look at Morr before I exited, pulling the door closed behind me and the doctor.

"She'll be just fine," he promised me.

Then he was gone, leaving me alone with a very upset Wake.

When I'd met Wake the first time, I'd thought he was an asshole. Mostly because he was overly protective of his little sister, who had a very real head on her shoulders. She didn't need him being so overprotective. But there he was, always in Danyetta's business, which put him in my business.

Over time, I came to realize that most big brothers were like that. And, possibly, I hadn't had the best examples of how a healthy family should perform.

Granted, I had a great mom and dad. They were truly the best. They just weren't a typical mom and dad. They were flighty, neurotic, and sometimes forgot they had children. I was raised to be an independent person. So were my siblings.

My sister could totally handle her own.

And always let me know real freakin' quick how she didn't appreciate my "man strength" being lorded over her. Or whatever it was that she liked to say to me on a weekly basis.

"Are you just going to stand there and act like you aren't hurting my sister?" Wake snarled.



Okay, so “a little” pissed was an understatement. Wake was a lot pissed.

Noted.

“Wake,” I started, ready to blurt everything out.

“I thought I could trust you!” he all but yelled in the middle of the hallway, causing people to turn our way. Doctors, nurses, patient care technicians, and even the hospitality workers were now all staring.

Fuck.

“My sister is...” Wake scowled, his teeth gleaming as he spoke out of them.

“Not mine. Hasn’t been mine since well before we divorced,” I finished for him.

Wake blanked for a few seconds, and I chose to tell him everything, despite the fact that he’d been acting like an ass since he’d walked in the door.

Poor Morrigan had no clue.

She just knew that Wake disliked her immensely. She’d clocked him from the moment he’d appeared in the doorway, looking as if he was about to tear the hospital down with his bare hands.

“What?” Wake asked, sounding just as baffled as he looked.

“I didn’t start dating her when I got out,” I said. “We were over, well and truly over, when we got divorced. Had been, really, for a long time. We made a great kid together, but that was truly all it was for either one of us. A break from reality. She always loved that district attorney. I’ve always loved her.”

I jerked my chin in the direction of Morrigan’s door.

Wake looked at me. Really looked at me. And I knew he knew when he saw it.

My conviction.

“Why would you not tell me?” he asked. “Why didn’t she? Why the lies at all?”

I shrugged. “Honestly, I didn’t tell you one way or the other because I wasn’t going to lie to you again. Had you asked what was going on, I would’ve told you. But you didn’t ask. You assumed. And I have no control over what Yeti says or does. She should’ve been the one to tell you.”

“Don’t you think Bowie will be confused?” he asked.

I shook my head. “He’s the one that we haven’t misguided at all. He asked when he heard some stuff at school about Yeti and me. I wouldn’t allow Danyetta to confirm it. He needed to know the truth.”

Wake blew out a breath. “So what was the last year about? Why act like it was anything different than what it was?”

“You’ll have to ask her,” I said. “But all I know from what she’s told me was that being in a relationship, or what appeared to be a relationship, was solving a few problems for her. I had no reason not to, since I haven’t been seeing anyone else. So I thought, why not?”

Which, in hindsight, it might’ve been something I should’ve put a little more effort into, and maybe I wouldn’t be in the situation I was currently in. But also, I didn’t owe Wake that explanation. I didn’t need to know what Danyetta told everyone as long as she wasn’t lying about our relationship now.

The last year of her doing whatever she’d had to do, I’d seen a difference in her demeanor. She’d changed for the better, and I hadn’t been doing anything else. So why the fuck not?

“I’m asking you first,” he snapped.

I looked at him.

“I’ve had a really long fucking day,” I said. “And it’s not even nine in the morning yet. Not to mention, you’ve come in here, being one of the most important people in my life, and

practically yelled down the house about how you disagree with everything Morrigan related. And if anyone deserves your ire, it's your sister. Not Morrigan. Morrigan, who has had a very tough life up until this point."

Wake's jaw clenched.

"I need you to put forth a little bit of effort and put yourself in her shoes," I said. "Because the way you just acted, after she was literally just attacked, is abhorrent."

Wake deflated then, finally realizing just how badly he'd fucked up.

Yeah, it was bad.

As in, I was disappointed in him, and that never happened.

He was our leader—even if he didn't want to be—for a reason. He was supposed to act better than the rest of us.

"I"—he blew out a breath—"am an ass."

"You're fine," I heard Morrigan say from behind me.

Or, more like rasp.

She sounded like she'd gargled with gravel and sent her words down a garbage disposal.

"Don't talk," I ordered.

She rolled her eyes, and that was the first sign of her old self that I'd seen since I first saw her earlier that morning.

"Um," Wake said. "I'm Wake."

"Morrigan, meet my friend, Wake Westfield. Wake, Morrigan St. Pete. She owns the coffee shop that your wife is always raving about."

"The place that costs me nine bucks every single day?" Wake asked.

Morrigan looked from me to Wake then back before widening her eyes.

She was uncomfortable.

“The place that costs you nine bucks,” I confirmed. “You ready to go?” I asked.

She nodded, then winced.

I wasn't sure if it was her throat and the bruising and swelling there, or her head, but I didn't want to hang around in a hospital hallway and wait for it to get worse.

“Do you need anything? Prescriptions?” I asked.

“No,” she mouthed.

“Those will be delivered to her apartment,” the nurse said as she came out of the room carrying discharge papers and the few items that Morrigan came in with in a plastic bag. “These are hers.”

I took them from her, then took Morrigan's hand next. “Let's go.”

Wake fell into step beside us, staying on my side instead of Morrigan's.

Something in which I appreciated.

Wake knew how to read situations well, and knew that she was uncomfortable with him. Though it was nobody's fault but his own that she was.

When we got outside it was to find Wake's SUV there waiting for us.

Guess he was our ride that I'd asked KD for.

Great.

I opened the back door just to see a car seat base and baby paraphernalia start to fall out.

“You'll have to go to the other side,” Wake said. “That side is baby zone zero. As in, every single piece of baby shit we have is in that one single area. Meaning, it falls out every single time we open the door to put the baby in.”

Wake and his wife, Dutch, had an infant named Wakely.

According to Wake, they were having four more. According to Dutch, they were having zero more.

It would be fun in the next couple of years to see who won that standoff. My money was on Wake, especially with how cute Wakely was.

I closed the baby-danger-zone door and walked with Morrigan to the other side, opening the passenger side door for her and helping her in before I walked around to the passenger side front seat.

Once I was in, I said, "We need to head to my place."

"Mine," I heard a croak out of the back.

Wake turned to me with a raised brow, waiting for me to give him the last word.

I opened my mouth to tell him my place when there was an enraged, disembodied voice filling the car.

## CHAPTER 9

*A single sperm contains 37.5 MB of DNA information. One ejaculation represents a 16K GB data transfer. That's equivalent to 62 MacBook Pros.  
-Text from Folsom to Morrigan*

## AODHAN

“I can’t believe you thought I wouldn’t find out that you were in the hospital!” a female’s voice sounded over the Bluetooth speaker in Wake’s SUV.

She closed her eyes with a weary sigh. “Folsom...”

“Uhh,” Wake said, unsure how a person had just started speaking out of his car who was trying to get a hold of me. Not him. “What’s going on?”

“That’s Folsom,” I said, realizing it was Morrigan’s best friend. “And I don’t think she intended not to call you. That might be my fault, Folsom. Morrigan was attacked at the gas station this morning. He choked her, and she has a lot of swelling around her throat. She can barely speak.”

“I know,” Folsom snapped. “I found out via a red flag that popped up on my computer when I woke up this morning to get my child to school.”

So she was pissed.

Noted.

“You’re taking her home?” Folsom asked.

“I’m taking her home,” I explained. “But I’m staying the night due to a possible concussion.”

“You stay with her or I’ll kill you.” She paused. “And don’t hurt her again, or I’ll kill you a second time.”

Then she was gone.

Morrigan pinched the bridge of her nose, mortified with her best friend.

I winced.

The words she’d said sliced a new, ever-filling hole inside of my heart, reminding me just how badly I’d fucked up.

As if I didn’t have enough guilt, there was more, piling it higher and higher.

“She sounds nice,” I offered.

“How did she just get on there and do that?” Wake asked. “I don’t even have this car hooked up to my phone. Let alone some random’s phone.”

I winced at Morrigan being called random.

Morrigan’s eyes flared, and I could tell that she was pissed as hell at Wake’s chosen words.

She wasn’t random.

She was as far from random as she could get.

“Folsom is a hacker,” Morr said, stating the obvious. “But she’s literally got no morals whatsoever. So anything and everything is on the table for her. If she wants you to know she’s there, she’ll let you know. Otherwise, you’ll never know.”

And now her throat was officially burning.

“Stop talking,” I growled, shooting her a glare into the back seat.

She looked out the window, and I could tell she was wondering if she could get out of having me in her apartment.

“Where are we going?” Wake finally asked.

I turned and looked at Morrigan, who wasn’t looking me in the eyes.

She grimaced and twisted the string from her hospital scrub pants in her hand as she squeezed her eyes shut.

“I’m programming her address into the GPS,” came Folsom’s voice.

Since I was looking at Morrigan’s face when she grimaced, I could practically see the inner wince that went through her. She didn’t want me to know where she lived.

That was a kick in the gut.

“See you soon,” Folsom quipped.



With that parting comment, Wake muttered to himself but started to drive to her place.

I turned around in my seat and got more and more concerned the deeper and deeper we went into the bad part of town.

It wasn't that there were "bad" parts of Accident, per se, but there were definitely some shady ones that I would really rather someone I cared about not be anywhere near.

And when we finally arrived at the location and I saw Morrigan's apartment, I winced.

"She's in 4B," Folsom said. "I unlocked her apartment for you. But don't doddle too long. Her neighbors are annoying enough that they'd walk right in if they saw an opportunity. Even if you're in the parking lot."

With that, Wake turned the car off after pulling into one of the visitor's spots and we all stared at the building.

"Isn't this the apartment complex that had the meth lab raided in it last week? I thought it was condemned," Wake murmured.

I heard the door open and sighed as Morrigan all but ejected herself out of the seat behind me.

"Good luck," Wake said as he saw Morrigan hurrying—well, hurrying for her anyway—toward the side of the complex.

I grumbled "thanks" and got out, following behind with Morrigan's bag of belongings fisted in my hand.

When I rounded the building, I saw no sign of her and cursed.

Hurrying more than I was previously, I sprinted to the exit on the side of the building that most definitely should be locked, and ran straight into Morrigan's back the moment that I pushed through the door.

"Ooof," I said. "Sorry, baby."

My hand automatically went around her waist, and almost instinctively, I pulled her back into me.

When I looked up, it was to find two very large Hispanic males blocking her way.

“Please don’t,” she croaked. “I’ve had a really, really bad day.”

Her hoarse, strangled-sounding voice caused the two males to look at her in surprise, obviously not noticing the marks around her throat until now.

They’d been too busy looking at her other attributes, like her unbound breasts in her scrub top.

“Excuse us,” I said as I shouldered my way past them. “We’re needing to get settled.”

The men moved, but only after giving her one more look over.

Together, we climbed the stairs to the fourth level.

“How do you not get exerted going up these stairs every single day?” I muttered darkly.

“I usually use the elevator,” she murmured softly. “But I saw three of the apartment complex’s resident bad guys and didn’t want to get into it with them. I’m tired.”

I knew she was tired.

She was also exerting herself way more than she should.

I gritted my teeth and climbed the last of the stairs until we got to her level.

Then we walked to her door, finally reaching it just as it opened and a man started to back out with a television in his hands.

I moved until my body was blocking the creep’s way, and looked at him with eyes that clearly said, “Put it back nicely or I’ll kill you.”

He gently placed it on the ground, his eyes full of fear, as he said, "I'm so sorry."

"You're not sorry," I snapped. "Who are you?"

"I know him," Folsom's voice came from the bag of clothes that I was holding. "Marshall Evers. He's got a rap sheet a mile long, the most significant being armed robbery. I've already sent his images to the police."

Folsom was on task, that was for sure.

"Thank you," Morrigan croaked.

"Please leave now," I said. "Before I do something that'll get me sent back to prison."

The man ran, practically bowling Morrigan over as he went.

I cursed under my breath, pissed as hell for a whole assortment of reasons, most notably the fact that Morrigan shouldn't be in this hell hole at all.

"Why in the fuck do you live here?" I growled.

"She gets free rent here for life because she owns the complex," Folsom answered for me, this time her voice coming from my own pocket.

I frowned hard. "What?"

"She owns the complex," Folsom answered. "But don't tell anyone. Morrigan doesn't want anyone to know. But she practically rents all of these spaces out for free for government section-eight housing. She helps out a lot of single mothers. She is a miracle worker. However, a lot of the single mothers come with a whole lot of problems. Like shady exes. Bad decisions on their kids' parts when Mom leaves for work. Stuff like that. Go inside. The weirdo in 3B is about to come out."

I'd never seen Morrigan move so fast before in my life.

I winced as I saw her all but slam the door behind her in her haste to get inside.

When I saw the “weirdo” in 3B pop his head out, I narrowed my eyes at the fucker.

He was a tall, lanky dude. Thirty-year-old white male with beady little eyes and hair that was practically nonexistent in a six-inch circle on the top of his head. He had a wifebeater on that was likely, at one point in time, white. But now it was dingy yellow in color, had a sweat stain at both armpits, and had a suspicious-looking brown stain down at the bottom of the shirt that I hoped wasn’t what I thought it was.

“Can I help you?” I growled.

The beady-eyed man blinked. “Who are you?”

“Morrigan’s man,” I said. “You?”

His mouth fell open in denial. “Morrigan doesn’t date.”

I looked at the man that could quite literally be the most disgusting person I’d ever met, and I’d met a whole lot of gross ones in prison, and said, “Morrigan doesn’t date people that are harassing her, no. But I don’t harass her. I love her.”

The man winced.

“Please be sure to leave her alone from now on, or I’ll have to take care of it,” I growled.

Beady-Eyed Man nodded once, swallowed hard, and then closed the door.

I reached for Morrigan’s door, then grinned wide when I felt the locked handle.

“Let’s see,” I said, looking at the numeric keypad above the lock. “If I were Morrigan, what code would I use?”

I tried her birthday, her favorite month and day—Halloween—then what used to, once upon a time, be her telephone code.

All three denied me access.

Then, on a whim, I used my own birthday.

The keypad went green, and I felt a wave of happiness inside of me.

Pushing through the door, I was surprised to see that the apartment's interior definitely didn't match the exterior.

"Wow," I said as I took a look around.

The whole entire apartment had been revamped. New floors. New paint, trim and walls. New furniture. It looked like I'd stepped right into the middle of a magazine display.

"I combined two apartments," she rasped. "How'd you get in?"

I grinned at the woman that had a cold bottle of water to her throat, staring at me from where she was leaning against the countertop.

A brand-new, beautiful quartz countertop that was black with ice-blue chips in it.

"Your favorite color," I said as I ran my hand over the smooth surface.

She smiled a sweet smile that reminded me of the ones that she'd grace me with a long time ago.

"I don't know if you still like coffee," I said, "but I'd almost bet that it'd feel way better than cold."

"I don't know," she admitted. "I was hoping it'd help with the tightness."

I felt my belly clench.

But before I could say "I'm so fuckin' sorry I wasn't there" to her, my phone rang.

**Unknown: I need help. ASAP. Bring a change of clothes for Morrigan and get to the clinic quick.**

I frowned, but before I could say, "Who is this?" the next text popped up.

**Unknown: -Folsom**

“Folsom just texted and said that she needs help. ASAP,” I said. “She said to pack a change of clothes and get there to help her.”

Morrigan sighed, abandoned her water bottle, then went into her bedroom and closed the door.

She came back out fully dressed in a pair of sweatpants, a black t-shirt that looked like it was practically painted on, and black Converse.

My mouth watered.

She also had a black bag in her hands that I hoped held enough clothes and toiletries for her to make it a few days at my place.

Because if I could help it, I wouldn't be bringing her back here until she could watch over herself. If I could convince her to stay with me permanently, even better.

“Make sure you lock the door well,” I said.

She shot me a “I know what I'm doing look” that always set my blood on fire, even when I was younger and dumber, and locked the door.

She then tested the door lock.

“That kid that was here trying to steal your television,” I said. “Who was that?”

“That was my neighbor.” She paused. “My fifteen-year-old neighbor.”

“Well, your fifteen-year-old neighbor's mother is about to hear from me when I don't have some unknown task to take care of,” I grumbled. “I think my bike should be here by now.”

At least, I thought KD was following behind with my bike. I wasn't quite sure. Nor was I sure if it'd even be in the parking lot now that I knew where Morrigan lived.

“She already knows her son is an asshole,” she whispered.

I gritted my teeth and took the stairs, this time stopping on the second step and holding my hands out for the woman behind me. “Come on,” I said when she didn’t come at first. “This’ll save you the time and the worry. I won’t drop you.”

“You dropping me isn’t what I’m worried about,” she said as she placed her hand on my shoulder.

I felt a wave of contentment wrap around me when she placed both hands on my shoulder and leaned forward. Catching her behind her back leg, right under her ass, I pulled her onto my back, and got clocked in the face with her bag.

“Sorry,” she murmured quietly, right into my ear.

“Then what are you worried about?” I asked as I took the stairs, her bag bumping against the front of my chest now where it’d slid to her wrist.

“Nothing,” she whispered.

And, for once, she actually sounded completely honest. As if there really was nothing wrong.

Though, we both knew that one for a lie.

There was definitely something wrong.

It just wasn’t something I’d caused.

Yet.

## CHAPTER 10

*You're as smooth as titties and whiskey.  
-Likely not a Chris Stapleton song*



## MORRIGAN

I wasn't sure how I got here.

One second, I was feeling the lowest of low—I mean, getting the life choked out of you would do that to you—and the next, I was in Aodhan's arms.

Though, I knew that I hadn't started there.

Once I'd passed out, I knew that I had hit the ground. I also knew that Aodhan's friend, KD, had helped me. And by help, I mean pulled me into his arms.

As if that wasn't scary enough—and thank God that KD was one of the good ones—Aodhan had gone after the man that had tried to kill me.

Though, I knew none of this firsthand. Everything that I was hearing was by either Aodhan or KD—whom I'd met briefly in the alley beside the gas station.

I was also piecing everything together that'd happened before that.

My memory had big, gaping holes in it.

Such as, I'm not sure how I got over there once I'd left the gas station's front door.

I also wasn't aware of why I'd gotten attacked.

I just knew that I had.

And for the life of me, I couldn't identify the man that'd been doing the attacking if my life depended on it—and frankly, it just might.

"It's here," Aodhan said, bringing me out of my contemplation of the night.

My throat hurt.

As in, really, really hurt.

I had no clue how badly getting strangled could hurt.

But talking was getting easier.

The heat from Aodhan's body was also making me sleepy.

I yawned as he set me down on my feet.

"Are you okay?" he asked, bringing his arm up to my side and latching on to my upper bicep when I started to sway.

"Fine," I whispered, finding that it was easier to whisper than to do anything with some effort behind it. "Tired. Hit a wall."

Having episodes always made me hit a wall.

Being strangled and having an episode? That was a recipe for a nap.

Aodhan's body heat, his spicy scent, plus those other two things? That was a cocktail of perfect napping.

But, Folsom needed help.

And she wouldn't have told us to come had she not needed it.

Though, I'm sure that she needed it from Aodhan and not me. I wasn't of much use, I was sorry to say.

Aodhan mounted the bike, then held his hand out like he always did when I was mounting behind him.

Though, what was different this time than all the previous times, was that he was reluctant to let it go.

How did I know he was reluctant?

He held on like his life depended on it, his gaze staring down at my hand.

Was he wondering about all that we'd lost out on, too?

All because of him?

Not to sound bitter or anything, but had he not forced me out of his life, going as far as to block me even, he would've known that life wasn't what he wanted it to be for me.

He would've gotten the text that I sent him to tell him that I couldn't stay in medical school.

He would've known that I was back in town.

He would've known that I hadn't moved on.

He would've known that he could say we were broken up no matter what, but I would always consider him mine.

But we were broken up.

Well and truly.

We'd both dated other people—or at least, I'd tried to.

I think on my end, it was because he wanted me to move on.

On his end, I decided that it was a desperation move. One that hadn't worked out well for him, seeing as he was divorced.

At least, that was what I told myself so I could live with the fact that he'd moved on, and I hadn't.

I closed my eyes and allowed the rhythmic thrum of the motorcycle's motor to soothe me. I went back to a time when this was the best feeling in the world. When I was on the back of Aodhan's bike, pressed up against him, I felt like my world was complete. As if there wasn't anything that could make it bad, because I had the perfect moment in time right before me.

But all good things come to an end.

Mine and Aodhan's had.

And this ride would, too.

Angry at myself for falling into the lull of remembered good times, I pulled back, forcing myself to put distance between Aodhan's back and me.

I could tell he noticed, too.

His hand went from his handlebars to his leg, and his fingers clenched, as if he wanted to reach backward and pull me back into him.

Well, I was done playing like this was going to happen.

Aodhan might have once been my dream, might've once been who I saw myself with for the rest of my life, but he wasn't for me anymore.

He wasn't going to be the thing that I looked forward to at the end of the long nights, telling myself that one day, he might just let me in again.

Stomach clenching in hurt, I crossed my arms over my chest and looked around, feeling the tingling throb of my neck start to ache with the continuous pounding of the wind against it.

By the time he finally came to a stop in front of the newly built vet clinic, I had pain-filled tears in my eyes.

Ones that I quickly dashed away before he dismounted, turned around, and offered me his hand.

I looked down, knowing he'd catch the sheen in my eyes if I didn't, and said, "Thank you."

At least the croaking of my throat was explained away by the near strangulation I'd received earlier.

Or, I'd hoped it'd be explained, anyway.

But Aodhan had always been so good at reading me. So good at knowing that I was in a bad mood before I'd even shown any outward signs of it.

Like now.

He must've realized that I'd pulled away, or started to build up my walls, because he caught my chin with one of his fingers, and gently lifted it up.

I kept my eyes closed, hoping that he'd let me go, but he didn't.

So, sighing, I opened my eyes to see his smoky-gray ones drilling into mine.

My breathing hitched.

Jesus, the man had always had a way about him. So captivating and intense.

I swallowed hard, and a blister of pain filled my features. One in which he saw.

“You’re in pain?” he asked.

I nodded, again painfully.

“I think someone inside might have some medication,” he said. “I should’ve gotten yours filled before we even came here.”

It’d been about an hour since we’d left the hospital. And two hours since they’d given me any pain medication.

At first, I’d been intending to tough it out.

But with the way my throat was starting to feel, I knew I wouldn’t be able to tough shit out.

“I have it,” Folsom called. “I filled it with the vet medication.”

I blinked.

“What?” Aodhan asked. “Why?”

“Because it’s the same shit, for a quarter of the price, and I dosed it so that it’s not fit for a horse, but a human. Don’t worry.” Folsom smirked.

I rolled my eyes, walked up to my friend, and threw my arms around her.

Folsom wasn’t a big hugger. She endured them for my sake, and her daughter’s sake, but ultimately, she hated being hugged.

But, in that moment when she returned my hug, I knew that she’d been worried.

“I’m okay,” I promised.

She sighed, swirling the loose hair at my neck, before letting me go.

“You’re not okay. You’re so far from being okay that it’s comical.” She paused. “But you’ll get there,” she agreed.

I would get there.

In fact, I had a feeling I’d get there faster if she kept giving me hugs like that.

She read the intent in my eyes, and shook her head. “Only one hug a year. You know that.”

I snorted.

She really did have that rule, at least for me.

I got a hug on my birthday, and my birthday only. At least one that was willing on her end.

What she usually got were a lot of nonsanctioned hugs and sneak attacks.

But she endured them for my sake.

“Come on.” Folsom caught my hand and dropped the pill bottle into it. “I have water in the kitchen. You can grab some while I get Aodhan’s help with a horse.”

But then she completely disappeared, leaving me to get my water on my own, and find the horse and Aodhan.

There was another woman there as well.

Matilda.

She wasn’t a big coffee drinker, but I’d seen her enough over the last year that I knew her by name.

She was on the ground with a syringe the size of her arm in one hand, and a needle in the other.

She was staring down at a horse that lay on the ground, and she was working quickly, starting an IV on the horse.

“So since when did Folsom start working here?” Aodhan asked Matilda.

Matilda barely spared him a glance as she tried, and failed, to get the horse’s head up. The horse had a really big head.

He was brown and beautiful, and huge. His belly looked rather large as well. As in, it wasn't supposed to be that large.

"Since Diana and I were both liquid shitting every time we squatted down, or sneezed, or thought wrong," Matilda said as she shifted on her knees in the dirt. "Get down here and help me hold this horse's head up."

Aodhan didn't hesitate getting into the dirt, and what might or might not be manure.

He dropped right down until his knees were planted right beside Matilda's. Then he lifted the horse's head up so easily that it was quite comical.

Matilda snorted out a laugh, as if his ease at doing what she couldn't was amusing to her and not offensive like I semi-thought it was.

"Wow, what a bruise," I heard said beside me.

Diana, also known as Luce, smiled tiredly at me.

"Uh, yeah," I croaked. "Just a small one."

Just a large one.

When I'd looked at myself in the mirror it was to see the bruising extending from the lower half of my face all the way down into my collarbone area. Who knew where it'd be tomorrow.

Also, there was a tender spot on my chest where the man had braced his arm—at least that was what the doctor told me. I hadn't remembered that part.

I was sure by tomorrow, that would match the rest of the bruising for sure.

Folsom, not one to do manure, went down to her haunches and started to listen to the horse's belly with a stethoscope.

"If we don't get him up soon, he won't make it," I heard Diana say.

It looked like all three vets in attendance were in agreement.

“What’s wrong with him?” I whispered.

I wasn’t sure anyone heard me at first, but eventually Diana, who wasn’t doing a thing, answered.

“He has colic.” She grimaced. “Has had it for a bit now, and it’s starting to affect other systems in his body. Not to mention, there’s the potential for stomach rupture, which’ll be fatal.”

“You’ll do surgery?” I asked.

“We would if we could get him up and moved to a place where we could perform the surgery.” She grimaced again. “We need a tractor or something if we can’t get him up. We’re fairly sure that at this point, there’s a blockage that can’t be reached via the tube.”

I didn’t say anything more as I watched them try to get this horse up, and fail.

But, over the next twenty minutes, more and more of the men from Aodhan’s motorcycle club arrived, giving them manpower. Eventually, they were able to wrestle the horse up to standing, and then get him to the area where they could dose him with some medicine and get him into the surgical suite for equines.

I stayed back in the arena with the other horses, watching and waiting.

It took Aodhan an hour to come back.

By the time he came back, I was so overly exhausted—and had popped one of my pain pills—that I was listing to one side.

I was with Folsom, my best friend. My best friend who looked like she wanted to murder someone.

“What?” I sort of slurred.



She looked at me, ass in the dirt, back against the metal poles of the fence, and stopped just short of touching me with her hands on her hips.

“Don’t look at me like that,” I told her tiredly. “I can’t handle this attitude right now.”

She snorted.

Then she turned that glare that usually sent grown men running away with fear toward Aodhan.

“I know who you are,” Folsom said as she glared at Aodhan.

Aodhan frowned. “Aodhan, this is my best friend, Folsom. Folsom, I’d like you to officially meet Aodhan.”

Folsom knew all about Aodhan. When we’d met, it’d been in the hospital of all places.

Her daughter had a condition that kept her in and out of the hospital a lot when she was younger. Meanwhile, that was my second home for what felt like a year when I was first diagnosed with POTS.

That’d been where we met and how we continued to be thrown around each other. Because it was fairly obvious that Folsom wasn’t a people person. The only people she liked were the people in her life that she put there.

And eventually, I’d been put there for her to take care of.

“Nice to *officially* meet you,” Aodhan said quietly.

Genuinely.

I could always tell when Aodhan didn’t like someone. Call it a sixth sense or whatnot, but Aodhan was being completely and one-hundred-percent genuine.

He wanted Folsom to like him.

Because he liked me.

At least, that was the way that his answer had come off, anyway.

“Uh-huh.” She crossed her arms over her chest.

Folsom seriously needed a spanking.

“Folsom,” I whispered, trying to get her to calm down. “This is not the time or the place.”

Aodhan, knowing I said something but having been too far away to hear what, looked at me curiously.

Folsom, having heard me, sighed and offered Aodhan her hand. “Thank you for the assist.”

Again, genuinely, he said, “Any time.”

She looked him dead in the eye then and said, “Don’t hurt my best friend, please.”

A weird look crossed his face then.

“Eh.” Aodhan hesitated. “I knew that a Folsom worked for Matilda and Diana, but I completely didn’t put you as Morrigan’s best friend, Folsom, until she just introduced us.”

Folsom’s gaze pretty much said, “Well, aren’t you intelligent?”

My lips twitched. “He’s had a rough couple of days.”

Folsom patted Aodhan on the shoulder. “Did you lose brain cells while you were imprisoned?”

Aodhan smirked.

“What about your anal virginity?” Folsom continued.

She never did know when to stop.

Then again, usually neither did I.

It could’ve just as easily been my mouth that came out of than hers.

“No, can’t say that happened, either,” Aodhan said. “I was pretty good at watching my own back.”

“You mean your own backside,” I croaked.

Aodhan shook his head, laughter in his eyes. “Yeah, my backside.”

“Well,” Folsom clapped, “I’ve met the infamous Aodhan. My life is now complete.”

Aodhan brought his brow up in a “you’re something else” look.

Folsom didn’t care, or didn’t even notice. There was no telling with her.

“I have to go back to work. I have to pick my daughter up in an hour, and I still have two more patients to see,” she said. “Remember, if you go visit any of the other wives, and you get in contact with Alice, she’s allergic to dogs. You’ll have to go home and change before you see her.”

My brows rose as Folsom walked away.

I looked at Aodhan to confirm, and he nodded. “She’s deathly allergic to dogs. Like, has to carry an EpiPen around with her in case she’s exposed to one, kind of allergic. Though, I think it’s the dog itself. She still reacts when the dog isn’t actually in front of her, but we try not to chance it. And no, I wasn’t planning on exposing you to all of them at once.”

“Ah,” I rasped.

And why did it hurt so badly that Folsom knew the ‘women’ better than I did? Why did it hurt that I should know them, had Aodhan not broken us, even better than her?

Questions were rolling around inside my brain, and as we rode out of the parking lot of the vet clinic five minutes later, I was still giving Aodhan a lot more space than I did the last time I was on the bike with him.

Again, he noticed.

And again, he didn’t try to push me.

We drove through the bustling streets of Accident, not stopping anywhere until we were on the opposite side of town. There, he pulled into a drive-through and showed that at least

he still remembered a little bit about me, i.e., my Wendy's order, and got me a Frosty and a small fry.

The Frosty might actually get eaten. I wasn't sure I could handle the fry.

But, since I liked to put all my fries into the Frosty, stir it up, and eat it, I might be able to get a few down.

He placed my Frosty and the small bag of fries into a cup holder on either side of his body that I couldn't see, then continued driving toward what I suspected was his home.

I had my suspicions confirmed five minutes later.

He pulled into the driveway of a house that made my heart ache.

Once upon a time, I'd told him exactly what I dreamed about living in when I grew old, and now there he was, living in it.

He got off the bike and offered me his hand, but I acted like I didn't see it as I got off with my head bowed and my eyes downcast.

He grabbed my dinner, my overnight bag, and together we walked toward his front door.

When he opened his door with a few electronic beeps of his keypad, I stopped on the threshold and blinked.

I was expecting a house that looked lived in.

What I got was a showroom on a farm with zero sign that a child lived there, let alone Aodhan.

# CHAPTER 11

*I never know what to say when someone tells me they're pregnant. Inevitably, "I like having sex, too" always comes out.*

*-Text from Aodhan to Morrigan*

## AODHAN

“Wow,” she said quietly. “You don’t even look like you live here.”

*That’s because I practically don’t.*

“Yeah,” I grumbled. “I don’t spend much time here. All the furniture and paint and stuff is the original owner’s. She got married to her husband, and he died like a week after they moved in after renovating this place completely.”

“That’s awful,” she rasped.

I walked to the kitchen, dropping her bag on the landing next to the stairs, and placed her food on the large counter in the middle of the kitchen.

She followed behind hesitantly, as if she didn’t belong here, and that made me really freakin’ mad.

What she didn’t know was that if anyone belonged here, it was her. This place was practically built for her. I may not have been the first person to own the house, but the moment I saw it, I knew that she’d love it.

And still, her hesitancy caused a bolt of fire to shoot up my spine. Damn, I was angry.

As in, irrationally so.

“She moved out because she couldn’t work this place on her own,” I explained. “I bought it the week it went on the market.”

*Because I knew that you’d love the hell out of it.*

*And maybe if, one day, you returned, I’d have your dream house ready to go for you.*

“Oh,” she said quietly, her eyes suddenly sad.

“Danyetta never lived here,” I continued. “Then again, neither has Bowie.”

She looked at me startled at that. “What? Why?”

I gestured toward her Frosty and the bottle of water next to the seat at the bar, and she took it.

She lifted the lid off the chocolate Frosty, then carefully pulled the wrapper off of the spoon.

Seconds later, she took the smallest of bites, a heavy sigh leaving her.

“Bowie doesn’t live here because I’ve never really gotten to know him,” I said. “Everything that went down happened in the weeks after his birth. I finally went to prison for good when he was around five.”

“That doesn’t mean he can’t live with you,” she pointed out. “You’ve been out for over a year.”

I had.

“I don’t want to force him to do something he doesn’t want to do,” I admitted. “From the very beginning, I wasn’t able to form that ‘bond’ with him since I knew that I’d be going away. I mean, it just felt easier to leave him if I didn’t get too attached. He almost feels like he’s Danyetta’s son, and not mine. But ever since I’ve been out, I haven’t been able to bridge that gap that I created myself. And it’s frustrating.”

“You protected the both of you.” She took another bite of her Frosty, and her face smoothed of even more tension lines. “I think that, given enough time, you can have a relationship with him. But sadly, he’s at an impressionable age. And from what I’ve seen and heard about him from people coming into the shop...he’s insanely smart. He is in the same magnet school now as Folsom’s daughter for gifted children.”

He was.

When Wake’s shit had been going on, they’d taken both Bowie and Lolo out of the local school, and though Lolo had gone back, we’d taken the opportunity to install Bowie into a different school.

I didn’t bother to ask how she found out, either. If I’d known that she was in town—and I was still quite

flabbergasted that I hadn't known—I would've tried to know everything about her, too.

Someone that is that much a part of your life...you don't just turn that off inside your soul. It's a feeling that's always there in the back of your mind.

It's like one of those motion sensor floodlights. You go about your day, and live your life. You don't really remember that it's there until the memory turns on, and you get blinded with it. Then it stays on, and since you're still there, thinking about it, causing the memory to turn into another, and another, the stupid light never turns off. Then you're there, blinded, and unable to function.

“Ouch,” I heard her say, pulling me out of my thoughts.

I looked at her trying to choke down a fry, and my rage at what happened to her tonight doubled.

Before I could put much anger into it, though, my phone rang, and she gestured at me to take it.

I did, with my free hand fisted.

I grimaced when I saw Danyetta's name on the screen.

That could only mean one thing.

“Hey,” she said as soon as I answered. “I know it's late, but I need you to pick Bowie up from practice. I tried to get there, there was an accident on 95. I can't get there on time.” Danyetta groaned.

I looked at my watch.

He still had fifteen minutes of practice left, and didn't need me there for at least another twenty because they usually went over.

“Okay.” I paused. “Do you want me to bring him here? So he can stay the night? Or will you be sooner?”

He did not like to be forced to stay here. But if she was going to be more than an hour, then he'd be forced to stay here.



“I’ll be there in less than half an hour,” she said. “I just don’t want him staying with that creepo of a coach.”

I grimaced.

Bowie’s baseball coach was a bit of a creeper. Though not outwardly intrusive, I just got a vibe from him that screamed, “keep your kid away.”

Bowie loved him, though. Not to mention the team was a good one, and there were some players on there that made Bowie a better player. So, I didn’t want to take him out.

But...still. The coach gave me a bad feeling, and I agreed with Danyetta. I didn’t want Bowie alone with him.

At least when I got there early, the assistant coach was still there.

“I’m going,” I said. “And I’ll drop him off at home with some dinner.”

“I brought dinner from the restaurant.” She paused. “But we know he doesn’t like it anyway. So if you want to take him for food, that’s fine.”

“I’ll ask him,” I said. “Be safe.”

She said she would, then hung up.

When I looked back at Morrigan, it was to see half her fries gone and one in her hand, fully covered in chocolate Frosty.

I’d never gotten into the habit of dunking my fries. I thought it was gross. But I always thought it was endearing when I saw her eat it that way.

Just another one of her quirks that caused me to love her even more.

“I have to go get Bowie from practice.” I sighed. “She’s running late.”

She nodded, then winced.

I felt my stomach drop.

“It’s okay,” she sounded better at least. “I’ll just eat these fries.”

I gathered my keys up again.

“Lock the doors. Set the alarm. If you need anything, text me,” I ordered.

She blinked at me in confusion, then anger started to leach into those eyes. Anger that I’d never seen directed at me before.

“Are you going to unblock me?” she asked.

I felt my stomach sink all over again. “You’ve never been blocked, honey.”

She snorted. “Then why can’t I call you? Why has every single text and call I’ve made bounced back, or been said ‘undeliverable’ since you left?”

I opened my mouth and then closed it.

I didn’t have a clue.

But I knew one thing for sure, I sure the fuck would never have blocked her. I’ve been secretly hoping since she left that she’d tell me she wanted to come back home. To me.

“Let me have your phone,” I ordered.

She gave it to me.

I dialed in my number, then pressed Call.

It didn’t go through.

My phone didn’t ring, and hers made a clicking sound then went back to the phone screen.

I scowled hard.

I walked to the kitchen drawer, pulled out a burner phone that I used when needed, and dialed my number again. It rang on both ends.

I frowned harder.

“I didn’t block you,” I promised her as I handed her the burner phone. “I swear to you, I did not block you. I’d never block you.”

She looked down at the phone I handed her, and I knew right then and there I had more to fix than I’d originally thought. Things that I needed to fix that I hadn’t realized were broken.

“I’m going to get Bowie, then we’re going to figure this out,” I promised her.

She halfheartedly smiled as if she didn’t believe that I wouldn’t block her, and I realized that I might’ve killed something inside of her. I might’ve inadvertently, by never getting her calls, broken something irreparable that I could never fix.

“I’ll be back,” I promised, feeling anger tightening in my gut.

What would cause that to happen?

I knew one person that could find out, though.

I leaned down and pressed a kiss against the top of her head, not quite intimate, but definitely not chaste, either.

With one hard look down at her face, I said, “I’ll be back.”

And that was a promise and a warning.

We would talk about what was going on. We’d also be figuring out what had happened.

Because no way would I ever take away even a second of talking to her. Text message. Phone call. Or in real life.

I walked out the door and set the alarm and locked the door on my app.

Seconds later, I called Folsom on the way to the bike, unsurprised to find Folsom’s number already in my phone.

She answered after the second ring.

“Hello?” she answered.

She knew exactly who it was without having to look it up.

“I didn’t block her,” I told her bluntly. “I would never block her.”

The sincerity in my voice must’ve been enough convincing for her, because she said, “I’ll look into it.”

Then she hung up.

After making sure the app on my phone said the house was armed, I headed once again for my bike.

The ride to the fields took me ten minutes. Five of which were following behind an elderly man that likely needed to lose his license a couple of years ago seeing as he was so hunched over he could barely see over the wheel.

That, and his glasses were so damn thick that even I could see through them easily from fifteen feet away.

When I got to the practice field, it was just in time to see Bowie heading out of the dugout with his bag slung over his shoulder.

My gaze went to the man behind him. The coach that really was too close to a couple of the other boys. Luckily, he wasn’t anywhere near my son, or I might’ve confronted the dude. Today wasn’t the day to fuck with me. Not after all that I’d gone through with Morrigan earlier.

And her pulling away without actually leaving my side.

I’d physically felt her withdrawal as she’d sat on the back of my bike. First in body, then in mind.

I couldn’t even explain it, either. It was just one of those things that I’d always been able to read when it came to Morrigan. Whether she was mentally present or away in the clouds like she was sometimes wont to do.

“You need to get a better mode of transportation,” Bowie grumbled darkly.

I hadn’t even realized he’d made it up all the way to me until his voice penetrated my thoughts.

“Costs money, bud,” I said. “And my bike works great. If I need to get somewhere when it’s raining, I just bum a ride from one of the guys, or your mom.”

He rolled his eyes and said, “Yeah, but also the problem is now I have to ride on the back of this bike with you, and it’s unsafe.”

I felt my eye twitch as I handed him his helmet.

I didn’t say anything, because it honestly felt like he was looking for a fight.

I drove him home after that, getting whacked multiple times in the face with his bat, likely on purpose.

When I got to his house, I got off the bike and went inside, smiling at Lolo as she waved from the couch. “Hey!”

God, that kid. She was such a good one.

“Hey, kiddo,” I said. “Y’all eat yet?”

She shook her head, her eyes looking hopeful.

“No,” she said. “What’d you get?”

“Get?” I said. “I didn’t get anything. I ordered pizza.”

From the app as I’d been stuck behind the old man who shouldn’t be driving, actually.

“Sweet.” She smiled. “I could eat the hell out of some pizza.”

I looked at Bowie, who was walking into the kitchen, ignoring me and Lolo.

“Hey, Bowie!” Lolo called to him, noticing my attention veer.

“Hello,” Bowie replied.

“You love pizza. You should be ecstatic.” Lolo looked at me, her brows raised.

“I was actually feeling Mom’s restaurant food for dinner,” he lied.

I felt my eyelid twitch.

“That’s too bad,” I heard Danyetta say behind me. “Because I gave it to the homeless man on the corner of the highway. He said thank you until he tasted it, and then he spat it out and asked me if I was trying to poison him.”

I burst out laughing.

Danyetta’s food was great, when it was fresh and hot.

What it wasn’t was great when it was cold, and the grease had a chance to settle into the batter.

“That’s a bummer,” Lolo snapped her fingers.

I threaded my hand around her ponytail and gave it a slight tug.

She laughed and got up. “You think you can give me a ride to Dayd’s house after I grab a slice of pizza?”

I nodded, knowing Dayd’s apartment was actually on the way to my place. All I would have to do was pull into his parking lot and let her out.

“How ya gonna get home?” I asked.

“Dayd will drive me. He’s at welding school until eight. Then he’ll be home,” she said.

“You could always take a whole box of pizza,” I said. “I ordered three.”

“Nice,” she said. “Dayd will like that. And he won’t complain about someone buying him food if it’s from you. He knows you don’t usually buy pizza.”

Dayd was a proud kid. I liked that about him.

“Whatever happened to you buying that pizzeria?” she asked. “I thought that was a done deal?”

A few months ago, Cassius’s girl, Alice, had an incident. It’d become clear that Alice could no longer run The Marina, a family business, like she used to do due to her own business

obligations. So the family had decided to sell their pizzeria, which I'd originally looked into buying.

"It's more work than I'm willing to take on right now," I admitted.

Honestly, I didn't think that the business hours would mesh well with Bowie's schedule, and I hadn't been willing to give up the only time I got with him to open a place like that.

So, I'd declined and moved on.

Now I ran fishing charters as a full-time job until my friend could get healthy and take back over. From there? Who knew what I would be doing.

"Oh," she said. "But it would've been nice to get free pizza any time we wanted it."

I chuckled. "What makes you think that I would give you free pizza, half-pint?"

There was a chair that was moved loudly from the corner of the room, and I turned to find Bowie planting himself in it with a scowl on his face and his math book in his hand.

"Willingly doing your math homework?" I teased. "Are you okay?"

Bowie looked up and glared at me. "The coach told me I had to work hard and make good grades if I wanted to succeed. That's what I'm doing."

I gritted my teeth to keep from asking what else the coach had to say.

Luckily, the doorbell rang, signaling the arrival of the pizza.

Food was grabbed, and Lolo and I were out the door without a goodbye from Bowie.

Danyetta's gaze promised she'd talk to him, and I looked away, knowing how that talk would go.

Poorly.

After making sure that Lolo was seen safely to Dayd's door with Dayd letting her in, I drove home and thought about the woman that was at my house.

The woman that would be there forever if I could make it happen.

I found her on the couch, asleep.

She looked like she hadn't moved an inch around the house since I'd been gone. Even her empty Frosty cup was on the coffee table, next to her unfinished fry.

I grimaced and walked farther into the house, making sure to lock the door, arm the alarm, and then start getting my nightly routine taken care of. My nightly routine consisted of checking every single window, door, and nook and cranny to make sure everything was locked, and there wasn't a thing inside my house that could fuck me up while I was sleeping.

I'd had one instance too many when it came to sleeping and not protecting myself during prison, nearly losing my life when it happened.

Absently I touched the scar on my neck, the one you couldn't see unless my t-shirt was off. It was thick, jagged, and the one place on my entire body that was blemished.

I didn't even have any tattoos, though I didn't see them as unsightly. Just a method in madness. Sitting down for any longer than I had to sounded like torture.

After getting everything checked out, I came back out into the living room with a large blanket that I used when Bowie stayed over.

Walking over to the couch, I covered her up, then sighed.

My eyes took in her sleeping form greedily. Fuck, how I'd missed her.

I'd had no clue how hard I was repressing my feelings and need until she was back. Having her inside my house? That was even more torturous. I wanted her in my arms, in my bed, where I knew she would be safe.



Instead, I would be leaving her on the couch.

Reaching down, I smoothed back her hair and said, “Oh, Mama. What am I going to do with you?”

The universe didn’t answer me.

Neither did she.

I left her on the couch to sleep and went to my own bed.

Not even the humid Florida fall air, seeping through the only open second-story window with bars, could warm me up after thinking about all the things that could’ve gone wrong today.

Or how badly I’d fucked up by not finding her again when my every instinct said to.

I just hoped that one day she would forgive me.

## CHAPTER 12

*I'm sorry I called you an asshole. I thought you knew.  
-coffee cup*

## MORRIGAN

I woke up to a note on the coffee table next to my fully charged phone that said: *Went on a run down the path at the back of my property. It's about a four-mile trail run, and I left at 0700. Text me if you need me. Left the burner phone on the counter charging.*

I looked at my own phone, tapping the screen to wake it up with a lazy flick, and saw that it was only a quarter past seven. He'd been gone for fifteen minutes or so, giving me plenty of time to get a shower and call Folsom.

What it wouldn't do was give me enough time to call Folsom to come get me and get out of Aodhan's place.

Not that she would.

She was a staunch believer in letting a person find their own way in life, meaning that she would be allowing whatever it was going on between Aodhan and me to play out. However, it may play out.

I loved her for her determination, but I knew it wouldn't be working in my favor.

Hefting my body off of the most comfortable couch in the world—last night after I sat in it, I'd all but sunk into it and never wanted to leave—I headed to the bathroom to relieve myself, and finally gave in to my curiosity and looked around.

As I was using the restroom, I went through his cabinets in front of me.

There was nothing there but linens, bath towels, toilet paper and a first aid kit.

After finishing and washing my hands, I found a spare toothbrush in the left drawer under the sink, brushed my teeth with it, and then went through the rest of the cabinets.

None of them looked as if anyone lived here.

The only interesting thing in the cabinets was a full bottle of sleeping pills—I counted the quantity and compared it to the label, okay?—and a bottle of ibuprofen.

After stripping my clothes off, I turned on the shower and then cursed when I remembered my bag.

That was when I ran out into the kitchen to find it, and ran smack into Aodhan.

He caught me before I could hit the ground, his large, burly arms wrapping around me so protectively that I sighed.

Then I stiffened.

A, my body remembered everything about how it felt to have him wrapped around me when I was practically naked.

B, my heart started to kick up a thousand miles an hour, and I could feel the excitement start to pour through my veins.

“Oh, shit.” I closed my eyes. “You have a chair I can sit in in the shower?”

Because there was no way I was risking taking a shower while standing up, after just having run into him practically naked.

“Of course,” he said. “Um, a kitchen one.”

I laughed. I couldn’t help it. “I can sit on the floor if the showerhead will reach.”

He squeezed me a little tighter, then I was up in his arms, and he was carrying me to his bathroom, not the one I’d just come out of.

His bathroom was a whole lot more interesting.

There was stuff everywhere, and I couldn’t wait to go through it all.

But the best thing in the entire bathroom was the shower that he deposited me right in front of.

Not only was it big, and amazing, and luxurious, but it had a shower seat.

Why did it have a shower seat?

“Why does it have a shower seat?” I asked him aloud when my silent question didn’t have a forthcoming answer.

“The lady that owned this place before me,” he explained. “She had a father that had an amputation. I think it might’ve been the guy’s lower leg or something. She bought this place, and then renovated the master bath for him, so that he could get in and out of it if he ever came over to stay. She wanted him to feel welcome.”

“Oh.” I felt my stomach start to stir, my senses leveling out now that I wasn’t upright for my body to overreact. “Nice.”

He opened the door, turned the shower on, then touched the tip of my nose before he explained what he was about to do.

“I have to go pick Bowie up and take him to school,” he said, his eyes trained on the floor. “I’m going to set the alarm, and pick up breakfast, then bring it back. Is that okay?”

I could tell him leaving me behind was hurting him.

He didn’t want me being here after having just been attacked yesterday.

But hey, the attacker was still in jail, I found that I could talk way easier, and Aodhan had a life. He couldn’t just stop living it because of me.

At least, that was what I told my selfish self that was slightly hurt that he kept leaving me, even if it was for his child.

God, I was such an asshole sometimes.

“Sure,” I said, acting nonchalant when in reality, I wanted to say, “don’t go.”

He studied my face, and that was when I was reminded that I was still in my towel.

“Uh, my bag.” I winced. “Can you grab that and bring it up here?”

He nodded once. “Anything specific for breakfast?”

I shook my head. “No.”

“Do you need anything done at the coffee shop?” I asked.

Also, no.

“No milk?” he pushed.

I felt myself melting. “I don’t know what’s going on with my milk deliveries. But when I didn’t show up yesterday, my employees took care of it by putting a sign on the door that we were temporarily closed. The new milk supplier is supposed to be there tonight, and Theresa is taking the shipment.”

“Good,” he said. “They’re going to be okay without you?”

I didn’t technically run the store at all. I couldn’t.

I’d tried to go that route in the beginning, and was shown very quickly why that was a bad idea.

That’s when I hired not only Theresa, but Barry and Martine.

Barry worked the opposite shift from Theresa, and Martine worked where the two others couldn’t fill in, or on weekends when one of them needed a day off.

“Yes,” I answered. “I’ve made it that way.”

He looked at me oddly, as if he didn’t quite like that answer, but I cleared my throat and said, “I didn’t turn the shower off downstairs, and I’m not sure how much hot water you have...”

He got the hint and nodded. “I’ll be back.”

Then he was gone.

I locked the door for good measure, then stepped into the shower.

I groaned at the feel of the hot water spraying all around me.

By the time I was through, I felt refreshed, jealous, and pruney.

I found my bag outside the bathroom door, and a note that said *here's your phone* stuck to my phone.

I took my phone and bag, then threw the note away in the trash, trying not to be sentimental about a damn note with three words on it.

That's when I saw the message waiting from Folsom.

**Folsom: call me ASAP.**

I called her as I started to pull the brush through my damn tangled hair.

At least I remembered that.

My curly hair was a damn disaster and would've been even worse had I not brought my wet brush.

Folsom answered on the first ring, letting me know she'd been waiting for me.

"Your dad," she blurted.

I frowned and dropped my arm to my lap before saying, "What about him?"

"Aodhan called me last night and asked me to look into why you weren't able to call him. That's because you were blocked from calling him. Since you're still on your dad's phone plan, he called the cell provider and asked them to block Aodhan's phone number. That's why you haven't been able to get ahold of him," she explained without taking a single breath.

Irrational anger started to fill me at that.

"What?" I all but shrieked.

He did what?

"Yep," she confirmed. "He called almost to the day that you told me Aodhan left. He blocked his number, as well as his mom's landline, as well as his grandparents' landline."

I was flabbergasted.

Utterly shocked and saddened all at once.

“You’ve got to be shitting me,” I finally said.

“No,” she sounded off.

Mad and ready to kill someone.

“I’ll call him,” I said, hoping to rein in her temper.

It was legendary.

I’d been holding her off for years from hurting my dad the way he hurt me, but this time, I wasn’t quite sure that I would be able to.

“You better do it now.” She paused. “You can just hold on. I’ll connect you. But I’m listening in.”

I rolled my eyes.

She and I used to do this all the time.

At first, it was because she wanted the moral support when she talked to her child’s baby daddy. But it’d turned into moral support for everything. Making doctors’ appointments, talking to important people, making lawyer appointments and changing wills. Making large purchases like the sale of that apartment building.

“There,” she said. “Let him have it.”

Then the phone started to ring.

“Yeah?” my dad answered, sounding miffed.

“Dad,” I said carefully. “I just got some news.”

“What kind of news?” he asked, sounding hopeful. “Have you fired your doctors?”

I rolled my eyes. “No. But I did get informed that you blocked Aodhan’s number on my phone so that I couldn’t call him, and he couldn’t call me.”

There was a lengthy pause and then a snort.



“There was only one way he would move on,” my father said. “And that was to block him so you wouldn’t call him back and guilt him into staying.”

My mouth fell open in shock.

I mean, I knew that he’d had a part in keeping me and Aodhan apart but...to go as far as to make it to where I could never talk to Aodhan? That was heartless.

“Dad,” I croaked. “What about your *daughter*?”

“My daughter stopped being my daughter when she chose sex before marriage,” he growled.

I all but fell over in surprise.

I mean, logically, I knew he knew that I’d had sex with Aodhan. I mean, he’d all but caught us parking at the end of his dirt driveway with half my clothes missing.

“And continued not being my daughter when she continuously chose medical bullshit over natural, healthy healing,” he continued. “And perpetuated a lie just to get people to feel sorry for her.”

That last part hadn’t really been surprising. I mean, logically, I knew that he thought I made it up.

If he trusted the medical community, he would think I had Munchausen syndrome—where I tried to get sympathy or attention by faking illnesses.

I only wished I was faking my POTS. Maybe then, I’d be able to live a normal life.

“Dad,” I said very carefully. “I think you’re the one that needs to seek medical attention. Possibly a psychologist would do you some good.”

“I would never...” he started, but I interrupted him. Something I’d never done, not ever. It was a for-sure way to make him mad. Very, very mad.

“I hope when you see me in a store, you keep walking,” I continued. “I hope one day, when I finally have a child, and

I'm happy, that you see that happiness and realize that you aren't a part of it."

There was a moment of silence, and then he laughed.

"You can't have a child with that fake illness of yours, if what you told me once was true," he countered.

A child was my pipe dream.

I knew that having a baby would fuck with my POTS—and even my neurocardiogenic syncope—but I wanted a baby. One day, if I was ever in a stable relationship and my partner knew everything about me and wanted me anyway, I might bring it up to him. I might ask him if he was willing to practically hover over my every move for nine months.

I wanted to give my child something that I had never been able to have myself.

Though, logically, I knew that would be very hard to do. It'd be easier if I had a man that was willing to pull out all the stops for me. To put me first. To give me the world.

"Are you even listening to me?" my father snapped.

"From now on, don't call me," I said with certainty. "Don't send me any letters. Don't look at me when you see me in a restaurant. Don't send your wife my way because I won't respond. Don't engage me at all. Act like I'm nothing more than a stranger on the street, since that's what you've treated me like since the day I was born."

"I raised you," he said.

"You fed me. You clothed me. You did the bare minimum. But let me tell you something, Gus." I refused to use his title anymore. From now on, he would be no more than "Gus" to me. "You barely did even the bare minimum. In fact, I think you stunted my emotional happiness every chance you got because deep inside, you don't think anyone should be happy. I think that one day, you're going to wake up and need me, and I won't give you the time of day. Because I'm letting it all go.

I'm letting you go. You are no longer anything to me more than a memory. A joke that wasn't even funny."

I hung up, then I blocked his number. I blocked their house number. I blocked my stepmother's number.

And for good measure, I blocked his work number.

Granted, it might actually call one day and be someone that wasn't him—him working for one of the largest shipping companies in the world meant that anytime he called me from his work, it showed up as a generic shipping number company-wide—but I'd take that chance.

I'd miss any package as long as it came with never hearing from my so-called "father" again.

And a thought occurred to me in that moment as I stared down at my hairbrush that I'd put down sometime in the middle of my phone call with my fath— Gus.

All this time, had Aodhan thought that I'd never called him? Had he thought that I'd just left, never to be heard from again, and hadn't taken a single glance back?

Had I inadvertently made it to where he thought that he wasn't good enough? Had I made him think that, after all our time together, that he wasn't worth fighting for?

Did he know what it meant that my phone had been blocked from calling him? Did he know that I would've never given him up? That I would've stayed in touch? That I would've come back way sooner than I had, had I known that he hadn't blocked me?

Had I known that he would've welcomed me with open arms, I would've come back, and I would've known that deep down, he was putting on a brave face. That he was hiding the fact that he never wanted to let me go.

I deflated.

I had let him go.

I hadn't fought for him at all.

“Okay,” I said to myself in the mirror. “You’re going to stop acting like this is about to end at any second. You’re going to convince him that this time, he’s good enough. This time, you’re going to stay, and you’re not ever going to leave. You’re going to grab him by the proverbial horns and tell him that he’s the one for you. And y’all should give this a try.”

“Are you done in there?” Folsom asked from the other side of the door.

My eye twitched. Did it surprise me that she was inside a house she’d never been to before? No.

I yanked open the door, and glared at her. “Where have you been?”

“Working,” she said.

“Why are you working there?” I asked, yanking my bag toward me, throwing it open, and observing the contents inside of it.

Yesterday, when I’d packed, I’d been a different person. I’d been “let’s wear whatever makes you comfortable” Morrigan. Today, I was “I want to look hot near Aodhan” Morrigan. Those were completely different girls with completely different fashion styles.

She shrugged, picking up the black leggings, a pair of hot-pink panties, and a black t-shirt off the bed before handing it all to me.

Aodhan’s t-shirt.

It would be absolutely massive on me—even back in high school his shirts had been massive—but it would be comfortable. And it somewhat appeased the whole ‘you need to look good for him’ thought process I had going on at that moment in time. Maybe seeing me in his clothes would please him...

“I was bored,” she admitted as she watched me get dressed. I didn’t bother to hide my nakedness from her. We’d moved beyond the point of being surprised when we saw each other’s

naked bits. “But working there is a whole lot like actual work, and you know how I am.”

I did know how she was.

Folsom liked to do stuff that was fun. She’d do this job at the vet clinic at most a week, then she’d say, “okay, well, that was fun,” and move on. Only, those sweet women that were dating two of Aodhan’s club members would suffer.

“You can’t allow them to think that you’re there, when you’re not,” I ordered.

“I already told them that I had another job. They only call me in when it’s a true emergency. Like today. Yesterday. Whatever. Both of them were out with the stomach bug. Which I hope that I don’t catch. I avoided it last week with my kid. I had to stay in their clinic all day and night with a can of Lysol. I don’t think I can handle getting sick. I don’t like vomit.” She scrunched up her nose.

I made a cross with my fingers and said, “The power of Christ compels you.”

She snickered and whirled around, her eyes studying her complexion in the mirror.

“I’m probably gonna be okay,” she said. “I would’ve had it already if I were going to get it.”

She did have a point. Last week, her daughter had been projectile vomiting everywhere. She’d hired some cleaners out of Intercourse, Texas, of all places, who actually worked on crime scene cleanup of all things, to come and deep clean her house after the “incident.” Had she been going to get it, the likelihood when her kid was using her as a pillow in the middle of puking sessions definitely would’ve been when she was going to get it.

“Okay,” I finally said. “Why are you here?”

“Because your dad sold you to the devil?” She rolled her eyes. “And you’ve had a lot of trauma goin’ on in your life. I would be a horrible person if I didn’t check up on you.”

“Hello, anyone home?” I heard called out.

By a female.

I frowned hard, then crept to the side of the door to peer out.

I was on the second floor.

Huh, imagine that.

I had no recollection of climbing stairs yesterday, let alone Aodhan’s house being two stories.

How had I missed that? Not only how had I missed the second story from outside, but I’d actively had to climb upstairs...

“You’ve had a lot going on,” my best friend said, reading my thoughts. “Do you know who that is?”

I shook my head, then took the stairs down until I reached the middle landing between flights of stairs to see Danyetta standing in the entrance, a look of worry on her face.

“Oh, good,” she said, entering farther into Aodhan’s house as she saw me. “I didn’t want to come inside any farther and scare you.”

“You could’ve knocked,” Folsom suggested, being her usual asshole self. Though, granted, this time she did have a right to be a bit snippy. It was one thing for my best friend to come unannounced into the house I was staying in. It was quite another when Aodhan’s ex-wife did it. Even if we weren’t anything to each other, Aodhan and me, I was still a guest in his home. “It is kind of weird to enter someone’s home.”

Not to mention, Aodhan had an alarm. Had he given her the code?

I mean, logically, I would think that Bowie would need to have it if he ever planned to stay with his dad. But why would Danyetta need to know it unless she made it a common habit to come over to Aodhan’s house without him being here?

I deflated slightly at the thought.

“I have a key,” Danyetta said. “What about you?”

Folsom snorted. “In this day and age, with electronic everything, I don’t need a key to get in anywhere.”

She was right. She didn’t.

I’d watched her walk into the bank after hours just to cash her own check. She’d done it, overwritten every single security feature there was, and walked out with cash.

She hadn’t stolen it. But she had helped herself. Like always.

Folsom didn’t have boundaries.

Then again, it was looking like Danyetta didn’t either.

I could totally see them getting in trouble together.

“I’m sorry,” Danyetta sighed. “I just really wanted to talk to you.”

My brows rose, and I turned my head slightly to the left as if to say, “Go on, feel free to share.”

“How about you take a seat,” Folsom suggested. “I’ll go make you a smoothie for a snack.”

I rolled my eyes.

Years ago, Folsom made it her life mission to fill me with healthy things such as fruit smoothies and tried to save me by ensuring I got lots of nutrients from my food intake.

It didn’t work, but the thought definitely counted.

I’d never be on Folsom’s league of healthy food intake, but she sure did try.

When I allowed it.

There was just so much health I could take before I decided being fucked up was better than unhappy.

“Aodhan actually went to get me breakfast.” I paused and looked at Danyetta. “And take Bowie to school.”

Danyetta flushed with embarrassment. “I needed him gone so I could talk to you.”

I took a seat on the edge of the couch, sensing I would need to be seated for this conversation.

“Okay.” I nodded. “Hit me.”

She looked nervous for a few seconds, bouncing her gaze from me to Folsom and back, before she nodded as if she saw what she needed to see.

“You know, he told me when we got together that if one day you called, he was gone.”

My mouth fell open. “He did not.”

“He did,” she said softly. “And we never slept together.”

My mouth all but fell off its hinges.

“*What?*”

Surely I’d misheard her.

Surely she hadn’t said what I thought she might’ve just said.

“We did this the medical way.” She grimaced. “Don’t ever tell Bowie this, but when I married Aodhan, it was with one very real thing in mind. To have a baby with Aodhan. But only in the ‘the doctor will implant his sperm into my egg’ kind of way. Not the ‘we’ll have sex’ kind of way.”

I shook my head as if to completely clear it of its shocked cobweb state.

“I...” I was relieved. I was so relieved it wasn’t even funny.

The thought of him being with someone else...that had literally torn me up so completely that I wasn’t willing to admit how badly it hurt.

“I wanted Bowie to be legitimate.” She scrunched her nose up as if disgusted by her actions. “I know that sounds super-duper stupid when I put it like that. I married a man that I



didn't want, that didn't want me back, just so I could have a kid with him and he could be legitimate.”

I blinked owlshly at her.

“Aodhan said something when he was dropping Bowie off last night, and I wanted to address it with you. To make sure you know that what we have wasn't based on love, or lust. It was a mutual agreement that it would last as long as it lasted, and the moment we found what we were looking for, things would go a different way.”

“That's...” I said. “I don't know what that is. That's crazy.”

So eloquent.

To be blindsided by her words, even after trying to convince myself that we could be together despite what I perceived as faults—i.e., him moving on so quickly after leaving me—was still a shock.

“I'd also like to be friends,” she said. “You mean a lot to him. I could see that the day that you fainted at the coffee shop. Actually, I saw it before that. You came out of the back room, your head downcast, and I swear to God. I saw him light up for the first time in years.”

That actually made me extremely happy.

To know that I still meant that much to him to affect his moods was everything.

“Oh,” I said softly, turning to Folsom.

Was I dreaming?

“No,” Folsom snorted. “You're not dreaming. I hope you're being really truthful here. This could make or break her. Them.”

Danyetta nodded with complete certainty on her face. “He doesn't think he's good enough for you. He never has.”

“I think that was my choice to tell her that or not tell her that,” I heard Aodhan say, anger clear in his voice.

I turned to find him standing in the doorway, looking as if he would explode at any second.

“Not to mention, it’d have been really fuckin’ nice to be able to stay in bed today, sleep in, and catch up on all the good REM sleep I’ve missed lately,” he said. “If you were here, you could’ve easily taken him.”

“But how would I have told her that I all but manipulated you into having a child with me?” Danyetta asked with all seriousness.

“What?” I asked.

That definitely hadn’t been mentioned.

“You didn’t manipulate me,” he groaned.

“I did.” She rolled her eyes. “We were friends. We’d been friends for a while. And I slowly whittled him down, day by day, until he said yes to the baby thing.”

Aodhan blinked. “You told her that?”

“Were you going to?” she asked.

Aodhan’s mouth shut tight.

No, he wasn’t going to tell me.

“Bowie won’t find out,” she said as if this was an old argument. “And I told you to call her years ago, before anything went down at the hospital with those nurses. The worst of which has moved back to town now that he’s out of prison.”

“I know,” Aodhan grumbled. “I already got surveillance on his house.”

“Good,” she said. “I know that he’s not allowed within a certain number of feet of us thanks to that restraining order that was granted, but I’m not fully confident that he won’t try to start something with us.”

“The guy got released?” I questioned.

Damn, I felt like I had whiplash. Their topics of conversation were everywhere.

“He got out weeks ago but finally made his way back here,” Aodhan answered. “We were hoping that he wouldn’t, since there were so many of his victims in this area. But we’re fairly sure that he’s moving back just to fuck with us. He knows that he has a lot of unhappy families here.”

From what I understood, Bowie, Danyetta and Aodhan had been the lucky ones. They’d found out very fast what had happened. They hadn’t taken an infant that wasn’t theirs home. They hadn’t bonded with another infant that wasn’t their baby. They hadn’t raised them and molded them into who they wanted them to be.

But other families had.

Lots of them.

And lots of them were very angry still.

A news special had just come on last week talking about the man going to prison—and now he was getting out?—and what the families were doing now.

Four of them were living in the same neighborhood, and they shared custody of their kids. How did you take a child away from the only person they knew? That’s right. You didn’t.

That was like a punch right to the gut.

“We only thought the hospital broke protocol with us, didn’t we?” I winced.

Aodhan smiled.

“Funny how fate works out, isn’t it?” he asked.

A big, brawny man like Aodhan talking about fate? That was like a soothing balm to my ragged soul.

“Yeah,” I said softly. “Funny.”

“Well,” Folsom said. “You got enough in those bags for me?”

“I have enough for you, since I knew you were coming over, yes.” He looked at Danyetta, his eyes narrowing. “You need to apologize.”

“I’m sorry,” she answered immediately.

Aodhan rolled his eyes. “Not to me, Yeti. To her. She didn’t need to deal with this today.”

Actually, today had been the best day for it.

I’d already been on the verge of throwing myself at him.

Knowing that he hadn’t moved on, not even a little bit? That was enough to force me off the ledge I’d been straddling.

I was now fully committed.

If he wanted me, he could have me.

# CHAPTER 13

*You don't have to die to be dead to me.*  
*-coffee cup*

## AODHAN

Something had changed.

Whether it was learning that I hadn't blocked her after all, or what she'd learned from Danyetta, I didn't know.

But after the two extra women at my kitchen table left, I would be asking her.

"What's with that look on your face?" Folsom asked.

*Was she always so in your face?*

Luckily, the words weren't directed at me.

Because I wasn't sure I could tell her what was actually on my mind—her best friend.

That wouldn't be appropriate to talk about right now with all the extra people in my business that didn't actually need to be there.

"I'm thinking that this table is a little cramped with four people sitting at it," I told her, not outright telling her to leave, but insinuating all the same.

Folsom grinned. "You want us to leave, don't you?"

If she could be direct, so could I.

"I want you to leave," I confirmed.

Folsom clapped comically. "See, look how easy it is to be direct. It didn't hurt you or me for you to say that, either."

"It kind of hurt me," Danyetta stood up, gathered her Egg McMuffin trash, and threw it into the trash can beside the back door.

Her eyes narrowed on something outside, then she dropped her head and looked at her feet.

"What?" I asked.

She gestured toward the door, and I looked up just as my alarm alerted me that two people were walking up my

driveway.

“Is that the district attorney dude?” I asked.

I knew the other man.

“Damn, that dude is a tall glass of black water,” Folsom said dreamily.

“What the hell is black water?” I wondered.

“I think it was a euphemism,” Morrigan said softly, her throat still scratchy despite her speaking a lot better this morning. “A tall glass of water is something people say when they’re talking about a man that’s a sight for sore eyes, you know? I think the black part was just her saying that man looked really good. And he’s an African American god.”

I looked down at her to see her cheeks pinking.

She went back to her chair, and I wondered if she was going to sit there just to sit, or if seeing Sheriff Sunny Summers was just making her heart wonky.

Jesus, I hoped it was the former.

I didn’t want her feeling like that for any other man but me.

And now I was sitting there considering punching the sheriff for being attractive. Go me.

I opened the door to the two men, and Danyetta all but hid behind Folsom, behind us all.

Derek Shepherd, who definitely wasn’t a doctor on television but an actual real-life district attorney for the state of Florida, walked in first. Followed by Sunny Summers, the new sheriff that was instated shortly after I was released from prison last year.

Derek’s eyes scanned the kitchen the moment he breached my door, looking for the one woman that he’d likely been dying to see. Sunny’s eyes came directly to me.

He held out his hand, and I shook it.

“Just making a friendly visit to let you know that Adler Newsome was seen around town today, and he left with a warning never to show his face in the area again.” He looked at me as if he knew exactly who Adler had made an acquaintance with this morning.

Which was right.

Me.

When I’d seen Adler out and about this morning, something enraged had come over me. He was acting as if he hadn’t changed the lives of hundreds of people. As if he was just out for a cruise of the town, when we both fucking knew the only reason he was there was because he wanted to stir trouble. To let people know that he was back and wasn’t leaving.

“Imagine that,” I drawled.

“Were you anywhere near The Wharf today?” he asked, looking pointedly at the McDonald’s wrappers still on my kitchen table.

“Sure was,” I said, not seeing the point in lying.

A, it would be lying to Sunny, the sheriff of the county where I currently lived. B, he knew, and was just confirming. And C, there were a lot of witnesses.

Not that I was sure any of those witnesses would be talking.

It bugged me to no end that motherfucker could move freely through our town.

If he suffered a fucked-up face every time he went out to see the town, well, that was his own problem.

“What’s this got to do with anything?” Morrigan asked then, her arms crossing over her chest. She glared from her position sitting at the table.

“Just making friendly conversation.” Sunny shrugged, his eyes going to Morrigan, or more specifically, Morrigan’s throat. “How are you, coffee lady?”



Morrigan snorted. “I’m well. How’s the coffee shop doing this morning?”

“Exceptionally well,” he confirmed. “Your milk order arrived on time, and I got my usual cup of hot chocolate right as the doors opened this morning.”

Morrigan fist-pumped the air, and Derek finally looked away from where Danyetta was hiding to stare at my girl.

He frowned, his gaze flicking from me to Morrigan again until something finally dawned.

“You and her?” he asked.

That was directed at me.

“Me and him,” Morrigan said, answering for me. “Just like it’s always been.”

I honestly hadn’t been expecting those words. She could’ve said any number of things, and I would’ve not been surprised in the least. But her admitting it, straight out, that there was something here?

I hadn’t expected that.

Derek’s gaze went to Danyetta again who, might I add, still hadn’t come out from behind Folsom.

I shook my head and said, “So why are y’all here? If not to accuse me of a crime?”

I wasn’t trying to be rude or anything, but Morrigan had just said something that was tearing my brain to pieces. I needed to talk to her. I then needed to feel her underneath my hands.

And the best way for that to happen was for everyone to fucking leave.

“I’m here because I was going to play golf with Sunny after this,” Derek said. “And I was going to sit in the car but...”

But he saw Danyetta’s car and came in, thinking he’d get a glimpse of her. Plus, he was a glutton for punishment. Like I’d

always been.

Any glimpse of the love of his life, even if she was with another man, was enough to survive on.

I'd had a few of those instances over the years.

But my mistake had been going through Morrigan's father. He would give me an update on how she was doing—likely lying through his teeth every fuckin' time I asked—and then would send me some photos of the last time that they'd visited her.

Had any of those photos ever been real?

If I had to guess, maybe not.

“And...” Danyetta finally came out of her hiding spot, a new determination in her spine. “We were just getting to know each other. Morrigan had a tough couple of days, and this isn't the time or the place for this to happen with her still recovering.”

At her words, I visibly saw Derek flinch.

I'd never gotten the whole story out of Danyetta about Derek.

I knew that they'd had a relationship. I knew that something had happened. I knew that she loved him and would never love another person as long as she lived. But that was about it.

Hell, the reason I'd agreed to have a kid with her had been because I'd seen myself in Yeti.

“We were just visiting,” Sunny said. “Y'all are on the way to the golf course.”

We were. If you made us on the way.

My brows rose at his blatant lie.

I looked at him, watched him flick his head very minutely in Morrigan and Folsom's direction, and I knew. Whatever he had to say needed to be said without them present.

Got it.

“Well then let me walk y’all out,” I suggested.

Sunny nodded, said his goodbyes, and followed me outside. Derek was a lot slower to do so, but eventually, when Danyetta wouldn’t look at him, he left with a nod to everyone. When we were on the front porch, Sunny’s eyes went out to the area beyond. Derek joined us seconds later, crossing his arms and leaning against the pole next to the front steps.

His gaze looking at everything and nothing before he finally said, “I have a really bad feeling about that nurse being let out.”

It wasn’t as if I needed my suspicions of him being back and what I thought he might or might not do, to be confirmed through someone else. But it was good to know that someone else felt the same damn way as I had.

“The old judge, district attorney, and sheriff had some good ol’ buddy-buddy thing going on,” Derek said. “I’m in the process of going through some old files, and I feel like there were a lot of things overlooked, missed completely, and covered up. Cases that should’ve never been cases. People sent to prison and serving time for things that should’ve never been time served.” He looked at me pointedly. “We have the chance to clean things up, and we’ve partnered up to do just that.”

I nodded, happy to hear that.

“Thank you,” I said.

“What happened before won’t happen again,” he promised.

Then he went to the car, leaving Sunny and me on the porch alone.

“He’s a good guy,” Sunny said. “But sometimes he’s so literal, black and white, that it’s hard to like him.”

I grunted out a laugh. “You’re not lying.”

“I feel like possibly there’s a disconnect between him and me. That’s why the golf day,” he said. “But I did stop to say

that I felt like something was going to happen. It's a gut feeling I can feel right in here," he pressed his hand to his chest, right over his heart. "Had these feelings since I was a kid, and they've never steered me wrong."

I nodded. "You think it's just him?"

Because I felt like it was more than just him.

I got the same feelings. Though they were now directed at quite a few people, not just the sick fuck who liked to switch babies for fun. For instance, the man that attacked Morrigan. He was just one of a multitude of people that'd been bothering me lately.

"The guy we're holding until Monday," he said. "He's not saying anything. He's barely even moved since we got him to jail after being checked over. But someone came to try to see him the other day. Another guy that said he was his 'club brother.' But the guy said they were leaving, and not to come find them because they didn't want to be associated with dumbasses. His exact words. The guy practically deflated when he heard his 'club brother's' words." He sighed. "Haven't seen them at all since. My guess on that end, it's a dead end. Nothing will come of that. The judge will sentence him, he'll spend time in jail, that's the end of that."

I crossed my arms over my chest. No, still not happy with it. No amount of jail time would ever be enough for what he'd done to my woman.

"There's something going on with the youth population, too," he said. "I've had a couple of kids your son's age start vandalizing. Good kids, according to their parents. All of them are flabbergasted that their 'babies' are turning into deviant tyrants. Then there's a growing number of teenage pregnancies. Though, luckily all those girls are of age. But there's just a pulse in this place of bad shit going on, and I can't figure out what it is."

"I can ask Bowie. And Lolo," I said. "Wake would know more about Lolo, though. She's a good kid."

“I notice you didn’t say your kid was a good kid,” he observed.

I remembered what the little fucker had said to me this morning as he’d gotten out of the car.

*And for what it’s worth, your new girlfriend looks like she’s special. A special piece of trash.*

I clamped my hands into fists.

That’d be something that I would be bringing up to Danyetta when we were alone next.

“He’s something.” I paused. “But I don’t think he’s dumb enough to get into trouble with kids his age. He’s at that new school, and they’re all nerds. Bowie barely leaves his room, and when he does, it’s to go to his friend’s house that’s the next street over. Once there, they livestream, cuss, and video themselves doing mini raves when they finally manage to kill someone in COD.”

COD being *Call of Duty*.

He didn’t know it, but even though I freakin’ hated *Call of Duty*, and video games in general, I was their only follower. When Bowie got onto the live stream, a notification popped up on my phone, and no matter what I was doing, I got on and watched them. And when I couldn’t do it, I got an SOS signal out to Danyetta, and she watched them.

At first, it was because we wanted to make sure they were being safe about it. With the internet and information age being what it was, I’d wanted to make sure that he wasn’t inadvertently sharing information about his life, where he lived, where he went to school, stuff like that.

But now, it was because when Bowie was livestreaming, it was as if I was witnessing a different kid. One that didn’t hate me and everything there was about me.

“That’s good.” Sunny nodded. “Anyway, there’re a few things on my mind lately, and right now, I don’t think that I can pinpoint why. But if any of those end up involving any of

y'all." He gestured at my cut, the one that denoted me a member of the Gator Bait MC, and finished with, "I'll let y'all know."

I nodded, offered him my hand, and was watching him leave when Folsom and Danyetta walked out the door.

"Did we give you enough time to talk without us?" Folsom asked.

I grinned at her. "He was concerned about a lot of things, one of which being Yeti and my son. But I told him he had nothing to worry about there."

"Cool." Folsom nodded. "Goodbye, Aodhan. Be gentle with her."

I tilted my head and watched as a mirthful gleam entered her eyes.

I wasn't quite sure that she meant "be gentle with her" in the "take care of her soul, it's gentle" kind of way. More like a "if you decide to fuck her brains out, be gentle with her because she was just strangled" kind of way.

"I'll do that," I said as I watched her walk away to a moped that I hadn't seen parked down the street until now.

It was old, too.

So old, in fact, that there wasn't a single speck of paint on it that wasn't flecked off and showing primer beneath.

Only when she was successfully on her way did I turn to face Danyetta.

"I didn't mean to go blurting all that out today," she admitted to me. "But when I got started, I just felt like she needed to know it all." She grimaced. "I lay there in bed last night, thinking about all the things. And I decided that as a woman, I would want to know the guy that I've been in love with half my life didn't actually, in fact, sleep with another woman during the middle of him supposedly being in love with me."

I grimaced.

When she put it that way, it did sound bad.

I wouldn't have been very happy to think that, either.

Just now, it was absolutely killing me to think that she'd moved on.

If she had, I wouldn't have blamed her. I mean, my God. I'd pushed her away, supposedly moved on, and had a kid with someone else. Then, I'd gone to prison. If that didn't have bad news written all over it, I didn't know what did.

"Move on with your life, Aodhan," she said as she started moving toward her own car. The one that I'd seen and immediately had an apoplectic fit to see when I'd arrived. Yeti always moved to the beat of her own drum. There'd been no telling what I'd walk in on. "Allow yourself to be happy. If she offers you the chance, I want you to hold on and never let go."

Her words made me remember what Bowie said as I'd dropped him off today.

"Wait," I called as she was almost to her car.

She turned around.

"Did you get a chance to talk to Bowie about Morrigan last night?" I asked.

She nodded. "I wanted him to know that I was okay with the move. That, even though we weren't together anymore, we'd still be a family. I showed him and Lolo a picture of you and Morrigan when y'all were young."

I swallowed hard. "He's really unhappy about it."

"Funny thing, Aodhan," she called out as she opened her car door. "Kids don't have a requirement to be happy. The law states we have to take care of them. Such as feed them, give them a roof over their head, and make sure they're safe. It says nothing at all about happiness."

Then she got into her car, closed the door, and backed out of my driveway.

I waited until she was gone, too. Then realized what I was doing.

Stalling.

I walked into my house, closed and locked the door behind me, then found Morrigan watching me from the stool she'd started occupying when Sunny had walked into the house.

"I told myself it didn't matter," she said softly, her eyes full of vulnerability. "But it did. It does. Knowing that you didn't move on...that matters to me. It matters so much that I'm having a hard time breathing right now."

I swallowed.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I'm sorry I ever unintentionally made you think that about me."

I was going to tell her if I ever saw her again. But she hadn't called.

Goddammit, she hadn't called!

Her fucking father.

When I'd gotten that message, I'd wanted to go over to her father's house and rip his head off.

But I'd spent enough time away from her. I wasn't adding any more time to the list because of her father.

"We've wasted a lot of years," she said, standing up.

I felt my heart start to pound.

"We have," I confirmed.

Years I hadn't wanted to waste.

Years that we couldn't get back.

Years that had been torture.

She moved slowly toward me, and I, for once, felt what it was like to be the prey.

By the time she reached me, standing toe to toe, I felt like my heart would fly right out of my chest.



“I’m tired of wasting my life,” she said. “I want you.”

I want you.

Three simple words.

The only three words I needed.

Between one breath and the next, we were in each other’s arms.

Seconds later, I was striding down the length of my hallway toward my stairs, then up toward my bed.

Seconds after that, I was falling with her to the mattress, clothes flying, and things were progressing very fast.

“I don’t...” she said as she pushed me away slightly, both of us panting from our kisses. “I haven’t slept with anyone else.”

“Thank fucking God,” I growled.

“And since I haven’t done that, I don’t know if I’ll pass out,” she admitted.

The thought stilled me.

“I don’t think I will. When I’m sitting or lying, I never pass out,” she confessed. “But you don’t have to stop if...”

I laughed at her. “I’m not going to keep going when you’re passed out.”

She smiled. “I don’t mind.”

# CHAPTER 14

*No daddy. Just issues.*

*-Coffee Cup*

## MORRIGAN

“I don’t mind,” I said.

His carefree laugh sent my heart racing.

Well, racing further. It was already pounding a mile a minute.

I wasn’t sure if this was going to work.

I was so freakin’ nervous.

Not to mention the fact that this was the first time Aodhan and I had been this close in a very long time. This was definitely years in the making.

But then there was the fact that this would be the first time that I’d been intimate with someone after my diagnosis.

I mean, logically, I knew that this would all work out okay. I was with a man that I trusted more than myself, and if things needed to be handled with care, he’d definitely be caring. A lot.

But I wanted this to be okay. I wanted to be normal, in this one little aspect of my life.

I wanted to do this. I really, really wanted to do this.

“What are you thinking about so hard behind those eyes?” he asked, kissing said eyes, forcing me to close them, one by one.

I shivered underneath his nakedness, feeling the hard bits of him, but also relishing in the way he was being so sweet, too.

“I’m hoping I can be normal,” I whispered brokenly. “I don’t want to stop.”

I wanted to feel the excitement of an orgasm with Aodhan.

“Do you pass out when you come on your own?” he asked, his mouth moving softly over the shell of my ear, and the curve of my neck.

“I get nowhere near as excited about masturbating as I am right now, with the possibility of you getting inside of me soon,” I pointed out.

He leaned to the side, his big, scarred, rough hand reaching down and curling around my knee, lifting it up high and pushing it to the side.

Even just that simple of a movement had me all but shaking underneath him, my eyes closing as I allowed myself to feel what it was like to have his hands on me.

God, this was what I’d wanted for so long.

To have his focus on me. To have all his undivided attention.

His hand moved up, going from the back of my knee, to the inside of my thigh, coming just short of stopping his hand right before my mound.

“I used to think about this all day and night,” he said. “Me running my hands all over you.”

“You don’t think about that all day and night anymore?” I teased.

His laughter rumbled over my already frayed nerves, but definitely in a good way. In a “you’re about to get laid” kind of way.

“I still think about you all the time,” he admitted. “But now, I have things I worry about that aren’t just running my hands all over your naked body.”

He punctuated this statement by running his fingers lightly over my throat.

The bruising was god-awful. With each moment that passed since I’d been hurt, the bruising got worse and worse.

I shivered slightly at the lightness of his touch.

My eyes opened, and I saw him gazing down at my neck with a pained expression. As if he was heartsick that I’d had to go through it in the first place.

I mean, it wasn't like I enjoyed going through that. It's been one of the worst experiences of my life.

However, it wasn't the worst experience.

The worst experience was watching Aodhan walk through my door the last time after he told me we should break things off. That was the moment in my life that I still had nightmares about.

But I couldn't be mad at the thing that brought him back to me.

Well, I could.

I definitely wasn't counting it as lucky, but I was counting it as a stepping-stone to the thing that I wanted most in my life. Him.

His eyes finally lifted from my neck, where he was lightly tracing the bruising, to my face. Our eyes connected, and he held our gazes together so long that I started to squirm.

"Kiss me," I pleaded.

He leaned down, oh so slowly, and kissed me.

One single kiss on the center of my lips.

And it was life changing.

I knew in that moment that I would never let this man go again. I wouldn't let him.

He would have to stay with me forever, because I was tired of not having him around.

I threaded my hand around his neck, held him to me, and kissed him back then. I gave it everything I had, and when I finally let him pull back, we were both gasping for breath.

"What was that for?" he asked, his hand once again going to my leg that he had moved to the side, pushing it backward and up.

I lifted my hips as I said, "Just trying to let you know that I won't let you go again."

His eyes flared.

Then he was lifting himself up, fitting himself against my entrance, and pushing inside.

He pushed his cock all the way inside of me with very little resistance. I was so wet for him I might be embarrassed about it later. But for now, I was too busy lifting up, urging him deeper and deeper inside.

Aodhan had always been a bit too big for me. But the stretch had always been my most favorite part about when he entered into me for the first time. And now, even with my body screaming that it was way too much, I relished in the delicious way his body filled mine so completely.

He groaned, dropping his forehead to rest against mine, and twisted his hips. Not side to side, but a delicious up and down number that he used to do so long ago. The one that instantly sent a delicious shiver straight to those parts deep inside.

“Mmmm,” I moaned, unable to stop myself. “You didn’t forget.”

He laughed, his breath puffing out against my lips as he said, “You think I’d forget anything about you? You’re my favorite obsession, Morrigan St. Pete.”

I smiled, causing my lip to brush his lower one.

He leaned forward and took my mouth, using his tongue to sweep inside at the same rate that his cock penetrated my pussy. Short, perfectly placed thrusts that were driving me insane.

They were also doing what they were designed to do: make me come.

I could feel it building, slow at first, until suddenly it was an imminent orgasm on the horizon.

I could feel how big it felt. The magnitude of the explosive I knew he was about to detonate.

It honestly kind of scared me a little bit.

If I was going to pass out, this was about to be it.

I could feel the spacey feeling, and I couldn't quite tell if it was because of my impending orgasm, or my impending faint.

But I hoped and prayed that it would hold off just long enough...

My hand reached up and latched on to his wrist that was planted beside my face.

My fingernails dug into his wrist, and I cried out as the mother of all orgasms took me over.

Distantly, I heard him roar his release, and little black spots danced in my vision.

I didn't pass out, though.

I groaned, my eyelids drooping lazily as an almost boneless feeling washed over me.

Aodhan pressed a kiss onto my throat, right over the bruised mark of another man's hand, and said, "That was the last time anyone but me will touch you."

I shivered in delight and said, "I think I might need to stay here until I calm down."

His laughter ruffled the stray hairs against my neck this time.

"I think that's okay," he teased.

It was okay.

I was perfectly okay.

I all but sank into the bed beneath me, my legs tangling with Aodhan's, as I closed my eyes and released a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding.

"That was about fifty years of pent-up sexual tension," I taunted.

He grunted out a laugh, pulling out of me as he did.

I instantly felt bereft without him inside of me.

“Jesus,” I whispered. “I feel so empty.”

I gasped as his fingers gathered the wetness that I could feel leaking out of me, and shoving it back inside.

“You still on birth control?” he asked.

I shook my head. “No.”

He stilled above me, and I felt the distinct stiffening of his softening member on my thigh where it lay limply. Well, definitely not limply anymore. It was most certainly as unlimp as a dick could get.

“Whoa, cowboy,” I teased.

“Mama,” he growled, his fingers pushing in deep. “Why does the idea of you not on birth control turn me harder than a goddamn concrete cinder block?”

I licked my lips, then glanced up into his eyes that were definitely telling me all kinds of feelings at the moment.

“Because the thought of permanently marking me as yours is a caveman thing you’ve always had going for you,” I teased.

His eyes twinkled then. “Permanently marking you as mine...I kind of like the sound of that.”

Then he was replacing his fingers with his cock, and I was once again being filled up exactly how I wanted.

This time was much slower than the last.

We were lazy and sweet, and the orgasm that he produced out of me was much less explosive but a whole lot more impactful.

Because I loved seeing the sweet side of Aodhan.

I loved even more that the only person he showed that sweet side to was me.

“I want this,” he said after we both came down from our releases. “I want to see this through to the end.”

“The end?” I asked, surprised.



“I want this to be it for us. I want to fulfill our bargain. I want this to be the beginning of forever for us. I want you for me, and I don’t care what anyone or anything thinks about it,” he said.

“What about your son?” I asked, pushing up onto my elbow and placing my hand on his chest. “Baby, we need to let him into this gently. He doesn’t need me shoved into his face all fast like. That’s not how I want this to go.”

He shook his head. “Honestly? I’m tired of pleasing everyone and everything but myself. I want you. You want me. Those are the only two people that should matter at the moment.”

“But your son...” I started.

“Hates me,” he finished. “My son hates me.”

My mouth fell open. “He does not.”

“He does,” he disagreed. “He can’t stand me. Goes out of his way to make my life hell, and doesn’t care that he does it, either. I’ll protect him, and still love him anyway, but I’m done letting him dictate my life. Done letting anyone but you dictate my life. I deserve to be happy.”

He was right. He did deserve to be happy.

“Okay,” I finally said. “But we’re gonna make him like you.”

He snorted. “Good fucking luck.”

I would make him eat those words.

I smiled.

Then tested my sea legs.

I managed not to pass out.

At least, not until an hour later when we tried to do it again in the kitchen standing up.

Note to self: don’t have sex standing up, and you’ll be okay.

## CHAPTER 15

*I'll love you until my lungs give out, even if you're the one  
stabbing them.*

*-Morrigan to Aodhan*

## MORRIGAN

“I’m sorry, what?” I asked, hoping for clarification.

What I got was a repeat of what I thought I’d heard, but hoped I didn’t.

“There was some vandalism at the store,” Theresa said. “Martine came in for shift change. We were both in the back stocking up on everything. We didn’t hear the bell go off, and everything inside is now burned to a crisp because someone decided to set the front booth on fire because we weren’t answering fast enough.”

I shook my head.

“That’s...” I didn’t even know what that was. Crazy. We’d had some colorful people come into the shop before, a few of which had gotten a bit out of hand, but nothing ever like this. “That’s not good.”

“No,” Martine agreed, having stayed quiet throughout the entire conversation. “The crazy thing was, we didn’t hear a thing.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose, trying to figure out what to do next.

The phone was taken from my hand, and then Aodhan was asking questions I hadn’t thought to ask.

“When did this happen?” He paused. “Where were y’all again?” Another pause. “Do you have security camera footage?” Pause. “Are you both okay?” Pause. “Are the police there?” Pause. “Do they need us there now, or will they be heading our way?”

It went on like that for a solid five minutes, and I listened to both ends of the conversation, still in a state of shock.

My building was toast. At least, the front part where all the interactions with the customers, and all the coffee was made. The back was practically a storage room, and my office may

not have been harmed, but I was sure it'd still have to be gutted if there was any smoke damage.

"I'll have her down there in ten minutes," Aodhan said, reaching over and flipping the blanket off of himself.

He stood up, and I watched the muscles in the back of his thighs and butt ripple.

My stomach clenched for a different reason then, and I swear to you, I was a horrible person. Who thought about pulling their lover back down into bed and forgetting your problems when your place of business just burned down to the ground?

"Do you have private access to your camera system?" he asked.

I pulled out my phone and looked into the system. "Kind of. If there was any tampering to the camera outside my office, then I'm not sure what kind of luck I'll have..."

He bent over the bed, pushed me back onto it, and the phone fell to my side. My eyes flared wide and landed on him.

"What's with that red?" he asked, trailing the back of his index finger down my cheek.

I blushed harder.

"Thinking about naughty things there, Mama?" he teased.

God. Mama.

How I'd missed hearing him call me that.

And to hear him calling me that when he was all but pressing me into the bed? While we were both naked? Yeah, that was the biggest shock to my system.

Last night had been incredible. We'd spent all day and all night getting reacquainted with each other in the biblical way. Now we were having to face the real world again.

But I didn't have to do it alone.

“There’s likely a ninety percent chance that I’m going to pass out today,” I said.

I wasn’t necessarily due, but I had a feeling what I was about to see in my office would set all my nerve endings to fizzling. Getting mad was one of my biggest triggers with my POTS.

He continued to run his finger over the apple of my cheek before saying, “I’ll always be there to catch you, Mama.”

Then he pushed off of me.

I watched him walk toward his bathroom, and only when he was completely gone from view did I pull up my phone app for my camera system.

I watched a man in his late forties come into the shop, walk up to the register, and tap his fingers. With each second that passed, he seemed to get angrier and angrier. He made absolutely zero attempt to call out to anyone, or make his presence known.

After about five minutes of waiting, he turned around and left, pushing over a bottle of creamer on the counter as he left.

Minutes later, you could see the smoke start to fill the area.

I switched to a different view, this time watching him enter and exit.

But it wasn’t the man that started the fire.

It was someone else.

Someone that walked through the door of my coffee shop, poured something out on the closest table, stuffed a roll of paper towels from the table into the middle of a pile, and then pulled out a lighter and lit it all.

The paper towels took all of two seconds to flare up.

The table took even less time, since I’d found them all made from repurposed barn wood.

The stuff was dry, original, and it went up like kindling.

The arsonist watched the paper towels burn, and then once he was sure that they would catch the other tables, he left.

“Babe, what is it?” Aodhan asked.

Stomach in knots, I watched a mini version of the man standing in front of me run out of my shop, then turned my eyes up to him with my heart shattered.

I did not want to tell him what I just saw.

But I showed him anyway.

He took the phone from my hand, his eyes wary, and looked at the video that was now on repeat.

At first, he watched.

I knew he saw the man leave, pissed as hell for not getting any service in the five minutes that he’d been standing there—that would be something I was going to talk to Martine and Theresa about. That was ridiculous. Nobody should have to wait five minutes for someone to show up.

There was no way in hell they were back there “not hearing anything.”

They were either not in that back room at all, or they were very preoccupied.

My bet was they were back there having sex.

Martine and Theresa thought that I didn’t know about their relationship—which was quite hilarious because even if I didn’t have cameras in the private areas, I did have eyes in my head. I saw the way they interacted when they were around each other.

Aodhan’s stiffening had me closing my eyes and dropping my head to my chest.

“What...” Aodhan paused, his voice ragged. “God, no.”

I clenched my hand into a fist in my lap, then slowly blew out a breath and stood from the bed.

While he was looking at the screen, I moved to get dressed, knowing that this was about to be bad.

Aodhan's son, Bowie, had set my store on fire.

•••

“No, the cameras weren't working,” I said, voice firm and absolute. “I was having issues with my internet last week.” And I was. I even had documented proof that they'd come out. “And never got the cameras up and running again.”

I'd just lied to a cop.

I was going to look horrible in orange.

Sunny's eyes looked at me, really taking me in, and I knew he knew I'd just lied.

His head tilted, and he said, “There've been some youth setting fire to some things lately. Porta potties, woodpiles at construction sites, playground equipment. I don't want to say that this was them, too, but it wouldn't surprise me.”

I gave him a solid look.

One that definitely portrayed my stance. I wouldn't be backing down.

I wouldn't be turning Bowie in.

I wouldn't...

“It was Bowie,” Aodhan said.

Those three words felt like they were ripped straight from his soul.

Sunny's eyes turned from me to Aodhan.

“I know,” he said. “I watched him come out of the building from the business across the street's camera footage. We would've had him regardless of if we got the actual proof here or not.”

Aodhan's hands were clenched into tight fists, causing the veins in his forearm to stand out, pulsing with his anger and

despair.

“You gonna have to charge him?” I asked, hoping to hear that he wasn’t, but knowing in my heart that he was.

“Yes,” Sunny answered. “It’s unfortunate for him that he was caught, but he’ll have to answer to this crime.”

“It’s unfortunate not because he was caught, but because he thought he could do this and get away with it in the first place,” Aodhan snarled.

Oh, boy.

He was big mad.

“Aodhan...” I started, but he whirled around and nailed me to my spot with a hard glare.

“My son will have to answer to this one, Mama,” he growled. “And not even your mama-bear instincts will save him from this. He fucked around. Now he’ll find out.”

Oh, *shit*.



# CHAPTER 16

68. *You owe me one.*  
*-Text from Morr to Aodhan*

## AODHAN

Shock. Despair. Denial. Shame.

Those four feelings were swimming through my bloodstream as I drove to the school to get my son. I'd already called Danyetta to meet me at home, and she'd said that she was already there talking with Wake and Dutch, Wake's wife. Sunny was to meet us there after he was done at Morrigan's shop.

Morrigan sat quietly in the seat beside me, going blue in the face as she tried to convince me not to do anything rash, and to just pay for the damages.

"I mean, I'll bet if I don't press charges..." she started, but I'd had enough.

"Mama," I said quietly. "Even if you wanted to not claim this on your insurance, and allow me to pay for it, I couldn't afford to pay for it. I have about thirty *K* saved up in the bank, and that's it. Your store is going to easily cost at least seventy-five *K*, if not more, to fix. I just don't have that. And neither does Danyetta." And before she could come up with another argument, I said, "And even if we did have the money, we wouldn't go that route. I fuckin' hate that I have to let this lesson be learned, but it's going to be learned. Not to mention, your insurance company, who is going to fix this for you, will want to charge Bowie."

She grumbled something under her breath that caused me to smile for the first time in half an hour since I'd seen that fuckin' video.

"Just..." Morrigan started, trailed off, then started again what felt like a whole minute later. "I was left quite a bit of money."

I looked over at her.

"My grandmother on my mom's side. I didn't know about it until I was twenty-five and my grandmother's lawyer called me to ask why I hadn't touched that account yet. Apparently, it

was something my dad was told about when I was a young girl. Then, when he received the statements letting me know how much money was in the account, and how much was invested in my name, he threw them away.” She paused. “I have a lot in there. It hadn’t been touched, and only invested, in the last how many ever years. There’s a good chunk in there. I can use that to...” I was already shaking my head.

“Not this time, baby. We’re not even going to finish talking about this,” I ordered.

She crossed her arms across her chest so cutely, then pouted the rest of the way to the school.

I parked and got out, leaving Morrigan to hold down the fort in the car while I went inside and got my kid.

The woman at the front desk called Bowie for me almost reluctantly after I proved that I was Bowie’s father with not one but *two* forms of identification.

The moment that Bowie stepped out of his classes, I gestured for him to follow me outside without saying a word.

He walked behind me, and I could almost hear his brain thinking.

*Does he know that I snuck out of school?*

*Does he know that I did something bad?*

“Whose car is that?” Bowie asked curiously as we walked up to it.

I opened the passenger back door as I said, “Morrigan’s.”

He paused halfway into the car, and I finished his descent by pushing on his head and all but demanding with steady pressure that he get into the car.

He looked up at me, started to protest, but I leveled him with a glare that could peel paint and said, “I wouldn’t argue with me right now.”

He opened his mouth and then closed it.

“Get in,” I ordered.

He got in, swung his legs around, and I closed the door.

When we were all inside, I said, “Buckle up.”

Bowie did, and Morrigan turned around in her seat and waved at Bowie. “Hi, I’m Morrigan. I’m...”

“My girlfriend,” I finished for Morrigan.

She turned her gaze to me and glared.

I smiled again, this time a lot happier than the last.

God, I loved the woman with my whole heart.

I still hated myself for leaving her.

All these years, I’d thought she’d been safe and happy. All these years, her father had done nothing but lie to me about her happiness.

“Uh, hi,” Bowie said, sounding like the words were pulled from his strangled throat. “Nice car.”

That last part was said facetiously.

Morrigan didn’t own a nice car.

Far from it.

It was the same damn one she drove all those years ago when I’d left her behind.

It was time for a new one, but I couldn’t very well buy her one with her being an independent person. What were the odds she’d just take it with a smile? That’s right, zero.

Morrigan turned around with a fake smile on her face, and we drove to Danyetta’s in silence.

When we got there, Danyetta, Wake, Dutch, and Sunny were standing on the front lawn.

Danyetta looked more than pissed, letting me know that Sunny had caught her up on the news.

We got out of the car and walked toward them, and Danyetta's dam burst.

"What were you thinking?!" Danyetta screeched.

I heard the neighbor's weed eater stop two houses down and said, "Let's take this inside."

Bowie looked like a frozen deer in a spotlight, so I caught him by the shoulder and gave him a small push to get him moving.

He did, but kept glancing back at Sunny, who was in his full uniform looking intimidating as hell. Beige tactical pants, beige tucked-in, skintight long-sleeve shirt. Desert-tan-camo-patterned bulletproof vest with his large gold star pinned to the middle of it. And a gun on his hip as well as a beige patch on the upper right corner of his chest that said "sheriff."

Let's just say, he had the angry look down pat, too.

"Sit." I gestured toward the one and only chair by itself across the room from all the other seating. That was where Lolo liked to sit and read. "And maybe you can explain to us why you thought it would be a good idea to sneak out of school, go burn down Morrigan's coffee shop, and then return as if you hadn't just committed a felony."

Bowie swallowed hard.

Then with trembling words, explained what he did this morning.

"And why did you think that this would be a good idea?" I snapped.

Bowie flinched as if I yelled at him often, which pissed me off even more, because I didn't. Not even close. In fact, I'd been more than patient all this time.

And honestly, I felt like I was doing a damn good job at being patient with him, when I could've just as easily gone the other way when it came to how he'd been acting toward me lately.

I'd been dealing with his bad attitude now for a year.

I deserved better.

"I..." He stopped, unsure what to say, because it was likely he didn't have an explanation for what he'd done.

"You..." I urged.

He closed his eyes and opened them, and not even the tears in his eyes were enough to break my anger.

"Son," Sunny said, inserting himself into the conversation. "What you did would get you fifteen years in a federal prison if you were tried as an adult. Though you're too young for that, you made an adult decision today that could very easily affect the rest of your life."

Bowie let out a low moan.

"You can kiss all those sports you love goodbye," Danyetta said stiffly. "No more friends. No more electronics. No more cool school. You'll be going back to public school, where you no longer have all those really cool classes you love. For you being a damn genius, you really made a poor decision today."

Okay, well it was a good thing that I wasn't alone in the anger scale.

"Do you mind if I say something?" Morrigan asked quietly.

All eyes turned to her.

"No, feel free," Danyetta said just as quietly. "You're going to be a major part of this family. I feel like maybe you should have a say in how we're raising our son."

Morrigan looked as if she was brought close to tears by those words, and I was happier than a pig in shit that she'd given Morrigan the acceptance that she needed. Because Danyetta was right. Morrigan might not be wearing my ring—yet—but she would be. Very soon in the future if I had my way.

Because when the love of your life was the love of your life, you couldn't just wish that feeling away. It was a constant

ache deep in your heart that constantly let you know where they should be—right beside you. And I'd done a whole lot of denying myself of that lately.

It was time for me to lock her down.

“Why would we listen to you?” Bowie lashed out.

Morrigan started talking before either Danyetta or I could react.

“Because through your father, you became someone I'll protect with all my heart,” she replied. “Who encouraged you to do this? I saw the video. I know that look in your eyes. You were angry and hurting. You didn't want to do it. Why did you?”

I hadn't noticed any hesitation.

But I was so fucking angry that I was only focusing on his actions. Not his hesitations.

Bowie looked shocked for a moment. As if he hadn't expected to be asked who'd given him the idea.

He looked at Morrigan for a few long seconds before glancing at me. Then at his mom.

“My coach,” Bowie rasped. “He was the one to give me the idea.”

My head snapped in his direction. “What?”

“Coach Kingston. My baseball coach. He was talking about how when he was young, he used to get really mad, and set things on fire.” He winced. “I...” He shook his head. “I shouldn't have done it. I knew it as soon as I turned the wheel on the lighter. But I was just so mad.”

Well at least there was that.

That didn't matter anymore, though.

“It'll cost us a hundred thousand dollars to fix that coffee shop,” I told him. Bowie blanched at my words. “I don't have that kind of money, and your mother's only line of income to

that much money would be if she sold her restaurant. Is that what you want?"

"No!" he shrieked.

"Why were you mad?" Morrigan asked.

Bowie opened his mouth to blurt out whatever, but then closed it.

"You are taking him away from me." He sniffled. "It's not fair."

I felt my heart shrink a bit at that.

"I'd never take him away from you," she replied.

"And you can't blame your bad actions on your father deciding to see someone," Danyetta responded. "And to be quite frank, your attitude toward your father has been atrocious for quite some time. Way before Morrigan came into the picture. And, though I don't necessarily agree with your coach saying that he used to burn stuff when he was mad, I also think that you're an intelligent child that can tell when he should and shouldn't do something."

"Agreed," I concurred.

Bowie's shoulders slumped.

"Do you want to know what it's like to be in federal prison?" I asked.

Bowie looked as if he didn't, but I told him anyway.

"I was told when to eat. When to sleep. When I could take a shit. When I could bathe my body. When I could see the doctor." I ticked off my fingers. "And those were only the good things."

"Couldn't talk to y'all," Wake said. "Which fuckin' sucked. Danyetta called to tell us you fell and needed stitches in your eyebrow, and I've never seen your dad so fuckin' broken."

Bowie looked as if he'd just been kicked.

"Can she not press charges?" Bowie asked hopefully.



Bowie was young. He had stars in his eyes, and he was easily influenced.

But this time, I couldn't save him.

"No," I said. "Because not only were you caught on her cameras, but you were caught on the ones across the street."

"I didn't mean for it to get that big." He winced. "I saw the two of them talking before I went inside. They were right there. They were supposed to see."

Even his tears couldn't help this time.

"Well, they didn't," I said. "And what's worse is you could've killed them. Had they not been paying attention as little as they were, they could've been trapped in the back with nowhere to go. They could've died back there, and it could've been your fault."

Bowie started to cry then.

"I never meant to." He sniffled. "He just said that when he did stuff like that, it made him feel better. Made his head not feel so full."

He being his coach.

Well, he was my next fucking errand that I had to run.

"What do we do from here?" Danyetta asked. "Will he be arrested?"

"As of right now? No," Sunny said, wincing. "That's not to say it won't happen in the future."

Sunny got up to leave, and I followed him.

Morrigan stood, too, her face set in a frown.

"Where are you going?" she asked, sounding ravaged just like me.

"To talk to this coach of his," I said. "To get some insight into what he was thinking when he told a bunch of kids that when he got mad, he used to set things on fire. Wake, do you think you can take Morrigan home?"

I followed Sunny out as Wake said, "Sure."

I might feel bad about sending Morrigan with Wake and Dutch later, but right then, I needed to go get some shit off my chest.

"I'll go with you," Sunny said. "You know where he's at?"

"My guess, he's at his place of business. He owns the Sports Den in Hocha," I said. "When it rains, he holds practices there instead of at the fields."

"What are your thoughts?" he asked, looking worried.

"I'm thinking that piece-of-shit baseball coach that I've had a horrible feeling about has been influencing little kids," I said. "He's likely been the deciding factor in the youth of this town starting vandalism as an extracurricular activity. I'm thinking he knew exactly what he was doing when he suggested to the kids what he did to 'feel better.'"

Sunny nodded. "I agree. Let's go."

## CHAPTER 17

*Gymnophoria—the sensation that someone is mentally undressing you.  
-random facts*

## MORRIGAN

To say that I was uncomfortable would be an understatement.

The moment the door slammed behind Aodhan, all the people in the room turned to look at me. Even Bowie, the boy-man that was definitely more boy than man.

His eyes were the same gray as his father's, but the rest of his coloring took after his mother. Blonde hair, pale skin. I could definitely see a lot of Danyetta and Aodhan in him. But his body makeup and mechanics? That was all Aodhan.

As I stared at Bowie as he stared at me, I took in everything about him, down to the little thing that he was doing with his fingers. Tapping the tips of one set of fingers together in a seemingly random pattern.

"Your father does that," I said, gesturing toward Bowie's fingers. "He used to do it a lot when he was younger. Sometimes he would go so fast that I always thought it was a random pattern. But one time I asked him whether he did it in a specific order or not, and he said that he tried to tap them in a way that they wouldn't touch consecutively."

Bowie immediately stopped, causing me to snicker.

"Your father also has that same scowl," I said. "He used to give it to people at the gas station when they called me a weirdo."

"Why'd they call you a weirdo?" Danyetta asked as she came to sit on the chair arm her son was sitting in.

"I wasn't the most normal of kids." I scrunched up my nose. "Aodhan and I were born on the same day. Both of us lost a twin at birth. Did he ever tell you that?"

Dutch gasped. "No!"

I looked at her, then got up and held my hand out to her to introduce myself. "I'm Morrigan. It's nice to officially meet you. I've heard a lot about you around town."

A wail sounded from the corner of the room, and that's when I turned to see that a baby was now very much awake in a playpen behind a small room divider.

Wake left and came back with a baby. A very cute one that was adorably sleepy looking, and only had eyes for her father who was holding her with such devotion.

I would've thought that holding a baby would turn the large, intimidating man into a man that was a little bit more approachable, but if anything, he gave off a more dangerous air. Touch or hurt my kid in any way, and I'll fuck you up.

I stepped away from him, and he noticed.

I stepped a few more steps away, and he noticed that, too.

"I'm not going to hurt you," he said.

I shrugged, feeling my heart start to pound.

I immediately regained my seat, but it was useless.

All the excitement for the day led me to only one outcome.

I passed out before I could make it to my chair.

•••

"...I think she's waking up," I heard a commanding female voice say.

"You sit over there, and keep your stupid scowls to yourself," I heard another order.

The second female definitely sounded pissed.

I opened my eyes, and I could see that I was on the floor.

But, like normal, I couldn't do anything about being on the floor.

It usually took me a few minutes once I woke up to get my body to move. There was nothing quite like being awake, but paralyzed, as your brain decided to reboot.

“It says on the internet,” I heard that boy-man’s voice say, “that she should be just fine. Luckily the couch caught her fall.”

Oh, good. At least I wouldn’t have to deal with more stupid bruises. Or another concussion.

Jeez, I’d had so many at this point that they had me under concussion protocols like they did for football players.

“Hi,” Danyetta said as she came into my line of sight.

I blinked.

“Aodhan is on his way back, but he was already thirty minutes away when we called.” She winced.

I blinked again.

I didn’t know what to say to that, so it was a good thing that I couldn’t speak.

“You passed out,” she explained.

I blinked. Yes, I knew that.

I did it often.

“Was it Wake?” she asked.

I blinked.

Yes, but no.

I was suddenly being lifted and moved to the couch, and all I saw was a wall of muscular chest covered in black t-shirt.

“I told you to leave her alone,” Dutch snapped.

“Yeah, but I’m sure it’s a hell of a lot more comfortable on the couch than it is the floor. And I’m not leaving her there,” Wake growled.

I felt that vibration in his chest.

“You’re the reason she passed out,” Dutch said. “I don’t think she wants you anywhere near her.”

I would've laughed at this ridiculous conversation had my faculties been all online.

"She passed out because she has a condition. Not because of me," Wake argued.

"The baby needs you," Bowie said. "I think she needs changed."

"How about you go do that then," Danyetta said.

Her voice clearly said, "don't argue with me, or else."

I again would've smiled if I could.

"Do you need anything?" Danyetta asked me then, pressing a cool compress to my forehead.

I blinked twice, wondering if she would notice.

"Okay, good," she said, confirming that she did. "Aodhan said we just hang out with you until you can function normally again. Right?"

One blink.

She nodded as she said, "Your phone has been ringing off the hook, too. Folsom?"

"That's her best friend," Wake said. "She also happens to work at the vet with Matilda and Diana."

"Ohhh." Dutch snapped her fingers. "This is the best friend!"

I finally got enough feeling in my hands and feet that I could start wiggling my toes.

That feeling spread all the way up to my arms, then shoulders, then feet.

Tingles followed in the feeling's wake, and I groaned, twisting my head to get it placed better onto the pillow.

"There she is," I heard said.

I blinked and stared at Wake.

He hadn't moved very far. A foot and a half at most.

“Sorry,” I said, cringing slightly. How freakin’ embarrassing. “I usually have more preparation than going down that fast.”

“Sounds like you can’t help it,” he said as he backed away. “I’m sorry for putting you into a position where you felt fear.”

I snorted and managed to sit up in a lounge.

“How long was I out?” I wondered.

Wake looked at his watch. It was a big, bulky-looking black number that took up half his forearm. But it was Dutch who said, “Twelve and a half minutes. Do you normally run fevers while this happens?”

I nodded. “My body essentially overreacts. Where my heart rate should’ve just risen at the way Wake startled me, it instead went into ‘I’m going to freak out so badly that you have to pass out’ mode. Sometimes that includes a lot of sweating, a higher temperature, excessive saliva production. It’s just grand.”

Wake snorted, and that’s when Bowie came back in with the child, freshly cleaned.

He sat down on the end of the couch that I lay on.

I pulled my feet toward me, and he sat the baby between us before he said, “That was scary.”

I laughed. “That was nothing. Just wait until I do it in public, and you have to figure out how to scrape me off the floor.”

I winced at that.

I always managed to pass out at the worst times. Such as this one.

“You do that often?” he squeaked.

I laughed.

Which was when Aodhan walked into the door, looking frazzled.



“I should’ve never left.” He took in the scene. “I should’ve thought better of it.”

I snorted and gently moved my feet, hoping not to displace the baby with my movement.

She looked like she was pretty sturdy, but still. I didn’t want her to be falling due to my movement.

Gosh, she was cute.

“It’s not like you didn’t leave me with trusted people,” I admitted. “Though most people wouldn’t say your ex-wife is a ‘trusted person’ but in this case, I think you’re safe.”

Danyetta started giggling.

But surprisingly, it was Bowie who said, “I really messed up.”

Aodhan snorted.

Wake grunted.

Dutch and Danyetta nearly said the same thing at the same time. “Duh.”

I looked over at him, watching as he kept a steadying hand on the baby’s belly.

Then said, “You move on from here. You do your best. You make sure that you’re not going to make that mistake again. And you always trust your family to take care of you.” I looked around the room for a second then moved back to Bowie. “I never had that. You’re lucky.”

Bowie winced. “I heard about your dad.”

My brows rose.

“What?” I asked.

“I heard about your dad. I heard the two people working at your coffee shop talking out back before I did anything.” He winced. “They were talking about how your dad offered them money to leave. To quit.”

That didn’t surprise me at all.

“They’ve apparently been offered money three times now,” he continued. “He sounds like a jerk.”

I winced. “He is a jerk.”

“Sounds like you need someone new to watch your back.” He looked at his father, who was busy watching me on the couch, and not Bowie. “I’m glad my dad found you. He needs someone to take care of.”

At that, Aodhan looked toward Bowie.

But it was Danyetta who said, “You don’t need taken care of?”

“I need…” He paused. “I think I need to quit baseball.”

Wake crossed his arms over his chest, then leaned into his knees with his elbows as he said, “You got any more you need to tell us about him?”

Bowie flushed. “I don’t like him very much, either. He has this new friend that’s been hanging around during practices. Says he’s going to start being our assistant coach for in case the actual coach can’t make it. But he gives me the creeps. He’s always talking about the good ol’ days when baseball was a fun sport and didn’t have as many rules. I think he’s full of hot air, but nobody else seems to have the same problem with him as I do. But the coach and him are so buddy-buddy, I’m scared to say anything negative about him because I want to still play.”

“Bowie.” Danyetta pinched the bridge of her nose. “Why haven’t you said anything about this? Have we ever made you feel like you couldn’t come and talk to us about absolutely anything?”

Bowie shrugged. “I guess I just didn’t want to be a bother.”

“You’re never a bother,” Aodhan replied hotly. “You’re our son. It’s our right and our privilege to worry about you.”

“Well…” He shrugged helplessly.

I sat up, bringing attention to myself.

I reached forward and touched the little fist that was fisting the couch right beside Bowie's leg and said, "I'm not your parent. But I'm here for you just the same. If you need us, we're here. Always."

Bowie nodded. "I'm sorry for doing that to your store."

I was sorry, too.

But it wasn't the end of the world.

I did think he didn't intentionally set that fire.

I also knew that given time, he and his father would have a good relationship. That one day, there would be no more questioning who Bowie would turn to.

"It's okay." I winked.

And it would be.

I just had to find a way to fix it.

•••

"I'm going with you," I grumbled at him. "We can even take my car. They don't know it."

"Sunny's already there anyway. This won't be a surprise," he grumbled back as he all but carried me out of his ex-wife's house.

"Well, then perfect time to go. Plus, there's food," I teased.

He patted my butt, and I laid my head on his shoulder as he all but hauled me toward my car.

"First thing tomorrow, we're buying you a car that doesn't blow," he grumbled as he deposited me into my seat.

"I've been putting a lot of my excess cash into a savings account." I reached over and unlocked his door before he could use the key. "I don't have the money for a car."

"You have the money," he said as he got in, started it, and drove out of the driveway before he could even get his seat

belt on. “But that doesn’t matter anyway. Because I’m paying for it.”

The finality in his tone made me roll my eyes.

“Aodhan...” I started, but he reached over and squeezed my thigh, right above my knee. “I think I’m owed this after everything we’ve put you through.”

I didn’t say another word as we drove through town, then out of it, toward the coach’s place of business.

When we arrived, it was to find Sunny still waiting in his car.

“I know you’re not going to stay in the car,” he said. “But I’d like you to at least stay outside. The garage doors are all open.” He jerked his head toward the bay doors that were open. “Sit in that seat right there? I will try to stay close to the door so you can hear.”

I shot him a grin. Clearly, Aodhan knew me well.

“Thanks.” I blew him an air kiss.

When I would’ve gotten out to walk, he walked right over to me and hauled me onto his back one-handed.

I wrapped my arms around his neck and nuzzled my nose into his throat as I said, “Be calm. Do this the adult way. And don’t let him get away with anything.”

He squeezed my thighs, and too soon, he was putting me onto my feet and depositing me on the bench right outside the garage doors.

He winked at me, then left, meeting up with Sunny right inside the doors.

I could hear them asking for the man, Justin Kingston, almost immediately.

A squeaky male voice hurried off, indicating the one running what was likely the front desk was a young teen who hadn’t quite come into his own yet.

I bit my lip and fiddled with the cuticle on my thumb as I listened to them speak quietly.

## CHAPTER 18

*I don't have a resting bitch face. I'm just a bitch that needs  
rest.*

*-Morrigan to Aodhan*

## AODHAN

My stomach was in knots.

My brain was also in several places. Part of it was outside, with Morrigan. And the other part of it was at Danyetta's house with Bowie.

I couldn't quite decide how I should feel in that moment.

Thirty minutes ago, as I'd made my way back to Danyetta's place, I'd mentally berated myself all the way there. Mostly because I knew Morr's triggers, and I'd definitely left her there, like a ticking time bomb.

Now, I was berating myself for wanting to accompany Sunny on this little errand, when I should be at home with Morrigan and my son.

But the moment Justin Kingston made his way out of his office, with his arm around the uncomfortable young teen, I knew I'd made the right decision in coming.

Justin was a douchebag, and it was obvious to see when you knew what you were looking for.

"Sheriff Summers," Justin said, his eyes ping-ponging between me and Sunny. "What can I help you with?"

I crossed my arms over my chest so I didn't inadvertently reach toward him and strangle the life out of him.

"We're here because you were implicated in a case that popped up today," Sunny said. "A few boys have been arrested lately for arson. One of which was Mr. McBanks's son. And a few of the boys have given you as an inspiration in why they were committing arson in the first place."

Justin blinked. "I'm sorry, what?"

"And, since I can access sealed juvenile files, I do know that you were implicated in your own arson cases." Sunny linked his fingers in front of him. "I also saw another little notation on your file. One that says you're not allowed to be

around children due to an indecent exposure when you were twenty-two.”

My mouth nearly hit the floor.

That I hadn't known.

But, now that I did, I was damn sure going to make sure that he wasn't ever around any kids again.

“From what the court order explains, you have to be accompanied by another adult. One that can verify that you are not mistreating any minors.” He looked around. “Do you have any supervising adults present?”

Just then, the back room door opened, and out walked Adler Newsome. The douchebag who'd tried to switch my son at birth.

He swaggered into the open area at the front just as Sunny said, “Ah. That makes sense then.”

Adler and Justin both looked at him, confused.

I was confused, too.

But only because my brain was clouded with a killing fog.

For the two of them to be hanging out, there had to be at least some knowledge of what the other had done/was doing.

“And I hate to break it to you, Justin, but a convicted felon doesn't count as a supervised adult,” Sunny offered. “Unless you have someone else up here, you're already in violation of this.”

He jerked his chin in the young kid's direction that'd been manning the front desk.

The kid was likely all of fifteen and definitely still a child. He was also looking on with his phone in his hand, recording every second of the standoff.

He was bouncing back and forth between looking at Sunny and me, and then Justin and Adler.



Justin's smirk fell off his face as he heard Sunny's words. "That's bullshit and you know it. Those charges were bullshit charges. I changed in front of my girlfriend's daughter. My girlfriend who, might I add, broke up with me later because of a falling-out. Then accused me of that. I've been doing this business for fifteen years now without any supervisory adults. I think I can keep doing it just fine."

"Not when you have this kind of prior, and definitely not when these kids are taking your advice and starting fires because of something you urged them to do when they couldn't handle their emotions. Justin Kingston, you're under arrest." Sunny pulled out his cuffs.

Adler stepped back and said, "Don't worry, buddy. I'll keep this place up and running while you're arrested. We'll figure this out."

"Actually, about that," Sunny said as he produced a second pair of cuffs. "You also have a stipulation in your early release. And that is to stay away from children when you're unsupervised. But also, you're under arrest for the assault of Kayden Fellows. He filed a criminal trespassing charge on you, as well as an assault charge, just a few minutes ago. You can explain yourself down at the station as well."

Adler stiffened, and I could tell he was damn close to protesting.

But I shifted my feet, ready to intervene if I needed to.

"I would also like to point out that I have body cameras on the front and the back half of me. New issue with the sheriff's department." He smirked. "It's a live camera feed, too."

That's something new. And very interesting to hear about.

"I..." Adler hesitated, unsure what to do or say now.

"Are arrested." Sunny nodded his head.

And then they were.

They both walked calmly to the cop car after having their hands cuffed behind their backs.

The young teen babbled about “locking up” and Sunny and the two men walked calmly to the cop car and got inside.

Then Sunny was giving me a nod of appreciation for having his back, and I turned back to my woman who was nowhere to be found.

“I’m over here.”

I looked to find her in the car, windows rolled up, and only the one cracked just a small amount so that she could “hear” but not “be in the line of fire.”

Fuck, my girl was smart.

“Ready to go home?” she chirped.

I grinned at her.

Yeah, I was ready to go home.

With her.

And I always would be.

# CHAPTER 19

*Hello.*

*-Based on how you read that “hello” will tell you which generation you’re from. Adele, and you’re a Millennial. Lionel Richie, and you’re Gen X.*

## MORRIGAN

The bruises on my neck were fading.

Life was surprisingly awesome, actually.

Bowie was putting in more effort with Aodhan. Aodhan had fully taken over the captaining of his friend's boat permanently—something that had taken a lot of convincing for him to do on my part. Because he was worried about me, and didn't want to be gone or away from me for long periods of time.

Etienne, one of Aodhan's good friends and a member of the Gator Bait MC, had taken over the restoration of my coffee shop after a company had come in to clean up the fire damage. And even that was in full swing.

Then there was my apartment building.

Basically, in the last three weeks, I'd moved out.

I hadn't really intended to move out completely. At first, it'd just been me wanting to spend as much time with Aodhan as I could. And the next thing I knew, I was looking in Aodhan's closet and the majority of my wardrobe was hung up.

I'd also like to point out that it hadn't been me who'd done the clothing transfer, either.

While I'd been taking a nap—I did that a freakin' lot now that I had no coffee shop to go to—I'd woken up to Aodhan dropping off a bag of my clothes between fishing charters.

Then just yesterday, I realized that the only thing that wasn't in Aodhan's closet was my winter gear. Winter gear that I rarely used since I'd come home to Accident.

“Are you even listening to me?”

I looked up from the contemplation of my neck and my bruises to find Folsom standing in the bathroom, uncaring that I was naked as the day I was born, with a razor in my hand.

I'd just gotten done buzzing my pubic hair off of my body using Aodhan's clippers.

And now I was staring at Folsom in the bathroom doorway.

It was unsurprising to me to find her there. A, she had the alarm code now. B, she didn't even seem to need the alarm code anywhere.

"I wasn't listening because I didn't know you were there," I pointed out. "What's up?"

She looked at the cute little pile of pubic hair that I'd just shaved off of my body, and then the clippers, followed by the razor that I was now using to trim up the edges.

"I asked what you were doing," she explained.

I grinned at her and gathered up my pubic hair.

"Well," I admitted. "I read something the other day, and I know it's really freakin' weird, but I figured since Aodhan likes me, he also likes my weirdness."

I mean, he'd never had a problem with my quirks before, so why would he have any problems with them now?

"Okay, but that still doesn't explain why you're gathering up your pubic hair," she said. "And why you didn't just go get it waxed like I told you to do."

She had a point. I could admit that this looked really freakin' weird, even for me.

"Well, so back in the Victorian era, women gave their pubic hair to their lovers for good luck," I explained.

Folsom blinked.

"And I thought the torture technician would look at me like I was a big weirdo if I asked for her to gather up my pubic hair for me to take home to give to the man that I was in love with."

She shook her head, unsurprised by my thought process. "And what are you going to do with this bouquet of pubic

hair?”

If anyone in the world knew me better than I knew myself, it was Folsom.

I grinned wickedly at her, then placed my teeny-tiny bouquet on the bathroom counter before stepping into the shower.

Today was a day of pampering, according to Aodhan.

Today, before he'd left for work, he'd dropped an envelope on my bedside table, kissed me with so much heat my toes curled, and left.

In that envelope was a gift certificate to get my hair done, to get a facial, and finally to get my toes done.

But first, I was showering and heading out to eat with Danyetta, Folsom, Diana, Alice, Dutch, and Matilda. It was our first such breakfast date, and I was really looking forward to it.

I was excited to see the ladies and even more so to talk to Danyetta.

Mostly because I wanted to see how Bowie was doing from her perspective, and if my observations on his rapid turnaround with his father was partially due to his sorrow for burning down my business.

Another interesting fact on that front? No charges had been filed against Bowie.

Everything was just mysteriously swept under the rug, and I had a feeling Sunny had a lot to do with that. Oh, and Wake. Who'd helped pay for Bowie's actions.

Which infuriated Aodhan.

But, I was happy. Because I saw in Bowie a kid that was frustrated, just like I'd been at one point in time. Though our situations weren't similar now, our situations were definitely similar then.

I mean, my own mother had gone to jail for her suicide attempt. Well, not for her suicide attempt, but for her killing my twin sister, and almost killing me.

She'd spent the first five years of my life in prison. And to this day, I still hadn't seen her for more than a few minutes at a time, here and there, throughout the years.

My father had gone out of his way to keep her away.

And my mother had gone out of her way not to see the mistake she'd made. Whether that mistake had been failing at her attempt to kill not just her, but us, too, or just herself, I'd never know.

What I did know, though, was that she was doing amazing now that she was nowhere near my father or his reach.

She wasn't going out of her way to be a successful person in life, but she was still a contribution to society.

I checked up on her every now and then, and when I had extra cash, I sent her some anonymously.

Like just yesterday. I sent her a thousand-dollar cashier's check.

Since I wasn't exactly living at my apartment, my gas bill, my electric bill, and my water bill had drastically changed. Therefore, that meant extra cash. And I always sent the little bit extra from those three things to her, no matter what the amount.

I wasn't exactly sure why.

And, since I did it anonymously, there was no way for her to trace it unless she cared enough to drive out of town to a faraway post office where I drove to send it so she couldn't follow the trail back to me.

Anyway, when I say that I knew where Bowie was coming from, I meant it.

Our lives might not have been exactly the same, but they were definitely similar. And I felt a kinship to the man I love's

child.

“So what are you going to do with it?” Folsom poked my bouquet with an extended finger.

I grinned, sped through my shower, and explained my thought process.

By the time I was out, she was going through Aodhan’s medicine cabinet.

“Condoms?” she asked, pulling the unopened box out.

I grimaced. Those had been in there since I moved in.

“The expiration date on the box is from ten years ago,” I said. “Likely, at least this is what I’m telling myself, they’re from when we were still together.”

She looked at the date, and sure enough, nodded her head in approval.

“That makes sense,” she put them back. “Are you still on the pill?”

“I was on the implant,” I said as I wiggled my arm, causing my arm fat to sway with the motion. “But it’s way past due so I fished it out myself a few weeks ago.”

“You would’ve finally been putting it to good use,” she teased, batting her eyes at me.

I felt my face flush.

Oh, yes. We would’ve definitely been putting it to good use.

As in, every single morning before he left. Every single afternoon when he arrived home. And if he was on an overnight trip, he would do me in the morning when he left, and the next morning when he slipped into bed.

He’d also gotten better at sex, if that was possible.

He may not have had sex with anyone else, but he’d definitely gotten a lot more stamina. Not to mention he took his sweet time torturing me now. Before, it’d been all about



urgency and passion. Now it was about savoring his favorite meal.

“I’m happy for you, best friend.” She paused, raised her eyebrow, then got a wicked gleam in her eye. “Or should I say Mama?”

I flushed all over again.

When other people said it, it sounded weird.

But when Aodhan called me Mama? Oh, man. It definitely did things for me.

“Get dressed already, you filthy woman.” Folsom tossed a shirt at me. “And I’ll braid your hair.”

I sat down after getting dressed and let her braid my hair.

While she did that, I put on my makeup.

By the time we walked out the door ten minutes later, pubic hair in hand so I could stop by Hobby Lobby to get the things I needed for it, I was convinced today was going to be a good day.

I couldn’t have been more wrong.

•••

“I’m sorry, but what?”

It was Matilda who asked this.

I definitely liked her a lot.

Not that I didn’t like Dutch, Diana, or Danyetta.

But Matilda? She was definitely the most relatable to me.

She had her quirks, and she definitely didn’t care that she had them.

Oh, and also, she was the one who asked me what I’d been doing at Hobby Lobby.

Which had then had Folsom explaining about my pubic hair bouquet.

“I don’t know how to put it more clearly.” I pressed my hands against my cheeks.

I felt flush.

Thank God I was sitting down.

“Well, now I have to make one,” Diana said. “I mean, I can’t have Aodhan running around with his good luck charm, and my love not having one.”

She grinned wickedly at me, then gestured to my shirt pocket, where I’d hidden it after sitting in the parking lot and putting it together as we waited for everyone to arrive.

The damn thing had beads, a leather cord holding it all together, and even some sparkles.

There was no way in hell I was ever giving it to Aodhan.

It was only after I’d put it together that I realized how freakin’ weird that it was.

My thought of “it’s good luck” wasn’t going to be good enough to explain my weirdness.

And I’d worked myself up into a freakin’ flurry.

I’d have to remain sitting for the foreseeable future, because my severe anxiety had turned my head into a wasteland. And, when my head got like that, other things went, too. Like my heart rate, and the incessant sweating, and everything else that would trigger a faint.

“I’m going to make one, too,” Dutch confirmed. “But my hair is red as fire. There’s no way in hell that mine’ll be as inconspicuous as that.”

“Same,” Diana grinned.

“I’d have to grow mine back out. Or he’d have a really small one.” She paused. “I guess I could collect the small shavings and put them in a glass bottle. Then he could carry that around. Same thing, right?”

“I wish I had a man that I could make a pubic hair bouquet for.” Danyetta paused. “And I really like that shirt, Morrigan. Where’d you get it?”

I looked down at the shirt I was wearing.

“Actually, you bought it,” I admitted. “Apparently, this was in Aodhan’s storeroom to be donated. It must’ve been Bowie’s last year? He said that it didn’t fit anymore, and he was supposed to take it to the donation center. But he only had his bike, and had no way of getting it there until he figured out a better way to transport it since it’s so big. He’s apparently been taking it a few Walmart sacks full at a time.”

It was the sweetest thing in the world when he’d told me. I’d actually let out an “aww” at his explanation when I’d questioned the Walmart bag full of clothes in the corner of his office.

He’d explained that he’d asked Danyetta if he could help in any way with anything one of the first few days that he’d been out, and she’d told him that she had three huge bags of clothes that needed to go to the donation center that were full of boys clothes that once used to fit Bowie.

They’d been sitting in his storeroom for a year as he slowly emptied them out one trash bag full at a time.

A few days ago, I’d decided to get the clothes out myself, but they’d been too heavy. So I’d had to empty them out the exact way he’d had to do it. And ended up finding a few new shirts in the process.

“I actually remember that.” Danyetta looked sad for a second. “I wish he’d loved me.”

I blinked at her, surprised that she’d admit that.

“Or that I loved him, for that matter.” She grimaced. “Being in love with someone that isn’t willing to put in the effort, and scale back on his efforts to further his career, is a punch to the gut.” She looked at me then. “When he left you, I think that broke Aodhan’s heart. I think he was just counting the days until he could get you back.”

“What’s your full story, Danyetta?” I asked. “Wake hated me pretty hard. So y’all must’ve sold the lie really well.”

“Amen.” Dutch shook her head. “That first night when he found out about you, Morrigan? I think he might’ve killed someone to protect his sister’s heart.”

I grimaced.

Dutch winked.

“I met the man I won’t name, because I feel like if I say it he appears, when I was sixteen. We fell in love hard. And two years later, he was gone. Poof. Right out of my life as if he was never there to begin with. But I was never able to stop loving him just because he was gone. And then he moved back.” She grimaced. “Which was when I started being petty. I wanted him to see what he left behind. Which was where Aodhan came into the picture. Plus, my biological clock was ticking. I wanted a baby. And I felt like seeing that I was moving on would really hurt him. And it did. But that didn’t make him make a move. It only made him further his career. Now he’s the assistant DA, and likes to come into my life at the worst times.”

“Like when he found out your son burned the coffee shop down and wanted to rub it in your face?” Diana asked.

I gasped. “He what?”

“He didn’t necessarily do it, but he definitely gave me shit about it.” She shook her head.

That was the thing that confused me about Danyetta. To love someone that completely, through everything that she’d loved him through, he would have to show himself worthy of that love. And from what I’d seen, and heard, he hadn’t done that.

“This him?” Folsom asked curiously.

We all looked at the assistant district attorney. The man that apparently Danyetta was deeply in love with, even after all these years.

“Yeah,” she nodded, her face dropping a little at the sight of him.

He was attractive, I’d give him that. He had this air of untouchability about him that practically screamed “stay away.” He carried a gun at his hip, he was dressed in what I thought might be a three-piece suit, and had his hair perfectly styled.

“I’ll give him a computer virus.” She tapped away on her phone. “It’ll do nothing but cause pop-ups. Then when he runs a virus test, it’ll cause more pop-ups. It’s not damaging to his computer or anything. Just annoying.”

Danyetta burst out laughing.

We all followed suit, because she sounded like a strangled kitten when she did.

Breakfast was fun, and I enjoyed the hell out of it.

That was, until, the incident.

I’d been drinking coffee for two straight hours. Coffee, usually, didn’t affect me in any way other than to make my heart rate elevate slightly.

But pairing that coffee with excitement—such as getting to know the people that were closest to Aodhan—had all but caused me to put myself in the perfect storm of readiness.

My afflictions loved excitement, elevated heart rates, and things that otherwise put my body in a state of unrest.

So when Aodhan came in and stuck his face into my neck over the back of my chair, that was my final straw.

So when I tried to stand up to give him a hug, I felt my knees get weak, and the planets aligned.

“Whoa,” he said when I fell into him.

Luckily, or unluckily this time, I didn’t pass fully out. I was embarrassingly aware of every single second as he caught me up in his arms, sat down in my chair, and cradled me like one would an overgrown child.

I stared up at him as the tingling sensation started to overtake my limbs.

“This a mild one?” he asked as he ran his nose along the bridge of mine.

I blinked, unable to form words.

“She’s had two coffees too many, and has been sitting here in the heat. Sadly, it’s not unexpected,” I heard Folsom say.

Aodhan’s eyes were thoughtful as he stared at me, his beautiful stormy ones taking in every inch of my face. Not saying a word, but just looking at me while the conversation at the table continued as if I hadn’t been having one of my many episodes.

His eyes eventually trailed down to the gap in my shirt, and that’s when I realized my mistake.

“What do you have in your shirt?” Aodhan asked.

I should’ve known better than to leave it there. Of course, he’d see it. He was taller than me, and could see down my damn shirt to check out my boobs. Of course, he could see into my shirt pocket.

I was so freakin’ embarrassed at this point, mostly because there were six huge bikers standing around looking down at me, that I didn’t want to say.

But the good thing was, I couldn’t say.

So I kept my hand clenched tight, not showing him the stupid bouquet of pubic hair that I’d made him, and instead, slapped my hand over my shirt.

“Nothing,” I stuttered, forcing the words out despite my tongue’s desire not to work properly.

The feeling came back into my hands, then slowly my feet, and the blushing continued. Eventually, he started to bring his finger up to pull the pocket’s gap a bit wider.

That’s when I finally forced myself to move. Clumsily at first, I all but fell out of his lap into a chair beside him.

Luckily, one that Diana had vacated to get to the restroom before she and her man left.

Seeing me start to flush, he twisted, grabbed me around the ass, and then hauled me up onto his back. It was just my luck that this particular position kept me from passing out just like sitting down did. It was my new favorite position to be in ever.

“What are you doing?” I squeaked, unable to put any effort into my words yet.

“Going to have a conversation with you in private, since it seems that you’re having trouble articulating whatever you have in your pocket in public,” he answered.

And, like Folsom was always wont to do, she went and embarrassed me in front of not just the ladies now, but all of their men, too.

“She made you a bouquet of her pubic hair.” Folsom crossed her arms over her chest, ready to defend me to my death. “But she also got you a rabbit’s foot, a horseshoe off a winning Kentucky Derby racehorse, a photo of a shooting star, and a tiny little ceramic elephant.”

“Why?” he asked, reaching backward and snatching the damn thing straight out of my pocket despite the fact that I was all but pressed against his back.

I felt my chest get tight, and I buried my face into the crook of his neck, wishing the world would open up and swallow me whole.

“Because she says you said you have the worst luck, so she was trying to help you have better luck.”

Aodhan softened even further.

He knew me, knew my idiosyncrasies. Knew that I was the weirdest person on the planet.

“I don’t know what to say.” He smiled as he held up the tiny bouquet. “But I kind of like it. I think I’ll tack it to my bike somehow.”

I felt my face flame.

“You never gave me a pubic hair bouquet,” Wake accused Dutch.

“Lalalalala.” Danyetta covered her ears. “I don’t want to hear anything about you and your wife’s pubic hair.”

“You were literally just talking about my wife’s pubic hair yesterday when you asked her to go get a Brazilian wax with you,” Wake countered.

“Oh my god,” someone said from not our table, but one a few down from us. “Do you mind? Some of us are trying to eat. My god, talk to your significant others about personal matters in the privacy of your own bedroom. And Jesus Christ, can you get your hand off of her butt? There are children here.”

I felt Aodhan’s hand squeeze my ass tighter, and could almost see his face as he stared the old lady down.

“I think it’s just fine where it’s at,” Aodhan disagreed. “But would you mind closing your mouth until you’re done chewing? Masticated food grosses me out.”

I started to snicker and couldn’t help it.

Jesus, this was like right out of a comedy show.

The only thing that could make this better would be...

“Well, I tend to agree with her,” I heard my father say. “Do you ever think about the fact that this is how you will go to hell?”

I looked up to find my father staring at me with disgust, his arms crossed over his big, barrel chest.

“What do you mean, this is how she’ll go to hell?” Aodhan snapped.

“Indecent exposure.” He gestured at me, Aodhan’s hand, and my ass. “I’m sure that y’all are fornicating outside of wedlock again as well. Then there’s your ultimate sin.”



“And what would that be?” I found myself asking.

“Lying to everyone about a fake ailment.” He gestured to me. “No wonder you had your business burned down. No one wants to deal with that kind of drama.”

I shook my head. My father wasn’t even making sense anymore.

“Dad,” I said, staying exactly where I was. “I know this is really hard to believe, but I’m happy now. Please leave me alone. Don’t call. Don’t write. Don’t stop me in the middle of a restaurant to talk.” I looked at him pointedly. “And if it’s all the same to you, you can act like I don’t exist at all.”

My dad rolled his eyes. “I’m not actually talking to you because you’re my daughter. I’m talking to you because I agree with this lady right here.” He pointed at the lady that’d gone back to her meal, completely ignoring us and everyone else in the restaurant, instead focusing on her cheesecake. “But it’s hilarious you think I care.”

I knew he cared.

I knew that I bothered him on a daily basis.

Why else would he go to such great lengths to control my life?

Wake stood up and helped Dutch out of her chair.

He threw down four hundred-dollar bills, which likely would go way over what we spent, and held his hand out for his wife.

She took it, and the two of them walked in front of my dad, blocking our view of each other.

Something was said between Wake and my father, and when Aodhan stood and made his way toward the door, it was with me on his back.

I didn’t look back to see if my father was watching.

I also didn’t look forward.

I pressed my face against Aodhan's neck and breathed him in, completely ignoring everyone and everything as we made our way out to the parking lot.

He placed me on the back of his bike sideways before he reached for his bouquet, then he attached it to his bike.

Folsom followed behind me, her face buried in her phone.

When she arrived at my side, she did it bumping into Kobe.

She snarled at him, lifting her nose and baring her teeth. "Watch where you're walking."

I placed my hand over my mouth to hide the laughter as he looked at her like she'd gone crazy.

She dismissed him, then walked up to me and sat on Aodhan's bike next to me, barely fitting but uncaring as she did.

I looked over at her phone to see her fingers flying, and the screen displaying a bunch of zeros and ones. Code.

"What are you doing?" I whispered at her as the group of people gathered around the seven bikes in the parking lot.

"Giving your dad the same virus that I gave to the district attorney," she grumbled. "I know that he doesn't get on his computer much, because it's too modern of an advancement for him, but when he gets on to pay his bills next month, he'll have to take it into the shop because he can't use it. Which will inconvenience him."

I smiled.

Only my friend.

My eyes wandered past Aodhan's big body, and where he was securely attaching my gift to a cranny on his bike that looked like it might not catch much wind, and studied the parking lot.

My dad's old beat-up pickup was parked a few rows over, and a few rows over from that, there was one single car in the distance that caught my attention. But before I could study it

too hard, it backed out of its parking space and left the parking lot.

“What’s got you frowning like that?” Aodhan’s finger caught my chin, turning my face so that I was staring up into his eyes.

“I was just looking at that car.” I nodded toward said car. “How much longer do you have until you have to leave for your overnight trip?”

He looked at his watch, dropping his hand. “An hour and a half. I have to go home, shower, grab dinner, talk to Bowie and go.”

I started to lift myself off his bike, but he caught me up, only putting me down again when I was in front of my car.

He took the keys from my hand, unlocked my car, and then handed them to me.

I took them, leaned up on my toes, and kissed the hell out of him.

It wasn’t a chaste kiss, either. It was a “I wish we had a lot more time to do what I want” kind of kiss.

When he pulled back, his eyes were partially glazed.

“Could you spare maybe ten minutes?” I teased.

“Fuck,” he groaned. “I wish I could. But from what I understand, you brought Folsom here.”

My smile widened. “We could always ask one of the boys to take her back. Make use of the ten minutes it’ll take her to get back.”

He backed away, looked at his watch, and cursed. “I’ll meet you at home.”

## CHAPTER 20

*My personal style is better described as “didn’t expect to get out of the car.”*

*-Text from Morrigan to Aodhan*

## AODHAN

She beat me home. Only by enough time for her to get out of her car and run inside, though.

When I followed behind her, happy to find the door locked even in the short time that she'd been there, I headed straight for my bedroom.

I pulled my t-shirt off over my head and was working on my jeans right around the time that I rounded the corner into my bedroom.

I found her in the bathroom, shower running, a grin on her face.

“If you're quick,” she said. “We can get two birds with one stone.”

With that, she stepped into the shower.

I followed behind her seconds later, my clothes all over the floor, discarded and nowhere near the hamper.

She moved backward, giving me as much room as she could, and said, “I know that you like this house and all, but if I could change one thing, it would be to make this shower twice the size, and put about three more showerheads in it.”

I reached for her, pulling her wet body into mine, and kissed her. My tongue dueled with hers, and I groaned at the taste of coffee and whipped cream on her lips.

When I pulled away, it was for the water spray to hit Morrigan directly in the face.

She squeaked, spluttered and pulled away with a laugh. Meanwhile, I lifted her up and pressed her directly against the wall, pinning her there with my body.

We'd found that the best ways to keep her from passing out—and she would pass out if she was in some sort of standing position because I was just that damn good—was to either keep her from doing any work whatsoever when she was in an

upright position, or keep her on her back where the threat of passing out was almost nil.

But she was so damn tiny that it was almost just as easy to lift her up and do the work than to bend her over and take her from behind. At least when we were in the shower where the warm environment already threw her out of whack in the first place, body temperature-wise.

“Fuuucckkk,” I said as I notched my cock at her entrance.

The first few seconds as I slid inside were always the fuckin’ best.

The tightness. The wet heat surrounding my cock. The way she all but sucked me inside.

All of those things combined into one of the best experiences I’d ever had.

Each time with her was like the first time all over again.

Her legs tightened around me, her fingernails raking down the length of my pecs, and her head went backward as I filled her in one long, steady thrust.

“Holy shit,” she breathed. “Why does that always feel so damn good?”

I had the same damn question.

But, unlike her, I was only able to form monosyllabic words when I was inside of her.

Words like “yes,” “fuck” and “shit” were a few of my favorites.

She rocked her hips, urging me to move despite the fact that I was close as hell.

It didn’t matter that I’d just had her this morning.

It also didn’t matter that I wanted to last longer than a minute and a half. Not when she felt so damn good.

Not to mention, she went off like a bottle rocket without me having to do a single damn thing to help her get there. Just

with the feel of my cock inside of her alone, she was getting off. It made me feel like I was a million miles high.

It also worked when you were in a time crunch, and you sometimes erupted like a teenager, despite the fact that it'd been a decade and a half since you'd been one.

"I'm coming," she breathed, her fingers latching on to my neck to help rock herself against me faster.

I could feel her fingers digging in deep, and I knew that there was no way in hell that she wouldn't be leaving marks. Little half-moons, five of them on each side, at the base of my neck, right where the cord met my shoulders.

Then she was screaming.

Her pussy clamped around me. Her hands squeezed, and despite her small stature, she was able to make me light-headed with just the perfect placement of her hands.

I came, following directly behind her as if we'd choreographed the decision to both go at the same time beforehand.

"Shit, shit, shit," I cursed, my eyes squeezing tightly shut.

Then I sagged against her, pinning her tightly to the wall.

She started to laugh, then I felt her reach behind me for something.

Seconds later, her fingers were working a lather through my hair.

I cracked one eye open, my eye practically millimeters away from hers, and grinned.

She reached out with her tongue, then poked me in the eye, causing me to pull back with a laugh.

Our shower went at lightning speed after that, mostly because I was at least ten minutes behind now.

I got out, leaving her just getting to the shaving her legs part. One of my favorite things to watch.

Sadly, I had to go.

After popping my head back into the shower for a quick, but still very unchaste kiss, I ran downstairs, grabbed the Tupperware of leftovers from dinner last night—curry chicken and rice—and all but ran out of the house.

I stopped to see Bowie, gave him a hug that he was surprisingly quite receptive of, and headed out.

I made it to the boat just in time to see the crew loading our people for the night onto the boat.

I gave my “first mate,” a chin lift and went upstairs to the tower.

After starting the boat, I waited for everyone to be seated and headed out.

With the biggest fucking smile on my face.

Goddamn, was this what happiness felt like?

I rubbed my chest and was sure.

This was definitely what happiness felt like.



## CHAPTER 21

*Him: just a word, yet one person came to mind.  
-Morrigan's secret thoughts*

## MORRIGAN

The doorbell rang about twenty minutes after Aodhan left for his overnight fishing charter, and I frowned when I got up to answer it.

On the other side were Danyetta and Bowie.

“Do you mind if he stays the night here?” she asked, looking worried. “I’ve had something happen at the restaurant that I’m fairly sure is going to take me all night. Faulty vent hood. But I can’t leave him alone, for obvious reasons.”

I winced at that.

“Damn, Bowie,” I teased. “There you go makin’ a mess of things.”

He flashed a grin at me, but surprisingly, he looked awfully hopeful.

“Come on in,” I said, waving at Danyetta that it was “okay.” “I was just about to order a pizza.”

Actually, I was about to do no such thing. I was about to go to bed without food because I was too tired to eat. Yet, a second wind came over me at the sight of the boy-man that was now taking up quite a bit of my—Aodhan’s—living room.

“Pizza sounds great,” he smiled gratefully. “Love you, Mom. I’ll be okay.”

Danyetta waved, then she was gone, all but running to her car.

Poor woman.

I would hate to have to answer to emergencies in the middle of the night.

Luckily, my coffee shop wasn’t open, and the apartment complex I owned had a night manager that dealt with anything that came up unexpectedly—though she was paid in free rent for that.

“What movie are you watching?” Bowie asked as he looked at the screen.

I grinned sheepishly.

“Actually,” I said as I pressed pause on the show to show him. “I’m watching old reruns of *Chips*. The old seventies show that had two motorcycle LA highway patrolmen. It’s one of the only things that my dad used to let me watch when I was a kid—he controlled every single bit of my childhood like that—and it’s one of those things that I turn on when I can’t find anything else to watch.”

“Ahh,” he sat down. “Do you want me to order from the app?”

He showed me his phone, and I sat down gratefully.

Truthfully, I’d been wavering in energy since the shower earlier.

Not that it wasn’t the best thing ever—to have sex with Aodhan—but damn, did it wear me out.

Not that I would ever tell him that, either.

I’d be damned if he stopped.

“Sure,” I said. “I want the smallest pizza they have. With extra, extra cheese.”

He nodded his head in understanding, then his fingers flew.

My phone dinged on the table beside me, and I reached for it and smiled when I saw the message.

**Aodhan—at the losing signal spot. Love you.**

My heart all but melted. We hadn’t exactly said “I love you” since we’d reconnected, though we both felt it, and showed it.

**Me: Love you, too.**

Sadly, it went green, indicating that he was most definitely out of cell range.

That had to be the worst part about him taking these trips out to nowhere. The not being able to get a hold of him thing.

If there was ever an emergency, it'd have to wait until he got back for him to know anything was wrong.

“Ordered,” Bowie said as he sat back. “I saw they started putting up new drywall in your store today.”

Etienne had pushed my shop to the front of the line—a perk that Matilda said was being part of Gator Bait MC—and within a few days, I would have walls, and could start working on the counters.

Everything in the back had survived, so it was my guess that I'd have the shop up and running within a few weeks. Which actually kind of bummed me out. The whole having downtime thing was excellent.

“Why do you look so bummed?” he asked curiously, leaning back on the couch, crossing his arms across his chest, and leveling me with a curious stare that reminded me so much of his father it hurt.

Eyes that I trusted because of who they came from.

“I'm not sure that working is for me,” I admitted. “I didn't realize just how tired I was. The thought of going back to work really sucks. This last week of sleeping in and doing nothing has been so nice. Not having to worry about getting milk for the lattes, or oh, shit, the credit card machine is down, or whoops, well there goes a leak in the men's bathroom...that is so nice.”

“What about hiring someone else to run it so all you really have to do is collect a paycheck?” he wondered.

I thought about that.

“Well,” I paused. “The reason that wouldn't exactly work is pretty simple. The coffee shop doesn't make enough money to pay me and a manager to run it. I barely make enough to pull in a full paycheck as it is.”

He tapped his chin with his index finger, a move so much like his father that it startled me.

“If it’s not netting you a good profit, then it sounds like it’s not the best investment. If you’re not having fun with this particular endeavor, then it sounds like you should cut your losses and move on to something that’ll give you what you want.” He shrugged. “Dad always says that there are too many variables in life. To control what you can.”

I smiled. “If I quit, then I won’t have any money to live off of.” I paused and corrected myself. “Well, I have the apartment building. That nets me a profit. And it’s passive income. But even that comes with struggles.”

We talked like that for a full forty-five minutes as we waited for the pizza to arrive. Then it finally did, and we devoured it. Me a small pizza, and him a large.

I shook my head when we were finally through, two episodes of *Chips* down, and said, “I can’t believe you just ate an entire large pizza.”

He pointed at the soccer ball that was on the ground by the door. “I’m a growing boy that works out a lot. I actually had soccer practice right before I came over. It’s like my stomach is a bottomless pit.”

Giggling, I checked my phone, then sighed.

Folsom had texted again.

**Folsom: You can’t ignore this. Your dad is a dick. I can’t believe you won’t let me do anything.**

I rolled my eyes and typed out a quick text.

**Morrigan: You can’t do anything because that’s illegal. Plus, there’s nothing to find. He never steps out of the Stone Age. Trust me when I say, he’s not going to have anything for you to mess with.**

**Folsom: You could at least let me try.**

**Morrigan: I could, but I'm tired of dealing with anything related to my father. We're going to let it go. We're done allowing him to ruin our life.**

**Folsom: Fine. But if you ever change your mind... let me know immediately.**

**Folsom: Also, I set your alarm. Why do you always leave it unarmed?**

**Morrigan: because we just had pizza delivered. Night. Love you.**

“Your friend?” Bowie asked, his eyes on the television.

I smiled. “My friend.”

“She sounds intense when Mom talks about her,” he said. “What’s her story?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know it. I know that she’s a really impressive hacker. I know that she can do things, and get things, that shouldn’t be possible. I know that she’s sweet, and has a three-year-old daughter that’s a genius. But as for her backstory? That I don’t know. She’s never shared it with me and I’ve never pushed her on her unwillingness to share.”

He looked at me again.

“You’re a surprise.”

I frowned. “Why?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “I guess when I heard about you, I expected you to be an asshole or something. I mean, you’re the person that used to love my dad, and he left. I thought you would take that out on him or something. But you didn’t. And you’ve been incredibly nice. I feel bad that I jumped to conclusions where you’re concerned.” He grimaced. “And that I allowed myself to think poorly of you when you didn’t do anything to give me the indication that you were a bad person.”

I patted his thigh, then got up and cleaned up the pizza boxes.

A wave of dizziness overtook me, and I immediately sat back down.

He looked at me curiously.

“Dizzy,” I admitted. “I’m fine.”

He shook his head, then got up and cleaned up the mess that I couldn’t clean up. Then he checked all the windows and the doors, then turned out all the lights.

“Can you get to the bedroom by yourself?” he asked. “Or do you need to hang out and watch some more shows with me?”

I pointed at the couch. “I’ll move up there in an hour or so. I just need to give my body time to regulate.”

He nodded. “I got a job.”

I blinked. “What?”

“I can’t officially have one yet, since I’m not old enough, but I got one anyway. Don’t tell my mom. I’m gonna help pay this back.” He tapped his backpack at his feet. “I’m gonna work while you watch this. That okay?”

I shook my head.

“You’re terrible,” I admitted. “But that’s fine.”

I’d also be bringing it up with both of his parents tomorrow.

Which he likely knew I would.

Hours later, I was finally able to get upstairs to take a load off. I all but collapsed into the bed, and didn’t realize it until the next morning, but I’d slept so well.

I hadn’t realized that I slept bad without Aodhan until Aodhan wasn’t here, but his son was.

Ever since my attack, the thought of being alone was abhorrent to me. Not that I would be telling Aodhan that or anything. Then he’d feel bad, and there would be nothing we could do about it.

•••

“Hey, Morr!” I heard Bowie call.

I stopped in the middle of brushing my teeth and called out, “Yeah?”

“I turned the alarm off because I needed to take the trash out. Do you need anything from me?”

I smiled. “No, but thank you!”

“Welcome. I’m gonna play some *Call of Duty* on the big TV. Is that okay?” he yelled.

“Yes!” I said. “I have to get some payroll done, and then I’ll be down!”

Plus, Aodhan should be home very soon.

It’d been a full twelve hours since he’d left. Any second, he’d be sliding that tight butt onto the back of his bike and riding home to me.

Well, to Bowie, too.

I faced forward and cleaned the bathroom mirror where I’d sprayed toothpaste foam during my conversation, and then went back to brushing my teeth.

I felt better today.

A lot better.

Better enough that I wished, only kind of anyway, that we were completely alone when Aodhan got home. But I’d thoroughly enjoyed Bowie’s presence last night, and maybe I could get Aodhan to take us out to lunch...

There was a clicking sound in the bedroom, and I walked out, excited because I thought maybe Aodhan was home early. But who I walked out to definitely wasn’t Aodhan.

Hell, it wasn’t even a man at all. But a woman.

My mother.

I blinked, staring at her in shock.



“What are you doing here?” I asked, shocked to not only see her, but to see her standing in my bedroom where she definitely wasn’t supposed to be.

“He’s going to kill you,” she whispered, her eyes slightly chaotic as she started to move toward me.

And before I could do much of anything, because I was still in complete shock to see my mother for the first time in forever, I didn’t stop her from not only getting in my space, but touching me altogether.

Her hands went to my neck, and once again someone was choking me.

I instantly started to fight back, pushing her away.

But, for an old woman, she was extremely strong and wouldn’t let go.

That’s when I started to panic, which wasn’t a good thing for me.

Anxiety and my condition didn’t mix.

I started to feel light-headed, but still I tried to pry her off of me.

She wasn’t necessarily hurting me, but she was there, in my personal space, with her hands on my neck. That was enough to shoot my adrenaline into overdrive, and my stupid body to start overreacting.

When my vision started to haze around the edges, I groaned.

“Let me go,” I whispered, feeling her fingernails dig into my skin, and hot liquid started to drip down my neck. “Please don’t do this.”

My vision darkened even more, and my last waking thought was “Bowie.”

## CHAPTER 22

*I look like I'm trying to help, but in actuality, I'm pressing the  
"elevator close" button as fast as I can.*

*-Aodhan to Morrigan*

## AODHAN

Party girls. The life of the party. Always wanting to go, go, go, and do, do, do.

That just wasn't Morrigan.

I couldn't wait to get home and find her in bed.

I was early. As in, two hours early, because the family that'd booked the charter with me had asked to go back early due to their son having a puking problem for the majority of the overnight trip.

I'd obliged, and now I was not only early, but I was bringing food home, and couldn't wait to surprise her with not only the food, but me in the bed.

My thoughts were on Morrigan as I pulled out of the donut shop's parking lot.

I just loved when I walked in on her sleeping.

Dating and loving a sleepy girl, I never had to worry about what she was doing, where she was at, or who she was with. Why? Because I knew exactly where she was, at any given point in the day.

At home. Asleep.

It didn't escape my notice, either, that she loved being at home all day, every day.

Sure, she loved going out and spending time with people outside of the house, but ultimately, she was a homebody, through and through. She enjoyed being at home, lazing around in bed, and watching movies on the couch.

Even better if I was there with her.

I was all but whistling in excitement to see my girl when I pulled into the driveway with the donuts and chocolate milks that I'd purchased.

When I opened my front door, however, I didn't see who I expected to see.

“Hey, Bow,” I said. “What are you doing here?”

*And why are you not at school?*

Not that I cared that he was in my house. I actually kind of liked it.

But I hadn’t expected to see him.

“Mom had an emergency at the restaurant and she dropped me off last night,” he answered. “And we only had a half day at school today, and Mom said it was absolutely pointless to go. So she said I could take the day off.”

I grinned. Sounded like a plan to me.

I never could quite understand what the point of half days was. They seemed like they were a waste of time.

“Where’s Morrigan?” I asked, already knowing the answer.

“She got up about an hour ago, but she had a bad night last night, I think,” he answered. “She said she was tired, ate too much, and needed to burrow into her cave for the night. We watched a movie for about thirty minutes before she fell asleep. I heard her moving around this morning already, but she said she was going to get some payroll done before she came down.”

I looked at the screen to see him playing *Battle Zone*. Something that was new that he’d never played before about two weeks ago. Not that you’d know it. Now, he was well past “good” into “professional gamer” territory. But I suppose that was what happened when you were a certified genius and decided to put your focus into something.

“Ah,” I said. “Try to get to bed before midnight tonight, though, okay?”

“Does that mean you’re not coming down for the rest of the day?” He snorted. “It’s the weekend.”

Meaning, since he didn’t have to go to school tomorrow, there was no way in hell that I would get him in bed at a normal time. I was such a bad dad sometimes.

“No, I won’t be staying up there all day,” I paused. “But remember you have a soccer game at one tomorrow. You need to at least be somewhat awake for that.”

“True,” he paused. “I’ll think about it.”

Then he went back to playing.

Bowie’s and my relationship had progressed over the last six months since he’d decided to give spending time with me a chance.

I patted him on the head, then placed a chocolate milk—my chocolate milk—on the coffee table. “I’ll put some donuts on a plate for you in the kitchen.”

He grinned, but didn’t look away from the screen. “Thanks, Dad.”

Thanks, Dad.

Two simple words had enough weight to put a spring in my step as I mounted the stairs, completely forgetting to put some donuts onto a plate for him.

He likely wouldn’t notice for a while anyway.

I carefully turned the knob to the bedroom door, and swung the door open just barely, in case she was actually asleep and not doing payroll like she’d said.

My eyes hit the bed, and I frowned, because I didn’t see her.

I pushed farther into the room and came to a sudden stop when my eyes landed on the floor beside the bed.

My heart all but leaped out of my chest when I saw her on the ground, in a pool of her own blood, staring at me.

Her eyes were terrified, and the relief in them when she saw me sent my stomach damn near to the floor.

I skidded to a stop next to her, unsure how I’d gotten from the door to her in the amount of time it took me to blink.

“Baby,” I said, bending down and cradling her head. “What happened?”

Had she fallen? Hit her head? Was she okay?

“H-hurts,” she whispered. “M-my m-mom c-came in through the w-window.”

I looked over at the window to see it ajar.

That was when I realized that not only had she lain on the floor for a while, but she’d also been freezing her ass off.

“Your mom?” I asked, my voice rising an octave.

“Y-yes.” She swallowed hard. “My mom.”

I was already shaking my head.

I’d only met her mom a handful of times, and each of those times I’d seen the broken woman that she was. I hadn’t thought that she was capable of this, though.

“What happened?” I asked, pulling out my phone.

She stopped me with a hand on mine.

“I’m okay,” she promised. “The blood is from her fingernails in my neck. And I passed out. But I’m okay. I’m just coming back online.”

I gathered her up to me, my heart all but tearing in half.

“The fuckin’ window?” I shook my head.

She nodded.

“Yes,” she nodded her head against my chest. “She’s off her rocker again. She said ‘he’ll kill you.’ Or something like that. And then started to attack me. I freaked out and my body did what it does best.”

Meaning, she passed out, and her mother had either thought she was dead, or close to it.

I’d never thought I’d be happy that Morrigan had POTS before, but there I was, appreciating the fuck out of it.

“Let’s get you cleaned up,” I said as I walked with her to the bathroom.

•••

She wasn’t hard to find.

Between Folsom’s ability to hack anything, anywhere and Kobe’s ability to find anyone, anywhere, she was quite easy to lock down. Sunny and I showed up at the hotel room that she’d rented for a night under a fake name.

She opened the door with an unsurprised look on her face, as if she’d only been counting down the minutes before someone showed up to apprehend her.

“It was worth it,” she said stiffly.

I looked over at Sunny, who produced a set of handcuffs. “Let’s go.”

She came easily.

And it was weird as fuck to walk with her to Sunny’s police car because she acted as if she were going on a trip, not going to the police station.

When we got her into an interrogation room, Sunny instructed me to stay outside while he went about interrogating her.

It was weird looking at her.

She was an older version of Morrigan, and I knew in a few years, Morr would look exactly like her.

She didn’t look bad at all. In fact, she was quite attractive for a crazy lady.

My phone rang, and I picked it up without looking at the readout.

“Hey,” Morrigan breathed. “Did you find her?”

“We did,” I confirmed. “I’m at the police station now. Sunny has her in an interrogation room. Want to listen?”

“No.” She sounded grossed out. “I’ll talk to you later. Bowie and I are going to get lunch. He’s asked about my turtleneck about a hundred times.”

I grinned, seeing my reflection slightly in the glass. “Love you, baby. Be careful.”

She hung up, and I got back to work listening to Sunny interrogating Morrigan’s mother.

“Why did you attack your daughter?” Sunny asked, skipping right to the good part.

“He is obsessed with her,” she whispered. “He’s going to hurt her. I just thought I could do it less painfully.”

Less painfully.

I closed my eyes as the implications tore through me.

“What happened?” he asked, mirroring my thoughts. “What do you know?”

“I’ve been doing my best to keep an eye on him throughout the years,” she explained. “I come by once a month. Go through his things. Make sure that he’s being good, I guess. But the last few times I’ve come, he’s become overly obsessed with all things Morrigan.”

My stomach sank.

“He was never going to leave her alone,” she promised.

It was then it hit me. Even in her fucked-up way, Morrigan’s mother was trying to protect her from the man that meant her harm. She wasn’t right in the head. She wasn’t even able to look after herself. Not after what was done to her over the years. But even then, she was still trying to protect her in the way she thought would be the best way.

First, by trying to take them out of the picture before they were even born, to keep them from having to endure their father’s ways. Then, later in life, when she realized that her father was obsessed with her.



Granted, there were other ways she could've gone about it, but still, in her own way, she was trying to watch out for her child.

My phone rang, and I answered it again without looking at it.

“Hey, it's Folsom. Is Sunny with you?” she asked.

“No.” I paused and knocked on the glass. “Do you need him?”

“Yes,” she said.

Sunny came out and jerked his chin up at me, silently asking me what I needed.

“He's here,” I said.

Folsom immediately started in on what she'd found.

“According to her history,” Folsom said into the speakerphone, “she's always had bouts of lucidity paired with her manageable schizophrenic episodes. The prescriptions are helping her manage it for the most part. But that's why she still lives with her parents, according to the medical documents I hacked into that I'm now reading.”

Sunny pinched the bridge of his nose, as if he was trying to unhear that last part.

“Her phone made several stops today,” she said. “One at your house, Aodhan, and one at her father's. And, just sayin', but there was a page out of that house about ten minutes ago. The wife called in a heart attack.”

I looked at Sunny.

He cursed under his breath, then pulled out his own phone and made a call.

It was confirmed ten minutes later that Morrigan's father died at a county hospital of a heart attack.

And likely the woman behind the plexiglass was responsible for said heart attack.

Well, shit.

# CHAPTER 23

*S'mores before whores.  
-T-shirt*

## MORRIGAN

One would think that learning about your father dying would be a really bad day.

Honestly, other than my mother trying to choke the life out of me, it was a really great one.

Why?

Because I had the best day with Bowie, and an even better night with Aodhan after Bowie went home.

It started with lunch at a fresh sushi restaurant where we ate so much sushi that we left practically rolling our way out the door. Then we went to buy some clothes, where we raced our little mall-rented scooters throughout the mall.

It was followed up with cupcakes at the only bakery in town, and then me dropping him off at home where he was supposed to talk to his mother about his new “job.” I was also made to promise that I would be at his soccer game tomorrow at one, which there was no way in hell I wouldn’t be sitting on those sidelines. Even if I had to go by myself.

When I got home, it was to Aodhan cooking dinner at the stove, with the phone to his ear.

“No,” I heard him say as I walked in. “Really? That’s hard to believe.”

I walked up behind him and wrapped my arms around his midsection, placing my face against the gap between his large, muscular shoulder blades.

He spoke some more to whomever he was on the phone with, but I listened to the vibration of his chest, and not his words.

By the time he was hanging up and turning in my arms, I was completely lost, hypnotized by the timbre of his voice.

“You okay?” he asked, running his fingers lightly along my neck.

“I’m fine,” I promised. “I haven’t had any lingering side effects all day. Who was that on the phone?”

He squeezed me lightly before letting me go to go back to whatever he was doing at the stove.

I moved to his side and leaned against the countertop, looking down into the many pots on the stove.

Beef tips and rice.

One of my favorites.

“That was Sunny, giving me an update,” he answered. “I hate to tell you this, but the call from your stepmother was true. Your dad had a heart attack while she was away at work. He died.”

I grimaced.

Was I sad? Not really.

You couldn’t be sad about someone dying that really wasn’t a part of your life.

The sadness was, in actuality, more about what I didn’t have, than what I did.

“That sucks,” I admitted. “Was my mother involved in any way?”

“No.” He paused. “At least not that she confessed. And Sunny is fairly sure that she would’ve confessed. She told us everything when it came to you.”

“Interesting,” I said. “What does that mean now? What will happen to her?”

“Sunny got with the police chief in your mom’s hometown, who got with your grandparents. They have medical power of attorney, and have once again checked her into a mental facility where she’ll be for at least another six months as they evaluate her.”

“Hmm,” I said. “Well, that’s interesting.”

Which was all it was.

Did it suck, her strangling me? Even if she did a shitty job at it? Yes.

Did I give a second thought to anything when it came to her? Nope.

“Will you marry me?” I asked him.

He blinked, turned, and stared down at me. “What?”

“Marry me,” I repeated. “Will you?”

His eyes twinkled as he said, “You know, I had all this planned out.”

I batted my eyelashes at him. “You did?”

“I did,” he paused. “But it’s better this way, I guess. I was freaking out because I was worried I might overly excite you, then you’d pass out, and then you’d be mad at me because that would be how you remember me asking you to marry me forever. So...yes. I’ll marry you.”

The pure sheepishness on his face was priceless.

“Before next month?” I asked. “That’s when we said we’d get married if we weren’t married by our birthdays.”

He reached down, picked me up by my armpits, and placed me on the counter. “I’ll marry you tomorrow.”

The way he got so into my face to say it sent excitement zinging through me.

I smiled slyly at him. “Tomorrow wasn’t on the table.”

“Tomorrow will be on the table...” He hesitated. “But I kind of like the idea of getting married on our birthdays. Seems fitting. Some of the most important days of our lives happened on that day.”

I leaned forward and placed my forehead against the middle of his right pec, closing my eyes and sighing as the most euphoric feeling rolled through me...contentment.

I was content.

My heart was at peace.

My whole entire being felt like it was finally exactly where it was supposed to be...there. With him. In his arms. Against his chest, listening to his heartbeat.

“Dinner’s almost ready,” he rumbled. “I have to eat, then I have to go get Bowie from practice.”

Speaking of Bowie...

“Did y’all agree to let him keep working?” I asked.

He’d gotten a job online. It was completely remote, twenty hours a week, and none other than my favorite stalker friend had helped him come up with the forgery that lied to his employer and told them he was over eighteen.

“We’re going to let him,” Aodhan said. “Yeti and I talked on the phone today. We think that it’s best if we allow it to happen. But if it starts interrupting his schoolwork, or affecting his soccer, then we’ll say something about it. We’re both in agreement, though. This is something he feels like he needs to do, mostly because he does need to do it. He told Folsom when he got this job, and she helped him, that he was going to help pay Wake back for helping cover the cost of renovation. I tend to think that it’s a good idea for him.”

I wrapped my arms around his waist and squeezed.

It was a laughable effort, me giving him a hard hug, but he understood, and returned the hug just as hard.

“What do we do now?” I asked curiously.

“Now?” he asked, pulling back and tucking a stray lock of hair behind my ear. “Now we get to live our happily ever after.”

So we did.

# EPILOGUE

*Whiskey: the nighttime sniffing, sneezing, how the hell did I  
end up on the bathroom floor medicine.*

*-Aodhan to Bowie*



## AODHAN

### **Folsom: Congratulations**

I rolled my eyes. Why did it not surprise me that she knew already?

Excitement rushed through me as I all but jogged into the hospital.

“Would you slow down?” Morrigan giggled.

Her POTS, although better in the last fifteen years, still wasn't great, either. Through the years, as she'd aged, her POTS had somewhat leveled out. Now, extreme excitement or surprises didn't affect her. What did affect her was running, keeping her heart rate elevated, and pretty much any exercising whatsoever that had her upright.

Hence her being on my back as we all but ran into the hospital.

Cameras flashed in the vestibule, and I cursed.

Shortly after all the shit went down with Bowie's coach, he'd switched fully to soccer. And what a decision that was.

Bowie now played for FC Brooksborg, an up-and-coming soccer team in Madison, Wisconsin that was taking the soccer world by storm. One second, they were a nobody soccer team with an überbillionaire from Dubai as an owner, and the next they were playing, and beating, the best of the best.

Their latest conquest was FC Madrid last night. Hours before Bowie's baby was born.

Bowie played in Madrid, flew straight home, and walked into the hospital just in time for his child to make his or her appearance.

His child.

Holy fuck, I was a goddamn grandfather.

“You're gonna miss the elevator if you keep lollygagging!” Morr giggled from my back, tapping my chest as if she would

a disobeying horse.

I snorted and moved faster, already practically running. Now I was outright sprinting for the elevator.

I made it, though, causing my girl to laugh.

When we arrived on the floor where my son was located, I walked right up to the first nurse behind a desk and said, “I’m looking for my son.”

Her brows lifted. “And is your son having a child?”

Today, Bowie had his first child.

“My son had his first child.” I smiled. “As of two hours ago. McBanks.”

She grinned.

She knew that name.

It really wasn’t a surprise.

It was famous now.

Though, in our small little town of Accident, it was infamous.

But only because it was Morrigan’s new name, instead of Morrigan’s old name—St. Pete.

All those years ago, and what happened with Morrigan’s mother and father was still a scandal. The most recent one, and the further away one.

One trying to kill themselves, and take their unborn babies out with them, all because a man was controlling wasn’t something the town forgot. Then, years later, when said man has a heart attack because he refused modern medicine? Well, let’s just say the St. Pete name had a bit of a stigma to it.

The McBanks name, however, was known worldwide because my son had become the soccer star midfielder. The “hot, smart soccer guy” that everyone loved.

I hadn’t learned that last part from Bowie, though. I’d learned it from Morrigan and my ex-wife as they squealed

about his photos in *Sports Illustrated Magazine*.

Needless to say, he was a very large celebrity in the soccer world, and hell in the United States and Europe right now. Everyone knew his name because he was apparently “cute.”

“I can see where he gets it,” I heard a nurse say.

I looked over just in time to feel Morrigan’s hand tighten possessively on my shoulder. A hiss in my ear let me know that she was two seconds away from biting the woman’s head off.

“His room number?” I asked.

“We’re not allowed to let anyone...”

“Dad!”

I turned to see my son in the hallway at the very end, a bundle of blanket and baby in his arms.

I left the nurses behind and headed straight for him.

His eyes were light and bright with excitement as he all but shoved his kid into my arms.

I dropped Morr like a hot potato, and cuddled the baby close into my arms.

“Shit, son,” I said quietly.

Morrigan pushed past me, giving us a moment, as she headed inside to Bowie’s wife.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw them hug. But my eyes were all for my son’s baby. My grandchild.

“Boy or girl?” I asked quietly.

He moved to the side so I could enter, and I all but melted when the baby opened his eyes.

“Boy,” Bowie whispered, a little awe in his voice.

I grinned at my son. “Holy fuck. You’re in for a ride.”

“I understand now,” Bowie said quietly, his eyes only for his son in his arms.

I leaned down so that I could see the baby's face.

He looked exactly like Bowie did at that age.

God, that felt like a lifetime ago.

"Understand what?" I asked, letting my fingers run through the red hair on the top of my grandson's head.

"Why you went berserk when that man tried to switch me," he said. "I've followed him all around this hospital. They're all freaking out because I won't stop following him. I make them nervous, they said."

Fuckin' good.

"Fuck 'em," I replied.

"You're gonna have to watch that language," Morrigan said, in the corner with Danyetta, who'd beat us to the hospital by only a few short minutes.

Danyetta giggled. "Agreed."

"Triple agreed," Bowie's wife said.

I sighed.

"This kid has a father that plays professional soccer who is known to be one of the most aggressive in the league. A mom that plays professional soccer, and won the award for most yellow cards last year. A grandmother that is married to a district attorney that deals with only the most violent of criminals, and then me. A grandfather who's in a motorcycle club, and runs a fishing charter service that sees mostly men all day long. Do you honestly think that this kid is going to not know the word 'fuck?'"

"Well," his wife laughed. "When you put it like that, I guess it does sound a bit silly." She hesitated. "But maybe for now, we should at least try to act like we have our shit together?"

"You just said 'shit,'" I pointed out.

She started to giggle, her face flushed with happiness.

She held out her hands and said, “All right, you’ve had him for like ever.”

“I’ve had him for at most ten minutes,” he said, but still he gave me his son. My grandson. Holy fuckin’ hell. I had no clue that this possessive, willing to protect the goddamn world feeling would extend to someone that was my son’s but...there it was. I’d protect this kid with my life, just like I would my own kids and wife. Hell, even Danyetta and Bowie’s wife now fit in that category.

“Where are the kids?” Yeti asked.

I grimaced. “In school. We have like an hour before we have to leave to go get them. They’re gonna kill us for coming up here without them. But they all have tests today.”

The end of the six weeks was such a pain in the ass.

I would’ve totally taken them had I not already had a plan to keep them out tomorrow throughout the rest of the weekend.

“The only one that’ll be upset is Tiny,” Morrigan said.

Tiny was actually our oldest daughter. At seven years old, she may be the eldest, but she was definitely the smallest.

Our other two sons, who were four and five, towered over her.

Then there was Bowie who all but dwarfed them all.

“Tiny will live,” Bowie laughed. “Poor y’all.”

I rolled my eyes, then passed him his kid back with the utmost reluctance. “Poor me. She doesn’t cop that attitude with Morr.”

“She doesn’t, because she knows she can’t get away with it,” Morrigan pointed out.

Morrigan’s pregnancies had gone about as good as could be expected. She passed out a lot. They had to induce her four weeks early on each pregnancy, and by the third child, we’d

decided that we were done. Even though we had plenty of more space in our hearts for more.

“When I watched her last week, she told me that I needed to work on my angry face, because it wasn’t as good as her mom’s.” Yeti laughed. “We worked on it for twenty minutes, and I tried it on Bowie. It totally worked.”

“It did,” Bowie laughed. “She did it over FaceTime when she told me I didn’t call her enough.”

He stood up and walked the baby over to Morrigan, who took him with a small smile.

I watched them all coo and aww over the baby, and I rubbed that part of my chest where it always felt so warm when anyone I loved was in the room.

“You did great, Bowie McBanks,” Morrigan whispered.

Yeti took that moment to squeeze my shoulder. “You did great, Aodhan McBanks.”

I caught her hand with mine and squeezed. “You did, too, Yeti Brooks.”

That’s right. Yeti was no longer a McBanks, but a Brooks.

A year after Morr and I had tied the knot, she’d met a man that hung her moon. And not the district attorney that kept stringing her along.

Daryl loved her and appreciated her like she deserved, and they had two more kids together.

Now, we celebrated our holidays together like one huge, happy family.

And I fucking loved it.

My phone buzzed in my pocket and I pulled it out to glance at it.

**Tiny: You are so dead to me.**

I grinned and typed back.

**Me: why?**

**Tiny: I have Life360. I know where you are. So dead to me.**

I burst out laughing. Then sent my girl a picture of her new nephew.

“Who’s that for?” Bowie asked, grinning.

I showed him the text thread, and he shook his head. “You’re so dead to her.”

“It’s fine,” Morrigan said. “We’ll take her to the gas station to get a chicken sandwich and a Coke, and she’ll be right as rain.”

The way to all of my girls’ hearts were through their stomachs.

“Better tack on a Snickers bar,” Yeti suggested. “Those will help.”

And they did.

The next day, everyone was in a great mood.

And I felt the greatest feeling in the world. Having my whole family safe, happy and whole, all together under one roof.

•••

I hope you enjoyed *The Voices are Back!*

Next up is [\*Special Kind of Twisted!\*](#)