



BLACK HEARTS SERIES
BOOK FOUR

HER

Brutal

KING

USA TODAY BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

A. N. STAUBER

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BLACK HEARTS *BOOK FOUR*



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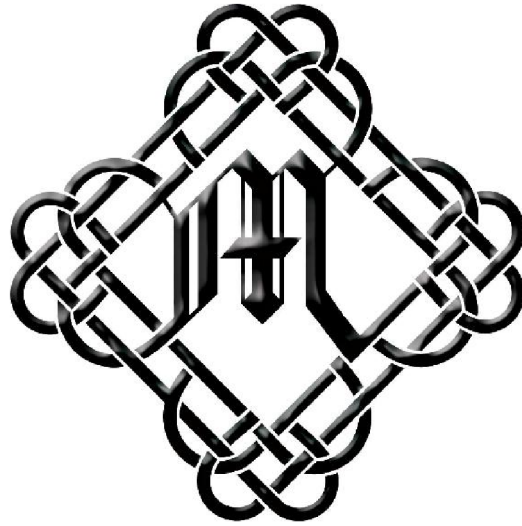
About the Author

To all my girlies with daddy issues:

Sammy's father was written to show that not all dads are deadbeats. May you find a tattooed book boyfriend with a giant pierced schlong to treat you like a princess since your real daddy wouldn't.

Declan is ready to fill those shoes for you now.

Author's Note



WELCOME

CONTENT GUIDE:

This mafia story is NOT a clean romance. I do NOT condone any situations or actions that take place in this fictional story.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE:

Saoirse (Sur-shuh)

Aoibheann: (Ev-in)

If you don't have any triggers, please feel free to skip the rest of this message.

WARNINGS:

This book includes but is not limited to:

Extreme graphic description of violence, explicit language, alcohol abuse and sexual content. There is also murder, torture, descriptive mention of the loss of a significant other (for both MCs), suicidal ideation, attempted suicide on page, breath play, PTSD from traumatic death events. The characters in this story are mentally fucked.

Prologue



“GET THE FUCK OUTTA here!” the bouncer yells, his Boston accent thick as I’m tossed onto the street.

My body hits the concrete with force, and I groan at the pain in my wrist. The door to the bar closes with a thud, echoing through the street. This time of day, everyone’s at work. Attempting to stand and right myself, I stumble instead. I drank too much, and now, my entire body is useless.

This will hurt tomorrow.

It will be worth it, not to feel the pain now.

Not to see the face of my lost girl, the dead eyes staring back at me as I pulled her from the bloody water. I was only a kid and had already seen so much death. But hers had been the worst. Hers had actually mattered.

“Killing her without trying her out would be a shame,” a man says, his Russian accent thick.

His voice comes from the alleyway, and I turn to figure out what he’s talking about. I half expect him to be toppling over a

woman, but all I see are two men dressed in black with their hoods up. There's no one else in the alley with them. And in the afternoon light, I'm able to take in the scar on the right side of one's face.

“We have to be quick. There's a panic button, and if she activates it, we're fucked,” one of them says.

“Still. If we catch her by surprise, she won't be able to press any buttons. Just seems to be wasteful. I haven't gotten laid in weeks, man. The old lady's pissed at me.”

The scarless one snorts, dropping the butt of his cigarette to the ground. He snuffs it with the heel of his boot. “That's what happens when you're a cheating bastard. Wanna add rapist to the list too?”

The one with the scar shrugs. “Wouldn't be the first time.”

The other one laughs. “Fine. We should get going. Gotta make it quick.”

I move to make myself known, grunting loud enough that they'll know they aren't alone. I may not be a good guy. Hell, I know I'm a dark monster. But raping and murdering women is where I draw the line. And if I can stop it, I will. I'm not carrying a firearm today. I had business this morning in the police station, and the last thing I need is to be caught with an unregistered weapon. My fists will have to do.

“What's up, fuckers?” I ask, a sly grin on my face. I'm sure my words come out slurred, but they have the desired effect.

Both heads swivel toward me. Recognition hits the one with the scar. His eyes pop as he takes in the sight of me. “Declan Murphy in Russian territory?” he chuckles, rubbing his hands together. “We just hit the lotto, Dinetto.”

I hum, excited to get what I fucking came here for. I’ve been brewing for a fight since the second I stepped into the bar.

“I’m going to enjoy killing you, Irish fuck.”

“Bring it, old man.” I grin sardonically.

A fist flies toward my face. I’m slow because of the alcohol I consumed but dodge it.

The fists continue to fly until one of them connects with my jaw. I fall on my ass, laughing as I savor the pain. Yes, this is what I wanted. One of them towers over me, grabs my shirt by the collar, and he pounds into me over and over.

Blood pours down my face, the taste of copper on the tip of my tongue. My head pounds, until finally scar man is pulled off me.

“Get off him,” someone mutters. I recognize that voice. It belongs to Ivan Novikoff. He’s from Miami, though I’m sure he’s here on some type of business with the Boston Bratva.

It would be my luck that he’s here now, preventing me from taking the brutal beating I deserve.

My vision blurs from the hits, and I’m sure an eye is swollen shut. The adrenaline courses through me, despite having my ass handed to me. A gun cocks, the sound drawing my

attention as it's pressed to someone's forehead. "Get out of here before I tell the Pahkan what you've done."

The two men hurry out of the alley, leaving me alone with my savior. "Jesus, Declan." He towers over me. I grin, glancing at the blurry figure in front of me. "Let's get you cleaned up."

I'm lifted, my arm wrapping around his neck. He grunts. "You're fucking heavy, man."

"Should have let them kill me," I murmur.

My chest tightens, a lead balloon inflating inside of me. I didn't stop them from hurting her. Whoever she is.

Chapter One



FIVE YEARS LATER

I MAGES OF BLOOD FLASH with each blink of my eyes. It covers my hands. Every man I've killed. Their faces come into focus, from the most recent all the way to my very first. And then, all I see is Cara.

I still remember every detail. When I found her. The way her eyes were opened. How my stomach churned with bile. The raw ache in my chest that cracked open when I felt her cold skin. How pale she was with the blood drained from her body.

Her mother's primal screams still pierce my ears. Earth-shattering screeches that sliced through my chest like butter. The way she dropped to her knees while I jumped into the pool, tainted with her daughter's blood. The way I performed

CPR on her, despite the slashes in her wrists that drained the life out of her before she could drown.

I still remember how I shielded her from her brother, Scotty, and their mother so that image couldn't be burned into their brains the same way it is in mine.

Every. Fucking. Day.

I take a swig of the metal flask, then toss it into the passenger seat, not caring to put the lid back on. My foot hits the pedal, accelerating even faster. I'm ready to make the replay stop. I'll reach the bridge in about thirty-five seconds.

I know this because I've done it too many times before. Tonight, though? Tonight, I won't chicken out.

I'm tired of everything. Of not getting enough sleep, of reliving the worst days of my life over and over again. Of not being able to file away every detail of my life.

People say that if they could, they'd love to read their favorite book for the first time, or watch their favorite movie for the first time, to relive those emotions that story stirred in them.

But I can, and it's a fucking curse, not a gift. That gift dies today. With me. This is it. The final ending. I roll the windows down.

"For Cara," I say, white knuckling the steering wheel. And then I yank to the right, flying over the railing of the bridge.

The Lamborghini hits the water like concrete. It doesn't take long for the water to spill in. I keep my seatbelt on. Anything

to keep me from changing my mind.

My socks are wet.

The engine kicks out.

The water is to my knees. I breathe in; I breathe out. I reach for the flask, but my belt locks and I can't reach it. Mother fucker.

I'm submerged to my chest now. There's no going back, and I don't want to.

There's no oxygen. I'm completely submerged. But I welcome the forever sleep. Arms wrap around me, trying to pull me free. I buck, wanting to fight against their hold. *No, please.* Let me go. Let me be free. Leave me to die.

I can't relive this moment anymore.



A buzz sounds; the bars unlock. Metal rolls, and then there's a click. The draft of the cell threatens to send a shiver up my spine, but I force away that feeling.

“Murphy. Get the fuck up,” an officer says, his tone clipped.

I don't budge. I want to be numb, but my brain won't let that happen. Metal hits metal again, this time in a symphony as

handcuffs are dragged across the bar to create an abundance of noise.

“Declan Murphy. On your feet.”

I hear him calling me, but I don't respond. Can't they just leave me laying here and let me die. I wait for the pain from what the frustrated asshole will do to me. I welcome it. To help drown out the incessant highlight reel of how I failed Cara. If I can't be numb, I'll take whatever uncomfortable feelings I'm able to grasp.

“Last fucking call,” he grinds out.

Yes, please. Fight me. Make me bleed the way she did. Make me hurt, end me. Stop it all. Make me numb. He won't do it, though. He knows who I am, what would happen if he touched a Murphy boy. The empty threat hangs in the air, and I still don't move.

The officer huffs, his footsteps becoming louder as he approaches. His hand clutches my shoulder, then he tosses me to the floor.

I don't react. I just lay on the cement floor, waiting.

“Your ride is here. Jesus. Get up, Murphy.”

My ride? I called no one, told no one about what I did. It was reckless, stupid now that they pulled me from the murky waters.

The second my family finds out that I drove intoxicated, they'll start up an intervention, and that's the last thing I need.

“Who’s here?” I ask, grunting as I bring myself up on all fours.

He shrugs while I stand, stumbling to regain my balance. “Fuck if I know.”

My mind flickers back to the scene of the accident. Someone was there. Someone pulled me out of the water. My eyes were closed, so I didn’t get a good look at their face, and that makes the memory fuzzy. Vision makes the vivid scenes so real, so when I don’t have the image, the memory isn’t as sharp as when I can see something so clearly.

Was it a man? A woman?

I shuffle through the options, the other senses I had at my disposal. Touch. The hands tugging me toward the light were rough. Large, strong hands that probably belonged to a man. All I could smell was dirty river water and dead fish. That wouldn’t help decipher anything.

When I came to, I only saw the face of a paramedic pushing down on my chest. I coughed up water. Fuck. Had my heart stopped beating? Maybe.

My heart sinks with that realization. For a moment, my mind was blank, and I let the darkness slip through my fingers. I could’ve ended the pain that festers deep inside of my bones, but someone prevented that.

A faceless someone.

The officer grabs me by the elbow and drags me down the hall. I didn’t go to the hospital. I convinced the sergeant on

duty that I'd be fine. Just take me to jail, lock me up. Maybe I'd get lucky, and some secondary drowning would happen in the cell.

Hours later, I'm still breathing. I may be Irish, but I did not, in fact, get lucky.

"Here." The officer shoves a plastic bag at my chest, then opens the door to the lobby.

I glance around, trying to take notice of anyone in the lobby, but it's empty. My feet ache, and my clothes are a sopping wet mess, but I walk to the exit.

"Christ, you look like shit," Scotty says.

I turn, groaning when I see my friend leaning against the railing of the stairs. He's in jeans and a T-shirt, and I do a double take—the scruff of blond hair on his cheeks is something new. I'm not used to this side of him, only used to him wearing the black suit, with a clean-shaven face. That Scotty is gone now that he's out of organized crime. It's only been a month or so, but civilian life seems to have softened his face. He's not as tense, smiling more.

Love and all that shit. They say it's good for the soul. I wouldn't know. I'd never know, since my love is gone.

"See my sister's making sure you're getting fat." I grin as I head toward him and punch at his stomach.

He chuckles, shaking his head. "I've gained weight. But it's all muscle, bro." He flexes his bicep, then extends his hand for a shake.

I take it, pulling him into a brotherly hug. “I’m glad you’re happy.” Even if it is with my baby sister. The words hang in the air, left unspoken.

“I wish you were,” he says, pulling away. He grabs the duffel on the ground beside him, then shoves it at my chest. “You can get dressed in the car. Saoirse is waiting, and she’s about to give you an ear full.”

I snort. My youngest sibling, and only sister, is a spitball to be reckoned with. So, I brace myself for her wrath. Together, we head down the stairs, then down the block to the parking garage. When we get there, Saoirse rolls down the window of the front passenger seat. She pokes her head out of the blacked-out Rolls Royce, her red hair almost to her shoulders already. She’d cut it off last month after she was rescued from her kidnapping. It looks great on her, but the reason behind it always causes my stomach to swirl with rage whenever I see the new style.

“You asshole!” Saoirse shouts. “The hotel opening is *tomorrow*. As if I don’t have enough on my plate, I get a phone call from the chief of police telling me you’re in the drunk tank?”

I roll my eyes, open the back door of the car, and climb in. Scotty rounds the car to get into the driver’s seat. And I take off my dirty clothes. Saoirse doesn’t care, though. She whips her head around, continuing her lecture.

“God, Declan. You smell like rotten fish.” Her nose crinkles.

I grunt.

“Why?” she practically shouts. “You could have killed someone, Dec. You could have killed yourself.”

That was the point. I did it because I wanted to die.

My gaze snaps to hers. “Drinking and driving is nothing compared to the other heinous crimes, Saoirse,” I grind out. “Leave it be. I was just letting off some steam.”

She huffs, shaking her head. “Leave it be. Do you understand why Chief Santez called me and not Callum?”

Callum is the oldest of us, the one in charge. I don’t respond as I pull on a fresh t-shirt.

“Because of Scotty, Declan. You may not give a fuck about anything but yourself, but this hinders his run for mayor.” Her voice softens, and I know it’s for the fear that she may not get out of this life. Scotty going for mayor of Boston will help further his political career. It’ll get both of them away from the danger of the Mafia, and that’s what she’s always wanted.

“It’s fine, princess,” Scotty says, starting the engine. “We took care of it.”

“Took care of it,” Saoirse says, but the bite to her tone is gone. She turns forward, and he rests his hand on her thigh. Immediately, it douses her anger. My best friend since childhood, Jameson Scott Burne, has put out the fire inside of my sister’s soul. Or at least dimmed it so it’s not a raging, uncontrollable forest fire.

I stare in shock, mouth agape. “If I knew you’d calm her down so easily, I’d have told Callum we needed to set up a

forced marriage the second she turned eighteen,” I deadpan.

Saoirse’s head snaps back toward me. “Shut up and get dressed. You can shower at the hotel. I had your belongings sent to a penthouse there already. You’ll be sober and smiling for this dinner tomorrow, Declan. Or I’ll shove you in the trunk, and when I drive you over a bridge, you won’t be able to get out.”

I snort, shimmying on the sweatpants they packed for me. Silence fills the air, and I swallow as the guilt for ruining her big night settles. “I’m sorry, Saoirse. I forgot about the hotel opening.”

And I truly mean that I’m sorry. Had I remembered, I would have at least waited to end my life on a day that wasn’t so important to her.

Chapter Two



IT'S BEEN FIVE YEARS, Samira. When are you going to come home? Your father and I could help out more if you'd just move back, baby." Mom's voice comes through my cell phone. I've just told her about the draining day I've had, and her response is to tell me I need to move back home?

I roll my eyes. She can't see me, but I'll bet she can hear the muscle strain all the way from Connecticut. Our daily chats on the phone are always the same. I tell her about my day. If it's a good one, she tells me how much she misses her grandbabies and asks me when I'll sell the house so she can have them back home with her full time. If it's a bad one, like today, she tells me it's time to come home so she can help. Either way, it's the same argument, and I just don't have it in me to fight today.

Never mind the fact that Boston is my home. This is where I started a family with my late husband, Ian. Selling it would be like leaving him behind. We picked the location for the

schools and the closeness to the diner. Ian was so happy when he saw the backyard. He'd scooped me up, twirling me as he smiled so widely that I got a glimpse of those sweet dimples that always made my heart beat faster.

We conceived our youngest, Max, on the couch in the living room. We made friends and created a family from those friends.

There are too many memories here. I'll never leave Boston, even if it means raising my kids without the help of my parents. I steel myself, knowing I'm about to argue with my mom. "Mom. We're doing all right here. The kids have had enough happen to them. I won't pull them from their schools. From their friends."

Mom scoffs, dismissing my worries the way she always does. "Kids are resilient. They'll make new friends, honey."

My kids *are* resilient. They've endured the tragic loss of their father at only twelve and five. I'm not about to yank them from the only thing that's been constant since. "Mom. Boston is our home. It's where they've grown up, where they've made their friends. It's where ... " The words swirl around in my gut, like a sinking rock. "It's where Ian is."

"Honey, that's just a grave site. He's in your hearts. He's all around you in everything you do. Every day."

I swallow, shaking my head. The most frustrating thing is that she acts like we're across the country. My parents' farm in Salisbury, Connecticut, is only three hours away. She's only been to my house three times since the month after Ian's death.

But Dad travels here all the time. She says it's because she can't leave the orchards unattended, and that her goats will get separation anxiety if they think she's abandoned them. But Dad hired someone to help when I left for college.

Deep down, he always knew I wouldn't come home.

My eyes are closed as I force away the tears. I can't cry. Not here, standing in the middle of my bedroom. The only place I'm allowed to cry is in the shower, where the kids can't hear me. "Mom. Please, I don't have the energy for this conversation."

Tucking the phone between my ear and my chin, I fold a towel and toss it onto the bed. "I've gotta get the vomit out of the minivan before the smell settles. Max upchucked after baseball practice today. I don't understand why these coaches run them so hard. They're eight years old. It's not like they're training for the MLB."

Mom laughs. "Your father was the same way with your softball team. It's why I finally forbade him from coaching. Men and their sports—"

"Is that Sammy?" Dad's voice comes through the line, and I catch the tail end of him arguing with her as he steals the phone. "Hey, Sammy. I heard you had a rough day?"

"Hey, Dad. Yeah. We're fine now. Max is clean and playing games like nothing ever happened. The car has seen better days, though."

“That’s a shame. I’m proud of you, baby girl. Doing this all by yourself.”

As if I had a choice. As if Ian didn’t up and croak on me. I know he doesn’t mean any ill intent, so I keep my mouth shut as he tells me about his fishing trip. Dad and I have always been close. But it’s been harder for me recently. Memories of me in my teenage years going fishing with him or ordering pizza and wings while we watched Sweeney Todd. Every time I talk to him, the guilt eats at me. My daughter will never get those moments with her father. Em’s time with Ian was cut short—robbed from her.

My phone beeps with an incoming notification. Saoirse Murphy is calling me. I’m hosting a grand opening event at her hotel tomorrow, so I use it as an excuse to get off the line. “Hey, Dad. I gotta go. I’ve got a client on the line.”

Dad hums his approval. “Okay, sweetheart. You’re doing great. I’ll be there in a few days to help, okay?”

“Okay, Dad. Bye, I love you.”

“I love you, sweetheart.”

I hang up the phone, then open the text chain.

Saoirse: Are we all good for the opening tomorrow? Anything you need from me?

Sammy: Yes. I’ll be at the hotel around noon to make sure everything is ready for dinner.

Saoirse: Sounds great! Thank you.

Sammy: Absolutely! I'm looking forward to our first event together! :)

I plop my phone into the massive heap of unfolded clothes on my bed, then let out a heavy sigh. I glare at the clothes, not wanting to fold them, but knowing it's got to get done. For a moment, I debate shoving them onto the reading chair in the corner and forgetting about them until tomorrow. But tomorrow will turn into the next day, and before I know it, a month later I'm looking for my favorite black dress, only to find it wrinkled at the bottom of the pile.

"Fuck, fine," I grumble to myself, getting to work quickly. The kids are super quiet tonight, tucked away in their rooms after a hearty dinner of chili and warm homemade bread.

Their bellies are full, and I won't hear from them until I force Max to take another shower before bed. Em's probably already showered and on a video call with one of her friends. She'll stay up into the early morning if I don't go in and make her turn off the phone.

Halfway through the laundry, a knock sounds against the frame of my open door. I glance up, smiling at Veronica. She isn't just my assistant at the event coordinating business I own. She's also a friend and roommate, and she helps me out immensely with the kids. I indicate for her to come in.

She's young, only six years older than my seventeen-year-old, and beautiful. Her dark hair is curled today, falling over one shoulder, and bright, dark, almost obsidian eyes watch me. She's got dark red lipstick on, popping against the black mini

dress she's in. She must be getting ready to go out. I glance at the clock. It's only seven in the evening, and she usually waits until ten or eleven to leave.

I finish the shirt I'm on. "What's up?"

She smiles brightly, eyeing me with a mischievous look that screams she's about to drag me out of the house with her. "It's Friday night. Em is here. Max is showered and playing video games in the living room." When she reaches the bed, she grabs a towel and folds it.

My brow raises with skepticism. "Max is showered? Like with soap?"

She nods, a smirk plastered on her face. "And his hair is shampooed. *And* his teeth brushed."

Okay, now I'm just in complete and utter shock. There's no fucking way my son took a shower without being tossed in the tub. Veronica tried once, when I was working late, to get him bathed. He promptly told her to go fuck herself in a less aggressive, curse-free way that an eight-year-old can. She's never tried since, and I've never expected or asked her to, either.

Veronica senses my lack of faith. "Believe me, Sammy. He is."

"What did you do?" I ask.

"I simply told him if he showered with soap, I'd give him a hundred bucks for his Fortnite packs."

My mouth gapes. "Why would you do that?"

“Because you’re stressed out and need a night off. I also gave Em a hundred to watch him for the night. We’re going out.”

My head shakes back and forth so rapidly. I haven’t been out without my kids ever since Ian died. I’m not about to do it now. “No. We’ll come home to a crime scene. Em is not equipped to watch him. That’s why I always make sure you’re home with him if I’m not.”

Veronica rolls her eyes. “It’s for one night. You need to let loose before this event tomorrow.”

“No. I need to make sure I’m well rested in case all hell breaks loose and I have a million things to fix tomorrow. Same with you. This is a huge event. And I’m throwing Saoirse’s bachelorette party in two weeks. Then her wedding. If I fail at this one, she’ll fire me. She’s my biggest client, and I cannot fuck this up.”

Veronica scoffs, waving an indifferent hand. “Everything is ready to go. It’s not a wedding with a huge cake or large flower orders. The only thing that can go wrong is the catering company. And if that happens, it’s on Saoirse since she outsourced it. So, breathe. It’s time to get you out of the house. You can’t spend the rest of your life having no life. It’s good to get out, to move on, Sammy.”

A bark comes from the dog bed in the corner of the room. Bruce, the Doberman, I adopted as a family dog and had trained for protection, is curled up on his pillow. His black coat shines, and the brown around his mouth moves as he

barks again. As if he agrees with Veronica. The traitor. I scowl, narrowing my eyes. “Quiet, Batman. Or I’ll stick you outside for the night.”

Veronica gasps, clutching her hand to heart. “How dare you insult my baby! She doesn’t mean it, Brucey baby.”

Bruce lets out a yawn, then rests his head again, unphased by the insult. He’s used to all the nicknames we give him—all ranging from ‘Frito Feet, Batman, Brucey Baby, Bruce Butt, Pumpkin Face, and Pickle man. The last one is because he’s swiped a pickle or two straight from our plates.

“Come on, Sammy. You’re all wound up. You need to get laid.”

I shoot her a dirty look. “Stop.”

She rolls her eyes. Beginning dating again is a sore subject, one I always shut down.

“Fine. Just come and dance with me.”

“No.”

She huffs. “Wow. 200 bucks wasted.”

I laugh. “Not my problem.”

The clothes get folded in no time with her help. She continues the entire time, trying to convince me that going out will be good for me. And maybe it will, but I just don’t feel like it. Not when my heart isn’t in it.

“I’ll let you sleep in. I’ll make breakfast for the kids and get Max to the sitter. I’ll even drop Em off at her softball

practice.”

My ears perk at that offer. When was the last time I could sleep in? Never. I swirl the options in my head, playing each outcome out. If I’m the DD, I can’t drink. I’ll get sober sleep, which means I’ll be well-rested for work tomorrow. Veronica is young. I have no doubt that she’ll be able to party it up tonight, then get up in the morning and act like nothing is wrong. I don’t envy her for that, but I’ll certainly take advantage of it.

I chew on the inside of my cheek, then grab that favorite black dress of mine. “Fine, but you better not wake me up until we have to leave to get to the hotel.”

Veronica shrieks excitedly, jumping up and down. “Kids! I’ll throw in another twenty if you come put away these clothes!” she sings as she hurries out of my room.

Chapter Three



CLUB ROYALE IS INSANELY crowded as I make my way along the edge of the room to get to the VIP section. A DJ plays music in the far corner on a platform, and the stereos surrounding him bounce with the volume. My ears ring, and I quicken my pace to get into the hallway with soundproof walls.

I fucking hate coming here, but it's the only way Antonio Rossi will meet with me. Public and on his turf. It may have to do with how I kneecapped one of his capos at a meeting on Irish territory a few years ago.

That meeting was one of the very few times I lost control of my rage in a business setting. I'm pretty good at maintaining face and keeping my composure. That day, though? That day, Cara had visited me in my dreams. It wasn't a light, free one. Sometimes when she visits, she laughs and is happy, carefree. Others, she's in a more sensual mood. But this dream. That night, she'd visited me with tears in her eyes, blood streaming from her wrists.

I tossed and turned, unable to pull myself awake. It was a catch-22. I didn't want to see those images in my sleep, but the dream had been so real. I could smell her, feel her, hear her. I didn't want it to end because of that. She clawed at me, scratching and begging me to let her go while I held on, begging her not to do what she had done.

When I woke, I was sweaty, my heart hammering in my chest. The last thing I wanted to do was discuss territories and other bullshit that didn't matter with the Italians. So, when the asshole called me an Irish prick, I let the heat inside of me grow to its boiling point, and I gave him something to whine about.

The memory is quite satisfying now, as I walk up the steps to the private rooms in the club. Private isn't the right word, though. There is a glass wall in each room that overlooks the dance floor. Only the rich rent out these rooms. It provides access to the floor and allows you to see the crowd of people dancing, but the music is dimmed inside.

I move past the glass rooms and make another right to the back offices, where Antonio and his crew wait for me. Scotty saunters behind, hands stuffed into his pockets. It's been a few months since he's been with me to a meeting, and the only reason he's at this one is because my sister insisted on it.

Scotty's used to being a guard, not a brother. So, he steps in front of me when we reach the office, ready to be the first one to take a bullet if needed. But he's not a guard anymore. He's my sister's fiancé. That makes him more important than me.

Saoirse can deal with a dead brother, not a dead husband. I press my hand on his chest and shove him back.

He grumbles in protest, and I shoot him a dirty look.

“My sister would kill me if you came back hurt. Get used to it, *prince*,” I say, the word dripping with a taunting tone. Scotty calls my sister a princess, so that clearly makes him the prince. He’s going to have a field day when he realizes my brother, Sean, changed his marker from ‘Frog’ to ‘Prince.’

Scotty scrubs a hand down his face. “I don’t think I will ever get used to it,” he murmurs.

I nod, pushing open the door. A bodyguard stands before me to be intimidating. His shoulders are square, a scowl placed on his face. But he’s about three inches shorter than me and lacking thirty pounds of muscle. I could easily take him if I wanted. But he’s not here in case of a fight. He’s here to pat me down and ensure I have no guns. His name is Ricco, and it’s always the same guy.

“Make it snappy, Richy,” I say, purposely calling him by the wrong name.

I like to keep everyone on their toes. The only people that know about my memory are my brothers. Not even Saoirse knows how easy it is for me to recall a conversation or a contract with just the tug of a wire attached to those memories.

Hell, even Scotty doesn’t know. If he did, he’d be nicer to me. He’d realize just how fucked I am, always picturing the death of Cara—his sister.

I open my arms as Ricco pats me down, his hands gripping my balls. I lean down and swat at him. “Hands off the jewels, asshole.”

“Seriously,” Scotty says. “Do they think you’ve got a gun shoved up your ass?”

“I did.” I nod. “But don’t worry, Tone,” I say, my gaze dropping to Antonio Rossi, who’s sitting on the couch in the corner, a cigar in hand. “I made sure I left it on the nightstand at home.”

“How considerate of you,” Rossi says and takes an inhale of his cigar. He leans forward and sets the cigar on the table, then reaches for a decanter of whiskey.

Ricco finishes patting me down, then moves onto Scotty. I approach the couch, accepting the glass he poured for me. “Tone, this is my brother-in-law, Scotty.”

“Which one are you?” Rossi asks, leaning back, his arms wrapping along the back of the couch. “Are you the fruitcake one?”

“Because that’s not offensive,” I say, sitting on the two-seater sofa that’s placed catty-corner to Rossi. He’s referring to my brother, Paddy, who’s married to his childhood best friend, Michael Griffin. And seriously, he’s lucky I don’t have my gun to kneecap his ass for the offensive term toward my brother and his sexuality.

Nobody fucks with the Southies, but more importantly, nobody fucks with my family. Blood over everything else.

Rossi laughs as Ricco finishes Scotty's pat down. "You're too easy to offend, Murphy." He pulls a drag from his cigar. "I love fucking with you."

I grumble in response. "What's on the agenda for this meeting, Tone?"

Rossi shrugs, his gaze assessing Scotty before he finally snaps back to me. "The Russians moved in on my part of town."

I nod. "We're having issues too."

The Russians have run rampant since the loss of their Pahkan. The New York Bratva attempted to make moves in Boston, even kidnapping Saoirse for a marriage alliance a few months back. We've been dealing with the shit fest, and until we get Jericho and Yuliya Vasiliev in charge of both New York and Boston, we're in limbo. I can't tell Rossi all of this, though. It's all under wraps while Jericho figures out how to take care of his brother, Anton.

Rossi leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "Word is the governor has connections to the Russians."

Scotty pauses mid-step, his entire body tensing at the mention of the governor, Corbin McClellan. Corbin and Scotty have a unique history with Saoirse. Corbin used to be engaged to Saoirse until Scotty went and blew up that marriage arrangement. Even the mere mention of Corbin gets Scotty breaking out in hives. Normally I think it's hilarious, but not when we have Italians present to sense his uneasiness.

“Not sure what connections you think a governor would have with the Bratva,” I say, making sure my tone is indifferent. The last thing I want to do is give Rossi any ammunition.

“Just that he was helpful in your war with the Bratva.” Rossi shrugs.

And I know he won't give away his source, despite how badly I need to know what he knows. How he knows it. Scotty pulls himself together, then sits beside me.

“We need to clean up the streets before we have a real problem, Murphy,” Rossi says. “Before we wake up and the Bratva have their claws in both Little Italy and the South End.”

I nod because I fucking agree. “Where were they, and how many?”

“Caught them selling by the church on the 12th. Three of them.”

“Selling? H?”

Ricco snorts, and I glance at the bodyguard who is usually very fucking quiet in situations like these. “If it were drugs, we'd have handled it ourselves. No need for a potato-sucking twat to take care of our shit.”

“The only potatoes I've been sucking are attached to your sister's chest,” I shoot back, my eyes narrowing.

Scotty chokes on a fit of laughter, covering his mouth with his hand and coughing to hide it.

“Enough, Ricco,” Rossi says.

I turn my attention to him. “What are they selling?”

Rossi clears his throat, his eyes darkening with a rage I’ve seen in myself once or twice. “A girl. Couldn’t have been more than fifteen.”

“Fuck,” Scotty and I say together.

“Where is she?” I ask.

“With the Bruchetti brothers. They’re keeping her safe until we can find her family and get her home. There’s a language barrier that’s hindering the process.”

“Russian?” I ask, and he nods his head.

“I can translate,” Scotty says.

Somewhere along the line, Scotty picked up the language. He’s always been scholarly and interested in learning. He said the Navy taught him, and I believe it, but he also speaks Spanish. Rossi squints at Scotty as he assesses him, wanting to ask how he speaks Russian, and probably if he knows Italian too. Finally, he nods, then pulls his phone out.

He makes a call, then hands over the phone to Scotty after he puts it on speaker so we can all hear. Scotty speaks back and forth, flitting between English and Russian as a girl cries on the other line, speaking so fast that the words I don’t recognize just sound like noises coming from her mouth. He translates back in English to whoever is with the girl. Each time he speaks Russian, his voice is softer, more soothing. A voice a

father would use with his daughter, and each time it causes her to let out a fit of cries.

When the call is over, he hands the phone back. We spend the next thirty minutes discussing how we're going to handle the situation before Scotty and I leave. I make my way down the steps, Scotty following, and back onto the heavy dance floor. I'm not one for dancing or loud scenes like this, but my palms itch to get to the bar and order a drink.

I make it halfway there before Scotty tugs on my arm to get my attention. Already knowing he's about to tell me I have to go home; I roll my eyes. I'm not a child. Damn it. I'm a grown adult that can have a drink at a bar without begging "Daddy" to let me stay out late.

"Not tonight, bro. We gotta get back before Saoirse has my balls," Scotty yells over the blaring music.

I shake my head. "I'm staying. You head back."

"I don't think that's a great idea, Dec." He stuffs his hands into his pockets. His brown eyes bore into mine, soft and caring. Empathic. And the last thing I need from him is empathy.

"I'm staying, bro," I say, heading back toward the bar.

"There you are!" A hand tugs at my elbow, pulling my attention away from my end goal straight ahead.

I turn, eyes falling on a woman with dark hair. Her bright golden eyes watch me, a hint of hope tracing them as she offers me a tight smile. My gaze travels along her body. Short

black dress, thick thighs, and high heels that make have the top of her head hitting around my eyes. She's short, but damn, does she look good in this dress. I travel back to make eye contact, noticing how her shoulders seem tense, her grip on me tightening. She's uncomfortable, despite the weird as hell conversation we're having together right now.

"I've been looking everywhere for you, babe," she says, her head jerking in the opposite direction.

I turn my gaze to where she's pointing, a man standing right beside her, his hand on his ass. Slowly, my mind makes the connection. She's pretending I'm her boyfriend, so this jackass gets lost. My top lip turns up in a snarl, willing to play. Because one thing I hate worse than the leaders of organized crime are rapists. No means no, and I'll fucking remind anyone who needs it.

"Everything okay?" I ask, not taking my eyes off the man in front of me.

The woman's nails dig into my elbow, almost as if she's willing me to read her mind, to know what's bothering her. "Yeah, fine," she says over the blaring music. "I was just telling this guy I didn't want the drink he bought me. That my boyfriend wouldn't appreciate me taking it."

My gaze drops to the mixed drink in his hand. Well, she's smart not to take an open drink from a stranger. Maybe if it had come straight from the bar, but not from the hands of someone offering, where it could be tampered with. I wrap my arm around her waist, tugging her into me, and fuck if my

body doesn't enjoy the way she molds right into my side. Her floral scent permeates me, despite being in a crowded room with sweaty bodies. There's a part of her dress that's bare in the back, and my hand meets her heated flesh.

"Oh, sorry," the guy says. "I'll just go somewhere else."

He turns to leave, to find someone else he can drug, no doubt. But Scotty stops him, his hand gripping the collar of his shirt. "What's in the drink?" Scotty asks.

"N-nothing," he says, eyes darting away as his body tenses.

Scotty pats his pockets, pulling out a plastic baggy of little white pills. He holds it between his fingers, waving the baggie for me to see. I tilt my head toward the staircase. "Take him to Rossi."

Scotty grabs him by the scruff of his neck and drags him away. The woman clinging to me sags in relief, and I glance down. Her dark hair is pulled into a half-up style, curls fall around her face. "Thank you," she says, squeezing my forearm.

I nod, moving my hand from her back to her wrist. Dragging her away, I get us into the hall where the bathrooms are, where it's quieter. "You, okay?" I ask, giving her a once over. There are no markings on her body, save for the slight nick of a line on her throat. It's straight, no longer than half an inch, and an old one judging how its two shades paler than her tanned skin.

She nods, pressing her hand to her throat. She catches her breath, her eyes closed. "Yeah. I'm fine, now. He just made me

uncomfortable. You were the first guy I saw that seemed alone, so I approached you. Thank you, again.”

My fingers entwine with the hand I’m holding, and I drop my head so that our foreheads are practically touching. Her breath slows down, and I close my eyes, taking in the sweet scent of her. She’s older, but seems so innocent, her wide eyes giving away that she’s nervous. Or maybe she’s still rattled from a pervert trying to date rape her. Either way, my presence appears to unsettle her.

It won’t stop me from crowding her space. Anything I give her would be consensual, but the need to make her squirm runs deep inside of me. And she squirms, her throat clearing. My eyes drift to the way her throat bobs. She’s nervous. She’s run from one predator to another. I may not hurt her in the ways that piece of shit would have, but if she let me, I’ll hurt her in other ways. Push on her wounds until she screams. It’s been so long since I’ve had that desire.

“You ... ” She clears her throat again, her chest heaving. “Do you ... want to ... dance?”

There’s a hint of red staining her round cheeks, and I chuckle, enjoying the way I make her uneasy. Two minutes ago, she felt confident enough, safe enough to approach me and pretend I was her boyfriend. Now, she’s not sure if she’s just made the biggest mistake of her fucking life. She’ll be fun to chase, that’s for sure.

“Sure,” I say.

I grab her hand, dragging her back onto the dance floor. The music grows in volume as we approach the center of the floor. Her ass presses against me, right up against my pelvis, warming my cock. Her hips sway to the beat, and I wrap my arms around her, squeezing her tighter. She's stuck with me now. I'm not letting her go.

Chapter Four



THE MUSIC BLARES THROUGHOUT the club while I carry a vodka tonic with lime toward the dance floor. Veronica thrashes her head around wildly, as if we're in the middle of a mosh pit, and not an overcrowded club where disco tunes blare at an unhealthy level for my old ears.

The man who saved me from a shitfest earlier still follows me around, but I can't complain, because he's been buying my drinks since. His palm rests on my hip as I stop near Veronica.

We watch as a man takes a risk, moving in behind her. His hands grip her hips, and he accidentally gets knocked back by her elbow. I laugh, enjoying the scene as he lets go of her to cover his now bleeding nose. She turns around, hands clasped to her mouth, and stares with wide eyes as he backs away. One of his buddies grabs him by the elbow, dragging him off the dance floor.

"Nice dance moves!" I shout over the blaring stereos.

"What?" Veronica calls back.

“Nothing.” I shake my head, then take a sip of my drink. “Have you had enough fun yet?”

We’ve been here for hours, and I’m ready to go home, put on some comfy jammies, and crawl into bed with my dog, Bruce, as my heated-slash-weighted blanket. He makes for a great cuddle partner. Better than any man here could be.

Veronica shakes her head. “No! We just got here. Besides, I’m not leaving until I find someone to go home with.”

My brows shoot to my hairline. “You’re wasted. You’re not going home with anyone but me.”

“Stop worrying so much.” Her hands snake around my neck, pulling me in so that we’re dancing sensually now. She presses her mouth to my ear. “I’m barely drunk.”

“You’re insane.”

My head pounds to the beat of the music, and I take another sip of my drink. I’m not sure how this happened. How one drink turned into two, then three, and I don’t even know what number this is now. I haven’t been drunk since Ian’s wake five years ago. I refuse to have more than just a glass or two of wine at night when the kids are asleep, too scared to give into the urge, to give into the bottle and slip into nothingness.

Yet, here I am in a club, dancing in a thin dress, my body on fire as a man touches my thighs. His chest is hard against my back, and despite how crowded the dance floor is, I can smell his cologne over the body odor. And god, are the hands on this man large. He moves them to my stomach, his skin warm as

one of the hands slides into my pants. The movement causes his growing dick to press right against my ass.

I made the mistake of going up to him when that pervert from earlier tried to shove a drink down my throat. He was the first person I saw that seemed like he would stop what was happening. When the other person he was with took off, I knew it was a good choice.

So why is my body humming on high alert? Why am I apprehensive that this man seems to be just as bad as the person who cornered me and tried to get me to drink a drink laced with roofies? His smile meets his beautiful ocean-blue eyes, and he appears sincere. But something deep within me tells me to run.

Maybe it has nothing to do with him, maybe it's me. I'm not ready for this type of close contact. I'm not over Ian, and probably never will be. But this, the way he touches me, shoots pleasure through every part of my body. As much as his touch is foreign and unwelcome, I still crave it.

I close my eyes, forcing away the doubt. I'm here to have a good time. A man's touch shouldn't matter, if I don't fuck him. And I won't. I'll go home the second Veronica is ready. We'll get a cab and head back to the house, where my children sleep. We'll wake up and start preparing for the hotel opening tomorrow. This will be a distant memory. One where I'll reminisce about how a man felt, how his hands grazed my thighs and sent attraction zapping through me.

I deserve one night off from everything. One night, where nothing else matters, where I can be free and forget about the life I currently live. Whoever this man is, whatever his name is, he's helping me to forget. So, I grab his hands and let them ride further up my thighs, beneath the hem of my little black dress.

Here we go. My one night of pretending. I'm twenty again, single, no kids. This is just a normal Friday night for me. Back in college. Before my life went to hell. Yeah, the college days weren't filled with heartache. The only responsibility I had was getting good enough grades, so that I didn't lose my scholarship.

God, what I would give to go back in time and hit refresh. I wouldn't change anything. I'd only restart that day, the day he came home early to be with me.

The man's hands squeeze my ass, and I bend slightly, resting my hands on my knees. His cock is hard now, pressing right against the crack of my ass, and I'm thankful for the barrier between us. If we were naked, he'd practically be shoving inside of me right now. This is the most action my pussy has seen in five years. It's desperate, and I know if I slid my hands between my panties, I'd be slick with arousal.

As if to agree, my clit tingles, greedy for friction. I want more, and I'm just drunk enough to almost give in, but still clearheaded enough to know that I'm not ready for that. Still, it doesn't stop me from rubbing up on this dude like a feral cat

in heat. I tell myself I'll walk away. Just one more song and I'll peel myself off the floor and walk the fuck away.

I have the willpower; I know I do. And I'll prove it to myself. One more song. We dance, and I allow myself to be free. My mind empties, while I focus on moving, understanding the feel of the tempo. Then, the beat changes. And I force myself to stop. I turn to my mystery guy, offering a smile. "Bathroom!" I yell.

He nods, releasing his grip on my ass. One of his hands moves up, gripping my wrist, and then he drags me off the dance floor. I gape at him, wide-eyed, as I stare at the back of his head. He pulls me down a hallway where there's an insane line for the women's bathroom, but we brush past everyone.

The club is large, so there's a row of stalls in the women's bathroom. The line moves quick as long as no one is puking or shitting, but the men's line is nothing. Mystery guy kicks open the men's room, shoves me inside, then locks the door.

"Excuse me!" I say. "What on earth are you doing?"

I glance around, noticing that this bathroom is way smaller than the others, only three urinals, one stall and two sinks. We're the only ones in here, and it's clean. It smells of lemon cleaner and there's no trash or stains anywhere. So fucking different from the women's.

He steps forward, crowding my personal space, and I step back. He's quiet, and that scares me more than anything else. What the hell is going on? And why does my core clench

around nothing, as if aching to be filled with this beast in front of me?

He walks toward me, and I take a step back, trying to keep my distance. But it doesn't work. I just keep walking backward until my ass hits the countertop. I brace myself against the sink, gripping the cool tile to keep myself upright. His gaze remains on me, but he reaches for the paper towels hanging on the wall to the right, snatching them up into his hand.

Then he dabs at my dress, where some of my drink had spilled earlier. I push his hand away, taking the napkins from him, and do it myself, but it's hard when I can't remove my line of sight from him. His eyes are icy, like the Atlantic. Mesmerizing in all these weird ways I don't want to explore.

I swallow, suddenly feeling overheated. He tilts his head to the side, eyes narrowing.

“You're scared of me.” It's not a question; he knows I am.

I don't respond, but his lips twitch, as if he enjoys that. “There's nothing to be afraid of, doll.” He drops his head, his lips grazing my ear. “I only bite when you beg for it.”

My eyes close, and I shake my head. No. I should not be turned on right now. I need to go home. Need to find Veronica and get us the fuck out of here before I do something I regret. I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to compose myself. It's really fucking hard to when you're drunk.

He chuckles. “God, you’re a whimpering mess. It’s fucking beautiful.” A finger presses against my chin, then drifts lower, gliding down my chest, my stomach, my thigh. He slides it up the dress, right to my traitorous cunt.

I clamp my lips shut, but my mouth betrays me next, letting out a squeak. A finger slides inside of me. I don’t stop it, or him. It feels too fucking good. Too liberating and free. Veronica was right. I needed this night out.

Before I know it, my ass is on the counter, and he’s tearing at my dress, ripping it along the side to spread my legs wider. His mouth moves in to press against mine, but I shake my head. *No. Kissing is too intimate.* He nods, dipping lower to tug a breast free.

“No—” I gasp.

“Fucking soaked for me already.”

He shoves three fingers deep inside of me, invading me in a way I haven’t felt in a very very long time. The sensation is almost too much to handle. I open my mouth to ask him to stop, but nothing but my moans leave. A thumb rubs along my nipple, and he tugs at it hard enough that the pain would slice through my pleasure if the palm of his hand wasn’t grinding against my clit.

No, the burning of my hardened nipple only makes the ache between my legs intensify. This man is rough, and that’s what I need tonight. Nothing intimate, nothing sensual. No lovemaking. My first time in five years is about to be rough.

The tears I may cry won't be from guilt. They'll be from pure pleasure and pain. Sensual can come later.

“Fuck,” I moan, letting myself give into this man.

He lets out a groan, his chest rumbling with his own desire, and then he's pulling his fingers from me and fishing into his pocket. When he pulls out a condom, I sigh. No, I don't think I can take it that far. The hand that was inside of me presses against my open mouth.

“Clean your cunt off my fingers,” he says.

Then, reality kicks in. *Oh, no. Oh no.* What have I done?

“Oh my God,” I blurt, shooting off the edge of the sink. “I have to go.”

I scramble past him, and in my hasty exit, struggling with the lock, I drop my purse. But I don't bend for it, I just open the door and flee. I need to get the fuck out of here. My heart races as I make a run for the exit.

Chapter Five



“MORNIN’ BABY.” IAN’S THROATY morning voice sounds in my ear, and I inhale, a smile on my face. His scruffy beard grazes against my cheek as he presses his hot lips to my nose.

“Mmm, good morning,” I say, snuggling into him, my ass pressing against his thickening—

Wait ... That’s too ... my eyes snap open, and I turn to the man in my bed. Icy blue eyes watch me, a dark beard covering a wicked smile. Oh no ... what have I done?

My hand reaches behind me, grasping at the emptiness. Cool sheets, and Ian’s side of the bed untouched. My heart crushes against the weight of the impending doom, of the horrible trick my mind has played on me.

“No. No, no, no.” The choked sob pushes itself out of my throat.

Ian is dead.

He's been gone for five years. As if that isn't already the reason I can't fall asleep at night, my brain likes to wake me up with this horrible nightmare almost every damned day. Except now, my dreams replace him. With the man from the club.

The scent of sweet vanilla lingers, reminding me of how he made waffles the day he died. As if it happened yesterday. The way he kissed me awake; finger fucked me into oblivion while I fisted his cock. The way we stayed quiet with our heavy breaths, even though the kids weren't home. How he kissed my neck and my ear. Then, when we were done, he climbed out of bed and made us breakfast.

The perfect morning that began the worst day of our lives.

"Mooom!" Max's voice travels through the walls of the house. He's probably headed to tattle on his older sister.

I groan, pulling the covers over my head. There's never any time to process that my husband is gone. No time to sink into a never-ending hole of depression. Because I have children that need me. I'm a mom first, a widow second.

My stomach churns, nausea from all the alcohol I drank last night threatening to escape. I hurry to the bathroom and barely make it over the toilet before I'm upchucking last night's contents. *So fucking stupid.* How could I have let Veronica convince me this would be fun? It's anything but.

I wipe my mouth, then lean back to get my shit together. My kids will be in my room at any minute, and I'm not prepared for that shit at all. I stand, heading for the sink. Running the

faucet, I look at myself in the mirror. I groan. It's rough; my hair is a mess, and makeup runs down my face. I stink, too. Clearly, I was too intoxicated last night to even get my pathetic ass into the shower.

I inhale, closing my eyes. What did I do last night? My throat hurts, and I gasp, clutching my neck. My eyes snap open as the memories flood in. Did I ... ? No. I shake my head in denial. No, I couldn't have. I'd never do that. "Oh, fuck." I lean over, washing my face. "I hooked up with someone."

"You what?" Veronica squeals from the entrance of my bathroom.

She's the reason I'm in this mess, after all. She convinced me to go out last night. Promised me she'd get up in the morning with Max and make breakfast so I could sleep in.

I hate her.

I roll my eyes, knowing that I'm a liar, because really, I fucking love her. Without her, I'd be drowning in my mess. She's saved me countless times between stepping up when I need a five-minute breather or pulling the weight for me at work on a bad day.

But last night was all her fault. I never would've gone to the club if it weren't for her. Never would've let a stranger finger fuck me in a public bathroom.

I groan and glare at her. "I'm a horrible person."

Veronica rushes to the counter, pressing herself against me in an awkward side hug. "Oh my God. You had sex with

someone. *Finally.*”

“No! Not finally! God. Do you know how shitty this feels? I let a stranger finger me! While I’m still grieving my dead husband.”

She waves her hand, scoffing. “It’s been five years. Time to get back on the horse.”

I shake my head, turning the sink on to scrub my face. “That’s not how this works, Vee. You don’t just get over the love of your life like that. And I hate how I feel right now.”

“We’ll get you some grease and you’ll be good as new.”

It’s not my stomach. It’s my heart. I betrayed my wedding vows; I gave up on him. I let another man touch me, and I hate myself for it.

Veronica squeezes my shoulders, commanding my attention. “Sammy. You’re a grown woman with needs. You did nothing wrong. It’s not like you went and got hitched. You simply scratched an itch.” She stops, her eyes narrowing in on me. “Wait. Please tell me you came?”

Heat rises to my cheeks. I dip my head, turning away from her.

“Oh my God!” She shouts. “What the fuck, Samira?”

“I freaked out and ran away,” I defend.

I yank away from her grip and rest my hands against the countertop. My shoulders sink. I’m defeated. Embarrassed about what happened, but most of all, I hate myself. It feels

like I've betrayed Ian somehow, letting another person touch my body.

"You can hold a place in your heart for Ian, and still have whatever it is you want," Veronica continues, cutting into my thoughts. "Whether that's companionship, a fling, or more. Moving on doesn't mean you're forgetting him."

I force a smile on my face, but I feel anything but happy. She pulls me into a hug, squeezing me. "Now, get yourself together. I was going to let you sleep in, but since you're awake, I'll get us some greasy food. I'll bring the twerp with me too."

"Okay," I say on a broken whisper. I sniffle, pulling away.

"Hop in the shower." She backs away and out of the bathroom.

I'm left alone to stare at my reflection. My eyes are puffy from tears, but more importantly they're lost. I haven't been myself in a very long time. I don't even remember what it's like to know who I am. Sure, I've been through this before. After having kids, becoming a work-wife and mom, I had to find myself after. But this? This is something different.

I like to fuck, damnit. I enjoy the feel of a man touching my body, of giving me pleasure, and I love being the reason a man comes undone.

My sex life used to be healthy and active. Before, I'd have never let what happened last night upset me or make me feel anything but positive. Now ... I sigh. Now, I'm lost and

broken, and I'm guilty for coming close to another man who isn't my husband.

I hop in the shower, cleaning off the negative emotions with scalding hot water and an exfoliating brush. There's nothing better than melting your skin off to start a fresh day. I even get to shave and wash my hair with no interruptions. I bask in the quietness, something I don't think I get enough of, and don't leave the bathroom until I've completely dried and put lotion on my body. I'm ready to crawl back into bed when my phone rings.

Contentment washes over me as I answer. "Hey, Dad," I say, nestling the phone between my ear and shoulder. I crawl into bed and let out a yawn.

"Good morning, sweetheart," he says, his voice cheerful. "Happy Saturday. I just wanted to wish you luck on your event tonight."

"Thanks, Dad." I grin, happy that he remembered how important today is to me.

"What are the kids up to today?"

"Max is going to hang out with the neighbors, and Em will probably go to one of her friends' for the day."

He tuts, and I already know he's thinking up a good excuse to drive over today, instead of on Thursday, like we planned. He always offers, and I always say no. The truth is. As close as I am with him, I always feel too bad. He already did his job

raising me. He doesn't need to raise my children, too. It's better this way.

A part of me thinks he is trying to make up for the fact that Ian's parents aren't involved. We haven't seen them since the funeral. No Christmas cards, or birthday wishes. They don't answer my calls. It's like we never existed to them now that their son is gone.

"Did I leave my reading glasses there last month?"

I internally sigh. "No, don't think you did."

"Hmm. I can't find them anywhere. I think I may have left them in the attic when I put away your Christmas decorations."

I close my eyes, pinching the bridge of my nose. I hate going into the attic. It's why I left the tubs of Christmas crap in the hallway until May. My dad had finally gotten so sick of seeing it whenever he visited that he went up there with his bad back and did it himself. I felt horrible when I came home and found out. Had he fallen, he could've been seriously injured.

"I can look for them. Give me a minute."

"No, no. Don't go going up there and getting spooked, Samira. I'll just drive down and see if they're there."

"Dad," I warn.

"It's fine, sweetheart. If I leave now, I'll make it to you right as you have to leave. I can take my grandbabies out for lunch. I miss them."

“I don’t want you making that trip twice in a week,” I continue.

Before, we’d swap visiting months. We would take the kids there for a weekend one month, and the next Mom and Dad came to us. I haven’t been able to bring myself to drive to the farm since everything happened, and the kids haven’t wanted to go. I haven’t pushed it. So, my dad comes once a month.

“It’s settled. I’ll stay the entire week.”

I groan. Dad chuckles at my pain.

“I’ll see you soon,” he says. “I love you.”

The line goes silent before I can protest, and I drop the phone. *Bastard.*

Chapter Six



I EXHALE THE SMOKE of my Newport, savoring the buzzing in my head that comes from the nicotine. Saoirse's been at my throat for the past hour of this event, making sure I don't drink too much. After the second glass of whiskey, she tried to cut me off. I switched to vodka and lime, so she'd think it was seltzer water.

The small outdoor space I'm in is empty, save for a green dumpster where flies swarm. I snuck through the kitchen of the hotel and out the back door for some quiet. The chaos of the event inside requires too much energy. I don't want to pretend I'm happy when I'm not.

The door creaks, and a woman steps outside. She slams it shut, then lets out a sigh. Eyes closed, she bends forward and squats against the brick wall until she's seated on the ground. The features of her face are hard to make out in the shadows, but I can see the way a butterfly clip holds back her silky black hair. She wears black dress pants and a rose-colored satin button-up, nude heels. She's not a guest. If she were, she'd be

in a cocktail dress. If she were an employee, she'd probably be in all-black like the rest of them. No, this woman is the one in charge.

I stifle through the names and roles Saoirse mentioned to me in the past few months of planning this event, and land on one. Samira Cullen is the event coordinator.

I snuff out my cancer stick, then turn to her. "You needed a break too, huh?"

A small gasp escapes her, and her eyes snap open. Bright eyes the color of champagne land on me, surveying me, trying to make out if I'm a threat. *Fuck me*. It's the girl from the club. I hadn't recognized her right away in the shadows, but now it's clear. I couldn't forget her face even if I wanted to. And I don't.

I jerked off to the feel of her tight cunt squeezing my fingers, to the musky scent of her arousal on those same digits, and I'm not ashamed of it. She's more than just attractive. She's the type of woman that haunts your dreams. The type of woman who will slip between your fingers if you don't hold on tight enough, and I'll be damned if I let her run away this time.

Her hands fly to her chest, and she closes her eyes to compose herself. "God, you scared me," she says, her voice soft and raspy. Does she not recognize me? She doesn't act as though she does. If she'd been drinking, maybe she forgot.

My head tilts, waiting as she inhales through her nose and exhales through her mouth. Slow, deliberate breaths, an obvious effort to calm her racing heart. She spooks easily. But

the way she's focusing on dragging oxygen into her body, I've triggered an emotional response. One she's trying to control before it spirals.

“Hey,” I whisper, my voice soothing. Her eyes snap open, and I raise my hands in surrender. “Didn't mean to scare you.”

I take a second to scan her, letting the image of her sink into the confines of my brain. She's got an oval-shaped face, thick lips painted the shade of bubble gum. Blush creeps from her neck to her round cheeks, and there's a crease above her brow. She's not as soft toward me as she was last night.

My gaze drops lower, toward her neck. There's a small scar across her throat. The line smooth, two shades paler than her brown skin. An uncomfortable tightening happens in my chest, almost knocking me back. Beautiful doesn't describe the woman sitting before me. One look at her, and she's tantalizing—ethereal. It's like meeting her for the first time all over.

I inch forward, curiosity driving my every move. She inhales, her eyes widening while her neck stretches to peer up at me. Her hands fly to the wall, and she shoots up, pushing herself against it. Pupils blown, flushed face, and shallow breaths. She fears me, or she's aroused. Both possibilities pull the same reaction from me. A hard cock, and a need to taste her pink lips.

I stare at her, wanting to know more about her. This morning I didn't even know her name. Now, here she is, connected to my world; tied to my sister. My gaze instantly drops to her

hand. It's bare, and I hate the way relief hits me. Why the fuck would I care if she's single or not? I shake my head, not wanting to assess the answer to that question.

"I'm Declan," I say, extending my hand to shake hers.

"Oh, right," she nods. "Saoirse's brother." She exhales, the tension in her shoulders easing. Then, as if she realizes what that means, her face hardens into shock. "Oh my God! You're her *brother*." She clasps her hand over her mouth, pulling a chuckle from me.

I stuff my hands into the pockets of my trousers. "I am. And you're the event planner. Samira, is it?" I glance around the closed-off alleyway, then step closer when I'm satisfied we're alone. "And there's no running from me now, is there?"

I dip my head against her neck, a finger running along the bare skin there. She's trapped between the brick wall and my hard chest. I ignore the crackling tension between us, yank my hand away, and take a step back. It's just enough to allow her space, but I keep my hand right where it is. My heart kicks up, processing what this means. Samira will be in the Murphy circle, close-knit. Once my sister digs her nails into someone, she doesn't let go. She gets kind of attached like that. And I'm going to enjoy playing with this woman, the woman I thought I'd never see again. My thumb stops right at the vein right above the delicate curve of her clavicle. It's pulsing just as rapidly as mine, but for different reasons. I'm aroused while she's scared.

I don't blame her. I'm a Made Man with a dark past, a hot temper, and demons dancing in my brain. She'd be insane to think any part of me is welcoming.

Samira continues to stay in place, unable to move because I'm not allowing her. I know this is wrong, but she's too fucking intoxicating. Maybe it's her mysterious vibes, the way she took off right before she allowed me to make her come, or even the way she reacts to me. Like she's not sure what to do or say, like her only focus is on making it out of this with her head screwed on straight.

"You should get back inside," I finally say. If it were up to me, I'd strap her to me just so I could have that scent following me around. "My sister will be missing you."

She swallows, the bobbing of her throat causing my gaze to drop. My tongue darts out, wetting my suddenly dry lips.

A soft sigh escapes her. "I'd move, Mr. Murphy. But you're not allowing me."

Chapter Seven



CITRUS AND A ZESTY tang invade my nostrils as Declan Murphy crushes me to the wall. His lip curled up as he chuckles, the low hum causing my heart rate to pick up. Nothing I've said this evening can warrant being humorous. Nothing he's said can either. Yet, here he is, pinning me to the brick wall, invading my personal space.

“Ask nicely, Samira,” he says, his nose rubbing against my cheek.

I groan, hating how slick this entire encounter has made me. He's a client's brother, a rich boy, someone who thinks he can take whatever he wants, and completely not my type. Despite all of that, here I find myself turned on by the danger this man omits.

I'm not one who believes in auras and other world energies, but even I can feel the danger that comes off him in waves. Why hadn't I felt it last night in the club? There, he seemed safe, inviting. Now? Now he's intimidating, and I don't know what's changed, or even what to make of it.

I clear my throat. “Mr. Murphy. Please step aside so I can get back to work,” I say. My voice cracks, betraying any amount of confidence I might have had.

He nods, stepping back. Relief shudders through me but is quickly replaced with disappointment at the lack of warmth that goes with him. My gaze falls to his waist as he stuffs his hands into the pants pockets of the black tuxedo.

It’s hard to see muscle, or the fine outline of his body in formal attire, but I can tell he’s big, cut to handle any type of hostile situation. It’s why I approached him at the club the last night. He seemed like he could hold his own in a fight. Something about him told me he was safe. Like tugging toward a magnetic field.

I want to head inside, but that feeling is still there. The distance is too much, despite knowing I shouldn’t give in. I can’t do this. Can’t get involved with someone so close to my personal life. It makes moving on too real, and I’m not ready for that.

Declan heads for the kitchen door and opens it. Then he steps aside to let me in first. I inhale, bracing myself to get back to work, to slip on the professional mask and forget this brief encounter outside ever happened. I’d meant to call my dad on this break, but that clearly isn’t happening.

I step inside, the slam of the door behind me jolting through my entire body.

Declan’s hand rests on my shoulder, giving it a tight squeeze. “It was just the back door, Samira,” he says, his voice calm

and soothing my nerves. I'm shaking like a leaf, my teeth chattering as the kitchen staff hustle around us.

Hot and cold. Intimidating, then calming. The whiplash from this man is intense. It also makes me wonder. Who is he? What's the real version of him?

"Sorry," I whisper, continuing our path until we shove through the doors and into the ballroom.

People mingle in the open space I've decorated with soft blues and pinks. The tablecloths on the round tables are navy blue, and in the center are baby pink flowers in crystal vases. The open bar has the same-colored cloth, and in the center of the room, where people should be dancing, they're just standing about, chattering away with drinks in their hands.

I exhale. Right. Rich people rarely dance. They mingle and use these things for political gain. How can I forget that? The first birthday party I'd ever attended with Ian had been similar. It was the most boring party I'd ever been to, and it was a kid's party. No games, no music, no fun.

Snooze.

Saoirse spots me from across the room and rushes for me. Her eyes narrow in on Declan. He lets out an annoyed huff. "Look out. The fun police have arrived."

I open my mouth to protest, but Saoirse is there, dressed in a black cocktail dress and looking stunning; her red hair is tucked in an elegant updo. Her glare stays on Declan as she

pulls me into a hug. “There you are. I haven’t seen you all evening.”

I pull from her embrace. “Hey, Saoirse. Sorry, I’ve been in the back making sure everything runs smoothly.”

Declan side steps so he’s closer to me, and I catch another whiff of that citrus scent. It only makes my heart beat faster. He practically presses his chest against my back, heat radiating from him in bursts, and I stiffen while trying to focus on Saoirse. She’s staring at us, lips formed into a scowl.

I clear my throat, forcing myself to focus. “Okay, so all that’s left is for you to announce that the guests can head to the room in an hour,” I say. “And then I’ll be sneaking off like we discussed.”

After dinner, Saoirse is doing a trial run. The guests will stay the night in assigned rooms, but she has hotel staff to oversee that. I’ll head home soon now that dinner is over and return in the morning to clean up the conference room. One more hour and I’m free of the brick wall that I can’t seem to shake myself free from.

“You’re leaving?” Declan asks from behind me.

I nod, without turning to acknowledge him.

“Of course, Declan. She’s got other things to do,” Saoirse cuts in, her tone clipped as she rolls her eyes at her brother.

It elicits a growl from him. I’m an only child, so I’m not sure exactly what this is about. Do most siblings argue like this? Here I thought my children were the only ones who argued

like that. I'm constantly getting on them about loving each other more, but maybe this is a natural reaction for them.

"Anyway," I say. "I'm so happy for you. Congrats on the opening. This was a great turnout."

Saoirse's scowl slips away, and her face splits into a wide grin. "You're a lifesaver. I couldn't have done this without you."

I dip my chin in acknowledgment. "Of course." Letting out a yawn, I force myself to ignore the swirling nervousness in my gut. Declan's presence unsettles me, and as much as I don't want to unpack exactly what that means, I know I probably should. Otherwise, it will turn into a gnawing sensation and a desperate need to scratch an itch I don't want.

I need to get out of here. "Is there anything else you need from me before I head out?"

Saoirse shakes her head no. "You're free to go. Thanks again, Sammy. See you tomorrow."

I head back toward the kitchen, trying to free myself from the grumpy force. But he follows me. When I'm in a closed-off hallway, he crowds me, pushing into my back. "Sammy," he whispers against my ear.

"Declan," I say through gritted teeth.

"Don't leave. Come up to my room."

I shake my head, and his hand pins my wrist to the small of my back. His chest presses into me from behind, and my cheek squishes against the soft-green wallpaper. I wiggle, trying to

free myself, but all it does is rub my ass against his groin. A gasp escapes at the feel of a thick, hard cock pressing into me. He groans, clearly liking the compromising position. I try to think of how I can break free from his hold, but I come up short. This is one of those moments in my life where all the self-defense training I've taken leaves my mushed-up brain. I need to start the classes again.

"I can't," I manage to say, ignoring the way his thumb strokes along the inside of my wrist, all soft and contradictory to the suggestive way he pins me to the wall.

"Why can't you?" His breath tickles the back of my neck.

I close my eyes, channeling any ounce of inner strength I may have. "Declan. Please don't make this any more uncomfortable for me than it already is."

"Uncomfortable?" He releases my wrist but doesn't move his chest from my back. "Is that what I do to you, Samira?"

I gulp, my throat suddenly so thick. *Yes. Yes, you make me uncomfortable.* I want to scream it at him, but nothing comes out. Instead, I nod my head against the cool material on the wall.

He lets out a dark chuckle. "Good."

The weight pressing against me is gone, and I let out a sigh of relief. "Thank you," I say in a breathy whisper. But when I turn around, Declan is gone, and I'm left alone in the hall.

Chapter Eight



“I’M HOME,” I SING, coming into the kitchen from the back entrance, brown paper bag in hand. Dad sits at the island, reading glasses snug against the bridge of his nose as he swipes through the iPad he holds.

Vee plops into the bar stool at the kitchen island. She reaches for the bottle of wine in front of her, then pours herself a glass. Dad taps his finger against his now empty one, and she tops him off. “Finally,” she mumbles. “I’m starving!”

I drop the bags on the counter, digging through takeout containers. She swipes the bag of fresh garlic naan from my hand.

“Hey,” I say. “That was rude!”

Vee shrugs, opening the bag and pulling one out. She takes a bite, then tosses the rest on the island.

“Smells great,” Dad says.

“Best takeout in Boston,” Vee agrees.

“Can’t be better than your mother’s cooking,” Dad argues. “She makes the best butter chicken. Don’t you miss it, Sammy? Having a home-cooked meal from your momma?”

Yes.

I clear my throat and continue to take out the food, lining it up and opening containers for buffet style dinner while she pulls out plates and utensils. “Dad, can you get the kids?”

“Sure, sweetheart,” he says, climbing out of the bar stool. He rounds the island, heading for me, and presses a kiss to the top of my head.

I tilt my head onto his shoulder, accepting the embrace, and his body tenses beneath me. I glance up at him, his brows scrunched in disdain as he grabs the white paper receipt stapled to the brown paper bag. “Christ, Sammy. Honey. A hundred bucks for takeout?” He moves to pull out the wallet from the back pocket of his jeans.

“How do you survive with these prices? This would be maybe forty bucks at home.”

“All those city taxes,” Veronica agrees through a mouthful. “Plus, they’re the best in town, so they up their prices. Blasphemy.”

He pulls out a crisp hundred and tries to hand it to me.

“It’s fine, Dad,” I say.

He tsks, shaking his head, but I put a hand out to stop him. I’m pretty well off in the finance department, between the high-end event planning I do and with Ian’s life insurance. I

have the luxury of not needing to worry about how to pay for college. Ian's parents are upper class, and the kids each have a trust fund set up for adulthood. A simple takeout dinner is nothing, and he knows if he continues the conversation, I'll wind up crying. So, he backs off.

He slides the cash back in his pocket, then presses another kiss to my head before disappearing to get the kids.

"So ..." Veronica bumps her hip against mine. She peers over her shoulder to make sure Dad is gone before lowering her voice. "You may have been drunk the other night, but I was not. I saw your hotty at the event last night. Who is he?"

I groan, smacking my hand against my forehead. "I was hoping you didn't recognize him."

"Oh, but I did. Spill. Did you guys fuck in the coat closet?"

My eyes practically bulge from my head. "My children are in the house! Stop being so crude."

Veronica rolls her eyes. "I'm just trying to figure out who the boy is that's getting you out of this dry spell."

A pang in my chest has me dropping the container of fried dumplings onto the counter. "Stop saying it's a dry spell. It's called grief, Vee."

"I know what it is, Sammy," she snaps back. "It's the path to your old age and loneliness. Do you think that when your kids are grown with their own families, they're going to want you hanging around like a canker sore that won't go away no matter how much mouthwash you use?"

I gasp in offense and clutch my hand to my chest. “I love when my dad is around.”

She rolls her eyes. “Please, if he were here constantly, he would drive you up a fucking wall.”

Vee scoops up a serving of each dish into her bowl. “Come on, Sammy. Tell me about the hotty.”

I groan. “Nothing happened, Vee. And nothing will happen because that guy you think is so attractive? He’s Saoirse Murphy’s brother. And I cannot be caught fraternizing with a client’s family member. That’s bad for the business.”

Veronica’s mouth drops in shock. “Samira. You let your client’s brother finger you in a dirty club bathroom, you filthy girl.”

I clasp a hand over her mouth. “Stop it before a child hears.”

“Hears what?” Max asks. Blonde, spiral curls bounce in my line of sight as he plops into a chair at the kitchen table.

Veronica shoots me a worried look, leaving me to come up with a lie on the fly.

“The truth about Santa,” Em says quickly.

“What?” Max asks, his gaze moving between us.

“Em!” I say.

She shrugs. “The twerp is twelve. It’s time, Mom. Cut the cord.”

Panic sets in. I’ve been avoiding this conversation. I’ve let Max believe in the harmless lie for as long as I can. The truth

is, I don't want him to grow up. My kids getting older and reaching milestones is supposed to be bittersweet. But with Ian gone, it's just pure fucking bitter.

“What is the truth about Santa?” Max asks, fear etched in the lines of forehead.

Dad strides in, playing with the band on his wristwatch. “Are you talking about the big red guy?” he asks. “Grandma just put in an order of lavender soap bars for Mrs. Claus.”

“Whoa,” Max says. “That's pretty neat.”

My work phone goes off and I excuse myself to answer. “Samira Cullen.”

“You forgot your purse at the club,” Declan's gruff voice comes through the line.

I freeze, not wanting to take this call in front of anyone, let alone Dad and the kids. I hold up a finger toward them—this will only take just a second—then sneak out of the side door. Bruce follows, poking his head through before I can get it closed.

“Mr. Murphy,” I say, walking through the backyard. I clear my throat, trying to force away the smile that wants to break free.

“Ms. Cullen,” he responds, a hint of amusement in his otherwise dry tone.

“You can give it to Saoirse. I'll see her tomorrow.”

“Don't you need it sooner?”

“It was a clubbing purse. I think there was only lipstick and cash in it anyway.”

I’d put my ID in Vee’s purse and left my phone in the car. The handbag was simply an accessory, and I have a feeling Declan knows this. Otherwise, he would’ve brought it up the night we stumbled into each other at the opening. No, this was just an excuse to reach out. He’d made it clear he was into me with his brazen attitude of trying to get me to go home with him, even after he knew who I was.

Still, he’s a client’s family member. I can’t cross that line.

Declan grunts through the line, deep and gruff, and I almost feel him in front of me again, the weight of him holding me against the wall. *My eyes snap shut. No, don’t go there.*

“Just give me your address and I’ll bring it by,” he commands.

A brow raises in defiance. “No?” I say, not sure how he thinks I’d just give him my address.

Despite the silence I’m met with, I can sense his brooding; the scowl on his lips while he contemplates how to respond. “Once is chance, twice was coincidence,” he starts.

Three times is fate. I open my mouth to speak but choke on the air. Or, as James Bond says, “Three times is enemy action.”

He chuckles low enough that I can barely hear him. “So, if we run into each other again, I should assume you’re a hostile?”

I tip my chin with defiance. “If we meet—outside of our connection with Saoirse—for a third time, then we should probably pretend we don’t know each other.”

“The last guy to piss me off is wandering around in a wheelchair. So, yeah. Maybe we just stay acquaintances, doll.”

He clicks off the phone before I can respond, leaving me to speak out into the air. “What the fuck?”

I brush back the stray hairs flying around my face from the wind and push down the fleeting feeling in my stomach. The butterflies of excitement swirl with the churning of bile from anxiety. It’s all too much, and I don’t want to deal with it.

The back door swings open. Bruce barrels from across the yard and right toward the person exiting. I turn, smiling at my dad. “Everything okay, sweetheart?” He stuffs his hands into his pockets, walking with leisure as he approaches me.

I nod. “Yeah. Work thing.” I clear my throat, hating how the lie sounds. Like betrayal.

I tell him everything, yet here I am pushing down the truth of what’s going on with me.

His shoulder brushes against mine. “It’s okay to not be okay, Sammy.”

I blink back the threat of tears. “It’s never gonna be okay, Daddy.”

“Oh, honey.” He sighs and pulls me into his chest. My hand wraps around the collar of his shirt. “You don’t have to be so strong all the time.”

I shake my head. “I’m not strong. I’m falling apart every fucking day, just waiting, hoping, praying that the next time I wake, it’ll be easy. And it’s just never going to be easy again, is it?”

“No,” he agrees. “It won’t ever be easy. And that’s why you need to give yourself grace.” He holds me tighter to him, squeezing my shoulder to support me while we embrace in an awkward side hug. “But something tells me that’s not why you’re crying.”

“I’m not crying,” I say through sniffles.

His thumb brushes against a stray tear on my cheek, and I let out a pathetic laugh. “Nothing has changed between us. You need me? I’m here. But I can only be here if I know what you need.”

“I don’t know, Dad. I don’t know what I need.” I pull away. “An uninterrupted night of sleep, for starters.” I wince. When was the last time his face didn’t wake me, or the reliving of the nightmarish day he left us?

Dad crosses his arms, the silence wrapping us into a secluded blanket, shielded from the reality of the world. He and I have always been able to sit in silence together. It’s when we always did our best problem solving, and I know what he’s going to suggest before he even says it.

“When I leave on Monday, I’ll take the kids with me for a few weeks.”

“No,” I say through gritted teeth. “They haven’t been there since—” I shook my head.

“Exactly. They haven’t been to the farm in five years. It’s time. It’s about fucking time that you all face your fears. Moving on doesn’t mean forgetting him. It means being able to get through the day without falling.”

I rear back at his harsh words, but I know he’s right. It’s time. We all need to learn to adjust. We all need to face this new world without him, and the kids need to learn how to honor him instead of walking through life with a chip on their shoulders. Em especially. If I don’t get her shit attitude in check soon, she’s going to get kicked out of the private school his parents pay for. And that’s the last thing I need—my asshole-in-laws showing up to judge how I’m parenting.

“Fine. Let’s do it.”

Chapter Nine



S COTTY POURS US EACH a finger of whiskey in the living room while Saoirse and Samira giggle in the kitchen. I smelled her the second Scotty opened the door. That sweet floral scent that just sets my entire body at ease. They'd been in the living room, huddled on the love seat with their heads together while they planned the wedding.

When my eyes landed on her amber toned ones, I stopped mid-stride. I knew she'd be here. Hell, I practically strong-armed Sean into telling me when and where they were meeting so that I could conveniently show up. Still, I paused, and the shock on my face had been genuine. She glanced up from the couch with pouty pink lips and bright fuck me eyes and knocked any coherent thoughts right off the tracks of my seriously simple brain.

Samira was just as surprised, though. She'd excused herself to the bathroom, and when she came out, Saoirse rushed her away. I thanked the god I didn't believe in for putting her in my path.

Third time's enemy action. Her words from last night play over again while Scotty stares at me expectantly. Fuck, I have to come up with a reason for being here. Especially since I left that fucking purse at the hotel again.

I lean forward, resting my elbows on my knees. "Cara," I whisper. The girls are still in the kitchen, but I don't want Samira to hear this, so I keep my voice low. My thumb mindlessly rubs along the scar on my palm.

Scotty's face turns a pale white. We never bring this up, and for good reason. It's best left in the past.

"What?" Scotty asks when I don't elaborate.

I clear my throat, suddenly too clammy to think straight. *Fuck.* I need to get out of here. "I was just thinking about how she won't be here. For the wedding."

Scotty chews on his bottom lip to maintain his composure. "I'd been thinking about that."

"I've been thinking about her a lot lately."

"Me too." He takes a sip of his whiskey.

I suppose we all are. The death of Tommy Walsh could be to blame for that. Saoirse had killed him after her kidnapping, and his last words still stuck with me. I killed his brother, Brian. I ended the life that took my sweet Cara's. We were only teenagers when she died. I'd thought the revenge had been paid until his brother took my baby sister.

Scotty had almost been left with two women he loved gone because of what one man had done fifteen years ago. Guilt

tightens my chest, forcing me to take deeper, more intentional breaths. I set the ripple into place that created all this horrible turmoil.

“Saoirse wants to figure out a way to include her,” he says, pulling me from the deafening silence of our grief. “Maybe her favorite flowers as the centerpieces. It’s been so long, though.” He sighs, hazy eyes peering at me. “Why can’t I remember her favorite flower, Dec?”

I swish the tumbler in my hand mindlessly, the image of my forever young Cara floating on stage at a ballet recital. She had her blonde hair pinned back in a tight bun, and she didn’t smile as she danced gracefully during her solo.

“Gladiolus,” I say. I’d brought them that evening. I brought them to her every time she performed, every time I took her out.

“Thank you,” he whispers. “Fuck, thank you.”

“And maybe her favorite cake?” I raise a brow.

“Lemon with blueberry mousse filling and buttercream frosting,” Saoirse said from the door frame that led from the living room to the hall.

I glance her way, nodding. “Disgusting,” I say, sticking my tongue out.

But I’d eat it. For her.

Samira follows Saoirse into the room, and I can’t help the way my gaze instantly falls to her, trailing until she reaches the

couch opposite me. My sister sits, but she doesn't. Instead, she glances toward me, then back to Saoirse.

“I'm going to head out. I've got dinner plans.”

Heat prickles at the base of my neck at the thought of her out to eat with another man, but I force away any potential feelings of jealousy. There's no room for love or anything else remotely puke worthy. Attraction only blurs anything I want from the mysterious woman standing before me. Lust does not equal love. I wipe my hands against my pants, then stand.

“I should get going, too.” I head for Saoirse to give her a hug.

“You just got here, Dec. Stay a bit,” Saoirse says, standing to embrace me. She squeezes my neck. “You've been drinking,” she whispers low enough that only I can hear. “Please let Scotty take you home.”

“I'll be fine,” I lie and press a kiss to her cheek. Pulling away, I then make eye contact with Samira. “I can walk you out,” I say.

She narrows her gaze at me. “I'm just in the driveway,” she says. “Not a far walk.”

“Still.” I shrug, placing my hand at the small of her back. “Can never be too safe around here.”

She snorts. “In Back Bay? This is the safest area in Boston.”

“Riddled with Irish cronies.”

Sammy's laughter grows as we leave Saoirse's townhome. Her car is parked in front of mine in the double wide driveway that can easily fit eight cars. We walk in silence now, my hand never leaving her back.

"You didn't bring my purse," she says when we get to the driver's side door.

She's so close, her scent coursing through my veins, her heat burning my palm at her back. I rest my hand on the door and when she finally unlocks it, I tug it open for her.

"It's at the hotel. In the penthouse. You can follow me there," I say.

Her eyes roll in annoyance, yet there's a twinkle of amusement. "Hard pass."

"Why?" I ask, allowing my gaze to roam her body. She's curvy in all the perfect places—a handful of ass for me to squeeze while she rides me until we're both delirious with pleasure, and in dire need of rehydration. "You were so into me the other night." I lick my bottom lip. "Now you can't be bothered?"

She shakes her head as she climbs into her vehicle. Long legs poke out while she sets her purse on the passenger seat, and then a flash of a red bottom heel when she climbs all the way in before pressing the push button to start the engine. I duck my head into the car and tug at her seatbelt.

"What are you doing?" she asks when I lean across her to fasten the seatbelt.

I smooth the restraint, my hand gliding down her chest. “Making sure you’re secure,” I tell her. I don’t miss the sharp intake of breath, the way her cleavage poking from the satin button shirt she’s in brightens with a red hue. “Safety first. Always.”

“Declan.” She sighs, eyes squeezed tight. “You have to stop. This is inappropriate.”

I shake my head even though she can’t see me. “Why... is it, Samira? Because you say so?”

Her eyes snap open, fight flashing in them. “Because, Declan. Saoirse is a client. And this will inevitably end.” She waves a hand between us. “You’ll grow attached, want more than I can give you, and when it ends, I’ll be out a very *secure*, high-paying job, out of my friendship with your sister, and my reputation as an event planner will be overshadowed by my inability to keep business and pleasure separate.”

She spoke so fast; I don’t have time to even wonder if she’s able to breathe before she inhales sharply.

“Cute,” I say when she slams the door. I raise my voice so she can hear me through the glass. “That you think you’re the one who will break my heart.”

She lets out a laugh. I wait patiently, one hand on the roof of the car until she rolls down the window. “My heart is un-fucking-breakable,” she declares, a hand on her chest.

When Sammy peers up at me again, there’s ice where the warmth had been, and I shiver at the thought of her being cruel

and manipulative; the way she's coming off now. I'm the one who is supposed to tear her apart, not the other way around.

She rolls the window back up, never glancing back at me when she starts up the car.

"Third time is fate, Samira," I call over the roar of the engine coming to life.



Back at the hotel, I pace the length of the penthouse, cell phone clenched tightly in my fist. I have her number; I can call her. I glance at the time. Three in the morning is an asinine time to call her. I know that, yet the urge to do so is alarmingly high.

I can't get the thought of her out to dinner with another man out of my head. Hell, I don't even know if it was an actual date, or even someone of the opposite sex. I stopped in my tracks. Shit. What if she's bi and I have to compete twice as much?

How is it my mind has flittered away from the depressing images of death, to fucking her until she's passed out from exhaustion? I'd much rather those images, but both are obsessive. Both are going to cause destruction, both lead to no sleep.

I chew on the inside of my lip, debating how the fuck I can get a handle on this situation. I glance at the tattoos covering my bare body. If I can't distract myself with a scene, then I usually do it with pain. I'm running out of space for ink, though.

Kat, my tattoo artist, is used to hearing from me at odd hours. I've never fucked her, always kept it professional, and I pay her well. She could be here in thirty minutes, find some sliver of my body that can hide beneath the suits I wear, to ink. I'd get the fix I need to calm my overactive mind. I'll give her an extra tip to make it worth her while, and I won't wake up Samira by being a crazed person. It'd be a win-win-win.

"Fuck it," I mumble, dialing Kat.

Chapter Ten



HEAT TRAVELS UP MY spine, the invasion of a horrible memory holding me hostage. My bare feet remain glued to the cold tile of the kitchen floor. Warm fingers snake around my body, gliding against the frigid temperature of my stomach.

“Would be a shame to kill her and let this body go to waste,” the man said, his hot breath against my cheek.

I moved my face away, hating that I let them see my tears. I couldn't stop them, though. Couldn't stop what would happen next.

“Sammy?” Veronica calls. Her fingers snap in front of me.

I see her; I hear her, but I can't force myself to respond.

“What do you want?” I asked between deep breaths. “M-m-money? It's in the s-s-safe.”

The one in front of me laughed, his blue eyes watching me intently. Neither of them wore masks, and I knew they would

kill me. Their faces were too distinct. One with a scar over his right eye, the other with a tattoo on his neck.

I would die after they did whatever they wanted to me.

“Sammy, honey.” Veronica holds onto either side of my shoulders, shaking me.

I still can’t shake away from it. Not until I relive the end.

“Let go of her!” Ian shouted.

The one holding me didn’t, though. It only made him press the knife against my neck harder, drawing a bead of blood from me. My body shook, and the gunshot went off. The man in front of me fell to the ground.

Curses and more gunshots flung through the room. The pressure of the metal on my throat left, and he lunged, plunging the blade into Ian’s stomach. Then he ran, sliding into the puddle of blood on the floor. And Ian, my Ian ... the life draining from his shining blue eyes.

I gasp, doubling over while I struggle to catch the air in my lungs. My heart aches from working at hyper speed.

Veronica rubs my back. “It’s okay. It’s not real,” she whispers.

Except it is real. It’s the most real thing to ever happen to me. And I’ll never stop reliving it. Sometimes I can go weeks without it haunting me, but the memories always come back. I’m not always sure what triggers it. Today it was dropping the flower vase. The ear-piercing shatter of glass made my heart stop and my brain shut off.

I need to make time for self-defense classes again—they've always been something that helps curb the lack of control I have when this happens.

“Jesus, Sam. I've never seen you so far gone before.” Veronica drops her phone into her pocket. “I was about to call 9-1-1 and everything.”

I stand upright, cheeks heating with embarrassment. “God, no. Please... just, never do that.” I force a soft laugh past my lips.

She guides me to the kitchenette, settling me onto the bench. Her hand squeezes the back of my neck. “That was bad, Sam. I've never seen it so...” Veronica shivers, shaking her head. She hurries to the fridge to get me a glass of water and some Advil. “You're not sleeping again, are you?”

I shake my head, accepting the pills

“You need to. They're always worse when you don't sleep.” Veronica hurries to the mess on the floor, sweeping up shards of glass.

“I know. I'm just stressed. This will be their first visit back to the farm since—” *God. I shouldn't make them go.*

My throat dries despite the entire cup of water I just drank. “I should cancel. They're not ready.”

Veronica shakes her head, sitting beside me. Her hand clamps over my forearm, mean to be comforting, but I don't think there's anything that can ease the turmoil inside of me.

“It's time you all move on. It's been five years,” she says.

A choked noise escapes me. “Move on? How are my children supposed to move on, Vee? Their father was murdered in our home.”

I glance at the spot I’d just been standing in when the anxiety attack happened. The same place I held my husband as he bled out. I couldn’t move, not when our children had just lost their father. It would’ve ruined them more than they already were. So, I stayed, replaced the stained hardwood with cold white tile.

Still, this home haunts me. It holds the good and the bad. His face fills each corner. His love, his very essence. I can never leave. There’s too much of him.

My heart hammers in my chest again. I quickly shake my head, forcing away the ill thoughts. There’s no time for panic attacks or PTSD moments. I’m sick of this. Dad and Veronica are right. Time to move on.

“Let’s talk about something else,” I say, clearing my throat. “When are we scheduled to check out flower arrangements?”

Veronica nods. She reaches for her purse in the center of the table, then pulls out her iPad. “Thursday.”

I sigh in relief, my head bobbing enthusiastically. We spend the next half hour running through all the details, prioritizing the items on the to do list, and delegating tasks. My stomach grumbles at the same time Veronica’s does.

“We should break for lunch,” I say, standing from the table. The luxury of working from home is being able to cook meals

without having to order out. I mean, don't get me wrong, there are plenty of days that me and Vee grab takeout, but mostly we break and cook something fresh.

“I can send out these emails this evening,” she says, standing with me.

She heads for the fridge, rummaging to find something to make.

“I'll grab some veggies for a salad,” I say when I notice she's taken out the glass of fresh honey vinaigrette I made for the week. One upside to being my boss is the free time I have to make just about all of our food from scratch.

Baking and cooking fresh is one way I cope with grief. I may have woken up at three this morning to make a French baguette and buttercream-frosted cupcakes.

I head through the sliding door in the corner of the kitchen that leads to the brick-laid patio. The backyard had been a selling point of the massive home. Ian's family came from money, and though the expensive price tag that came with a four-bedroom home in a good area of the suburbs with private school was daunting—especially since I was only twenty when we bought this place—I'd made the house our home. Starting with the garden. The patio has iron lounge chairs and a dining table with intricate rose patterns welded into the frame of the tabletop. Large potted plants with pops of colors and some herbs that double for consumption litter the corners of the brick seating area.

Birds chirp, because yeah, I made sure we had some trees and bird feed to make this place serene. Every time I step outside to let out Bruce, the Doberman I bought after the home invasion, my heartbeat returns to normal as I take in the peaceful space. My dose of medicine to keep the demons at bay. And it works most of the time.

I round the corner, heading for the fenced-in garden, and grab one of the wooden baskets I keep hanging on the railing. It doesn't take long to grab some lettuce, tomatoes, onions, carrots. Then, I head inside, where Veronica is already dicing up a chicken breast to add into our salad. The bread I made this morning is already in slices and laid out on a baking pan to toast.

This is oddly domestic. Without having to speak, we read each other's mind. She prepped the bread, decided we needed protein for the salad, and helped get started. A pang settles in my chest, and I long to have this back. To be so in sync with a partner that they just know what you need and do it.

Ian is gone. I've come to terms with that. But this? This is the first time I've felt like maybe I'm ready to move on, to learn how to cohabitate with someone else.

Fear settles where the ache in my heart is. I never want to give myself to anyone, just to have to lose them again. And I also don't know if I could live with myself for moving on. The guilt of being with someone else still fucks with my head. It still feels a lot like cheating.

Chapter Eleven



“**T**OO SKINNY,” VERONICA SAYS from the couch. She’s sprawled out with a fleece blanket wrapped around her, despite the summer humidity. “Too old ... too hairy ... too *bald*.”

I chuckle from my spot curled up on the recliner, face buried in a book. Dad left with the kids this morning, and I stressed right until he sent me the much anticipated “We’re home, safe and sound” text. It eased some of the worry enough that I could sit and attempt to read a book. I use the term loosely, since Veronica’s commentary on the dating profiles she’s swiping on is loud enough to be mistaken for speaking into a megaphone at a high school football game.

The day’s been pretty low key, other than that. We finished work early and I came home, showered and got into pajamas before we ate dinner.

“What exactly are you looking for in an online dating companion?” I turn the page in my book, not bothering a glance in her direction.

“Young, but not younger than me. Hot, but like, not celebrity hot. Funny, muscled, good in bed.”

“How will you know if they’re good in bed?” I ask.

“Well, the ones who aren’t typically say something extremely crude and pretend like they can locate the clitoris without a treasure map.”

I snort. “Gross. I’m glad I never had to do the online thing.”

Veronica shoots up, eyes wide with excitement. “Shut up. We should totally get you an online profile.”

“No,” I say.

“Come on, Sam. It’ll be fun. You’ve got the next two weeks of no kids. This is a perfect way to dip your toe back into the dating pool.”

I shake my head. There’s no use in putting up too much of a fight. She’s going to just do it. Besides, she’s not wrong. It is a good way to get a feel for the type of men out there these days without feeling like I need to commit. What’s a few text messages back and forth?

She climbs out of her fleece cocoon and hurries toward me to swipe my phone. I don’t stop her, not even when she unlocks it with my Face ID.

“Looking for twenty-three through thirty-four,” Veronica murmurs, typing away at the screen as she heads back to her makeshift dome.

“I’m not trying to date a child,” I murmur.

“It’s for stamina. You’re approaching your peak sexual drive age. You need a younger man to keep up with you.”

I make a gagging sound.

“Favorite hobby ...” Her voice drifts off. “Gardening ... When I’m not at work, you can find me—”

“Attempting to read in peace but unable to because my roommate doesn’t shut the fuck up.”

“—relaxing by the pool with a frozen drink in hand.” She blatantly ignores me, continuing to type aloud as she sets up a dating profile for me.

It doesn’t take long for her to finish, then she gets to swiping. “No, no, no ... ew, fuck no!”

At this point, I’ve abandoned all hope of finishing up the book I’m reading. She’s too distracting. “All right,” I say. “You’ve had your fun. Give me back my phone!”

She sighs but doesn’t put up a fight when I come over to take it back. I let out a yawn. “I’m headed to bed.”

Veronica snorts. “Don’t lie. You’re going to message all the dudes I just matched you with.”

“I don’t think you realize how annoying you are.”

“I definitely do. It’s just that I don’t care.”

I roll my eyes, leaving her be while I head up for bed. It’s not until I’m comfortable beneath the covers with freshly brushed teeth that my phone goes off with the notification for the dating app.

FlyGuy25: You should let me take you on a date, then bring you home for some amazing sex. You'll look in my nightstand where you won't find any condoms, just an engagement ring, and I'll come deep inside you then marry you the next day.

What in the hell? I swipe to the next message.

JerryTheBerry: Hey there!

Oh, a somewhat normal one. I tap out my response.

SamCat: Hi. How are you?

JerryTheBerry: I'm good. Just about to jerk off.

Disgusting.

Twanky: Hey SamCat. Do u give good head? That's 1 of the reqs to get me to invite u over.

SamCat: No. I use all teeth and have a horrible gag reflex.

Twanky: Gross byyyeee.

This is an utter waste of my time. I sigh, tossing my phone onto the nightstand. I'd have better luck on the street with a sign that says "Freshly in the dating world again." It's not a surprise Veronica hasn't found someone online. These apps are filled with gross weirdos.

Bruce curls up beside me. I tuck my arm over him, then yawn again before letting sleep take me.



“Sammy!” The barista calls.

I pull my head from the chain of messages I’m sending to a man whose screen name is *TobyToby*. I reached out to him Monday evening after reviewing his profile and asked him about his double name. We’ve been chatting since then.

I won’t lie, Veronica has me sucked into the addiction of swiping on a profile, and once I found a couple of decent guys who weren’t trying to creep me out with their odd requests, I’d been able to hold a decent conversation.

It’s not like I’ll want to meet any of them in person, but the adult conversation outside of Veronica and our clients is refreshing. It’s made the week go by fast. Friday is here, and it feels like I just said goodbye to my kids this morning, not five days ago.

Do I attribute it to *TobyToby*? Definitely.

I grab my drink and slide my phone into the purse dangling from my arm. The harmless flirting can continue when I’m home and finished with work for the weekend. I’ve got about an hour left of work for the week before I can call it and head to the farm. I miss the kids, and Dad might be mad when I

show up, but asking me to be away from them for fourteen days won't happen.

A few emails following up on a client's birthday party and invites to send out for Saoirse's bridal shower, plus follow-ups for the last minute change in the bouquet for the wedding.

I settle into my spot, laptop open and ready to tackle the last bit. The chiming of the dating app goes off, and call me eager, I dive into my purse to check the notifications.

TobyToby: Cute Joke

SamCat: Something witty.

TobyToby: I'm loving where this convo is going. Do you think we could move it to a coffee meet up tomorrow?

I suck in a breath. I need to focus to get this stuff done so I can see my babies. Plus, I'm just not sure I want to take it that far.

SamCat: I'm actually out of town this weekend. Rain Check?

TobyToby: Bummer. Totally will cash in on that.

SamCat: Look forward to it.

I close my eyes, attempting to focus when my phone goes off. "God damn it," I mumble.

"Hey Saoirse. What can I help you with?" I greet, my customer service voice in full force.

"Hey, Sammy. I'm calling to give you a heads up. We need to adjust the cake tasting."

“Oh?” I ask, tilting my head to the side.

Saoirse and Scotty are scheduled for a cake tasting tonight. If she cancels at the last minute, I’m going to blow a gasket. I spent three weeks trying to get her into a vegan bakery that didn’t have food that tasted like sandpaper.

“Declan will do the tasting.”

“What?” I ask, thankful she isn’t dropping this on me in person. I’m not sure I’d be able to hide my utter surprise at the news.

“He’s going to do the cake tasting. I trust him to get it done.”

“Oh,” I say, still trying to make my brain catch up.

Who the hell enlists their brother to do that? Especially someone like Saoirse, who even struggles to let me do my job sometimes. She’s not a Bridezilla the way I’ve had in the past, but she definitely has strong opinions and high expectations. Both of which I understand and embrace fully as an event coordinator.

Saoirse knowing what she likes and not making my job easy, sure. But this? This is just throwing me through a loop right now.

“I’m sorry,” she says. “I hope this doesn’t ruin anything. It’s just I think Declan needs to be the one who makes this decision.”

“It doesn’t at all. I’ll call the bakery and inform them of the name change. Could I have Declan’s email so I can forward

him the tasting sheet to print out? It'll have some help to make flavor comparisons as we get more bakeries on the list."

"I'll text it to you. Also, can we have them make a new flavor?"

"Of course. What's the flavor?"

"Lemon with blueberry mousse filling and buttercream frosting."

"Sure," I say, recalling Saoirse mentioning that flavor to Scotty when I was there the other night. "We can do that. Send me his email, and I'll sort everything else out."

"Thanks, Sammy. For everything."

We say our goodbyes, and things go well for the next hour. No distractions, and I chalk it up to the Do Not Disturb feature on my phone. It's only when I'm closing my laptop that I catch Declan's email response.

I'm good.

Dec

He's good? What the fuck does that even mean?

Good evening, Mr. Murphy,

Can you please elaborate? You're good as in, you have your phone and will take notes? You're good as in it's all printed and ready to go?

Kindly,

Samira Cullen.

Ms. Cullen,

It means I don't need to take notes, but thank you.

Yours Truly,

-D.

D. He's signing it D now. I slam my laptop closed and begin plotting how to get away with murder. So much for my weekend at the farm.

Chapter Twelve



MY HAND FALLS TO the back of the empty chair beside me, and I grip it with force. This is what I wanted, right? Here Samira is, standing before me in a closed bakery, only open after hours because she had Saoirse pay an exuberant amount not to have to deal with a crowded room.

I knew what I was doing when I sent her the email, when I told her I wouldn't be filling out her stupid flavor notes sheet. I didn't need the sheet, and if she wanted it filled out, she could come and do it herself.

A part of me had hoped she wouldn't call my bluff, that she wouldn't show up.

Samira is a gorgeous woman. Surely, she could be out with a man right now. Instead, here she is. *With me.* Part of me is shocked, but another part of me is eager to prove to her we can have whatever professional relationship she feels we have, while also exploring the tension brewing between us. Just because her client is my sister, it won't affect the personal one.

I've made it clear what I want from her, and I won't just walk away with my tail between my legs because she's hesitant.

I want her to give all of herself to me. Her smiles, her laughs. Fuck, even the tears. And I desperately want to know how she feels beneath me, naked and tangled in the sheets. Still, I'll take any part of her she will give to me, including this scrappy, angry little scowl she wears as she approaches.

I offer her a grin, pull back the empty seat, then pat it, beckoning her to sit.

Her eyes narrow in on me. "I don't know what you're after, Mr. Murphy, but just know that you won't get it," she says, her voice holding none of the conviction that her words are meant to. No, her voice is soft, yet raspy. It's thick with a hint of sultriness that sends my cock jolting upright with anticipation.

"I'm just trying to help my sister out, Ms. Cullen."

"Really?" She scoffs, as if that is the most outrageous lie I could tell. "Is that why you refused to fill out the sheet I sent you? You care so much you don't need to remember which cake was the best? Which one you think will be the right fit for Saoirse and Scotty's wedding?"

"As I said in our email exchange, I don't need to take notes."

Her lips screw up in distaste. "No?"

"Nope."

"You're just going to keep it in your memory bank and hope it all works out?"

“Yep.” I tap a finger against my temple. “Got a pretty good memory bank.”

“I doubt that very much.”

An employee drops a tray of assorted cakes in front of us, then fills two glasses with water, then heads to the back to give us the privacy I’m sure Samira requested.

I don’t need to ask. I already know the one in the center is the cake we’re here for. The blueberry filling gives it away.

Samira pulls out a pink binder from her purse while I reach across the table and stab a piece with the fork. This side of her—the proper one—is so different from the one I met in the club. She’s attractive in her business suit, her high heels and perfect makeup. So proper with straight posture while she clicks her pen and prepares to write whatever I say down.

I want the messy version. The one with mascara smeared, her pink lipstick wiped free to show the nude color of her lips while it stains my cock. I want to see her in jeans or sweats, her hair all tangled after a long day of work. That version, the version of her in the club was the real her. This one is just a mask.

She peers at me intently while I take a bite. I chew and swallow despite the taste. It’s *horrible*. And it’s not the substitute of regular flour for almond, or cow’s milk for almond milk, or eggs for applesauce. This cake just plain fucking sucks.

I swallow while Sammy readies her pen, preparing herself for whatever it is I'll say. She watches intently, and I gulp down the entire glass.

“This isn't it.” I fold the napkin and set it on the table. “I'm starving. Let's grab some dinner.”

Her mouth drops, pink lips forming that sweet, shocking way it seems to do whenever I speak. I'm aware of my lack of small talk, my need to get straight to the point. I know it surprises people when I don't circle around the topic.

I'm direct, and I don't give a fuck how your day is going. Because mine is most likely going like shit, but society dictates I need to lie and say it's good. Fuck that. I prefer to skip it all.

“What do you mean?” She glances toward the other untouched slices of cake. Each of them has little cards that state what they are. Chocolate, vanilla, and a few others. “You haven't even touched the others.”

I shrug. “Saoirse wants this flavor. This bakery isn't it.”

Her mouth parts, eyes falling in slight disappointment. “There's no other local vegan bakery that caters weddings in this area.”

“It's disgusting, Samira.” I rest my hand on the back of her chair. A finger catches a bit of her soft hair, and I stop myself from twirling it between my fingers. “I can't, in good faith, approve this cake.”

The rumble of her stomach cuts through the air, and a slight bit of concern courses through me. Is she just hungry because it's getting late? Or is it a case like Saoirse, where she skips meals? I tug the ends of her hair to command her attention.

She turns toward me, wide-eyed.

“You need to eat. Let's go,” I say.

“I'm fine,” she insists.

I remain seated as she closes the binder, forcefully shoves it into her purse, and then comes to a full stand. “What do I tell Saoirse?”

“I'll tell her the truth. This place tastes like dirt. We'll find a bakery, doll.” I stand, buttoning my suit jacket. “I'll see what I can find in New York and shoot you a list.”

“New York?” she asks.

I nod. “Yeah. I'll be there on Sunday for business. I'll poke around and see what I find.”

“Right, okay. But ...” She sighs. “Please. Can you please just fill out the paper? For Saoirse.”

I roll my eyes and hesitate, but stick out a hand anyway. Sammy grins with her feat and rummages to pull out the paper again. I take it, glance over the colored sheet with bullet points and boxes and flowers, then fold it up and slide it into the empty pocket inside the jacket.

“But this means you're getting dinner with me.” I wrap a hand around her waist and pull her into me before she can get

away. Then I drag her out of the bakery.

“It’s not a date,” Samira insists.

“It’s a business discussion,” I say. “We’ll google bakeries, and you can squeeze some on my itinerary.”

“Do you visit New York often?”

We settle into a comfortability as we head out of the bakery and shoot across toward the Mexican place on the opposite side of the street.

“Once a month,” I tell her.

“Crap. So, we need to squeeze them in this Sunday, huh?”

The wedding is in two months. There won’t be enough time to book after the tasting if we wait until next month.

“Probably,” I say. “And I’ll probably have only an hour because I’m visiting my aunt for tea.”

I open the door for the restaurant. My hand settles at the small of her back on the satin cream-colored shirt she’s wearing and savor the feel of her company—of dinner out, with someone that’s not involved in work, or one of my siblings.

The tables are packed for happy hour, so we opt to sit at the bar.

“Okay.” Her lips form a thin line when she settles into the stool beside me. “What if I call around and have it delivered to you? Will you have a hotel?”

I shake my head. “It’s just a day trip. But I could book a room for an hour?” I pause, then smirk, a wonderful idea forming in my head. “Why don’t you come, too?”

She laughs. “I meant it, Declan. Strictly business.”

That’s not a no. So, I push her more. “I just think it’ll be easier. You can take the notes while I taste. I’m going to be exhausted from the flight, business meetings, and then tea with my aunt. It’ll be easier if you just come along. Plus, if we find a bakery, you’ll be there to hash out the details and book it at the last minute.”

She chews on her bottom lip. “I’m afraid of airports,” she finally blurts.

“What?” I cover my mouth to hide an amused grin.

She raises her hands in defense. “They stress me out, okay? The rush to make it to your gate in time. How long will TSA take to pat you down? What if I’m randomly selected and pulled aside? What if the flight is delayed and I have to take a bird bath shower in the bathroom sink? Will the person sitting next to me smell like onions? Will they get sick on the plane and cover me in vomit?”

We order our drinks and an appetizer, and I burst into laughter. I’ve never had to deal with those things as an adult. We arrange for a private flight and bypass the dramatics. If there’s a weather delay, the pilot texts us before we even leave our house.

“You can take the jet with me,” I offer, taking a sip of the whiskey when the bartender plops the drink in front of me. “I’ve got to pay for it either way. You can spend the day shopping or working, or whatever. Then we can meet for the cake tasting around four.”

“No.” Her head shakes furiously. “I couldn’t impose.”

“It’s not imposing. It’ll save you the stress and money. There’s plenty of room on the plane. Don’t make it a big deal, Sammy.”

My tongue darts out, licking my lips as I watch her take a sip of the margarita she ordered. Even the way she takes a sip somehow makes me want to undress her. The way she closes her eyes and lets out a soft moan of satisfaction, The way her nose scrunches when she sets the drink down. All of it. All of her makes me insane.

“Fine,” she says. “But we need to lay out some ground rules.” She turns, offers me a stern look of warning.

“I’ll be a good boy, Ms. Cullen,” I promise. Though I give her a devious grin that says otherwise.

Chapter Thirteen



DECLAN PEERS OVER MY shoulder in the crowded bar, and I know before I even lock the screen of my phone that he's caught sight of the app. His hand reaches out, swiping the device before I can put it in my purse.

"What's the code?" he asks.

I clear my throat. "I thought you were in the bathroom."

"I was. Now I'm not." He shoves between the guy sitting next to me at the bar and my seat. "What's the passcode?"

I shrug. "Not your business."

His hand settles over my wrist, the heat of it drawing my gaze to him. We had a great dinner at the bar, but now I'm ready to get away. It's bad enough I agreed to spend time with him on Sunday. I can't give him any more than what I already have.

He peers down at me with a darkness that sends all the warning bells to my brain; still, I can't help to make eye

contact with him. My breath halts with his intensity. I close my eyes, tearing away from him.

“Some asshole named Toby wants to stick his dick in you.” His voice is so low, so deep and filled with rage, I can’t even respond. “Do you even know him? He could be some creep. You clearly met him online, judging by the way he was asking to meet up with you.”

He read the messages. “It’s not your business,” I repeat. I tug my hand to get away, but he yanks me closer.

I topple off the stool, right into his hard chest. My heart beats so fast that I’m about to overheat. He brushes the hair from my face. “What if he rapes you, Samira? What if he hurts you? Murders you?”

“It’s whatever,” I snap. “I wasn’t going to meet any of them.”

“Them?” He drags a hand through his hair. “There’s *multiple?*” he grits out through clenched teeth.

Declan releases me, and I bring it to my chest, rubbing the feel of his rough hand away. I push away the fuzzy feeling in my stomach. Why does this turn me on? Why am I into how possessive a man I barely know is? How overbearing he is?

“I was just bored, okay?” Why am I defending myself? I don’t owe this man anything. Yet here I am, defending my reckless actions.

“Fuck.” He sucks air through his teeth. “What are you doing to me?”

I could ask you the same thing.

I don't move when he drops his forehead against my shoulder. It should unsettle me, but it's not. There's a familiar feeling of wanting this, of feeling safe despite his intense need to claim me as his. A finger runs along the small of my back, lower until his hand cups my ass over my pleated skirt.

"Declan," I whisper, not sure that I'm ready for more.

"You say you want me to stop, but I know how wet you were the other night in the club."

I close my eyes. "Wanting you and being able to have sex with you are different things."

"Can still smell how turned on you were. I sucked you clean off my fingers. God, you tasted like oranges. I want more, Sammy."

"I can't give you more," I say on a bated breath. My heart cracks.

"Then I'll take whatever you have to give. I don't fucking care. One night. One second. *Anything.*"

I close my eyes. What can I give? "This weekend," I rush out before I can change my mind. "When we come home on Sunday, we walk away from it. We pretend it never happened."

"Fine. Fucking fine."

The hand gripping my ass moves up my back, and then he's clutching my neck with a tight force. His fingers dig into me,

and my eyes fling up when his mouth connects to mine. My first kiss in over five years is rough and commanding. He takes control, plunging his tongue into my mouth.

It's desperate, filled with an urgency to get as much of it in the short time frame I've set. In forty-eight hours, it will be over with. I'm overwhelmed with the scent of bergamot and the scratchy feeling of his beard against my face.

This is it. This is what I need to get back into the swing of normalcy. Declan Murphy is about to claim me in ways I don't think I've ever been before. There's no fear, no guilt. Just the need to know what this man looks like naked.

He pulls away, grinning. "Are there still ground rules, Ms. Cullen?"

"Yes!" I shriek. "Yes, there are."

He chuckles. "Fine. We'll go over them in my bed. Naked. Let's go."

And like all things Declan does, he grabs me by the elbow in a haste to get out of the restaurant. I'm led back across the street, where he's snatching my purse and digging through to find my car keys.

"Did you drive?" I ask when he shoves me into the passenger seat of my Audi. And just like the other night, he leans in to strap me in. This time, when his hands graze my chest, I embrace the heat of his touch, anticipation causing my nipples to ache.

"Yeah, but I'll text my brother to pick up the car."

He rounds the front, then slides into the driver seat. The engine starts up, and he glides into the busy street. “What are your rules?” he asks when we fall into silence.

I bite my lip, trying to figure out what I’m comfortable with. We need the safe sex talk, as weird as it is. “I haven’t been tested in years, but I’m not sexually active,” I say, cringing when it comes out all awkward. “Still. Condoms are a must.”

He nods. “I’m up to date on screenings and agree about the condoms.” He glances at me, one hand on the steering wheel. “I’m not worried about that, Samira. I’m worried about being too much for you.”

“Too much?” I ask, my face scrunching up.

He nods, his fist tightening the steering wheel. “You said you were worried you’d break my heart,” he says. “I’m going to say that’s highly improbable. I’ve had my fair share of intimate partners. And I don’t get attached.”

I watch him, an internal fight happening with the way he opens and closes his mouth. We come to a red light, and he turns his head toward me. “I have certain ... desires.”

Oh.

I make a mental scan of the things I like. What are my kinks? I honestly hadn’t thought about it. What’s the point when you’re not having sex?

I lift a brow. “Such as?”

“We can get into all of that later.” He licks his lips, his gaze turning dark before he turns back to the windshield and

presses on the gas as the light turns green. “Right now, I want you to open those pretty thighs for me and touch yourself.”

“It’s still light out,” I argue. “Someone will see.” I press a finger to my mouth and bite down.

Even though I protest, one leg comes up and the heel of my foot lands on the edge of the seat. A groan of satisfaction leaves Declan. It only spurs on the confidence I’m channeling, and I rest a hand on the inside of my leg.

“More,” he says in a throaty command that sends a surge of thrill rushing through me.

I obey, gliding a hand down until I reach the hem of the lace panties I’m wearing. He continues to drive, glancing over every few seconds, while I stroke two fingers along the sensitive flesh, up toward my knee, then back down my leg. I draw lazy patterns, teasing both of us.

When he stops at another red light, I push aside the lace fabric, feeling my slick arousal. Then I finger myself, eyes trained on him.

There’s no time to question what I’m doing, or why. I can only feel the need we have for each other, the air thick with tension. Despite how good this feels. I want it to be his hand. I’ve pleased myself enough all these years. It’s the caress of a man I want now.

“Touch me,” I say. “Please, Declan.”

He lets out a groan and shifts in the seat. My back arches when a hand leaves the steering wheel and lands on me. His

nails dig into my knee, and I gasp when he drags my leg toward him. He slides it between his legs. I settle against the back of the seat and soak in how good it feels.

The roughness of his calloused hand against my bare leg, the harsh way his fingers dig into me, the rushed movements of a man in a frenzy to have me. I squirm as his hand travels higher and higher until he cups my pussy. Heat coils inside of my belly when a finger nudges against my entrance. But then he pulls away after a soft tease, back down the apex of my thighs, and up again. He circles my clit, glides toward my entrance, only enough to make me whimper when he pulls away the second I feel an ounce of bliss.

“Yes,” I pant.

Two fingers slide inside of me, and he thrusts once, twice, only to remove them when I let out another squeal. My knees naturally fall, only for him to shove them back open. Over and over, he plays with me, never fully giving me the release that’s been building up inside of me.

He pulls into a parking garage—probably the hotel’s garage if I’d been paying attention instead of being teased—and he slams the car in park. Declan’s seatbelt flies off. Then he’s leaning over, shoving one leg open while he fills me with two fingers.

“Declan,” I squeak between harsh thrusts. “Oh—” My entire body tenses.

He leans over, his face right against my core, then spits against my clit.

“No” His fingers pull out of me to slap the inside of my thigh. “Keep. Them. Open.”

My eyes roll back at the gruff command, the way he pins me with his elbow to the passenger door. I couldn't close them now even if I gave it my full effort.

“Stop fighting me,” he warns, his tone stern. It only sends a jolt of electricity through me.

Or what? I want to ask. I open my mouth to speak, but he silences me with the fingers that were just inside of me.

“You taste yourself?” he asks.

I groan around him, nodding. “So good, isn't it? Fuck. I need you.”

My tongue swirls around the saltiness of his skin and the musky taste of my wetness, lapping up every drop.

“Stay still.” He pulls his hand from my mouth.

“I need to come, and you're teasing me,” I gripe. “It's impossible to sit still.”

“Every time you clench around me, you buck and I can't do my job, Samira. Sit still or I will strap you down.”

I shocked sound escapes me. “You will not!”

I shiver at the dark chuckle leaving him. It's filled with a threat, and I don't think I want to be on the receiving end of it. My mouth snaps shut, and to my appeasement, he enters me again. Each thrust has his palm stroking my aching bundle of nerves until that coil spirals tighter and tighter.

I bite down on the inside of my lip as the waves of my climax reach their peak. “Fuck,” I cry with one final stroke of my clit until I’m sensitive and quivering against him.

Declan hums in satisfaction, straightens out my skirt, and then turns off the car. “Fuck is right,” he says through an exhale. “I don’t think forty-eight hours is long enough to satisfy this deep craving I have for you.”

Same.

Chapter Fourteen



“**W**HY DO YOU LIVE here?” I ask, taking the stemless glass that Declan offers.

I sip the cool, white wine, my gaze on his arms as he rolls up the sleeves of the white dress shirt. Various colors of ink trace along his skin from his wrists and swirl up and into the shirt again. I hadn't noticed the tattoos before today. Every time I've seen him, he's been in the suits—practically covered from head to toe.

With his jacket tossed away, his tie gone, and the first button of his shirt undone, I can see them all. He's covered in them. Vibrant colors of flowers and skulls, some black and white work. I set the drink on the counter and grab his arm to inspect the detail further.

“My place had a roof leak.” He rests his hands on the countertop of the island. “It should be fixed soon.”

A finger runs up his arm. “Is this up like all the way to your shoulder?”

“Mhm.” He pulls away to unbutton his shirt. Underneath is a thin, white tank top and I can see the ink lining his torso, to the start of his neck. Fuck, he is seriously covered. “Basically, my entire body except my hands, neck and face.”

“Wow,” I say, a bit breathless. “That’s—did it hurt?”

A bright sound of laughter escapes him, different from all the other times I’ve heard it. “Yes. It hurt.”

“Is your ...” I clear my throat, then shake my head. No. I’m not about to ask if he has his ass cheeks or penis tattooed. That’s awkward. “Why?”

He pulls off his tank top and does a little spin so I can catch the rest of the art on his back. I gasp at the stunning mural there and approach to touch it. A horse is reared up on its hind legs, its dark hair blowing in the wind. My fingers run along the white and brown paint pattern on its stomach.

“Because without pain, sometimes I feel like I’m dying inside.”

My heart cracks at the admission. “For me, the pain makes me feel like I’m the one dying.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Me, too,” I whisper, moving my touch toward a weeping girl sitting on a rock below the horse. It’s almost as if the horse is about to stomp down on her, and her teardrops are red. For blood? “Who is she?” I ask, stroking the blonde hair.

I’ve never seen such detail in a tattoo. It’s breathtaking. So fine tuned. I feel as though I’m staring at a painting in a

museum. There's emotion in the images.

“She represents the women who have taken their lives because their loved ones failed them.”

“Oh, Declan.” I wrap my hands around him, my cheek resting against his back. “I'm so sorry.” I want to ask who. Who does he feel like he failed? But I don't know if I can without giving him my own. And I'm not about to tell him about Ian. Not at this moment, when we're supposed to have nothing but each other until Sunday evening. Maybe I'll tell him the truth later.

He clears his throat, then turns around so we're facing each other. “Enough of the bullshit emotions. I brought you here to fuck you, not pour our hearts out.” He grabs my chin and forces my gaze to clash with his. “Unless that's what you want.”

I don't pull away from the icy blue depth of his eyes. They're like an ocean full of hurt, and why hadn't I noticed that before? Is it why I'd been drawn to him at the club? Here we are, two broken souls filled with heartache and the inability to walk through life without experiencing the gnawing feeling of destruction that seems to follow us.

“Anything,” he reminds me when I don't respond. “I said I'd take anything. So, if you need more words, then fine. But I'd prefer none. No words. Just the sweet sound of your moans.”

I grin at him. “The latter. I want that. Take my clothes off, Mr. Murphy.”

He shakes his head, his soft grip on my chin turning into a firm hold. “Undo my belt.”

I inhale a shaky breath, then do as I’m told. My fingers fumble with the metal belt.

“Anytime you’re uncomfortable with anything I’m doing at all, you can tell me to stop.” His thumb rubs soothing strokes along my cheek, keeping me in place with that firm grip. “I can see it in you, too. The pain you’re trying to bury.”

My head shakes with agreement. So much pain and hurt. I just want it gone. I know grief isn’t predictable. I can do fine one day and the next it can bring me to my knees, struggling to take in oxygen, but I want more of the good days, for the bad days to be rare.

“Say it.” He cuts into my thoughts.

“If I want to stop, I just have to tell you.”

“Perfect.” He releases my face, removes my hands from his arm, and guides them along the rippled muscles of his chest and stomach until we reach the waistband of his slacks.

He doesn’t have to tell me what to do next. I undo the button and reach into the black boxers. My thumb runs along the head of his cock. I massage a bead of pre-cum into the velvet flesh before fisting him.

“Oh my God,” I gasp when I reach a cold metal ball sticking out. His dick is thick, it’s long, and it’s fucking pierced. *Holy fucking hell.* “Is it tattooed too?”

He peers down at me, a smug grin peeking through his beard. “Get on your knees and find out.”

I don't move right away, so he takes a fistful of hair and nudges me to drop onto the tiled floor. His grip gives him the ability to move my head any way he likes, and I gasp when my cheek is shoved against his groin. The hardness of the piercings digs into my flesh. I wiggle, trying to rub my thighs together to relieve the ache building up in my core again.

“Pull him out, doll. I want to see you worship my cock.”

I swallow, my throat suddenly thick with anticipation. His grip tightens, and I wince at the burning pain in my scalp. I'm not moving fast enough for him, and if I don't hurry, the pain will get worse. I straighten, reach for the hem of his underwear, then yank.

A pierced penis springs free. I turn my head to the side, taking in the sight of the Jacob's Ladder. There's no ink, just the piercings, but it's still a work of art. I wrap my hand around the shaft, then press the softest of kisses to the tip.

Declan groans, and I peer up at him. He's watching me with pure need gleaming in those ocean-like eyes. I shift to rub my thighs together with my desperation. My tongue darts out, wetting my bottom lip, then I open fully to take him inside of my mouth.

“Yes,” he says through a deep rumble in his chest.

My tongue swirls along the tip, then I take him in deep. The metal of the piercings rubs against my tongue while I move

my head until he moves his hips to match my pace. We settle into a rhythm until the salty taste of his cum hits my tongue.

“That’s it, doll. Fuck, your mouth feels so damn good.”

And fuck, the noises he makes while he comes undone make me so wet; I can’t take it anymore. I slide a hand between my thighs. The slickness of my arousal coats my finger as I massage my clit.

Declan pulls me up with his hold on my head. I wince, and even though I hate how much it hurts, I can’t deny that it also shoots a thrill through me. Not knowing what he’ll do next mixed with the arousal only heightens my senses.

I can still feel the indent of his fingers digging into my thighs when we were in the car, and the emptiness right now is a stark contrast to how he touched me then. I want that again, especially now with the taste of him on my tongue.

His hand wraps around my throat. With his firm grip, he pushes me against the kitchen countertop. I squeal when my ass hits the cool granite. I shiver under his intense stare. He’s assessing me, and then his eyes fall on my mouth.

A groan escapes him. “You should see yourself right now,” he says. “With your mascara running down your face and that pretty pink lipstick all smeared.” He chuckles. “You look all used up.” The rest of his statement dies on his tongue, but I see it in his eyes. *You look like my fuck doll.*

Is that why he calls me doll? Why won’t he say it now? Is he scared it’ll push me away?

My stomach tightens, and I glance down between us. The pink evidence of my lips being wrapped around him stains his cock. He squeezes around my neck, commanding my attention back to his face. Then he releases me and steps back. Its not tight and I can still breath, not like the day I was hurt. His touch is completely different than those monsters.

My heart hammers as nerves settle in the pit of my stomach. This man is huge. He's tall with broad shoulders and muscled arms. He could crush my windpipe with minimal effort. And he's staring at me with an intensity that should be off-putting. The silence in the room isn't helping settle the anxiety.

“Take your skirt off.”

I grab the zipper on the side of my waist and tug. The material falls to the floor with a thud.

“Turn around. Put your hands on the counter and bend over.”

I don't hesitate. Following his instruction is too easy. He knows what he wants from me and requests it with clear direction. A warm hand settles on my back.

“I need to grab a condom,” he starts. “Don't *fucking* move. I'll be right back.”

Chapter Fifteen



SAMMY IS IN THE same position I left her—ass in the air, resting her arms on the counter. She peers at me over her shoulder, eyes wide when she takes in what I'm holding. She's only giving me forty-eight hours, and I fully intend to spend as much of that time as I can buried inside of her.

After she begs for it, of course.

I want her to rethink this temporary agreement by the time we part ways on Sunday. She's already got me addicted to her with these few encounters with her. It's not just her body; it's her smile, her laugh, her scent.

Right now, it's the soft inhalation of breaths she takes while she attempts to slow her rapid heart rate. She's nervous and doesn't want me to know. I step forward and press my palm against the delicious curve of her ass. She presses into my caress, and I squeeze the soft flesh. A satisfied moan escapes her.

My fingers trace along the edge of the black thong she's in.
"Take it off."

She reaches behind with one arm and tugs at the thin fabric. They slide down with a swift shimmy of her hips. Before she can set her hand back on the counter, I lock her wrist in my grip. "Give me the other."

She does as she's told. With both hands in my grip, she's standing upright, back to my chest. I'm completely naked, but she's still got on her silk top.

"I love how good you listen to me." I reward her with a kiss to her ear. "I'm going to let go. Don't move."

I release her to bend for the underwear that's wrapped around her heels. With one delicate kiss to her ankle, she lifts so I can tug the fabric free. We do the same for the next leg, and then I stand again. I bunch them up in my fist and grab her by the neck. With a forceful tug, her head whips toward the ceiling.

"Open."

Her brows furrow. Not because of the order. She's been following my instructions just fine. It's more out of curiosity about what I'll do next. I count to three in my head, and when she still hasn't opened her mouth, I drop what I'm holding and slap her ass. She shouldn't be concerned about what's happening next. I don't want her worried about anything but listening.

I don't repeat myself. She gets the idea pretty quickly, and her lips part as she peers at me with wonderment. God, this fucking woman. She's clearly a natural submissive, and that couldn't make me any happier. I grab the panties, then shove them into her mouth. I'd be lying if I said I didn't love how gorgeous she looks with her champagne eyes wide with shock.

"Tap my thigh to make me stop," I say, releasing her hands.

Sammy immediately sets them on the counter. Then I cover her mouth and nose with one hand. Her eyes snap shut so she can focus on steady breaths. I brush back the hair from her face and reward her with a kiss on the top of her head. When her eyes snap open, I catch the frantic worry settling in them. Worry that turns to fear. Her scent permeates the room. The combo of sweet lavender mixed with her musky arousal and the natural adrenaline coursing through her veins.

When I release her, she drops her head and spits out the underwear.

"What the fuck?" She shouts through breaths of air.

I ignore her and swipe a hand between her cunt. Warm, stick arousal coats my digits, and I massage her clit. "Don't lie to yourself right now, Samira. You liked that."

She shakes her head and opens her mouth to protest. I shove my fingers into her mouth, shutting her up before she can even speak. "Taste that? That's the taste of your needy pussy weeping for me, baby. Don't fucking deny it."

An elbow hits me in the side, only resulting in an amused laugh to come from me. She shakes her head and pulls away. “Asshole!”

“And here I was about to tell you what a good little girl you’ve been.”

She glares at me.

“Take off the shirt,” I say.

Her spine straightens, but the frustration she holds for me melts away, softening her facial features. She wants to listen.

“Do it for me, doll. And I’ll give you whatever you want.”

She hesitates before she nods. “No more of the breath play. It’s a hard no.”

“Done.”

Her hands reach the bottom button of her shirt, undoing the first button. A finger drags up to her navel where she does the next. Over and over until she’s undone them all and shrugging out of the silk. A brown laced bra is all that’s left to take off.

I nod toward it. “Bra.”

She shakes her head. I lift a brow at the second show of defiance. The mischief twinkle in those champagne eyes tells me she’s liking this game of tit for tat. I give, she gives. It’s not my normal style, but the way she watches me fucking undoes me.

“What do you want?” I ask.

Sammy's gaze drops and her tongue darts out to wet her lips.
"Stroke yourself."

"Come spit on it, then."

She takes a step forward. Then another. She moves to drop to her knees, but I stop her. I grab her chin and pull her face toward mine. When her mouth parts to ask me what I'm doing, I pull her toward me until our faces are less than an inch apart. I spit in her mouth, and she rears back, about to protest. When I shove her toward the ground, she just lets out a sigh.

I groan as a delicate hand wraps around my cock. Warm saliva dribbles down her chin and onto the shaft. She leans back on her heels and peers up at me through those thick lashes. I grin when she juts out her bottom lip to give me that sweet puppy-dog look. She gave me what I wanted. Now it's my turn and I better pay up.

I fist the hard length and move with the lubrication of our combined spit. I toss my head back, the friction of my movements easing some of the throbbing ache I have to be inside of her. "Grab the condom." I nod toward the foiled packet on the counter.

She reaches up, moves her hand around a bit to find it, then tears it open. Her hand replaces mine as she rolls on the condom. Her tongue darts out with concentration, and I force away the need to bury myself inside of her. I promised myself I'd take this slow. She deserves the time spent while I worship every inch of her, know every single detail of her body, and

bring her so much pleasure so that come Monday, when we're no longer together, she'll crave me.

I don't know if I'll be able to let her go then. Fuck, I don't think I will be able to give her up. She stands before I need to tell her. "Where?" she asks, glancing around. "I'm old, Dec. I don't want to do this on the hard floor again. My knees still hurt from earlier."

"Shut up, you're not old."

Her lips form a tight scowl. "I could have been your babysitter when you were in diapers."

"Fine. The couch." I extend a hand to help her up.

She takes it, a soft groan escaping. "Did you hear that?"

"What? Your griping? Loud and clear."

"No. The clicking of my broken-ass knee."

I shake my head. "How am I supposed to hear anything over the heavy sound of you complaining?"

She shoves my chest. It's barely strong enough to hurt, let alone make me budge. Still, I'll make her pay for it. With one swipe, I grab her waist and toss her over my shoulder. Her shriek turns into a laugh as I carry her toward the couch in the center of the sitting area. I toss her onto the couch, her tits bouncing with the force.

I drop to my knees before her and settle on the ground between her spread thighs. "You're so fucking sexy like this," I say, sliding three fingers into her tight heat. "Soaked for me,

with your perfect tits aching to be touched.” I swoop my head to take one in my mouth.

“Yes,” she says when my teeth graze the hardened bud. “Oh, fuck, that’s so good.”

She clutches my forearm with both hands, just the way she did earlier in the car. She clings to me as if she’s begging me not to let her go. I take my time teasing each breast, alternating between sucking, biting, pinching. Every sound that leaves her is like a direct line to my cock. It only makes me harder and more desperate for her.

“God, just fuck me already,” she whines when I bite down on her chin.

“God is not here. The only thing you’ll be worshipping tonight is my cock,” I say. I line the head up with her entrance—just the tip, then pull away to smack her swollen clit with my dick.

Sammy lets out a throaty sound, her ass lifting from the couch. “I feel so empty.”

“Yeah?” I rub myself against her clit over and over. “Need me to fill you, baby?”

She nods, her head lolling back. “Yes.”

Finally, I slide into the warmth of her. I can’t help the growl that escapes. “Oh, fucking Christ, Samira.” I slide in another inch. “You’re so damn tight.” Almost *too* tight. I’m not going to last much longer, even with the head she gave me.

I slide in deeper while I stroke her sensitized clit. She loosens until I slide fully inside. “That’s it. Fuck, you take me so well.”

“I do.” She nods. “Because I’m so dirty for you.”

My cock twitches inside of her at the sound of her words. “Are you my filthy girl?”

She tightens around me. “Yes.”

“Yeah, you are. You’re taking my cock like the little slut you’re made to be.”

“Oh my God,” she cries out as I slam into her.

I throw her legs over my arms to grip her hips. It gets me deeper and makes her tighter, and I fucking lose it every time she squeezes around me. My balls tighten, the fullness becoming an urge I need to release. “So good.” Thrust. “So tight.” Thrust. “So wet.” Thrust, thrust, thrust. “Take me so well.” Thrust.

Her pussy contracts with each push inside of her until both of us are pushed over the edge. I shove inside one last time, my entire body stiffening as I cry out. “Samira.”

Her chest rises and falls with her heavy breaths, and then I topple over her. I rest my head against her chest, but leave my cock buried right where he is. A hand plays with the hair on the back of my head while I lie on top of her, my eyes closed. I wait until the adrenaline finishes coursing through my veins, until my dick softens inside of her, before I pull out.

When I do, she wraps her arms around my neck and holds me in place. “No. Not yet.” Her voice cracks.

So, I don't move. I lie there, with my ear pressed to her breast, and the beat of her heart lulling me to sleep.

Chapter Sixteen



I GLANCE AROUND THE massive penthouse. I hadn't had the time yesterday to take in the entire space. After the couch incident, Declan had carried me to the bathroom where we continued our dirty activities. We didn't go to bed until way too late. Now, I'm sore *everywhere*.

The living room has a sitting area, wet bar, full kitchen. There are three bedrooms off to the left, and a master suite to the right. Saoirse essentially designed a 3,000 square foot apartment with floor to ceiling glass window panes overlooking the bay.

Room service brought up an array of breakfast options about twenty minutes ago, and I sip at my second cup of coffee for the morning while I work. Declan's still asleep, but I need to work my magic and get this cake situation sorted out.

I scribble a list of vegan bakery shops on a notepad I found in the kitchen area, then mark down their phone numbers. Declan was still sleeping when I woke up and showered, and I wasn't sure what exactly he expects from me today.

Do I stay until he's awake? Do I leave and come back? I don't know, but I do need to run home and get clothes. Right now, I'm in a hotel robe with wet hair. I didn't want to put on the clothes from yesterday when they smelled horrible. It would have defeated the purpose of showering.

Once I have a list of six bakeries, I give Vee a call. She picks up before the first ring even finishes.

“Where the fuck are you?”

I wince from the loud volume, my head a little achy from the wine I had last night. I shot her a text last night, letting her know I wouldn't be home and asking her to feed Bruce. She sent me a thousand texts of pictures with her snuggling the dog.

In one of them he wore her pink bathrobe, had on the watermelon hair towel wrapped around his head, and she was painting his nails. There's never any doubt that she doesn't take care of him well, but that picture solidified I didn't need to worry about him being neglected.

“Don't worry about it,” I say. “I have a list of bakeries. I figured if we split the calls, we can knock this out.”

“Don't worry about it? Sammy, in the three years I've lived with you, you've never not come home. Was it Toby? Did he dick you down? Man, I really thought his profile photo was a catfish. What man has hair like that in real life?” She stopped only to take a breath before continuing, “And bakeries for what?”

“Declan will be in New York tomorrow. I need you to help work some magic and get some samples sent to his hotel around 5:00 pm.”

I’m met with silence on the other line, and I know she’s trying to process what the hell this means. “You told me yesterday Saoirse delegated that task to him. But I didn’t realize we were doing a private tasting in New York in a freaking hotel room.”

“We’re on a tight deadline for this wedding.”

She huffs, knowing that I’m right. “When are you coming home?”

I clear my throat. “If you make a big deal out of this, I will kill you.”

“Lips are sealed.”

“Doubtful.” I roll my eyes.

“Just fucking tell me, already!”

I sigh. “I’ll be home Sunday evening.”

There’s a long beat of silence while she processes this information. “Oh. My. God. You’re with Declan Murphy.” She gasps. “Samira Cullen. You finally scratched the itch. I am so proud of you.”

Declan comes out of the bedroom, a towel wrapped around his waist. My gaze instantly goes to him and his mouth-watering look. His hair is wet, too, droplets of water dripping onto his chest.

“When you finish the calls, can you swing by on the way to your appointment with some clothes?”

“Yeah, sure. What room number?”

“Leave it at the desk,” I say, my tone stern.

“You’re no fun.”

“Bye,” I sing, then hang up.

Declan stands behind me, his hands fall on my shoulders, and he massages them. “Why didn’t you wake me?”

I glance up, offering him a smile. “You were too cute.”

A brow lifts in acquisition. “There’s nothing cute about me, doll. Ask anyone and they’ll tell you I’m a scary asshole.”

“You are cute. When you snore with your mouth all open and drool coming out.”

He snorts. “No way. *You* were the one snoring.”

I clutch my heart. “Wow. That’s the second time I’ve heard that. What is it with you *rude* men? Lying is not okay.”

His eyes cloud with an emotion I try to identify, but it’s gone before I can. That deep rumble he somehow pulls from his chest sounds, and I stiffen in the seat. “No talk of other men.”

“Jealous?”

He reaches over me to grab a strawberry from the fruit bowl. “No. *Possessive*. I’m not sharing you with thoughts of another man. You’re fucking mine, even if only until tomorrow night.”

My heart stops. *I'm his.* Oh, fuck me. We're both screwed come tomorrow night.

He moves to pull out a chair and sits beside me. I hate the way I lean into him naturally, needing the warmth of his touch, even if it's just the rubbing of our thighs together. I turn to him, and oh, the butterflies flutter deep in my belly when he makes eye contact with me. This isn't supposed to be happening, yet here we are.

“What?” he asks.

I shake my head. “Nothing.”

“So Veronica is bringing you clothes?”

I nod.

“You live with her?”

“I do. When I first hired her, she was looking for a place and I had the room. I paid her enough to afford her own place, but she didn't have the credit to be approved on her own.”

He pours himself a coffee, then refills mine. “That was generous.”

I shrug. “I have this huge house and the room. Plus, it makes work way easier. And she gets to take care of the dog when I do stupid things, like agree to go home with a scary, pierced dick dude.”

He narrows his gaze at me. “You just said I was cute.”

I pat his cheek. “You are.” I laugh at his dramatic eye roll. “I need to make these calls so I can set up the cake tasting.”

He twirls a strand of my hair on his finger. “Okay. We’re going to lunch.”

“Lunch? In public?” A hot flash is on the precipice, making me feel nauseous.

“Yes.”

“I thought ...” I chew on my lip. “You don’t want to stay in?”

Declan shakes his head. He peers at me over the lip of the coffee mug. “How boring would that be?”

I open my mouth, but I’m not sure exactly what to say, so I snap it shut.

He takes a slice of bacon and tears a piece off with his teeth.

“What happens with all this food you decidedly don’t eat?” I ask. There’s enough food here to feed a family of four. If I weren’t here to put a dent in it, I’d bet most of it goes to waste. I mean, who actually eats fresh fruit every morning?

“I’ve never had food brought up, so I wouldn’t know.”

“Oh. But today you did?”

“I had it scheduled last night. Wasn’t sure what you’d want.” He takes in the plates scattered around. There’s French toast, pancakes, different varieties of eggs, bacon and sausage.

“You could have just asked, you know?”

He lets out a soft chuckle. “Yeah. I supposed I should have.”

A hand falls on my lap, and the other tugs at the ends of my hair again. I turn to him, which is what he wanted.

“What do you want?” he asks. “For tomorrow?”

I reach for the French toast and stab an already cut up piece with a fork. “Bagels.”

“Really?” he asks, swiping a hand down his beard. “Bagels are so basic.”

“They’re delicious. I love making fancy cream cheese. Like strawberry, or chives and onion. I butter the bagels and toast them in a frying pan, and it’s so good.”

“Good to know.” He inhales a long breath through his nose. “I need to go down to the gym. Will you be done with your calls in an hour?”

I nod. “Should be. I’m splitting the list with Vee.”

“Cool.” He chugs his coffee, then stands. He turns to walk away but stops. “Sammy?” he says, turning his head back.

“Declan?”

“Thanks for staying this morning.”

I clear my throat, the sudden lump there causing it to be hard to breathe. “Yeah. No problem,” I say as he walks away.

Chapter Seventeen



Declan

S AOIRSE AND HER ECO-FRIENDLY ways. I let out a chuckle after I read the sign by the water cooler in the gym.

We care about the environment. Lowering our carbon footprint is the best way to ensure a clean ecosystem for our children and their futures. Please take a complimentary BPA reusable bottle to enjoy the freshly infused water. Murchadh Hospitality thanks you for choosing us to be your temporary home.

I grab the clear plastic bottle and pop the lid off, then fill it up with lemon mint water from a fancy glass water container beside it. My sister built this place from the ground up on green energy. The foundation of it is even made with recycled hemp. I remember Callum had been a bit in arms about the budget she seemed to blow through. I can't deny that this is the comfiest hotel I've ever stayed in, though.

Sweat drips from my brows, and I drag a hand towel over my face to clear it, then push at the glass door to leave. I haven't been to the gym in a week, mostly because I don't enjoy working out in public. But Samira had things she needed to finish, and if she was going to actually get them done, I needed to leave her be. If I stayed up there, I would tug off that robe and fuck her until she was in tears from the pleasure.

I had to get out of there for both our sakes. It's been an hour since I left her, and I'm hoping that's enough time because I want to spend as much of this weekend as I can with her before tomorrow. I head down the hallway for the elevator when I notice the spa on my right. I stop in my tracks, hesitating.

Sammy mentioned last night that her knee bothered her. I caught the way she winced when she got up this morning too, holding her back as if it were hurting. "Fuck it," I mumble, heading for the door.

Inside, there's a young woman standing behind a reception desk. "Good morning, Mr. Murphy," she says in a chipper tone. "How was your evening?"

I stop, glancing back to see if maybe one of my brothers is behind me. Just as I thought. I'm alone. How does she know me? She must sense the confusion plastered on my face, because she hurries around the desk. "Ms. Murphy mentioned you may stop by and requested we greet you by name."

Interesting.

I force a smile. "Right. Well, here I am."

"Here you are," she smiles. "How can I help you today?"

"I was hoping to book a massage for two."

"Oh, of course. Will one of your siblings be joining you?"

I have to choke down my laughter. Who the ever-loving fuck comes to the spa with their sibling? "No. It's for myself and my partner." The word comes out sticky. She's not my partner,

but what was I supposed to say? My lady friend? The woman I'm fucking? No. Those options made her seem cheap.

"Sure," the girl says, and I finally glance at her gold name tag. Enya.

I cycle through the names of our employees. The Irish name isn't common in America, so she's from the Southie side. Oisín Daly runs a block for us and has three girls.

"Enya," I say. "Is your dad Oisín?"

Her face lights up and she nods. "Yup, that's him."

I offer her a smile. "I hadn't realized Saoirse hired from the block. It's nice to have you here, Enya."

A red tint dusts her cheeks as she turns to the computer to book my appointment. "She's not really. Sean gave her a list of some of the daughters, and she tried to bring some of us on to help us with our college. I'm attending UMass in the fall, so I'll be here on break."

"How many did she hire?"

"Sixteen of us."

And there are easily 1,000 daughters of our soldiers. I hadn't realized Saoirse even considered doing this. I'll have to ask her about it when I see her again. Or Sean. I shake my head. "Do you have anything available today?"

She nods. "Yes, sir. How is 11:30?"

I glance at the digital clock above her head. "That's perfect, thanks."

I excuse myself to head back to the room. When I get there, Samira is sprawled out on the couch. She's still in the bathrobe. Her feet dangle over one side, her head resting on the opposite arm, and she's holding her phone raised over her face. I close the door, my eyes on how her toes wiggle. She's laughing at something.

"Hey," I call, approaching her.

She jumps at the sudden noise, though not as harshly as she did the night of the hotel opening. "Christ, you gave me a fright."

"You didn't hear the click of the door?" I ask.

"No! I was reading." She moves to sit upright and sets her phone on the coffee table. "How was your workout?" Her eyes roam my body before she makes eye contact with me.

"It was good." I sit beside her and tug her into my lap, despite how sweaty and gross I smell.

She straddles me, the warmth of her pussy pressing into my groin.

"How was your book?" I ask.

"I just sat down to start it. Three of bakeries agreed to the cake tasting for a hefty fee that Saoirse agreed to pay."

I run a finger from her brow, along her cheek, and stop at her chin. "Good."

"So, while you're at tea with your aunt, I'll make sure everything gets set up. And then we can leave whenever we're

finished.”

I nod, pressing my thumb against her bottom lip. She makes the tiniest of little mouse squeaks, staring at me with doe-like eyes. When her mouth parts, I slide the tip of my thumb inside. She closes her lips around it and sucks. *Fuck me.* My growing cock nudges through the basketball shorts I’m wearing to press against her bare heat. We have thirty minutes before our massage, but I’ll only need two with her.

I slide a hand between us and dip two fingers inside of her. The suction she has on my thumb increases at the same time her hips move. Her heated gaze locks with mine, and an intensity burns beneath them. She’s silently pleading for more.

My digits pump inside of her while my thumb strokes her clit. It doesn’t take long for her breaths to become heavier, for the weight of her body to sink into my lap. She opens her mouth, and I move that hand to the nape of her neck. Her head drops, and our mouths clash with an intense kiss that throws me through a loop.

I haven’t made out with anyone in over a decade. It pulls me back to the days when I was a teen, sneaking kisses with Cara in the confessional booth at bible camp. That same light feeling flutters through my veins with Samira’s soft lips pressing against mine. She bites at my lip when she pulls away.

Continuing to fuck her with my fingers, each thrust pulling more slickness from her, each time stroking that sweet spot inside of her that makes her entire cunt clench around me.

Until finally, her nails dig into my shoulders and a soft cry escapes. When her body relaxes and she's finished her climax, she reaches into my shorts.

I shake my head. "After I shower. No condom out here."

Sammy takes a nibble of my neck as she reaches into the pocket of her robe and pulls out that familiar foiled packet. "I was expecting you to come in and ravish me, Mr. Murphy. I'm prepared."

I snatch it from her and tear open the packet. She watches as I push down my shorts, slide on the condom, and before I can adjust her, she's sinking onto my cock. A silent scream tears from her. Her nails dig into my shoulders. Even without her own soap here, she still has that perfect scent that just settles the chaos inside of me.

"Damn, baby. You feel so good," I tell her, wrapping my arms around her. I pull her close to me, so her chest is against mine, and softly stroke her hair.

Her hips move slowly, but each time she lifts and slides down again, she tightens around me, squeezing me with the velvety smoothness of her inner walls.

"You ..." She pants. "Too."

I run my hands along her back, soaking in how close we feel, how totally not like a onetime thing this seems to be. A single tear drops from her eye. It slides down her cheek and before I can catch it with my thumb, lands on my chest.

"Shh," I whisper when another falls. "It's okay."

Her head shakes. “No,” she sighs. “It’s not.”

I swipe at the water leaking from her face, still buried inside her, and I know she’s thinking the same things. Her hands move to cup my face. “Nothing is okay. This feels too good, and I can’t. I can’t do it,” she says, her voice laced with a panicky edge to it.

“I know,” I say. She doesn’t have to tell me. I can feel the loss she bears on her soul. It’s deep like mine, and if I could take it from her, I would. There’s nothing I can do for her besides give her whatever she asks for. “But we can pretend it is. Even just for this weekend, okay?”

She snuffles, then nods. “Okay,” she whispers, falling into my chest.

I glide a hand between us again to massage her clit. “Come for me, doll. One more time.”

She sighs, but nods against my shoulder. I stroke her while she rides my cock until we both hit our release together. When we come down, she practically bolts from my lap and clutches the robe around her chest. “Damnit, Declan,” she growls.

I yank the condom off and use my boxers to clean up the mess still dripping down the head. I’m about to shower anyway. Standing, I slide them off with my shorts. “You practically jumped me,” I argue. “How is this my fault?”

I tie off the condom and pick up my clothes. When I stand upright again, I catch a glance of more tears threatening to spill.

“You held me,” she practically shouts at me. “You asshole! You were supposed to be rough like last night. Not hug me and wipe my tears away.”

I rear back, not prepared for this fight. I guess one could say the way I stroked her back and held her close to me as hugging her. “I held you while you rode me, Samira. That’s all.”

Her eyes snap shut, closing me off from the rest of her emotions. Where is all this coming from? She’s the one who took the lead. Her head shakes back and forth, and I step forward to grab her. When my grip lands on her elbow, they open. Then she lets out a slew of tears.

“Stop crying,” I sigh. “And tell me what’s wrong.”

“I don’t want to feel anything,” she shouts through the tears. “That’s why I agreed to this, Declan. Because I don’t want any emotions clouding my judgement. And you’re not even doing anything wrong. I just ... ” She lets out another long exhale. “I can’t have anything more than sex with you, okay? No more sweet touches. It’s too much.”

“Fine,” I say. “Come on. Let’s go get showered. We have to be downstairs for massages in fifteen.”

She chews on her bottom lip, but finally nods. “Okay,” she says, swiping at her tears. Then she follows me into the other room.

Chapter Eighteen



DECLAN OPENS THE DOOR to the spa and guides me in with a hand on my back.

“Mr. Murphy, Ms. Cullen,” a blonde at the desk greets. I squint to catch her name tag. Enya.

I glance back at him, confused when we’re greeted by the receptionist by name. He shoots me a wink. “What did you do?” I mouth.

His hand guides me forward.

“I’ve got the mud facials all set up for you,” Enya says. “You’ll do that first, before the couples’ massage.”

“Mud facials?” I blurt, whipping my head toward Declan. “You’re getting a mud facial. With that beard on your face?”

He tugs at the strands of hair in question. “Maybe I’ll just skip that part?” he says, a brow raised at Enya.

“Sure. We can have you start the massage early.”

“I’ll just sit in while she does hers,” he offers.

“I’ve never had a mud mask,” I admit. “Do you think it’s like the same thing as a regular one? I can’t imagine mud on my face. That seems so unsanitary.”

He chuckles. “It doesn’t, but if my sister thinks it’s a good idea, then it probably is.”

I debate that for a moment, then nod. “The sheets she chose are divine. They were seriously so soft, I couldn’t believe it.”

“They are. I don’t want to go back to my place when the pipes are fixed.”

“I don’t blame you.”

Enya escorts us back into a room where we undress and change into dark towel-like robes. They’re quite cozy. And then a few moments later, a beautician comes in to start the facial.

“What’s it smell like?” Declan asks from the chair beside me.

I make a dramatic show of inhaling through my nose while she spreads the thick spread over my face. “Dirt.”

She lets out a giggle, and Declan follows with his own deep rumble.

“It’s actually not bad,” I say. “Don’t think it really smells like anything.”

“Good. I wouldn’t want you tasting like soil later when I go to kiss you.”

My cheeks heat despite the cool cream being rubbed onto my face. His foot reaches out, bumping into mine, and I open one eye to turn his way. “Hey,” he says. “I’m sorry about earlier, okay?”

I shut my eye. “I know, I am, too. Let’s just blame it on lack of sleep.”

“Sounds good.”

Alex, the beautician, finishes up and disappears for thirty minutes while the mud settles and does whatever it is mud does to your face. The massages go just as smoothly. We’re taken to a dark room where soft music plays and settle onto the tables. Two separate people come in and introduce themselves.

Maxine moves to Declan’s side while Joe comes to mine. He props himself up on his elbow. “Absolutely not,” Declan says.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, lifting my head from the hole in the table.

“You go to her,” he says, looking at Maxine.

Oh. He’s doing his possessive thing. I grin, setting my head back onto the cushioned table, and close my eyes. Maxine starts on my shoulders, and I let out a low moan as her touch helps ease the tension I’ve been holding. “This is amazing,” I say.

Declan shushes me. “You’re supposed to be quiet and relaxed. No talking.”

“If I don’t talk, I’ll fall asleep.”

Maxine chuckles. “That’s completely fine, love. I’ll wake you when it’s over.”

And I do fall asleep. Maxine gently coaxes me awake, and when I’m propped up, I catch the sound of Declan’s deep chuckles. He’s sitting up, his robe on, and Joe is gone.

“You totally snore,” he says through his laughter.

“Shut up.” I lean forward and nudge his chest. “I do not.”

Maxine slips away. I hop off the table and grab my robe. “Oh, wow,” I say, leaning down to rub my bad knee. It’s never been the same since I was a catcher in high school. Softball had been brutal on my joints, but one game I caught a cleat to my knee trying to stop a girl from sliding into home. For the past six or so years, I’ve lived in constant pain. I chalked it up to aging.

But now, the ache is gone. I bend my knee, then kick it out. No click. “The click is gone!”

“That’s good, doll.” He jumps off the table. “I’m starving. Let’s grab lunch.”

My heart turns into a gooey, sticky mess. First the intimate sex on the couch, now this? That smirk told me everything I need to know. He’s being kind. Too kind. He’s listening to all the things I’m not saying, and that’s intimate partner stuff. This weekend is supposed to be about me learning to get back into the swing of dating. It’s not meant to be serious.

We leave the spa and head through the main lobby. I follow his lead into the parking garage where my car is still parked.

Dec gave me my keys this morning, and they're tucked in my purse. He heads for the passenger's side and waits until I'm close enough that the key fob automatically clicks open when his hand touches the handle. He opens the door and helps me in.

"I can drive, you know?" I say.

Declan ignores me and ducks in to fasten my seatbelt. Just like the first time he did it, his fingers linger over my breasts. Just like the first time, I shiver at the intensity of his touch, at the small action that speaks volumes of his character. He puts on this act, pretends to be grumpy, pretends he's some badass. But the way he touches me, the way he wants to make sure I'm safe, it tugs at my heartstrings.

I only open my eyes when he slams the door shut. By the time he climbs in, I've composed myself enough to plaster on a fake smile. "Where are we going?" I ask.

He shrugs. "I don't know what you like, so I didn't bother trying to find a place."

Tapping my chin, I try to think of a place to go. "I mean, really, I'm not picky. I can find a dish I like anywhere."

"You're not picky? No dietary restrictions?" He asks, starting up the car.

I shake my head and he pulls into reverse. "Nope. What's your favorite food?"

"I'm a cheap date. I like to get the value deals at Wendy's."

“Oh, spicy chicken nuggets with a chocolate frosty is a must-have,” I agree. “Let’s go there.”

“You sure? We could grab anything anywhere.”

I nod. “I’m totally sure.”

“Wendy’s it is.”

We fall into silence while he pulls out of the garage, and his hand settles on my thigh. It’s comfortable, easy. The same familiar feeling from earlier when we were on the couch comes back, and I inhale a sharp breath, steadying myself. Just because it’s nice to be around him, doesn’t mean feelings are developing. It means we’re finding things in common that we didn’t think we had. That doesn’t equal love. It doesn’t even mean friendship.

I bite my bottom lip and close my eyes to steel myself for the rest of the evening. Declan squeezes my leg. “Are you from Boston?” he asks.

“No,” I say. “I moved here for school. I’m from Connecticut. My parents own a farm.”

“And you loved city life so much you stayed?”

I grin, glancing out the window. Something like that. More like I fell for the city boy and got pregnant. But I’m not ready to admit that. At least not yet. I don’t know if I’ll ever want to talk about Ian with those who didn’t know him. And I especially don’t want to talk about him now with Declan.

“It’s a beautiful place,” I say, settling on a simple answer.

Declan stops at a red light. I braid our fingers together and bring them to my lips.

“You ever think about leaving the city?” I ask. “You grew up here, right?”

“Yeah. We moved here when my mom was pregnant with me.”

“Oh. From where?”

“My parents lived in Ireland.”

“That’s pretty neat. Have you ever been?”

“Nope. It’s on my list of things to do at some point in time.”

“I bet it’s beautiful there.”

“My mom talks about it all the time. She’s from England but moved when she met my dad.”

“Oh, I bet they miss it. Have they been back since the move?”

The light turns green, and he hits the gas.

“They haven’t. What about your parents? Were they born and raised in Connecticut?”

I go to open my mouth but stop. A car at the intersection to our left barrels right toward us. Declan focuses on me and doesn’t see the car. Like it’s in slow motion, I can’t yell at him to watch out fast enough—the car comes closer and closer. I point, and a shrill scream leaves my throat. Declan turns and catches sight of what’s going on, and somehow, he speeds up and misses the car coming for us.

He slams on the brakes. I squeezed shut my eyes, and the loud crunch of the aluminum hood hitting something else is loud and alarming. My eyes fly open as the airbags deploy, dust falling like ash in the car.

“Oh my God,” I scream, my face instantly feeling like it’s been burned.

“It’s okay, you’re okay,” Declan says soothingly. His hand brushes the hair from my face, but I can’t pull my attention to him. I’m stuck in that frozen, scared state that always seems to happen whenever something huge and scary happens to me.

He’s promising me it’s okay, but it doesn’t feel okay. It feels horrible. My chest is heavy, and I can’t even focus enough to make sure I’m breathing. My door opens, and someone reaches in. They tug at my seatbelt and drag me out. That familiar scent. Citrus and spice. I cling to him, my fingers digging into his arms.

“Sammy, breathe, baby. In through your nose, out through your mouth.”

I close my eyes to focus on his voice. He inhales loudly so I can hear him, and I copy him. I inhale and exhale over and over to the sound of his breaths until I feel safe enough to let the world in.

“There she is,” Declan says, his voice gentle like he’s talking to a wounded bird he’s just found on the side of the road. His hand clutches my face. “Besides the scrapes, are you hurt at all?”

I shake my head. “I ... I think I’m fine.”

“Good.”

Declan’s lips press against my forehead and then he pulls away, leaving me cold despite the summer heat. Blue and red lights flash in the distance, and then the sound of sirens screams at us when they approach.

Chapter Nineteen



“SHE’S FINE,” HALEY, MY sister-in-law, says, resting a hand on the small of her back. She places the other over her growing stomach. “I promise. Let her take a little nap and she’ll wake up just fine. It’s just some cuts and bruises.”

I turn to my brother, who’s sprawled out on the couch in the sitting area of the hotel suite. It’s Saturday, so he’s not in his typical work attire. He’s wearing jeans and a white t-shirt. He also has a smug smirk beneath his auburn beard. I narrow my eyes at him.

“You look like you need a doctor, too,” Haley says, pointing her finger in my face.

“I’m fine,” I promise. “Sammy is not, though. She screamed like it cut her leg off. Are you sure she’s okay?”

Haley nods. “She was probably in shock, but she’s settled now. I gave her ibuprofen, and I’m sure she’ll be sore for a bit, but back to normal in a few days. No concussion, no broken bones. Everything is perfect, Declan.”

“I wonder what Saoirse is going to say,” Callum says in that smug Irish accent. “When Haley runs into her at their next girls’ night and tells her you’re sticking your dick in her wedding planner.”

I wave both middle fingers in the air toward him. It only causes him to let out a burst of laughter.

“Saoirse won’t care,” Haley says. “She’ll be happy that you’re happy.”

I raise my hands in defense. “Oh no. No. We’re not dating. This is a onetime hook up thing.”

“Says the man driving around the woman’s SUV,” Callum says. “I believe the worrying and calling Haley to have her checked out also should be moved to the ‘Declan is pussy-whipped column.’”

“He’s going to hurt you,” Haley says to her husband. “You better stop. I need you alive to help me raise twins.”

She heads over to him and reaches for his hands. Callum takes hers in his and stands. His gaze is on me, though. “We’re leaving. Don’t call my wife again.”

Haley offers me a smile. “See you, Dec. I promise she’s fine.”

I follow them to the door and when they’ve left, lock the deadbolt. Haley may think that she’s fine. But I don’t believe it. I can still hear the bloodcurdling way she cried out. If not in pain, then in fear. That coupled with all the ways she jumps at loud, sudden noises. She’s traumatized over something.

I head for the fridge and grab a beer before making my way back to the bedroom. Sammy sleeps peacefully despite the butterfly bandages that line her nose and brow. Her wrists are wrapped as well from the burns. I keep replaying the moment.

When the light turned green, there wasn't anyone at the red light to my left—no cars, no passersby, nothing. There's no way someone approached, then ran it that quickly. And that they continued on without even stopping. I call Sean.

“What's up, bro?” he asks after the third ring.

“Hey, can you do me a favor?”

“Depends. What do I get out of it?”

I roll my eyes. “The gratification of knowing you're not a complete dweeb and are a good brother.”

He hums while he contemplates. “I don't think that's enough. But let me hear what you need.”

“Can you check the surrounding cameras from the accident? Something isn't adding up.”

“Yeah. I'll get on it. How are you guys? Haley and Callum haven't answered my texts.”

“If they're not answering you, how did you even know about it?”

“I have keywords flagged in our texts, so I knew when you texted her.”

My mouth drops in utter shock. “You hacked our phones?”

“Of course, I did. Our family is always being targeted by someone and I need to know when and where you all are.”

“That’s disturbing,” I snap.

“Maybe. But are you alive?”

“No thanks to you, asshole.” I hang up the phone.

Before I enter the bedroom, I take a moment to breathe. Then I turn the knob. Sammy is curled up in a fetal position in the center of the king bed. She’s bundled under the white duvet, looking extremely cozy despite the bruises already forming on her face. I set the beer down on the nightstand and kick off my shoes. She stirs when I sit at the edge of the mattress and tug off my shirt.

I turn and scoot her over, then slide under the covers beside her. She lets out a soft whimper and adjusts herself so that both her arms are wrapped around mine. I press a kiss to her forehead, then grab my phone to play a game while she naps.



Samira twirls around as she walks down the length of the plane, taking in the sight of the cabin. A white leather couch sits to the right, and she plops down while I lift her overnight bag into the overhead storage.

I sit down beside her, and just like all the times before, buckle her into her seat. Her breath hitches. She wound up sleeping the entire day away yesterday, but now seems to be in better spirits.

I fasten my seatbelt and the flight attendant peeks through from the front cabin. She offers us a smile as she approaches. “Good morning Mr. Murphy. Have you eaten breakfast?”

“We have, thank you, Mariah,” I say. “This is Ms. Cullen. She’ll be on the flight home this evening as well.”

Mariah turns to Sammy and gives her the same welcoming smile. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Ms. Cullen. Have you flown private before?”

“Can’t say that I have.” Sammy extends a hand and Mariah shakes it. “Thank you so much for everything.”

Mariah nods. “Of course. We’re gearing up for take-off in about fifteen minutes. Can I get you anything to drink?”

Sammy turns to me, a question on the tip of her tongue.

“The plane is fully stocked,” I say. “Water, tea, coffee, juice. Wine, whiskey. Whatever.”

“I’ll have orange juice, please,” she says.

“Same for me, Mariah. You can bring them up once we’re in the air and it’s safe. Along with a bottle of champagne. Thank you.”

“Wow. This is so fucking fancy.” She jabs me in the side with her finger. “I don’t know if I can ever go back to the

coach class status ever again.”

“You can use it whenever you’d like.”

She laughs. “Yeah. I don’t know if I could afford that. “

“Why do you think I’d make you pay? Just call and it’s yours as long as the family isn’t using it.”

Her eyes go wide. “You’re insane.”

“No.” I grab her hand and settle it against the zipper of my trousers. “Just insanely hard for you.”

“Dec,” she hisses, pulling her hand away. “There are people on the plane.”

“They’re employees, and they’re in the cockpit.” We move, solidifying my stance. “The plane doesn’t get used as much as it should. I’ve been telling Callum for years we should rent it out to companies when we aren’t using it, but he disagrees. Says we need it on standby.”

“Who on earth needs a plane on standby?” she asks.

I braid our fingers together and rest them on the armrest between us. “Men who are always getting into trouble and don’t know how to delegate. There’s been a few times we’ve had to get somewhere last minute. Could we have just gone and booked a public flight? Sure. But why would we when we have this bad boy on standby.”

She senses the sarcasm laced in my words and laughs. “Fine. You win. I guess it would be nice to have a plane to take you anywhere in the world with a simple call.”

“Yeah, I’ve been spoiled. Especially for business meetings. They only take up half a day instead of an entire one.”

“Why haven’t you been to Ireland, then?”

“I don’t know. Work keeps us pretty grounded.”

“What is work?” she asks.

I stifle through the list of options that are vague enough that she doesn’t pinpoint what I do but narrow enough she doesn’t feel the need to ask questions. “I’m in accounting.”

“Accounting? What does one in accounting do to fly around in a plane.”

“The plane is the Murphy’s. We, as a family, invest in different businesses. But my main position is in the financing business. I’m good with numbers.”

A line creases in her forehead, but she doesn’t ask any more questions, which I’m grateful for.

“How’s your head feeling?” I ask, trying to move on from the subject.

“Better today. My wrist is just sore.”

I nod. “You moved your hand to block your face.” I bring our hands to my lips and press a kiss on her wrist, where its swollen and bruised. “Rest your eyes, doll.”

Sammy yawns, then presses her head against my shoulder.

Chapter Twenty



“HEY BUDDY,” I SAY, a smile plastered on my face when Max’s forehead comes into focus through the video. Dad peaks his head into view.

“Hi, Mom,” Max says.

“Sam?” Dad asks. “Is that a bruise? What happened?”

I sigh, rolling my eyes. “I’m fine. Just had a bit of an accident yesterday.”

“Oh, fuck. Are you okay?”

“Language,” Mom calls from off view, at the same time I say “Dad!”

“Well, what happened? Are you hurt badly? Is the car totaled?”

“The car was totaled, yeah. But nothing major. Got checked out and everything is fine. It’s just some cuts and bruises.”

Dad sighs. “Who was at fault?”

“Someone ran a red light, Dad. It wasn’t my fault.”

“Okay,” he says. He narrows his eyes. “Where are you? A hotel?”

I roll my eyes. “I called to say hey to the kids, not be grilled. Max, how was week one at Camp Grandparents?”

“It’s been so much fun, Mom!” Max yanks the phone from Dad and hurries up the steps. He shuts the door to my old bedroom and plops down on the bed. “I don’t want to leave. Can we move to a farm? I want chickens and goats like Gram and Pop have.”

I laugh. “I don’t know, bud. Won’t you miss your friends?”

He sighs, then nods. “Yeah, I will.”

“And you can visit the chickens and goats whenever.”

“Are you sure? Because it’s been forever since we’ve been here. I don’t even remember ever coming before.”

I suck in a shaky breath. “Yeah, bud. I know it’s been a while, I’m sorry. But I promise we can start coming more often.”

“Okay, cool.”

“Where’s your sister?”

“She went to the Benson farm. They have horses and their granddaughter invited her out on a trail ride.”

My heart lightens at the thought of Em getting along with a kid her age. She’s been worse off than Max in the lost parent department. I know it’s because she was older when we lost him, and she has more memories. There is naturally just more

pain that comes with those memories. She shut out her friends almost immediately, and I don't think she ever tried to make new ones when the old ones didn't try as hard to stick around through the loss. I don't blame them. They were twelve-year-olds who couldn't fathom losing a parent, and Em was the Rubix cube they couldn't solve.

“Don't worry. There's no boys or alcohol,” Dad cuts in. “I went out and installed a camera at Beckett's Ridge.” His face cuts into the clip, one brow scrunched, the other raised as he eyes me. “No boys and no alcohol. If I find either there, I will ring everyone's necks.”

“What? Like you rang your dear daughter's?” Mom deadpans.

I snort. Dad caught me at Beckett's Ridge plenty of times growing up. It was the center of the woods where a few farms all backed up. Technically, it was on our property, but all the kids went there to do their kissing and underage drinking. Every time he caught me, he'd start with a harsh punishment, like being grounded for six months. By the time we made it home, I'd work him with tears until it turned into muck duty for a week. I was the queen at making him feel bad and giving in to whatever I wanted. I still am.

“I was in a special circumstance. Dad, you better go hard on her. She needs tough love. No more pushover, okay?”

“I know, Sammy. I know what she needs. Are you going to tell me what you're doing at a hotel?”

There's a beep of the door being unlocked with a room card, and the handle moves.

"I gotta go, Dad. I love you guys."

"Bye," Max starts. "Love you. See you next weekend."

I shut off the screen as Declan closes the door. "Hey," he greets, kicking off his shoes and tossing his wallet and keys into the bowl at the entrance. "Did I just hear you talking to someone?" He glances around the room as if he's looking for a threat.

"I was on the phone with my parents." I head over to him, abandoning the cakes that are lined up at the dining table. My arms swing around his neck, and I plant a kiss on his lips. I moan into his mouth, just savoring how good it feels to be held again.

He rests a hand on the small of my back. A finger trails up the hem of my shirt, and when it presses against my bare skin, a tingle spreads throughout my entire body.

"How are you feeling?" he asks.

"I'm fine. How about you?"

He forces a smile through a scowl. "I don't know. I think ..."
His head shakes. "I think that something's wrong with my aunt."

"Oh?" I ask. "Tea didn't go well?"

I pull my grip from his neck to grab a hand and guide him into the dining room.

“It did. Her son-in-law was just ... off.”

We sit down together, and I rub a hand down his arm. “Do you think she’s not safe?”

He turns, making eye contact with me finally. Swirls of confusion flutter in the soft blue waves of his irises. “I think he knows not to hurt her. But I don’t know if she’s comfortable there. Her husband died a few months ago, and she’s been asking for more visits with me since.”

A pang of pain hits for his aunt. “She must be feeling lonely, then. You could have invited her here. I bet she would have loved to help with the cake fiasco.”

“I should have. Maybe we can come back next weekend and take her out for dinner.”

I pause for the briefest of seconds before deciding to ignore the ‘we’ comment. It was probably a slip-up. We only have tonight. This is it. It’s over. There’s no time to be hung up on words that mean nothing.

Declan grabs the fork in front of him and reaches for the first plate. I hold a breath while I wait for his response. I’ve already tasted them all. There was no way in hell I’d sit here with the cakes staring at me and not trying them so that I could expect what he’d say.

I already know that this one is too dry and tart. I also made my tasting sheet and tucked it away into the bottom of my purse so that when we go back to Saoirse, I have actual, reasonable points for saying no, other than “this is dirt.”

He chews and swallows the entire bite before turning to me.
“No.”

I lean in, as if he’s about to tell me a secret. “Why? Why is it a no?”

“Because what the fuck? I need to wash it down with a glass of milk and isn’t *that* the exact opposite of what vegans want?”

I raise my hands in defense. “Okay, man. I was just asking.”

He takes the second one. This one isn’t dry. It’s actually the best of three, but knowing how difficult he’s been, I tried my best to guess what the issue will be. It’s the sweetness. I wouldn’t describe the cake as too rich, but it’s almost as if the sugar is fake.

“There’s a weird aftertaste.” He reaches for the water in front of him. “Like, plastic or something.”

“Plastic?” I ask. Hmm, yeah, it did kind of taste like that.
“Okay, weird.”

I reach for the third and final one and hold it out in front of his face. “This is it. My final offering. Will you take it?”

He shoots me an annoyed look before taking the plate from me. I tap my fingers against the tabletop to feign impatience. My eyes are glued to him. He stabs the desert with force before taking a bite. It’s the worst of them all. I saved it for last intentionally. There’s too much lemon, making it too sour.

He doesn’t even chew, let alone swallow, before he’s gagging and spitting it out. “Fucking no.”

I let out a fit of giggles. “What’s wrong with it?” I ask.

“Stop, Samira. You have got to know by now that this vegan thing will not work out. I don’t know why she wanted me to do it.”

The smile I’m wearing wipes free with the harshness of his words. This isn’t funny for him. There are lines of frustration etched between his brows and forehead. He’s got a valid question. Why did she want it to be him? Why are we here doing this instead of her, when she’s the one who wants the entire guest list to eat this cake. It would be more reasonable to have one regular cake and one vegan.

“*Disgusting*,” he said the night at Saoirse’s. Lemon cake is disgusting, yet here he is eating it.

What else had the guys been talking about when we walked in? I close my eyes, trying to recall exactly what it had been about. They were talking about a girl. Scotty had asked about her favorite cake.

“Cara,” I say, shaking my head. *It’s for Cara*. Just like the sudden flower change. I bring my knees to my chest and squeeze them. “Oh, god, Declan. Cara is the weeping girl, isn’t she?”

“I don’t want to discuss this.” His jaw ticks.

I nod, knowing not to press it. I don’t want to talk about my failures either. Not when they come in the form of the people I love dying. “Sorry. I pushed too far.” I stand and collect the

disposable plates to toss in the trash. “What’s the name of the bakery?” I ask.

“What do you mean?”

“That she liked. What’s the name?”

He rubs his eyes. “Please, Samira. I don’t want to do this right now.” When he looks at me, my heart breaks for him. She’s here with us now, in this room. I can tell by the way he looks at me, red-rimmed eyes and exhaustion in his gaze.

I want to say, “I’m tired, too.” But I don’t. I head for the trash bin and toss the plates.

“Tell me the name of the bakery so I can have a reference. If I know what the cake tastes like, I can find us someone to replicate it. Or I don’t know. Maybe even convince the people to do it.”

“It’s Scotty’s mom’s recipe. She’s too old to bake it herself.”

I chew the inside of my cheek. “Get me the recipe. I know someone who can help.”

“Who?”

“My mom. She’s like the queen of baking. She wins blue ribbons in the state fair like every single year.”

He lets out a choked laugh. “The state fair? Are you from the country, Ms. Cullen?”

“Stop being so dramatic,” I say. We’d started the chat about where I was from before the car crash. Then things obviously were sidetracked. “I’m from Connecticut. I just so happened to

live on a lavender farm surrounded by other farming families, but we were not in the country. The closest gas station was four minutes away.”

“Wow, a whole four minutes? Is that on one horsepower speed or 180?”

My mouth gapes open at his sheer audacity to make fun of me. “We did not ride the horses to the gas station. What would be the point of that?”

“I don’t know what it is you country folk do in your spare time, Samira.”

The tension in my shoulders dissipates now that we’ve steered away from nuclear territory and are into steady ground. I hate making him feel horrible, and I do not want to spend our last few hours on heavy topics. I want this Declan, the man standing before me, smiling. He’s right. When he’s dressed up in his suit, a frown in place, and he uses that deep, burly voice, he is scary. He’s not the sweet and innocent Declan; the cute guy I see when he’s dressed down or peacefully sleeping.

“We country *folk*,” I say with sass. I pop out my hip and rest a hand on it. “Do the same things as all the other kids do growing up. Except instead of sucking face in the back of a movie theatre, we did it on the ledge at the ridge.”

He shoots me that devious grin. My heart skips a beat. How can he be so devastatingly handsome? It isn’t right. My gaze falls to the way he unbuttons the dark dress shirt he wears. Today, there’s no t-shirt under it. Just bare skin covered in the beautiful marks of art. I could study every line, every image

barred in his flesh for *years* and still not remember it all. It makes me wonder how much of it is meaningful, like the crying girl on his back, or is some of it just something he hid the invisible scars that mar his soul?

“Come here,” he says.

Declan points a finger at me, then waggles it. I obey; the stupid, foolish girl that I am. I walk to him as if he tugs on an invisible line tethering us. There are bonds we share—unspoken ones that neither of us wants to dig into. We’re both comfortable skirting around the truths. When I’m close enough to him, he clutches my throat and pulls me so our mouths are so close that I can feel the warmth of his breath. If one of us speaks, our lips will be touching.

“Kissing boys beneath the oak tree?” he says, and my thighs clench around an empty nothingness at how rough his voice is.

All I can do is dip my head in acknowledgment of his question.

“On the mouth?”

A squeak escapes me. He presses his lips to mine. It’s quick, just enough to leave me wanting more. So, when he pulls away, I’ll follow.

“Did they kiss your sweet pussy, too?”

I close my eyes. My throat tightens with his firm grip, holding me to him. His jealousy is surging out of him in waves, and I’m not sure I want to tell the truth and make it worse. “Yes,” I breathe.

“And how was it?” He slides a hand into the waistband of my sweats. “Did they make you come?”

I shake my head. “No.”

“You want me to make you come, doll?”

I nod.

“Then stay here with me. One more night. We’ll leave in the morning, then cut ties.”

One more night with him. My heart sores at the thought, but I know if I say yes, I’ll never stop. One more night will turn into the rest of the day, will turn into tomorrow again. “One more night,” I whisper, hating myself for going against what I’ve already promised.

Chapter Twenty-One



I SIP COFFEE FROM my mug while I catch up on emails from the weekend. I open up the dating app and don't even bother to check out the ridiculous number of notifications I have on there. I just delete the entire thing. It was Veronica's idea in the first place. I don't need cyber companionship and Declan's right. Meeting a stranger online is dangerous. It's not a risk I'm willing to take when I have children who need me.

I roll my eyes at the sudden flutter in my stomach when Declan's name pops up in my head. The weekend is over, which means I need to get over him.

"Morning," Vee says, coming into the kitchen. She opens up the cabinet with coffee mugs and clangs around until she finds one she likes. Then she slams the door shut.

"Morning. Can you simmer down?"

"What?" she asks.

"You're very loud this morning. Slamming things. Is everything okay?"

A huff escaped her. “It’s fine. I’m just over the dating scene.”

Bruce settles at my feet. He plops his giant paws over mine. “Would you like to elaborate?”

She juts out her bottom lip in pure Vee fashion. “Men suck, that’s it.”

“They do,” I say, but I’m busy looking at the good morning text from Declan.

Declan: Good Morning, doll.

Sammy: We agreed, Dec. You’re breaking our agreement.

Declan: Technically, no. I’m not. I’m sending you the cake recipe.

Sammy: Fine. I’ve got it. Now stop texting me!

Declan: Third time, Sammy. Remember that? If I run into you by chance for a third time, you’ll give me that dinner. You owe me that much.

Sammy: I gave you the weekend. Plus, an extra night. Nothing is owed.

“I just don’t understand,” Vee continues, pulling me away from my phone. “I’m hot, aren’t I?” she waves at herself from head to toe.

“You are, Vee. Did someone tell you that you weren’t?”

“He might as well have! I sit down across from him, and he looks me up and down then says ‘You’re fatter than I thought you’d be.’”

My mouth flaps open. The fucking audacity. “That’s a fucking joke, right? Who the hell says something so mean?”

“Assholes. That’s who! And I wasn’t even offended,” she continues. “I mean, you know I don’t care about weight. I’ve dated guys with dad bods, I’ve dated guys just as slim as me.” She waves her hand in the air. “What the hell kind of bullshit is that man on? The thought that he could find a woman and harm her with his unnatural beauty standards is so fucking disturbing.”

“I agree. So, what did you say?” I ask.

“I tossed my drink in his face, called him an idiot asshole, and left.” She drags a hand through her hair.

I chuckle, completely able to see her fly off the handle like that.

“I just haven’t been able to stop thinking about it. I’m so upset.”

“I would have been too. And I bet it did kind of hurt. To realize he wasn’t interested in who you are as a person, only about your physical appearance.”

She nods encouragingly. “That was exactly it, the smug prick.” She grabs the coffee pot and pours herself a drink. “But enough of that. Tell me about your weekend. Was it filled with lots of hot, sticky sex?”

“Not telling you about my sex life.” I roll my eyes.

“Aha! But you admit there is a sex life.”

“Shut up. You’re so annoying.”

“Please tell me you’re wearing condoms. I feel like Declan is probably a man whore.”

My ears burn at that assumption. What if he’s been texting me, but he’s already moved on to the next woman? And why does it matter? “Why do you say that?”

Her eyes widen as she stares at me, as if to say *are you blind?* Yes, I guess I am blind. “The man was pulled right out of an MC movie set. With that luscious beard and those tattoos.”

“Am I the only one who didn’t know about the tattoos?” I ask.

“He’s covered in them. Saoirse posted pics on her Instagram.”

“I don’t have Instagram,” I say over the brim of my mug.

“I know. That’s why I manage the business one.”

“And I love you for that.”

She sticks her tongue out. “You’re welcome. What do we need to do today?”

“I need to call my mom and beg her to make this cake.”

“Your mom is making the cake now?” She opens the fridge to grab milk for her cereal.

“Maybe. The tasting in New York was a miss. I don’t know what else to do, so I figured why not? Maybe she can do it and then we can move on to the next issue we face.”

She nods in agreement. “Definitely.”

“I’ve got self-defense this afternoon, too. So, I figured after we handle the birthday party booking for the Henderson’s, we can call it a day.”

“Perfect. It sounds like we have a solid plan for the day.”

On the list for today that I didn’t speak out loud.

1. Stop thinking about my weekend with Declan.
2. Don’t text him back unless it’s about the cake.
3. Stop thinking about how many times you came with a man for the first time in half a decade.

Yeah, this is going to be a long day for me.

Chapter Twenty-Two



I TOSS MY PHONE onto the bed and grind my teeth. She's been ignoring me since Tuesday morning. It's Thursday evening. I've debated calling her or sending another text to her, but I don't want to appear too clingy, or unable to catch a hint. I know what she said. After the weekend, it would be over.

I've decided that I don't want it to be, though. Freshly showered, I plop on my stomach onto the white sheets of the hotel bed. My phone buzzes, and I hate how fast I jump up to check it, desperate for it to be her. Except it's not.

Sean: Have a clear video. Definite hit.

My fist clenches around the sheets. I fucking knew it.

Declan: Who?

Sean: Russians. What the actual fuck. I'm over this shit. We've been dealing with this for too long.

Declan: Do you have names?

Sean: I can do you one better. I have pics.

Sean shoots over two photos. Two mugshots, and one man I know I've seen before. He is the man from the alleyway. The rapists, and more than likely murderers. I stop for a moment, wondering about the girl I didn't save, and my heart tightens. Did she survive? Was she hurt? Will I forgive myself if I ever find out the answer? No, I won't. It's better that I don't know for that reason.

The tightening sensation turns to dread that forms a sour feeling in my stomach. Thinking of a stranger hurt makes me yearn to keep Sammy safe, even if she's not answering my texts. I've given her the space she needs. I open our messages together and click on her info. Then, I click her location. I shared it to mine when she left her phone unlocked while she showered.

She wants a third chance meeting before she can realize we're good for each other? Then I'll make it happen. I chew on my bottom lip. She's at a jiu-jitsu place downtown. I pop up and hurry to grab clothes and shoes. I've been drinking, so I'm not about to drive over there, but I can grab a driver.

Finn, one of the guards on duty, shows up twenty minutes later, a scowl on his face. I hop into the passenger seat. "I hate you so much."

"Don't lie. You love me."

"Not when you cock block me."

I shrug. "Could've said no."

He grumbles under his breath. “Not when you pull rank.” He pulls out onto the road. “For the record, I think this is a terrible fucking idea.”

“Oh look, a grunt putting in his two cents where it doesn’t belong.”

He sighs, pinches the bridge of his nose, then shakes his head, never peeling his eyes off the road before us. “Still, I needed to say my peace.”

“Well, it’s been said. Now take me over there before her workout finishes.”

“What’s your plan, Dec? Gonna storm in there and demand she leaves with you?”

“I don’t know,” I admit. I can’t just storm in the way I’d like. It’ll give me away. She’ll know I’m tracking her.

Finn doesn’t argue anymore, just drives silently while I come up with my plan. By the time he drops me off in front of the business, I’m level-headed and the fuzzy buzz from the whiskey I drank is significantly gone.

I glance in the windows, peering in at a sweaty Samira. She shoves at the man, attempting to grab her, but he overcomes her and brings her to the ground. I have to fight every bone in my body not to race inside and stop this entire encounter. Especially when her eyes widen with panic before she squeezes them shut. He loosens his hold on her, but doesn’t get off her.

My fists clench at my sides, but I force myself to remain planted on the sidewalk. She's not actually in any danger, and this is good, that she wants to learn how to keep herself safe. Protected. At least, that's what I tell myself, especially when she has me to keep her away from danger. My jaw ticks while this asshole stays on top of her, and I stay on the outside, looking in.

Her eyelids snap open, then I get to watch her as determination takes over, and she breaks the hold. Over and over. Each time, pride swells and pulls at my chest. Despite the clear fear that was there a moment ago, she's pushing through and learning how to do what he's teaching her. And I can't be mad at her for that. I can sure as shit force him off her, though. This will be the last time he touches her. I will teach her the damn self-defense skill if I have to. Or if she just needs a trainer to push her. I can be that, too.

I can be whatever and anything that my girl needs.

She slips away from his hold again, and that seems to be the last time. They both move to get off the mat, and she disappears behind a door. I take that as my time to hide. I don't want her to see me as soon as she comes out, so I hide in the cafe across the street.

Chapter Twenty-Three



“**H**ANDS ON MY WRISTS, Sammy,” Brendan grunts in my ear.

My eyes are wide, and he’s squeezing my neck. *Too hard.* I gasp, unable to focus on his command, and I really fucking hate that when the fear kicks in, my response is never to fight. I always freeze up.

Even when it’s not real, like right now.

He’s frustrated, and I don’t blame him. I’ve been in self-defense classes off and on for two years, and I still struggle with knowing how to get out of some of the most basic holds. The panic sets in, and even though Brendan walks me through it, I can’t bring myself to actually move.

But I pay him good money for these private classes, and I need to have something to show for it.

“Come on, Sammy. Focus.”

I shake my head back and forth against the mat.

“Wrap your hands around my wrists. That’s all you have to do, then we can break.”

I suck in a breath. I need to get better at this. How am I supposed to protect my family if I can’t even get out of a false attack?

My hands wrap around his wrists.

“Good.” He releases the hold on me.

“No. Let’s finish,” I say, determined not to give up, despite the fear that threatens to halt my every movement.

It doesn’t help that I had another nightmare last night. The day following the terrors, the memories of Ian’s death always halt me. I should’ve canceled class today, but it’s too late.

Brendan runs through the hold again, talking me through the motions of how to get off. Hold his wrists around my throat, lift my hips, and push away with my legs. Run.

Over and over, until I’m able to break from the hold with him using most of his strength.

The next thirty minutes go by slow. I’m not here, too transfixed on my shitty day. Every day has been shitty since he died, but some days are worse than others. This—today—being alone when I want to throw in the towel is one of the worst ones.

My entire body quivers and sweat drips from my brow when finally, Brendan tells me our time is up. I pack up my things and head for the locker room to change. The eeriness of being

here alone shouldn't be too much for me, but here I am with a heaviness pressing down on my chest.

When I go home, it'll be to nothing. The kids are still at my parents'. Vee texted me to tell me she won't be home. These nights always seem to catch up to me, and I'm not sure I'm ready to go home and sit in bed with only the dog to keep me company. Batman is an awesome snuggle partner, but his paws smell like a stale bag of Fritos, and I'm not in the mood for that. I'd much rather have the scent of bergamot.

Crap. That's like the hundredth time I've thought of Declan since I've been ignoring him. I'm supposed to be over him by now. Instead, I'm finding myself craving the smell of his cologne. *Gah*. I lean forward, resting my elbows on my knees.

I already can feel the depression settling. Once I climb into bed alone, I'm going to not have the will to get out. I let out a sigh, resting my elbows on my knees. Then I let the water in my eyes fall freely. I'm tired of crying, of feeling this sadness that curls deep inside of me. I hate I don't know how to make it stop. Two minutes. I allow myself that before I clean myself up, wipe away the tears, and get my shit together. Opting for a shower here, in the locker room, because I already know that the second I get home, I'll have no motivation to do it.

When I'm finished and changed, I grab my duffel bag and head out. After saying goodbye to Brendan, I head toward the train station. I didn't drive here today; I knew I wouldn't have the energy after my workout. Except, when I pass the bar before I make it to the subway, I freeze, and everything tells

me to go in. It's a urge that settles deep in my bones. And who am I to deny the universe what it wants?

There's a little internal fight with myself, but not much. It's just enough to make me feel better about my shitty decisions. I don't even *want* to get drunk, I just don't want to be alone when I get home.

I take a seat on the barstool, holding the shot glass in my hand. "I miss you," I whisper. *I miss you every day.*

Squeezing my eyes shut, I let out a deep huff, not wanting the words to escape. Thinking them is hard enough without them ever leaving my lips.

My heart aches every morning. I wake up and touch your pillow and you're not there. Come back to me so that I can tell you how beautiful our daughter is, and we can laugh about all the crazy things Max does. You won't be there when she needs her daddy to walk her down the aisle. You won't be there when Max needs you to teach him how to shave.

I don't know what or how I've been doing this without you by my side. Every day, I feel like my best friend is missing. My heart can't take it any longer.

I don't want to drown in my sorrows with alcohol. I've never been that type of person, but I've always had the children to keep me on the straight and narrow. Two weeks without them is almost as bad as losing him.

So, I do whatever I thought I couldn't do before, and I take the shot. The burn in the back of my throat and sets my

stomach on fire, and I wait for the hazy cloud to fill my brain.

In the distance, the scraping of a stool against the marble floor catches my attention. A man's rough clearing of his throat, and then his familiar voice. "Whiskey, neat."

My stomach dips with a familiar sensation of butterflies. I turn and catch the dark scruff of his beard. He's wearing a suit like I've seen before. Darkness looms over him, and I force a smile despite the nothingness that fills in the spots he left behind when I shut him out.

Fucking hell. It's our third chance meeting. The one I never thought would happen.

Declan's head turns in my direction, and he cracks a smile. "Sammy. What are you doing here?"

I stand so abruptly that the stool nearly topples over. "What are *you* doing here?" I ask him.

There are two empty seats between us, and I shove past them to be near him. My arms snake around his neck, his citrus and spice cologne so close. I take a soft inhale to be sure he is real, that I'm not hallucinating.

"I could ask you the same," he rasps. "Actually, I believe I asked you first."

I don't answer him, just press my mouth to his. His tongue plunges inside of mine, and his arms wrap around my lower back. He pulls me against him. I don't pull away. Not until I'm breathless, and my heart is beating so fast I can feel its pulse in the spot behind my ear.

I've been so determined to push him away, and I'm not sure why. Not when last weekend he made me feel more alive than I have been in a long time. Maybe it's the wrong way to go about the grief I've been dealing with today, but I don't want to be alone. And here he is, ready to make sure I'm not.

"I think you're stalking me," I whisper, my fingers scratching his scalp.

The soft hum of his approval sends a jolt of arousal straight through me, and I nibble at his ear. "Where's your car parked?" he asks.

I shake my head. "I don't have it. Vee dropped me off at self-defense and I figured I'd take a cab home later."

He tucks a strand of hair behind my ear, his intense gaze on me. "Self-defense?"

I dip my chin in a silent acknowledgment.

"With a man?"

I roll my eyes. "Yes, with a man, Declan. Does that seriously matter?"

His lips tighten as he contemplates my answer. "Actually, no. It doesn't. I wouldn't want a woman touching you like that anyway."

I snort, his caveman response extremely overbearing, yet somehow amusing.

"I'll teach you whatever it is you need to know," he says.

“Oh?” I smooth out the crinkle between his brows with my thumb. “You’ve got the qualifications to do so?”

He nods. “Yes, actually.” He prevents me from asking any more questions when his grip on my waist tightens and he scoops me into his arms. Breaking eye contact, he pulls his attention away from me to pull out his phone. He taps on it a bit. “Come on,” he says.

“Where?” I ask.

“Finn is outside. He’ll take us home.”

“Who’s Finn?”

“My driver.” Declan slams a hundred-dollar bill on the bar top, then drags me out of the building. A black SUV is parked on the side of the road, and he yanks the door open before guiding me inside. Declan climbs in behind me, then slams the door shut. “Thanks, Finn.”

I glance around the spacious backseat of the truck. He didn’t have a driver on the plane. He’d driven us in the rental car since mine had been totaled, and when we came home, my rental was parked in the hangar where he left it. The more I think about it, I can’t recall a time when he drove us in his car. I don’t think I’d even seen his vehicle.

“Do you not own a car?” I ask as the driver pulls into the street.

“I totaled it around when we first met. Accident on the bridge.”

“Oh,” I whisper. “Wow. Two accidents so close?”

He grumbles. “The one in your car was not my fault, doll.”

“I know that. But still. And the one on the bridge?” I ask, fully aware of the stern mom voice I’ve put on.

“May have been my fault. But no one was harmed.”

A hand falls on my thigh, and fire burns through me. I bring my knees together to calm myself. Then I do my best to ignore the aching emptiness inside of me. He must know that his touch is practically making me melt because his hand glides higher and higher until it’s under the fabric of the running shorts I’m wearing.

“Dec,” I whisper, my eyes fluttering closed while my head falls against the headrest.

“Sam,” he says, his fingertips brushing against the hem of my panties.

“There’s someone right there,” I manage to get out as he teases me. He spreads me open but never enters.

“I know,” he says. “Don’t worry, baby. I’m keeping it PG for now. Until I can get you in my bed.”

Despite that, he dips the tip of his finger inside before pulling it out again. I bite my lip to stifle the desperate groan that’s fighting to escape. He’s going to tease me until I’m a sobbing mess for him. That’s just wonderful. He leaves behind a wet trail of my arousal as his digit traces shapes along the sensitive flesh of my thigh. Then, back up toward my entrance.

I gasp when he slides in again, only to pull away. Then again. It only leaves me needier for him. Over and over, he

goes, and each time, I have to clamp my mouth shut to prevent my whimpers from being heard. By the time the car pulls up to the hotel, I'm practically a weeping mess, and he never even took off my clothes. When the vehicle comes to a stop, Declan shoves the back door open and pulls me out of the car before slamming it closed.

He drags me upstairs, and I tell myself this is truly the last of the "last times" we'll have. No more. I'll leave when I get my fill, head home to feed the dog, then pack up the car in the morning and head to Connecticut. I miss my babies. I need them.

Declan squeezes a breast hard enough that I let out a pitiful cry.

When we finally make it up to his room, I don't waste any more of our time together. I drag him to the bedroom, my hands cupping his face while I walk backward, and we make out. His kisses are rough and needy, but then again, so is my desire for him.

My fingers fumble with his belt, and just as I get it off, he shoves me onto my back onto the mattress. I bounce against the plush duvet, never letting go of the belt still wrapped around his waist. "Take it off," I demand.

One thick eyebrow raises as he gives me a curious look. "If I want to take my time worshipping you, you'll let me."

I shake my head and let out a victory cheer when I finally undo the metal. The prong slides out of the notch on his belt, and I yank it free. I tug it the rest of the way until it's off the

loops. “I don’t want you to take your time, Declan. That’s not what I need right now.”

He props himself up on one of his elbows. “What do you need?”

My hand sinks beneath his boxers and I grip his hard length. The metal balls of his piercing dig into my palm and I lick my lips in anticipation of how good his ribbed cock feels inside of me.

I pump him and squeeze with a firm grip.

“Need you inside me.”

Declan lets out a deep groan, and I continue to pump him. “Fuck,” he bites out.

I plant my heels into the mattress and lift my ass into the air. “Off.”

“God damn. Just be patient.”

I shake my head and release him so I can take the shorts off myself since he’s not. Slow and intimate isn’t what I want. I never have, and he knows that. Fast, rough, debilitating is what I need. I don’t want to walk after this. I love it when Declan is commanding, and right now he’s not. It’s almost like —

“Fuck, I’ve missed you, baby,” he says, pumping his cock over me.

My heart clenches. Yup, there it is. I suck in a breath of air. “Don’t fucking say that,” I snap.

“Say what?” he asks, his voice dripping with threat. “How your fucking body was made for me? How I’ve missed watching the blush creep to your cheeks when you clamp around my cock as you’re about to come? You don’t want me to say how much my cock aches to fill you up?”

I glide a hand down my stomach, lower, lower until I reach the apex of my thighs. “Oh, goddamn. More.” I slide a digit between the arousal that’s practically dripping from me.

“Spread,” he demands in the cruel tone he uses right before he’s about to unleash on me.

I obey. Declan slides off the bed, and I furrow a brow. “Where are you going?” I ask.

He rounds the bed, reaches the nightstand, and pulls out the familiar foiled packet along with a purple toy, a bottle of lube, and leather cuffs. “Will you play with me, doll?”

God, his voice is like velvet stroking my skin. It sets my insides on fire.

“Yes,” I say, breathlessly.

“I want your tears,” he says. His knee presses against the mattress, and my body falls toward the center with his weight. “I want your pleasure screams. I want you to have to beg me to stop.”

My tongue darts out, wetting my dry lips, and I swallow, my throat suddenly feels so thick. The anticipation is killing me, and he hasn’t even touched me yet.

“Remember before? When I said I would stop if you told me to?”

I nod, reaching for him, hating how far away he is.

“I won’t this time. So, tell me now.”

I shake my head. I want this too. We both want it. Declan exhales, and his shoulders loosen. He was worried I’d tell him no.

“Tell me, Sammy.”

My head shakes again. “No. I want this. I want you.”

“Then you need to come up with a word, doll. Something that will tell me you’ve hit your limits.”

“Okay,” I rasp, my head nodding. I flutter through the possibilities. What’s something that will come easily? Then I crack a smile when it comes to me. “Batman.” Bruce the dog protects me, he gives me peace of mind. If it weren’t for him, I’d probably never get any sleep. I’d be too worried about someone hurting my family while I sleep.

“Fine. Batman.” He grips my feet and brings it to his mouth. Warm, wet lips press against the inside of my ankle. “But no superhero can save you from me, baby.”

“I don’t want to be saved,” I rasp. *I can save myself.*

Declan’s tongue glides along my leg, up further and further until his teeth sink into the sensitive flesh at the inside of my thigh. I yelp at the burning pain that slices through me before

he kisses it away. “Put your feet together, then drop your knees wide.”

I listen, just like I always do when it comes to his instructions. He rewards me with a kiss on my swollen clit. My mouth parts with a breathy sigh. “God, why do you have to tease me so much?” I ask.

“Because it makes it all the sweeter when you finally come undone.” His mouth moves, pressing against my navel.

The clicking of the lid on the lube snaps open. He drips it onto the toy and then presses it to my entrance. I hiss at the cold liquid. Declan presses a button, and it comes to life inside of me, vibrating and buzzing. I instantly move to close my legs, but he plants his elbow against one knee and a hand on the other, forcing me to remain open and ride through the intensity of the pleasure.

“Stay open, or I’ll tie you down,” he warns.

Heat pulls in my stomach with his threat. He presses an open-mouthed kiss on my throat.

“Dec,” I pant. “Please. It’s so much. I just need you.”

His dark chuckle causes me to shiver. Then he presses another button and my entire body tenses. Air pulses against the sensitive bundle of nerves on my clit, and I gasp at the fierce pressure building up inside of me. My hips buck, grinding the air while he continues to keep me pinned in place. Then he bites a nipple through my shirt, his teeth scraping

against my flesh, and it sends the final jolt of need straight to my pussy.

I come undone, crying out his name despite not having him inside of me, despite all the efforts of my climax coming from the thin purple plastic toy inside of me. My fingers run through the back of his head, tugging at locks of hair. He continues to tease my breasts, sucking and biting, kissing and licking, or rolling the hardened bud between his fingers.

And I am just a writhing mess. A tear falls from my cheek. He licks it up, a rumbling sound escaping him. The toy shuts off sometime later. I'm too delirious to know how much time has gone by, but I'm so sensitive it hurts, and I know I've come at least twice more.

A silent sob escapes when he slowly tugs the dildo from me. I'm empty, and I don't want to be. But relief also settles in my chest when I realize how sore I already am. Declan sits up while my body is a limp noodle, but I'm pliable. I don't struggle when he grabs me by the hips and flips me over. There's rustling behind me, then his shirt falls to the floor. His jeans follow.

“Take off your shirt if you don't want me to rip it off you.”

I sit up on my knees and tug it off and drop my bra on the floor beside it. He yanks my wrists behind me, and I wait patiently while he straps the leather cuffs around them. When he's finished, he grabs my nape and pushes me down so I'm on my hands and knees. Then, he presses the tip of his cock right there. He nudges inside inch by slow fucking inch. I

know he's not all the way in, but still, he fills me, the ridges of his pierced dick pushing inside of me. They feel so fucking good.

Who needs a toy when he's pierced for her pleasure?

Rough, calloused hands slide along my back. "Fuck, you're soaked."

"You fill me so good," I say. "I need to come again. Faster. Please?"

"Not yet. Savor it. My bad little girl. So greedy, for what?" He drags out of me, then slams hardback in. I jolt forward and collapse into the bed. "Take what I have, and then I'll give you another orgasm."

I clench around him. He groans. "Fuck, I love when you do that."

I smirk against the sheets and do it again. His hand comes down on my ass, then again in the same spot.

"Fucking tease. Stop. Let me enjoy how warm and tight you are."

I moan when his dick twitches and his fingertips dig into the tender flesh around my hips. His movements grow more ragged. "Yes," I pant. "Come, baby. Fill me up."

He slides in and out, hitting me just right, that sweet, sensitive spot inside of me getting stroked each time. And together, we cry out in pleasure as the climax hits us. As his cum fills me and I strangle his dick, or so he calls it. He

collapses on me and my stomach presses even deeper into the mattress.

Declan strokes my hair while we both come down and then he pulls out of me, leaving me empty. He climbs out of bed and when I roll over; I catch the unopened condom sitting right where he'd left it. My bottom lip quivers, and he must follow my line of sight because he lets out a pained grunt.

“Fuck, Sammy. I forgot. I was in the moment.”

I blink, shaking my head. “I’m on the pill.”

“Still, we agreed.” He grips my chin, forcing my hand toward him. “We’ll go get tested together in the morning. God, I’m so fucking sorry. I got caught up. That’s not an excuse.”

I bite my bottom lip, drawing blood. “Thanks,” I whisper.

Chapter Twenty-Four



“**M**OM!” MAX CHEERS FROM the kitchen counter of my parents’ farmhouse.

My stomach churns at the sight of Mom at the counter stirring batter for the cake I asked her to help with. The last time I stood in this home, I told my children that their dad was dead. She’d been baking them her famous blackberry lavender cake as if nothing had happened.

Mom knew. Dad knew, but they were trying to keep things normal for my babies while they awaited my arrival. Max giggled on a step stool beside her as they licked the batter off the whisk. *And then I crushed him.*

Now, he hops off the stool and hurries toward me and wraps his arms around my waist. “Hey, Maximilian,” I say, forcing a happy voice for him. “How was your little vacation?”

“Good.”

I bend over, pressing a kiss to the top of his head.

“We got to see some chickens hatch,” he says, pulling away and spinning in a circle. “It was so cool, Mom. There’s one that’s all black and fluffy. I named her Violet, and she is seriously so adorable. I get to teach her how to eat.”

Mom’s hobby is breeding different kinds of chickens. The business is their lavender farm. I grew up on acres of land that produced 150 acres of lavender. When she wasn’t doing that, she was hatching chicks year-round, so even though it’s well out of chick season, it’s normal for her to hatch babies this late in the year.

“Violet is a perfect name for a silkie,” I say. “How many others were there?”

“Four. Only two made it,” Mom says.

I plop onto the stool beside Max while he recounts his week, Em nowhere to be found. As if reading my mind, Mom gives me the answer I’m looking for. “Emmy and Daddy are showering. They had a long day harvesting.”

I nod. “How was she?”

“A perfect angel,” she promises.

I snort. When had anyone described my teen—almost adult—as an angel? She’s hormonal and ragey, and bitter with the world for dealing her a shitty hand. Then, the realization sets in. Maybe they needed these last two weeks. Farm work always had a way of easing my anxiety as a kid. Was this the medicine they needed the entire time? Had I been depriving them of what they needed?

“Hey, Mom,” Em says, taking the steps that lead from the bedrooms upstairs into the kitchen. She barrels toward me, wraps me into a hug from behind, and presses a kiss to my cheek.

“Hey, honey. You have a good week?” I turn my head back to press a kiss to her cheek.

Dad comes in next, his eyes wide when they land on me. “Sammy,” he warns, narrowing in on me. “The whole point of this was for you to be finding yourself again. Without children.”

I pucker out my bottom lip. “I missed them. Besides, it’s only Friday. I was coming to pick them up on Monday anyway.”

He rolls his eyes. “Fine.”

I turn to face Mom. “I thought I could help you sell at the expo this weekend.”

She perks up at the offer of my manual labor. I hate selling at the craft events she signs herself up for. Growing up meant waking up early and never getting to sleep in. Now, it means spending time with my family. And not just my kids. Mom and I aren’t as close as me and Dad. I know it’s because our personalities clash. But I also know I need to make more of an effort to create these memories.

“What’s for dinner?” I ask.

“Butter chicken,” Mom says.

I let out a low moan of approval, and my stomach immediately growls to announce its hunger. I've missed her cooking more than I've missed spending time at the farm. Em heads for Mom, snatches the whisk from her and licks off the batter.

"Tell me about your week," I say to her.

Max has given me his recap. Now I need hers. She lets out a grumble. "It's like a freaking child labor camp. I've been up every morning at six A.M. That should be illegal."

I snort. "Six? Gram used to come in at four every school day and make me get up to feed the animals before school."

"And then they were so used to eating that early, you'd have to get up at the same time in summer," Mom laughs.

"Pure torture. It prepared me for late night bottle feedings, though. You kids never let me sleep."

Even though her back is facing me, I don't miss the massive eye roll from Em.

"Sammy," Mom says. "You and Max go set the table for dinner while Em and Daddy help me finish dinner."

"Sure, Mom." I hop off the stool and head for the utensils.

Dinner flies by with fits of laughter from the kids while Mom and Dad tell them embarrassing stories about my horrible farming skills. I've always had a green thumb, but my luck with animals hadn't been so great. I loved them, and my parents loved to make me happy. They'd get me anything I asked for.

We had the land. I was an enthusiastic kid, and I took care of the animals.

Now, it seems I might have the same issue with Max. He's already excused himself from the table and taken Bruce with him to check on the baby chicks.

Em clears the table while I load up the dishes. Dad wipes down the table while Mom puts icing on the two cakes. When she's finished, she cuts it up and hands out a plate to each of us. Each plate has one slice of the regular cake, and one of the vegan.

"Which is which?" Dad asks.

Mom shakes her head, a smirk on her face. "You have to guess."

Dad shoots her a weary look but grabs the fork. "Is there poison in this?"

Mom rolls her eyes and tosses a frustrated wave at him. I take a bite of the first slice. "This is so good," I say between chewing. I can tell by the moistness and the decadent flavor that it's got egg and dairy in it. But I still have high hopes on the second slice. If anyone can do it, she can.

I take a sip of water to cleanse my palate before biting into the next. My eyes widen. The taste is so close, that the only reason I even know the difference is just by the level of moistness and creaminess. "Fuck, Mom. This is good."

She reaches over and smacks the back of my head. Em lets out a giggle. "Don't talk like that here."

“Sorry,” I laugh, digging into the dessert. “You think it’ll still be good on Monday?” I ask.

“If you keep it in the fridge.”

“Perfect. I’ll let you know what they say. And you’re sure it won’t be too much for you to make for eleven-hundred people?”

She waves her hand. “You forget that we’re empty nesters. It’ll be nothing to make that.”

“And I can drive it down,” Dad offers. “I’ll stay the weekend.”

“I’ll come, too,” Mom says. She hates the drive, but she’d never miss out on someone complimenting her baking skills, so I’m not surprised that she’s offered now.

When we’re finished, I clean up our mess while everyone else piles into the living room for a movie. Max comes back inside, Bruce by his feet and the chick in his hands. I let out a chuckle. “Grams is not going to let you keep that animal in the house.”

He nods eagerly. “She does! And she lets me sleep with her.”

I draw a brow. “Aren’t you worried you’ll squish her? Or she’ll poop in your bed?”

He shakes his head, blond curls falling in his face. “She sleeps in a bassinet, so I won’t roll on her.”

I sigh. “Wow. Grams has really lost her marbles, hasn’t she?”

Max giggles and I follow him into the other room, my heart feeling full for the first time in a long, long time. I've missed my babies, and it's good to be back with them.

Chapter Twenty-Five



“**M**AX! COME HELP ME wash up these veggies!” I call as I slide into the kitchen from the back door.

My fingers are covered in dirt from pulling veggies for tonight’s dinner from the garden. I glance down at the wedding band I slipped on this morning. I haven’t worn it in a while, but having the kids home from their summer trip left me feeling like a piece of me was still missing. Ian should have been with me when I made the drive up to the farm, but he wasn’t. And even though something is happening between me and Declan, I still yearn to have my family back.

Nausea churns in my stomach. The guilt of loving two men is just too much. That’s why I can’t spend too much time trying to decipher those feelings.

I drop the basket onto the counter by the sink. Max’s video games are still blaring from the living room. He hasn’t moved an inch, despite me calling for his help. Inhaling, I let out a sharp cry. “Maxamillion! Come help me wash these veggies if you want to eat.”

“Momma?” His voice is so close that I whip around to catch him standing in the entrance of the kitchen. My eyes train to the tall figure standing behind him.

Pulse quickening, I struggle to maintain an even breathing pattern. Declan doesn't know about Max, about my children. *Shit, shit, shit.*

“Declan,” I say, my voice strained.

Declan grins, stuffing his hands into the pockets of his jeans. His steel-blue eyes darken, and the ticking of his jaw tells me everything I need to know. I'm going to pay for this little lie.

“Hey, Sam. Max here was just telling me that his mom was outside tending to the garden before dinner,” he tells me, his voice cheery despite the brutal way he glares at me.

He eyes the basket of vegetables I'm holding. I hitch a breath, praying he doesn't notice that I've put my ring back on. But I couldn't possibly be that lucky. No, I know the second he sees it. The second his eyes bulge and his face reddens. His fists clenched at his sides.

“Mom, can I go to Henry's for dinner? They're ordering pizza,” Mac cuts through the thick tension in the air, unaware of what the fuck is happening.

I scoff. *Of course, they are.* The Millers are the exact opposite of me. Laid back, no rules, pizza and fast food daily. And here I am picking organic vegetables from my backyard to force my growing boy to eat a nutritious dinner.

“Is your room clean?” I hide my disdain for the Laidback Millers. It’s not about the pizza, or that my son would rather be there for his meals. I’m mostly jealous that they’re still married. That they haven’t been ripped apart by death like my family has.

“I’ll do it tomorrow,” Max promises.

I don’t bother arguing. I want to, but the reality of Declan standing in my house causes me to pause. *Max can go. He should go.* “Fine. Be back by streetlights on.”

“But the new episode of Tommy Horror comes on at ten! We were going to watch it together.”

I tear my gaze from Declan and focus on Max. “Jesus, ten? That’s way too late.”

He eyes me with his big puppy-dog eyes. School is out for the summer, and he doesn’t have to be up early in the morning. I’ve always been a sucker for that sad look. The one that screams, but I’m fatherless. Please let me have happiness for once in my life? Give the kid an inch, and here I am a mile later.

“You better be back by 10:35,” I finally concede.

“Thanks!” He chants, hurrying past Declan and completely oblivious to the danger pulsating in this room. I should call the dog.

The second Max is gone, I’m yanking my rings off and shoving them into the pocket of my jeans. Maybe there’s a

chance he hasn't seen them. Maybe that look earlier was just the fact I didn't admit I have children.

Declan approaches and stands behind me, boxing me against the sink and his hard body. And fuck, his scent intoxicates me. So is this horrible pit in my stomach. He brushes back the hair from my shoulder.

“Jesus, Samira.” A soft, disbelieving laugh escapes him. “Fuck. You're married?” His anger radiates in waves, practically stopping my heartbeat. “And you have a kid?”

Two kids. And a dead husband.

I sigh, closing my eyes. Not bothering to respond, I turn on the faucet, letting water fill up the sink to wash my produce. “Did you think my ass got this fat by itself? No. This is three pregnancies, years of breastfeeding, not enough time to get to the gym, sleepless nights, and too many ice cream stand trips.”

“Three children?”

I scrub dirt off a carrot. “Two. One miscarriage.”

His arm wraps around me, hands resting on my belly. The heat of his breath brushes against my neck. His head dips low against my cheek. I wipe a hand free of water against my jeans, and lean up, running a finger through the soft tresses of his beard. Allowing myself to remember the feel of him, the spicy scent of his cologne that mixes with the peppermint of his beard oil, the hardness of his chest pinning me down so that I can't move.

I fucked up. I should've told him, but I wasn't ready. I'm still not.

“What will happen if Mr. Cullen walks in and sees me touching his wife?” He grits out through his teeth.

I don't answer.

His fingers move to either hip, digging into the flesh and practically pinching bone. “Because if I walked in on another man touching you, I would break every one of his fingers.” His lips press against my cheek. A hand moves from my stomach, fingers trailing along my bare arm.

My skin prickles under his sensitive touch. Heat coils in my belly at the anticipation. Ian is dead, but the thought of him walking in on me with Declan claiming me makes me wet. And that's really fucked up, considering the position I've put myself in. I was fucking stupid, letting a gangster fuck me for fun. Now, here I am with said criminal inside of my home, where my children sleep. Where my husband was fucking murdered for a home invasion. The haunting way he died still fucks with my sense of safety, and I should be scared right now. But I'm not.

I squirm, hating how my body betrays the feelings I know I should have, how I should react.

Declan fists my hair, pulling my head back tightly. The other hand moves up and claims a nipple. He pinches and pulls so hard that I let out a yelp.

“But you?” His voice is dark, filled with anger. Hatred maybe. “You fucking lied to me. And I’m going to punish you, Samira.”

He releases the hardened bud, and I hiss at the burn that follows. His hand wraps around my throat again, so tight that his nails dig into my skin. I fucking hate the burning need to suck in air. It brings me back to the worst day of my life. Crippled, unable to move, while my husband bleeds out everywhere. I squeeze my eyes closed, trying to maintain some type of calm before the panic can take over.

“I didn’t lie,” I gasp, struggling to catch oxygen. A tear trickles down my face. I only hid the truth. I never lied. He never asked, and I never told.

“No?” He releases his grip on my throat and grabs the back of my neck, pushing me against the counter until my cheek is touching the cool granite. His hand comes down on my ass. Hard.

I wiggle, trying to free myself, but it only makes him tighten his grip.

Max may be gone, but Emma could be home at any minute. As much as I want him to fuck me against the counter, I can’t risk her seeing me like this. They can’t know that I’ve moved on from their father. Not this way.

“Please. My daughter ...”

Declan chuckles. “Don’t want your daughter to know what a bad girl you’ve been, doll?”

I shake my head. “She can’t. She can’t find out this way.”

“Find out what? That two weeks ago, you were in this same position in my penthouse, cleaning my dick off with your mouth after you made a mess all over it?” His hand strokes my back. “Oh. Do you mean she can’t find out that her mother is a cheating whore?”

I shove away from him, but he doesn’t let me budge. “You wouldn’t understand.”

“Try me.”

I close my eyes, blinking away the tears. Once I catch my breath, I think of all the ways I can get out of this hold. I can gain control of the situation; unlike the last time someone broke into my home. I muster up the courage, and then my eyes snap open. There’s a chef’s knife within reach.

“Batman!” I call.

He chuckles. “No safe words for lying sluts.” Declan’s hand slides into the waistband of my jeans.

I chuckle, excited that he thinks I’m calling our safe word. No, I’m calling the fucking safe dog.

Bruce comes barreling into the kitchen, hearing his nickname being called. The second he’s beside me, he gets into attack mode, his teeth barred.

“One fucking command, Declan, and he will tear through your face like butter,” I grind out. “Let me go, or I’ll say it.”

“Call him off, Sammy,” Declan snaps, his grip on my neck tightening. “I have a fucking gun, and I’ll shoot him.”

“*Sitzen*,” I say.

Bruce sits, his hackles still straight as he growls.

“He will kill, and he will die for me, Declan. That’s what he’s trained to do. Let go of me and I will call him off.”

“Fuck,” he growls, but finally releases me.

I reach for the handle of the knife, then twirl around to face him. I don’t hesitate, pressing the blade to his throat. “This is where my children live,” I say, huffing through the rage building inside of me.

This isn’t sexy, this isn’t something that should turn me on. My babies live here, and he’s a threat to them.

“This is my house, and I refuse to be hurt here again.” The blade bites into his flesh, blood dripping down his throat. I snarl, my teeth showing as I step forward.

“Calm down, Sammy,” Declan whispers, his hands coming up in surrender.

I nod toward the dining table. “Sit the fuck down.”

He backs up, making his way to the table. Each step he takes helping to regain the lack of power I always felt I never had. He’s listening, he’s not fighting, and it gives me the courage to keep this act going. I tilt my head to the side, watching as he plops into the chair. The knife never leaves his skin.

“Give me your gun,” I demand.

He swallows, but nods and pulls the gun from his hip. I take it, make sure a round is racked, then lower the knife while I train the end of the barrel on his forehead.

“Don’t fucking move,” I say, walking backward toward the junk drawer for tape. When I have it, I toss it toward him. “Tie your legs and one of your wrists to the chair.”

His nostrils flare. “Samira. Stop. Stop it.”

I shake my head. “You don’t get to threaten me in my house.” I force myself to remain firm, and to my shock, my voice doesn’t shake how my hand does as I point the gun at him. “Let me make myself clear.”

I step forward while he watches me. He still hasn’t moved, hasn’t tied himself up. I press the gun against the bottom of his chin. “This is my home. No man will ever come in here and hurt us. Not a husband, and certainly not a man I fucked a few times. I told you what I wanted, Declan. A white picket fence and three kids is not what I asked of you.”

He licks his lips, and I catch the instant need twinkling in his pretty blue eyes. Despite the gun pressed to him, he wants to fuck me.

“Take off your pants,” I demand.

And like the good little boy he is, he listens.

Chapter Twenty-Six



Declan

HER EYES ARE WILD as she stares down at me. I swallow, my heart in my throat while she presses the cool metal of my own fucking gun under my chin. Her head cocks to the side while she regards me, pouty lips in a frown. They're nude today, not the pink they normally are. In fact, she isn't wearing any makeup at all.

Brown eyes that usually sparkle are dull, a forced grin that makes her look like she hasn't slept in days. She's ... *unhinged*. A new level of manic haven't seen before. And I'm a sick fuck for having a hard-on. But God damn, she is fucking sexy, and I will listen to whatever she tells me to do because I'm just as certifiably insane as she is. Maybe even more.

"Have you ever pulled the trigger on a gun before, Samira?" I ask to bring her back to reality.

She doesn't answer. Just bends down to tape my ankles to the legs of the chair. I don't fight her, wanting to see how this plays out. I'm naked from the waist down, every inch of my body fighting the urge to take control of this situation. When she's finished my legs, she tests each one, giving it a firm tug. Satisfied, she stands again and gets to work on my wrists.

I let her do it because something is wrong. Something deep inside tells me she needs my compliance right now, and I'll give it to her. Besides, breaking from duct tape is simple, and a rookie mistake as far as restraints go.

I wet my lips, taking in that unique scent that is just so perfectly her. Lavender, fresh soap, sweetness like a sugar cookie. “You gonna feed me, Sammy?” I ask as she tests the work on my hands. “Gonna be hard to taste test with my hands all tied up.”

The whole reason I showed up was for the cake. She’d asked to come by the penthouse later tonight, but I wanted to see her. So instead of responding, I just showed up. Now I see why she wanted to come to me.

She doesn’t want her husband to find out about what she’s been doing. A heaviness presses on my chest when I think about him. Does he know about me? He has to, right? How did she explain the weekend away with me? What did she tell him the other night when we met at the bar?

I’m not even jealous. I know what I have with her is special. But the lies she’s been telling? That doesn’t settle well with me at all.

“Talk to me, Samira. Fucking hell. What’s going on?” I tug at the tape wrapped around my wrists.

“What’s going on?” She scoffs, her head shaking, and then she begins to pace. “You broke into my home, Declan. Pinned me to the counter, and thought, what? That you’d have your way with me?”

She steps forward, the gun presses to my chest, and she squats so we’re eye level. “No. I’m not doing this again. This is *my* home. *Mine.*” Her teeth grind. “My children deserve to be safe.”

I nod even though I'm not following exactly what's happening, but I know I need to get her calm. "*You* deserve to be safe."

A tear falls down her face. "I do," she whispers.

My heart cracks for her. She's hurting and feels alone. "Let me go so I can hold you."

"I wish I were braver." She lets out a soft exhale. "I should have been braver."

"You are brave."

"No," she grits out, her entire body shaking. "I was a coward, and he died because of it."

"Who?"

My breathing picks up when she paces again. The gun is no longer pressed against me. Instead, she holds it to her chin while she walks back and forth, back and forth.

"Who died?" I ask again. *Come on, point it back at me. Don't aim it at you.*

My line of sight never leaves her while she continues to mutter under her breath. She's at the brink of madness, and I'm the dumbass who allowed her to tie me up instead of comforting her. I know what it's like to feel helpless.

"Samira, look at me," I say, my tone stern.

Her head snaps in my direction. "You want my attention, Declan?" Her voice is rough, thick with agitation. She steps

forward, inching closer and closer. “No. You just want the gun back so you can hurt me.”

I shake my head. “No, doll. I want you to tell me what’s going on in that pretty little head of yours. Let me in. Show me what’s hurting you.”

“Everything hurts, Declan.”

Same. Fucking. Same.

The desperation in her tone, the hurt etched into the lines of her face, make me want to reach out and hold her. Never let her go until she realizes I’ll do anything to stop the pain for her.

“Let me make you feel better,” I say.

She straddles my lap, the gun long forgotten on the dining table. “I just want to forget.” Her fingers slide into my hair, and she scratches at my scalp. “He’s everywhere. But he’s nowhere. And I think that hurts the most.”

I wince at how hard she tugs my hair. Tears burn the back of my eyes. Not from physical pain, but from the emotional. I know that feeling that burns deep inside of me. I hate how much I still wish Cara were here with me, how passing certain places makes my heart stop while I grieve for her.

Some days I can eat a bagel without any thoughts of her, but other days, memories of her hit me hard. Like the one time she plopped cream cheese on my face and I chased her around the house.

“I’m here,” I whisper. “I’m listening. Tell me.”

“Later,” she says, her hips grinding against me. “Right now, we forget them.”

“No one is due home?” I ask, sinking my teeth into the center of her neck.

“My daughter won’t be home until later. We’re alone.”

Disappointment settles in my chest. So, whoever she’s talking about isn’t him. She really is fucking married. I’m a selfish prick though, because right now I don’t give a fuck. Right now, she’s mine. Right now, I’m hers.

“And you’re about to fuck the home invader. Jesus Christ, Samira. If your husband comes in here and blows my brains out while my cock is inside of you, I will come back and haunt you.”

She snorts. “Relax. It’s just us.”

I press my forehead to hers, inhaling a shaky breath, and then blow it out. When I open my eyes to peer at her, those wild eyes are gone. She stares back at me with pure desire. Everything about this is so wrong. I’d never cheat, and I feel like technically she cheated on me when she left out this detail. It’s wrong, this is wrong, and I should stop it. But when she stands up to slide out of her jeans, I don’t stop her.

When she drops her lacey panties onto the ground, I practically salivate. And when she comes back to my lap and presses the warmth of her center into the hardness of mine, I can’t help the feral sound I make. I move to yank off the restraints, but she stops me with a soft *tsk*.

“Sammy, baby,” I say through a pained grunt.

“Shh,” she whispers. “No talking. Just feel me.”

I let out a low curse, my entire body stiffening when I hear the slam of the front door.

“Sammy,” a man calls.

“Fuck,” she mumbles, climbing off me. She hastily grabs her jeans while I yank my arms to my chest in a swift movement to free myself.

“I thought you said your husband wasn’t coming,” I growl, bending down to undo my feet.

She tosses my pants and shoots me a dangerous look. “If you could get out of that, why did you let me do it?”

“Does that matter when your husband is about to murder me?” I jump up and into my pants while she hops around until her jeans are buttoned.

“Sammy, honey.” The voice is closer now.

A man in his fifties stops in the entryway, his gaze shooting between the two of us. He has white hair and glasses. He’s *old*, and for a moment I wonder what Sammy is doing with him before I take in the seriousness of this situation. I glance down, my dick still out, and I stuff it into my jeans before zipping up.

The man cocks his head to the side, remaining calm. Nothing about his lax demeanor screams he’s just found his wife with another man. Then his gaze cuts to the gun on the dining table. They widen, fear clear in the way his chest rises rapidly. He

reaches into his pocket, pulling out his wallet. “I don’t have much, but it’s yours. Just don’t hurt her.”

“Oh my God,” Sammy groans, pinching the bridge of her nose. “Dad! He’s not an intruder!”

Dad?

“Dad?” I blurt, turning to Sammy.

She tosses her hands in the air. “Declan, this is my father. Dad, this is Saoirse’s brother. Remember the lemon cake guy?”

He nods, a grin spreading across his face as if everything is clicking together for him. “Yes. Was he here for that now? To try the *cake*?” He says cake, like it’s sinful, like he knows exactly what I was about to do to his daughter before he so rudely interrupted.

Sammy raises her hand to stop him. “No. Don’t.”

Is he egging this situation on? Knowing that she’s married? Her cheeks flush as she attempts to hide behind the neckline of her shirt. Her dad knows what he just walked in on, and he’s not judging her for cheating... and I’m not sure what the fuck is going on. I look at her for answers, but she just clears her throat, heads for the fridge, and pulls out the cake.

I approach the kitchen island, extremely uncomfortable, and take a seat at the backless stool. Sammy opens the containers, plates the desert, and sets two slices in front of me with a fork and a glass of water. Her dad eyes me.

“My wife spent a lot of time perfecting this recipe,” he says, a scowl now in place. “You better like it.”

Sammy shoots her dad a dirty look, then turns back to me. “He’s kidding.”

“Am I?” he asks. “Because I think that the first person you bring home after Ian should understand the importance of this. Of what it means to be in a relationship with someone raising two children alone. Two kids who certainly aren’t looking for a father figure.” He glares at me, then back at her. “This is a big step, Samira. This wasn’t what I meant when I told you it was time to move on.”

I turn to Sammy. “Ian?” I ask, raising a brow.

She raises one right back as if to say *duh, Sherlock*.

“You don’t know the name of her late husband?” her dad huffs, shaking his head. “This guy is a real keeper, Samira. Can’t even remember Ian’s name.”

She rubs her temple. “I never told him, Dad.”

His mouth forms a slight O shape, and he furrows his brow.

I shake my head. *Ian Cullen*.

“I should go get Em from her friends.” He steps backward, slowly removing himself from the awkward situation. “Take her out to dinner. Where’s Max? I’ll take him too. We’ll grab a movie afterward.”

“Max is with the neighbor. You can grab Em and come right home. No need to disappear. You’ve already dropped the

bomb, Dad. Thanks. Don't worry. I'll clean up the debris."

He raises his hands, palms out in defense. "I didn't know. I'm sorry." He reaches the edge of the exit. "But just remember, sweetheart. We still have plenty of room for you to come hide out at the farm."

"What's going on, Samira?" I ask, the name Ian clicking in my head. "Ian Cullen?" My hands clench the edge of the countertop. "I remember his death."

"His parents have their hands in a lot of different pots. You've probably done business with them. Probably have even met him. He was murdered."

"He died in his sleep," I say, recalling the obituary.

She shakes her head. "That's what his parents wanted."

"What really happened?" I ask, desperate to know the truth, to understand why she felt the need to keep this secret from me.

Why would she lie? Why would his parents not want the truth to come out? Wouldn't they want the killer to be found? Unless... unless he killed himself the same way my Cara did.

"I don't want to do this with you," she whispers, tears streaming down her face. "Please. Just try the cake so we can get on with this and you can leave."

"Did he off himself? It was a closed casket."

Her hand slams against the counter. "Fuck you!"

I step closer, the need to keep her riled up and pissed off coursing through me. Who fucking lies about how their significant other died? Someone who can't face the truth. That's okay. I'll help her realize just how badly she fucked up. I'll make her hurt the way he did, the way Cara did. "He did, didn't he? Probably fucked his brains all up."

Sammy lets out a carnal scream, her hand slapping me across the face. "Get out!" she screams. "Get out, get out, *get out.*"

All I can do is laugh while tiny fists slam into my chest. "What's the matter, Samira? Were you such a horrible wife that he couldn't take it anymore? He decided death was better than you?"

The screams she lets out are blood-curdling and nauseating. I can sense her pain as she weeps. I'm not sure if she's even in control of her body while she struggles to get her hands free from my grip. Tears and spit fly as she coughs and tries to control her breathing, but it's no use. The sobs leave her so hard and uncontrollable that I wouldn't be surprised if she can't see in front of her.

"*Ian!*" His name escapes through a scream.

Her knees give out, and I settle her into my lap on the ground. My chest hurts for her, but I continue to hold her until she can control her breath. There's so much raw pain there that it's clear she hasn't dealt with whatever happened.

The sniffles stop eventually, and all that's left is the sound of our breaths until she breaks it with a harsh sentence. "You need to leave."

“No,” I say, firmly. “*No.*” We’ve only started to break through this pain she has, and I’m not leaving until she gets it all out.

“*Bruce.*”

The dog is back at her side again, his teeth showing as he growls at me. There’s no fucking way that dog will let me near her.

“Going to hide behind the dog, huh?” I ask, standing up. “Fine, Samira. I don’t need you and your crazy bullshit.” I grab the cake and toss it in the trash can. “Have a nice fucking life.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven



“**Y**OU’RE CUT OFF, DEC.”

I shoot a glare at Jimmy from my spot at the bar. The back of his bald head shines and taunts me as he pours a drink for another customer.

“The fuck did you just say?” I call out to him.

“I said you’re fucking cut off.”

“The fuck I am. I own this shithole.”

Jimmy snorts. “Callum owns it, buddy. And you’ve had too much to drink.”

I stumble out of my seat, grab the pack of cigarettes beside me, and force myself to stand upright. The world spins, and the urge to upchuck is intense. “When I come back from my smoke, there better be a fucking drink in my spot. Or I’ll make sure you never work again.”

He places two fingers on his temple in salute, his eyes rolling with annoyance. And my drunk ass manages to get

outside for a hit of nicotine. The summer heat hits me the second the door to the bar opens. I lean against the wall to help my balance and light up a smoke. My eyes grow heavy with the first hit, and I close them.

Sammy's smile flashes in my head. Pretty pink lips, bright brown eyes. Soft hands brushing through my hair and beard. Yearning settles in my blood for a brief second before it's filled with rage. She lied. She turned me away.

My eyes snap open and I reach into the pocket of my trousers to grab my phone, but it isn't there. "Fuck." I must have left it inside. I need to go home, but not as much as I need another drink. I grip the doorknob and shove inside, plopping back into my seat. My phone is right there on the tabletop.

I raise the empty glass in front of me. "Why the fuck is this still empty, Jimmy?"

"Go home, Declan," Jimmy says.

And I'm just not in the mood to listen. Any other time he leaves me to my drinks, lets me do what I want. He's picked the wrong fucking day to decide he's going to be the hero in my story. I don't need saving. I need the bottom of a bottle and the barrel of a pistol inside of my mouth.

"Hey, man."

I turn around, grinning at my future brother-in-law. "Scotty. What's up, brother?"

He lets out a sigh and rests his elbow on the bar top. “Hey, man. Bar’s closing. Let’s get you home, okay?”

I shake my head. “No. I’m not ready to go home. Another,” I say, waving my empty glass in the air.

“You’re cut off,” Scotty says, his hand wrapping around mine to take the glass. “Jimmy’s worried about you. So, he called me.”

I press my fists to the bar top and stumble when I try to stand. The whole world goes upside down. And I know everyone is right. I don’t need anything else to drink. I’m rightly fucking smashed. Still. It’s not enough when I can feel this pain deep inside of my bones. Scotty reaches out and catches me.

“Fine. I’ve got stuff at home. I just didn’t wanna be alone, you know?” The words come out, but they’re like mush stuck to the roof of my mouth. I’m not sure how much was understandable.

“What’s wrong, buddy? Why don’t you want to be alone?” Scotty wraps his arm around my neck, stabilizing me as he guides me toward the exit.

“Thanks, Scotty!” Jimmy calls.

My foot gets caught on the threshold of the door and I tumble over, practically taking Scotty with me.

He lets out a pained grunt, helping me to stand. “Christ. How much have you had to drink?”

“Not enough.” I double over. “Fuck I’m gonna upchuck.”

“Oh, dude. I swear if you puke in my car, I will drop you at the bottom of the Charles.”

“A nap with the fishes.” I can’t help but laugh as the vomit pours from me, not giving a shit that we’re in the middle of the walkway. “Sounds wonderful. Let’s go.”

“Shut up and get in the car.”

I kick off my vomit-covered sneakers, leaving them where they are, then make my way toward the parked car in front of us. I hit the unlock button on the key fob right before he rips open the passenger door. When I go to open it, the door doesn’t budge.

“Calm down, big guy,” Scotty mumbles. He pulls out his keys, then unlocks the door and helps me get settled.

The engine roars to life, and my chest hums with the sound, despite this shitty night.

“Dec.” Scotty lets out a huff, pulling into the street. “I thought we stopped this.”

My fists clench in anger, and I glance out of the window, choosing not to respond. Not while the pain is too raw. Being without her is too hard. I bite the inside of my lip. Fuck, the last time I’d said that I meant Cara. Now? Now *her* is Samira, and I’m a waste of oxygen if I can’t get my shit together for her.

I’d been cruel to her. She was hurting, raising her children alone. And I made her feel like a dick for hiding her secrets

from me. *I hurt her. Placed my hand around her throat, even knowing choking was her hard limit.*

“It’s not healthy to keep drinking so much. Forget the fact that it’s reckless and if our enemies know they can find you on a barstool, wasting away, they can use that to hurt the family. This is about your mental and physical health,” Scotty says when I don’t answer him.

“Mental health?” I let out a boisterous laugh. “My mental health has been fucked since the day Cara killed herself, Scotty. I’ll never get any sort of clarity.”

“Then you need to seek professional help, not the bottom of the bottle.”

“Fuck that. No one can help me. Do you know what it’s like to always relive the worst day of your life? To wake up and see it, smell it, hear it over and over?” I tap a finger against my temple. “I’m a fucking prisoner to my mind. One more death, Scotty. One more murder, and I don’t know if I can take it. I pray every day I’ll wake up and I’ll forget who I am. What I’ve done. But there is no god to save me. There is *nothing* to shut it off.”

“Stop it, man,” he says, his voice low and broken.

“The alcohol helps, Scotty. It makes the images distort; it takes away my pain. I thought ...” My voice trails into nothingness, a soft laugh leaving me. “I thought she would. But she fucking lied to me.”

“Who?” he ask, his brows furrowing.

But I don't answer. I let sleep take me from the pain.



Cold water splashes in my face, pulling me from a deep sleep. I shoot up, let out a sharp gasp, and look around the room. I'm in Saoirse's living room. The scent of alcohol seeping through my pours makes my stomach turn sour.

"Fuck!" I shout when more water dumps over the top of my head.

"Oh good," Saoirse sings. "You're awake."

"Yeah, because you dumped water on me like a sadist."

She lets out a huff, one hand on her hip, the other dangling a towel in front of me. I swipe at it and start drying off my upper body.

"If I'm a sadist, you're a masochist. Drinking yourself into a stupor. Making my husband leave in the middle of the night to get your ass before you wind up in jail again," she says.

"Technically, you're not married yet."

"Semantics. Get your shit together. Stop drinking away the pain. It's time to move on."

"Move on?" I ask, standing. "You don't know what it's like for me to be trapped in that day. Over and over again."

“She was Scotty’s sister, Dec. I have plenty of an idea.”

I scoff, shaking my head. “Yeah? What was the last thing she said to him?”

She doesn’t answer as I stand and rip off the soaked t-shirt. “The last picture she drew? The last song she listened to? What was she wearing when she took her life? What did her suicide note say?”

She swallows, shaking her head. “I’m not saying you have to forget her. I’m saying you have to wake up and live your life.”

I drag a hand through my hair and shake my head. “You don’t fucking get it,” I say through gritted teeth.

“Then tell me!” Saoirse shouts. “Tell me so I can understand why you do this.”

Scotty steps into the room, dressed in a crisp black suit and ready for whatever it is he’ll be needed for today. I glance at the clock above the bookshelf and sigh. It’s nine in the morning, and I’ve officially missed the brothers’ monthly morning meeting. He’s been going to them ever since he and my sister announced their engagement.

“Fuck,” I sigh, shaking my head. “I missed the meeting.”

“I covered for you. Told them you had the flu.” He stuffs his hands into his pockets. “Though I’m sure Jimmy will tell Callum about last night.”

“Thanks.” I drape the towel around my neck. “I should get back to the hotel to change. Callum has my schedule packed with business meetings.”

“Did you not hear me? I told them you have the flu. You’re off for the week. And you should take that time to focus on sobering up. It’s not good for you to get like this, bro.”

“I need work,” I say.

“Well, you should have thought about that before you got shitfaced and puked in my car,” Scotty says.

Saoirse cups my face, forcing my attention toward her. “I’m worried about you, big brother. You’re sick, and the only person who can help you is yourself.”

She presses her forehead against mine.

“Okay,” I whisper, a stray tear falling down my cheek.

“Good.” She pulls away and her hands fall on her hips again. “And for the record? Sammy’s husband *was* killed. She wasn’t lying.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight



“STOP MOPING,” VEE SAYS from her desk across from mine in the home office.

I glance up from the monitor and shoot her a glare. “I’m not moping.”

“That frown on your face while you stare blankly at your computer screen says otherwise. When are you going to call him?”

I scoff. *Call Declan?* It’s been five days of radio silence. We both made it clear we don’t want to see the other person, and that will not change just because I miss him enough to be sad about it. He acted like a jerk when he pinned me against the counter. Was it because I may have been having an anxiety attack spurred on from the PTSD of being attacked in that very kitchen? Probably. But he had no right to do it, no matter how much he felt I owed him.

My lack of coming clean about the truth doesn’t mean I should excuse his behavior. Maybe if we had sat down like

adults and talked about it. Instead, he let anger rule his actions. *He hurt me.* Maybe not physically, but emotionally. I was fucked by how he handled the situation. Things were said by both of us we can't take back.

“Never,” I finally answer her question. “I’m never calling him. He was a complete jerk and was in the wrong.”

“You strung him along, Sammy. You hurt the poor boy. Lied to him.”

My breathing picks up, fury in my veins at her words. “I did not lie to him. I told him from the beginning what I wanted. He didn’t need to know the rest, and that’s not my fault. He’s the only one who can be blamed for any other outcome than the one where we slept together for fun. No strings attached.”

I blow out a slow huff. If I keep talking about this, my blood pressure is going to skyrocket. I pick up my phone when the text notification sounds, read the message from Saoirse, and then let out a groan.

“What is it?” Vee asks. “Is it him? Did he send you a dick pic?”

I shake my head.

“Then who?”

“It’s nothing important.”

She purses her lips, watching me closely with skepticism. Then she rounds her desk and hurries toward me. I lock my phone in a frenzy, already knowing she’s coming for it. Her hands reach out and I clutch it toward my chest.

“No,” I say through clenched teeth.

“Hand it over.”

She works to pry my fingers off the device one by one. I don't fight too hard because she won't unlock it without the code. She realizes that and tosses me a side eye as she returns to her desk.

“Vee,” I warn. “Give me back my phone.”

“Not until you tell me what the text was.”

She taps some more, then lets out a disbelieving laugh. “Really? I cracked the code on the first try. Ian's birthday?”

“Fuck off,” I say without any true malice behind the words. I return to my work, not wanting to feed into her.

“Saoirse is inviting you to a party on Saturday.”

“I'm aware,” I deadpan.

“Does she know you're fucking her brother?”

“*Fucked*. Been there, done that, no thank you.”

She rolls her eyes, waving a dismissive hand in the air. “Whatever. Does she know?”

“I don't know. Probably. Considering I stayed in his room in the hotel that she owns. And got a massage with him.”

Vee's eyes practically pop out of her head. “You didn't tell me you got a couples' massage with him, Samira!”

I roll mine. “It didn't matter.”

“The party is on Saturday and your dad is still here. You’re going.”

I shake my head. “No. Absolutely not. No mixing business with pleasure. Look where it’s gotten me.”

Vee texts Saoirse back anyway. “I’ll go with you. I can be the buffer between you guys. Everything will be fine.”

I groan. “What if I just want to lie in bed all weekend and not deal with this?”

“You can’t hide from your problems; you need to face them head on. And I’ll be with you.”

“Fine, but if he shows up, I’m stabbing him.”

“If he shows up, I’ll stab him for you. How does that sound?” she asks, tossing my phone back to me.



Vee grips my elbow as she knocks on the front door of Saoirse’s brownstone. I’m holding the gift bag of wine, but the grip she’s got on me is to make sure I don’t run. Because if she didn’t cling to me, I’d be in my car and peeling out of the driveway. *I don’t want to be here. Why did I let her talk me into this?*

“I hate you,” I mumble under my breath.

She tugs me closer to her. “You love me. Without me, you’d be under the covers moping over a man you claim to have no feelings for.”

I’ve never claimed not to have feelings. It’s just that I’ve been very clear on what I can handle emotionally right now. I open my mouth to clarify that, but the door swings open, and I’m greeted by a brunette with a growing belly. *Haley*. I’ve never met her before now, but Saoirse has talked about her oldest brother’s fiancé. I haven’t met Callum either, but from what I’ve heard, he’s just as scary-looking as Declan when it comes to height, build, and tattoos. Damn it, I really need to get on social media and stalk these people.

Haley wears a pair of maternity jeans, the nude color belly support band peeking out from beneath her white t-shirt. She eyes us up and down, then plasters a smile on her face. “Sammy, right?” she says, stepping aside to let us in.

“That’s me. And this is Vee,” I say, following her into the house.

“I’m Saoirse’s sister-in-law, Haley. Come on in. Saoirse’s in the living room. We’ve kicked the men to my place, so Scotty is gone.”

Guys’ night. My chest deflates with relief. The thought that this could have been an ambush to get me and Declan together is pushed away knowing that even Scotty isn’t here.

Haley leads us to the living room, where Saoirse stares with her chest out, glaring at another man.

“I don’t care what you want, it’s my job to be here. You want me gone? Take it up with your brothers.” His blue eyes dance with amusement despite the dark tone he’s using with Saoirse. The sleeves of his black dress shirt are rolled up while she flicks him the bird.

“That’s Finn,” Haley sighs, rolling her eyes. “Just pretend he’s not here.”

Finn turns toward us, gives me a once-over, then turns to Vee. “Forgive me,” he says, his back straightening. “Usually, I’m not such a dick. Saoirse is being—”

“Watch your word choice,” Saoirse snaps. “Or I’ll tell Scotty that you hurt my feelings.”

“*Stubborn*,” he says, side-eying her. He turns back to us. “Nice to meet you, *Mrs. Cullen*.”

I flinch at the harsh way he says my name. As if he knows I lied to Declan as if he’s mad at me on Declan’s behalf. “Veronica.” He dips his head toward her.

“Go sit in the kitchen or something,” Saoirse snaps.

“Gladly.” Finn brushes past us.

Saoirse smiles at me, then heads for me with a hug. “Thanks for coming.”

“No problem,” I say as she hugs Vee next. “I brought wine.”

“Not fair,” Haley grumbles, plopping onto the couch. She rubs her stomach.

“Sorry,” I say. “How is your pregnancy going?” I move to sit beside her while Saoirse and Vee sit on the opposite one together.

Vee moves for the tray of food in the center of the coffee table and dips a carrot into hummus.

“It’s going. I expect it would be easier with singles. I’m ready for it to be over and I have three more months.”

“Know what you’re having yet?” I ask.

“Girls. Fraternal. Thank God. I don’t know if I could have two little Callums running around. You haven’t met him yet, right?”

“I haven’t. He was at the hotel opening, but I didn’t get the chance to say hi. “

“We’ve met Sean and Declan,” Vee interjects. “Not Callum or the other... Patrick.”

“Sean?” Haley asks.

“We worked with him for security for the opening,” Vee says.

“Ahh,” Haley smirks, glancing toward Saoirse. “That’s why Finn is here. He’s been put on babysitting duty. Saoirse isn’t happy about that.”

I raise a brow, but lean forward, curiosity driving me. “Babysitting duty?”

“The guards call it that when they get stuck with the women.” Haley sips her water.

“Guards?” Vee says it before me.

Saoirse groans, waving a dismissive hand. “It’s just security measures. We’ve had threats in the past.”

Threats, guards. I guess it makes sense, even if Scotty is only running for mayor. The Murphy’s net worth is more than Ian’s family ever was. Maybe if I’d had guards following me around, he’d still be here. My breathing picks up, the way it has been whenever I think about that night. Declan coming over triggered my anxiety. I’d been working through it but having him there unwelcomed stirred those awful memories around.

I still need to decompress from it.

My heart rate picks up. “So, girls’ night. How often do you get together?” Vee asks.

“We try to once a week,” Saoirse says. “Sometimes twice if we get a good buddy read going and need to talk about it more.”

“Oh. What books are we reading?” I ask.

“Monster dick,” Haley cuts in. “Alien porn, the paranormal, werewolf knotting, nasty as fuck, dirty sex.”

Saoirse shoots her sister-in-law a wide eyed look. “Haley. Christ. Ease them into it.”

Vee snorts. “I don’t read much monster stuff. But I have an octopus dildo.”

“Oh my God.” I let out a gasp, the wine spurting out of my nose. “Vee.”

She shrugs. “They started it.”

“What do you read?” Saoirse asks, glancing at me.

I shrug. “Lately I’ve been reading a lot of... *dark* stuff.”

Haley raises an inquisitive brow. “Try us.”

I swallow hard, not wanting to discuss the history behind my choice of stories.

“Tell them,” Vee whispers. “It’s good to talk about it with people.”

Saoirse nods. “We’re good to keep your secrets, Sammy. We all have things building up inside of us that need to be let out before they destroy us.”

My heart pounds so hard I can barely focus. “I never really told anyone how Ian died.” I turn to Haley. Saoirse knows his name. “My husband.”

Haley offers a sympathetic smile. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Thanks.” My voice cracks. “Anyway. It was a home invasion. He wasn’t supposed to be there. He—The men...I think they were there just to rape me? I don’t know. But the things they said. The things they did.”

My blood turns to ice at the memory. *Cold hands pinning me down. Hot breath in my ear telling me how they were going to fuck me, kill me, then fuck me more.*

“Ian stopped them. He came home for lunch, and he walked in on it before they could hurt me. They killed him.” My entire body goes numb. “Sometimes I fantasize about how that night could have been different. And... I don’t know.” I shrug. “I pretend like both the men died, and Ian is still alive. That I’m the one who is dead. So, I’ve been reading a lot of books that have suicide in them.”

Slowly, I glance around the room, everyone staring at me in shock. “I’d never do it,” I rush out, shaking my head. “I wouldn’t *ever* leave my kids behind. But the way those characters feel makes me feel like my situation isn’t so fucking bad.”

“It’s an escape,” Haley says. “Do you talk about it with a therapist?”

No. I’m too scared too. What if I admit the ideations and they take me away from my kids? They can’t afford to lose two parents. “I go to one for the anxiety,” I say. “But I don’t take medication for it. I’m doing some self-defense classes and that seems to help.” *Until Declan fucked it all up.*

“I’ve been into the sweet rom-com lately,” Vee says, switching the topic with ease, giving me an out without drawing any attention to it. “Some of the backstories can get really dark, and I like how the main characters use humor to get through their shit.”

That is so totally, Vee. She hides behind her smile and crude jokes like a shield of armor. I’ve never learned the reason

behind it. I always thought she'd tell me whenever she was ready.

“That’s true,” Haley says. “I use dark humor to deal with my trauma.”

“The monster shit gets me hot because I feel like Scotty has this darkness in him he’s scared to let out,” Saoirse says. “Like I totally picture him as the horned devil that haunts the love interest. Plus, it’s this gruff asshole that kills humans, but is sweet on his girl.” Her cheeks turn a bright rosy shade. “Scotty’s my grump.”

“Anyway,” Vee says. “See. We’re all into whatever because of shit in our life. So, you’re not alone there.” She gives me one of her bright smiles.

The doorbell rings and Saoirse stands. “Dinner is here.”

The rest of the evening goes by without a hitch. Saoirse and Haley don’t mention Declan, and I wonder if they even know about us. Maybe inviting me here had just been a coincidence, and they really were just trying to bring me into the folds of their friendship.

We finish the evening with Vee and I stumbling out of the house and Finn driving my car back home for us. I’d drunk way too much by accident, and was going to call us an Uber, but he insisted it was his job to get us home safely and didn’t mind.

Grateful not to have to come back for my car in the morning, so I didn’t argue. I planned for my mom to drop off two cakes

to Saoirse's house for testing, and still, she didn't bring up Declan.

"She totally knows about Dec," Vee says through a hiccup. "I mean the fact she brought up the cake thing and asked for you to just bring them to her. He told her."

I shoot a longing glance out of the window, arms crossed over my stomach. "Nah. Maybe he just told her our schedules couldn't sync up," I defend.

Finn glances at us through the rearview mirror. "She totally knows. We all know."

Vee shoots daggers at the back of his head.

"Know what?" I ask, narrowing my eyes. My chest ached, suddenly completely aware that I may not see him again aside from Saoirse's wedding in two weeks.

"You broke his heart, you know?" Finn says, glaring at me through the mirror. "He can't stand liars. And you lied."

Finn brings the car to a halt. "We're here, *Mrs. Cullen*."

Thank fuck. I push on the door handle and hurry out of the car, suddenly feeling nauseous.

Chapter Twenty-Nine



“**M**OM!” EM SCREAMS FROM downstairs. I let out a sigh, not ready to get out of bed. I’m hungover from last night, exhausted, hungry, sick. The list of reasons for my bed as the better option than whatever real-life responsibilities are endless.

Her footsteps sound from the hallway, then the door cracks open, letting in light. I shrivel beneath the covers like a vampire being forced to face the daylight.

“Mom.” She taps on the door. “Gram and Pop are here. She needs your help getting the cake to the hotel.”

I groan. God. Today is the day. How has it already been two weeks? I’ve been going through the motions. Getting the kids up and ready for day camp or whatever else they had going on this summer. Thank God for Vee. She’s been fielding all the work that needed to be done at the hotel so I could avoid Declan. She even handled the rehearsal last night.

But there's no more avoiding today. No more pretending he doesn't exist. *I'm going to see him at the wedding in just a few hours.* Em heads to Ian's side of the bed and crawls in beside me. I turn over to curl her against me, my arm resting on her stomach.

"I miss him a lot today," she whispers.

My eyes snap open, catching sight of the photo of him on the nightstand. He's holding her when she's just a small baby, only a few hours old and still in the hospital.

I press a kiss on her cheek. "I miss him a lot every day."

"Do you think you'll ever move on?"

My breath catches. I don't respond, too focused on not breaking into a fit of tears in front of her.

"It's healthy, Mom. It's okay to find someone else to be happy with."

"Yeah." My voice cracks. "But I have you and Max."

"And one day we will be adults with our own families. I don't want you to be alone."

I let out a slow exhale. Then I poke her in the side. "Are you giving me permission to date?" I ask, my tone light and joking.

She lets out a snort. "As long as you're home by ten and refrain from public displays of affection."

"Wow." I let out a low laugh. "Tough crowd."

She squeezes my hand. "I'm serious, Mom. Max said some dude was here a couple of weeks ago. Was he... your ...

boyfriend?”

“No,” I say, too fast. “He was here to grab the cakes.”

And that’s all, I tell myself. I mean it too. I don’t think I can get over what he did to me. How he brought me back to the worst day of my life.

“Fine. But if he was. If you were trying to date? It would suck. But I’d understand and be okay with it.”

“Samira,” Mom’s voice comes from the hall. She slides into the room, and I offer her a smile. “Honey, we need to get going. What are you still doing in bed?”

I groan, tucking my head into the crook of Em’s neck. “I quit.”

“You can’t quit,” Em laughs. “It’s your business. And I like having food on the table. So, get up and get to it.”

Mom draws back the blankets and grabs my arms. “Let’s go. Shower, fast, before this cake melts.”



“Whoa, you’re gorgeous.”

Vee stands behind Saoirse, mouth a gape as she stares at her in the floor to ceiling length mirror. And she’s right. The mermaid cut on Saoirse makes her look like a princess.

“Fucking hot,” Haley agrees.

I offer a grin, then drape her veil over her face. “The most beautiful bride in Boston,” I say.

“Scotty is in place,” Vee tells us. “Five minutes.”

Saoirse nods. “Where’s my dad?”

A throat clears from the entrance, and all of us turn toward the sound. Callum Jr. steps forward. “Da isn’t feeling well. He asked if I’d do the honors of walking you down the aisle.”

Saoirse snaps her attention to me, tears threatening to spill out, and my heart breaks for her. Not having your father give you away on your special day is something no one should have to deal with. Luckily, the day has gone smoothly. No hiccups, so I’ll take this minor one. I can fix this easily.

“Where is Senior sitting?” I ask, turning to Callum. “End seat?”

My heart pounds, a rhythmic swooshing happening in my head. It causes my ears to sting with the sudden blood rush, and I stand straighter. I’ve never met him. But I’ve heard of him. Callum Murphy Jr. was a few years ahead of Ian and me at Harvard. There’d been rumors of him I never thought to believe.

People talk and exaggerate, but now, seeing him here before me, covered in tattoos and a dark gleam in his green eyes, I believe them. Whispers of Callum’s family being tied to organized crime. I always chalked them up to families like

Ian's just pissed off that the Murphy's could climb the social ladder.

Declan is broody, but I'd never think of him as a criminal. He made me feel safe from the moment we met in the club. But Callum gives me a sense of danger, and I wonder how much of what I've heard is true.

He nods. "Da is in the front row," he says in an Irish brogue.

"Okay." I suck in a breath. "Saoirse, honey. What if your brother walks you down the aisle? Then we get your father up and standing to give you away?"

"Declan can help stand," Callum offers, glancing at Haley.

Saoirse's bottom lip quivers. "But... what about my father-daughter dance?"

I don't miss a beat, offering a solution just as quickly as she's asking it. "We'll tap them out. It'll be a father-daughter-brother dance. Get him up there for pictures and a quick twirl, then give each brother a chance. Most of those dances end with an uncle or grandfather cutting in any way."

"Okay. Fine." She pulls me into a hug. "Thank you, Sammy."

"Of course," I say, rubbing her back. "Let's get you married."

"Yeah," she says through a snuffle.

"All right. Bridal party. Head on out through the left side," I say. "Vee, get the music started."

Vee, Haley and the rest of the party slide out of the room until I'm left with only Callum and Saoirse. Callum holds out his arm and together they slide out of the room, down the hall and into the grand ballroom.

I follow behind them, and when we get to the doors, hand Saoirse her bouquet. "You've got this," I whisper, flashing her a wink. The organist starts up the song, and the grand doors slide open. Then, Callum leads his sister down the aisle, toward a smiling Scotty.

Butterflies settle in my stomach as I watch him watch his bride, a tear falling from his cheek. This is usually my favorite part of a wedding. Seeing the bride through the eyes of the groom. Except this time, I can't shake the gnawing feeling that I'm being watched. And when my eyes land on the culprit, I have to refrain from flipping him the bird. Classy Samira is in place today. I've got a business reputation to uphold, and scowling at the bride's brother while cursing him out with hand gestures would be bad for business. Instead, I tear my gaze from him. He won't get any of my attention today.

Chapter Thirty



THE CROWD LETS OUT cheers and laughter as Scotty presses a slice of cake to Saoirse's face. My sister shrieks, then shoves a piece against him. It results in an all out food fight, my brothers joining in to cask the groom for touching our baby sister. Scotty doesn't find it as hilarious as we do, and he cusses us out while I search the room for Sammy.

It doesn't take me long to find her. She's in those sexy black stilettos, her hair pulled out of her face, and she wears a navy dress with lace sleeves. Her lips are red today, to match the red bottoms of her shoes and the bright red clutch stashed beneath her armpit.

She's standing beside Haley, one hand on her stomach, a bright smile in place. The babies must be kicking, because Sammy's eyes light up before she slides her hand to a lower spot on her belly. There's a tightness in my chest as I watch her with the mother of my nieces.

She avoided me all day. Hell, she avoided me since the night I arrived at her home uninvited and blew everything up. Haley heads off toward the bathroom, and then my doll is alone, her gaze traveling around the room.

When it lands on me, she freezes for the briefest of seconds before pulling her gaze away. She continues to scan the room, and I continue to watch her, unable to stop. We may be in a crowded setting in a public place, but we're in a room full of criminals, and I don't trust one of them for a second.

The New York Irish, Italians, and Russians are here, as well as a few Boston and Miami Russians. Weddings are off limits, and there aren't any rivals happening right now. This is a rare point in our life where no one is fighting. Years of hard work, of me and my brothers working to keep the peace, and we might finally have it for a bit.

Sammy's eyes widen when she takes sight of something. Her entire body tenses, and the wineglass in her hand falls to the ground.

What the fuck did she see? I scan the area, not sure what could've spooked her. *The Russian.* The scarred one from the car accident approaches her. She takes a step back, her head shaking. He's there before I can get to her, despite my feet moving fast enough to be beside her in seconds.

My hand settles on her back as he glares at her with dark, dead eyes.

"Imagine that." He chuckles, never taking his eyes off her. "The Irish to your rescue, again." Then, he hurries off.

“Sammy? Are you okay, doll?” I ask, tugging her to my side.

Her body is rigid against me. “It’s nothing.” But her voice cracks, and I know it’s *something*.

I tug her toward the kitchen and outside. Her hands shaking as I slam the back door to the alley we’d been in all those weeks ago. Her bottom lip quivers when I press her back to the brick wall, crowding her just as I had back then.

“How do you know him?”

She shakes her head furiously. “I don’t.”

My palm slams against the wall beside her head. She flinches, her eyes squeezed shut, and a soft whimper escapes her.

“Don’t lie to me, Samira. He’s got you worked up. What’s going on?”

“No, Declan.” She snaps her eyes open. A finger shoves into my chest. “You have me worked up. Leave. Me. Alone.”

“You won’t tell me what he meant? About the Irish rescuing you?”

Her hands flail in the air. “I have no fucking clue what that means!”

She shoves at my chest, and I move back, freeing her. “I’ve never seen him before, okay? I don’t know what the fuck that means.”

“He seemed awfully familiar with you, Samira.”

Her throat works as she swallows. Then her back straightens, and she turns to me, defiance shining in her pretty brown eyes. “If I told you the truth, you’d call me a liar. So just leave me the fuck alone. You go live your life, and I’ll live mine. The wedding is over in a few hours, and we’ll never have to see each other again.”

I scrub a hand through my hair, tugging at it in frustration. “Fuck, Sammy. I’m sorry, okay? I believe you, and I shouldn’t have said those things. I let my anger control me.”

She tilts her head toward the sky and exhales. “How am I supposed to believe you? After what you did to me?” Her hand falls to the front of her neck.

Fuck. I bring myself to my feet, grab her wrist, and tug her into me. “Tell me what’s wrong, so I can help you.”

She doesn’t respond, just pushes her head to the side, so she doesn’t have to look at me. She’s not fighting me either, though.

“Sammy,” I sigh. “I need you, okay? My head is all kinds of fucked up, and you keep me grounded.”

“Don’t you get it, Declan? I can’t give you what you need.”

“Why not?”

She shakes her head, blinks back the tears threatening to spill, then makes eye contact with me. “It’s not just my heart on the line. There are three of us. I can’t ...” Her voice cracks. “I can’t let them fall for you, too. I have to protect them.”

“I’m not going anywhere.” My jaw clenches, not liking that she thinks we can walk away from each other so easily.

“Ian is dead. The man who killed him is inside that room.” She points to the door. “I have to distance myself from this for the sake of my kids.”

“Tell me so I can keep you safe. *All of you.*”

A simple tilt of her head, *no*. Then she pushes away from me. “I need to get back inside.”

She brushes past me, but I’m not finished. I need to know what her connection is to the man who hit us. I can’t keep her safe if I’m not sure who her enemies are, and why they’re coming for her. Her hand wraps around the handle of the door, but she pauses when I speak.

“Saoirse told me that Ian was killed.”

A disbelieving laugh escapes her. “I told you that.”

“You did, and I didn’t believe you. Who killed him?”

She turns to face me. Her eyes are sunken in, as if she hasn’t been sleeping. I force myself to stay in place despite the urge to go to her, to wrap her in my arms and take away the heartbreak. “She told me about Cara. And I just find it so sad that we were both too stubborn to tell each other about the pain we carry.”

Then she’s gone, leaving me alone in the alley while she heads back inside. I press my back against the brick, my head hitting it. The pain splinters from my skull, down my neck, and I savor it. I need a smoke before I head inside, before I

force a smile on my face while my chest aches with the need to find her when I know I shouldn't.

She's right. I should let her go. There's no moving on from the secrets we kept from each other. So, I light up a cigarette and pretend that my life isn't one giant fuck up.

Chapter Thirty-One



MY EYES BURN. I need to sleep, and the house is empty. Too fucking quiet when all I want is to hold my babies, to make sure they're safe. How hadn't I put the link together before? That the Murphys are what Ian's family and all the others said about them.

Criminals.

But they're more than that. They know the men who killed my Ian.

I head for the fridge, thankful Vee could stay behind and let me leave the reception before it ended. It'll be best for me to head back in the morning to clean up. I just had to get out of there. It was suffocating—between Declan following me around, the man with the scar confronting me, and the argument in the alleyway.

I pull out the bottle of wine from the back shelf and pop off the cork. I don't bother with a glass and take a swig straight from the bottle. Bruce brushes past me and to the back door. I

head toward him to let him outside. He books it off the patio and up toward the grassy area to do his business. Then we both head back inside.

He takes off upstairs to get in bed, no doubt. I lock the back door, then head for the living room to put on some reality TV. The background noise will be welcomed. Hopefully, it'll silence the noise in my head.

A hand wraps around my mouth, and I let out a muffled scream.

The scent of cigarettes and fire. It's not the familiarity of bergamot, or the gentle touch of Declan. *It's an intruder.* My eyes widen, and I try to kick at his feet, but he holds me against him. I glance around for Bruce. He hasn't come down, and I need to make enough noise he knows something is wrong.

"Batman!" I scream against the hand pressed to my mouth. The word comes out as a soft cry, and not his name. *Bruce.*

My heart slams against my sternum.

God, please don't tell me I spent all this money on a dog that won't be able to save me when I actually need him to.

I kick my foot out, shoving against the end table. The lamp falls to the floor in a loud crash.

"Stop fucking fighting." The man grunts.

His breath is hot against my neck, and I'm immediately back to that day five years ago. Frozen, despite the self-defense classes. Helpless.

Bruce lets out a piercing bark as he barrels down the stairs. He bares his teeth and runs right for us, barking and snarling. He lunges for the man, biting the arm wrapped around me. The intruder lets out a grunt but releases me in reaction to the pain.

I drop to the ground and scurry away while Bruce lunges for his throat. He clamps on, and he doesn't let go, shaking while the man screams in horror and falls to the ground.

"*Faus*," I cry out, tears falling while I scramble to stand. "Bruce! *Faus*."

He's already biting him. The command is just an echo in the back of the chaos, but I don't stop chanting it over and over while I run to the kitchen for my phone.

I only make it to the hall when the front door slams open. My heart lurches in my throat at the thought of more men coming through the door.

"Samira!" his familiar voice calls. I can't relax even knowing he is here. The beat of my pulse rushes through my ears. My throat constricting.

Declan stands in front of me, and all I can do is point toward the living room where Bruce is eating the intruder. I never even got a good look at him, but I still know it's the scarred man who got away all those years ago. The man from the wedding. Declan barrels past me and toward the screaming and barking.

"Fuck!" he shouts. "Samira, call him off!"

I stand, wide eyed, peering into the living room. Bruce still attacks. The man on the ground is on his back now, trying to shield himself from my good boy.

“Sammy, call him off, doll. I’m here, let me help.” Declan’s words are closer now, but softer, more soothing than earlier.

His hand presses against my cheek. “Sammy. I’m here. It’s okay. You’re safe.”

I chew on the inside of my lip, unable to take my eyes off the dog and the intruder. “Declan?”

“Yes, baby. It’s me. Call Bruce off. Go get him a treat for being such a good boy.”

My entire body shakes. “Bruce,” I say. “*Oust.*”

He listens, immediately releasing the man and hurrying to my side. I don’t even have to tell him to sit, he just does.

“Declan?” I say his name again, still not sure if he’s really here. I can feel him, can smell him, but I can’t take my eyes off the man lying on the ground to look for him.

“I’m here, baby,” he says. “Get the dog a treat, okay?”

I nod, but I don’t move as he enters the living room. Declan kneels over the man, clutches his shirt, and pulls him up into a sitting position. Blood is everywhere, and I thank god the kids aren’t here to see this.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” Declan asks.

The intruder doesn’t respond. Declan’s hand slams into his face. I stumble back, a gasp escaping me.

Bruce tugs at my shirt, gently leading me toward the kitchen. I follow, and he sits me on a chair at the table. His head nuzzles against my hand, demanding pats. Bruce may have been trained to protect us, but he's also very good at making sure I'm okay. And when I'm not, he forces me to give him attention until I'm pulled out of the haze, just like he is now.

Get him a treat. Declan's voice sounds in my head, while Bruce licks at my hand. His dark fur is painted red, and he leaves behind red streaks from his muzzle on my skin.

"Where are the kids?"

I whip my head toward the sound of Declan. He's beside me, his white dress shirt undone at the top, sleeves rolled up. Blood splatters coat his chest, arms, hands, my line of sight honing in on them, counting each one until I can speak.

"Farm."

"Good." He pulls out a chair and takes a seat beside me. He puts a single finger below my chin and pulls it toward him. "He's the one who killed Ian?"

I nod and press my head against his chest. "I feel like I'm going crazy."

"I know, doll." His fingers run through my hair as he shushes softly and kisses my head. "You're safe now."

"What are you going to do to him?" I ask.

"Sean is on his way. He'll take him to one of our warehouses for questioning."

“And then?”

I’m met with silence. I know his answer, but I ask anyway.

“Are you going to kill him?”

“Do you want me to?”

“Yes.”

His arms wrap around my back, squeezing me tighter into him. “Yes, doll. I’m going to kill him.”



Declan settles me into the bubble bath, then kneels on the floor beside it. He dumps a cup of water over my hair, then lathers in shampoo before rinsing it out. I haven’t spoken much, still in shock about what happened.

I want to tell him to leave, that I can take care of myself, but every time I open my mouth to say it, the words don’t leave.

He moves onto my body, scrubbing the blood from my fingers with a bristle brush. I remind myself who Declan is. That I’m mad at him. But my body still wants him, and my stupid, stupid heart lurches forward with the gentle way he cares for me.

He’s broken, and I am too. Yet our pieces fit together when I don’t want them to. He isn’t safe, even if my heart thinks he is.

His hands drag a soapy washcloth up my arms, over my breasts. The rag scrubs me beneath the water. My torso, thighs, down to my ankles, then back up to the apex of my thighs.

I can feel myself growing wetter, a tingling emptiness inside of me when he brushes the washcloth lightly over my pussy. It's wrong, and I know it. But I open my legs for him anyway.

The muscle in his jaw ticks, and he moves to pull his hand away, but I stop him, my nails digging into his forearm. He's going to kill the man who's been haunting my sleep.

That thought should disturb me, but it doesn't. It turns me on, and clearly, I need my head checked because I want to thank him for it. Want to take his pierced cock deep in my mouth and suck him until he's ready to combust with my name on his lips.

The need to forget what happened just an hour ago drives me to do stupid things, and he's here with his intoxicating spicy scent that always seems to calm me. My hand wraps around his wrist, and I slide lower until I'm guiding his finger inside of me.

"Sammy," he warns, his body stiff. The edge of the rolled sleeve falls under the water, and he yanks his hand away from my center.

"Please," I whisper.

He makes eye contact with me, searching for answers to questions he hasn't asked. Answers I don't have for him. His hands move to cup either side of my face and he strokes the

rough pads of his thumbs against my cheeks. We stare at each other in silence for a long moment. Then he pulls the tub stopper, and the water drains.

“I have something I want to show you.”

I grip the edge of the tub to stand. “What is it?” I ask after he pulls me out.

I don’t get an answer. He doesn’t let me move a muscle as he dries my body with a towel. Then he’s carrying me into my bedroom. I’m dropped on my bed, his body looming over me, and I stare up at him. Dark hair is tousled, ocean blue eyes peer down at me with lust, and that need to be with him causes me to arch my back off the mattress.

“When will the kids be home?” The question is breathy.

I lick my lips. “I’m driving there tomorrow and staying a few days.”

My eyes travel to his chest as he unbuttons the white dress shirt and reveals hardened muscle painted in colorful ink. Dark ink splatters his chest and torso in shapes of skulls and flowers. There’s a snake on the inside of his forearm that I hadn’t noticed before. I prop myself up on my elbows to soak in every glorious inch of him.

“What do you have to show me?” I ask.

The shirt slides off his body, and I reach for the belt looped around his waist. He doesn’t stop me, doesn’t respond, just peers down at me through hooded lashes, pupils blown. I undo the metal prong and yank it free from his pants.

With a flick of his wrist, he unbuttons them and slides them below his waist. His hand disappears into the boxers and returns a second later, hard cock in hand. The piercings are still there, angry veins throbbing as he fists himself.

He takes my hand in his other one and tugs me forward to grab him. I wet my lips in anticipation, pulling myself up to my knees. Then I see it. The dark ink scattering across the shaft of his cock. Letters scrawled in cursive.

Samira.

My chest inflates with something I can't quite place a finger on. It isn't a jealous emotion, nor is it one of excitement. It's almost like . . . I enjoy my name, my mark on him, but not if someone else put it there. My mouth falls open and my neck snaps up to stare at him.

“Who did this?” I release my grip and shoot out of bed.

“What?” he asks, turning to get a look at me.

“Who the fuck put my name on your *dick*?”

Declan shrugs, as if it's no big deal. “The same person who did the piercings.”

I close my eyes, hating the way a possessive hold takes over. It makes me irrational and crazy. But someone touched his dick. *My* dick. “Was it a woman?”

He drops his chin just a fraction of an inch, just enough to acknowledge me.

“Declan,” I say through gritted teeth. “You let another woman touch your dick.”

“It’s not a big deal, Sammy. Kat’s done all my work. She’s seen my dick before, baby. I promise, he only gets hard for you.”

His smug grin enrages me. I want to smack it off his face.

I step forward, fisting his cock again. This time I squeeze hard, my nails biting into the warm, velvety flesh. “It’s a big fucking deal.” My voice is low, controlled despite this weird feeling of not being in control rushing through me. “No one touches you again.”

“Are you... jealous?”

He grunts when I give a quick, hard tug in response.

“You think this is funny?” My nails glide down the length of his cock.

He hisses through his teeth, trying to control the pain I’m putting him through. “No, doll. I think it’s fucking hot.”

I cock my head to the side. “You enjoy testing me? Because I don’t like this.”

“What?”

“How crazy you’re making me feel.”

He offers me a grin before grabbing me by the throat and forcing me to look up at him. “That feeling in your chest?”

His mouth crashes against mine in a feral need. Teeth scrape along my tongue and lips. I moan, slick arousal coating my

naked thighs. I'm dripping for him, despite how angry I am, how much I want to find Kat and claw her eyes out.

“In your soul?” Declan's hand holds me tighter. “It's there for me too. It fucking eats me from the inside out every day, Samira. The thought of losing you is too fucking much.”

And isn't that what possessiveness is? A fear that the person you love will slip from your grip before you have the chance to claim them forever. I don't want that to happen to us. The hand around my throat moves to cup my jaw and he squeezes just enough that my teeth dig into the flesh of my cheek.

“You own me just as much as I own you. We just have to stop being so damn hard headed and accept that.” His forehead drops against mine, my breathing ragged as he holds me in place.

It's too raw, too real, and nothing like anything I've ever felt before. My hand is still wrapped around him. I stroke him, my grip less threatening and more coaxing. “You put my name on your body.”

“Yes,” he breathes.

“On your cock,” I say it with disdain, a bite of frustration in my voice. “Why not your heart?”

Declan chuckles. “I was running low on real estate. It was that or my ass.”

I move my head from his to glance between us, where my hand strokes him and I spit. It lands at the head of his cock, and I use it for lube. He hisses when I tighten my grip again,

but the sound that follows his first hint of pain is a feral growl that sends fire to my belly.

“Fuck, yes, doll.”

His words come back to me. He’s told me before the pain of the needle sinking into his flesh grounds him. Maybe this is like that. I can’t imagine the pain is enjoyable. I certainly prefer the endless amount of O’s over being bitten or slapped. But if it’s what he likes, I’ll give it to him. Or at least make him suffer while I still get my fill.

“You like when I hurt you?” I place a hand on his chest, still pumping him.

He bites his lip, his eyes on me when he nods his answer. I respond by digging my nails down his chest. Red, angry streaks appear, blood trickling down his chest. “Sammy,” he says through bated breaths.

“More?”

He nods, and I shove him back onto the bed. I straddle him, pressing my pussy right against his groin. The metal balls of his piercings stimulate all my sensitive nerves. I’m soaked, gliding against him easily. The friction makes me whimper with pleasure.

I drop my head and bite down on his shoulder. I’m not gentle about it, scraping my teeth lower until I find a nipple and take it into my mouth. His cock twitches beneath me. It causes my hips to swivel in circles, chasing an orgasm without ever letting him slide inside of my slick heat.

I give him one last bite and then I guide him inside of me. For a moment, I forget about the man who broke in, about the blood covering me just a bit ago, about how we're fighting for the cruel things we said to each other. None of that matters right now, as Declan's hands find my back and he makes soothing circles.

"Fuck, I didn't believe her," he groans.

I pick up the pace, riding him, taking him deep inside of me. My breasts bounce with the motion. "What?"

"It's so sensitive. The ink. I'm going to come already."

I growl, my hand finding his throat, and I squeeze. He lets out a pained grunt. "Are you talking about another woman while you're inside of me?"

His face turns red, eyes wide when I realize he's struggling for air. I clamp around him, the knowledge that I'm controlling something taken from me before now turning me on. I release him for a moment, letting him take in gulps of oxygen.

When he's caught his breath, he grins up at me. "You may not like when I choke you, but fuck did your sweet cunt strangle me while you took the air from my lungs." He grabs my hand and presses a kiss to the palm. "Again."

With his direction, I wrap my fingers around him again, pressing hard enough that he struggles to breathe. I ride him until my clit slides against his pubic bone just right, sending me over the edge. I climax with his name on my lips, and his hot cum shooting inside of me.

Chapter Thirty-Two



SAMMY: Why is Finn here? And why is he refusing to leave even though I told him you weren't here?

Declan: I asked him to sit with you until I finish this up.

Sammy: Tell him to go home, now.

Declan: Absolutely not. He stays until I get home to you.

Sammy: Are you forgetting that I'm nine years older than you? I don't need a babysitter.

Declan: Samira, you own a fucking murderous guard dog because you're scared of being home alone. You shake every time a sudden noise is too loud, and three days ago you the man who killed your husband attempted to kill you. If you think I'm leaving you alone without protection while I'm not around to keep you safe, then you need to reevaluate your expectations of how a man is supposed to react when his woman is threatened.

Sammy: Ian died protecting me. I don't need another man's death on my hands.

Declan: I'm not dying anytime soon.

“Writing a novel over there?” Scotty asks from across the room.

I ignore my new brother-in-law, slip my phone back into my pocket, and just because I can, I punch the useless piece of shit in front of me dead square in the nose.

The skin on my knuckles peels off, my blood mixing with his as he sits in the basement of one of our warehouses. His face is unrecognizable now. Nothing adds up, and it pisses me off.

It's a good thing I have this perfectly good punching bag to take out my aggression. Three days of no answers. My patience is running thin.

I can't shake the pictures in my head. Sammy's head on my chest, tears flowing while his blood covered her. The sound of screams when she took in the irony of how things circled back to the beginning. Death of the man who ruined her life in the same kitchen five years later.

“Why were you at the Cullens?” I ask.

“To get my dick sucked.”

I slam my fist into his face. Over and over.

“Enough,” Scotty calls. He comes out of the shadows, a pitcher of water in one hand, a dishrag in the other. “Let me have my fun with him, Dec. I'll make him sing his crimes.”

“It’s mine,” I say through a growl. *My girl, my confession to extract.*

“You forget my area of expertise.” Scotty tilts his head to the side, taking in the broken appearance of the man who hurt Sammy. Not once, not twice, but three times.

“Is this a hired kill?” Scotty asks.

The Russian spits at his feet, blood spurting all over Scotty’s polished dress shoes.

Scotty grips the man’s jaw and snaps his head up. “I’m going to kill you.” He stuffs the cloth into his mouth, then plugs his nose. “Then bring you back to life.” He dumps the water over the man’s head. “Then kill you again.” The pitcher empties, and he tosses it to the ground. “Over, and over, and over. Until I get my answers.”

I cross my arms. “He’s not lying, man. He’s the Frogman. I’m sure you’ve heard of him?”

The Russian’s eyes widen when he recognizes the name. Scotty, the Navy SEAL, is obsessed with waterboarding; getting off on drowning someone until they’re on the brink of death, only to pull them from the angels calling to them.

I wouldn’t want my death to come by Scotty’s hands, and neither does this man.

“Fine!” he screams through a fit of coughs. “I’ll talk! Just stop, please.”

Scotty shoots me a smug smirk, crosses his arms, and walks in circles around the tied up man. “Were you a hired kill?”

“Yes.”

“Who hired you?” I ask.

“Amelia Cullen.”

Ian’s mother.

“Why?”

“No idea. She only gave us a name, address, and time. The stupid bitch fucked up, though. Got her own son killed.”

“And the car accident? There’s still a mark on her after all this time?”

He shrugs. “I saw her with you and decided to have a little fun.”

“Why were you at the wedding?”

“I’ve been following her since I realized she was linked to the Irish. Seeing how protective you were over her?” He lets out a strangled laugh. “Well, it was just the tip of the iceberg. It was her time to go. So I went to her house.”

My heart breaks. I don’t want to tell Sammy this truth. How am I going to break the news to her that Ian’s mother is responsible for his death? Will she even believe me, and if she does, will she forgive me for being the one to uncover that truth?

I don’t show any emotion, just reach for the gun tucked behind the waistband of my jeans, point and pull the trigger.



“Oh my God. There’s chicken shit on the counter!”

I freeze in my spot, standing at the entrance of Sammy’s kitchen. A younger version of her stands in only an oversized t-shirt, wet dark hair dangling in front of her face as she stares at what I can only imagine is chicken shit.

What the fuck did I get myself into? She hasn’t noticed me yet. I can sneak back out and pretend like I’m not here. Run for the hills and make up an excuse and never come back.

When I came by this morning to relieve Finn, I hadn’t thought of the fact her children would be here. Alive, taking up space. I take my socks and shoes off, leaving them next to the others piled there.

“Have you seen Violet?”

I whip my head around to see a little boy wandering in. He’s at least clothed appropriately in basketball shorts and a t-shirt. He stops, eyes narrowing at me. “Batman!” he screams.

I raise a hand. “No.”

Nails clank on the tile floor and there he is, the muscular Doberman Pinscher. My arch nemesis. I jump up onto a bar

height stool by the island. Bruce comes right for me, snarling as I claim higher ground and hop onto the counter.

“What the fuck?” Sammy Junior screeches, neck craning to glare at me. “Eww! Why aren’t you wearing underwear?! I can see your nuts.”

Oh shit. I ran home to shower and get out of my suit, threw on an old pair of gym shorts and a tee and hurried on over. Did I forget boxers? *Fuck*. I glance down at the dog and use a hand to cover my jewels. I raise a hand in a fist, then say the word I’d heard Sammy say all those weeks ago. “Batman ... *Sitzen*.”

“No, Bruce. Not *Sitzen*. Eat this fucker’s balls.”

Sweat drips down my forehead. The dog doesn’t listen to me. I can’t even get mad at him, because he’s only doing his job. He’s protecting my woman and her family. “God damn it,” I say. I know absolutely zero German. Couldn’t it have been Russian? I know a few phrases thanks to Scotty.

“Sammy!” I scream. “Samira!” *Where the fuck is she?*

“Should we say it?” Sammy Junior asks, a wild glint in her eyes.

She steps back, smirking at her little brother. God, she’s serious. She’s going to demand the dog to attack me. “*Bite*,” she croons. “Brucey boy, come on. You can do it.”

“Max,” I say, forcing a smile so I don’t come off like a dickhead. “Come on, bud. I’m a friend of your moms. Don’t you remember?”

Her mouth screws into a pout. “Oh right. I have to tell him to *bite* in German.”

She opens her mouth. She’s going to say it, I have no doubt, and the devious little grin she wears only cements the thought.

“What in the world?”

My head snaps toward her voice. Sammy approaches, a black satin robe wrapped tightly with a ribbon around her waist. Her hair is pulled into a loose bun at the top of her head. “Bruce, *platz*.”

He moves to lie down, and I let out a sigh of relief, uncovering my balls now that the threat is gone. She’s beside me now, her fingers wrapping around mine and tugging me to the ground.

“Declan, what are you doing here?”

“Judging by his free-ball status, he’s here to get laid,” Sammy Junior mumbles.

Momma Bear snaps her gaze toward her daughter. “What?”

“He assaulted my eyeballs! I need bleach, stat.”

Oh, Jesus Fuck. “It was an accident,” I say through gritted teeth.

“It was an accident that you flashed me with your old man balls?” She crosses her arms, one humorous brow drawn. “Mom, your boyfriend is a perve.”

“Okay, first, he’s not my boyfriend. And second, why were you looking up his pants?” She whips her head toward me.

“And why are you not wearing underwear? That’s gross.”

That’s what she acknowledges?

I open my mouth to respond, but stop when I hear a soft snuffle behind me.

“Mommy?” Max whispers, tears in his eyes. “I can’t find Violet.”

“Fuck,” Sammy mutters under her breath. She plasters a smile on her face. “I’m sure she’s around. Let’s look.”

“Violet?” I ask.

“No, Nuts McGee. You’re leaving,” Sammy’s spawn says.

“Em!” Sammy shouts. “Violet is his chicken. He brought her home with him from my parents.”

Em lets out a belly busting laugh. “Hate to break it to you, bud, but there’s chicken shit all over the counter, yet no bird in sight. Batman probably ate the fuck out of that thing.”

“Language!” Sammy points a finger at Em, mom voice in place as she heads for Em.

Max’s bottom lip quivers before more tears spill out, and I stand frozen, unsure what to do.

Sammy rushes for her son. He’s too big for her to scoop up and carry, yet small enough that she drops to her knees and cups his face against her chest.

“Em is just trying to upset you, sweetie. I’m sure Violet is fine. She’s probably just spooked, is all.” Her hand rubs soothing circles over his back. “You can kiss your weekend

trip with Amanda's family goodbye." Her voice hardens when she addresses Em.

"That's not fair."

"Actions have consequences. No Wi-Fi access for the rest of the summer, either."

"Why?! Because I made the dweeb cry?"

Sammy presses a kiss on Max's head. "Baby, go look in the bedrooms. I'll check the kitchen."

When Max is gone, Sammy turns back to Em. "You know what this chicken means to him, Emagine."

"It's a fucking bird, Mom!"

Sam slams her hand on the counter. "Look around, Em. This is it. The three of us. One day I'm going to be gone, too. And your brother is going to be all you have left. You keep pushing him away, you'll be all alone. And honey, that makes my heart hurt for you."

Em lets out a frustrated growl, her foot tapping. She folds her arms over her chest, glances at me, then back to Sammy. "You're being ridiculous."

I look at Sammy. She's fighting back her own tears, but she nods. "I'm being your mother."

Em lets out a frustrated huff, her nostrils flaring. "I don't get what the big deal is."

Sammy closes her eyes to compose herself. "The big deal is, it matters to Max, so it needs to matter to us, okay? It's ... it's

the first thing he's been attached to. Let's let him hold onto that, okay?"

"Fine." She chews on her bottom lip. "I'm sorry."

"Can you please help us find this thing?" Sammy asks. She drops to her hands and knees on the floor and heads to check under the dining table.

Em's lips curve into a smile. "I put her in the chicken coop after I stepped in bird shit in the hall. There was some on the counter, too."

She glances down to point it out, then back up at me. "I think ... you stepped in it."

I freeze, glance down at my feet, then slowly pick one up. I inspect it, see nothing, and put it down. Repeating the same with my other foot, I brace myself for impact. Sure enough, there's green gunk smeared on the bottom of my heel.

I gag involuntarily and rush to the sink. Sammy covers her mouth with a hand and bursts into a fit of laughter. Em follows in with her own soft giggles, and I stand on the outside looking in. The noise is infectious, and I let out my chuckle while standing on one foot, the other under the faucet.

The girls continue to laugh, fully on the ground, rolling around and holding their stomachs. Max comes back into the kitchen, the chick in his hands.

"Found her," he cheers, holding up a black fluffy bird. "Mom must have put her back in the coop and forgot to tell me."

I point at it, then scratch my head. “That’s a fucking chicken?”

Chapter Thirty-Three



DECLAN HANDS ME A glass of wine, then settles in beside me on the couch. He drags my feet into his lap, then drapes a fleece blanket over both of us. I let out a moan when the palm of his hand digs into the arch of my foot.

My heart lurches, recalling the familiarity of having a man back in the house. Of having someone do the dishes while I do a speed clean before bed, of having another person at the dinner table while the kids *laugh*.

“Thank you,” I say, gaze on him instead of whatever show he put on the TV.

His shoulder hitches in a half shrug. “Thanks for letting me stay. I should have called before dropping by. I didn’t mean to walk in and force an introduction with the kids.”

“I’m not going to lie. At first, I was pissed. I never expected to introduce them to a man. But Em’s laugh.” I shake my head, hating how much I’ve been crying lately. But this time, they’re

happy tears. “It’s been so long since she’s truly had a moment like that. It was good for her.”

“What’s with the chicken?” he asks, taking a sip of whiskey from the tumbler in his hand.

I let out a soft laugh. “He’s been obsessed with her. He watched her hatch a few months ago, and when I headed to the farm to get them the other day, he insisted on bringing her home. I told him no, but the chicken cried for him.”

“Chickens get attached to humans like that?”

“They can. For whatever reason, Max really bonded to Violet. And as much as I tried to be the bad guy in the situation, I just couldn’t leave her there. Not when they were both crying.”

Bruce hops up on the couch, landing right on my stomach. I let out a pained grunt at the same time Declan scowls. “Off, Bruce. Before you hurt her.”

The dog snarls, a low warning to back the fuck off. When he feels like Declan is done, he settles his head into the divot of my chest, using my breasts as a pillow. I scratch the top of his head.

“Go and get him a treat,” I say.

I start to tell him where they are, but stop. He knows already. Because he was here when I gave him treats after he mauled the intruder. A shiver runs through me at the memory. Two times is too many, and I never want to have someone unwanted come into my home again.

Declan narrows his eyes at Bruce. “Just tell him to get off, Sammy.”

I let out a snort, then press a kiss to Bruce’s nose. “He’s protecting me from you. We need to show him you’re not a threat, and that he has to listen to you.”

He lets out a curse under his breath, but stands up to head for the kitchen. And when he comes back, he’s holding the entire bag of treats, shaking the bag in front of Bruce. His ears twitch at the familiar sound, and his head cocks to the side.

“What if an intruder gives him food?” Declan asks. “Will he stop being an overprotective dickhead?”

“No. He only takes treats with permission.”

I tap on his back, and he hops off the couch without me needing to tell him. Then I sit upright. “Okay. There are a few basic commands that he will listen to for anyone he knows is a friendly. Then there are some he won’t listen to, unless they’re given by me.”

I grin, remembering the sight of him on the counter while Em tortured him. I may have sat and watched the show for a moment before intervening. The way she’d been grinning, the way her green eyes sparkled, a hint of Ian in that little dimple on her cheek. I wanted to soak it up for a moment before my dragon of a daughter returned.

“This morning, he wouldn’t have bitten you. Em knew that. She was just fucking with you.”

Declan grunts, staring at the dog. “I want him to obey if I give it,” he says. “I want him to trust me to help him keep you safe.”

My chest aches with the sudden fullness humming inside of me. Doubt is there, too, but I try to push it away. I don’t want to give into the dark thoughts, the negative energy I’m so used to being caught up in.

“Let’s start with the basics,” I tell him. I make a fist with my hand and raise it in front of Bruce. “We use both verbal and nonverbal commands. It helps his concentration, but also, if I’m unable to speak, he knows to look to me for direction. This is *Sitzen*.”

Bruce cocks his head to the side, then does what I’ve commanded.

“Good boy,” I say, leaning forward to give him pats. I raise a single finger in the air, then drag it to the floor. “*Platz*.” Bruce lies down without missing a beat. I place my hand diagonally over my chest. “*Hiere* is come.” I dip my head toward the opposite side of the room. “Start with his name, then come.”

I watch from the couch as Declan works with Bruce for a good twenty minutes. He gives him a command. Bruce listens, then he praises him with head scratches and treats. Over and over, until Bruce grows bored, and Declan catches on.

“We’re pretty informal with him, but I still do training. If we’re just lying around and he’s being a typical dog, I tell him to go lay down. Or if I’m scratching him and want his paw, I

just hold out my hand. If he's feeling a little clingy, he'll come over and set his paw on my lap. It's his way of holding hands."

Declan's sitting beside me now, and Bruce climbs up between us. He naturally curls up on me, resting his head in my lap, but when Declan reaches out and scratches the spot just above his rear end, Bruce lifts his head to lick his hand.

"What's with the Bruce and Batman thing? When do you call him what?"

I shrug. "They're nicknames, we just swap between them. Max calls him Batman the most. Em calls him Brucey Boy, or Bat Boy. And I ..." I smirk. "I usually call him Bruce. But that day in the kitchen, I gave into the irony of our safe word."

"Which is now useless." He snorts. "I'm not trying to get my ass bitten while I'm fucking you, doll."

I raise a brow. "Something tells me you'd like that."

He smirks. "Only if you were the one doing the biting."

He inhales sharply and his sudden mood change also shifts the energy in the air. He scratches at his eyebrow, a nervous laugh escaping. "Sammy. I have something I need to tell you."

"What's wrong?" I chew on the inside of my cheek, trying to play it cool.

He swipes his hands against his shorts. He's stalling, and fuck, the anticipation makes me want to vomit.

"The man from the wedding," he says.

I force a tight smile and dip my chin for him to continue. I don't think I want to hear whatever he's about to tell me, but I have to know. Maybe it's closure I need, or maybe I just need to know justice was served. That whoever hurt Ian isn't around anymore.

“Baby,” he says, grabbing my hands and placing them in his lap. “We haven't talked about what it is I do. I mean, the real thing I do for the family business. And I think I need to tell you that before I can tell you the rest.”

I close my eyes. “I know, Declan. I'm not an idiot.”

“What do you think you know?” His fingers dig into my calves.

“There are two types of families with money. Old and new. The old think they're better than the others. When I was with Ian, there were whispers at the events we attended.”

“What kind of whispers?”

I think of all the times I had dinner with one of our Harvard classmates. “Callum Junior killed a man in his class,” I say. “They were just rumors, and I never believed them. Until I saw him at the wedding. The way he's protective of Haley, it just kind of clicked. The man they killed was accused of raping one of their classmates.”

He shakes his head. “If Cal killed someone while he was at Harvard, I'd know.”

“Maybe you forgot? Do you—” I gulp down the hesitation. “Do you guys kill people ... often?”

He snorts. “I don’t forget things.”

“Surely that isn’t true.”

“I have an eidetic memory.”

My eyes grow wide. “You—*what?*”

He sighs, nods, and grabs my chin to pull my attention to him. “I’m about to ruin your entire world, baby. And you have to know how much this hurts me.”

I place my hand over his. “Just spit it out.”

“I tortured him to tell me why he was here. It took him days, but he told me everything.”

“Okay,” I whisper. “Why was he here?”

“No. We have to start at the beginning of the story,” he mumbles. “The day Ian was killed, I was so drunk out of my mind, I couldn’t even stand. I went into Russian territory looking for a fight. The previous night Cara had visited me in my dreams.”

I hold his wrist, keeping him close to me to show him I’m here for him, that he’s not alone in the grief.

“The memories are so vivid that when I have those dreams of her, it’s like I’m reliving the moment. I can recall the smells and everything down to the shade of the blood tainted water. There are only three things that help calm me when I get like that. Pain.”

He pauses, his gaze traveling down the artwork sketched into his body. “Sex, and alcohol. That day I chose alcohol. I picked

a fight in the bar and got kicked out. I was in the alley so fucking shitfaced that I couldn't even walk. And I overheard two men."

I freeze, already knowing what's next. "It was the men who came here, Sammy. They were talking about raping and killing you. I tried to stop it. I tried so hard to do something, anything. But I couldn't."

"This doesn't make sense, Declan. The police said that they chose a random house. That there were no signs of them knowing who we were."

"I know," he says. "This is where it gets crazy. The man admitted to me that he was paid to kill you."

I flinch, pulling away from him. His hand drops like a heavy weight. "What?"

"Ian's parents put out a hit on you, Samira. They wanted you gone, but Ian got in the way."

I pull away from him to stand, my body needing to move to keep me from reeling. "No. They never liked me, but this makes no sense. Who orders a kill on their daughter-in-law?"

"They didn't like you, honey. You were a small-town girl that came from no money. You have no social status. To them, you weren't good enough."

"So then, why wait? Ian and I had been married for years. We had kids together. A life. Why would they kill me, knowing it would ruin Ian? Em and Max?"

“Because rich people are assholes.” He offers me a sad smile. “I’m sorry, baby. I’m so fucking sorry. I hate myself so much. I should have stopped it. I could have prevented all this pain for you and the kids.”

Lifting a hand to silence him, I still walk back and forth. “How do you know they were talking about me?”

“I just do. It was the same day of his death, the same men.”

“Oh, fuck.” I clutch my stomach. Our lives have been weaved together for far longer than I’d ever thought.

He could have stopped it. I turn to him, my eyes wide.

“I was too late. For Cara, for you. I won’t ever forgive myself, Sammy. And I don’t expect you to forgive me, either.”

Three times is fate. How many times had he saved me now? Ian’s death, the car accident, the day of Saoirse’s wedding.

“You,” I start, my throat so dry and tight that I can barely muster the words. “You saved me.”

He scrunches his brows. “I didn’t.”

“You delayed them. If they had been even five minutes earlier, Ian would have walked in and found me *dead*.”

“No. Don’t you hear me? I could have stopped them, and Ian would be *alive*.”

“And I’d be dead at a later date if his parents were so hell bent on killing me.”

He growls. “I haven’t dealt with them yet.”

My lips curve into a wicked smile. “Oh, I will deal with them.”

“Not alone, you won’t.”

I nod. “No, not alone. But I have an idea.”

Chapter Thirty-Four



CALL ME UNHINGED, BECAUSE one week later, I'm sitting in the back of a black cargo van dressed in all black and ready to serve my revenge. Declan is beside me, Sean in the driver's seat. If you asked me six months ago where I thought I'd be, this wouldn't be it.

I wouldn't be in a van about to threaten the fuck out of my in laws. Though, I wouldn't have said I would be in love again, either. Yet, here I am, both things are true.

Declan presses a kiss to my forehead. "It's not too late to change your mind."

I shake my head. *No. This must be done, and I have to be the one to do it.* "Fuck, no. I'm ready for this."

I spent the last six days with Declan teaching me the ins and outs of shooting a gun, of punching people in certain places so that it won't hurt your fists as much. He taught me how to properly restrain someone—without duct tape—and planned out how we'd break into a heavily secured mansion.

With the help of his hacker brother, of course.

“Feeds are cut,” Sean says. He took a recording of old footage and swapped it with a live feed so that security doesn’t suspect anything.

We have an appointment to enter the premise under the guise of a water company coming to fix a broken pipe in one of the bathrooms. Sean rolls down his window as we approach the front gate. “Hey there,” he says through a pleasant grin. “I’m here to work on the bathroom.”

The guard nods, hands him a key card, then lets us through the gates. My heart soars, palms sweaty. I won’t kill them. But I am going to scare them. I’m going to take the evidence of their son’s death to the police and let them rot in jail.

Declan didn’t want me to get law enforcement involved. But I felt it was best for the situation. I would not kill my kids’ grandparents and sweep everything under the rug.

Sean pulls the van to the horseshoe driveway and cut the engine.

“Stay here,” Declan says, opening the back door. “What’s the signal?”

“Batman,” I say.

He presses his lips against mine. “Good girl.”

“It’s show time.” Sean grins, peering at me through the rearview mirror. Then he and Declan step out of the vehicle and head for the large steps that will take them to the front door.

I sit and wait. We are wearing earpieces, so I can hear everything going on. The front door opening, the maid greeting them. Declan offering her a thousand bucks to go home sick and leave the house.

“Bathroom is this way,” she says. My blood turns cold.

I want to hurt her so much. How can she live with herself? If I were responsible for one of my children’s deaths, I’d fucking hang myself. Yet, Amelia lives life as if nothing is wrong, as if Ian didn’t leave the world with his blood on her hands.

“Whoa, this is pretty flooded,” Declan comments.

I grin. Amelia’s influence is dwindling. It was easy to bribe the gardener to use the bathroom yesterday and smash a pipe. *Too easy.*

“Yes, well. Thank God you’re here to fix it now. I’ll be in the sitting room if you need me. There are cameras, so please keep your hands off my personal items.”

God, she’s horrible. How had I never seen through her before? I knew I wasn’t her favorite, but I didn’t know how badly she wanted me out of the picture.

“Oh, hey,” Declan says. “I noticed the painting in the hallway. The one of the young boy. I have a son that age. Is your boy obsessed with superheroes like mine? Batman is his favorite.”

Amelia laughs sweetly. “It’s been a while since I’ve seen my grandson. But yes, he was quite the Batman lover last I checked.”

Sean makes a rebuttal, but I'm too focused on climbing out of the van and heading for the front door to pay attention. I slip inside, immediately stopping when I catch sight of the family photo in the foyer. Ian holding a newborn Max, and young Em pressing a kiss to the baby's forehead. I remember that day. We'd taken so many photos, and his mother insisted on getting one of each of us alone with the children.

Back then, I'd thought she'd been looking out for me. She'd told me I would want a photo of just me and the kids one day when I did baby book stuff. Now, I know the truth. She just wanted me out of her life.

"Samira?" A shocked gasp escapes Amelia.

I force my gaze away from the picture and turn to her. She looks just the same as the last time I saw her. Blonde hair pulled back, bright green eyes staring at me. Ian's eyes.

"Hey, Amelia." I take a step toward her; she takes one back.

"W-what are you doing here?" she asks, continuing to walk backwards.

"I've come to talk to you about Ian," I say, closing in the distance between us.

Declan appears, standing behind her like a brick wall. She takes another step before colliding into his chest.

"Samira," Amelia whispers, clutching her hand to her chest. "What's going on?"

Declan grips her arms, but not tight enough to harm her. "Let's go sit," he says, guiding her into the sitting room off to

the left.

I follow, and Sean piles in, too. When she's sitting, I drop a flash drive onto the coffee table. "I know what you did, Amelia."

Her gaze snaps up to me. There's no remorse, no regret. Nothing but pure hatred as she glares at me. Her lips screwed into a tight pout. No verbal confirmation.

"Still don't want to admit it?" I ask, pulling out my phone to open the folder that holds everything the flash drive does.

A paper trail of how she paid those men to kill me, emails that are written demanding half payment up front. A phone call of her screaming how they killed the wrong person. Video of her pacing back and forth and discussing how their plan went so terribly wrong.

I swipe through the photos and documents, allowing her to see each one before tucking it away into my pocket again.

"What do you want?" she whispers, her gaze dropping to the floor.

I cross my arms, glaring down at her. "I want you to go to your lawyers when I leave. You're to release Emagine and Maximo's trust friends immediately into my control. You're to place me as your power of attorney until Emagine is eighteen in three months. The estate..." I wave a hand in the air, signaling the mansion that's been passed down to every Cullen son for a century. The house that was taken from Ian because his parents didn't approve of the woman he loved. "Belongs to

Imagine and Maximo. And once all of that is finalized, you'll walk into a precinct with that flash drive and turn yourself in for the murder of your son."

She shakes her head. "Even if I agreed, there are hoops to jump through. It would take months to convince the lawyers I'm of sound mind, that I'm not under coercion when I am."

I glance at Declan. "I don't like her tone, babe."

He smirks, head tilting to the side, making him look certifiably insane. Making my core tighten around nothing, a desperate need to be close to him.

"I don't either, doll. Tell me how you'd like her to be punished for her... *attitude*."

I turn to Sean. "Do you know who these men are, Amelia?"

She shakes her head. "They're two of the Murphy sons."

The name registers, her eyes widening. I step forward, crouching in front of her. "If it were up to them, they'd kill you. I'm the one who convinced them to let you rot in a jail cell." I drag the knife in my hand along her nylon pantyhose. "Maybe I'll give you the choice, Amelia?"

The tearing of fabric is the only sound in the room as I slice the stockings. "Ian had a choice. He could have watched them kill me. But he stopped them. I wonder what he would say right now if he'd survived and he found out you were the reason I died?"

"He'd thank me for taking out the trash," she snaps.

“No.” I shake my head. “He’d hate you for taking the mother of his children.”

I dig the knife into the center of her knee. She lets out a pained shriek I ignore. “What will it be? Death or prison?”

“You’ll pay for this,” she says through gritted teeth. “They’ll come after you, and this time they won’t fail. I’ll make sure of it.”

“Sounds like she wants death,” Sean chirps from behind.

“How disappointing,” I sigh. “Willing to die to protect her image. I forgot to tell you. If you die, the truth still comes out.”

I stand with a straight face, feigning indifference despite the nerves bubbling in my gut. “Orange wouldn’t look great on you anyway, Amelia. Don’t worry, I’ll make sure your death is slow and painful.” I snap my fingers. “Sean. She’s all yours.”

Sean approaches, brushing back the hair from his face with a gun in hand. “Thanks, Sam.”

I nod, stepping back.

He peers down at Amelia, who is too scared to move despite not being restrained. I offer him the knife, but he shakes his head. “My type of torture is psychological.”

“Jail,” Amelia blurts. “I’ll turn myself in. I swear. Please, just, don’t hurt me.”

I barely drew blood, but I imagine that Sean’s type of madness is worse than anything I could have done physically

to her. Declan rounds the couch and pulls me to his side. He presses a kiss to my cheek, then drops his forehead to my temple. “She doesn’t deserve your mercy.”

My chest tightens. “She doesn’t,” I whisper. “But Ian does.”

Chapter Thirty-Five



MY ASS IS SORE by the time Sammy comes to a stop in a wooded area of her family's farm. The horse I'm on is old and slow, just the right temperament for me. But Sammy's is young and spunky. The entire two-hour ride here we spent playing catch up as she continuously left me in the dust.

"Here it is," she says, hopping off the chestnut mare.

She grabs the reins and ties it to a tree branch, then heads toward me, doing the same to my horse as I climb out of the saddle.

"Here what is?" I ask, clanging around the cliff. "Where you brought boys to hook up with?"

A dusting of red tints her cheeks as she heads for the dirt path along the peak of the cliff. "We did more than that. We smoked and drank, too."

"You smoked?" I ask, trailing behind her.

"There's much you don't know about me yet."

She spins around, so she's walking backward, a grin on her face, and I fucking love how happy she's been lately. Love the way she's been showing me this carefree side of her. It makes me want to never leave the farm, and we've already been here for an entire week.

We continue up the trail, covered by the thick wooded area, until we reach the top. There's a clearing, the sun shining in as we look over the edge and down toward more woods. She tugs my hand and drags me down to the ground.

"You want to know what I did?" she asks, crawling into my lap. "With all those country boys."

Her lips brush against mine in a light touch. I glide a hand up the hem of her shirt, my thumb stroking the warm skin of her hip. "Learned how to deep throat so that when you met me, you'd be able to take the biggest cock you've ever had without gagging?"

Her teeth tug at my bottom lip, a soft giggle escaping.

"No," she whispers. "I never gave head. I was a pillow princess."

My grip around her waist tightens while her head drops lower until she's biting the center of my throat. "I made all the boys eat me out before I put out for them."

"Getting yours first." I grin. "So, you were always greedy for an orgasm, then?"

"I'm greedy for a lot of things, Declan." She tugs her shirt over her head. "Your cock is just the first one I've craved."

A low hum leaves my chest as she glides her hand into the waistline of the jeans I'm wearing. She fists me; her nails digging into my shaft. That sweet feeling of pain laced with her intoxicating scent sends my hips thrusting into the hair. I'm suddenly desperate to fuck her, to make her scream my name for the ridge to echo around us. For everyone to know who she belongs to now.

"I have something to show you," she whispers. Then she's tugging down the top of her white cami, her tits springing free.

She grabs my hand and places it over her heart, right below the fresh ink of a new tattoo at the swell of her breast.

Declan.

Before I can respond with words, her hand slips around my throat and she tightens her grip. Air is harder to take in, but it makes my already aching cock swell more for her. Her mouth drops against my ear, and she tugs at it with her teeth.

"Fuck me, Mr. Murphy."

"Take off your clothes, Future Mrs. Murphy."

She stiffens, then pulls away to make eye contact with me. "What did you just say?"

"Take your clothes off."

She shakes her head. "No. The other thing."

"Future Mrs. Murphy."

"Yeah." Her voice cracks. "Dec?"

It's my turn to take away her breath. I slide my hand into the pocket of my jeans and pull out the Tiffany Blue ring box. She snatches it and tugs off the white bow to open it. "We don't need to legally get married," I start. "Or you can keep Cullen. I know you want the same name as your kids. And I respect that. But I still want you, Samira."

I brush the hair from her face, desperate to convey just exactly what I'm asking. "I have this weird need to own you. To claim you, for everyone to know you're mine. That I'm fucking yours. So, marry me, baby. Make me the happiest man on Earth. We can have a ceremony. Call each other ours in all the ways that matter. In public, you can be Samira Cullen. Behind closed doors you can be Mrs. Murphy."

She nods, tears falling down her cheeks. "Baby. I'll be Mrs. Murphy in public, too." Her lips find mine through her tears. "Samira Cullen died the day Ian died."

I wrap a hand around her back, tugging her into my chest. She molds into me like we were made to be here.

"As much as I'm dying to bury myself inside of you, I have another surprise for you," I say.

"What?"

"Your father brought me to the ridge a few nights ago."

She rears back, mouth dropped in shock. "Are you leaving me for my father?"

I let out a snort, grab her hands, then bring us to stand. "No, you freak."

Her hand slides into my back pocket, and we peer over the ridge. From here we can see her house. It's small, no physical details able to be seen. But I move to the right where there's a large plot of land and another tiny building.

"That's Rittenhouse Mansion," she says. "It burned down years ago."

"But it was made of stone. So, the foundation survived."

She peers up at me, brows scrunched. "How do you know that?"

"The realtor told me when I did the final walkthrough of the property."

Her hand squeezes my ass. "You bought it?"

"It's ours, doll. A fresh start. No more nightmares, no more memories of what happened in your old house."

"It's... perfect," she nods. "Can we go see it?"

I nod, pulling out the keys and jingling them in front of her. "But can we drive? Because my ass is sore."

She lets out a bark of laughter, then stands on her tiptoes to kiss me. "Fuck," she whispers, pulling away. "I never thought I'd be lucky enough to find love like this again."

"I didn't either." I brush the hair from her face, my chest cracking with the admission. A lesser man would be jealous of a dead man. But all I feel is the need to hold her forever. I'll never let her go.

The End.

Read On

Black Hearts Series

Book 1: *Her Vengeful King* (Haley and Callum's Story: Out Now)

Book 2: *His Remorseful King* (Paddy and Griff's Story: Out Now)

Book 2.5: *His Vengeful Queen* (Haley and Callum Novella: Out Now)

Book 3: *His Ruthless Queen* (Saoirse and Scotty's Story: Out Now)

Book 4: *Her Brutal King* (Declan's Story: Pre-order)

Book 5: *Sean's Story* (Coming soon)

Queen of the Night (Aoibheann and Jericho's Story)

Author's Note:

I strongly recommend you read *His Remorseful King* prior to *His Vengeful Queen*. While Black Hearts is a series of stand-alones, the novella follows a plot point established within Paddy and Griff's story.

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About the Author

USA Today and International Bestselling author, A.N. Stauber, is a wife and mother to three children. She enjoys writing dark romance novels with strong female leads, always with a HEA. When she isn't reading and writing, she spends her days with her family. Other passions include: crafting, horseback riding, and procrastinating.