



dangers
of LOVE

THE SCOTTISH BILLIONAIRES

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DANGERS OF LOVE

THE SCOTTISH BILLIONAIRES

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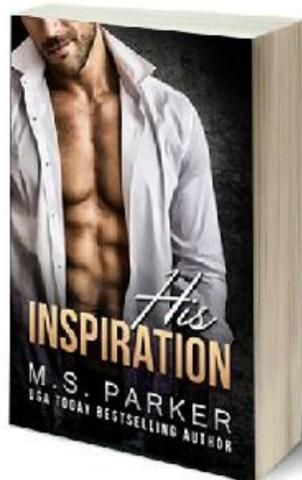
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THE SCOTTISH BILLIONAIRES READING ORDER

Alec's Story:

Prequel

1. Off Limits
2. Breaking Rules
3. Mending Fate

Eoin's Story:

1. Strangers in Love
2. Dangers of Love

BOOK DESCRIPTION

Eoin: I screwed up. Again. When I heard Aline's secret, I ran like the coward I was. Now, I can't think about anything other than how much I miss her. I just don't know if that is enough. Or if I deserve the happiness that being with her would bring.

When Aline Mercier walked out of her parents' house the day after Thanksgiving, she had no plan, only the certainty that things needed to change. Now, as she struggles to decide what she wants her future to look like, a twist of fate will change everything again.

Aline: My time in Iran changed me but no one seems to want to see or accept it. I'm determined to prove to everyone that I can take care of myself. That I'm a responsible, independent woman who doesn't need rescued by her sister. Or by a handsome, fierce soldier who broke her heart. Except something tells me that life isn't done turning my life upside-down.

Pick up the conclusion of Eoin and Aline's story, *Dangers of Love*, and find out what the universe has in store for them.

ONE

EOIN

MY FIRST OFFICIAL FULL WEEK ON THE JOB WAS A LOT SLOWER THAN THE TWO weeks before it, but I wasn't complaining. I didn't even mind the paperwork we'd spent all day Monday plowing through.

The rest of the week had been filled with preparation and organization. Getting up to speed on all the certifications I needed to allow me to use the skills I'd learned in the army legally in civilian life. An official background check for Cain's files. Time on the gun range. Sparring with the guys.

The last one might sound odd, but due to the type of work we did, whether it was a simple bodyguard assignment or a ransom drop, the bond between team members was more important than pretty much anything else.

They were a good group of guys. I didn't have the history with them that I'd had with Leo, or even with the other guys I'd served with, but I wouldn't have that with anyone else. What I could have, though, was something new. I could have friends who understood what it was like to serve, what it was like to go from military to civilian, for any number of reasons.

I loved my family, but they couldn't understand the same way these men could. Flashbacks. Following orders you didn't agree with. A chain of command. The reliance on someone who could be right next to you in a firefight.

"Congratulations," Cain said from the doorway of the office I shared with Bruce. Since Bruce was out on a job, Cain came in and plopped down in the other man's seat. "The last of all your paperwork came in. You can officially

start in the rotation on Monday. We have a bodyguard gig that you, Fever, and Dez are perfect for.”

“Who’s it for?” I doubted being a bodyguard was going to be my favorite type of job, but it was definitely better than any other civilian job I could’ve gotten, even in the security field. At least this would have variety and probably wouldn’t include dealing with drunks and sleazebags.

“Dana Stingley,” Cain said. “She’s a nurse at an assisted living facility and is going through a nasty divorce. She has a restraining order in place, but those things aren’t worth the paper they’re written on half the time.”

“So, this is going to be a long-term job?” I picked up the stress ball I’d gotten at the hospital in Germany. “I’m surprised she can afford it.”

“No, probably just a couple weeks,” Cain replied. “Apparently, the jackass she’s married to kept trying to intimidate her. Then, the day after the restraining order was filed, her car was vandalized. Graffitied, tires slashed, broken windows. Even though the cops believed that it was her soon-to-be-ex, they didn’t have any evidence. A couple days later, she started getting threatening letters, but again, no direct evidence.”

“Please tell me the police are at least looking into it and not treating it like it’s nothing.” I leaned forward, my fist tightening on the squishy blue ball.

“They are,” Cain said, “and they’re determined to put him away where he can’t hurt her, but they need evidence. They don’t want him to get off on some technicality, but they can’t guarantee her protection while they’re waiting to have enough to charge him, especially since they don’t want him to know that’s what they’re doing.”

“So, we’re keeping her safe while they work.”

“Exactly.”

Before I could ask about scheduling or anything like that, the bell over the front door dinged, alerting us that someone had come into the small lobby. Cain stood but didn’t even make it out of my office because Freedom appeared in the doorway.

“Good, you’re together, so I can yell at you both at the same time.” Her face was flushed, and there was no doubt at all about her tone.

She was furious.

Cain looked confused, and I didn’t blame him. Unfortunately, I had a sinking suspicion about why she was here.

“Did we have a misunderstanding about the invoice?”

Freedom looked at me and confirmed what I was thinking.

“It’s not about you, Cain,” I said. “She’s pissed at me.”

“Oh, I’m pissed at you both.” Her words were like ice as her gaze shifted from me to Cain. She jabbed a finger in his direction. “You’re the one who brought him and Aline together. Who put them together in Iran and then let them go off at the bar—”

“Hold on.” I stood, keeping my arms and hands loose. When you were as big as me, you learned the best way to stand without looking quite as threatening. “Yeah, I slept with Aline when we were in Iran, and I was on the job, but Cain had no way of knowing I’d do that. Hell, *I* didn’t know I was going to do it.”

“You’re my employee—” Cain began.

I cut him off too. “Aline’s an adult. Was it stupid? Yeah. But I didn’t force her or take advantage of her.”

I didn’t bother to mention the fact that she’d kissed me first or that the reason I’d given in was because she’d thought I didn’t want her. First of all, it wouldn’t do anything to make either of them think better of me, and second, it was none of her damn business.

“Nothing else has anything to do with the agency,” I continued. “That’s all between Aline and me.” I gave the snarling woman a moment to absorb what I’d said before saying the words that tore through me like a knife. “And it’s over. You know that.”

Cain shot me a glance but didn’t ask.

The expression on Freedom's face slipped. "You mean she didn't come to you? Didn't ask if she could stay with you during her little temper tantrum?"

I felt like a bucket of ice water had just been dumped on me. "What are you talking about?"

Now, I saw the worry under the anger.

"Sunday morning, she threw a fit after I told her that I'd..." Freedom's voice faltered, her eyes darting to the side, but not before I caught a flash of guilt. "She left. Took our car to the bus station and left it there. Our parents and I have tried to call her, but her phone's off. We called the police, but she's an adult, and there's no evidence of foul play."

My hands curled into fists as fear and fury fought in my chest. Freedom hadn't said it, but I could guess what she'd told Aline on Sunday morning. No way was it a coincidence that they'd gotten into a fight only hours after Freedom had told me about Aline having been a virgin.

Yeah, I'd left, and I hadn't talked to Aline since, so that was on me. Truth be told, I knew Aline well enough to know that, if Freedom had told her about the whole conversation, Aline would've been even angrier at her sister for the betrayal than she was at me for leaving.

"I tried calling the phone company to get her call and text history, but there's nothing on it after Saturday night, nothing but our calls and texts to her. I went back to our apartment in Stanford, but she's not there either. All her stuff is still there. She only took a few things from our parents' house. Her credit cards haven't been used either."

The way Freedom was explaining the situation made me think this was how she'd tried to convince the cops as to why they should be looking for Aline. I was worried about Aline, but it honestly sounded to me like she'd been upset at her family and decided to take some time to cool off.

"Then, Monday, Aline took money from her trust fund. Cash."

No surprise that Aline had a trust fund, but that was neither here nor there, as my mom liked to say. Sounded to me like she *really* didn't want to be found and was smart enough to know how her family would try to track her down.

Again, I couldn't really blame her, even if the logic wasn't doing a damn thing to make me less anxious.

"None of her friends have seen her?" Cain asked.

Freedom gave him a dirty look. "If they had, do you think I'd be here, talking to *him*?"

"Would they tell you if she asked them not to?" I asked before I thought better of it.

Freedom glared at me. "Of course they would. They know how worried we all are and would've told us if they knew where she was. All of our friends know that Aline doesn't always think things through."

Freedom said 'our friends,' which made me wonder if Aline had any close connections that weren't also close to her sister. I didn't ask, though. Freedom already looked like she wanted to murder me for my question. Well, my question and everything else.

"Maybe she just needed some time to think," Cain offered. "She had just gone through something pretty horrible."

"Which is why she shouldn't be out there on her own," Freedom countered, jamming her fists on her hips. "On her best days, she can barely take care of herself. Right now, she needs us even more."

I remembered thinking something similar about Aline when I'd first met her, but those circumstances had been crazy. Besides, I wasn't her sister. I couldn't imagine one of my siblings treating me that way. Or me treating any of them like that. My sisters would castrate me if I ever implied they weren't completely competent adults.

Maybe that was why I felt the need to say something. "She's twenty-two, not a child."

"You know what," Freedom took a step toward me, "if you'd just kept your dick in your pants, none of this would be happening. Aline would be at home with us where she belongs and not out doing who knows what."

She was right...but I couldn't take all the blame for it. Aline would probably still be at her parents' house if Freedom had just minded her own business too.

But I wasn't crazy enough to say it. Freedom had that 'castrating the bastard' look I'd seen in my sisters' eyes at various times growing up. I liked my balls right where they were.

Fortunately, Cain intervened.

"We'll look for her," he said. "No charge, of course. We'll make sure she's okay."

"Don't bother." She shook her head. "If you don't know where she is now, then I don't want anyone in this room near her." She pointed at me. "Especially you."

And then she was gone.

TWO

ALINE

UNTIL I'D WALKED OUT OF MY PARENTS' HOUSE EARLIER THIS WEEK, I HADN'T realized just how many of 'my' friends were actually Freedom's or our parents' friends who'd simply become mine by default. They liked me well enough, I didn't doubt that, but their loyalty wasn't to me.

In school, I'd been so much younger than everyone else that we hadn't shared interests until my junior and senior years, and by then, everyone had already chosen their friends. Then I'd gotten to college, and Freedom already had a group of people for us both to spend time with.

Aside from the fact that I hadn't wanted to put anyone in a position where they'd feel as if they'd need to take sides, I honestly hadn't been sure if any of them would've chosen me. I'd only been able to think of one person who'd take me in and not feel obligated to tell my family.

Martina Chavez and I had grown up next to each other and had actually attended kindergarten and first grade together. Even after I skipped two grades, we'd stayed friends. Her mom had been the live-in nanny for our next-door neighbors, so they'd moved after the kids had grown up, and I hadn't been able to see her as often as I once had, but we still kept in touch.

Between my move to Stanford and her going from high school to cosmetology school, our visits had been less and less frequent, but we had a unique bond that, whenever we were able to speak or spend time together, we picked up wherever we left off. I'd last seen her in June when we'd taken a trip to Vegas, but Sunday morning, I hadn't hesitated to take a bus to the

high-end boutique where she worked. She'd simply given me her apartment key and said I could fill her in later.

I'd been grateful for her help, but I hadn't told her anything more than I was tired of being treated like a child. Each day, she'd asked what'd happened to finally motivate me into action, but I hadn't been able to bring myself to form the words. Twenty minutes ago, she texted to say that she was picking up Thai on her way home, and I knew that meant she wasn't going to accept my succinct answer this time. She wanted to hear the whole thing.

Some women had ice cream or chocolate – or both – as their comfort food, but with Martina and me, it'd always been Thai. It was what she'd brought me when I was fourteen, and I'd overheard two senior boys making fun of the outfit I'd worn to school that day. Or, rather, they'd been making fun of the fact that I hadn't been able to fill it out any better than a fourteen-year-old boy would have.

I'd called Martina in tears, and she'd come over with sesame chicken. A few months later, I'd taken the same dish to her when her boyfriend had dumped her two days before the big spring dance.

I had to admit, she'd been beyond patient with me, letting me sleep in her guestroom and not giving an ultimatum about when I needed to either leave or start paying rent. Not that I intended to be a freeloader.

I'd gone to the bank on Monday to take money from my trust fund, and I had it in an envelope to give to her when I asked if I could stay a little longer. Just while I figured out what I wanted to do.

I'd barely had time to get my head together after everything that'd happened in the last few weeks. After her call, I decided that was the best time to ask, after I explained everything. With that plan in place, my nerves eased a bit.

She waited until we'd had a few minutes to eat before she said, "Spill."

I swallowed a quick drink, ready to confide in my friend. "First, I have to thank you for letting me stay and not forcing me to talk."

"You're not getting out of it this time." She pointed at me, her obsidian-colored eyes narrowing. "You need to deal with this stuff."

I held up a hand. “You’re right, and I’m going to tell you what happened. I just wanted to thank you first for not trying to get it out of me sooner.”

She grinned. “Yeah, I’m an awesome friend like that.”

I rolled my eyes, but I appreciated the tease. I was going to tell her everything, and it wouldn’t be pleasant, but she was trying to make it as easy on me as possible.

“Did you see the story on the news the day before Thanksgiving about the hostages in Iraq who were rescued from being sold?” That seemed as good a place to start as any.

She went completely still. “Yeah.”

“Four of them had actually been taken in Iran weeks before.” I pressed my hands together to prevent them from shaking. “I know because I was held with them too.”

The color drained out of Martina’s face, her normally honey-colored skin as pale as I’d ever seen it.

“Freedom had to have an emergency appendectomy our last week in Iran, so she went straight from the hospital to the airport where I was supposed to meet her. On my way there, some men with guns stopped the taxi, grabbed me, threw me into a van, and then took me somewhere on the outskirts of the city.”

“How was this not national news? International? Hell, even local?” Martina looked like she was going to be sick.

“Freedom kept it quiet because she wasn’t sure what had happened to me at first. She was trying to get the police to search for me when she was sent a ransom video.” I still went cold every time I thought about what that must’ve been like for her. No matter how pissed I was at her, I knew that she loved me, and it must’ve been awful for her. “She knew our parents could afford the ransom, but she didn’t trust the kidnappers to honor the agreement, so she called an old boyfriend who has a security agency and hired him to find me and get me out.”

The story became easier to tell with each word, and soon, they were pouring out. I told Martina everything. From being certain I was going to be raped when I'd been dragged out of the cell to seeing the men die in that hallway. I told her about Eoin pretending that I was a prostitute and then how I'd kissed him. And more.

I filled her in on everything that'd happened after I'd gotten home too. All the way up until I walked out of my parents' house and showed up at her work. By the time I was done, I felt surprisingly better, as if I'd purged myself of something that had been making me sick.

I reheated my food and ate it as Martina thought things over in silence. Finally, just as I was finishing up, she reached over and put her hand on mine.

“I'm so glad you're safe.”

With a start, I realized that no one had said it to me like that. Their relief and joy at seeing me home safely had been genuine, but it'd always been tinged with a hint of exasperation as if I'd held some level of responsibility for the chain of events.

Maybe it'd been unconscious on the part of my family, and I sincerely hoped that was the case, but either way, it just proved that I'd made the right choice by leaving.

Things needed to change.

THREE

EWIN

THIS WAS NOT HOW I PICTURED THE END OF MY FIRST OFFICIAL WEEK AT MY new job. After Freedom left, I waited for Cain to tell me that I was fired. Instead, he dropped back into Bruce's chair and sighed.

"No more fucking clients...or their sisters." He rested his head on the back of the chair and closed his eyes.

"Never again," I promised. "I'm done with women for the foreseeable future. Not worth it."

He raised his head and opened one eye. "You're forgetting who you're talking to. I dated a Mercier woman. They're worth a hell of a lot."

I blew out an exasperated breath. "Not this much trouble."

He shrugged and put his head back down. "Wait and see. They're a lot more addictive than you think. I dated Freedom for about three months, and then, just before I got my new assignment, she dumped me. Took me almost a year to get over her."

Shit.

"Not the same," I insisted. "Aline and me, it wasn't like that."

It might have been, if things hadn't gone to shit every fucking time I was with her. I slept with the woman three times, and each time, all hell had broken loose right after. Like the better the sex, the crazier things got.

“Mm-hm.” It didn’t sound like he believed me, but I wasn’t so sure I believed me either.

He looked like he was going to take a nap, which was fine with me because I didn’t feel like talking. My mind had already been fucked up because of what’d happened over the weekend, and Freedom’s visit hadn’t helped matters much. I needed to get my head on straight and focus on my future, not on the latest thing Aline had done to get herself into trouble.

I hadn’t been thinking for very long when my phone rang. A quick glance at the screen told me it was Israel McCormack, Leo’s dad. If he was calling me during the week, something was up.

“Hello?”

“I hate to bother you at work, kid, but…” His voice cracked. “Nana Naz… she’s in the hospital.”

I stood up so fast my head spun. “Is she…what happened?”

“I don’t know. Doctors wouldn’t let me stay with her while they’re doing the examination.”

I’d never heard him like this. I hadn’t been there when he’d gotten the news about Leo, but he hadn’t been alone then. He’d had Nana Naz. Now, he didn’t have anyone. Because of me. Because I couldn’t save Leo.

I had to do something.

“I’m on my way.”

A moment passed as he cleared his throat. “Thank you.”

“Call if something happens. I’ll check my voicemail when I can.”

Before I ended the call, Cain was on his feet, his expression serious. “What do you need?”

“Time.” I shoved my phone in my pocket. “Family emergency.”

He nodded. “Do what you need to do. The job’ll be here when you get back. Need me to do anything for you?”

I shook my head, my mind already halfway back home. “I’ll be fine. Just have to go.”

“Then go.”

He didn’t even pause, just told me to go, and he meant it. I didn’t know the other guys well, but I knew they’d understand too. Family came in all shapes and sizes, which I understood better than anyone. And that was why I planned to get back to San Ramon as fast as I possibly could. Another part of my family was hurting and needed me.

The five-and-a-half-hour drive sucked. It was long enough for me to hate every second of it but not so long that it would’ve been worth trying to find a flight. I made it two hours into the drive before I realized that it might’ve been smarter for me to have gotten one of my siblings who lived in L.A. to drive me.

Smarter because that was when I started to get that hollow echoing sound, the tunnel vision, that warned me that a flashback or panic attack – or both – was coming. I pulled over, hating myself for having to waste time but knowing that it’d be worse if I tried to fight through it while behind the wheel.

Fortunately, it didn’t take long to calm down. Focusing on getting to Israel and Nana Naz, of being there for them because Leo couldn’t, helped. I kept that in mind as I finished the drive to the hospital.

At the first red light I hit in the city, I texted Israel to let him know where I was, and he said he’d meet me in the lobby. He hadn’t called to give me any updates, but I was taking that as a positive sign. Plus, I doubted he would’ve left Nana Naz alone to come down to the lobby if things were that bad.

I refused to think of anything else.

When I entered the lobby, I spotted Israel right away. He’d always been a big man. Even though he was two inches shorter than me, he was broader, more muscular. The first time I’d seen him after Leo’s death, he’d looked older but still larger than life. Now, he looked...smaller.

The realization made my heart and stomach twist, but I didn’t let any of it show on my face. I had to be strong for Israel, had to be at least a fraction of the man Leo had been. I made a silent promise to my friend that if I had to

give up everything in L.A. to take care of his dad and grandmother, I would.

“Thank you for coming.” Israel hugged me, and I wished he’d been able to put his arms around his son instead.

“How is she?” I forced myself to ask the question, even though I dreaded the answer.

“She’s resting,” he said as he stepped back. “C’mon. Let’s walk while we talk.”

As he led me to the elevator, he told me what’d happened. “She was starting dinner when she had to sit down because she was having a hard time getting her breath. She’d been sitting there for a couple minutes before I came in and asked if she was okay. You know Mama. She’s always fine. Except she said she didn’t feel right.”

That alone was enough to explain why he looked so ragged. I’d seen Nana Naz handle an entire church dinner while she had a kidney stone.

“I wanted to call for an ambulance, but she kept saying she just needed to rest, but then she fainted and that was it. I called 911. She came to on the way here, but she was disoriented, groggy. I was worried she’d had a stroke. Her dad passed from one when she was twelve.”

I hadn’t known that. “Was it one?”

We stepped off the elevator onto the ICU floor, and he continued, “No, thank the Lord. The doctors ran all these tests and said they think it was a combination of being dehydrated and her blood pressure dropping. They’re keeping her here at least until tomorrow because they’re having a hard time getting it back up.”

That was good to hear, but it didn’t make me less worried. Nana Naz wasn’t really old, but she wasn’t young either. And she’d had a stressful year. Hell, she’d had a stressful life, losing her only child, helping raise her grandson, and then losing him too.

“I thought about calling you and telling you that you didn’t need to come.” Israel stopped next to what I assumed was the door to Nana Naz’s room. “But, honestly, I wasn’t sure I could get through the rest of tonight and

tomorrow alone.”

I knew what it cost him to admit that, which meant he was even more freaked out than I’d realized.

“I never should’ve left,” I said, shaking my head. “I promised Leo I’d take care of you both, and I can’t do that from six hours away.”

Israel gave me a hard look. “Where would the two of you be if my son hadn’t died?”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Both of you planned to make a full career in the army, right? Even if you boys ever decided to get married, neither of you planned to leave the service this early.”

“Right,” I agreed. “Yeah, we’d still be in the army.”

“In that case, you could’ve been on the other side of the country or the other side of the world, and I’d be right here.” Israel put his hand on my shoulder. “I’m grateful to have you here, but I don’t want you thinking that this means you have to stay in San Ramon for the rest of mine or Mama’s lives. I’d tell Leo the same thing.”

The fact that I knew he’d have done just that didn’t make me feel any better, but I didn’t argue with him. I wasn’t here to prove a point.

Nana Naz was sleeping when we went into the room, and while she looked peaceful, she also looked frail with an IV in her arm and an oxygen tube in her nose. I’d always thought of her as some unstoppable force. Invincible.

People always talk about how teenagers think nothing can touch them, but I think most forget that when we’re young, we think all the stable people in our lives will be there all the time. The loss of a mother I didn’t really remember and my time in the army had changed both mindsets pretty fast, but the reality of Nana Naz’s mortality hadn’t really hit me until that moment.

“The doctor said her oxygen is pretty low too,” Israel said quietly as we made our way to the chairs next to her bed. “He asked me if she was a smoker, and all I could think was that day she caught you and Leo smoking.”

I smiled at the memory, surprised at how little it hurt to think of it. Leo and I were in sixth grade when, for a reason I couldn't remember, I decided the two of us should steal a pack of cigarettes from these racist high school kids who never missed a chance to get after Leo. Once we'd taken the cigarettes, I'd gotten the bright idea that we should smoke a couple, just to show the world how tough and grown-up we were.

Nana Naz had caught us and smacked us both upside the backs of our heads. Then she'd made us tell Israel and my parents. She hadn't, however, made us apologize to the guys we'd stolen them from. About that, she'd merely said that we should've let the air out of their bike tires too.

"None of it had been Leo's idea," I admitted. "Not taking them and not smoking them. I know what he said, but it'd all been me."

"We knew." Israel chuckled. "Most of the time when you boys got in trouble, it was your idea, and he went along with it."

I grimaced at the memory. "I still have no idea why you never told him not to hang around with me."

"You've always had a good heart, Eoin," Israel said. My face must've showed my thoughts on *that* particular statement because he smiled. "You know that Angel and I were high school sweethearts, but I bet you don't know that we almost didn't make it." He looked at Nana Naz, a faraway expression on his face as he thought of her daughter, his late wife. "Six weeks before our high school graduation, a friend of mine, a boy I'd known since birth, was killed in a drive-by shooting. Cops dismissed it as gang-related violence and never really did much to find out what really happened. Thing was, Nate wasn't in a gang. He was just in the wrong place at the wrong time wearing the wrong thing with the wrong colored skin. We both were. I was just the lucky one who didn't get hit." He glanced at me. "As you can imagine, I didn't handle it too well."

He understood, I realized. He knew what it was like to have a friend killed right in front of him. And it was even worse for him. Yeah, Leo and I had been helping people in Iraq when we'd been ambushed, but we'd still been in the army, in an area where people weren't too happy with what we were doing. Israel and his friend had just been teenagers, minding their own

business.

“I was angry with the world. Started doing stupid stuff. Broke windows, graffitied walls, all the things angry people do when they don’t get justice.” A ghost of a smile appeared. “Angel dumped me because of it, said she wasn’t going to be with a man who acted like a boy.”

I’d always heard that Angel had been like her mom, and that definitely sounded like something Nana Naz would’ve said.

“She’s the one who straightened me out.” He gestured toward Nana Naz. “She told me that if I didn’t straighten up, then I’d end up being the sort of black man who made the justice system not care, and that would be a waste. She marched me over to each and every place I’d vandalized, made me apologize, and promise to pay for everything. Then she took me to the police station and had me confess there too. I paid everyone back, did fifty hours of community service, and I’ve been on the straight and narrow ever since.”

I didn’t know what to say, but he wasn’t done yet.

“That’s why we didn’t discourage Leo from hanging out with you. We told him he needed to be the kind of friend who made better choices and was a good influence, but we never thought you were a bad kid. You just needed some help to believe it yourself. Sometimes, we can have the best family in the world, but it takes someone outside the family believing in you that makes a difference.”

I honestly wasn’t sure I believed it now, but I thanked him anyway. Whatever the reason, misguided or not, their decision had played a large role in why I wasn’t in prison or worse. Without Leo, I doubted I ever would’ve completely straightened up, no matter how great my family was or how much they loved me. Israel was right. I’d needed it from somewhere else too.

He reached over and ruffled my hair the way he had when I’d been that brat who’d stolen cigarettes. “Now, while we’re here for who knows how long, how about you tell me what’s got you so troubled.”

“Am I that easy to read?”

He shrugged. “I know a thing or two about being in love.”

Love?

I shook my head. “It’s not love, but it is a girl.” I sighed. “I barely know her, but I can’t stop thinking about her.”

A wide grin split Israel’s face, and the flash of memory that came with it was bittersweet. Last time I’d seen that smile had been right before things had gone as wrong as anything could. I didn’t have to worry about getting lost in the past, though. Leo had gotten his stubborn streak from both his dad and his grandmother, and Israel wasn’t going to let things be.

“Hate to tell you, son, but that probably means it’s love.”

“You’re not going to let this rest until I tell you the whole story, are you?”

He shook his head. “I’m not going anywhere soon.”

So, I told him. Everything. From the first moment I’d seen her on that ransom video to Freedom showing up at the agency right before he’d called. When I finished, I shut up and let him process. It was a lot, especially since he already had plenty of other shit going on in his head. If he hadn’t insisted, I never would’ve laid all that on him, but I could see part of why he wanted to hear it. It might’ve been a lot, but it was a great distraction.

“I’m guessing you haven’t talked to your parents or siblings about this.”

“No, why?”

He raised an eyebrow. “Because they would’ve told you the same thing I’m going to tell you...stop being an idiot.”

I barked a laugh, but it wasn’t a happy one. He wasn’t wrong. I hadn’t talked to anyone in my family about it because they would’ve said exactly that. To stop being an idiot.

And I would’ve said the same thing to them that I was going to say to Israel.

“It doesn’t matter. I fucked up too many times.”

Well, I might not have worded it exactly that way with everyone, but the sentiment would’ve been the same.

“We all do,” Israel countered. “But, if she’s worth it, you go after the girl.”

I shook my head. “Even if she would forgive me, a relationship isn’t in the cards for me.”

“And why not?”

Maybe it was because I was tired, and I’d been so worried about Nana Naz that I was just now coming down from the adrenaline. Maybe it was because it was Israel and not my parents. Whatever the reason, I replied with the actual reason that’d been in the back of my mind since March.

“Because it’s not right. Me getting to be happy, dating, all the stuff that Leo should be here doing.”

Israel stared at me for several long seconds before smacking the back of my head. “You’re just really working at being an idiot, aren’t you?”

I didn’t know why his response surprised me, only that it did. How could Israel be okay with me getting to do all these things that Leo would never do?

“Nana Naz and I want you to live life.” Israel’s voice grew thick. “Are we sad that Leo didn’t get the chance to fall in love, get married, have kids? Yes. But that doesn’t mean we think no one else should get to be happy. Especially you. And that’s what Leo wanted too.”

Before I could argue with him, he pulled his phone from his pocket.

“Let me show you something.” He pulled up what looked like a video. “I got it a couple days after.”

I didn’t need him to say after what. There was a *before* and *after* for me too, and it was the same point in time.

Even though I guessed who was on the video, it was still a jolt to see Leo’s face on that screen. I braced myself for what hearing his voice would do, and then I pressed play.

“*Hey, Dad.*”

Fuck, that hurt.

“I was really hoping you’d never have to see this, but I had to plan for the worst. I make one of these before every tour. Eoin and I have an agreement

about what happens if one of us makes it home and the other doesn't, but with us being together out there, there's a chance both of us could...you know. So, I needed to have a back-up, and this is it."

A lump formed in my throat as Leo talked about how much he loved his dad and grandmother, and I wondered why Israel had said I needed to see it, how this was supposed to make me feel better. But I wasn't going to stop watching it. A part of me thought I deserved all the pain it caused.

"The other reason I made this video is because there are some things that, if Eoin made it back and I didn't, he needs to know."

Fuck.

"Guess that means it's time to talk to you now, brother."

I wanted to close my eyes. Turn off the video. Not hear that familiar voice. But I refused to take the coward's way out. I watched, and I listened.

"Eoin, I know you're taking care of Dad and Nana Naz, just like I'd take care of your parents if your Brady Bunch siblings couldn't hack it. I don't need to remind you of our promises to each other. What I do need to tell you is this...live. I'm asking Dad and Nana Naz to look after you too because I know you. You're going to blame yourself, no matter what the circumstances, and you're going to convince yourself that you shouldn't ever have fun again. You'll fight happiness tooth and nail."

Dammit. He did know me. The hand not holding the phone flexed, curled into a fist.

"You wouldn't want me moping and brooding, sitting on my ass – sorry, Nana Naz – if our positions were reversed. Enjoy Evanne and the mass quantities of other siblings when the rest of the Grace bunch start popping them out. Find a woman who'll take pity on your sorry a-butt and have a couple kids of your own. Name them after me. All of them. Girls and boys. Foreman did, right?"

Israel laughed quietly.

"I mean it, Eoin. You give my dad a daughter-in-law and some grandkids for me. When you finally get out of the army, use that brain and talent of yours to

make a difference in this world. You're destined for great things, brother. Don't forget it."

Leo ended the video by repeating that he loved all of us, and then that was it. It ended with him smiling that same smile he got from Israel. It hurt, seeing him, but I couldn't look away.

I was still staring at the screen when someone came into the room.

"Excuse me."

I looked up to see a nurse standing on the other side of the bed. She wore an apologetic smile.

"I'm sorry, but it's past visiting hours." She glanced at Israel. "We can only let immediate family stay overnight."

"He is family," Israel said. "He's my son."

My chest tightened with more emotion than I knew how to handle.

"Of course." She turned to me. "Stay as long as you want."

I nodded, not trusting my voice to speak. I'd stay until Israel and Nana Naz were okay with me leaving, and then I'd honor my friend – my brother – by doing as he asked. I'd live.

And I knew exactly where I needed to start.

FOUR

ALINE

I COULDN'T EXACTLY SAY THAT MY LIFE HAD BEEN *BETTER* OVER THE LAST couple days, but it hadn't been worse either. Definitely different, but if I was honest, I hadn't had a 'normal' day since before Freedom and I had gone to Iran. Before the trip, I'd hoped that I'd come home a different person, a person with a wider worldview, a new take on my life, but I hadn't expected any of this.

It was...weird.

Once I'd told Martina the whole sordid story, including why I'd walked out, she'd immediately said that I could stay with her as long as I needed to, and that she'd help me with whatever I decided to do next. I still wasn't entirely sure what that was going to be, but knowing that she would give me time let me relax more than I had since I'd woken up to Freedom moaning in pain because of her appendix.

I had a list of things that I needed to do, but the problem was, two of the major life decisions depended on the other, and I was unsure which I wanted to make first. Where I was going to work and where I was going to live. As much as I hated to admit it, I had been thinking along the lines of being wherever Freedom was just because that was how things had always been.

While I did think that my family didn't give me nearly enough credit for being able to take care of myself, I had to assume at least some of the blame as I'd not done much to prove otherwise. The majority of my life, there'd been little I'd wanted to do differently, and I hadn't foreseen the precedent

I'd been setting by going along with so much.

I still wanted to teach. That hadn't changed. And I still liked the idea of working in lower-income schools. What I didn't know, exactly, was where I wanted to live.

L.A. had its appeal since I was familiar with the city, and Martina was here. My parents were here too, just in case, even if I did loathe the idea of having to go to them if I wasn't as competent as I believed myself to be.

Stanford was also familiar, but I didn't know if that was where Freedom would be, and the idea of being near her was more distasteful than being near my parents. At some point, I would need to address the issue because I didn't think that this was worth completely writing off my family, but I wasn't ready to forgive them yet, and I didn't know when I would be.

Maybe what I needed to do was not factor my family into any decision-making. Was that how normal people did it? I didn't know. I'd never been 'normal,' and I'd never felt it as deeply as I did right now.

When people heard that I'd skipped grades and graduated college so young, they were always impressed, complimentary, but most people didn't realize that there were negatives to living life and growing at a different pace. Like being a minor in college who didn't have the same sort of break that other graduates had when they went to college. With me, because of Freedom, it hadn't even happened after I'd turned eighteen.

"Aline, can you get some more lip gloss samples from the back?"

Martina's question pulled me out of my head, and I nodded before heading to the storage room. I'd be forever indebted to her for everything she'd done for me, including this job. After we'd talked on Friday, she'd told me that the boutique where she worked was looking for some holiday help. I didn't *need* the money, but I also didn't have a job history or anything specific to do to distract me, so I'd happily accepted.

Or, at least, accepted with a somewhat positive outlook.

I'd never really given much thought to working retail since I hadn't needed a job during school, and my field wasn't business or anything like that, so post-college employment had never been a concern. Elementary school teachers

weren't unicorn-rare or a dime a dozen, but since I'd already completed my master's degree, I'd known I'd be going into the job market with an advantage.

But here I was, working in a store less than a month before Christmas. It wasn't too bad. Then again, it wasn't as busy as a typical store must've been around this time. Not a lot of need to push and shove to get the last custom-made bustier.

Silverton Designs had few things available for walk-ins. Most of the clientele set up appointments to have personally tailored clothes made and then have their hair and makeup done by professionals while they waited. Definitely not the sort of place that ended up on the news on Black Friday because three aggressive soccer moms got into a fistfight over the latest electronic wonder.

I was still smiling at the mental image when I arrived at the front counter with a handful of the samples, but it only lasted as long as it took me to recognize the man standing just off to the side.

"Eoin?" My hands were shaking as I put the lip gloss in the right box, but I was unsure if it was from anger or something else.

"Aline." He took a step forward.

I looked at Martina. "Tell him to go away."

She leaned close enough that I could hear her despite how low she'd pitched her voice. Her tone was gentle but firm. "Sorry, but you need to handle this yourself. I'll have your back, and if he tries anything, he'll regret it, but if he's just here to talk, then you need to talk to him."

I sighed. She was right. I wanted my family to treat me like an adult, which meant I needed to be one. Eoin wasn't violent, and he wouldn't try to intimidate me, so it wasn't as if I needed assistance because I was frightened of him. I just didn't want to deal with the conversation he clearly wanted to have, but adults had to do a lot of things they didn't want to do.

Maybe I'd made a mistake in wanting to be treated like an adult.

"Take a break," Martina said. "Go talk to him."

I nodded and looked toward Eoin. “Wait for me at the table out front. I’ll be out in a minute.”

I waited until he went through the door before letting myself take a few seconds to at least attempt to prepare myself.

“He’s not gonna try something stupid, is he?” Martina asked with a frown. “He’s a big guy. Maybe I should—”

“He won’t hurt me,” I told her. “And you’re right, I need to talk to him.”

Even though I firmly believed what I said, a part of me still hoped that he’d be gone and I could just avoid the whole unpleasant ordeal. It was weak and cowardly of me, but the way my stomach was twisting and roiling, I couldn’t help feeling that way.

When I came out, he was leaning against the wall. Though he immediately straightened, he didn’t try to come closer. I sat in one of the chairs and gestured for him to join me. It wasn’t until he settled across from me that I realized how drawn his face was. Concern drove away my reluctance.

“Are you okay?”

“That’s not an easy question to answer,” he said with a wry smile. “And before I try to start, I need to apologize. Again. I shouldn’t have ghosted you. Even if I left to avoid a confrontation with your sister, I should have called and talked to you about what happened.”

That seemed like a good place to begin, and as I owed him an apology as well, I seized the opportunity.

“I have to apologize to you too,” I said, feeling the blush rising in my cheeks. “Even if I hadn’t been thinking clearly enough the first night we slept together to tell you that I was a virgin, I should’ve told you the second night. Like how you’d been honest about the fact that we hadn’t used a condom. Heat of the moment is only an excuse once.”

He scratched at the stubble on his jawline. “We’ve really fucked things up, haven’t we?”

I could've answered that question several different ways, but it was the flash of pain in his eyes that made me decide what I would say.

"Maybe we need to stop trying to do this the way everyone else does and just...go with what feels natural."

Surprise, then happiness, lit up his face. "Really?"

The unease I'd felt vanished, replaced with a mixture of relief and anticipation. "Yes, really."

Two women glanced our way before entering the boutique.

"I need to get back, but I meant what I said."

"Then can I take you to dinner when you get off work?"

I studied his face for several moments. "If you'll answer a couple questions for me."

"All right."

"How did you find me?"

His smile held the sort of confidence that bordered on cockiness. "It's what I do. I find people. And it's not the first time I've had to find you."

I had to laugh at that, even though my next question was the more serious of the two burning inside me.

"Did my family hire you to find me?"

His smile softened. "No, it's all me. But I did know that you weren't at your parents' house."

"Because you went there first?" I almost wanted to ask him what they'd said, how they'd explained my absence, but another part of me didn't want to know.

He shook his head. "No, actually, that'd be your sister. She, uh, came to the agency, and well, she yelled at Cain and me, said that it was my fault you left."

I rolled my eyes. “It wasn’t you. But I don’t want to talk about Freedom or what happened when I left. Not now, anyway.”

“All right.”

I had one more thing I needed to know. “Are you going to tell them where I am? I mean, if Freedom comes back. I know you won’t go to them, but if Freedom comes to you and asks, will you tell her?”

“No.” He reached out and lightly touched my arm. “I won’t share anything unless you specifically tell me to.”

“Good answer.” I smiled, pleasure and relief and something much sexier surging through me. “You can pick me up here at six.”

FIVE

EOIN

I'D HONESTLY BEEN PREPARED FOR ALINE TO TELL ME TO FUCK OFF. I HADN'T handled anything with her well from the moment we'd met. I hadn't hurt her physically, and I had saved her life, but I'd fucked up the rest of it. Badly. But Israel had been right. Sort of. I didn't think I loved her, but now I was starting to think that I could. Someday. Maybe even someday soon.

All I knew for sure was I'd never forgive myself if I didn't try. Not only because I needed to honor Leo and the other men who died by living life, but because I could see a future now. A real one.

A good one.

With her.

I'd make this work, starting with dinner. Which was harder than it sounded. I couldn't just pick some random L.A. restaurant since I had no idea if the food would be shit, and the only one I knew of was where we'd had our first date. The place had been great, and we didn't exactly have bad memories of the place, but I didn't want to do anything that felt like going back over what we'd already done. We could go back there some other time, but tonight, we needed a fresh start. A real one.

Instead of asking Bruce for another suggestion, I did some web surfing and came up with The Mar Vista. Nice, but not the sort of place that had a tie and jacket requirement. Somewhere Aline wouldn't mind coming to straight from work, but special enough for this to be an official date and not just two friends picking up fast food or takeout.

On the way to the restaurant, we talked about why she'd left her parents' house, with her giving me the whole story and me telling her what Freedom had said to Cain and me. It wasn't the sort of polite small talk that people usually had on early dates, but we'd agreed to stop using other people's standards and expectations to tell us how we should act.

After we'd ordered our meals, she flipped the conversation around.

"Now you know what I've been doing since we last saw each other. What about you?"

Immediately, my mind went to Nana Naz, and then I realized that I could talk to Aline about what'd happened. I'd told her about Leo so I didn't need to go through all of that, and she could be objective because she didn't know Israel or Nana Naz.

"My friend," I began, "the one who...we promised each other that we'd look after each other's families if one of us made it back and the other didn't. His grandma, Nana Naz, ended up in the hospital on Friday."

"Oh no."

The concern on Aline's face warmed me without making me feel like she was pitying me.

"She's okay," I reassured her. "But it freaked Israel – Leo's dad – out enough for him to call me. She got dizzy and then passed out, so he called 911. Her blood pressure dropped suddenly. Turns out she was dehydrated and had low blood sugar. She had to stay overnight for some tests, but she went back home yesterday afternoon. She has to monitor what she eats and how much water she drinks now, but she'll be okay. Scared the shit out of me and Israel, though."

"It's terrifying when something like that happens to someone you've always thought of as invincible," she said. "This past spring, my dad had a heart attack, and it came as a huge shock to Freedom and me. It's one thing to know your dad's in his early seventies, but it's another to realize what that means in terms of health and mortality."

"He's okay now?"

She nodded. “He is, and Mom’s been watching him like a hawk. She hasn’t really said much to me about how worried she was, but she seems a lot more aware of the nine-year age difference between the two of them than she had before.”

The numbers caught up to me, and the surprise must’ve registered on my face because it prompted a question.

“Penny for your thoughts.”

“Just surprised at how much older your parents are than mine. Da doesn’t turn sixty until next August, and Mom’s five years younger than him.”

“They had a hard time getting pregnant,” Aline said. “Hard enough that they decided to use a surrogate. Mom was thirty-eight when Freedom was born. A few years later, they’d just started talking about adopting when, surprise, Mom gets pregnant with me.” She gave a soft smile. “I was their miracle baby, and it wasn’t an easy pregnancy. Six weeks early and both of us could’ve died.”

And now I understood her family’s overprotectiveness much better. The death of my mother and of Mom’s first husband had made both Da and Mom worry a little more than a lot of parents would, and a couple of us had gotten in some dangerous situations, but I couldn’t imagine going through what the Merciers had gone through.

“Do you mind if I ask about your family?”

“Not at all.” I smiled. “But most people have to take notes because it can get a little confusing.”

We spent the rest of the meal swapping stories about our families. Even though we’d both been born into money, we’d had very different experiences growing up. A few times, I wondered if it was a good idea, having this sort of conversation when she was at odds with her family, but except for a little wistfulness I caught once in a while, she didn’t steer us away from the subject.

The time flew by, and before I knew it, we were in my car, heading back to the apartment she shared with Martina. I wasn’t about to just drop her off in front of the building, so I pulled into the lot and found a space to park.

Before I could do anything more than reach for my seatbelt, Aline was reaching for me, her hands going around the back of my neck as she pulled me to her for a kiss.

I let her have control for several seconds, just enjoying the feel of her mouth against mine, but then I took over.

My hands in her hair, sliding down her back. The soft skin just above the waist of her pants. Lips parted, and tongues touched, explored. Territory that was familiar but still exciting.

Blood rushed south as I grabbed her waist and pulled her onto my lap. I groaned as she settled with a leg on either side, core pressing down on my rock-hard erection. The eager little noises she made as she rocked against me had me desperate with the need for more.

I caught her bottom lip between my teeth, lightly tugging on it, and then I slid my hands under her shirt, the heat of her skin sending a wave of warmth through my entire body. I'd never wanted a woman the way I wanted her, and though it would take some maneuvering, I knew I could be inside her within a minute. That wet heat squeezing my dick until I exploded.

The thought came to me then that I was the only man to know what it felt like to have her like that, and something sparked deep in me. Not jealousy, exactly, but the desire to keep things that way. Me not just being her first, but her only.

My mouth moved from her lips to her jaw and down her throat. She tossed her head back, and I kissed my way down her neck, pausing to worry at the skin over her collarbone, fighting the urge to mark her, claim her as mine. I hadn't earned that right.

Yet.

It was that thought that stopped me, had me pulling my hands from under her shirt. Her fingers were between us, on the button to my pants, and I caught her wrists.

"You don't want..." Her words trailed off, and the flush in her cheeks deepened.

“I want,” I assured her. “Fuck, Aline, I want so much.”

“But?” The word was cautious, as if she was waiting to hear my answer before she reacted.

“But as much as I want you, I want to do this right.” I closed my eyes, hardly believing what I was going to say. “I think we should take it a little slower this time.”

I waited for her response, heart thudding against my ribcage.

“Not because that’s what everyone else would say?”

I opened my eyes and shook my head, relieved at her question. “I don’t give a fuck what anyone else says or thinks. This is between you and me.”

She put her hand under my chin and lifted until I had no choice but to see her. “Good answer.”

She brushed her lips across mine, a kiss far more chaste than the others we’d shared, and then climbed back into her seat.

“Give me a second, and I’ll walk you up,” I said. “Don’t need anyone calling the cops on me for public indecency.”

When she gave me a puzzled look, I gestured toward the tent in my pants. A new rush of color flooded her cheeks, tempting me to take back what I’d said just so I could try to make all of her turn that pretty shade of red.

I kept my head on straight, though. I really did want this to work.

SIX

ALINE

THE MOMENT I WALKED INTO THE APARTMENT, MARTINA WAS THERE, demanding to hear all about my date. It wasn't late, so we shared a pint of fudge ripple ice cream, and I filled her in on everything – though I did cut back on the details of the make-out session.

I wanted to be alone when I finally let myself think about that, which meant it wasn't until I stepped into the shower that I allowed myself to recall each delicious moment of my night, from the delight in Eoin's eyes when I'd agreed to go out with him, all the way up to the light kiss he'd given me outside the door to the apartment.

Once I reached the end of my trip down recent memory lane, I was back to being as worked up as I had been when I'd first gotten out of the car. My entire body was humming with unfulfilled desire. It was strange. I'd gone through adolescence without sex and never felt like I'd missed out. I hadn't regretted the times I'd turned down dates, ignored romantic possibilities.

Now, I craved that physical contact. Sex. With Eoin. When I'd kissed him, that had been where I'd seen things going. To bed. With him. Again.

Was this normal? I knew there were men who didn't want to be a girl's first because they feared she'd misconstrue pleasure for love. I'd always believed that if I went into all sexual experiences without expectation of any connection beyond the physical, I wouldn't fall into that trap. Now, I was starting to wonder if the stereotype of the clingy virgin had some scientific basis. Would another man have made me feel the same way if he'd been my

first?

Or was it just Eoin?

I could picture him, every inch of that amazing body of his, and not just how he looked either. I could recall the texture of the hair on his legs, the thin trail down his torso. I knew the lines that defined his muscles and the scars that were as much a part of him as everything else.

My hand slid down my stomach, and I imagined it was his long fingers delving between my legs and slipping over my clit. A shiver ran through me, and I closed my eyes. A quick circle over that bundle of nerves brought back everything that had built up inside me while Eoin and I had been kissing, when his hands had been on me.

I let those feelings, those memories, that pressure, bubble up, fill me with more and more pleasure until I finally exploded, gasping his name as I came. My breath came in ragged gasps, and I leaned my forehead against the wall, waiting for my body to come back to itself.

Maybe I'd actually be able to sleep tonight.

SEVEN

ALINE

I WOKE UP WITH A SMILE ON MY FACE AND LAZILY STRETCHED MY ARMS above my head. Martina had to open the boutique today, so I already knew that I was the only one in the apartment. She never made demands of me, and she wasn't a noisy roommate, but the entire time I'd been here, I'd felt the need to be up and moving around if she was. Today, though, I could take my time because I didn't go back to work until tomorrow.

The only thing I had to do today was call my parents. I'd put it off long enough. I knew staying out of touch was causing them stress, and I hated it, but keeping quiet for the past week was the only way I'd been able to think of to get through to them that I was serious. I'd also needed the time to get my head together and figure out what I wanted to say when I did finally talk to them.

Now, I was as ready as I'd ever be.

Well, I would be, once I had breakfast.

I considered procrastinating a little longer after I'd finished eating, but I forced myself to take care of my dishes and then made the call. I used my old phone since my parents never answered numbers they didn't recognize, but I deleted all the voicemails and texts I'd gotten while I'd kept it off unheard and unread.

They'd all been from my parents and Freedom, anyway.

"Aline?!" Mom's voice was frantic, and a stab of guilt shot through me.

I couldn't let that distract me or make me reconsider what I had to say. "Hi, Mom. Is Dad nearby? I'd like to talk to you both at the same time."

"Oh, yes, just a minute."

I could hear her calling for my dad, and then, about half a minute later, Mom put the call on speaker. I imagined they were sitting in the front room, enjoying their usual after-breakfast cups of tea and coffee.

"We're both here, dear," Mom said finally.

"What's wrong? Are you in trouble?"

Dad's questions had me closing my eyes and counting to five. Of course, that would be exactly where his mind went. Another time, I could've written it off as completely natural concern, but taken in context, it was just another part of the whole problem.

"I'm not in trouble," I said calmly. "I needed time to think before we talked, and we need to talk."

"Is Freedom with you?" Mom asked.

Another count of five.

"No, Mom. I'm staying with Martina, and I haven't talked to Freedom yet."

"Martina? Martina Chavez?" Mom sounded surprised.

I wondered if that surprise was because they hadn't thought to reach out to her or if they hadn't realized that Martina and I had maintained our friendship this long. They'd always liked her, so it wasn't an issue of that, but I suspected they'd never really given any thought or consideration to any relationships I'd formed on my own.

"Yes. I'm staying in her guestroom right now." My stomach churned as I forced myself to bring up the main reason I'd called rather than just sending a text to let them know I was okay. "We need to talk about why I left, and this isn't easy for me, but it needs to be said."

There was a long pause, and I imagined them looking at each other in concern. Dad finally broke the silence. "All right. We're listening."

My teeth grated together. I wished I could be certain that it was only my imagination that he was speaking with the same indulgent tone he'd used when I was a child, but there was a good chance that it wasn't in my head.

"I love you both, I want you to know that. You've always given me everything I needed, and you've always had my best interests at heart." Emotion threatened to choke me, but I swallowed it down. "But I've been suffocating slowly. I thought when I turned eighteen, the same age Freedom was when she went to college, things would change, that you'd start treating me like an adult. And I thought the same thing when I turned twenty-one. Then again when I graduated from college. But all of you still treat me like a child. Like I can't take care of myself."

I took a slow breath and released it.

Before either of them could speak, I plowed on. "And part of it is my fault. I never told you how I felt. I just let it happen. Maybe I thought everything would magically straighten out on its own. Maybe a part of me liked not having to think about adult issues. Either way, this isn't all on any of you."

"We-we never knew." Mom's voice didn't sound as steady as it normally did. "We just want you to be safe."

"I know." I paced over to the window. "And I should've brought it up sooner. This never should've come out the way it did. That's on me. But Freedom completely overstepped her bounds when she interfered in my private life."

I didn't explain that it wasn't the first time she'd put herself between Eoin and me. I also didn't share that she'd gone to him after I'd left to blame him for me walking out. Those were things that I'd need to discuss with her at some point. But not any time soon. I wasn't even close to being ready for *that* discussion.

"I'm so sorry, sweetheart," Mom said quietly. "We've only ever wanted to protect you. And that's not an excuse. We should have done better."

"We will do better," Dad said. "I just ask that you be patient with us. It's not an easy thing, letting a child go."

I swallowed hard around the lump forming in my throat. I'd hoped that the conversation would go well, but I honestly hadn't known how my parents

would react to all I was feeling.

“Of course.” Relief wrapped itself around me like a warm blanket. This was going better than I’d expected. “I know you’ve always had my best interest at heart, and the last thing I want to do is cause you more stress, especially after what I put you through with the kidnapping and—”

“You were not responsible for what happened.” Dad’s voice was sharp. “Do not take that on yourself.”

“Thank you.” I cleared my throat, blinking back some unexpected tears. “Thank you for saying that and for listening to me. Seeing where I’m coming from.”

After a few seconds of silence, Mom asked, “Will you be coming home for Christmas?”

I appreciated that she’d only asked about the holidays, not if I’d come back now that we’d talked, but I wasn’t ready to promise anything yet. “Probably.”

“And your sister?” The hesitation in Dad’s voice was clear.

“I don’t want her to worry. You can tell her that I talked to you and that I’m okay, but I don’t want her knowing where I am.” I hated myself for saying it, but it was the truth. “I don’t know if she’ll respect my wishes to give me space.”

The fact that they didn’t immediately defend her and say that she’d do as I asked told me that I wasn’t off base in my assessment.

“Would you mind...” Mom sniffed, and I hated to be the one to make her sad. “Would it be okay for us to call you sometimes? Just to check in.”

I smiled, even though they couldn’t see it. “I’d like that.”

“You know if you need to come home, you can come back anytime, right?” Dad’s voice was gruff with emotion. “I’m not asking you to, don’t get me wrong. I just want to make sure you know that it’s always an option.”

“I know, Dad. And if I need to, I will, but right now, I’m good.”

We talked for a few more minutes, with me telling them about working with Martina and them telling me about the neighbor's new dog. When we hung up, I felt better. Sort of, anyway.

I'd been nauseous the last couple days, the stress of the last few weeks finally catching up to me, but I'd hoped talking to my parents today would make it better. Instead, my queasy stomach was still taking its time in settling down despite the toast I'd eaten.

Maybe I needed to go to the doctor, I thought as I pulled up my calendar on my phone to check my schedule. It wasn't until I saw a reminder that I'd missed. A reminder that I'd promised Freedom I'd make an appointment to see Dr. Rhimes, my gynecologist.

Dammit.

What twenty-two-year-old woman couldn't remember to schedule an appointment with their gynecologist after having sex for the first time?

I sighed and pulled up the number on my phone. It wasn't an emergency, but I did need to go. Not to keep a promise to Freedom, but because that's what a responsible woman should do.

EIGHT

EOIN

SO FAR, SO GOOD.

It'd been a week and a half since Aline and I had gone to The Mar Vista and then made out in my car like a couple horny teenagers. We'd talked every day since then and had seen each other every other day, even if it'd just been fifteen or twenty minutes at lunch. We'd fooled around a bit but hadn't had sex. In the past ten days, I'd taken more cold showers and jacked off more than I had since I was a teenager.

The crazy thing was, I'd enjoyed all of it, even with pretty much non-stop blue balls. I still wanted her like crazy, but I didn't feel like everything else was only emotional foreplay to get her into bed. I liked talking to her, spending time with her.

On the surface, we seemed like complete opposites, but the more we talked, the more we saw that our differences complemented each other. Better, the things we had in common were the important ones. We both loved our families but appreciated being independent too. We liked the idea of traveling but wanted to have a stable home to come back to.

We'd had the travel conversation yesterday, which had gotten me thinking about us maybe going away for a weekend. With Christmas being a Wednesday this year, we could make it a long weekend, leaving Friday and coming—

“Head's up.” Cain knocked on the office door. “Conference room. We've got a job.”

My plans for between Christmas and New Year's would have to wait. Maybe that was for the best since I didn't know what either of our work schedules would be over the holidays. Besides, a surprise might not be the best idea. With my recent luck, I'd plan a trip to somewhere Aline hated.

I sat down next to Dez and pushed everything else to the back of my mind. I knew I'd been lucky that Cain hadn't flat-out fired me after he found out that I'd slept with Aline. And he'd been great about reworking things with the bodyguard job I'd missed while I'd been with Israel and Nana Naz. I wasn't about to give him anything less than a hundred and ten percent.

"All right, we've been hired as extra security for Edwin Moss," Cain began.

"The actor?" Bruce lifted an eyebrow. "Did someone give his latest movie a bad review?"

"Since he came out two months ago, he's apparently been getting death threats. Someone decided to step it up, though, and broke into his hotel room in Vegas. He's there doing a charity poker tournament and is then heading to San Diego to spend Christmas with his boyfriend."

As Cain explained what we would be doing, I made a mental note to text Aline as soon as our meeting was done, letting her know that I'd be gone for a while. With this turn of events, I was glad I hadn't actually made any plans with Aline since I might not be back by Christmas. Disappointing, but it was the job. At least it wouldn't be as dangerous as a tour overseas.

Probably.

NINE

ALINE

DR. RHIMES HAD HEARD ABOUT MY KIDNAPPING, SO SHE SET UP A SPECIAL virtual appointment for me on Saturday morning, which I appreciated. The problem didn't begin until after she'd asked a number of questions, and I told her everything that happened and how I'd been feeling. At that point, she'd gotten quiet, and even through the computer screen, I could see the concern on her face. That's when she suggested I get a pregnancy test.

So now, I was standing in a pharmacy, staring at the wall of options and trying not to freak out.

It was just a precaution, Dr. Rhimes had said, and that was what I tried to keep reminding myself. I had an IUD, and the chances of those failing were slim. But, after all the craziness I'd been through recently, she agreed that she preferred to be overly thorough. She'd do a blood test no matter what, but she thought it'd be better if I had an idea of what to expect.

I'd almost decided on which test to buy when my phone alerted me that I had a text from Eoin. I had the message open before I'd consciously decided to read it.

We just got a job that's going to take us to Vegas and then probably to San Diego. We're not sure how long it'll take, but we're leaving for Vegas in a bit. I'll let you know what my schedule will look like as soon as I know so we can plan times to talk. I hate that I won't be able to see you before I leave. We'll do something special when I get back.

Dammit.

I couldn't let him go off and be unreachable when I could be pregnant with his baby. I'd screwed up before, not telling him about being a virgin. I wasn't going to keep something this big from him for any amount of time, which meant I needed to know before he left so, if the test was positive, I could at least tell him that it was a probability.

I grabbed one of the tests, paid for it, and practically ran the two blocks back to the apartment. Martina was at work, but I was unsure if that was a good or a bad thing. If she was here, she'd be supportive, but that also meant I'd have to tell her, and I felt that telling anyone before I told Eoin would be wrong.

If there was anything to tell him.

I'd paced from one side of the apartment to the other a dozen times before the alarm on my watch went off. My heart was going a hundred miles a minute as I walked into the bathroom. I'd gotten one of the simple ones that actually said 'pregnant' or 'not pregnant.'

It was the first.

Pregnant.

My knees went weak, and I sank down on the toilet lid. I would've liked to sit there for hours, trying to process the probability that I was going to have a baby, but the reason I'd rushed to take the test was still valid. I needed to tell Eoin before he became unreachable for who knew how long. This wasn't the sort of news one could exactly leave on a voicemail.

I dialed in a daze, only snapping to attention when I heard his voice.

"I'm sorry about the last-minute warning," he said in way of a greeting.

"That's not why I'm calling." My voice sounded strange even to my ears. "And it's all right. It's part of your job. I just had to tell you before you were unreachable for a while..."

Shit. Maybe this was a bad idea. Did you tell a man this type of news over the phone?

"Tell me what?" He instantly sounded concerned. "Are you okay?"

“I’m fine.” Even as the debate over telling him or not continued to war inside of me, I decided not to delay. “I might be pregnant.”

Less than a second after the word left my mouth, I heard a curse. Two. More. Yelling. Not just Eoin.

And then everything went silent.

“Eoin? Eoin?”

Nothing.

He was gone.

TEN

EOIN

THE SCREECH OF TIRES.

Shouting.

Light reflecting off metal and glass.

Curses.

A jarring impact sending vibrations through every bone.

Crunching.

Breaking.

Dizzy.

Falling.

Pain.

The flashes going off in my head were like individual snapshots I didn't only see, but heard and felt. Each one was barely a second in actual time, but they all seemed like an eternity.

Logically, I knew every minute contained sixty seconds, and every properly run clock counted a second out the exact same way, but experiencing time wasn't always like that. It changed depending on the circumstances. I knew that from too much experience.

And then I was hurtling back in time.

A loud bang and flying through the air, tumbling, crashing.

*Gunfire sending little sparks into the air, the sound echoing, filling my head.
It was so loud.*

And hot.

Smokey.

*My lungs burned, and every breath just made it worse. Burned through my
mouth, down my throat, filling my lungs with fire.*

*The world was hazy, edges blurred. Bodies were shadows and outlines
running across my vision. Legs moving, running. The sound of boots on sand
and rock.*

*Loud popping. Gunshots. Semi-automatic. Handguns. Rifles. Automatic.
Everything.*

An explosion rocked the world, shook the ground.

*No, the roof. Not the ground. I was upside down. Blood rushing to my head. I
couldn't move. I could see everything. But I couldn't move.*

My ears were ringing. The world was muffled and loud.

I could see everything.

*Bart, lying there with his eyes fixed on the sky. Mouth wide open, as if he'd
been screaming. In pain. For his mother. That he didn't want to die. But he
was dead. Neck clearly broken.*

While he screamed.

I could see everything.

I could hear him screaming, blaming me.

*Doto, pinned to the driver's seat. Blood pouring from his mouth. He
screamed too. Cursed me for letting him die.*

*More explosions, more screaming, more gunfire, more of everything. And I
still couldn't move.*

Someone was screaming my name.

Leo.

“Eoin! C’mon, man.”

Not Leo.

Cain.

“Wake up, you fucking bastard! I can’t yank your huge ass out on my own!”

Cain.

I opened my eyes to find Cain leaning over me. He looked like hell. Scratches on his face. Blood.

I blinked, wondering if I was seeing things. I had to be. There was no reason for Cain to be here, and no reason for him to be bloody.

Here.

Wait. Where was here?

I blinked again, and nothing changed.

Except I now realized that he was upside down.

“What...” I cleared my throat and tried again. “What happened?”

Cain ignored my question and asked one of his own. “Can you move?”

“Yes.” Even as I said it, I frowned as I realized something important. I didn’t actually know if that was the truth. Something was wrong, although I couldn’t figure out what it might be. I couldn’t understand what was going on or where I was.

“Eoin!” Cain snapped his fingers in front of my face.

I blinked again and started doing what I should have been doing already. Thinking. I wiggled my toes, then moved my legs. Some pain, but I didn’t think anything was broken. Arms were the same.

As if providing evidence, I wiggled my fingers. “I can move.”

“Great.” Cain moved out of my field of vision before a pair of hands latched onto mine. “Use your legs.”

I did it without really thinking, and between Cain pulling on my arms and me pushing with my legs, I moved. It wasn't until I saw the sky above me that I realized I was outside and that there was something wrong with why I was out here. Why I was on my back, staring up at the clouds.

As I sat up, I realized that the ringing in my ears was partly sirens. Dazed, I looked around, trying to separate what had actually happened from the flashback Cain's voice had pulled me out of.

One thing was very obvious. No one was shooting.

That helped me separate my flashback from real life, but it didn't tell me what was going on right now.

The agency's SUV was almost completely upside-down, and a moving truck was on its side.

We were in the street. An intersection, I realized as I focused in on the stoplights. No. That wasn't entirely accurate. I wasn't in the street. I was on the sidewalk. And so was the SUV. The moving van was on the actual street, and someone was directing traffic around it.

Fever. That's who was standing out in the middle of the street. Pollard Fevrier was a large and scary man, which was probably why none of the passing drivers were honking or shouting as he showed them where to go.

Or it could've been the second man walking up next to the first. Desmond “Dez” Ambler was a terrifying son of a bitch too. Even from where I was sitting, I could see that both of them sported some blood, but it didn't look like they were actually hurt. Then again, they were both marines, so they could've had a couple broken bones and were just ignoring them. They were almost as tough as an army.

“You look like shit.”

I didn't have to see Bode Monroe – “Bruce” – to know he was grinning. He was always grinning.

Sure enough, when I looked up, the first thing I saw were those nearly blinding teeth. “Can’t see what you look like with the sun reflecting off that smile.”

The comment was automatic, out of my mouth before I thought about it.

“How bad does your head hurt?” He crouched in front of me, and now I could see that, despite the smile, he was worried.

I frowned. “My head?”

“Dude, your head broke your window.”

“Broke a window?” I looked over at the SUV, and my brain started working again.

Or, rather, it started realizing that it *wasn’t* working correctly.

Because I just realized that I didn’t know what happened. I could put together from the visual clues that there’d been a car accident, and I’d been with the agency when the collision took place. And it was daytime.

“Shit.”

“What’s wrong?” Bruce asked.

I scowled. “My memory is fucked up.”

I hated admitting it, but if we were on our way to a job, I couldn’t compromise what we were hired to do because I didn’t want to look weak. A head injury could get a lot of people hurt or killed, and I wasn’t going to let that happen.

Not after Leo. I’d swallow my pride and do the right thing.

ELEVEN

ALINE

HE WAS GONE.

I stared at the phone. He'd been there one minute and then gone. He hadn't hung up. I was almost one hundred percent certain of that. I'd heard a curse, which could have been a valid reaction to what I'd just told him, but not the other curses that followed. Or the yelling. I'd heard it in other men's voices, not just Eoin's.

I might be pregnant.

My own words were ringing in my ears, and the news was still freaking me out, but all of that took a back seat to whatever had happened on the other end of the phone.

I called him back, and it went straight to voicemail. "Eoin, I need you to call me back because what I heard before the call ended scared me. Please."

I barely got the last word out of my mouth before I went down on my knees and threw up. Fortunately, since I had already been in the bathroom to take the pregnancy test, I made it to the toilet and didn't have a mess on the floor to clean up on top of everything else.

By the time I cleaned myself up and brushed my teeth, I felt like enough time had passed that I could call Eoin again without seeming like I was freaking out, even if that was what I was doing a bit.

Straight to voicemail again.

I left another message. “Eoin, I’m getting worried here. If everything’s okay, but you just don’t want to – or can’t – talk right now, please at least text me to let me know that you’re all right. Please.”

I paced, counting off two full minutes before sending a text that said pretty much the same thing. Eoin had it set up on his phone to show when he’d read a text, but the alert didn’t turn from ‘delivered’ to ‘read.’ Not after two minutes and not after four.

Something was wrong.

Eoin had made some poor decisions in the past when it came to handling things between us, but he wouldn’t just completely blow off all communication like that, especially not right in the middle of a conversation this serious. No, my gut said something had happened to keep him from responding, and I didn’t think it was as simple as the battery in his phone dying or lack of cell coverage in the area.

Based on what I’d heard and Eoin’s text about the agency having a job, I was fairly certain that he was with at least one, probably more, of Cain’s men. Which meant the agency would know at least a little more than I did.

After a quick search online to find the agency’s phone number, I placed the call. With each ring, my heart fell a little further. After five rings, the call went to an answering service, but I didn’t bother leaving a message. Either everyone from the agency had been with Eoin, or whatever had happened had called them away from the office. I was a little surprised that the landline hadn’t been forwarded to someone’s cell phone, but that wasn’t really forefront in my mind.

I needed to get ahold of someone from the agency, and while I remembered being introduced to the other guys, I didn’t have any information that could help me contact one of them. Except for Cain, I realized suddenly. Freedom had to have called him to hire his team to get me, and I doubted she hadn’t gotten every possible number she could use to reach him.

Dammit.

I really didn’t want to talk to her, but my need to find Eoin outweighed my family issues.

“Aline!”

The worry in Freedom’s voice was almost enough to make me feel guilty for how long I’d shut her out. Almost.

“I’m so glad—”

“I need Cain’s phone number,” I cut in.

Silence for two beats before she asked, “What?”

“Cain. Military guy. Your ex. Came to Iran to save me.” My tone was harsh, clipped, sounding nothing like me. It didn’t bother me the way I knew it should have, but personal analysis had to take a back seat right now.

“I know who he is.” Freedom’s voice was tight. “Why do you want his number? I think we have more important things to discuss.”

“Actually, we don’t,” I snapped. “I’m not calling to talk to you about what’s going on between us. Something happened to Eoin, and I can’t get ahold of him. No one’s answering at the agency either.”

“Eoin.”

It was amazing how much Freedom could say with just his name.

“Are you going to help me or not?” A sharp pain made me look down, and I saw four half-moon marks in the palm of my hand. “I can figure it out on my own, but you’d save me a lot of time if you just give me what I need.”

A few seconds of silence passed, and then, just before I was ready to hang up and try something else, she rattled off nine numbers. I repeated them back.

“Yes, that’s it,” Freedom said. “Am I going to hear from you again?”

“Yes,” I admitted, “but I can’t say when.”

“All right.” Another brief pause. “I hope Eoin’s okay.”

She ended the call before I could respond, and I was relieved that she’d done it. I couldn’t handle one more confusing thing for me to deal with right now. Not when I was already struggling with a probable pregnancy *and* whatever had happened to child’s father.

My hands were shaking as I dialed the number Freedom had given me, and I sank down onto the closest chair without remembering when I'd come into the kitchen. If I was going to hear bad news, I didn't trust my legs to hold me.

"Aline?"

"Cain?" My heart gave an unsteady thud, and I closed my eyes.

"First off, he's more or less okay."

A rush of air went out of me. That wasn't exactly what I'd wanted to hear, but it was better than so many other alternatives.

"We were on our way to meet a client, and our SUV was hit," Cain continued. "Eoin hit his head pretty hard, but he's conscious. The medics are taking him to the hospital for tests though, to make sure."

"Okay." My mind raced, all sorts of awful possibilities piling up one after the other.

"I know you were on the phone with him when we crashed." Cain's voice was gentle but held a firmness that I found reassuring. "I'm assuming you called him a couple times before calling me. His phone was smashed."

At least I knew now that the reason he hadn't answered his phone had been because of something wrong with the phone, not physical injuries that had prevented him from taking a call.

"What hospital?" As Cain told me, the wail of ambulance sirens echoed in the background. After confirming the hospital name, I added, "I'm on my way."

After hanging up, I wrote a quick note to Martina, telling her where I was and why, and then I called for a car. It was hell waiting for them to come, but it was still faster than taking the bus would have been. For the first time since I'd left my parents' house, a part of me wished that I'd stayed, if only because that would have meant I'd have had a car available for me to use.

If wishes were horses...

TWELVE

ALINE

I HANDED THE DRIVER A BILL AND TOLD HER TO KEEP THE CHANGE WITHOUT even looking to see how much that tip would be. The fact that she yelled a thank you meant I'd given her a good one, and I waved a hand at her in what I hoped was a polite manner. I doubted she'd be offended by my being preoccupied, especially as she'd been sympathetic when I'd told her I needed to go to the hospital because my boyfriend had been in a car accident.

My pulse was racing, and I had the now-too-familiar taste of fear on the back of my tongue, but I forced myself to walk calmly into the ER. No good would come of me panicking. If anything, it would delay me getting to Eoin, and that was the goal, getting to him. I needed to see for myself that he was okay.

I was halfway to the front desk when I spotted someone I recognized, and I veered off to speak to him instead. I wasn't Eoin's family, so I didn't know if I'd be able to get information about him, but Bruce had been with Eoin at the time of the accident.

"Bruce!" I called.

He spotted me when I was only a few steps away and smiled, but it wasn't the same brilliant smile that I'd seen at the bar where I'd last seen him. That alone was enough to tell me that it hadn't been some little fender bender.

"Cain said you'd be here," Bruce said. "He'll be back in a couple minutes and will let you know if you'll be able to see Eoin."

I didn't like having to wait, but I understood that Eoin's health had to come first. If he needed to rest, then I would stay here until I could see him. Fortunately, Bruce could do something to distract me for a few minutes.

"What happened?"

"It was crazy." Bruce shook his head. "All five of us were in the SUV, heading out for a job when this moving van came out of nowhere and just slammed into us. Cain was driving, and he did some fancy shit that kept us from wrecking into anyone else, but the SUV flipped."

My hands curled into fists, every nerve in my body taut. Logically, I knew that what Bruce was talking about was in the past, but I still felt like it was part of the present, something that was still happening.

"Dez and I were able to get to the van and get the driver out." Bruce rubbed the back of his neck, winced, and then continued, "He woke up in the ambulance on his way here, and the medics were able to figure out what happened. Apparently, he's diabetic, and he hadn't realized his blood sugar was so low. He passed out at the wheel."

I hadn't realized I'd been angry until Bruce finished explaining the situation. Cain had said they'd been hit, and while I supposed Cain could have been at fault, I hadn't really considered it. I didn't know much about Cain, but he'd struck me as the sort of capable man who always had the most competent person doing a task. I knew how well Eoin drove, which meant Cain was even better since he'd been behind the wheel.

No, I'd been furious at the other driver, at whatever had distracted them to the point of causing an accident. But now, I knew it hadn't been something completely preventable. Sure, the man might've taken better care of himself to ensure he wouldn't pass out, but this was a far cry from texting while driving or intentionally running a red light.

"Aline, Bruce."

I turned as Cain approached, and something tight inside me eased. While he didn't look happy, he didn't look like someone who had to deliver bad news either.

“I pulled some strings so I can take you back to see him,” Cain said to me before looking at Bruce. “Can you wait for Fever and Dez? Let them know that I’m going to call the client and figure out what our next step is.”

Bruce tapped his fingers to his forehead in a little salute. “Will do, boss.”

I followed Cain past the front desk and into the main ER. We passed three curtained sections before Cain pulled aside one of the curtains and motioned for me to step through.

The first thing I saw was blood, but then our eyes met, and Eoin’s entire face lit up.

“Hey.” He held out his hand, and I took it. He pulled me closer. “I’d kiss you, but I’m a bit of a mess.”

“I don’t care.” My chaotic emotions made my voice uneven, but I didn’t care about that either. I brushed my lips across his, contenting myself with a chaste kiss while we were in public. He was alive and didn’t seem to have any life-threatening issues. I could inspect every inch of him for myself later.

“Mr. McCrae.” It was only then that I realized a doctor was here too, and she appeared to be torn between amusement and annoyance at my presence. “I need to discuss results with you.”

Cain stepped away. “That’s my cue. I need to handle things with our client, and I’ll touch base with you when I have things squared away.”

As Cain left, I turned to follow, but Eoin’s grip on my hand tightened. “Stay.”

“Mr. McCrae.”

“You can talk in front of her,” he said to the doctor.

“All right.” The doctor ignored me and went straight to the facts. “The initial x-rays didn’t show any fractures, but I’m still waiting for the results of the CT scan.”

“If nothing’s broken, I can go, right?” Eoin asked. “I mean, the CT is just an extra precaution.”

“No,” the doctor said, looking annoyed enough that I wondered if Eoin had been giving her a hard time. “It is *not* just a precaution. You broke a window with your head, and while I don’t doubt you have a very hard head, bone versus glass isn’t a competition you want to risk losing.”

“You did *what* with your head?” It was my turn to hold his hand tighter.

He shrugged. “I’ll have a headache and probably a bruise, but it’s far from the worst thing that’s happened to me.”

I studied him for a moment. “This can go one of two ways. You can stay and wait for the results, or I can call someone in your family and have them tell you to not be an idiot. I have plenty of people to choose from.”

He scowled, but there wasn’t any real animosity in his expression. “All right. I’ll stay, but if the CT’s clear, I want to leave.”

“Fine.” With that, the doctor left the two of us alone, the expression on her face clearly saying that she was glad he would be my problem soon.

“I have to ask,” Eoin said, “how did you know I was here? I’m glad you are, don’t get me wrong, but I was surprised to see you come in with Cain. Did he call you?”

“I called him,” I explained. “Just logical.”

“Why was it logical?” A strange expression crossed his face.

“Well, you’d said you would be gone on a job for a while, and I heard male voices in the background during our call, so I figured you were together.”

Now he just looked confused, and a warning bell went off in my head. Something was off.

“Eoin, you texted me about having a job. We were talking on the phone.”

“I did? We were?”

I could barely ask the question. “Are-are you...are you having memory issues?”

He sighed. “I don’t remember the accident...or some before that.”

My stomach twisted. “How much is missing?”

“The last thing I remember is talking to you last night.”

Which meant he didn’t remember me calling to tell him I was probably pregnant.

Shit.

THIRTEEN

E O I N

“THE LAST THING I REMEMBER IS TALKING TO YOU LAST NIGHT.” I SHOOK MY head. “It’s weird. I didn’t even realize something was wrong with my memory right away. I mean, it was daylight, and I was sitting on a sidewalk, but my brain didn’t even register that my most recent memory had been at night and in my hotel room.”

“What did the doctor say?”

Aline’s voice sounded strange, but when I looked at her, she seemed fine. Maybe it was just the shock of first finding out I’d been in an accident and then learning that I’d lost some time. It wasn’t like this was a normal, everyday occurrence. Then again, considering how we’d met, *normal* didn’t really apply to us.

“That’d be another reason she wanted a CT scan,” I admitted. “I have a concussion so—”

“Yes, I imagine that would be inevitable when two hard objects collide at a high rate of speed,” Aline said dryly.

I lifted a shoulder. “At least it was the window that broke.”

“Well, clearly, your brain didn’t come out entirely unscathed.” Aline’s mouth turned down in a frown that tugged at my heart.

“I’m okay,” I said, lifting our hands so I could kiss the back of hers. “You’ll see.”

She nodded but didn't stop frowning.

"What were we talking about?" I asked after nearly a minute of silence.

She blinked, clearly startled by my question. "What?"

"You said that I'd texted you about the job, but then that we were talking on the phone when the accident happened. Was something wrong?"

Before she could answer, the doctor returned. "The CT scan is clear. No bleeding. But you do have a concussion, and I'd like to keep you overnight for observation."

That wasn't about to happen, but I said it more politely since she was just doing her job. "I'd rather not be admitted. I...don't like hospitals."

The doctor's gaze flicked up to my scar, and then she met my eyes again. "All right, let's make a deal. If you have someone to stay with you for at least the next twelve hours, I'll release you."

I looked over at Aline. "I'd like for you to stay with me, but I can get one of the guys or someone from my family to do it."

She shook her head. "No, I'll do it."

"I'll get started on the paperwork then." The doctor was gone as quickly as she had appeared.

When Aline didn't bring the conversation back to my recent question, I considered asking it again, but thought better of it. I didn't know when the doctor would be back, and I didn't want us to be interrupted again if something actually had been wrong.

I really hoped I hadn't done something stupid again.

Besides, there were a couple other things I needed to take care of now that I had an official medical report.

"Apparently, my phone is broken," I said. "Could I use yours to call my parents? I don't know how much attention the crash is getting in the news or if any of our names are out there. The last thing Da and Mom need is to see something on the news about me being in an accident. Especially after

everything else I've put them through.”

“Of course.” Aline fished her phone out of her purse and held it out to me. “Do you know their numbers?”

That was an odd question. “Um, yes? Why wouldn't I?”

Aline's light green eyes sparkled with humor. “You do realize that most people anymore don't actually know phone numbers because we use a contact list rather than putting in the numbers from memory.”

“Yes, I do know that.” I laughed. “But my parents insisted that all of us kids had at least a couple phone numbers memorized so that if we didn't have service or the battery died or whatever, we could use any other phone to make a call home. And ‘insisted’ meant we didn't get a cell phone until we could recite both of our parents' cell numbers and at least two of our siblings' numbers.”

“Smart,” she said. “I'd probably be in trouble. The only number I have memorized is the landline my parents kept ‘just in case.’”

“‘Just in case’ of what?” I asked.

Aline shrugged. “EMP. Zombie apocalypse. They never really specified.”

I chuckled as I dialed Da's number, glad for the humor before making this call. Me sounding positive would go a long way to convincing them that I was okay. Aside from the memory glitch, I was.

Yeah, I was going to have some pretty nasty bruises, but I'd gotten worse doing stupid shit growing up. If all I had to deal with asking a couple people to fill in what'd happened between late last night and when Cain had woken me up in the SUV after the accident, I'd consider it a good day.

LESS THAN FORTY MINUTES LATER, Aline and I walked into the hotel lobby. I'd spent most of the ride from the hospital to the hotel on the phone with Cain, discussing what was going on with the job I didn't remember us taking. He'd filled me in on what I'd forgotten, and then said that he'd

spoken to Edwin Moss – our client – and explained about the accident, including the aftermath.

The biggest two points of which were that the SUV was totaled and that all of our weapons had been confiscated by the police until we were able to prove ownership and permits. Cain had felt that it'd be best if the client hired another company.

Moss had been understanding and had taken the referral Cain had given him, so I could spend tomorrow and the rest of the weekend recovering. I hated being sidelined, but Cain hadn't budged on that.

"Has your brother found a place for you?" Aline asked as we rode the elevator to my floor. "I meant to ask you last night."

"I didn't tell you when we talked this morning?" I scratched the stubble on my chin., hoping to steer the conversation back to my unanswered question.

She shook her head. "Does that mean you've heard back from Rome?"

"I did." I reached for her hand. "I'll probably be signing for a condo on Monday." A thought occurred to me. "I'll need to call Rome and find out if I'd rescheduled my appointment after Cain scheduled a job. I'm sure Rome will make time to fit me in. I just don't know when."

"A condo?" she asked as we walked down the hallway. "Not an apartment?"

I shook my head. "That's what I'd asked him to look for – an apartment, I mean – but he said when he saw this place, he thought it'd be perfect for me. And it is."

She smiled. "What's it like?"

"It's pretty big, but when I saw it, I realized I liked the idea of having space, especially since it's the first place I've ever been able to choose like this. Before, I had to be ready to leave it all behind, so I'd never seen the point of putting any effort into having anything but just the bare necessities."

"That makes sense," she said. "I've never had a place of my own either. Though I am younger than you." She winked at me, a small smirk on her lips.

Damn, that was hot.

“Are you accusing me of robbing the cradle?” I teased her back as I unlocked the door and reached inside to turn on the light.

“Well, you are, what, forty?” She laughed even as she said it.

“Twenty-eight, thank you.” I glared at her, but it was all in jest.

“Practically ancient.”

As the door clicked closed, she turned toward me and reached up to put her hand on my cheek. Her smile softened, and the light mood shifted, not into something heavy or dark, but different.

“I was so scared when that phone went de...” Her voice shook. “Quiet. I thought...”

I put my hand over hers. “I’m okay.” I leaned down and brushed my lips across hers. “I’m pretty hard to kill.”

If she hadn’t known me as well as she did, she might’ve thought it was me simply trying to reassure her, but she understood both the truth of the words as well as why they had a bitter edge to them.

“Will you hate me if I say I’m glad of it?”

The vulnerability in her eyes both surprised me and reached something deep inside me, prompting me to say the truth in response. “Nothing could make me hate you, sweetheart.”

Her entire face shone, and a bolt of desire hit me square in the stomach and immediately traveled south. I was banged up and bruised with a massive headache in my near future when the ER drugs wore off, but my cock didn’t care.

“I need to clean up,” I said. “Join me?”

Heat flared in her eyes, and she nodded.

Neither of us spoke as we undressed, as the bathroom filled with steam. The only sound was the shower, and it created white noise, making it feel as if nothing else existed. The world could’ve disappeared, and we never would have known.

I stepped under the spray first, hissing in pain as the hot water hit the bruised and scraped skin on my back. Then Aline joined me, and all my attention focused on her. Slender, delicate body with small, perfect breasts tipped with pale peach-colored nipples. Fair skin that probably burned with the slightest hint of sunlight.

Her blonde hair was so light that even water couldn't darken it to brown. But her beauty wasn't just physical, no matter how quickly or how intensely my body responded to hers. She was smart and tough and put others before herself.

How the hell did I get this lucky?

Without a word, she picked up my shampoo, squirted some of it in her palm, and then gestured for me to bend over so she could reach my hair. I closed my eyes and just let myself enjoy the feel of her fingers massaging my scalp, picking out what I assumed was glass and bits of debris. Once she finished with that, she began to wash the blood and the dirt off, moving carefully but not like she didn't want to touch me.

She waited until she was done with everything else before finally, *finally* touching my cock. A shudder ran through my entire body as she moved the washcloth over the head and down the shaft. Every place on my body that she'd touched was humming, burning in a pleasurable way, overriding the pain from my injuries. After a few strokes, the washcloth was replaced by her hand, and I groaned.

When I felt her move, I opened my eyes to find her down on her knees, her lips parting to take the tip into her mouth. She slowly worked her hand and lips around and over, finding the perfect balance of enough but not too much. Her other hand moved to my balls, tugging on them, rolling them. Each sensation built on the next, and pleasure traveled through me, filling every cell with that white-hot pleasure that promised to completely eliminate any and all thoughts.

"Aline," I growled out the warning, but she didn't let up. Instead, she took me deeper, sucked harder, and I exploded in her mouth. She swallowed each drop, looking up at me through my lashes as she did it, which only made it that much hotter.

As soon as my brain started working again, I reached down and pulled her to her feet. My mouth crashed into hers, and I pushed my tongue between her lips, tasting myself but not caring. If anything, it just made me more determined to give her as much pleasure as she'd given me.

I moved her against the wall, my hands on her breasts, between her legs. She squirmed as I slid a finger between her lips, finding her clit already swollen, her pussy wet. With rough, deliberate movements, I brought her quickly, swallowing her screams as she came.

Finally, as her jerks and shivers stopped, I broke the kiss and put my lips next to her ear.

“I have a few ideas of how we can pass the time while you keep an eye on me.” I took her earlobe between my teeth and tugged on it. “Are you game?”

She took a shaky breath before answering with a firm, “Yes, please.”

FOURTEEN

ALINE

THIS WASN'T MY BED, BUT IT ALSO WASN'T THE ONE I'D BEEN SLEEPING ON IN Martina's guest room either. This mattress was much nicer, but the biggest clue was that I wasn't in bed alone.

I smiled even before I opened my eyes, anticipating what I'd see next to me. Six feet, six inches of leanly muscled goodness. He was self-conscious of the scars on his torso, but I saw them as proof of his bravery, his selflessness.

He'd earned each and every one of them, along with the one that ran down his left cheek, from his temple to just under his mouth. From his behavior and things he'd said, he definitely saw himself in a *before* and *after* way, but I'd only ever known him like this. My physical attraction to him wasn't despite his scars or because of them. It was simply him.

When I looked at him, my heart gave a funny skip. His rust-colored hair was a mess, and I found myself brushing it back from his face, enjoying the feel of the soft strands. While I had no doubt that he had nightmares about the things he had been through, right now, he looked peaceful.

Without warning, my stomach lurched, and I scrambled out of bed. My hand over my mouth, I barely made it to the bathroom. It wasn't until the retching subsided that I realized Eoin was next to me, his expression saying that he wanted to help but didn't know how.

“Are you okay?”

I nodded, closing my eyes for a moment. It was time to talk about that phone call.

“It can’t be the room service,” he said. “I ate the same thing you did.”

The sound of water had me opening my eyes, and Eoin held out a cup. I took it gratefully and rinsed my mouth.

“Let me clean up,” I said as I managed to get to my feet. “I’ll be out in a few minutes and we can talk.”

He looked confused but didn’t argue. Instead, he did as I asked, even closing the door behind him. I appreciated the consideration because I did want some privacy, not only so that I could brush my teeth and wash my face but so that I could pull myself together enough for what I needed to do.

Once I was as composed as I knew I would ever get, I went back into the main room where a fully dressed Eoin was sitting at the table. I appreciated his having dressed. This wasn’t the sort of conversation I wanted to have with either of us naked or even partially so.

I sat across from him, hiding my hands under the table so he couldn’t see how I was twisting my fingers together. If I could continue to appear collected and calm, maybe he wouldn’t realize what a nervous wreck I was.

How upset I was about how irresponsible I’d been.

“Yesterday, you texted me to say that you were leaving town for a job and that you’d reach out to me to let me know your schedule. When I received that text, I was in a pharmacy. And when I called you, it was because I had something, I needed to tell you before you became unreachable for an unknown amount of time.” I forced myself to meet his eyes. Out of all the emotions roiling through me, not one of them was shame. “I took a pregnancy test, and it was positive.”

He leaned back in his chair, stunned. I had a feeling that, if he had been standing, he would’ve fallen. My stomach was in knots as I waited for him to say something.

I wasn’t going to rush him or get mad that he didn’t instantly have a response. Even if I’d given him this kind of news without everything he’d

just been through, it would have been unfair of me to expect him to process instantly and give me the reaction I wanted.

Especially since I didn't really know *what* I wanted him to say or do.

Nearly two full minutes passed before he finally spoke. "I thought you said you had an IUD."

Not where I'd hoped his first thought would go, but at least a logical one. "I do." I blew out a breath. "When I got home after...I was supposed to make an appointment with my doctor, but I'd forgotten until yesterday morning after I threw up. When I called Dr. Rhimes and told her everything, she said she couldn't get me in until tomorrow morning. And then she said that I should get a pregnancy test because it was a possibility."

"A possibility? So the test could have been a false positive?"

He didn't sound upset or eager or anything, really. His face wasn't blank, exactly, but he was definitely not broadcasting what he was feeling. Not with his expression or his tone. Not a single thing.

Apparently, I did have at least some small expectation of what I'd wanted from him. Some concern or attempt of comfort. But, I reminded myself, he'd just been through a lot. That helped me not to be too annoyed. Who knew how different his reaction would have been if the accident hadn't happened and we'd had the rest of our conversation on the phone?

"It could be," I said. "Nothing's one hundred percent."

And there it was. A split second of something real in his eyes.

Something that looked an awful lot like relief.

For the second time that morning, I felt like I was going to throw up. Tears pricked at my eyelids, and I was suddenly grateful that neither of us had turned on more than just a lamp in the corner. Shadows could hide what I couldn't quite manage myself.

The silence between us turned awkward, and I pushed to my feet. "I should change."

I was in the bedroom before I remembered that I didn't actually have any clothes to change into. I'd come straight here from the hospital, and what I was going to wear had been the absolute last thing on my mind. I did, at least, have a clean pair of underwear in my purse. I'd made that a habit for years, and my time in Iran had made me almost compulsive about it.

I probably spent more time than necessary in the bathroom, but I needed it to get my emotions in check. I really hoped that this was some sort of placebo effect and not pregnancy hormones rearing their ugly heads. If I was pregnant, I didn't want to be a basket case for the next nine months.

If.

I didn't know the numbers when it came to the likelihood of an IUD failing or a pregnancy test giving a false positive, but both did happen. As my mind bounced around, I wondered if the insanity of my last couple months made it more or less likely that I'd beat the odds. And what would that look like? Was it beating the odds if I was pregnant or not?

And that was the moment I realized that I hadn't asked myself one very important question.

Did I want to be pregnant?

I hadn't intended it to happen. Hadn't even considered it a possibility. Honestly, I hadn't even been thinking about having a family in the near future. Obviously, I didn't dislike children, as that would have made my field of study quite foolish, but a baby at this point in my life wasn't even close to being on my radar.

Eoin wasn't the only person who was just now processing this information. Even though I'd technically known about it longer than he had – either counting or not counting the amnesia – things had gone pear-shaped almost from moment one. I hadn't been able to actually *think* about it yet.

I needed to do that. How could I hold Eoin's reaction against him when I hadn't truly thought it through yet myself?

My phone's alarm went off, making me jump. I reached for it, not remembering why I had an alarm set for today. When I saw what was on the screen, I closed my eyes and cursed under my breath.

At least I now had a legitimate reason to leave.

I had promised my parents I'd have lunch with them today.

Wonderful.

FIFTEEN

EOIN

I THOUGHT I TOLD ALINE GOODBYE, BUT I HONESTLY COULDN'T BE SURE. A part of my brain was even wondering if I'd dreamed the entire conversation while still sleeping next to her in bed. Or maybe I'd actually passed out again in the hospital and was now unconscious, and my mind was trying to freak me out to wake me up. Or maybe I'd actually died, and the afterlife was just some strange shit that made no sense.

Because there's no way this could be happening.

Could it?

I'd had sex with a lot of women over the years, and since graduating high school, I'd always used condoms, even if a woman said she was on birth control. Then I'd met Aline, and all that had gone out the window.

And now, she might be pregnant.

Might.

Possibly?

Probably?

Shit.

Then again, when I considered the odds, the fact that this was the first time anything like this had ever happened to me, I supposed it wasn't too far-fetched. Shit like this happened every day.

Hell, it'd happened to my brother, Alec.

At least I knew how my family would take the news. Well, more or less. I'd already been enlisted when all of that had happened, but it wasn't actually that hard to figure out.

While my parents hadn't been the sort who'd expected abstinence from any of us kids, they'd also been big believers in making sure all of us understood the possible consequences of our actions. When they'd given us each the sex talk and discussed birth control, they'd also told us that the only way to one hundred percent avoid pregnancy and STIs was to not have sex. Well, other than the obvious exception of rape, of course, and none of us would ever blame a survivor for anything that came from something like that.

If we did have sex, we'd be expected to take responsibility for anything that came up because of it, but they wouldn't tell us how that responsibility was supposed to look. The only thing they'd made clear was that brushing consequences off wouldn't be allowed, and the first of us to go through this situation had risen to the occasion just like he always had with everything else.

Alec married Keli, but the marriage hadn't lasted very long. He'd done the whole joint-custody thing until earlier this year when Keli had gone off the deep end and dropped Evanne at his house with primary custody papers, before running off with a boyfriend. That had sparked off a whole other kind of shitshow.

Aline wasn't Keli, but out of everyone in my family, Alec was the only one – that I knew of anyway – who could understand what I was going through. It was a workday, but I never called Alec just to talk. If he saw my name on the caller ID, he'd answer.

My phone was in the bedroom, and as I stood to get it, I realized how much time had passed since I'd sat down. And how fucked up I'd actually gotten yesterday. The pain wasn't bad enough to stop me, but it was enough to make me grimace as I walked, working the stiffness out of my muscles. A hot shower would do me some good too, but I wanted to talk to my brother first.

He answered on the second ring. "Eoin? Da said you were in an accident. Are you all right?"

“I’m fine.” I winced as I rolled my shoulders. “Sore and I have some nasty bruises, but nothing more serious than a concussion.”

That was more than I probably would have told him if something like this had happened before this past spring, but I’d put my family through enough worry this year. For him, knowing more would be better, not worse.

“Do you have a few minutes to talk?” I asked. “I could use some advice.”

Only the very brief pause before he answered told me that he was surprised. “Sure. What do you need?”

“I met this girl.” Shit. I sounded like a teenager, but I decided to plow on. “The first job I did with Cain, the girl...woman we were hired to...find...”

Shit. This was harder than I’d thought. I didn’t know how much of this was important. I’d never had to actually tell anyone in my family that I was dating someone because I’d never really done it before.

“Her name’s Aline, and we’ve been seeing each other since then.”

I really hoped I didn’t have to spell out that ‘seeing each other’ meant sex. Not because I’d never talked to my brothers about sex, but it was different with Aline. I didn’t want him thinking about her that way, even if I knew he wouldn’t *really* be thinking about her like that. No, his relationship with Lumen was solid, and he’d never fantasize about someone else’s girlfriend, but I still didn’t like even the idea of it.

Maybe a blunt, rip-off-the-bandage approach would be best.

“There’s a chance she could be pregnant.”

He didn’t say anything immediately, but that was okay because I knew he was thinking. He wasn’t an impulsive sort of guy, which was another reason that talking to him was a good idea.

“How high is a ‘could be’ chance?”

“I honestly don’t know,” I said. “She has an IUD and a positive pregnancy test.”

Another few beats of silence, and I wondered if he was going to ask me if we'd used a condom too, but he didn't.

"The two of you have been together a month?"

"More or less." It was an honest answer, even if I kept back some details.

"How do you feel about her?"

That was a good question, and I wasn't sure I had a good answer. I did my best. "I like her a lot. I care about her enough to work my ass off to be with her."

"Do you have to work at it because she's high maintenance or because you've done some dumb stuff already?"

The question held a bit of teasing in it, and I knew that wasn't because he thought this was funny. He'd almost completely fucked things up with Lumen more than once because he'd been an idiot.

"Mostly the second one," I admitted. "She's a bit...naïve. No, not naïve. More like optimistic. She believes that she can change the world with enough hard work and compassion, and sometimes, that makes her not see how the world really is. I like that most of the time, but sometimes, it can be annoying."

"Does she make you want to be a better person without her tellin' you to be one?"

This one was easy to answer. "Yes."

It took me a moment to realize that the noise he made was an attempt to cover a laugh. Lumen really had been good for him.

"Hate to tell you this, little brother, but I think you're a bit past *like* and *care*. If you're willin' to change yourself for a woman, you're well on your way to *love*."

The *l*-word should have just added to the near panic that kept wanting to push its way forward, but it didn't, which made me wonder if what I was feeling was actually panic or something else entirely.

“Look, Eoin.” Alec sounded serious now. “I’m not going to tell you what the right thing to do here is, but I will give you one piece of advice based on my own personal experience. Don’t be an idiot and fuck things up with her because of this.”

I frowned. “I’m not quite following you. When you found out Keli was pregnant, you married her, and it was definitely *not* a good thing.”

“If Aline hadn’t told you that she might be pregnant, would you have wanted to keep seeing her?”

Another easy one. “Yes.”

“Is she the sort of woman who’d lie so she could get pregnant?”

“No,” I said, my temper sparking at even the idea.

“I’m not makin’ accusations here.” His tone was mild. “But you defendin’ her instead of letting my question make you suspicious says a lot.”

Suddenly, a thought popped into my head, prompted by his question and the fact that it’d come after my comment about him and Keli. “Was that what happened with Keli? Did she...”

“I don’t know.” Alec’s voice was quiet. “I’ve never...it doesn’t matter now. However it came about, having Evanne in my life is the best thing that has ever happened to me.”

I didn’t doubt it. As much as I loved Evanne, I knew it couldn’t match how much he did.

“I’ve never told anyone except Lumen about what was happening when Keli told me she was pregnant,” he continued. “But you need to hear it too. I had planned to end things with Keli. Had, in fact, intended to do it when I met her that day. But, when she told me, I decided that providing a home with both mother and father was more important than my feelings for Keli.”

Shit. I hadn’t really known much about the relationship or spent much time around Keli during my rare times back home, and I’d never really liked her, but this was a surprise. Only until I really thought about it, though. Alec had been eight when our mother died, and it had been harder for him to accept

when Da and Theresa had married. He loved Mom and all of our siblings, but I could see why he would want Evanne to have both of her biological parents raising her together.

“What I meant about drawing on my personal experience wasn’t about what happened between Keli and me. I meant Lumen. I almost lost her because I had some picture in my mind of what I thought my family should be instead of embracing what I truly wanted. I tried to force things with Keli not only once, but twice, and if Lumen hadn’t been the amazin’ woman she is...”

His thought trailed off, but I didn’t need him to tell me what would have happened if Lumen hadn’t been the woman she was.

“If you want to be with Aline, then be with her and take whatever comes with it, baby or not. Don’t force it just because you think that’s the ‘right’ thing to do, but also don’t let fear rule you. Being afraid doesn’t make you a bad person, just human. Your lass is probably just as terrified as you.”

It was good advice, and I allowed myself a moment to let it all sink in. “I’ve got a lot to think about.”

“Aye, you do. If you need to talk more, just call.”

“Thank you. I will.” I ended the call but didn’t move from where I was sitting.

I was glad I’d called my brother and appreciated the advice he’d given me, but a part of me wished it could’ve been simpler. That he would’ve just told me what to do. Sometimes, following orders was easier than having to think for myself.

SIXTEEN

ALINE

BY THE TIME I ARRIVED AT THE CAFÉ GRATITUDE, THE CRACKERS I'D EATEN at Martina's had calmed my stomach enough that the absolutely amazing smells made me hungry rather than nauseous, for which I was grateful. If I could eat and didn't have to excuse myself to the restroom to throw up, my parents would think everything was okay.

I'd actually arrived before them, which I thought would set a good tone, but I waited for them rather than choosing a table. Part of what I wanted to show them today was that we could have an adult relationship where we all respected each other and interacted with the same sort of politeness and consideration we would grant to any other 'grown-up.' Part of that, in my mind, was getting their opinion on where we should sit rather than choosing for them, especially since I was unsure if they would've done the same for me.

I had to admit, I felt some satisfaction when I saw the surprise on their faces when they came inside and saw me.

"Do we want an outside or indoor table?" I asked after giving both of them hugs.

Once we settled at our indoor table, we made some small talk about the weather and the Christmas decorations here at the restaurant. While innocuous enough topics, I could still feel the tension between us.

I didn't like that the ease we'd once had was gone, but I knew that it hadn't been real for a long time. The only reason we'd been able to function as well

as we had was because I hadn't been brave enough to face any of it, to rock the boat.

Now, I had more than one reason to do a little rocking.

Maybe a lot.

Not that I intended to tell my parents that particular little bit. Some of my reluctance came from the memory of their disappointment when Freedom told them that I'd slept with Eoin. They would probably have the same sort of reaction to a pregnancy, and that would break my heart. But that wasn't the main reason.

The main reason was more complicated than that. Because of the problems my mother had carrying a baby to term and my own premature birth that had almost resulted in both of our deaths, my pregnancy would bring back the intense overprotectiveness that had followed the first couple days home after my kidnapping. *That* would suffocate me.

Either one would damage our relationship even more, and both would destroy it.

Besides, it was still only a possibility, which meant telling them might not even be necessary. Actually, it might've been worse to tell them and then turn around and tell them that I'd been wrong. Even though my mother loved both Freedom and me, I knew she still grieved each baby she'd lost. A false positive wouldn't be the same, but it might trigger her memories of everything she'd gone through back then. No matter how pissed I might have been at them, I wouldn't do that to either of them.

"So, what have you been doing over at Martina's place?" Mom asked. "Perusing possible employment opportunities in the area, or perhaps looking into continuing your education into the doctorate level?"

I noticed she hadn't mentioned me looking for jobs outside of L.A., but I didn't bother addressing that. Picking at every single thing that annoyed me would be counterproductive. I needed to choose my battles.

"Actually, I've been working part time at the boutique where Martina works. After what happened in Iran, I wanted something low-key while I decided what I wanted to do next."

I could almost read the thoughts as they moved across my parents' faces. Surprise. Confusion. Exasperation.

“Retail?” Mom wrinkled her nose as she said the word. “You have a master’s degree in elementary education, and you’ve chosen to work in retail?”

“If money is an issue, it doesn’t have to be,” Dad said. “You can come home and be free to take your time finding the right place for you. Somewhere your education and talents will be appreciated.”

How had my parents become such snobs? Was this something that had always existed in my family and I hadn’t noticed until now?

“It’s not a money issue,” I said. My voice was a little stiff, but I thought that was pretty good considering everything I had going on right now. “Martina would never ask me to pay to stay with her.”

I didn’t add that, even though she’d told me I didn’t need to, I’d given her money from my trust to help with utilities and show my appreciation for what she’d done. I had a feeling I’d earn a lecture with whatever information I shared. No need to stoke the fire.

Mom really looked confused now. “Then why are you working at a store? Any school would be lucky to have you, and Stanford would accept you into their doctorate program if you didn’t feel ready to teach yet.”

Apparently, I wasn’t going to get away with letting the matter be settled with the answers I’d given so far. I sighed, suddenly bone weary.

“I would’ve thought you’d both be proud of me for working rather than sitting around doing nothing.” I looked at my father. “Your parents were hard-working blue-collar people, and you worked your way up to having your own business.” I turned to Mom. “You both have always been such hard workers. Why wouldn’t you want me to follow in your footsteps?”

“We admire your work ethic,” Mom said, reaching across the table to pat my hand. “You’ve always worked so hard to get through school early and stay at the top of your class. We just don’t understand why you’ve chosen this particular job when you could do so much better.”

“There is nothing wrong with working retail,” I said, my hand tightening around my fork. “Why are you being so condescending about it?”

They both looked surprised, but I couldn’t tell if that was because they hadn’t realized how they’d sounded or if it was my speaking up about it that’d caught them off-guard.

“Of course, there’s nothing wrong with retail work,” Mom said, sounding quite offended by the very idea. “But those are the types of jobs that...”

The sentence trailed off, and she flushed.

“The types of jobs that someone like me shouldn’t ‘need’ to take?” I asked quietly. “Why? Because I was fortunate enough to grow up in a household where money was never an issue? Because I was born with a high IQ that made it easy for me to learn? Because I have a college degree? You always taught me that everyone was unique but equal.”

“You’re right.” Dad wrapped his hand around his glass but didn’t drink. “You’re absolutely right. Your mother and I raised you girls to treat everyone equally, and now we’re behaving as if you’re doing something beneath you.”

I couldn’t keep the surprise off my face. Not only had he just admitted how they sounded now, but he’d admitted that they were wrong for it too. I could count on one hand the number of times either of them had acknowledged they were wrong, and it had never been for something like this.

“We just want what’s best for you,” Mom said. “When you have children, you’ll understand.”

My stomach twisted. That could be a lot closer than they knew.

“It doesn’t make what we said right,” she continued. “But I hope you can see that our intentions were in the right place.”

I was tempted to remind her of the common saying about the road to hell and good intentions, but I simply took the win and offered them some information as an expression of my gratitude. “I intend to look for substituting jobs for the second semester so that I can get a better idea of where I might like to look for more permanent work.”

“That’s a good idea.”

I would’ve appreciated Mom’s compliment more if she hadn’t sounded so surprised.

“While I don’t *need* the money from the job, I do like not having to use my trust fund for everything,” I continued. “I may want to get my doctorate one day, but it won’t be in the near future.”

Especially if I was pregnant.

“Freedom hasn’t said anything to us about her plans.”

Dad was trying too hard to sound casual, which meant I could guess what would follow. I wasn’t wrong.

“Has she said anything to you?”

“She hasn’t.”

Mom twisted her napkin between her fingers. “Have you talked to her at all?”

“Yes. Yesterday, as a matter of fact.”

“And?” Mom asked when I didn’t continue.

“And it was a short but polite conversation that had absolutely nothing to do with why I don’t want to speak to her right now.” I finished my water and signaled to the waiter that I wanted a refill.

“I hate seeing you girls fight,” Dad said. “Surely you can work it out. It can’t be worth ruining your relationship.”

“I’m not going to ignore her for the rest of my life, but I’m not ready to talk to her right now.”

“But with the holidays coming up...you must see how difficult it would be for the whole family.”

I gritted my teeth at my mother’s not-so-subtle attempt at manipulation. “I’ll try to talk to her before Christmas.”

“And you’ll come home for it?” Dad asked.

I didn't remind him that, technically, their house wasn't my home. After all, I wasn't even sure where home was for me, since the only place I'd ever lived beside my childhood home was the apartment I shared with Freedom, and I didn't plan on going back there any time soon.

"I'll spend Christmas with you," I agreed.

I glanced at my phone and wondered if I could get away with excusing myself yet. I wasn't working today, but I was exhausted, and a nap sounded like the best idea in the world. I couldn't tell them that was what I wanted to do, though. They'd immediately ask if something was wrong, and no truthful answer would be a good one. Fortunately, I did have something that needed to be done, and it was something I could do and still take a nap.

I didn't think I'd ever been so pleased by the need to do laundry.

SEVENTEEN

EOIN

I'D PROBABLY TAKEN LONGER THAN I SHOULD HAVE TO THINK ABOUT THE situation, but it wasn't like I'd had an uneventful two days. Still, I felt guilty that it had taken me a few hours to finally call her.

When she didn't answer, I left a voicemail, asking her to call me when she could because I wanted to talk to her. Then I'd called Cain to check in about work and to let him know that I was feeling better. He'd tried to talk me into taking Monday off too, but I'd reminded him that Christmas was next week, which would make for a short week, and Cain had given in. He'd added that if he didn't think I was up to being there on Monday, he'd tell me to go home, and if I didn't listen, he'd call my parents.

At some point in time, I was going to call foul when someone threatened me with my parents, but this wasn't the time to do it. I agreed to his terms.

A quick glance at the time showed that it'd been an hour since I'd called Aline, and she hadn't called me back. I couldn't remember if she was working, and I didn't want to bother her if that was the case, so I sent a text this time, basically saying the same thing I had in the voicemail, except I added an apology where I said that I knew I hadn't had the best reaction to her news but that I'd just been shocked and now wanted to talk about it.

Then I waited again, and there was still nothing. She hadn't seemed angry when she'd left this morning, but maybe I'd just been completely clueless. It wouldn't be the first time, especially when it came to this woman. But I did know that she wasn't the sort of woman who kept quiet about things she

didn't agree with. Hell, she'd gotten into my face seconds after meeting me, and I'd been carrying serious firepower. Ghosting me wasn't her style.

Which was why I felt uneasy after twenty minutes had passed without any response from my text. It'd been more than an hour since my call too. If she'd gone to work, I liked to think that she would've at least told me that.

Hell, even a *fuck off* would've been something.

I called again with the same result. Voicemail. This time, though, I realized something I hadn't noticed the last time. The call wasn't sent to voicemail right away like it would have been if her phone had been off, and it didn't only ring once or twice like it would've been if she'd been declining my calls.

No, it had rung several times, as if it was going off, but she was ignoring it. The first time, she could've just walked away from it for a bit, but she would've seen the alert for my call and my voicemail. And then my text. And my second call.

I stood and began to pace, anxiety and tension raising my pulse, tightening my muscles.

Could she have forgotten her phone somewhere? It wasn't here, but I assumed she'd gone back to the apartment, even if she'd had to go to work. Maybe she'd accidentally left it there.

Except I couldn't think of many people in their twenties who didn't have their phones on them at all times.

I called her again.

Voicemail.

My vision started narrowing. Pressure grew in my chest.

Why wasn't she answering?

I sent another text, this one only two words: *call me*.

Something had to be wrong. It was the only logical explanation.

An image flashed in my mind. *Leo looking up at me with dead eyes.*

“No,” I said out loud. “That’s not what happened.”

Bart saying I should have saved him.

“No.” I shook my head.

Doto saying that I hadn’t saved Aline either. That she was dead, and it was all my fault...

“No!” I slammed the palm of my hand down on the table, and the pain shocked me out of the flashback.

I called her again.

When she didn’t answer this time, I knew I had to do something. I couldn’t just stay here and wait for her to call me back when all the signs were pointing me toward something bad keeping her from her phone.

The baby.

It hit me like a punch to the stomach. Aline had told me about her mother’s pregnancy issues, about how she and her mother had both almost died.

I had to get to her.

For several terrifying seconds, I couldn’t think, and then I knew where I needed to go.

It was all I could do to walk to my car and not run. The entire way to the boutique, I reminded myself that speeding wouldn’t be in my best interest. If I got pulled over, it would just make things worse.

I was torn between going to the boutique and going straight to the apartment, but I knew, logically, which was the best route to take. If Aline was at work, going to the apartment wouldn’t give me any answers, just make me more worried that something had happened inside, and I’d have no way in. If I went to the boutique and Aline wasn’t there, Martina could tell me where Aline was. And if something was wrong at the apartment, Martina could get us inside.

Logic, however, didn’t make the drive any easier.

Martina was near the door when I opened it, and she gave me a puzzled look. “Afternoon. Wasn’t expecting to see you.”

“Aline’s not here?”

Martina frowned. “No. I thought she was with you.”

I shook my head. “We spent the night together, but she left this morning, and now I can’t get ahold of her.”

“Wait a minute.” Martina held up a finger as something apparently occurred to her. “She had lunch plans with her parents. She’s probably still with them.”

“At four o’clock?”

The little relief I’d seen disappeared, and the frown came back. “Let me try her.”

“Be my guest.” My words were a little sharp, but it made sense that she should try first. Maybe I’d been wrong, and Aline didn’t want to talk to me after all.

Martina pulled out her phone and made the call. At each unanswered ring, the worry on her face grew. When she shoved the phone into her pocket, her expression was serious. She looked around the store and then called out, “Beckie! I need to run home. You got this covered?”

A tall woman behind a rack of skimpy underwear gave a distracted wave without pausing in her conversation with a middle-aged woman holding a leather corset that was definitely *not* her size.

Martina’s voice echoed in my head. “I need to get my keys. I’ll be right back.”

Dark shadows edged my vision.

Shit.

While Martina hurried away, I began counting in my head, trying to drive back what was coming. I couldn’t help Aline if I was lost inside the past, and I couldn’t let another person down.

Aline.

She'd been the one thing that had been able to keep me grounded before.

I built a picture of her in my mind, not just a physical one, but one that had her heart and her strength. Her stubbornness and fire. So many parts of her that annoyed me and turned me on at the same time.

By the time Martina came back, I wasn't great, but I was in control enough to drive us both to the apartment. Neither of us said anything, but I had no doubt that she was just as worried as I was, which actually made me more anxious. If someone who'd known Aline as long as Martina had thought my reasons for being concerned were valid, that meant I wasn't just overreacting because of what'd happened to me this year.

I barely held myself back when we reached her door, reminding myself that she had the key and that would get me to Aline faster...and not breaking the door would make it more likely that Martina would let me in her apartment again.

She must have sensed my impatience because, as soon as she opened the door, she stepped out of the way and let me go in first. I heard her behind me as I quickly scanned the main room on my way to the guest room where Aline was staying. The curtains let in a crack of light that was enough for me to see Aline lying on the bed.

Ice-cold fear cut through me, and I crossed the distance in just two long strides, reaching for her. The moment my hand touched her shoulder, she made a soft, sleepy sound, and I sank to the edge of the bed, my knees going weak with relief.

“Eoin?”

“Hey.” Out of the corner of my eye, I caught Martina's shadow in the doorway, and then it disappeared. I didn't hear the front door close, but I assumed she was giving us some privacy, which I appreciated.

“What's going on?” Aline pushed herself up into a sitting position. “How did you get in here?”

“Martina.” I gestured behind me. “I kept trying to get ahold of you and couldn’t. I got worried and went to the boutique to see if you were there or if Martina knew where you were. When you didn’t answer her call either, we got worried.”

Aline frowned, looking confused for a moment before she closed her eyes and sighed. “I put my phone on silent when I was at lunch with my parents and never turned it back on. All I could think of was getting back here and taking a nap. I was just so tired.”

Guilt flooded me. Of course she was tired. She’d had almost as bad a day as I had yesterday, and she could be pregnant. And it wasn’t like either of us had rested much after we’d gotten back to my hotel room either.

“You said you called me?”

Her voice drew me back to the present.

“I did.” I reached for her hand, threading my fingers between hers. “I needed to apologize for how I reacted when you told me that you might be pregnant.”

She shook her head and squeezed my hand. “No, you don’t. It was a shock, and you’d already had a few of those in the last twenty-four hours.”

“Still.” Her skin was soft beneath my thumb. “Something else should have been the first thing out of my mouth, no matter what I was feeling.”

“I’m listening.” She gave me a sweet smile.

“I’m here. You’re not going through this alone.” I reached out and brushed some hair out of her face. “No matter what the blood test shows or what you decide to do, I’ll be with you. I *want* to be with you.”

I wished I could’ve said something more than that, but I wasn’t ready to say *love*. Not when I still wasn’t entirely sure how to define what was between us. And I was pretty sure that a declaration of love in a situation like this wouldn’t have been taken seriously anyway.

“It’s okay,” she said.

“No, it’s not. I was shocked, but I could’ve handled it better.”

“Thank you.” She leaned forward and gave me a soft kiss. “Now, it’s water under the bridge.”

I cupped the side of her face, and she leaned into my hand, her eyes closing. Brushing my thumb back and forth across her cheek, something settled on me, something I couldn’t place right away. When she turned her head and kissed my palm, I realized what it was.

Peace.

I’d had moments where I hadn’t been in actual conflict with anyone and plenty of times where I’d been having fun. I had happy memories too. But I’d never had anything like this. She made all the noise in my head go quiet and still.

Right then and there, I understood Alec’s advice in a way I hadn’t when we’d talked earlier. This was what he had with Lumen. It was what I couldn’t lose. *She* was what I couldn’t lose.

A sliver of panic tried to rise up, reminding me of all the people I’d already lost, but I pushed it down. I didn’t need to be afraid because I was with her, and I wasn’t going anywhere. I’d keep her and the baby safe. And it started right now.

“Your appointment is tomorrow morning, right?”

“Yes, Dr. Rhimes cleared some time for me.”

“I’d like to come, if that’s okay with you. I can drive you and take care of whatever else you need me to do.”

“Thank you. I’d like that.” She wiggled a little closer. “I haven’t told anyone else, not even Martina, and I wasn’t really looking forward to going alone.”

I was a little surprised she hadn’t told her parents at lunch, especially since this sort of thing seemed like prime mother-daughter stuff, but then I remembered why Aline had left her parents’ house in the first place.

I’d bet anything that she hadn’t told them because she was worried they’d think she’d fucked up. I felt a flicker of anger toward them. If they said one word to her like this was her fault, I’d have a few things to say to them about

how they treated their daughter.

I didn't tell her any of that, though. She didn't need one more thing on her plate.

"What time should I pick you up?"

"My appointment's at nine-thirty, so nine o'clock in case there's traffic?"

"All right." I took out my phone and set the alarm so I'd be sure to hear it.

"Now, since I interrupted Martina's workday and your nap, how about you two let me order in for all of us?"

"That would be wonderful." Aline's smile lit up her face.

"What do you want?" I asked.

A slight stab of guilt jabbed at me for the one reason I hadn't given when I'd told her why I wanted to order dinner. Yeah, I felt bad for bugging Martina when Aline was okay, and for waking Aline from her nap, but I'd had another motive too. If I ordered food for all of us, I could stay for dinner without being rude and inviting myself. I wasn't quite ready to say goodbye to Aline, even if I'd see her again tomorrow morning.

I was in deep with this woman...and I wasn't sure if that was a good or bad thing.

EIGHTEEN

ALINE

I DIDN'T KNOW IF I'D THROWN UP FIFTEEN MINUTES AGO BECAUSE I HAD morning sickness or if it'd been nerves, but either way, it hadn't been pleasant. I'd been able to force down some crackers, and they'd helped with my upset stomach, but I knew I wouldn't be able to completely quell my anxiety until I had the results of the blood test. Even if I was pregnant, the waiting was far worse than either answer would be.

Eoin seemed to share my sentiments as he arrived nearly twenty minutes early, and apart from the drive, hadn't been able to sit still. Even in the car, he'd been moving, tapping his fingers on the steering wheel or on his leg, flipping through radio stations, that sort of thing.

The latter would have annoyed me normally, but nothing about this situation was normal. And if I were to be entirely honest, I didn't mind the radio being on because neither of us had said more than a few words, and I preferred the background noise that prevented a total awkward silence between us. Now it was only an awkward semi-awkward silence.

Walking into the waiting room did absolutely nothing to ease the awkwardness either. While Dr. Rhimes kept tasteful art and stuck to entertainment and sports magazines, there was no doubt what sort of office this was. I'd seen men in here a few times since I'd started coming to see Dr. Rhimes, but it definitely wasn't a regular thing.

This morning, we were the only ones there so far, which I hoped would make it easier for Eoin to wait. I'd told him that I wouldn't mind if he stayed in the

car, that I could understand him being uncomfortable. His dry response had made me laugh.

“I’ve spent days packed into a small metal box with nine other men. In the desert. Without bathing. I think I can handle a doctor’s office.”

As I signed in, out of the corner of my eye, I caught him looking around the room and couldn’t resist a little tease.

“The waiting room might not be that scary, but you’d never be able to handle what goes on behind those doors.”

I surprised a laugh out of him, and a warmth went through me. I liked that I could bring out this side of him. I wasn’t foolish enough to think that he was only soft and sweet on the inside, that his tough exterior was all an act. Honestly, I didn’t think I would have wanted him this much if that had been the case.

I liked that he was rough around the edges. I liked that he was strong, and not just physically. I liked his determination and even his stubbornness. Even butting heads with him wasn’t always a negative thing.

I knew I could be head-strong, and contrary to what a lot of people probably thought, I didn’t want a man I could walk all over. I wanted one who pushed me out of my comfort zone, to think about life in a way I hadn’t. Someone who didn’t treat me like a delicate, fragile doll who needed to be protected from everything and anything the big, bad world had to offer.

A couple minutes after we sat down, Eoin half-turned toward me, a slight flush to his cheeks.

“You know that if you want me to go with you, I will? I mean, I don’t want you feeling like you can’t ask me to go in the room during appointments or whatever. I mean, if you are pregnant, I want to do that sort of stuff. If you’re okay with it.”

I couldn’t imagine how difficult that was for him to say, especially since, by the end, his ears had turned bright red. I leaned over and kissed his cheek. “Let’s take it one day at a time, all right? Right now, I want to go back by myself, but if I am pregnant, we can talk then about what we’ll do next.”

He nodded, relief on his face, though I wasn't sure if it was because I hadn't asked him to come back with me now, or because I hadn't made any sort of decision about future visits. I honestly didn't know what I'd want at any point other than right now. And it might not even matter.

We were saved from further discussion by a nurse who came out and called my name. I followed her into the back, where she took my vitals and asked why I was there.

Heat rushed to my cheeks, but I refused to look down. I hadn't done anything wrong. "An exam and blood work for a pregnancy test."

She glanced at my file. "Right, I see that Dr. Rhimes put a note on here to do the blood draw first, and then she'll come do the exam. She's putting a rush on the test results so they can come in today."

"A rush?" I asked, my heartrate speeding up.

"Mm-hm." She didn't sound worried as she went about getting the things she'd need to take care of the basics.

When she didn't give more of a response, I flat-out asked the question, not even trying to hide the annoyance in my voice. "Why is she rushing it?"

"Oh." The nurse seemed taken aback, but she recovered quickly enough. "I don't know."

Another few seconds passed, and I began to wonder if this was going to be a pattern. Unfortunately, I was not in the right presence of mind to be patient and polite, and while I'd never been shy about making my thoughts known, the incident in Iran seemed to have given me a new sort of boldness.

Like finally drawing a line in the sand with my family.

If this woman thought she was going to get off easier than them, she was sadly mistaken. "Does it say in my file? I'd like to know why my test is being rushed. I'm grateful that I won't be waiting as long as I thought would be necessary, but I would like to know why."

She sighed as if I'd asked her to do something extremely difficult, but she did turn her attention back to my file, so I held my tongue.

And held it.

And held it.

Just when I was about to snap at her to hand over my damn file so I could read it myself, the door opened, and Dr. Rhimes came in.

“Good morning, Aline.” She smiled at me and then looked at the nurse, the smile vanishing. “Do you have a good reason as to why you aren’t done, or at least in the process of taking Miss Mercier’s blood?”

The tone made me think I wasn’t the only person unhappy with this nurse’s work, and I had to stop myself from snickering.

“I told her there was a rush on her test, but then she wanted to know why.” The nurse sounded like a petulant child. “I didn’t know, so I was looking it up.”

Dr. Rhimes walked over to the door and opened it. “I’ll take it from here.”

“Fine.” The nurse practically stomped out of the room.

When Dr. Rhimes turned back to me, she said, “I’m sorry about her. She’s my partner’s niece, and she did well in school, but her bedside manner... leaves something to be desired.”

I snorted, then laughed, some of my unease fading. “That’s one way to say it.”

“Let me get that blood drawn first.” Dr. Rhimes went over to the items the nurse had already gotten out. “And yes, I am ordering a rush. Getting pregnant with an IUD is extremely rare, but it can also be dangerous.”

All of that tension returned and multiplied. I’d known that, of course. When I’d gotten the IUD, she’d explained everything, and I’d read all the literature she’d given me. I’d heard all of it again when I’d gone to the doctor I used in Stanford when I couldn’t get back here for appointments. I knew it, but I’d forgotten it.

Perfect. Something else to be terrified about.

“Now, I know that our primary concern here is pregnancy, but I am going to run several tests, just to make sure that your partner was being honest about his sexual history.” Dr. Rhimes worked efficiently as she talked. “Did you take the test I recommended?”

I nodded. “Not long after I spoke with you. It was positive.” I was proud of myself for managing to say those three words without my voice shaking. “I had planned to call you back after I had the results, but things went...crazy.”

“It’s all right,” she said. “It wouldn’t have changed anything I need to do today.”

I watched her work with quiet efficiency. “Okay.”

“Now, those tests are fairly reliable, but they aren’t one hundred percent accurate.” She set down the last vial on the tray. “Let me get these sent to the lab. While I’m doing that, go ahead and change into a gown.”

One of the things I’d always liked about Dr. Rhimes was how straightforward she was. She never sugar-coated anything for me, which was why having her as my doctor had been one of the few stands I’d taken when my mom had tried to convince me to go to her gynecologist. I’d wanted someone I could trust to tell me the truth and not tell my mother anything, even unintentionally. Mom could’ve given professional interrogators a run for their money.

A knock at the door came just as I finished tying the hospital gown in place. “Come in,” I called.

Dr. Rhimes waited until the door was closed behind her before gesturing toward the table. “Other than the pregnancy test you took, has anything changed from the information you told me when we spoke?”

I opened my mouth to say no...and then remembered that there was something relevant I needed to tell her.

“Um, I had sex again.” My face burned. “More than once, actually.”

She was a true professional and didn’t even blink an eye. “With the same partner?”

I nodded. “There’s only been him.”

“Did you use protection?”

Dammit.

“No.” I couldn’t look at her. “It wasn’t a conscious decision, but I know it was stu—”

“I’m not going to lecture you, Aline. I’m your doctor, not your priest or your therapist.”

Her small smile took any sting out of the words. Another reason I’d always liked her. She’d never made me feel bad for being a virgin, and she’d never judged when I’d asked for the IUD, even though I hadn’t been sexually active at the time. She cared, but she didn’t try to parent me.

It was...refreshing.

I looked up at the ceiling as she did the exam, trying not to appear as uncomfortable as I felt. It was strange. I’d always thought that after I’d had sex, I wouldn’t find it as disconcerting to have someone getting up close and personal with that particular part of my anatomy, but I actually found myself more self-conscious than I had been in the past. Maybe it was because, despite what she’d said about not lecturing me, I still felt like I’d behaved poorly and proven that I couldn’t take care of myself.

“Well, shit.”

That wasn’t something a girl wanted to hear when she was in a position like this.

I pushed myself up on my elbows. “What?”

“The IUD is out of place.” She sighed and slid her chair to the side so we could see each other. “It does happen, but it’s rare. Did you have any problems during your last period?”

I thought for a moment. “Not that I can think of. I started right before my sister went into the hospital for her appendix. I really wasn’t paying much attention to anything but that.”

“Did you check the strings when you finished menstruating?”

At least with this answer I didn't have to feel like I'd been the one to screw up. Even my parents wouldn't have blamed me for this one. “No. I know that for certain because I'd just finished the day before I was scheduled to come home. I'd been so busy getting things together since Freedom was still in the hospital that it slipped my mind. By the time my reminder went off on my phone, I didn't have my phone anymore.”

When Dr. Rhimes gave me a puzzled look, I realized that she didn't know what'd happened to me. I'd told her about me having had sex for the first time but hadn't explained anything else.

“Did you see the news story on the group of hostages who were rescued right around Thanksgiving?”

“Yes,” she said slowly.

“One of them mentioned that there had been a woman who'd disappeared while they'd all still been in Iran. That was me.”

The doctor's face drained of color. “Please tell me this isn't—”

“No,” I assured her quickly. “No, they didn't rape me. But that's why things were so crazy around my last period. I was taken on my way to the airport and was held for six days before I was rescued. It was after that that I had sex.”

“The man in the waiting room?” she asked.

I nodded, a different sort of blush stealing into my cheeks. “He's one of the men who saved me.”

“I am so glad you're okay.” Her voice was tight, and I suddenly realized that she was trying not to cry.

“Thank you.”

After a beat, she was back to professional mode. “My recommendation is that we remove it now, and after we get the test results, we can discuss if you want me to reinsert it. If that's the case, you can decide when you want to schedule that appointment.”

It took me a beat to figure out that the last part of her statement referred to what I chose to do about the pregnancy if my test was positive. I'd have a different set of timetables if I decided to terminate than I would if I chose to have the baby. I really hadn't consciously let myself think that far ahead yet, and I didn't want to until I knew for certain and talked to Eoin.

I kept my response noncommittal. "That makes sense."

When I went back out into the waiting room after everything was done, I found Eoin sitting in a corner chair, pretending to read something on his phone while the expression in his eyes was far away. I wasn't surprised. He had a number of reasons to look dazed, this current circumstance just one of several.

I barely took two steps before he was on his feet, all at once totally present and focused on me. My stomach clenched, surprising me with the intensity of my desire to touch him. To have him touch me. Not necessarily in a sexual way, just the need to feel his presence in a tangible way.

He must have felt the same because he took my hand, his fingers tightening around mine, and didn't let go until we were getting into the car. He started it but left it in park as he half-turned toward me.

"Are you okay?"

I was surprised – and a little pleased – that his first question hadn't been about when we'd get the results from the blood test.

"I am. Apparently, my IUD..." I searched for the right word, "moved."

He raised an eyebrow but didn't say anything.

I hitched a shoulder. "It's not common, but it does happen from time to time. We're supposed to...check after our periods, but I didn't get a chance to because that was the day I was kidnapped."

If I hadn't been watching him so closely, I might've missed the tightening of his jaw when I mentioned my kidnapping. Not once did I see, however, any sort of disgust or anger or annoyance.

I knew a lot of men didn't even like to think about the female reproductive system outside of the ways it affected them, but Eoin just listened. I was grateful for it, especially since I'd been a little nervous about telling him such private things. Our areas of intimacy weren't exactly progressing in a traditional manner.

"It wasn't because we..." He gestured between us. "I mean, I didn't do this to you, did I?"

I shook my head. "No, it most likely happened during my period."

The relief on his face told me how worried he'd been about that. This time, I was the one offering comfort. After a moment, I kept going.

"Since we don't know for sure yet if I'm pregnant, Dr. Rhimes removed it. She's put a rush on the blood test so we should have an answer later today. If I'm not pregnant, I'll schedule an appointment to have another IUD put in. If I am..."

I let the sentence trail off because he didn't need me to say what would happen if I was. We'd have a different sort of talk between us then.

"All right." He kissed my hand and released it. "Do you feel okay?"

"I do."

"Then I was wondering if you'd like to come with me to see my new place." He didn't look at me as he said it, and I knew he was trying for nonchalance, but I could feel how unsure he was.

"Of course." I leaned over and kissed his cheek. "I'd love to."

As I buckled up, I felt my own relief that the situation hadn't destroyed what we'd been building. Maybe things would work out, no matter how the test came out.

NINETEEN

EOIN

MY BROTHER, ROME, HAD OUTDONE HIMSELF WITH THIS CONDO, AND I'D made a point of telling him that when he'd met me there before I'd gone to pick up Aline this morning. I hadn't, however, told him about what was going on.

I wanted her to meet my family. I knew that by now, but I didn't want it to happen with a question mark over our heads. So, until we got those test results, only Alec knew that this was a possibility. No matter what happened, though, I wanted her to see my new place because, at some point, I planned for it to be *our* place.

Some of my tension had left when Aline had told me that she was okay and that the IUD debacle hadn't been my fault, but it'd been such a small bit that as we moved into Playa Vista, my stomach was one giant knot of nerves. Most of it was because we still didn't know for certain whether or not she was pregnant, but there was still a part of it that had to do with how she felt about my new home. I wanted her to love it.

I took her hand as we walked up to the building, and I tried not to let my anxiety show. While my life would change if Aline was pregnant, it would be nothing like how hers would be affected. She needed me to be strong, needed to know that I was steady and reliable. That she could lean on me, count on me. If I looked like I couldn't handle my shit when a kid was a maybe, how could I ever ask her to trust me to take care of her and a definite baby?

"Wow," she breathed as we walked inside. "This place is huge."

“Four bedrooms, three bathrooms, a little over twenty-five hundred square feet.” I didn’t even try to keep the note of pride from my voice. This was the first real home I’d ever owned. And I did own it.

I was a lucky son of a bitch, and I knew it. I’d been able to invest most of my military income as well as the trust that would’ve gone toward college instead of having to live on it. I also had money that came from my shares of the family business that I invested as well. One of the reasons for that choice was that, by the time I was ready to retire, I wanted to do whatever I wanted to do without cost being an issue. The only thing that had changed in my plans now that I was post-army was that I’d realized I needed work to keep me busy. At least I already had that taken care of.

“Let me show you around,” I said. “It’s a bit bare right now since I haven’t moved in yet. I have some stuff in storage, but it won’t even come close to filling the place.”

I wanted to tell her that she should start looking for where her things would go since, if there was a baby, they’d both be here too, but I didn’t want to spring that on her before we even knew whether or not she was actually pregnant. I wanted her input either way, but it was the difference between asking her to help me pick out stuff that would look good because I didn’t know shit about that sort of thing and asking her how she wanted to decorate our bedroom and the nursery.

As we went into the master bedroom, and I looked over to see Aline’s reaction to the view, I realized that I hadn’t taken into consideration how overwhelmed she must’ve already been. She had this shell-shocked expression on her face, almost the same one she’d worn in Iran when everything had finally hit her.

“Hey.” I stepped in front of her and cupped her face between my hands. “It’s okay.”

Those beautiful eyes turned up to mine, and she looked so lost that I did the only thing I could.

I kissed her.

TWENTY

ALINE

EOIN'S PLACE WAS GORGEOUS. AND HUGE. NOT AT ALL WHAT I'D BEEN expecting, even after he'd told me that he'd leased a condo rather than an apartment. I'd already known that he'd come from a wealthy family, so it wasn't the cost of a place like this that surprised me. It was more that this didn't seem like the sort of place that a single, not-quite-thirty, former military man would live. This was more of a...family home.

A beautiful one, but I was starting to feel like seeing all of it, being here with him while such a large question was looming over us, was untethering me from reality. I had experienced this strange disconnect only a few times in my life, most of them recently.

"Hey." His hands were on either side of my face, his skin hot against my cheeks. "It's okay."

I looked up at him, and then his mouth was on mine, firm pressure without being aggressive, and the contact sent a wave of warmth washing over me, pushing away thoughts of anything else.

This man could distract me from anything.

As he broke the kiss, his hands slid down my neck and over my shoulders to come to rest on my upper arms. My skin tingled where he touched it, and I leaned into him, opening my eyes as I did so. I reached up, wrapping my arms around his neck and going up onto my toes to initiate another kiss...

And he turned his head away.

My stomach dropped. Oh. He'd said that I wasn't going to be alone, and that he wanted to be with me, but he hadn't said that he still wanted *me*. He wasn't breaking up with me because I might be pregnant, but that didn't mean that the results of the test wouldn't shape where we went from here. He was a good man, and he'd take care of his child. Or we'd pick up our relationship where we'd left off before, dating and heading toward a possible serious future.

I just hadn't realized until now that they were two separate things. It made sense, though. I'd guilted him into sleeping with me that first time, and then I'd told him that I was safe from pregnancy because of my IUD. He'd trusted me, and I'd let him down.

These thoughts tumbled one over the other through my mind, swift and severe, the edges cutting at me, telling me all the ways I'd messed up, the mistakes I'd made. How I'd not only put myself into a position to derail my future but also Eoin's, and possibly an innocent child. How could Eoin ever trust me again? Why would he want to? Would I—

Fingers snapped in front of me.

“What’s going on in that mind of yours?” Eoin brushed his knuckles across my cheek. “You disappeared into your head, and I can see on your face that what’s happening there isn’t good.”

I took a step back. “It’s nothing.”

“Don’t do that.” His voice was firm but not harsh. “Don’t shut me out, please.”

He was right. I owed him honesty. Or at least as much as I could bear.

“You didn’t want to kiss me again.” I looked at his chin, unable to bring myself to look him in the eye as I spoke. “I’d just thought that, we’re here in your house that you wanted me to see, and you kissed me, and when we kiss, it usually leads to…” Heat flooded my face, and I let my words trail off.

“You still think I could look at you, touch you, and not want you?”

His voice was thick with emotion, and that was what made me look at him. The ferocity in those vivid green eyes made me catch my breath.

“Just seeing you, hearing your voice.” He stepped closer so that our bodies were almost touching. “Fuck, Aline, just the thought of you...” He shook his head.

“Why didn’t you kiss me back then?” Maybe it was the hormones or some sort of placebo effect from me thinking I was pregnant, but I needed to poke at the hurt, needed to hear him state it clearly.

He took a lock of my hair and tucked it behind my ear, his fingertips lingering on my cheek. A small smile played on his lips, the intensity shifting to something...tender.

“You’ve had morning sickness, and then less than an hour ago, you had an exam and procedure I assumed would make you not want...contact.” His thumb stroked across my bottom lip. “I didn’t want to pressure you into anything or for you to even think that’s what I was doing.”

“So, it’s not because I might be pregnant?” I forced myself to ask the real question. “That doesn’t make you...not be attracted to me?”

He shook his head as if he couldn’t believe what I was saying. “If you knew the things I want to do to you...”

Hope and arousal twined together. “Like what?”

He stepped into me, forcing me to take a step back. “Lick and suck and bite your nipples until even your softest bra is too much.”

I swallowed hard and took another step back. He was taking me back to the wall, and I couldn’t wait to see what happened when we reached it.

“Pick you up and fuck you against the wall until you scream my name.” Step. “Take you on your hands and knees, spanking your ass until it’s a pretty shade of pink.” Step. “Maybe I’ll tease your ass with my finger, see what that does for you.”

My back came up against the wall.

“But I think, right now, I’ll be content to just make you come on my fingers.”

He didn’t specifically ask permission, but he didn’t do anything until I nodded. Only then did he undo my pants and slide his hand into my

underwear. I shifted my stance to let him get where he wanted to go, and the first pass of his finger over my clitoris was pure bliss.

He didn't move his hand any lower, simply moving his fingers in tight circles, the perfect pressure and the perfect friction driving me to a quick and explosive climax. I pressed my face against his chest to muffle my cries, unsure who might be able to hear me, but that was the only coherent thought I could muster.

Everything else was the sort of pleasure that left my knees weak and my muscles limp.

He held me there, murmuring things I couldn't quite hear as his free hand moved up and down my spine, soothing me. In that moment, I knew that I was falling hard, that I *had* fallen hard. I could only hope that he would be there to catch me.

Or, better yet, that he'd fall *with* me.

TWENTY-ONE

EOIN

I DIDN'T UNDERSTAND WHY ALINE WOULD – AGAIN – THINK I DIDN'T WANT her. I knew her family was really overprotective of her, but I couldn't imagine that translating into any type of emotional abuse. She was a certified genius and one of the most selfless people I'd ever met. And she was gorgeous. The fact that she'd been a virgin – barely even kissed if Freedom had been right about that too – confused the shit out of me because she had to have had guys all over her.

Just the thought of any other man near her made my arms tighten around her. I still had my hand in her pants, could hear her ragged breathing slow and even out...and I was jealous of men I didn't even know, men who might not even exist.

Men I didn't want to exist.

I wanted to be it for her. The only man who'd ever know what she looked like when she came.

Shit.

The thought should have terrified me, but it didn't. Even though I was painfully hard, I was content to stand here, holding her, rubbing her back with my free hand.

“That's it,” I said quietly. “Relax. I've got you.”

I called her sweetheart, told her that I was here, that she wasn't alone. I probably repeated myself, but I didn't think she cared. I could've stood there

all day, but a knock on the door broke into our little bubble, and a thought came with it.

“Dammit,” I muttered. “I completely lost track of time.”

“Who is it?” she asked as she straightened her clothes, her cheeks flaming with color.

“Cain and the guys,” I answered as I went into the bathroom to quickly wash my hands. “Apparently, before we left the office Thursday, I’d asked them to come help me get my things from storage. Cain brought it up yesterday when I called him to check in.”

As I walked back out to the bedroom, my phone started vibrating in my pocket. I answered it, giving Aline a smile as I headed for the door.

“I’m coming.” I didn’t bother with a greeting. “Don’t be an asshole.”

Cain laughed. “Takes one to know one, right?”

I hung up on him, and less than a minute later, opened the door to let the guys in. “You’re a riot, Cain.”

Dez whistled as he stepped inside. “Damn, army boy. I knew your type was soft, but *this*?”

“Fuck you, Dez.” I flipped him off.

“No, thank you.” Dez winked at me. “You’re not my type.”

“Aline.” Bruce’s eyebrows went up. “We didn’t know you were here.”

Eyes went to her and then to me, apparently deciding I needed to offer an explanation of some kind.

“Hi, guys.” She stepped up next to me and slipped her hand into mine. “You all look like you’re feeling better than the last time I saw you.”

“Yeah, not all of us are as delicate as your...man here,” Dez said with a grin. “I mean, if he even *is* a man.”

As soon as Aline wasn’t around, I was going to punch that smirk off his expression. And then I saw Aline’s face. It was pink, but she had that

stubborn set to her jaw that I already recognized. The glint in her eyes was something I knew too.

“My degree is in education, not biology, but if you’ve ever seen him naked, you wouldn’t have a doubt in your mind that he’s all man.” She gave Dez an exaggerated up-and-down look, then added, “But I can understand your confusion if you only have your own...*equipment* to judge by.”

Dez’s jaw dropped, and the other guys burst out laughing right along with me. Even Fever laughed.

Aline squeezed my hand, and I looked down at her. “I hate to do this now, but I’m scheduled to work at the boutique from two to seven, and I didn’t drive here. It’s already one-thirty.”

I frowned. Work? After the morning she’d had? “Did Martina know you had a doctor’s appointment today?”

“No, I didn’t tell her.”

“I’m sure she won’t mind if you call off.”

Aline gave me a strange look, as if she didn’t understand why it was a good idea for her to take a personal day. I didn’t know Martina well, but I had no doubt she’d do what was best for Aline.

“I don’t think you really need me to help you move, do you?” She gestured toward the guys. “Unless there’s something you don’t think they can handle.”

Shit. She was annoyed.

If she stayed, I knew she would try to help, and even though I didn’t have a lot, I didn’t want her exerting herself like that. At least at the boutique, she probably wouldn’t be doing any heavy lifting.

“I’ll take you,” I said. “Do you need to stop by the apartment for anything?”

She shook her head. “What I’m wearing is fine. I’m doing inventory, so I’ll mostly be in the back, counting, that sort of thing.”

The guys had been wandering around far enough away that they weren’t eavesdropping, so I raised my voice to get their attention.

“Hey, I’m running Aline to work. Meet me over at Life Storage in thirty minutes.”

“Which one?” Cain asked.

“East Commercial.” I pulled out a couple bills and set them on the counter. “Pick us up some beer and make it the good stuff, not that shit you marines drink, Dez.”

“Bite me.”

I was laughing as Aline and I went to my car, but my heart was only half in it. We still hadn’t gotten the test results, and I really didn’t like the idea of her being away from me when she got the call. Except I liked the idea of her working when she was possibly in a – for lack of a better phrase – delicate condition even less.

Neither of us talked on the way to the boutique, but I didn’t know if her silence was because she was thinking about something or if she was still annoyed at me, and I didn’t know how to ask without sounding like a complete asshat. I’d put my foot in my mouth more than once with her, and she was too important to me to risk saying something stupid. Again.

I parked as close to the boutique door as I could without taking a handicap space and then turned to Aline. “You said you get off at seven?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll be back then.”

“That’s not necessary,” Aline said. Before I could argue, she added, “Martina gets off at seven, too, so we’ll go home together.”

“Oh.” I hadn’t even considered that possibility. “That’s good.”

“Thank you for driving me.” She leaned over and kissed my cheek.

I hoped that meant we were still good. I did have something I needed to ask her before she got out, though. “Will you call me as soon as you get the test results?”

She smiled. “Of course.”

That made me feel better, but as I watched her walk into the boutique, I still wished that she was staying with me, that we were going to be waiting for the call together. It wasn't only that I wanted to be there for that news, though. I just didn't want to leave her here. The need to protect her, to watch over her, was stronger than anything I'd ever felt for another human being, not even my family.

It was harder than I liked to drive away and nearly impossible to tell myself that it was the right thing to do. But I did.

TWENTY-TWO

ALINE

I'D NEVER TRULY APPRECIATED HOW MONOTONY COULD PASS THE TIME. IT didn't speed it up, exactly, but made it blur together, made the time... inconsequential. I'd made it three-quarters of the way through the inventory list when my phone rang. I jumped, startled, and then fumbled for my phone.

I usually kept it on silent while I worked, but I hadn't wanted to risk missing the call from Dr. Rhimes. I'd told Martina that I had an important call coming at some point that afternoon or evening, but not what it was about. She hadn't asked, and I was thankful for her trust in that respect.

Now, as I answered my phone, a part of me wished I would have told her, if only so that I could've had support as I heard the news that could, quite possibly, change my life.

"Dr. Rhimes?"

"I have the result of your blood test."

She wasn't going to draw this out, which I appreciated, but I wasn't ready to hear it. I needed more time to brace myself. To prepare.

No. I needed to face things head-on, no matter what was coming.

She must have been waiting for me to give some sort of indication that I was ready because she didn't speak until I asked, "What is it?"

"You're pregnant."

I sank down on a chair. I wasn't really surprised. I'd suspected as much from the moment she'd told me to get the test. I'd felt it, in some way I couldn't quite explain, and then it'd been all but confirmed when she'd told me about the IUD having moved.

Somehow, it still shocked me.

"Aline?"

"I'm here." My voice sounded like it was coming from far away.

"I know this wasn't expected," she continued, "and you don't have to decide anything right this second. In fact, my advice would be to not make any decisions for at least a couple days. You have time to process and make sure that what you're doing is truly what you want."

I found myself nodding, even though she couldn't see me. "Yes. That's good. Yes."

"Are you okay?"

The concern in her voice jarred me out of my daze enough to realize that I needed to give her a coherent statement to let her know that I wasn't going to pass out or something like that.

"I'm okay," I said. "You're right about not making an impulsive decision. I'll take the rest of the weekend and most likely get back to you on Monday, if that would work."

I didn't know why I was almost asking her, as if I needed her permission or approval.

"You have time," she repeated. "Talk it over with anyone you need to and call if you have any questions."

"I will," I said. "Thank you for rushing the results and for delivering the news personally."

"Take care of yourself."

I didn't realize that I wasn't alone until I ended the call and heard movement near the door. Martina's expression was troubled, worried, as she came over

to where I was sitting.

“Results?”

The single word question told me that she hadn't heard everything, but what she had heard had been enough to make her curious. While I didn't like the idea of telling her before I told Eoin, I needed someone right now. Besides, I reasoned, it wasn't as if Eoin didn't know anything about what was going on.

“I'm pregnant.”

No *might be*. No *probably* or *possibly*.

I was pregnant.

“Damn.” Martina leaned against one of the shelves. “Is it Eoin's?”

She obviously knew that he and I were dating, but she hadn't known that he'd been the only one I'd ever had sex with, so her question made sense.

I nodded.

“Does he know?”

“Sort of,” I said. “I took a home test on Thursday and told him about that, but this was the confirmation from my doctor.”

She crouched in front of me and took my hands in hers. “What can I do? What do you need?”

“I don't know,” I said honestly. “This...blindsided me.”

She squeezed my hands. “Does Eoin know you had a blood test done?”

“He went with me to the doctor.”

She smiled. “He seems like a good man.”

“He is.” I managed a smile.

“Then maybe you should talk things over with him,” she gently suggested.

“You're right.” I glanced at my phone. “We only have—”

“Go,” Martina said as she straightened.

“Are you sure? I don’t want to leave you short-staffed.”

“I’m going to call you a cab. I don’t think you’re in any condition to drive.” She put her hand on my shoulder and gave it a squeeze. “Do whatever it is you need to do, okay? And you tell me if there’s anything you need from me.”

I nodded, my brain feeling as if I was moving at half speed. “I’ll do that.”

I stayed in the back until she came to tell me the cab was there, but I couldn’t remember if I’d just been sitting there or if I’d actually done anything. I felt like I was running in sand, trying to walk in knee-high water. Time was disjointed, jumpy.

After closing the taxi door and giving the driver the address, I was suddenly two blocks away with no memory of getting there. A few minutes later, it happened again, taking me from a red stoplight next to a McDonald’s to the point where the car turned onto the road where the apartment building was located.

Paying the driver, getting out of the cab, going up to the apartment, all felt as if I was watching rather than doing. Once in the apartment, I dropped into the closest chair and called Eoin.

“Hey.” His voice was tight, like he’d been stretched too thin and too far.

“Hi.” Two awkward beats, and then I decided to just jump right in. No point in drawing it out. “Dr. Rhimes called. I’m pregnant.”

“Are you all right?”

A clenched fist in my chest relaxed. Even though he’d apologized for how he’d responded before, I hadn’t fully believed he’d react better to the confirmation. I closed my eyes and let the relief wash over me. It was brief since I had far more to worry about than just his initial reaction, but it helped a bit.

“Still processing,” I answered honestly. “It’s one thing for it to be a possibility, or even a probability, and something else to get that definitive answer.”

“Are you still at work?” he asked. “I’ll come get you.”

“No, I’m at the apartment. A cab dropped me off.” I rubbed my forehead. “Thank you for offering, though. I appreciate it.”

“So, Martina is still at work?”

“Yeah. She overheard the end of the call, so I told her what was going on. I know you should’ve been the first person—”

“No,” he interrupted. “No apologies or feeling guilty. You weren’t hiding anything from me. It was just circumstances.”

“That’s exactly what it was,” I agreed, grateful that he understood. The last thing I needed right now was to hurt him unintentionally.

“The guys just left,” he said. “Let me pick up something for dinner and bring it over.”

A part of me wanted to say yes, to be able to put aside everything else and lose myself in him and the comfort he offered. But that wouldn’t have been healthy or responsible, and with a baby involved, I had to do the right thing.

“No, but thank you.” I pressed my hand to my stomach. “I want to talk to you about it, but I need to get my head on straight before I can have a real conversation. I’m not shutting you out, I promise. I just need some time alone to process.”

“All right, if that’s what you need.” He didn’t sound happy, but I could tell he was trying to be supportive. To be what I needed. “If you change your mind, please call me.”

“I will,” I promised.

As the call ended, I leaned back in the chair and stared up at the ceiling, wondering where I should start. I seemed to have either too many things in my mind or none at all.

It was going to be a long night.

TWENTY-THREE

EWIN

I PUT MY PHONE DOWN ON THE COUNTER AND GOT A BEER FROM THE FRIDGE. If I wasn't driving anywhere tonight, I didn't need to worry about how much I drank. If I couldn't be with Aline, taking care of her, getting a little drunk sounded like a good idea. Not so much that I'd be hung over tomorrow, but enough to take the edge off.

It was a hell of an edge.

Pregnant.

I was going to be a father.

Maybe. Aline could decide to terminate the pregnancy, but after how her parents had struggled to have kids, I didn't think that was going to be the route she took. If she did, I'd be there with her, but even as shell-shocked as I was right now, I was hoping she'd have the baby.

My baby.

Fuck.

I needed to sit down, but the few chairs I had were covered with shit from my storage unit. The floor would have to do. I leaned back against my refrigerator and took a long drink.

I'd never really thought about being a father. My parents never pressured any of us kids about giving them grandchildren, even before Evanne had come along. Besides, with as many of us as there was, the likelihood of no more

grandkids was virtually zero, so I'd never felt guilty about not considering marriage or family. I loved Evanne, and I'd love being an uncle to any other nieces or nephews that came along, but one of my own?

A little girl with strawberry blonde hair and green eyes. A boy with Aline's smile and fair skin. A leftie like me and my mother. Not Theresa, my biological mother. I was the only one of the kids who'd gotten that.

I didn't remember her, but I had no doubt she'd have been excited to have another grandchild. My heart twisted painfully as I realized that my child wouldn't know anything about Ma, not from me anyway. Yeah, I could tell them that her name had been Shannon McCrae, and her maiden name had been Allen. I could share all the stories that Alec and Brody had told the twins and me growing up. Carson and Cory only had a couple vague memories, but I had nothing.

She was one of the reasons I hadn't wanted to get married or have kids. Da marrying Theresa had driven it home, but not because I'd ever been angry at him getting married again. They'd both been so young when they'd lost their spouses, and I'd seen how much losing a parent – or both parents for Fury and his siblings – had hurt all of us. I didn't want that for anyone. I didn't want to risk leaving a child without a father.

Or at least that was what I'd told myself while I was in the army. Now, I wasn't really in much more danger than the average person. Less than a cop and far less than a firefighter. Sure, it'd been an unusual couple of months, but Cain had insisted that wasn't the norm.

So, if my excuse had really been about my job, then it wouldn't have applied since March, but since I'd been out, I hadn't changed my mind or even thought about it again. Because I was still afraid. Not afraid of what the loss of me would do to them, but what it would be like for me to lose another person I loved.

Shit.

I was such a selfish little shit.

Asshole.

Images began to flash in front of my eyes.

A picture of my mother holding me in the hospital hours after I was born.

Doto impaled and bleeding, dying.

Bart's broken neck.

Leo.

Pulling him from the wreck.

Getting shot.

Him looking up at me in that split second before the explosion blew him apart, sending a piece of his bone through my body armor and almost puncturing my heart.

Other men and women who had gone out on missions and never come back. Who'd come home safe from a tour and then killed themselves. So many. Too many.

I closed my eyes and put my head back. I couldn't spiral. It'd been a couple days since I'd been woken up by a nightmare and having that shit in my head when I was awake would probably fuck with me when I was asleep too.

I needed to focus on Aline and the baby. The future, and not the past.

When I'd talked to Alec, he'd warned me not to be an idiot and make the mistakes he had. Him marrying Keli had been one of those mistakes, but it'd only been a mistake because he hadn't wanted to actually be with Keli.

He'd stayed with her because he'd let his own issues with us losing our mother push him into doing something he'd known was a bad idea. If Keli hadn't been pregnant, their relationship would've been over. With Aline and me, I still would've wanted a relationship, just maybe not as fast.

I would've been a little lost even if there wasn't a baby involved, but I was really out of my league here. I'd fucked up so many times already with Aline, and she'd forgiven me, been willing to work at making this thing between us work. Now, we both had someone else we had to think about, and if I fucked things up again, Aline might not be as willing to give me a second chance. Or, more likely, an eighty-third chance.

If I finally used up her patience, pushed her too far, I'd lose her and a child. Not to death but my own stupidity. And if I did that, how would I protect them? How could I keep them safe if I'd pushed them away?

Or maybe that was the answer.

Get them as far away from me as possible.

If I hadn't stayed friends with Leo, maybe he wouldn't have enlisted. Even if he still had, he might've gotten out before the mission that led to an ambush. Or he might've decided to rise in the ranks. He'd been good enough to do it. If he and I hadn't been friends, he could've been anywhere else on that day. Hell, he could've settled down with a wife and six kids.

It was like that movie about the butterfly. One little difference, and suddenly you're in a mental institution because you think you can time travel.

Who knew how many other people might still be alive if I hadn't enlisted? A different person in my place that day might've made all the difference. If neither Leo nor I had been in the convoy, there would've been two new people who could've changed things. Kept Doto or Bart alive. Maybe both.

Okay, so maybe I wasn't responsible for those deaths, and even I couldn't find a way to blame myself for the pulmonary embolism that had killed my mother, but people I loved died around me all the time.

"Eoin, help me. Save me."

Ring in my ears, but I could still hear him begging me.

"Save us. Don't leave us here."

Hear all of them begging for their lives.

"Eoin! Save me!"

Aline? Where was she?

A scream of pain.

"Aline!" I didn't see her, but I could hear her screaming my name. I couldn't see anything. It was dark and cloudy and too heavy to breathe, and she kept screaming. "Aline!"

No. No. No.

“No!” I tried to scream it as I pulled myself out of the waking nightmare, but it came out as something like a croak. My heart was racing, my breathing harsh. My mouth was so dry that trying to swallow made me cough.

I realized I still had my beer bottle in my hand, and I drank the rest of it all at once. When I finished, I stood up, my head spinning for a moment. I grabbed onto the counter and counted to ten. Not every flashback fucked with my balance, and it never lasted long, but it sometimes happened, especially if I was triggered while drinking.

A lot of people thought that flashbacks were just really intense memories, and when someone with PTSD was triggered, they would relive an event, and that was it. Sometimes, it happened like that for me, and maybe that was all that some people ever had, but a lot of times, the shit I saw and heard came more out of the guilt I felt for all I hadn't been able to control.

Or fear of what might happen in the future.

I wasn't stupid enough to think that I could keep everything bad away from Aline and the baby, but I'd do whatever I could to keep them as safe as possible. To do that, I needed a plan.

And, suddenly, an idea popped into my head. Part of an idea, anyway. It just might be what I needed, but I had work to do if I was going to pull it off.

Instead of taking another beer out of the fridge, I reached for water. I could handle this with one beer in me but getting buzzed was no longer an option. I had shit that needed done.

TWENTY-FOUR

ALINE

I HADN'T THROWN UP YET, WHICH MEANT THE MORNING WASN'T GOING TOO badly, but my night had been restless enough that I was still exhausted. I'd tossed and turned, constantly in that weird place where I was sleeping but knew I was sleeping.

The worst part was that I hadn't even been able to focus my thoughts enough to get any real thinking done. I'd start in one place and end up on some crazy tangent that made absolutely no sense and didn't even connect to my original thought in the first place.

It went something like this...

At some point around two or three in the morning, I realized that I didn't know how to diaper a baby. I'd never babysat or even been around many infants. I didn't even really know much about toddlers either, but I'd be okay once they were school age.

I'd have to decide whether or not I wanted to teach at the same school my child attended, and while that would make the most sense travel-wise, it might make it difficult for me to avoid being their teacher. I'd had a couple professors who'd said that it was usually a bad idea to teach your own child, but it wasn't unethical, though some schools might have their own policies regarding that. I'd have to take that into consideration when I started researching places to put in my resumé.

That thought made me realize that I needed to update my employment history to include the boutique. While retail wasn't in my field, I was enjoying the

work. The clothes were amazing, which led to something else...

I was going to need new clothes before I knew it. Maternity ones. Then the post-baby-body clothes. I should donate the old ones I wouldn't be able to use anymore. Maybe a homeless shelter or a thrift store. Or I could find a church that did clothing drives. The church where Freedom and I had been baptized as babies gave things away every Christmas.

Maybe Eoin would want the baby baptized at his family church. It could be in Scotland. I needed to look into getting a passport...

Hours and hours of this sort of inner monologue, one thought chasing the previous one, my brain bouncing all over the place.

I sighed. I'd promised Eoin I'd call him today and that we'd arrange a time for us to talk, but I was dreading that conversation. Not because I thought Eoin was going to say something wrong, but because I still didn't feel like I was ready for any deep conversation. The only thing I had definitely decided was that I didn't want an abortion. I wanted my baby.

That seemed like a big enough decision for yesterday, but now, I regretted not trying to figure more out. If I was going to be a mom – no, there wasn't an *if* – now that I *was* a mom, I needed to be able to do things like that. Make the tough decisions. Know what should be done and how to do it. Or, at least, know where to start looking.

I didn't have a plan for this.

I'd always had a set goal, a timeline of sorts, but I'd never really thought of it as rigid. While I did like knowing where I was going and what I was doing, I considered myself flexible. The problem was, this wasn't about being able to bend. I'd gotten pregnant by a man I'd only known for a little over a month. The only man I'd ever slept with.

That wasn't bent. That was completely broken off and thrown a mile away.

Okay, so maybe that was a slight exaggeration of reality, but it definitely felt that way. I'd stayed so focused on school, my eyes fixed on graduation before moving on into the education field where I'd establish myself before starting a family. I'd even gone so far to plan on having a baby shortly after school let out in the summer and then be able to return in the fall.

I knew life didn't always work that way, especially when it came to fertility. My own parents were proof of that. But there was a difference between not making a big deal out of not being able to schedule a pregnancy around a school year and getting pregnant when dating hadn't even been on my radar. Well, for the most part, anyway. Eoin and I had started dating before I found out I was pregnant, but I was fairly certain that I'd actually gotten pregnant when we were still in the 'hook-up' stage of things.

Timing was, it turned out, a bitch.

I sighed and finally sat up. For the first time in my life, I was tempted to continue lying in bed, staring at the ceiling, and not doing a single productive thing. Some people might've thought I deserved to do that, to wallow and moan about events already set into motion.

Even if I had decided to terminate the pregnancy, my life had already changed, if for no other reason than it had put Eoin and me into a position that made us look at our future in a different way. While I knew it was ultimately my decision whether or not I wanted to have the baby, Eoin's feelings were part of the equation now. He'd said he was with me, no matter what, but now that it was real...

I'd made my decision, and he'd have an opinion about it, one way or the other. His thoughts would also affect our relationship, either for good or bad. And that, in turn, would change the path of my future.

A ripple effect. One little pebble into the middle of a pond disturbed water all the way out to the very edges. Being pregnant wasn't exactly a little pebble, but the principle was the same. Once the water had been disturbed, even when it was calm again, it had changed on some fundamental level.

I had changed on a fundamental level.

And at the core of that change was the fact that I was no longer responsible for only myself. I had another life to consider, to care for, to make my priority. I couldn't freak out.

Strangely enough, that acknowledgment calmed me more than anything else. Was I more ready now than I had been a few minutes ago? No. Did I have a better idea of what I was going to do next? Not really. Just that I needed to

get out of bed and get something to eat because my child needed nourishment.

With that goal firmly in mind, I climbed out of bed and headed for the kitchen. Martina had picked up extra hours this morning, so I was alone, and the place was relatively quiet. I could hear some noise from the neighboring apartments, but the sound was muffled, more of a background noise than anything that really drew my attention. It was surprisingly pleasant.

While I didn't feel as if I would be sick, I still chose something bland and ate it slowly. I needed a plan for the day, and that was what I thought about while I ate. One thing I needed to do was clear, at least. I'd promised Eoin I'd call him. The two of us really had to sit down and have a real talk about where we went from here, but I didn't know if I had it in me just yet.

I needed to organize my thoughts, so I took a notepad and pen out of the basket on the table and began to write down everything I needed to do. I'd put them in order later.

Make a prenatal appointment with Dr. Rhimes, remembering to get an official due date as well as recommendations for the best literature.

Tell my parents and decide if I want them to tell Freedom or not. Perhaps I was being weak, but I had to be honest about what I could and couldn't handle. Freedom finding out was something I wasn't entirely sure about.

My living situation. While I had some time before that would become a problem, I didn't want to rush into something I'd regret. I'd never intended to stay at Martina's apartment for very long. The first of the year had been my absolute furthest out deadline to get a place of my own.

Now, I needed to decide if I wanted to keep with that, or if it would be better for me to go back to my parents' place. Needing a room for the baby automatically excluded going back to the apartment I shared with Freedom in Stanford. How involved Eoin truly wanted to be would contribute to the location in which I searched for appropriate places.

As I wrote, my mind became clearer, necessary thoughts falling into line while all the detritus floated away. By the time I finished – for now anyway – I was calmer, more in control. While I couldn't honestly say that I would ever

be one hundred percent confident enough to talk to Eoin, I knew I had to make that call.

Before I did, however, a text came through on my phone. Eoin's name flashed on my screen, and I opened the message.

I hope I'm not waking you. I know we said we'd talk today, but I was wondering if, instead, you'd be willing to come to my place tomorrow evening? We can have dinner and talk face-to-face.

He didn't give a reason, but considering how good he'd been about me needing some time to myself, I wouldn't have felt right denying him the same opportunity.

A second message came in as I was typing out a reply.

I should have asked this first. How are you doing? Do you need anything?

I smiled and added to my response. *No morning sickness today, so that's good. I didn't really sleep well. Mind was going a mile a minute. I don't need anything at the moment, but thank you for asking. Tomorrow evening is perfect.*

A couple minutes passed, and my phone lit up again.

If you need me before then, just let me know, and I'll be there.

I read those last three words two more times and then sent: *Thank you.*

It wasn't a declaration of love or commitment, but I couldn't get those words out of my mind. *I'll be there.*

However he meant those words, this man and I would always have a connection. I put my hand on my stomach, even though I couldn't feel any change yet. Despite trying hard not to have any expectations about Eoin, I couldn't help but think how nice it would be if, someday, those words were for forever.

TWENTY-FIVE

EOIN

I'D WORKED HARD ENOUGH YESTERDAY THAT I'D SLEPT WITHOUT ANY DREAMS or nightmares, but the moment I'd woken, I'd been all the way awake. Immediately, my mind had flooded with everything I'd still needed to do today, and I hadn't wasted any time.

I'd finished with more than an hour to spare and then showered, finishing in just enough time to answer the door and get the food I'd ordered for our dinner. I hadn't wanted to add the possibility of me messing something up with our meal because I was too distracted by everything else.

The ball of anxiety in my stomach hardened as I finished getting dressed. Some of my siblings had gone to various charity events over the years, and most of them also had jobs where suits were the norm, but with me having been in the army and not really a part of the whole high society shit, I didn't have a single suit. Honestly, it was probably a good thing that I didn't have one. It might've been over the top for what I had planned tonight, and I wanted to get this right.

I checked my reflection, which was something I didn't do often, but I wanted to make sure that I looked my best. For the first time in a long time, though, I barely even noticed my scar. It didn't bother Aline, and I wasn't going to let it bother me.

Dress slacks and a nice short-sleeved dress shirt set the right tone but didn't make me less nervous. For a brief moment, I wondered if I should've called my brother, Carson, since he was a designer, but if he suggested something I

didn't have, it'd be too late to do anything about it and that would just fuck with my head.

The food was in the oven, staying warm, and I had a bottle of sparkling cider on ice. The table was set with my brand-new matching dishes and a pair of wine glasses out of the dozen I'd picked up yesterday. A vase filled with a mixture of flowers sat in the center.

I could recognize the roses, but the woman at the flower shop hadn't told me what the other ones were when I'd picked them up. They looked and smelled good, which was the most important thing.

Aline had sent me a text that she was on her way, so I took the time to do another walkthrough of the entire condo, making sure I hadn't left any shit out, that I'd put everything exactly where it belonged. When I'd brought her here on Saturday, the place hadn't been messy, but it'd been very clearly *not* lived in. Which made sense, since I hadn't actually lived in it at that point.

Now, even though it'd been less than forty-eight hours since I'd officially moved in, it looked more like a real home. I hadn't filled it up completely, because I didn't want her thinking of it as my space, but I'd done enough for it to look like a place she'd want to live.

I hoped.

I made it back to the front room a few minutes before she rang the doorbell, and then she was standing there, smiling at me, and it was time to show her that I was the sort of man she could trust to protect her, to take care of her and our child.

Her eyes widened as she stepped inside. "You've been busy."

"I have."

She ran a hand across a table. "I thought you didn't have a lot in storage."

"I didn't. I picked up some things."

"Some?" She sounded amused, but it wasn't condescending. More like she was enjoying herself.

I watched her looking around the room, seeing the new sectional and coffee table, the lamp and bookcase from my bedroom at my parents' house. The flatscreen across from the couch was new, but the gaming system on the bottom shelf of the bookcase was one I'd gotten last Christmas. I doubted Aline enjoyed that sort of thing, but I could play while she read. Hell, with the type of games that were out there, I could find something that was based off a book. That could make for an interesting date night where we wouldn't even have to leave.

I made a mental note to look into it.

"It looks great," she said. "Is this the only part of the house you furnished since Saturday?"

"No, but dinner's staying warm in the oven, so why don't we eat first, and then I can show you the rest of what I did."

Her stomach growled, and color flooded her cheeks. "I guess that answers for me."

I chuckled. "Let's eat then."

"Did you work today?" she asked as I turned off the oven and opened the door.

"We had a meeting this morning about our upcoming jobs, but since we don't have anything scheduled until the upcoming weekend, Cain said we could take the rest of the week off."

"What's this weekend?" she asked. "Or is it something you can't talk about?"

"Nothing top secret," I said with a smile. I set the last container on the table and reached for the cider. "A jewelry store is bringing in some high-end pieces, and they want some extra security on hand."

Bringing up work led the conversation to some basic small talk as we ate, and I was grateful for it. We were having a baby together, and there was still so much we didn't know about each other. Basic stuff like favorite colors and songs, what sorts of pets we might want, whether or not *Die Hard* was a Christmas movie. When I found out she'd never seen it, I told her that we'd have to fix that soon. Maybe that'd be a good one to watch around New

Year's.

I wanted our first Christmas together to be extra special, and as much as I liked *Die Hard*, that really wasn't the kind of mood I wanted to set. After all, this wasn't only our first Christmas together, it would be the only one we'd have with just the two of us for a long time. I wanted to make it memorable. Something to look back on fondly when we had kids waking us up at the asscrack of dawn to open presents.

Kids.

Huh. Hadn't realized I was already thinking plural.

"This was delicious," Aline said as she finished the last of her pasta. "Thank you."

"I can manage a few simple, decent meals, but nothing like this." I refilled my drink and gestured toward her wine glass with the bottle. When she nodded, I topped off her drink as well. "My parents made sure we could all do the basics, but I didn't really see the point in learning much when the army provided most of my meals."

"I'll have to teach you a thing or two." She smiled with a warmth that showed all the way through to her eyes.

"I look forward to it."

I didn't mean for my statement to come out with any sort of sexual meaning, but even I could hear it. I couldn't help it, I supposed. I wanted her all the time. Wanted her so much that it almost physically hurt.

"Let me get this cleaned up real quick, and then I can show you the rest of the place." My voice was calm, but my insides were anything but. I hadn't eaten a lot, but I was starting to think that maybe I shouldn't have eaten anything at all.

"That sounds good." Aline stood up and reached for one of the bowls.

"Sit. I've got it." Before she could argue, I added, "Let me take care of it. Please."

She sighed. "All right, but when I cook, I plan to do the same thing to you."

“Agreed.” For now, anyway. Once we were settled together, we’d figure out how we were going to do things in our family. I’d be damned if I’d be one of those men who thought clearing the table and doing dishes was the wife’s job.

After I had everything off the table, I held out my hand to her, and she took it, threading her fingers between mine. We made our way through the living room, but rather than taking her to the library or office down the hallway, we went up the stairs. I hadn’t really done much to either of those spaces since she was the reader and the one who could benefit from a home office. Besides, the two important rooms were upstairs.

I pushed open the door to the master bedroom and watched her face to see what she thought of the things I’d done in there.

I’d gotten a new bed around the same time I’d brought my belongings from San Ramon, and it’d been in storage until I’d bought this place. The guys had helped me set it up, ribbing me the entire time about how soft I was for needing a California King bed. While I’d originally picked it because I was too tall for pretty much anything else, now I was glad because I wouldn’t have to look into another one just because Aline would be here too.

“Do all ex-military still make their beds like that after they’re discharged?” Her eyes were twinkling as she looked up at me.

“All the guys I know still do,” I said, letting myself tease a bit. “Not that I’ve seen a lot of guys’ beds.”

She laughed, her gaze moving to the dresser I’d brought from my parents’ house. I’d gotten it when I was fourteen, and once, pissed off at my parents for something, I’d carved *fuck* into the top of it. When Da had seen it, he hadn’t yelled. Instead, he’d told me to carve every curse word and insult I knew all over the dresser. I’d looked at him like he was crazy, but I’d done it. And I’d loved it.

At first.

After a couple weeks, however, seeing those words carved there made me feel uncomfortable and a little guilty, especially when my parents or siblings came into my room. Finally, two months had passed, and I’d been tired of

seeing it all the time, so I'd asked Da if I could get a new dresser. He'd said no and handed me sandpaper. He'd told me that once I'd sanded the entire dresser to the point where the words couldn't be seen, I'd be allowed to paint it.

I'd never vandalized anything else.

"What's that look for?" Aline asked. "Is there a story here?"

I chuckled and then told her what I'd been thinking about. She laughed too and stepped farther into the room, reaching out to touch one of the few things I had on my walls. A picture of my family a few months after Maggie was born. It was the last that we had of all of us together. Ma died six or seven months after it had been taken.

"Your biological mother?" Aline's voice was soft.

"Shannon." Familiar sadness went through me as I said her name.

"That one's you, isn't it?" Aline pointed.

I nodded. "Yeah, the one with the big ears."

She laughed, but it was a sweet sound, the kind that said she understood that while I loved this picture, it hurt me too.

"She was beautiful."

"She was," I agreed.

I took Aline's hand and just stood there for a moment before continuing with the tour. The master bathroom didn't look much different since all I'd done was put out a few things and some cheap towels. Linen and stuff like that were things that I thought Aline would like to choose.

"There's one more thing I want to show you," I said.

We moved from the bedroom, and I let go of her hand to open the door to the room across the hall. My palms were sweaty, my blood rushing in my ears. This was it, the main reason I'd asked her over this evening.

I flipped on the light and heard her gasp.

“I didn’t do a lot because I thought we should plan it together, but the one thing I saw in my head when I pictured the nursery was a rocking chair like the one Ma had when I was a baby.”

“Oh, Eoin.”

I finally looked at her, and her eyes were filled with tears, but she was smiling.

“It’s perfect,” she whispered.

I’d needed to see how she reacted to the chair before I could know if the next part of my plan was a good idea. She loved the chair, so it was time.

I dropped to one knee as I pulled a small box out of my pocket. A trip to the jewelry store I’d be guarding this weekend had led me to the simple but elegant engagement ring I held out to her.

“Aline, from the moment I saw you, my life was changed. I looked into the future and saw you. Now I see you and the family we’ll have together. Will you marry me?”

TWENTY-SIX

ALINE

I WAS STILL ASLEEP, AND THE STRESS OF THE LAST COUPLE MONTHS WAS giving me strange dreams. That was the only explanation I could come up with as to why Eoin was down on one knee, a beautiful ring in a velvet box in his hand. Because there was no other possible scenario that led to him saying such sweet, romantic things and then proposing.

Right?

Except I remembered waking up and having breakfast with Martina before we both went to work, her for a ten-hour shift and me for five. Silverton Designs wasn't as packed as most retail places the day before Christmas Eve, but it was busy enough for Martina to pick up some extra hours and give me something to do so I wasn't sitting around, worrying and wondering what would happen when I finally talked to Eoin...

Maybe that was what was happening here. I'd sat down after my shift ended, and exhausted, had dozed off. Since I'd already been thinking about Eoin and what he could have planned, my overworked brain had created the current situation.

Except marriage hadn't even been on my radar. At all. Yes, I'd been thinking about how Eoin and I might work things out so that he could be a regular part of our child's life no matter what stage we were at in our relationship, but a proposal tonight hadn't crossed my mind. Honestly, I even would've been surprised if he'd simply mentioned us moving in together, probably with me having my own room.

Only seconds had passed, thoughts firing across my synapsis almost too fast to fully process. The shock I was certain showed on my face allowed me those few moments without turning things awkward, but I couldn't stretch that out forever. I needed to respond.

I wasn't prepared. My head was spinning, and I wondered if I'd faint. Part of me almost wished for it. If I passed out, I could put off yet another life-altering choice. Never before had I wished so hard for the ground to open and swallow me up.

Life was funny. I had wanted my family to treat me like an adult and respect my decisions, even if they disagreed. I'd wanted it so much that I'd walked away from them to prove that I could take care of myself.

And since that moment, I'd been faced with the type of adult decisions I never dreamed I'd need to make at this point in my life.

But I refused to go back to how things had been. I had something to prove, not only to my family but to myself. If I couldn't cope with surprises, then what chance did I have to succeed on my own?

Which brought up another question. If I accepted Eoin's proposal, was I really still doing things on my own?

"Aline?"

The worry in Eoin's voice pulled me out of my head. He looked concerned but not embarrassed, which meant he was most likely still thinking that I was too surprised to speak. He would have accounted for the initial shock, but I was on borrowed time.

"Yes." The word came out before I realized I'd made a decision. I hadn't weighed the options, considered the pros and cons, but as soon as I said it, the fear that had been building up inside me vanished. I had no doubt that I'd be terrified again at some point, but at least I wouldn't be frightened alone.

And I hadn't gone back to my parents or Freedom.

Eoin was my choice, and I was his. This was our life together.

"Yes?"

I smiled and leaned down to give him a kiss. “Yes.”

He slid the ring onto my finger as he stood, his smile stretched from ear to ear. My heart skipped a beat, and it had nothing to do with anxiety. It was all him. No matter how scared I was, how concerned about the future, I still wanted him, in part because of the pure physical attraction, but also for one other very specific reason.

He made me feel safe.

And right now, safety was a very big turn-on.

He ran his thumb over the ring, his skin brushing against mine so lightly that I almost couldn't feel it. A ghost of a touch. More of an awareness than a physical sensation.

Heat rushed through me, from my center out to my extremities, every cell practically vibrating. I turned my hand over, let his fingers trace over my palm, ran my fingertips over his wrist. He caught his breath, his eyes darkening.

“How do you...feel?” he asked, his voice rougher.

I raised an eyebrow. “Uh, fine? Thank you?”

One corner of his mouth tipped up in a rakish grin. He pushed some hair out of my face. “Let me clarify. Are you feeling well enough to *celebrate*?”

“Oh,” I breathed as my stomach clenched.

His expression faltered slightly. “Unless you're not...I mean...are you okay? Or you just don't want...”

A strong, confident man was appealing, but seeing that hint of vulnerability, that part of him that most people didn't get to see, it twisted something inside me. This was what I saw when I looked into his eyes, what I felt when we made love. The part of himself that no one else got to see. The totality of a man who was so much more than the scars on his body or the wounds in his soul.

“I feel fine,” I said with a soft smile. “No nausea, nothing like that.” I put a hand on his cheek. “And I definitely want to *celebrate* with you.”

His lips crashed into mine, hungry, all-consuming. Fire ignited within me. Not a slow simmer, but an explosion blazing across every nerve. I clutched the front of his shirt, wrinkling the fabric. His tongue swept into my mouth, and all thoughts fled. The scent of him filled me, cedar and sandalwood, and just *him*.

His hands slid down to my butt, and he lifted me. I wrapped my legs around his waist, both of us groaning as his erection pressed against my core. Layers of fabric were between us, but the friction still sent a shiver of pleasure through me. I dug my fingers into his hair, nails scratching his scalp as his hands flexed on my ass. I was vaguely aware that we were moving, but it was an undercurrent of knowledge, not close enough to the surface for me to really care.

Then I was on a bed, Eoin's body covering mine, the weight of him pleasant. I ran my hands up his arms and across his shoulders, over his back, enjoying the feel of his muscles flexing under my palms. Knowing what was underneath his clothes, I pulled at his shirt, wanting to see, to touch.

He pushed himself up onto his knees and pulled his shirt over the back of his head with one hand before tossing it off the bed. It was one of the hottest things I'd ever seen. I sat up, running my hands over his torso, familiar territory with each dip and ridge, each scar. When I pressed my lips to the skin just above his belly button, he sucked in a breath.

"Aline." My name was a prayer, a warning, a blessing.

"Eoin." I smiled against his stomach and hooked my fingers into his waistband. My tongue traced a scar, then his belly button, moved down the trail of hair until it disappeared into his pants.

His hands caught mine, fingers curling around my wrists. He lifted our hands before kissing my fingers, kissing the ring. Our mouths found each other's again, and we tumbled back on the bed together. Hands tugged at clothes, found buttons, and zippers. Newly bared skin practically sparked with each point of contact, radiating out until the spaces between us crackled with electricity.

His lips trailed down my throat, kissed the hollow there. I tipped my head back, eyes closing. A hand covered my breast, fingers plucked at my nipple,

teased it. His erection was hot against my hip, the skin soft but the muscle hard. Teeth scraped against my collarbone, and I moaned, losing myself in the sensations.

A hand between my legs had me arching my back, pushing my hips toward him. His finger slid over my clit, and I gasped at the jolt of pleasure that went through me. He chuckled, the vibration adding to everything I was feeling.

“So wet for me,” he murmured.

“Yes,” I agreed. “For you.”

A single digit slipped inside me, the heel of his palm pressing against my clit. With single-minded deliberation, he worked his hand over me, his finger inside me, pushing me toward climax. When his lips latched onto my nipple, I cried out, my nails digging into his arms. He sucked hard, a faint edge of pain to the pleasure his mouth was giving me.

“Come for me,” he whispered a moment before he took that sensitive flesh between his teeth and bit down.

The shock drove me over the edge, and a sound that I could only describe as a kean came out of my mouth. The orgasm ripped through me, turning everything into the sort of blinding, powerful ecstasy that wiped out the rest of the world.

When I came down, Eoin was on his side, looking at me while stroking himself with his free hand. The pleased expression on his face made me smile, and the sight of how turned on I’d made him brought my own arousal flooding back. Then he did something that made my heart ache in a different way.

He leaned over and kissed my stomach. The soft look in his eyes left no doubt as to the reason for his gentle gesture. If I’d had any doubt about his feelings toward our very unplanned child, that would have eliminated them altogether.

I reached for him, and we kissed, something unhurried and sweet that had as much fire as previous ones, just slower burning. I leaned into him, running my hand down his chest to his stomach and lower. Just before I reached my goal, he stopped me and rolled me onto my back again.

“Not yet.” He kissed down my body, spreading my legs apart before settling between them. “I want to make you come with my mouth at least once before I’m inside you.”

As he lowered his head, I fisted the comforter and the ring – *my* ring – pinched my finger, reminding me of its presence. Reminding me of what it meant. That he was mine as much as I was his. That this beautiful, amazing man – the father of my child – belonged to me.

Things might not have gone according to plan, but I couldn’t regret any of it. Not when it had led me here.

TWENTY-SEVEN

EOIN

THE SCENT OF PEACHES WOKE ME UP, AND IT TOOK A MOMENT FOR ME TO remember why my bed smelled like fruit. Aline. My eyes opened, my need to reassure myself that she really was here greater than me wanting to sleep a little longer. Once I saw her, I couldn't look away.

We were both on our sides, her back to my front. Her body was curled up, making her look even smaller than she was, and a surge of protectiveness went through me. I slid my hand from her hip to her stomach, wondering when I'd be able to feel the changes to her body, when the baby would start to move, how big it was right now.

Was it a boy or girl? Would Aline want to know before or have it be a surprise? When would we be able to tell?

I had a lot of research to do, I realized. I wanted to do this right, and that meant not leaving everything up to Aline. Some of the questions colliding together in my brain were the kind that she and I could talk about. I could find the answers for all the others myself. Show her that I meant everything I'd said. That she and the baby were my future, my family.

My chest tightened with the intensity of my feelings. I had parents and siblings I loved, a niece I would do anything for, even if I wasn't the sort of person who showed or talked about that kind of thing, but this was something else. Like my center of gravity had shifted.

I honestly didn't even have the words to explain it. I just knew that every choice I made from here on out would be based on what was best for Aline

and the baby. I would protect them both, no matter the cost to me or anyone else.

As my thoughts kept going on that path, I suddenly remembered that the paperwork I'd gotten from Cain about my health and life insurance through the agency was still sitting on my desk at work.

Dammit.

I needed to make Aline the beneficiary for my life insurance and add her and the baby to my health insurance. I hadn't told Cain why I'd needed that information so soon after I'd filled it out originally, even though I'd already been planning the proposal when I'd talked to him. I hadn't wanted to risk him telling Freedom and spoiling the surprise for Aline. If the sisters were even talking. It'd been the distraction of what I'd been planning that'd made me forget the papers.

I supposed I could have waited until I went back to the office, but I didn't want to delay, especially with the holidays possibly slowing down the process. If the loss of my mother and Leo had taught me anything, it was that everything could change in an instant.

I sighed. I'd wanted to stay in all day with Aline, but I wouldn't be able to relax or enjoy myself if I didn't go get the papers.

It took some maneuvering, but I managed to get out of the bed without waking her. She needed more rest than she was getting. While I didn't think Martina was pressuring Aline to work at the boutique, I doubted Martina was discouraging it either, though that could change now that Martina knew that Aline was pregnant.

In the end, it wasn't Martina's responsibility. Aline was my fiancée, carrying my child. I'd take care of her now, and I'd start by letting her sleep while I dealt with the insurance business.

Not wanting her to wake up alone and not know where I was, I wrote a quick note and hung it on the fridge. Maybe I'd stop to pick up something special for us to have for lunch too.

With that in mind, I headed out. I'd barely gone a block before I realized how absolutely stupid it was for me to go somewhere today. It was Christmas Eve,

which meant all the last-minute shoppers were out and about. As I inched forward, I was glad that I'd done all my shopping online and had even paid extra for gift wrapping.

Yeah, that meant I hadn't actually seen any of the presents I'd be giving out, so if someone fucked things up, it'd be as much of a surprise to me as it would be to the person opening it, but it definitely was worth the risk, especially since I'd had to arrange for Rome to take my gifts to San Ramon.

I had some ideas about what we could do today and tomorrow, but Aline and I hadn't discussed it yet, so I'd decided to send my presents just in case she and I made other plans. Mom and Da might be disappointed if I missed my first Christmas back home, but once they heard about the engagement and the baby, I was pretty confident they'd understand.

The drive time to the office basically doubled, and by the time I parked, I was seriously regretting having left my place at all. Maybe if our offices hadn't been so close to a couple shopping centers, it wouldn't have been as bad, but I vowed that, next year, if Aline and I were in L.A. for Christmas, we'd have her family come to us so we weren't dealing with this traffic with a baby in the car.

To my surprise, I wasn't the only one here from the agency. Cain's car was in its usual spot. The accountants in the building on the other side of the parking lot must've been here too because I saw the Firebird and the Ford Focus that two of them drove. I didn't see them, so I assumed they were holed up in their offices.

Cain was stretched out on the couch in our small lobby, and he sat up when the door sensor dinged, alerting him to my arrival. When he saw it was me, he frowned. "What are you doing here? Is something wrong?"

I shook my head. "I just left my insurance paperwork here."

He stood, following me to my office. "You came in on Christmas Eve to get insurance papers?"

I had to tell him anyway, and his question meant I didn't need to try to find some awkward way to introduce my news into a conversation, so I went with it. "Yeah, I need to get Aline covered on my health insurance and listed as the

beneficiary for my life insurance.” I picked up the papers and turned to face Cain. “She and I are engaged, and we’re having a baby.”

Cain stared at me without saying a word, like he was waiting for me to say I was joking.

I wasn’t, and I let the seriousness of the situation show in my voice. “She’ll be moving in with me, but I’m not sure exactly what day because we have to decide the best day for us to drive to Stanford and get her things, but we’ll plan it around when I’m scheduled to work.”

“Wow.” Cain shook his head. “Congratulations, man. That’s great.”

Even though he seemed to be sincere, I got the impression that he didn’t really think I’d made the best choices, but since he was at least trying, I wouldn’t call him on it. Sometimes, the best thing to do was just prove people wrong.

“Thanks.” I stuck the papers in a manila envelope. “Everything okay with you?”

“Yeah, why wouldn’t it be?” Cain sounded confused.

“Because it’s Christmas Eve, and you told all of us not to come in until the weekend, but you’re here.”

He shrugged and gave me a half-smile. “Not all of us have pretty fiancées waiting for us at home.”

It wasn’t until then that I realized I didn’t really know that much about Cain’s personal life, and I was suddenly tempted to ask him if he’d thought about getting back together with Freedom now that they’d reconnected. But that would’ve been a bad idea on a lot of fronts, the first of which was pissing off my boss, and the second was similar.

No way in hell did I want to piss off my future sister-in-law. Things between Aline and Freedom were tense, but I knew that shit happened all the time with siblings, and I wasn’t going to do anything that could keep the two of them from making up.

“Since you *do* have a pretty...and pregnant...fiancée waiting,” he continued, “why don’t you get out of here and spend some time with her.”

“I’ll do that.” I walked toward the door, but something occurred to me before I reached it. “Hey, if you happen to talk to Freedom, don’t mention any of what I told you. Things are still...tense between the two of them, and Aline should decide when to tell her family.”

“Right.” He nodded. “I won’t say a word to anyone.”

“Thanks, man.” Since neither of us enjoyed unnecessary conversation without a purpose, I left, my mind already jumping ahead to what I could pick up for us to have for lunch.

That’s what I planned to do from here on out. Focus on the future.

TWENTY-EIGHT

ALINE

WHEN I WOKE, IT TOOK ME A FEW MINUTES TO REMEMBER WHERE I WAS, BUT the disorientation itself wasn't a surprise. In fact, in the last couple months, the times I *had* known where I was as soon as I woke up had been few and far between.

What *was* new, however, was the strange weight on my left hand. A weight that drew my attention to it only moments before I remembered what it was.

A ring.

An engagement ring.

As I stared at it, I realized I hadn't really looked at it last night. I'd just registered that it was pretty, my mind more focused on the fact that Eoin was proposing.

I wasn't a jeweler, but I'd seen my fair share of engagement rings flashed about during one social event or another. I was ninety-five percent certain that it was white gold. A swirl halo style with a full carat diamond, and smaller diamonds on either side along the front of the band.

It was breath-taking.

I ran my thumb over it, almost like I was trying to convince myself that all of it was real. Eoin McCrae had changed my entire life in a little over a month, starting with literally saving my life. He'd been my first lover and was the father of a child I'd only recently learned I was carrying. He'd aggravated me and thrilled me. He'd given me orgasms that had made me see white and left

me pleasantly sated. And even though he hadn't known me long, my husband-to-be had found the engagement ring I would've chosen for myself.

My fiancé.

I was going to get married.

I was going to be a mother.

Maybe not in that order.

I let out a slow breath, thankful that Eoin wasn't still in bed with me. Yes, we would be sharing a bed on a regular basis soon enough, but at this exact moment, I needed a few minutes to compose myself before I saw him. Prepare to face the reality of what had been a whirlwind night. Because the proposal and everything that had followed had been wonderful, but the baby was very real and needed real-life decisions made.

And it was my responsibility to make them.

No, I silently corrected myself. *Our* responsibility. Because we were in this together. He'd made that clear even before he'd given me the ring. No matter where things went with us, he wanted to be part of our child's life. Despite what others may have thought from Eoin's appearance, I knew how important family was to him. Yes, the proposal had thrown me, but the commitment to the baby hadn't surprised me in the least.

After I cleaned up a bit, I headed for the kitchen, fully expecting to run into Eoin there, if not on the way. I was a yard or so away when I realized that I didn't hear any sounds. Not things being moved around, doors opened or closed, not even the whisper of footsteps on the hardwood floor.

The kitchen was empty.

I frowned. I hadn't expected Eoin to be here making me breakfast or anything like that, but I had thought he'd be here getting himself coffee or something to eat. It was Christmas Eve, and he hadn't needed to go to work, which I had assumed meant he'd be here.

Before I could start analyzing his absence, however, I spotted a piece of paper on the fridge, and it appeared to have been handwritten. Relieved, I

went to it.

Woke up and remembered I'd left something at the office but didn't want to wake you. I shouldn't be too long. If there's anything you need, text me, and I'll pick it up on my way back.

I felt a little awkward being here without him, but I supposed now was as good a time as any to acclimate to my new surroundings. After all, we were engaged, and he had already started on a nursery, which I assumed meant he intended for us to both – no, all *three* of us – to live here at some point.

That was when it hit me that we hadn't talked about when the move would happen or how long our engagement would be. I didn't know enough about his family to predict whether or not they would approve of us moving in together before we were married, but since I was already pregnant, I couldn't really see the point of us living apart for appearance's sake. But I also didn't know if Eoin planned for a long engagement and some time in his new house by himself.

Guilt gnawed at me. He'd spent his entire adult life serving and protecting our country, only leaving after he was wounded, and when he finally found a place he wanted for his own, he was suddenly pushed into a situation where he couldn't enjoy that freedom.

I could sympathize, I realized. I'd never lived on my own. Never had a life where I answered only to myself. And when I'd finally broken free, I hadn't even had the time to adjust to mostly taking care of myself before I'd found out that my short-lived independence had turned into a crash course in all things adult.

My chest tightened, and I had to close my eyes to fight against the nearly overwhelming sensation of drowning. Could I truly do this, or was I simply deceiving myself? Had I made the decision to have and keep this baby because I would have felt like a failure otherwise? That my family's opinion of me as an irresponsible and naïve child was justified? Was I in over my head, or would most women who experienced an unplanned pregnancy, regardless of age or circumstances, have similar moments of doubt?

I put my hand on my stomach, trying to decide if I already noticed a difference or if it was just in my head. I was slender enough that I wouldn't

be able to hide it once I did start showing. Not that I felt the need to conceal anything, I firmly told myself.

True, this hadn't been intentional, but I wasn't a minor who now had to decide whether or not she could finish high school. I was twenty-two, had a degree in a good field, and the advantage of a trust to ensure that money would never be an issue. Both of those didn't even take into account Eoin's involvement.

When he returned, we'd discuss things in more detail now that the emotion of last night had passed. A part of me, however, had the sudden desire to call my parents and confess all, ask for their help. But if I did that in a moment of weakness, I'd never forgive myself. I would just be proving what they'd thought all along.

So, no, I wouldn't be going to them for advice or help. At least until I spoke with Eoin and determined whether or not I actually did need to do anything more than simply inform them of the changes in my life.

As for my sister, despite how close we'd always been, Freedom was below our parents when it came to people in whom I wished to confide. I had, however, told my parents that I would talk to Freedom before I joined them all for Christmas. Considering today was Christmas Eve, I didn't have much time left to make good on my promise.

Which meant I needed to call my sister.

I wouldn't, however, be telling her anything about the baby, Eoin, this place, or the engagement. Not yet.

No, I would keep the conversation firmly fixed on the plans for tomorrow, what I needed to bring, and perhaps tell her a bit about what I'd been doing since Thanksgiving. I could handle that.

I hoped.

I made myself some toast, even though I wasn't queasy. There was, however, a distinct possibility that talking to my sister would make me sick to my stomach, so I decided that a preemptive strike in the form of breakfast was in order.

My stomach was already churning when I pulled up Freedom's contact information and made the call. Part of me hoped that it'd go to voicemail, and I could simply leave a message saying that I'd be at Mom and Dad's tomorrow, but that would only be putting off the inevitable.

"Aline? Are you okay?" The concern in Freedom's voice both made me feel guilty that I'd worried her, as well as irritated that she seemed to think I was calling because something was wrong.

"I'm fine." The words came out flat, so I tried again. "I was calling to see what time dinner was tomorrow."

Freedom wasn't stupid. She knew that I could have called or texted either of our parents, especially since I'd already spoken to them while avoiding her. She knew I'd intentionally chosen to speak to her.

"So, you're coming for Christmas?"

Now, I couldn't hear anything in her tone at all. She was being careful with me in a way she never had been before.

"I am," I said, being just as careful with her. "Is there anything I'm supposed to bring?"

"Just the usual."

"I don't usually bring anything," I pointed out.

"Yeah, that's pretty much what they expect of you this time too."

I wanted to pretend that I didn't hear the undercurrent of double meaning in her words, but I knew I wasn't imagining it. She – *they* – didn't expect anything of me. Not when it came to practical responsibilities, anyway. Oh, I could be counted on to study for a test and ace it but being in charge of a veggie tray was expecting too much.

I closed my eyes and pushed back my annoyance. I hadn't called Freedom to continue an argument or even to defend myself.

"Can you get your gifts to the house without a car?" Freedom asked. "I'll be at Mom and Dad's by this evening, so I can come pick you up in the morning."

I didn't know yet what Eoin's plans were for tomorrow, but I didn't think it would be too much to ask him to at least drop me off at my parents' place, no matter how early it was. It said something that I was more willing to possibly get up insanely early on Christmas Day rather than have to rely on Freedom for transportation.

"It's not a problem," I said. "Are we eating at noon?"

"Around then." After an awkward couple moments, she cleared her throat. "How's Martina doing?"

That answered any question I had about whether or not our parents had told Freedom where I was, despite the fact that I'd asked them not to say anything to her about where I was staying. At least Freedom hadn't chosen to use the information to come speak to me in person. Perhaps finding new footing with each other wouldn't be as complicated as I'd feared.

And then I remembered that she was in Stanford, which could also be an explanation as to why she hadn't shown up at the apartment. I wasn't in the mood to figure out which it was, though. Or mention that I wouldn't trust my parents with any sensitive information soon.

"She's good. Everyone at Silverton Designs loves her, and she's one of the most requested stylists on their staff. After the first of the year, they're going to take her completely off the register and make her only a stylist."

"That's good to hear."

Another few beats of awkward silence, and then it was my turn to ask a question. "How's Dr. Ipres?"

"She's doing well," Freedom said. "She's taking a sabbatical this summer to visit some relatives in Greece."

As the conversation drifted off yet again, I internally cringed at the thought of hours of this tomorrow, but I'd already made the promise. Perhaps I'd ask Eoin to go with me. I hadn't yet decided a timeline regarding what I wanted to reveal or when. Having him there would help center me.

Right now, I needed to end this agony. "Well, I have a couple other calls to make, so I'll see you tomorrow around noon."

“All right. I’ll see you then.”

As I ended the call, I breathed a sigh of relief that it was over. Yes, I would see her tomorrow, but I was already planning to avoid any time with her where we didn’t have at least one other person in the room with us. I hated the distance and unease between us, but I had drawn a line in the sand, and I couldn’t go back on it. How my family saw me was too important for me to brush off. For me to have any semblance of adult relationships with them, I had to stick to my guns.

Rather than dwelling on how the call had gone, I picked up my phone to make another call, this one to Martina.

Since Martina was at work, the call went to voicemail, which I’d expected. “Hey, it’s me. I’m still at Eoin’s, and I don’t know how long I’ll be here. Um, a lot’s happened, and I’ll fill you in the next time I see you, but it’s all good stuff. I’m probably going to come by sometime today to get some of my things, but I don’t know if it’ll be before you’re off work or not.” Emotion pricked the backs of my eyes, and I cleared my throat. “Thank you, Martina, for everything. I wouldn’t have gotten through all this without you.”

As I ended the call, I thought how true that last statement was and wondered if I’d ever be able to return the favor someday.

TWENTY-NINE

EOIN

SINCE I DIDN'T GET BACK TO MY PLACE – THAT STILL SOUNDED STRANGE TO me – until close to noon, I wasn't surprised to hear Aline when I opened the door. I was, however, surprised to see that she was in the kitchen, standing in front of my stove and stirring a pot of...something.

"I'm almost afraid to ask what's in there," I said as I set my papers and my bag down on the counter. "I didn't think I had anything pot-worthy. Mostly frozen dinners and stuff I could grill."

The smile she gave distracted me for a moment from the fact that she was wearing one of my shirts. Unsurprisingly, it was pretty much a dress on her, the bottom only a couple inches above her knee. My dick perked up at the thought of what she was – or wasn't – wearing underneath, but I wasn't going to give in to the urge to take her right here on the counter. I didn't know how she was feeling this morning, and her well-being was more important than me being horny.

I filed the idea of fucking in the kitchen as something to do at some point in our future.

"I can't take any credit for it," she said as she turned back to the pot and continued stirring. "About fifteen minutes ago, one of your neighbors stopped by to introduce himself and brought you some homemade chicken noodle soup. Like the noodles are homemade too. I couldn't turn that down."

I didn't like that she was using *your* and *you*, but I supposed it would take a bit to get used to saying *our* and *us*. Hell, I was having a hard time wrapping

my head around it. But that wasn't what I wanted to talk about at the moment.

“And would this neighbor happen to be an elderly gentleman without any interest in his definitely taken neighbor?” My tone was teasing, but my stomach had clenched at the thought of her being here alone when a strange man knocked on the door. What if he had been some Ted Bundy type? Shit like that happened.

“No, Kevin looks like he's about your age.” She glanced over her shoulder at me. “But I got the impression that his husband is closer to mine since he mentioned Landon being a student at UCLA.”

I relaxed, though it was more because of the ‘married’ thing rather than him having a husband. Just because he was with another guy didn't mean he was only into men. Then again, there were plenty of married serial killers, and sexuality didn't really mean shit either when it came to stuff like that since—

“Are you okay?”

Aline's concerned question cut through my thoughts, and I realized I'd been heading down a dangerous spiral. I gave myself a mental shake.

“Of course.” I gestured to the bag I'd brought in. “I picked up some Christmas cookies at a bakery on my way back.”

Her entire face lit up, and she ran over to me, jumping up to wrap her arms around my neck. I caught her automatically, a thrill going through me at the complete trust she had that I'd catch her. She planted a kiss on my cheek and squeezed me tight.

“I love Christmas cookies!”

I chuckled at her enthusiasm and barely managed to resist sliding my hands under her shirt to see if she was as bare as she felt. Instead, I used the opportunity to ask a question. “Does that mean you're feeling okay?”

She slid down my body, and I sucked in a breath as her feet touched the floor, the shirt riding up to show that, no, she wasn't wearing any underwear.

Fuck.

“I am,” she said. “In fact, I’m actually hungry. Should we find out if the soup tastes as good as it smells?”

I pressed my lips to her forehead. “That sounds perfect.”

As we moved around each other to fill our own bowls, she nudged me with her elbow. “What did you leave at work?”

“Oh, my health and life insurance stuff.” I waved a hand toward the envelope on the counter. “The way Cain has everything set up, even though we’re not married yet, I can put you on my health insurance because of the baby. I wasn’t sure what sort of coverage you had and figured even if you had insurance, having a secondary policy wouldn’t be a bad idea.”

“That’s...yes, thank you.” She frowned.

“Should I have not done that?” I asked, working to keep my voice casual. I was so out of my depth here.

She smiled but still looked distracted. “No, that’s not it. Thank you for thinking of it because I hadn’t. Freedom and I have always had insurance through our parents’ policy because we were both single and in college, but I hadn’t thought about whether or not I was still covered after graduation.”

“Didn’t you need to have insurance to go to Iran? I’d think that Neutral Ground would make that a requirement.”

“And that would be why I’m frustrated with myself,” she said with a sigh. “I went to the hospital right after we got back and then went to see Dr. Rhimes last week. Neither time did I even consider that I might not have insurance.”

She made a frustrated sound, and I didn’t need to be a mind reader to know what she was thinking. “Hey, don’t beat yourself up over it. I know what it’s like to suddenly make a major life change when life throws a curveball or two. No one can prepare for everything.”

This time when she smiled, it looked a little happier. “Thanks.”

Since we were on the subject, I figured I might as well stick with it. “I needed the life insurance papers because I’m putting your name on the policy as the beneficiary. While my military benefits won’t cover a girlfriend or a fiancée,

the life insurance can go to whoever I pick, and after we're married, I figured it'd be good to have something extra for you and the baby if something happens to me."

"I don't like thinking about that," she said, reaching across the table to squeeze my hand. "I mean, I understand the reasoning, and I'm grateful for it, but I hate having this discussion, especially when we haven't been together that long."

A sliver of panic cut through me. "We don't have to talk about it now if it bothers you."

She shook her head. "No, we need to. I just feel like we're doing all of this backward."

Trying hard to contain the anxiety twisting up my insides, I explained my reasoning, "Yeah, it's not exactly typical, but nothing about our relationship has been. I want to be involved in our child's life from moment one, from before moment one, I guess. You moving in here makes more sense than you finding your own place in L.A. and trying to take care of everything there by yourself just because that's what would be 'normal.'" It was my turn to squeeze her hand. "Remember how we talked about not doing things based on everyone else's opinions? We need to do this for us. For our baby. Our family."

She was silent for a few seconds, and I worried that I'd pushed too hard, that I was being too intense. Then there was the fact that I hadn't actually asked her to move in. I'd spoken more like it was an assumption, which might not have been the best way to handle things...but then she nodded.

"You're right. I'm still processing everything."

I moved my thumb across her engagement ring and realized I hadn't asked her if she liked it. I didn't want her to wear something she hated just because she thought I needed her too.

"I meant to ask if this is what you wanted," I said, tapping the ring. "We can exchange it if--"

"I love it." This smile reached all the way to her eyes. "It's beautiful and exactly what I would've picked for myself."

I didn't hide my relief. In some ways, we knew each other better than couples who'd been together for years, but in a lot of other ways, we were still mostly strangers. Like the fact that I'd never met her parents and had no idea what they thought about me. Or if they knew anything about me at all.

Which brought me to something else we needed to discuss.

"With everything else going on, we haven't really talked about Christmas." I gestured to the still fairly bare room. "I don't really have a lot in the way of decorations, but I arranged for a tree to be delivered this evening. I wasn't sure if you already had plans, and it's okay if you do, but I thought if you didn't, maybe we could decorate it together."

She finished her soup before responding. "I promised my parents that I'd be over tomorrow around noon." She glanced at me and licked her lips. "I didn't tell them that you'd be coming because I wasn't sure what you had planned."

"Do you want me to come with you?"

Some of the tension went out of her body. "I'd really like that."

"Perfect," I said. "Then we'll get your things from Martina's this afternoon, pick up something for dinner, then come home to eat. After that, we'll do a video call to my parents, and whoever's there already with them. Once that's done, we can have Christmas cookies and decorate the tree, maybe watch a movie."

"That sounds good." She stood, her expression slightly dazed. "Do you want more soup?"

I shook my head. "No, thank you. Why don't you sit down, and I'll clean up?"

"It's okay," she said. "It's just putting things in the dishwasher. And we had a deal about me letting you clean up last night, remember?"

I reluctantly nodded. "All right. Thanks."

I was going to choose my battles with her. No way would I let her wear herself out, and the closer she got to delivery, the more I'd do for her, but right now, this wasn't worth an argument. Especially since we had plenty of

other things to talk about.

“I’m not sure which of my siblings will be at my parents’ place tonight, but there are so many of them that I don’t think calling each of them to tell them about the baby and the engagement is necessary. We can just tell everyone who’s on the call and then let them pass the news around. That’s usually how we do things like this. It’s hard to get everyone together, even for a holiday.”

“You want to tell them about the baby and being engaged?”

It was my turn to frown. Did she want to keep this a secret because she wasn’t sure about it? About the baby or about us?

I didn’t like the idea of hiding something like this. Did she think we wouldn’t last long enough to get married? “Do you not want to?”

As I waited for her answer, I wondered what I could do to change her mind. I couldn’t lose her or the baby. Not when I was so close to being able to keep them both safe.

THIRTY

ALINE

I'D WANTED TO TALK OVER LUNCH, DISCUSS WITH EOIN WHAT WE WERE GOING to do. The nitty-gritty details, since the basic 'keeping the baby' and 'getting married' part of things was already settled.

I'd thought he'd be in the same place I was. That his grand gesture of making over his new home to accommodate a baby and then proposing had been all he'd had on his mind. Not that they had been unimportant because they both meant a lot to me, but I'd still thought we would be on the same level when we had this discussion.

But he'd been taking charge and doing things that needed to be done while I'd been sitting around, talking to myself. He'd figured out health insurance that I hadn't even thought about and had even made provisions in case something happened to him before we married. He'd pretty much assumed that I was moving in right now, and we'd be moving forward together from here on out, so he'd started to work on what shape that future would take.

I was upset with him for how he'd responded when I first told him I might be pregnant, but since then, he'd adjusted better and faster than I had. He was ready to announce our engagement and tell people about the baby too. I hadn't even had the guts to ask Eoin to go with me tomorrow. I'd waited for him to offer.

Now, I had a question to answer and absolutely no idea what to say.

"Hey, talk to me." Eoin's concern was written all over his face. "We don't have to do anything you don't want to do."

He meant it. I had no doubts about his sincerity. With the exception of me putting us in actual life-or-death danger, he always respected my choices, and I could excuse those prior moments of manhandling me without my consent since he'd done it to save our lives.

"I'm fine with telling your family that we're engaged. It's the pregnancy part I'm a little...leery of sharing." I sat back down across from him. "I just think that we might consider holding off until I'm a little farther along."

His finger traced a pattern on the back of my hand, and I had a feeling that he wasn't even truly aware of the movement, focused more instead on what I'd said. "Is something wrong? With the baby?"

"No," I assured him. "It's just...my mom had so many issues getting pregnant, staying pregnant...I just don't want to jinx it."

He came around the table and knelt in front of me, taking my hands in his. "Everything is going to be fine. I won't let anything happen to you or our baby."

I wanted to tell him that he didn't have control over enough of the world to make that type of promise, but I knew that he already understood that. He wasn't making that vow because he was naïve or a dreamer. He was making it because he was just as scared as I was.

"It's okay," he said. "We don't have to tell anyone that you're pregnant. I just thought that it would make sense when we told them about the engagement. Either way, people are going to think we're moving fast, but I thought it might make things easier." He kissed my hands. "We won't say anything you don't want to. We don't even have to tell anyone about being engaged. You can just be my girlfriend, and we stayed in L.A. because we wanted to spend our first Christmas here together."

He'd do it. He'd let me hide our engagement and our child, like I was ashamed of them both. And how long would the deception really last? Even if we got married tomorrow, people would still be able to do the math and figure out that the baby had come before the ring. It wasn't as if the two of us had even known each other long enough for anyone to speculate that we'd gotten engaged because it was the next logical step in our relationship.

I was scared that something would go wrong, and that came from my mother's medical history, but if I was being truly honest, if the conception had happened at a later point in my life, after a slightly longer relationship, I wouldn't have been leery of telling our families. I'd never had the health issues that my mom had always had from years of trying to stay thin enough for her career. I was also younger than she was when she'd started trying to get pregnant.

No, if I asked him to keep a secret like this from his family, I would be doing it for selfish reasons, concerned about what people would think about me and the choices I'd made in my life. They were going to be my family too, and I didn't want the first time I met them to be looked back on as me hiding things from them. I also didn't want Eoin to think that I was in any way ashamed of being with him. My own issues needed to take a back seat here.

Honestly, I was beginning to think that I should follow his lead in all of this. He clearly knew better than I did about what needed to be done or how to do it. I was in so far over my head that if I didn't take his hand, I'd drown.

"No," I said with a smile. "This isn't just about me. This is *our* engagement. *Our* baby. I want you to be able to tell who you want when you want."

"Are you sure?"

The joy I saw in his eyes told me that I'd made the right choice. After an awful year, he deserved to be able to share some good news with the people he loved. And unexpected as all of this had been, it was indeed good news.

THIRTY-ONE

EOIN

IF I DIDN'T QUIT SNEAKING LOOKS AT ALINE, SHE WAS GOING TO CATCH ME and want to know what the hell I was doing. Then I'd be put in the very awkward position of either lying to her and her figuring it out or telling the truth and pissing her off. Neither scenario ended well for me.

She'd agreed to tell my parents about our engagement and the baby, and I was going with her tomorrow to spend Christmas Day with her family. Both of those were things that I wanted, but I kept feeling like some other shoe was going to drop and ruin it. That she'd suddenly recognize the fact that she could do so much better than me and decide that, while she might want the baby, she didn't want me along with it. Or she'd think about how pissed Freedom was going to be when she saw me and realize I wasn't worth the headache.

Death wasn't the only thing that could take someone away.

So, I kept watching her, paying close attention to every expression, to every shift in body language.

I'd been worried at Martina's that I'd have to talk Aline into letting me carry everything, but she actually hadn't had that much stuff, so it'd been easy to take the heavier bag and leave her with the smaller bag that held her laptop and other electronic stuff.

When we picked up things from her parents' house tomorrow, I expected a little more push-back, and I definitely wasn't looking forward to what would happen when we went to Stanford to move everything from the apartment she

shared with Freedom. But that was the future, and I had enough to think about just for today and tomorrow.

On the way home, we picked up some Italian food from a restaurant run by Jehovah's Witnesses, who explained to us that since they didn't celebrate holidays, they made a killing staying open when everyone else was closed. They were reasonably priced, and the food was really good, so I didn't mind that they'd included a couple copies of *The Watchtower* in the bag with our food.

Now, as I finished cleaning up after our meal, Aline went to clean up and put on a nice sweater even though I'd told her that no one would care what she was wearing. I got it, though. I'd already planned on telling her to pick out my clothes for tomorrow because I wanted to make a good impression on her parents. Freedom already didn't like me, so I had that strike against me before we even got there. Who knew the shit she'd told them about me?

"How does this look?" Aline asked as she came into the kitchen.

A deep, festive green, her sweater was just clingy enough to show off her figure but not so tight that it was inappropriate for a family engagement. It made her eyes appear even greener, and as I stepped closer, I reached out to see if it was as soft as it looked. Sliding my arms around her waist, I found that it was even softer than I'd thought.

"You look amazing." I kissed her forehead. "We do these sorts of calls all the time, and the only thing we care about is that everyone's wearing pants."

She laughed, the sound edged with some nerves. "I shouldn't think that would be a difficult rule to follow."

"You'd be surprised," I said with a laugh of my own. "My little brother, Sean, was visiting his twin, Xander, in England a couple years ago for their birthday, and Xander was on a video call with me and Leo. Sean walked behind Xander, stark naked and scratching his b—"

I cut off the last word as heat flooded my face. Talking to my fiancée about my brother being naked was bad enough. I really didn't need to mention the whole ball scratching part of the story, especially if that meant she'd be thinking about his balls when she met him.

It took me a moment to realize that what I was feeling wasn't only jealousy, though that was bad enough. It was insecurity. A little voice in the back of my head wondering if Aline might find one of my brothers more attractive. Hell, it could be all of them. More than one person had commented over the years how unfair it was for one family to have so many good-looking people in it, and it wasn't an exaggeration.

"Why was your brother in England?" she asked. "Xander, I mean. I understand why Sean was there."

"Oh, he plays football there." When she gave me a confused look, I laughed. "Sorry. I forgot you're American. Xander plays soccer for the Tottenham Hotspurs."

"Aren't you American too?" Before I could respond, it looked like something clicked in her mind. "Wait, when you first spoke to me, I remember thinking that you had an accent. Very faint."

"I was born in Scotland. All of my full-biological siblings were. I was about five or so when we moved to the States, so I lost most of whatever accent I had. Alec's the only one that really kept it. When we get stressed or something like that, you can still hear it with certain words since we grew up hearing Da's accent."

I didn't need to add any more explanation about why she would've heard it in Iran. The situation wouldn't have been easy at any point in time, but the fact that it'd been the first time I'd been in a firefight since the ambush had amped it up even more.

"So, it's just the McCraes who are from Scotland?" she asked as we sat down in front of my laptop. "The rest are from America?"

"Yeah. Austin, Rome, Paris, and Aspen, they're the Carideos. They were all born in San Jose. Blaze, Fury, and Rose are Gracens, and they were born there too. All of us lived there for a few months right after Da and Theresa got married, then we all moved to San Ramon. That's where Sean, Xander, and London were born. After Mom's brother- and sister-in-law passed, the Gracens came to San Ramon to live with us too." I grinned at the expression on her face. "Don't worry, there's no test."

“I’m glad.” She waved a hand in front of her smiling face. “I’d need to study for a week to get all that.”

I glanced at the time. “Ready?”

She let out a long breath of air. “As I’ll ever be.”

I made the call and reached for her hand. She was a strong woman, but it’d been a rough couple of months, and the last thing she needed was my family overwhelming her.

Another reason why this introduction was better with video.

“Eoin!” Paris’s voice came through a moment before the screen focused on her. “Right on time too. We were betting whether...oh, hi.” Paris’s dark eyes went from me to Aline and then back to me. “Mom’s going to kick your ass for not telling her you have someone with you.”

Aline tensed, and I squeezed her hand. “It’s not how it sounds.” I glared at Paris even while trying to reassure Aline. “Paris doesn’t always think before she speaks.”

“Is that Eoin?” Mom appeared behind Paris, and her eyebrows shot up, emphasizing their common features. Mom’s hair was a dark reddish-brown to Paris’s pitch-black, but there was no mistaking the genetics there.

“Hey.” I waved with my free hand. “Can you get everyone together, so I don’t have to repeat introductions?”

“Mm-hm.” Mom stepped out of sight.

“Told you,” Paris said with a grin. Out of all of my siblings, she and I were the closest. Seven months older than me, the way our birthdays had fallen had put us in the same classes growing up. She’d never rebelled like I had, but she definitely hadn’t been quiet and compliant either.

I flipped her off, barely getting my hand out of sight before the screen filled with a dozen members of my family.

“Theresa said you have a surprise for us. I see she wasn’t exaggerating.” Da smiled at Aline. “Good evenin’. I’m Patrick, and I hope you won’t be holdin’ my son’s lack of manners against me.”

Aline laughed. While there was a nervous touch to the sound, she wasn't clinging as tightly to my hand as she had been, which was good, and probably what Da had intended.

"Good to meet you," she said.

"Let me get your names out of the way first," I said. "You already met Paris, Mom, and Da." I pointed to the tall one with the deep red hair pulled back in a ponytail. "That's Rose. She lives in Colorado." Sandy brown hair and blue-green eyes, my most easy-going brother had his arm on Rose's shoulder and a strange, serious expression on his face. "Brody's from San Ramon." Short raven-black hair and a serious expression was next. "Aspen lives there too." Only shorter than me by an inch, my L.A.-based stepbrother was next. "Rome. He lives in L.A."

Rome shot Aline a little salute. "Nice to meet you."

Aline waved. "Nice to meet you too."

I kept going. Slightly shorter but just as broad was the oldest of us all. "Alec, the old man of the bunch." It actually was a surprise to find him there since he was the biggest workaholic in the family, and that was saying something. I didn't mention that, though.

"Austin." The baby of the family had strawberry blonde hair, and like Aline, the sort of delicate appearance that made us all extremely overprotective. "London's an actress in New York." Next to her was one of the twins. They were identical, but I'd never had any problem telling them apart, even when they were together. "That's Sean." The musician was next with her honey-blond hair and ever-present smile. Except that smile didn't quite look like it was reaching her eyes. I'd have to ask about that later. "Maggie's the family musician." And then were the two whose names she knew, though she'd only seen one of them before. "That's Cory, and I'm guessing you already recognized Fury."

"She did?" Fury was understandably puzzled. "I'm sorry, I don't think I know you."

Aline shook her head. "I graduated from Stanford this past spring."

“Ah, that makes sense.” Fury turned all his attention to her, his dark eyes amused. “I’m guessing there’s a good story about how you went from Stanford to him.”

I interrupted before we could get into that minefield. “Everyone, this is Aline Mercier.” I held up her left hand. “My fiancée.”

Dead silence.

I took advantage of it to drop the second bomb so we could get it all over with at once.

“And we’re having a baby.”

Jaws dropped. The only ones who didn’t look like I’d hit them with a two by four were Austin and Fury. Well, them and my parents. They were surprised too, but they managed to control their expressions for the most part. They were also the first to recover. Austin and Fury were impossible to get reactions from.

“Congratulations.” Theresa’s voice was steady, and her smile was genuine, but her gaze kept darting over to me, and there were questions in her eyes.

“Aye, lad.” Da cleared his throat. “Bit of a surprise, but good news all the way ‘round.” He looked at Aline. “Welcome to the family, lass.”

“Thank you.” Her fingers had tightened on my hand.

“Damn, big brother.” Sean grinned at me. “How’d you manage to snag someone like her?”

“If I knew, little brother, I’d tell you.” I laughed. I should’ve known I could count on Sean to break the tension with some half-asshole comment. “Trust me, I know how lucky I am.”

“I’m just glad we’re finally getting some more women in the family,” Paris said. “Not that I thought it’d be you next. I mean, Alec was a bit of a surprise, but you...”

“Paris.” Mom’s tone held a warning we all recognized.

Paris grinned. “Come on, you can’t tell me you expected this.”

Mom gave Paris a look that silenced my slightly older sister before turning to Aline. “How are you feeling, dear?”

“Good.” Aline’s smile was a little stiff, but it wasn’t forced, just uncomfortable. “Some morning sickness, but not a lot.”

“That’s good,” Mom said. “Mine were all different. With Sean and Xander, it didn’t hit me until noon.” She reached over and tried to fix some of Sean’s hair, even though we all knew it was a losing battle. “Like clockwork with them.”

“Thanks for sharing that, Mom.” Sean rolled his eyes. “That’s exactly the sort of thing I want my future sister-in-law to know about me. Want to share about dirty diapers next?”

“Don’t tempt me, young man.”

Aline laughed quietly, and I wondered if it was the exchange between Mom and Sean, or her remembering what I’d told her about our family’s ‘must-wear-pants’ rule. Either way, it was a sound I liked hearing.

“Do you know when you’re due?” Rose asked.

Aline shook her head. “Not exactly. I think August, but I should know more once I see my doctor after the first of the year.”

I could see a couple of them doing the math, trying to figure out how far along she was. They could figure out a lot of things that way. Like when she and I had started sleeping together, which might lead them to asking about how we’d met.

I was pretty sure the reason no one had asked about how long we’d been dating was because they’d all realized that things were moving fast. After all, I’d been with them on Thanksgiving and hadn’t mentioned that I was dating anyone.

“Have you picked a date for the wedding?” Paris asked. Her face lit up. “Carson can totally design your dress! He’s amazing!”

“Carson?” Aline glanced at me, the question barely loud enough for me to hear.

“Cory’s twin,” I said. “He’s a designer in New York.”

“I’ve already told him that he’s designing mine, but that’ll be far, far in the future, if ever,” Paris continued. “He’d love to do yours, I’m sure. And he’d do it for a good price too.”

“Paris.” Maggie put her hand on Paris’s arm. “Let’s stick with Christmas and save the wedding planning collaboration for later, all right?”

For a moment, I thought I saw something strange on Maggie’s face, an emotion or something like that, but when I tried to focus on it, it was gone. I told myself to remember to come back to it later, ask one of the others if something was going on with her, but even if I forgot, I had complete faith that someone would figure it out. A family this big, secrets didn’t last for long.

“Sorry.” Paris grinned at Aline. “I can get carried away sometimes. Just ask your fiancé. I’m sure he can find some great stories to tell about the shit we used to get into growing up.”

“Language.” Mom said it with the same exasperated tone she always used when she wished we’d lay off the curses but wasn’t going to make a big deal about it.

That was how she’d always been. She didn’t like us swearing, but as long as it wasn’t directed at someone seriously or disrespectfully, she’d just give us that same warning. For her and Da, it’d always been about respect. The one time I’d really gotten my ass busted had been the only time in my life I’d called one of my sisters a bitch. I couldn’t remember which one or the circumstances, but I sure remembered the punishment.

Mom had arranged for me to spend two months cleaning kennels at a local animal shelter. She’d said I needed to learn what a real bitch was.

Since then, there’d only been one woman I’d ever used that word for, and that had been Alec’s ex-wife, Keli. There had been enough extenuating circumstances that if Mom had known about them, she probably would’ve said it herself.

“So, Aline, since my son is clearly neglecting the good manners he was taught as a child, how about you tell us a little about yourself?” The warmth

in Mom's voice was genuine, but so was the slight reprimand she directed specifically at me.

And it was all rightly on me. Aline may have been a little hesitant to talk about the pregnancy, but my family should've at least known about her. We might not have been dating long, but Alec had realized how important she was to me when I'd talked to him. The rest of them should've known it too.

"Um, well, I'm from L.A.," Aline began. "And, like I said, I graduated from Stanford. My sister did at the same time too. Her name's Freedom, and there's just the two of us and our parents."

Aline may have looked calm and composed, but my leg was pressed against hers, and I could feel her shaking. I didn't know if it was fear, anxiety, or just the result of adrenaline from working herself up, but she needed me to take over.

"Aline has a master's degree in elementary education," I said. "She plans to be a teacher."

"Master's?" Cory was clearly impressed. "You barely look old enough to have a Bachelor's."

"I know I look younger than that," Aline said with a laugh. "It's okay."

"She's a genius." I smiled at her, aware of the looks my family was shooting my way.

I hadn't smiled this much in a long time, and now they knew the reason why. It was her. After spending almost a full year spinning in circles, I had my focus again.

I had a future and a purpose.

THIRTY-TWO

ALINE

THE VIDEO CALL HAD BEEN...INTERESTING.

I'd enjoyed meeting Eoin's family, even though it had been a little overwhelming at first, but I'd still been relieved when it was over. I didn't regret the decisions I'd made, and I knew I'd absolutely love my in-laws, but everything had just been happening so fast. I needed the world to slow down a bit.

Fortunately, Eoin had arranged for something nice and relaxing for the rest of Christmas Eve: decorating the tree he'd had delivered, eating Christmas cookies, and watching a Christmas movie or two.

Perfect.

The tree was on the small side, barely reaching my shoulders even with the stand, but it was a freshly cut white pine with long, soft needles and just the right amount of scent. Since we didn't have a lot of ornaments, it hadn't made sense to get a big one. It wasn't much smaller than the ones Freedom and I had always gotten for our apartment, but a part of me was already looking ahead to the sorts of trees that the high ceilings here would be able to accommodate.

The slightly embarrassed expression on Eoin's face when he brought a box out of one of the closets brought me back to the present.

"Growing up, all of us had our own boxes of ornaments. Da and Ma had always bought us one every year before she passed. Mom had made ones for

her, her first husband, Marcus, and their kids. Blaze, Fury, and Rose brought their family ornaments with them when they moved in. Then we started our own family tradition of making ornaments for each other.” He opened the box. “By the time London was two or three, we had to start getting two trees, but we kept making them because, when each of us moves out, we get to take the box of our ornaments with us.”

“That’s wonderful,” I said, moving over to stand next to him.

“You might not think so when you see some of them,” he warned. “I’m not the most artistic person in the world.”

Someone else might’ve thought he was being flippant and didn’t care about the items in that box, but despite the short time we’d been together, I’d learned to read him better than that. He was trying to distance himself from something he was emotionally connected to because he was unsure as to what my response would be.

I hated that he thought I might be anything other than supportive, but I was starting to understand that he still saw himself as the screw-up bad boy he’d been as a teenager. A boy who knew his family would love him no matter what, but still didn’t believe that they liked him or were proud of him. And certainly a boy who could never be loved by anyone else.

I put my hand on his arm, surprised at the strength of the emotions that went through me, both at my realization and the physical contact. “Would you love our child any less if their first picture of you was a stickman with purple hair?”

He looked startled by the question and then laughed. “No, of course not.”

“What you have in there is no less precious because it might not be ‘perfect.’” I put the word in air quotes to ensure that he didn’t miss it. “They’re a part of you and your family that our child – our *family* – will use to build our own foundation, our own traditions. It’s a beautiful beginning to what will be a great life together.”

Every word I said solidified in my mind that accepting the proposal had been the right thing to do. And my little speech accomplished something else too. It revealed to me the not-so-secret truth that I’d been dancing around for a

while.

I might not have been ready to say *I love you* to him, but I had fallen in love. I didn't know when it'd happened, but it was there, big and bold. Something too large to be ignored, even if I'd wanted to.

That awareness clung to me as we went through his box of ornaments, and he shared stories about them, talking more than I'd heard him speak in one stretch at any other point in time. I didn't interrupt, though. I was usually the one with all the words, but I didn't mind being the listener today. I was eager to learn all I could about him.

Despite how uncomfortable I'd been a few times during the video call and the anxiety that had come before it, today had quickly become one of my favorite days. We ate the amazing cookies he'd brought home and laughed when the tree nearly fell because we'd put too many heavy ornaments on one side. Then we'd turned off all the lights except the ones on the tree and settled on the couch to watch *White Christmas*.

As the opening scene began, Eoin put his arm around my shoulders, and I leaned against him, loving the way we fit together so perfectly. I hadn't really thought about the way we must've looked together, him being so tall while I was barely average height. The sheer power in his body while I looked delicate enough for a strong breeze to knock me down.

Physicality wasn't the only difference between us either. We'd both come from hard-working, wealthy families, but that was where those similarities ended. He had a massive blended family, while mine was limited to my parents and sister. He'd gone into the army straight out of high school while I'd graduated young and entered college the following autumn.

We didn't make sense.

But I didn't care, and I hoped he didn't either. If the ring on my finger was any indication, he and I were on the same page, but a small part of me still wondered if our engagement had more to do with the baby than it did him actually wanting to marry me.

We had time, though. Just because we were expecting, engaged, and living together after knowing each other only for a little over a month didn't mean

our wedding needed to come as quickly as the rest had.

I pushed all those thoughts away. I wanted to enjoy our Christmas, and while part of that included the strange circumstances surrounding my relationship with Eoin, I didn't want every waking moment consumed by that particular situation. I wanted at least something that felt like it could be just a normal Christmas Eve with a guy I was dating.

Not that I had any clue what that would feel like.

Still, I focused my attention back on the film, determined to enjoy the simple act of watching a Christmas classic with my boyfriend. Fiancé.

Bing Crosby and Danny Kaye had just revealed their big surprise to their former commanding officer when Eoin's fingers began to lightly stroke my upper arm. It was an absent sort of touch, the kind that isn't really intended to seduce or arouse, but nonetheless, it left tendrils of heat on my skin, twisting coils of warmth low in my belly.

Desire gripped me with an intensity that startled me, though it shouldn't have. Nothing with Eoin had been expected, so there'd been no reason to assume that anything else would be. I might not have been at a place where I could admit to the seriousness of my feelings, but there was something I could do to show him how much I needed him.

Ignoring the final number playing out on the massive screen, I moved to straddle Eoin's lap. Surprise registered on his face, visible even in the dim light cast by the tree and the TV, but his hands automatically went to my hips, steadying me.

Before he could ask what I was doing, I covered his mouth with mine, pouring everything into the kiss. All the anxiety, the longing, the confusion, the gratitude. All the things that had been in my life from the moment we'd first met, the ways he made me feel. Because if all I'd had with him had been simple and good, it wouldn't have been real. Maybe some people could have an uncomplicated relationship, but I wasn't an uncomplicated person, and I didn't think he was either. Those complexities were what made us who we were, and they were what would make this work...or would break us.

I wasn't going to let myself go down that particular path, though. So even with the things that weren't exactly positive, I channeled them into the optimistic future I saw for us and our child. A future where *I love you* would be frequent and direct. One where it was spoken in words and not only in actions.

And even though words had always been essential for me, for right now, action would do.

I pulled at his shirt, craving the feel of his skin against mine, and he seemed to feel the same way as his hands slid up my torso, over my ribcage, taking my shirt with them. I made an annoyed noise as we separated long enough to get our shirts off, and the sound must have amused him because he was grinning at me before I started kissing him again. The fact that I could make such a serious man who'd had such a hard year happy enough to smile like that meant more to me than I'd realized it would.

His skin was hot under my palms, muscles tense, and I couldn't stop touching him. His hands were all over me, one fondling my breast over my bra, the other dropping to my butt to give it a squeeze. Fingers crept under the waistband of my jeans, pulling me closer, holding me in place to grind our bodies together. I was more than happy to assist him, the friction through our layers of clothes sending little jolts of pleasure through me. The feel of him hardening under me was as much a mental aphrodisiac as any of the physical contact.

"Damn." He groaned as his lips moved to my jaw. "Sweetheart. You're killing me here."

I dug my nails into his shoulders, the feel of his teeth nipping at my skin sending a shiver through me. "The feeling's..." I gasped "...mutual."

His mouth moved down my throat, sucking on my skin in such a way that I knew I should probably be concerned about him leaving marks, but all I could really think about was how good it felt to be with him, to lose myself in the sensations, in him.

"Need you so much." He pushed up my bra, fingers rolling my nipple, plucking it.

“Me too.” I shoved my hands between us, jerking at the button and zipper with an impatience that made Eoin chuckle, the vibration sending a new shiver through me.

“Get up.” He lifted me off his lap even as he said the words. Before I could take things the wrong way, he added, “You need to get those pants off.”

Right. My pants. Just having his pants off wasn’t going to do me much good if I stayed fully clothed.

In the time it took me to kick off my pants, he had his pushed down his thighs and his erection free. I didn’t bother with my underwear, not wanting to wait even a few seconds longer to have him inside me. I climbed back on his lap, using a hand on his shoulder to steady myself while the other pulled aside my panties.

“Easy, ea—”

I sank down on him in one continuous motion. It wasn’t fast, but I didn’t stop or slow down either. I just let him fill me, stretch me.

Complete me.

I let out a shaky moan, my head falling forward, and my eyes closing. Was it always this good? Would it continue to be this good? Every time? It didn’t seem possible.

“Fuck.” Eoin’s hands tightened convulsively on my hips. “Fuck. Aline. Sweetheart.”

His voice was gravelly, harsh, as if each word was ripped from somewhere deep inside him, and I had to open my eyes. I had to see his face. See if his feelings matched mine.

His eyes were a deep green now, darker than even the needles on our tree. They burned into mine, held my gaze. Neither of us looked away, not even once I began to move. Unfamiliar whimpering sounds fell from my mouth, and the muscles in my thighs burned as I found a rhythm that worked for us both. A roll of hips and shift of angle put the friction right where I needed it. My muscles tightening around his cock with each rise and fall made him groan, made him jerk with the sort of involuntary movements that came with

struggling self-control.

“Aline...sweetheart...fuck...sweetheart...” Eoin mumbled words over and over, some comprehensible, some not.

But I didn't need to know what each word was to understand what was happening between us. No matter how urgent, how needy we both were, we were making love.

THIRTY-THREE

ALINE

BEST. CHRISTMAS. EVER.

I woke up next to Eoin, my muscles pleasantly sore, and my stomach blessedly calm. A glance at the clock on Eoin's side of the bed told me it wasn't quite eight-thirty, which meant we had plenty of time for a slow morning. I was glad for that.

Eoin and I had decided to open our gifts for each other this morning – nothing big since neither of us had realized how our first Christmas together would go – and then head to my parents' place. The few hours between now and then would give me some time to prepare myself for what was coming. It also allowed me to enjoy the holiday morning with just the two of us. That wouldn't be something we'd experience again for quite a while.

I watched him sleep until my need for the bathroom superseded my desire to keep my eyes on him. When I came back into the bedroom, he was awake and waiting for me. We made love again before heading to the kitchen for breakfast, which we ate in the living room while we opened our gifts.

These were the memories I held onto as I dressed for the trip to my parents' place. I still wasn't sure how much I wanted to tell everyone today, but they needed to meet Eoin as, at the very least, my boyfriend. Mom and Dad had initially heard about him from Freedom the morning after Eoin and I had spent the night in their house, but I didn't know what else she'd told them after I'd left.

I supposed I'd be able to gauge their reaction when we walked in together and then determine from there how much to share. If I didn't need to do much damage control, I'd feel more comfortable giving them what would definitely be surprising news.

Movement in the mirror caught my attention, and I met Eoin's eyes in his reflection. I held up the necklace he had given me earlier today.

"Help me?"

As I pulled my hair aside, he smiled and came over. He had large hands, but his fingers were dexterous, and he easily fastened the necklace before placing a kiss on the back of my neck.

"I'm glad you like it." He moved my hair back over my shoulders, his touch lingering. "I've never bought jewelry for anyone but Mom before, and it's definitely not the same thing."

"No, it wouldn't be." I turned to face him. The expression on his face was that soft one I'd only seen a couple times before, and it'd only been when he'd told me something that I believed he didn't share with many people.

His fingers brushed against my cheek. "It looks good on you."

I raised up on my toes and kissed his cheek. "Maybe after we get home, I'll wear just it and my ring."

Heat filled his eyes instantly. "Maybe you could give me a little preview."

"I'd like that." Reluctantly, I stepped out of his arms. "But if we get distracted now, we'll end up being late to my parents' and then later getting back."

"Then let's get going."

I laughed and smoothed down my dress. "That sounds good to me."

WE'D BEEN AT MY PARENTS' house for a while, and things had been a little strained, but everyone had been polite so far. Mom and Dad had been

surprised that I'd brought Eoin, but the only slightly awkward thing either of them had said was when Dad had mentioned that they were glad to finally meet him. But then Mom had shifted the conversation to whether or not Eoin had any food allergies, and everything had gone fine from there.

Well, mostly fine.

Freedom might not have been outright rude to Eoin, but a coolness existed in my sister's attitude toward him, which meant that things were even more tense between us, but neither of us addressed the issue. I assumed her reason was the same as mine: not wanting to ruin the holiday for our parents, especially after the difficult year we'd had.

Much of the small talk had centered around Eoin's family, and since he had such a large one, my parents had been able to find enough questions to get us through the meal and to our gift exchange. I'd been pleased to find that Eoin had, unbeknownst to me, purchased gifts for both my parents and Freedom.

Since he hadn't known them well enough to have found anything personal, he'd gone with gift baskets with various coffees and teas with a few different types of chocolate and snacks. The fact that the one he'd given my parents contained delicacies my dad could still eat with his dietary restrictions had meant as much to me as the necklace around my neck.

Now that the gifts had all been opened, the five of us were sitting in the front room with the Christmas tree and all the decorations I'd grown up with. Eoin's arm was around my shoulders in a way that looked as casual as his tone, but he still felt stiff and unnatural in his dress slacks and shirt. The tension in him increased when Mom turned the discussion from Freedom's recent interactions with Dr. Ipres to something that none of us had talked about yet.

"Perhaps this should have been something that we said as soon as you arrived, but Gerard and I need to thank you for what you did for Aline." She glanced at Freedom, then at me, before turning back to Eoin. "The girls haven't given us many details because they're trying to protect us, but we know that the situation you put yourself into was a dangerous one. You and the other people in your group risked a lot to save our daughter, and we owe you far more thanks than we can ever say."

Eoin's scar stood out, a stark white against the flush of his cheeks. I was taken off-guard as much as he was, and it wasn't as if my parents were accusing him of something, but he clearly wasn't comfortable with their gratitude.

After a couple seconds of silence, he cleared his throat. "I really don't know how to respond to that. *You're welcome* seems corny, and not like it's enough because I got something out of it too." He glanced at me, our eyes locking for a single heated moment. "I'm thankful every day that I was on the team that went after her."

I leaned over and kissed his cheek. "I am too."

He moved his arm from around me to take my hand in his. I ignored Freedom's glare and focused my attention on our parents. This seemed like a good time to make our excuses and leave. My parents were happy, even if they weren't completely informed of what was going on between Eoin and me, and I was unsure that Freedom could keep quiet much longer. Her disapproval was like a palpable *thing* pushing at me.

"It's getting late," I said as I stood up. Our linked hands brought Eoin up too when he didn't let go. "I'm going to get some things from my room, and then we'll be leaving."

Both of my parents' expressions fell, but they quickly recovered. I didn't know if Eoin had even seen it.

"You're planning on continuing to stay with Martina then?" Mom asked, a forced brightness in her question.

I was just trying to decide the best way to answer the question when Freedom spoke up, and everything went to hell.

"We can pack your things in the car tonight, and then I'll pick you up at her place tomorrow morning for us to head back to Stanford. I was going to spend tomorrow here too, but it's been a while since you've been home, so we'll leave early."

Dammit.

“I’m not going back to Stanford,” I said, my grip on Eoin’s hand tightening. “I’ll be staying in L.A., and after the first of the year, I’ll start looking into the local school systems in the area.”

“Then why do you need your things if you’re going to be here?” Freedom practically demanded.

“I’m not staying *here*,” I said, fighting to keep my voice even. “I’m staying in L.A., not with Mom and Dad.”

My sister crossed her arms and narrowed her eyes. “I don’t want to live in L.A.”

“I’m not asking you to.”

This was not the way I’d wanted this visit to go, and I silently begged Freedom to just let things go, put off the discussion until the two of us could have a private conversation.

Instead, she let out the sort of exasperated sigh that one normally associated with children. “So, you’re just going to have some tiny room in Martina’s apartment?”

“No.”

“You’re going to get a place of your own?” She barked a bitter laugh. “You’ve never lived a day on your own.”

My control snapped. “I can take care of myself, but for your information, I won’t be alone. I’m living with Eoin.”

Double dammit.

THIRTY-FOUR

E O I N

THE MOMENT THE WORDS CAME OUT OF ALINE'S MOUTH, I COULD SEE THAT she wanted to take them back. Not because she regretted accepting my proposal or didn't want to live with me, but because blurting it out like that had been like dropping a bomb.

Now, we were just waiting for it to explode. I could read it on their faces. I read it on her face too. She realized the impact of what she'd done.

And then Freedom turned on me, her expression furious.

"What the *hell* did you do?!" She pointed at me, her clear blue eyes flashing. "How dare you take advantage of her when she was upset! Out on her own for the first time and vulner—"

"We're engaged," Aline cut her off, clearly deciding to get it all out now that things were in motion for a confrontation. "And I'm pregnant."

Freedom's jaw dropped, and her face went white.

Aline's jaw tightened. "So, back off."

"What?"

The word came out as a whisper, confirming for me that Aline had never spoken to Freedom that way before.

"Eoin is my fiancé and the father of my child." Aline squeezed my hand but didn't show any other sign of how difficult this was for her. "It seems like a

pretty good idea for us to live in the same house.”

“I-I don’t...” Paulette shook her head, but the stunned expression on her face was still there. “You’re pregnant?”

Aline gave her mom a small smile. “I am.”

I had a feeling it was more the smile than the words that broke through to Paulette, but no matter what it was, she rallied.

“And you’re engaged?” Paulette was smiling now. Not the same full kind of smile that she should’ve had when hearing this sort of news, but considering the circumstances, I couldn’t really blame her for not jumping for joy right away.

“I am.”

“Where’s your ring?” Freedom’s question was flat, without any inflection, as blank as her face and impossible for me to read.

I was about to answer that Aline had left the ring at home, but my fiancée reached into the little pocket at the front of her purse and pulled out her engagement ring.

The fact that she’d brought her ring with her made me absurdly happy.

“We hadn’t planned to make any announcements today,” Aline said as she slid her ring into place. “Everything’s still new.”

“New?” Freedom’s laugh was brittle. “You two have been together for, what, five weeks? Six?”

“It is a little sudden,” Gerard said. He gave me a hard look. “For all of it. Are you prepared for how this is going to change your life, young man?”

I understood the challenge, and I deserved the disbelief, but I wasn’t running from this. They needed to know from moment one that I would be there for Aline and our baby, no matter what.

“I am,” I said firmly. “I have a condo that’s big enough for a family, and I’m financially stable. I have a good job with great insurance that will cover Aline and the baby even before we get married. I will take care of my family.”

I didn't bother to explain that my job wasn't what gave me that financial security. I didn't want them thinking that I was some spoiled rich kid who'd never had to work a day in his life.

"You can't really be..." Freedom shook her head as she turned to her parents. "How can you let her do this?"

"I'm twenty-two years old," Aline said quietly. "I have a master's degree in an essential field. I have a wonderful fiancé with a good job and a beautiful place for us to live. We're going to make a home for our family here in L.A." She looked at her parents and then back at her seething sister. "We're going to pack some things and then be back down to say our goodbyes."

I kept my eyes on her as I followed her up the stairs. I doubted any of them were feeling friendly toward me at the moment, and I really didn't want to see whatever was written on their faces right now. I doubted I'd be able to stop myself from saying some things I'd regret. This wasn't how either of us had imagined things going today, and I had no doubt that Aline's mind was racing a hundred miles an hour.

I hadn't noticed much about her room the only other time I'd been here since I'd been more focused on taking her to bed. This time, I still didn't take it all in. I simply scanned the room for anything she might want to take. I was surprised at how much personal stuff was here.

My parents had kept our rooms pretty much the same so we could use them whenever we needed to, but with the exception of my siblings who didn't have a place of their own yet, those rooms felt more like really familiar guest rooms than 'ours.' Aline's room looked more like she'd been living in a dorm than having had an apartment of her own.

Well, not really her own since she'd moved into Freedom's place. Maybe that was why it looked like she still lived here too. I mean, her closet was at least a third full, and her dresser had cosmetics and other toiletries she might need.

"We both keep some stuff here so we don't need to take a lot of luggage back and forth every time we come home," Aline explained as she set a suitcase on the foot of the bed. "But since I'm living in L.A. now, coming to visit my parents won't involve an overnight stay, so I can take whatever I need and not worry about having to bring it back."

“I don’t want to go pawing through your underwear drawer, so why don’t you tell me what you want me to pack.” I went for a teasing tone, hoping to get a smile, and I did, but it didn’t reach her eyes.

Still, she tried to joke in return. “I’m pretty confident that you’ll end up seeing all of my underwear at some point, so I might as well get some use out of you.” She turned back to the closet. “Everything in the dresser should fit in there. I’ll put my dresses in a few garment bags and then get some things from the bathroom.”

I considered commenting that it was definitely a better idea for her to get the things from her bathroom because I’d clearly shown before that I couldn’t find the right door, but I didn’t think talking about the night Freedom had caught me in the hall was a good idea.

Instead, I just did as Aline asked and moved everything from the dresser to the suitcase. We moved quickly but didn’t rush. All in all, it took about fifteen minutes to get everything put together in such a way that the two of us could carry it all to the car in a single trip.

I could see her visibly bracing herself to go back downstairs, and I hated it, but I wasn’t going to make her feel like she needed me to rescue her. I would protect her from any danger, but if I acted as if she couldn’t even deal with her family, I’d be no better than they were, treating her like she was a child and not an adult having a child.

But if I had the slightest hint that she needed me to step in, I would. I wanted her family to like me – even Freedom – but that was secondary to taking care of Aline. She and the baby came before everything else. Everyone else could fuck off if they didn’t get that.

I followed her back down the stairs and offered her family goodbyes that were only a little stiffer than the ones she gave them. As we took everything out to the car, I found myself wishing there was a way I could redo the day, give her a great first Christmas instead of a good day that was ending in conflict.

Although, it wouldn’t be late by the time we got home, so maybe I could salvage something after all. Hot chocolate, leftover Christmas cookies, and another Christmas movie might be enough to push that brief blow up to the

back of her mind.

THIRTY-FIVE

ALINE

YESTERDAY COULD'VE GONE BETTER WAS MY FIRST THOUGHT UPON WAKING UP, but the second was right on its heels: *it could have been worse*.

I regretted having blurted out three big announcements like that, but I hadn't been able to take the condescending treatment anymore, especially when Freedom had gone from relatively passive to straight out aggressive.

Things should've gotten better during the time I'd been out on my own, but nothing seemed to have changed. If anything, Freedom was worse, and I didn't understand it. I felt like something must have been going on with her for her to behave this way, but I simply didn't have the energy to add her issues to my plate right now.

Perhaps it was selfish of me to not inquire about my sister's life, but pursuing something she was allowing to affect her to such a great extent was, in my opinion, a straight shot to overwhelming stress for me. If she wanted to reach out with an apology and explanation, I wouldn't turn her away, but my baby's health was directly related to my own well-being, and that came first.

I refused to dwell on that part of yesterday, though. I preferred to think about the good parts. The morning hours before we'd gone to my parents' house. The stilted but not unfriendly meal and gift giving with the family. Then skipping over the unpleasantness to when Eoin and I had arrived back at the condo, and we'd had hot chocolate and watched *A Christmas Story*. We hadn't even unpacked any of the things I'd taken from my old room. Doing everything at once today seemed like a better idea.

Assuming that, since I wouldn't be returning to Stanford with her, Freedom wouldn't be returning to Stanford until later this week, spending today with Mom and Dad, helping them take down the tree and any decorations that they couldn't do by themselves. I experienced a small pang of guilt for not being there, but I didn't think I was wrong in thinking that the tension between Freedom and I would make the experience more stressful for them than if I wasn't there at all.

Besides, the longer it took me to retrieve my things from the Stanford apartment, the more my family would think this was some sort of childish rebellion that would eventually fade rather than a rational adult decision that I intended to follow through. On a personal level, this would help me settle in at Eoin's place.

Our place.

Home.

I needed to start thinking of it that way. After all, I wasn't a girlfriend moving in with a guy she barely knew after not even having a toothbrush at his bachelor pad. I was a pregnant fiancée making a home in a place that had been purchased for our family.

"Are you sure you don't want to stay the night up here and drive back tomorrow?" Eoin asked as we pulled into the apartment parking lot. "We could get a hotel room or stay with someone in my family. I have a few options there."

I shook my head. "If we drive back tonight and get in late, you can figure out the best sleep schedule for you to be on for the weekend, but if we drive back tomorrow and run into traffic, you could be exhausted going into a late shift, and that's the last thing I want or you need."

"I could call Cain, tell him that something came up. One of the other guys could cover it."

I didn't doubt for a minute that Eoin would do it if I gave even so much as the slightest hint that I wanted him to, but I also knew that he would hate doing it. It wasn't about needing the money. No, he never wanted to let anyone down, that much had always been clear to me, and with him wanting

to go with me to doctor's appointments, he would feel guilty for requesting time off right now when it wasn't really necessary, especially since he was the newest member of the team.

"No." I reached over and gave his hand a squeeze. "Your work is important. Save the time off for our ultrasound appointments."

He raised my hand and kissed it before getting out of the truck. "That sounds good to me."

While we hadn't specifically discussed finances, I'd pieced together enough to know that we could live well for quite a while without either of us working, even after the leftover money from my trust was spent. My understanding was that Eoin not only had a trust similar to mine, he also had accumulated significant savings from his years in the military and had invested well.

On top of all that, he also had income from shares in a successful family business. Like me, however, he wasn't content to sit back and do nothing, not even after he'd sacrificed so much for this country. He wanted to work, to contribute to society.

And maybe prove to people he had a worth he didn't quite believe in himself. Something else to which I could relate, despite both of us having grown up in good, loving – albeit imperfect – families.

With how the last couple months had gone, a part of me was a little nervous when I unlocked the door to the apartment. I honestly wouldn't have been surprised to find Freedom waiting, ready to give a lecture while we packed my things. To my relief, she wasn't there.

Relief, however, wasn't the only thing I felt as I led Eoin back to my bedroom. I had some guilt too. I hadn't told Freedom that I was coming today. I planned to leave her a note, but she would still come home to my things being gone.

"Are you sure we don't need help?" Eoin asked.

"We'll be fine," I said, going straight to my closet for the rest of my luggage and the three totes I used to keep my off-season clothes. "Freedom furnished the apartment before I started at Stanford, so the large items are all hers." I

looked at him as something occurred to me. “Did you want to take some of the appliances or furniture? Electronics?”

“No, that’s not what I meant.” He went to my dresser and picked up a cedar music box. “Once we get your things settled at home with mine, we can go buy whatever else we need.”

“So we’ll have yours, mine, and ours?” I laughed, and so did he.

“I hadn’t thought of it like that, but yeah, I guess that’s what it would be.” He set the box down. “I just want you to have whatever you need to feel comfortable.”

I moved over to wrap my arms around his neck. “You and the baby are my home. Other stuff is just icing on the cake.”

He pulled me tight against him, his big hands curling around my hips so that his fingers were on my butt. “Now, I think we may need to get some icing on our way home.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Are you hungry for cake? I thought I was the one who was supposed to have cravings.”

He gave me a heated look that made things low in my stomach clench. “It’s not cake I want to eat icing off of.”

I let out a shuddering breath. “Then I guess we better get started. With you working the next three nights, sexy time is going to be limited.”

He burst out laughing. ““Sexy time?””

I grinned at him. “It sounded good in my head.”

“I’m sure it did.” He then proceeded to kiss me breathless before releasing me and insisting that we hurry up because he had a very specific flavor of icing in mind.

I WAS BEGINNING to think that my life would never feel real again. Normal hadn’t really ever been something I’d experienced, but my world had

always been solid. Dependable. Not average or boring, but logical, even when things were out of the ordinary.

Going to Iran with Neutral Ground had been a new experience for me, but it had been thought-out, planned. It wasn't until I'd been kidnapped that everything had begun to take on this strange hazy feeling, as if I was locked in a dream from which I couldn't wake, and it hadn't gone away even after I'd been rescued.

In the time since then, when I'd been staying with Mom and Dad, or even at Martina's, the situation hadn't been something I'd intended to be permanent. I hadn't settled in because neither place was really home. The problem had been that, until Freedom had learned about Eoin and me, I hadn't realized that the apartment in Stanford hadn't ever truly been my home either. I may have referred to it that way, but only in the same sort of sense that a college student would talk about their dormitory.

None of the places I'd lived had been mine in any adult sense. They had belonged to others who'd brought me in at different points in my life. Anything that I might have wanted to contribute had always needed to coincide with someone else's wants or needs. Someone else had always arranged the furniture, chosen what they thought was best in everything from my bed to the type of toilet paper in the bathroom. I bought my own toiletries, but the color of the towels had already been chosen before I'd arrived.

Despite Eoin having purchased the condo prior to our engagement, it still hadn't acquired that 'lived-in' look. He'd brought in his own things from the life he'd had before, and he'd arranged the basics in a few rooms, but he'd made sure I understood that he saw this as our home that we were creating together for our family. I could change things around, replace things, and it would always be about us.

With him having been gone overnight Friday night, Saturday night, and last night, there had been a lot that I'd been doing on my own, but that had honestly helped me feel more like this place belonged to both of us. Yesterday, over dinner, he'd told me that he wanted to put my name on the deed and merge our bank accounts. I knew there were women who – with good reason – needed to keep separate finances, but since neither Eoin nor I

had any need to be wary of the other having a financial motivation for marriage, I took it for what it was, a way for us to have an equal partnership.

So even though the world still felt a little unreal, I was happy.

Freshly showered after handling the sweaty business of putting the last of my books into the library – with plenty of room left over for additional books – I went into the kitchen to find Eoin rummaging through the cabinets.

“You’re up early.”

“The best way for me to get back in a regular sleep schedule is to get just a few hours and then get up to have as normal a schedule as I can for the rest of the day.” He turned around with a triumphant expression on his face. When he held up the can of ravioli, I cringed.

“Please tell me you’re not going to eat that.”

He kissed the can. “Of course I am. Want some?”

The expression I made must’ve spoken for me because he laughed before asking, “The smell won’t make you nauseous, will it?”

I shook my head. “Just the taste, and that has nothing to do with being pregnant.”

“Your loss.” He opened a couple cabinets before he found what he was looking for and then dumped the canned food into the bowl. “I thought we could go crib shopping this evening or tomorrow morning so I can put it together on New Year’s Day. I don’t have any jobs on the schedule until next week when we’re doing some PI work for a woman who thinks her husband is messing around with her best friend.”

“I thought you guys were a security firm.” I made myself a cup of tea.

“We are,” he said, “but Cain takes on some investigation type cases where it might not be safe for a civilian PI. Like a child custody case where a spouse might try to grab their kid or an abusive ex who might try to intimidate a PI.”

The interesting image that came to mind at his words made me laugh. When he gave me a confused look, I explained, “I’m trying to picture the sort of arrogant, misogynistic bully who beats their spouse thinking they’ll scare off

a PI, and then they see you guys. I mean, you are an intimidating group of men.”

Eoin laughed. “I guess we are. Well, except Bruce. You have to admit, he looks like he should be hanging out on the beach or something.”

“You’re not wrong.”

As he sat down at the kitchen counter, he asked if I was going to have any lunch. I grabbed a bag of dried fruit and held it up.

“Really? And you’re making fun of what I’m eating?”

I opened the bag and sat down next to him. “You’re eating dinosaur-shaped pasta in a can.”

“If you’d ever eaten army food, you’d appreciate fine cuisine.”

I shook my head, laughing. If anyone would’ve told me that the intense, grumpy man who’d literally thrown me over his shoulder would be joking around with me while eating kid food, I would’ve said they were nuts.

“What do you think about crib shopping today or tomorrow?” Eoin went back to the previous subject. “Or did you have something else in mind that you wanted to do?”

“No, that sounds good,” I said. “I’ve actually been getting a little antsy, not having anywhere to go.” I picked out an apricot and popped it into my mouth. “I’ve never been very good at staying still, but since what happened...” My voice trailed off.

“It takes you right back,” he finished, his expression serious again. “Makes you feel like you’re trapped all over again.”

I nodded and pulled out another piece of fruit. “I think that was a lot of the real reason I worked with Martina, so I could remind myself that I could be out and about, that I had a place to be.”

“We need to get you a car,” Eoin said. “Maybe we should look for one of those while we’re out crib shopping. Any idea of what you’d like?”

I sighed and shook my head. “No clue. I don’t know very much about them.”

“Well, what were the things you and Freedom talked about wanting in a car?”

I made a half snorting sound that was half-amusement, half-exasperation. “You think she actually asked my opinion on what kind of car to get?”

“How about this,” he said, “we go crib shopping tomorrow morning, then do a little online car shopping in the afternoon so we can narrow down what you like. Since you’re not on any sort of timetable, we can make sure you get what you really want.”

“That sounds good,” I said. “But I would like to get one fairly soon so I can give schools a definite date of when I can start.”

He blinked, visibly caught off-guard. “Wait, what?”

“Oh, not full-time teaching,” I hurried to explain. “I’m going to start out as a substitute for several different school systems during the spring semester. I figure that will help me figure out whether or not I want to continue subbing in the fall or look for a full-time position. Of course, the baby’s due date and any restrictions Dr. Rhimes gives will influence my decision too.”

“I hadn’t realized you were still thinking about teaching.” Eoin frowned as he put down his spoon. “I mean, now that you’re pregnant and don’t have to worry about where to live or anything like that.”

I gave him a strange look. “It’s because I’m having a baby that I want to sub now so that, by the time the baby’s born, I’ll have a good idea of where I want to work after, even if I don’t know yet if I’ll want to stay home for a bit.”

“That makes sense.” He didn’t look happy about it, but he wasn’t arguing. “I don’t know much about the different districts, but it sounds like something we can research online.”

I nodded. “That’s what I was thinking too. I want to do some cross-referencing, look for the ones in the lowest-income districts that also have the most troubled students. See where I can do the most good.”

Eoin went very still, and his face went blank. When he spoke, he was more careful than I’d ever heard him. “You’re looking for what?”

“I want to go somewhere I can make a difference,” I explained, thrown off by his reaction to what I’d thought was a good plan.

“You’ll make a difference no matter where you go,” he said. “You’re going to be an amazing teacher, whether you’re there for a day or a year.”

“Thank you.” I smiled, but now we had a tension between us that hadn’t existed a few minutes ago. “When I did my student teaching, I was at this amazing elementary school that had small class numbers and more resources than it knew what to do with. The salaries there were great too.”

He scratched at the stubble on his chin. “If you want to go back to a school near Stanford, we can figure something out.”

“No, that’s not what I’m saying.” I struggled to find the words to express what I’d felt that semester. “A school like that will get the best teachers because they can afford to be competitive in ways schools in poorer neighborhoods can’t. But money isn’t something I need to worry about, so I can afford to work for much less, go to places that couldn’t normally pay for someone with my credentials.”

I felt like such a snob saying it that way because I firmly believed that plenty of quality teachers came from public colleges, and I also believed that not all intelligence could be measured by IQ, but I knew that I was smart. Literally a genius according to standardized testing. I didn’t think it would be bragging to say that I’d be an asset to any faculty.

“That’s true,” he said. “But when you were thinking of all that, you weren’t pregnant. You can’t seriously be thinking of working in some school with metal detectors and gang members.”

“You’d rather I teach at a school with a nice library and good tech? Great sports programs?” I tried not to let my annoyance seep into my words, but I didn’t think I succeeded.

“Yes!” he snapped.

“You mean a school like Columbine in Colorado?” I countered, my own temper rising. “Or Sandy Hook? Don’t you think I know that being a teacher doesn’t automatically mean I’ll be safe? If I’m going to be in danger no matter where I go, why not be with kids who society has written off? Kids

who, despite the statistics regarding mass shootings proving that they generally *don't* take place in those 'bad' schools, are generally given the dregs of educators?"

"Do you even hear yourself?" He pushed to his feet, something dark on his face. "After what happened in Iran, how can you even think about putting yourself in that kind of situation again? Are you just looking for trouble?"

I stood up too. He was still much taller but being on my feet made me feel like we were a little more on even footing.

"I'm fully capable of deciding what I want to do with my life, Eoin." I crossed my arms. "I would've thought Christmas with my family had driven that point home."

"This is different."

"You're right," I agreed. "Because you're not my parent, so stop treating me like a child."

He threw up his hands. "You're damn right I'm not your parent because I never would've let you do something as fucking crazy as going to a war zone on some fucking crusade!"

Everything inside me went cold.

"*Let me,*" I echoed his words and then nodded. All right then. "Fuck you, Eoin McCrae."

Without another word, I walked out.

THIRTY-SIX

EOIN

WHAT THE HELL JUST HAPPENED?

We'd been getting along great since the engagement, even after that rough patch on Christmas Day. I'd half-expected her to backpedal on getting married since her family seemed to think it was a bad idea, but she'd stood her ground.

I doubted her parents would be upset for long. Their baby was getting married and was pregnant with their first grandchild. They were concerned, not idiots. They'd come around before the wedding. Or the birth. Aline and I hadn't set a date yet.

Except now I wondered if we'd be doing any wedding planning at all.

I'd simply been trying to explain to her why her plans for teaching at schools in bad neighborhoods wasn't a good idea for a pregnant woman, and she'd flipped out on me. I'd already expected there'd be hormone issues that made her act emotionally or irrationally, but I hadn't expected this.

I winced as I finished that last thought. Mom and my sisters would kick my ass if they ever heard me refer to a woman as emotional or irrational because of hormones.

And maybe that hadn't been the reason at all. After all, Aline had gotten into my face in Iran when she'd realized I planned to leave the other hostages. Actually, now that I thought about it, she'd never really had any problems making her opinions known to me.

I just couldn't understand why she'd want to do something that risky. Going to Iran had been crazy, but at least it'd only been her at risk. Now she was pregnant. Couldn't she see how dangerous the world was? How many things I had to protect her and our baby from?

I'd thought I'd been getting through to her, convincing her that she could find much safer places to work, and then she'd mentioned the school shootings that had been happening for more than twenty years. One more thing to worry about. One more way to have her and the baby taken from me.

I'd been in elementary school when the Columbine shooting occurred, but my older siblings had been in junior high and high school, old enough that it'd been all they'd talked about for days. There had been more since then. Little kids too. Teachers. Some bad enough that I'd heard about them in war zones.

My chest tightened, and my vision narrowed. Every picture and news story I'd seen, even ones I hadn't realized I could remember, came flooding into my mind, tangling up with everything else.

Kids running out of their school with their hands in the air. Flags being lowered to half-mast. Crime scene tape around a parking lot. Police cars with lights flashing and a parade of names and faces. The sound of gunfire and the smell of dirt and death.

It occurred to me that I needed to sit down, but then I realized I already was sitting. I didn't remember doing it. I closed my eyes and put my head in my hands, focusing on breathing, focused on keeping my panic attack from becoming a full-blown PTSD flashback.

When this happened before, I'd think about Aline, and her face and smile grounded me, but thinking about her now just brought up all the fears of what could happen to her.

A knock on the door made me jump, but at least I recognized the sound for what it was and not as an explosion or gunshot. Knowing that I hadn't completely disappeared from reality help me steady myself enough to get up and go to the door. Part of me wondered if it was Aline. If she'd forgotten her keys, she'd have to knock or ring the doorbell.

It wasn't Aline, though. It was a young guy in a brown uniform. "Eoin McCrae?"

He massacred the pronunciation of my name, but I didn't bother to correct him. No one who ever saw it said it right the first time.

"That's me."

He handed over the package, his gaze fixed on my face. He was still staring when I turned around and closed the door. I figured my rudeness balanced out his.

I went to toss the box on the counter, not really caring what was inside, but then I saw the return address.

Israel McCormack.

Leo's dad had sent me something.

If anything was going to get my mind off of the shit that'd just happened, it'd be something from Israel and Nana Naz. Sure, it'd make me think about Leo, but I'd take that over my head spinning out over Aline walking out.

Another box was inside the plain cardboard box, but on this one was a card with my name on it. In Leo's handwriting. When I flipped it over to open it, my fingers were shaking. A different hand had written a brief message on the back of the envelope.

I found this in the last box of Leo's things. I don't know what's in the box or in the card, but I think it was a birthday present. It's a little late for that, but that's not important. I know this year hasn't been a good one, but I hope that this will bring some form of closure so you can go into the new year with hope and a new outlook. Love you, son.

I swallowed hard, but the lump in my throat didn't go away. A part of me wanted to put the card away, unopened, put the box in a closet, and pretend that I hadn't gotten it. Not that I'd be able to pretend that Leo was still alive, but Israel had talked about closure, and that wasn't something I felt like I wanted.

Or deserved.

But I opened the card, anyway.

It was a birthday card with the sort of corny joke that Leo had always loved. And there, right under the punch line, was a message from my best friend.

Creeping up on thirty now, old man. Hard to believe we've been friends for more than two decades. Here's hoping for a few more, brother.

“Fuck.” The word cracked as I said it.

I sat down before reaching for my gift. My pulse pounded as if I was running a marathon, but I wasn't going to back off now. I forced myself to take off the wrapping paper and then opened the box. I braced myself for what was inside, but there was no way I could've prepared myself for this.

It was a book.

Not a big one. Probably the size of one of those little kid books Evanne had had five years ago, but the picture on the front wasn't some Dr. Seuss craziness or whatever.

It was a picture of my mom and me on the day I'd been born.

I opened it and found another note from Leo inside.

I know you don't remember your mom, so I put together some memories for you.

Each page had a memory from someone in my family. Alec. Brody. The twins. Extended family from back in Scotland who I hadn't seen in years.

On the last page was a picture of me with both of my parents and a memory from Da that I'd never heard before.

I don't share this with many people, but my late wife, she had a touch of the sight. The night before Eoin was born, Shannon had a dream that he would be a great man. A brave man who would sacrifice everything for the people he loved, but also a man who would take every loss to heart. A man who would fight and love with everything that was in him. I never told him any of this, didn't want to put any pressure on him, and maybe that had been the wrong thing to do, but without even knowing, he's become the man his mother always knew he would be. A man we are both proud to call our son.

Shit.

I rubbed my cheeks, hardly aware that I'd been crying. I would've had to be a cold-hearted bastard to not shed tears over that. I wasn't mad at Da for not telling me this years ago...I wouldn't have gotten it before. Now, for the first time in my life, I understood what it meant to hear the right thing at the right time to get the needed revelation in time to fix a mistake before it became the worst moment of my life.

I'd done it again. Now, however, I needed to not only apologize to Aline but actually talk to her about the why behind my behavior. I'd admitted it to myself but hadn't wanted to say it to anyone else. Hadn't wanted to admit that I was fucking terrified, and my way of dealing with it was to overreact. That I felt like I had to carry all of that weight on just my shoulders instead of asking for help.

Instead of treating her like the equal partner she was supposed to be.

I just hoped she'd actually answer my call.

THIRTY-SEVEN

ALINE

WHILE I MIGHT'VE THOUGHT SNOW AT CHRISTMAS WOULD BE NICE EVERY once in a while, right now, I was glad for the warmer December weather that L.A. offered because it meant I could walk wherever I was going. I didn't have a specific place in mind. I just needed to be away from Eoin.

And I needed to talk to someone.

Tears burned my eyes.

No, not someone. I needed my sister.

I knew she'd probably say, "I told you so," but I also knew that she'd come. It wouldn't matter where she was or what she was doing. If I needed her, she'd drop everything to help me.

When I looked up and saw a café, I decided that was where I would wait. I got myself a decaf latte and then texted Freedom, praying that she hadn't gone back to Stanford yet. She answered a moment later, saying she'd be here in fifteen minutes. I closed my eyes and let myself feel the relief that I wouldn't be alone much longer.

I sipped at my drink, more to look like I was doing something than any real desire for it. Not that it wasn't delicious, because it was. I just didn't want anyone coming over to talk to me. Maybe, if I stared at the dark liquid long enough, I could turn my brain off. Hypnotize myself or something.

"Aline?"

I raised my head to see Freedom standing on the other side of the table, concern clear and sharp on her face.

“What’s wrong?” She sat down and reached out her hand to take mine.

I pressed my lips together and shook my head. I’d wanted her here to talk to her, but now that she was right in front of me, the words seemed to stick in my throat.

“Dammit, Aline. What happened?” She squeezed my hand. “Did you...did you lose the baby?”

The question startled my tongue loose. “What? No. No, that’s...no, I’m fine. The baby’s fine.” At least I hoped it was. I didn’t feel like anything physical was wrong.

“Did something happen with Eoin?”

After the question, I waited for her to tell me how she’d been right all along, that I’d been irresponsible and lacked good judgment. That I couldn’t handle the real world.

But she didn’t say anything like that. Instead, she just repeated the question, and the floodgates opened, words pouring out before I really thought about any of them.

“Everything’s just happening so fast, and I thought I could handle it, but now, I’m thinking that I can’t because absolutely no one in my life thinks I know what I’m doing or can take care of myself. I mean, I understand why it’s hard for you and Mom and Dad to see that I’m grown up since it’s not like I had a normal childhood and adolescence so you had to take care of me during times when most people would’ve been on their own, but I really thought Eoin saw me the way I saw myself. Capable and smart and independent and...” I shook my head and pulled back my hand to twist my fingers together. “But he doesn’t.”

“That’s not how it sounded last week.”

I shook my head again. “I told him that I wanted to look into doing some substitute work at some low-income schools, and he just started arguing with me, saying that I’d be putting myself and the baby at risk, just like I’d put

myself in danger by going to Iran. I told him that he wasn't my parent, and he said that if he had been, he wouldn't have let me go at all."

Freedom winced. "Let you?"

I nodded.

"That was stupid."

I frowned at her. "But you were right. All of you were right. I don't know what I'm doing. I was stupid to believe that I could make this work with someone I clearly don't know as well as I thought I did. How could I be that dumb? So completely wrong about the type of man—"

"Stop." Freedom's voice was gentle, and when I looked at her, I was startled to see that she had tears in her eyes. "Please, Aline, stop. You're not stupid."

I shook my head, wanting to argue, but she didn't let me.

"I'm so sorry I ever made you feel that way." She grabbed a napkin and dabbed at her eyes. "I'm especially sorry for how I behaved on Christmas. How I went after Eoin when I heard you were pregnant."

"But you weren't—"

"I was taking out my own issues on him," Freedom said. Her voice was firm again. "I had a pregnancy scare a few years ago."

My jaw dropped. I hadn't known.

"My freshman year, there was this guy named Jack Graves. Pre-law and a junior. We started dating, and I thought things were getting serious. I wanted him to come home to meet the family on Christmas, but he thought it was too soon."

I could see the pain on her face, and my fury toward this man I didn't know pushed back my own feelings. I wanted to tell her that she didn't need to talk about him if it hurt so much, but I knew that she must've had a reason, and if this might help heal our relationship, I'd listen. I'd been a fool to wait so long, to let things fester rather than forcing the issue.

“A couple days after I got back from break, I realized I’d missed my period, and when I told Jack, he freaked out. Said that I was trying to trick him into something more serious. He even insinuated that I’d been sleeping with someone else, and if I was pregnant, it wasn’t even his. I wasn’t pregnant, but that was it for Jack and me.”

I reached for her hand. “I’m sorry.”

She gave me a weak smile. “Thank you, but that’s not why I’m telling you this. I’m telling you because I’d thought I’d moved past it, but in the last few days, I’ve come to see that what happened with Jack really messed with my head.”

“Well, yes, it would,” I agreed.

“You don’t understand. I was *jealous*, Aline,” Freedom said. “Jealous that this man who you’d had a fling with, after learning that you were pregnant, proposed and wanted to make a life and family, while the man I’d been dating for months had cheated on me and accused me of trying to trick him.”

Suddenly, I saw Christmas in a whole new light. Heard the things she’d said with this new information in mind.

“Eoin’s lost people close to him.” The soft tone surprised me almost as much as what she said. “Maybe it’s fear of losing more people he loves that has him pushing so hard to protect you.”

I didn’t know what to say. The last thing I’d expected when I’d called her was for her to *defend* him.

“What’s going on with you? You’re not acting like yourself.”

Freedom’s laugh had an edge to it. “I know. And there’s a lot more we should talk about, but I need to know something first.” Her expression was serious as she locked eyes with me. “Do you love him?”

That was a question I hadn’t really let myself think about, which was pretty foolish considering the ring I was wearing.

“Put aside all the crazy. The way you met, the baby. If you had just gotten to know him as a man, as Eoin McCrae, would you want to be engaged to him?”

Make a life with him?” Her gaze practically bore a hole into me as she asked a second time, “Do you love him?”

Maybe the reason I’d never asked was because I’d known I wouldn’t even have to think about the answer. It’d just be right there, ready to come out.

“I do.”

She smiled. “Good. Now, stop running away. Go back home and talk to your fiancé. Don’t let him get away because you’re too scared or too proud to make him talk about his baggage.”

I leaned back in my chair. “I really didn’t see this coming when I called you.”

This laugh was far lighter than the one before. “I’ve had an eye-opening last few days.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Really?”

“Let’s just say that you’re not the only Mercier woman who prefers to leave instead of dealing with things that are tough.”

I was beyond stunned. “I’m an awful sister. How did I not know you were going through something so terrible?”

She pointed a finger at me. “No. Don’t do that. This isn’t about my shit, okay? I want to tell you everything, but right now, you need to talk to Eoin before this thing is beyond fixing.”

She was right.

I should have stayed and told him how it made me feel when he questioned my choices. Asked him what was at the root of what he was saying rather than making assumptions. Face my own fears that, deep down, I really couldn’t do this, and make myself vulnerable so that he would do the same in turn.

“Do you need me to drive you back to your place?” Freedom asked.

I shook my head. “I’m not far, and the walk will give me a few minutes to get my head on straight.”

“Good idea.” She got up and leaned over to kiss my cheek. “Give me a call later, and we’ll set up a time for us to have a long talk about a lot of things.”

I stood up and grabbed her in a hug. “I’d like that. I’ve missed you.”

In a voice thick with emotions, she whispered in my ear, “I’ve missed you too.”

THIRTY-EIGHT

EOIN

I'D JUST BEEN READY TO CALL ALINE WHEN A TEXT CAME THROUGH THAT SHE was coming back and we needed to talk. I went back and forth between anxiety and relief while I waited for her. We couldn't keep doing this.

Our lives were linked, and we didn't have the luxury of waiting until we had our shit figured out before deciding to start a family. The baby was on the way, and no matter what she and I disagreed about, I had no doubt that we were on the same page when it came to being the best parents we could be. To do that, we needed to work this out sooner rather than later.

Since I didn't know if Aline had her key, I unlocked the door and then spent the next fifteen minutes or so pacing from one end of the living room to the other and back again.

When she came in, I wanted to just blurt out an apology and explanation, but I also didn't want to come on too strong. How the fuck did people do this? How did they know what to say or how to say it? I didn't know the answers, and I hated how unfair it was to Aline that she'd gotten knocked up by someone who was so completely ignorant when it came to knowing how to have a real relationship.

"Let's get something to drink and get comfortable," she said, her voice much calmer than it had been when she'd left.

I hoped that wasn't because she'd decided it was too much and she was done with me.

“All right,” I agreed. “I’ll get you something. Juice?”

“Water’s fine.”

When I came back with ice water for her and a sports drink for me, she was already seated on the couch. Since she was at one end, I sat at the other, leaving space between us that could be crossed if she wanted me to.

“I’m sorry,” I said before she could speak. “And I’m not going to just leave it at that. You deserve to know why I freaked out, because it’s something that I’m going to need your help to get through.”

“All right,” she said, her attention focused on her drink. “I have some things I need to apologize for too. Do you want to go first?” She glanced at my face. “I don’t really know how this is supposed to go.”

“Me either.” I laughed, feeling a bit better at her admission. “I’ll go first and save us from trying to figure it out.”

“I’ll go first next time then.”

A hint of a smile played around her lips, and that gave me the hope I needed to rip off the band-aid.

“I’m scared.” I took a deep breath and pushed on. “I lost my mom when I was really young, and it fucked with my head. I acted out a lot, to the point that Da threatened to cut me off completely. If it hadn’t been for Leo convincing me to enlist with him, I don’t know that I ever would’ve straightened out.” It was easier to say his name than I’d thought it would be. “It was tough when soldiers I knew died, but it was different when we were ambushed. There was this kid, barely out of basic, and he was just gone. This other guy, he’d been pinned...” I shook my head. “He wasn’t dead yet, but I knew I couldn’t save him. I tried to save Leo but...”

Aline slid closer to me and put her hand on my knee, but she didn’t tell me that I didn’t need to talk about it, that I’d already told her a lot of this. She was just there, letting me know that I wasn’t alone, and that was what I needed to finish.

“My trying to save him is what ended up killing him. Logically, I know there really wasn’t anything I could’ve done differently. If we’d stayed, we

would've gotten shot, and I went to the only shelter close enough for us to get to. Hell, I was shot twice just getting there." My calf and shoulder ached with the memory. "It would've been bad enough to see him die in any way, but to have him die because I'd failed him—"

"No." Aline squeezed my knee. "I'm not going to tell you that you can't feel a certain way, but never forget the facts. Leo died because of a thousand things not in your control."

I nodded and put my hand on hers. "You're right. And this is exactly why I needed to tell you all of this, because I need you to remind me of the facts when I can't see them myself. I can't do it by myself."

"You don't have to." She kissed my cheek.

More than anything, I wanted to take her in my arms and show her everything I was feeling, but I knew we had to get through this if we were ever going to be more than sex.

"From the first moment I saw you, I wanted to protect you," I continued, "and you seemed determined to make that an impossible job. When you told me you were pregnant, all I could think was that now there were two of you to protect, and if I hadn't been able to keep Leo alive, how could I manage to keep you safe? I still feel like that, but I know how I reacted wasn't the right way. I should have told you that I'm terrified that something is going to happen to you and the baby. Asked if we could talk through stuff. I'm sorry for how I handled it."

She ran her fingers through my hair, and I leaned into her touch. She kept getting closer, not farther away, and I hoped that was a good sign.

"I'm sorry too," she said. "I can't expect you to know what I'm feeling if I don't tell you. And I shouldn't have blown off your concerns or acted like they were unreasonable. We're parents, and we have to do what's best for our family as a whole. I should have told you how I felt rather than going on the defensive. And I definitely shouldn't have walked away. Part of the reason things with my family got so bad was because I never wanted to work through conflict. So much of what I've done in my life has been easy, and I don't like it when things are hard."

I took her hand in mine, my thumb brushing back and forth across her knuckle. Part of me worried that she was going to break up with me, but I refused to let that part get the upper hand. She didn't sound like someone who was giving up.

"I came back because I wanted to fight for you. For us. I'm done backing away from something just because it'll take some work. Some things we have to go through fast because of our situation, but we can't skip steps."

I took a slow breath to steady myself and then asked the question I didn't actually want to ask. "Do you want to break off the engagement? Step back from that until we work through all our issues?"

"How about I keep the ring, and then when I'm ready to pick a date and start wedding planning, I'll propose to you?"

I chuckled and pulled her into my arms. I kissed the top of her head. "Whatever you say."

"Let's not do this again." Aline's voice was muffled against my chest, but I could hear the hint of a smile. "Here's an idea...show tunes."

"Um...what?"

She pulled back to look up at me with a smile that said she was thinking something mischievous. "I love musicals, and I think whenever we start arguing, we should sing a show tune. They make everything better."

I wasn't sure if I looked horrified or amused, but whatever my expression was made her laugh, and it was the laugh I loved, the one that lit up her entire face.

"I love you." It was out of my mouth before I knew the words had even formed.

Her mouth fell open a little bit, like I'd genuinely shocked her, which was sort of funny since I'd figured that my proposal would have pretty much topped any other sort of surprise. It should've been the first thing that I'd surprised her with, that confession, but I couldn't go back and say it before proposing. And if I was being honest, I wasn't sure that I could have admitted it then. Admitting it would've meant I had more to lose.

At least, that was the way I'd thought before. Now, I realized that not admitting it didn't make the danger any less. It just meant I wouldn't get any of the good. Having her, having a family with her, that was worth the risk.

"I love you too." She beamed at me, and we just sat there for a few minutes, smiling at each other before she wiggled her eyebrows. "Does this mean no show tunes?"

I laughed. "I hate to break it to you, but I'm definitely *not* the one in the family with the musical talent."

"That's okay," she said as she ran her finger along my bottom lip. "You have *other* talents."

My eyebrows went up. "Are you trying to seduce me?"

She slid her hand down my chest to my lap. "Is it working?"

I wanted to make a smartass, sexual comment, but my concern for her was still there. Not the near panic from before, but enough to make me ask a question. "Are you sure you want to do this? You're feeling okay?"

"Yes to both questions." She pressed her lips to mine in a brief but scorching kiss. "Now, take me to bed."

She didn't have to tell me a third time. Less than five minutes later, we were both naked and falling into bed together, laughing and kissing, limbs tangled. Touching her, having her touch me, had the same electrical effect on me as it'd had before, but there was a lightness now that wasn't there when things had been great between us. Like the things that we'd just shared had had a weight to them, and now we weren't carrying it alone.

The realization made me smile, and that was when she slid her fingers into my hair, pulled my head down, and brought my mouth to hers. I made a sound, pushed my tongue between her lips, devouring her as my hands touched everything I could reach. Soft breasts. Sensitive nipples that hardened as I teased them. The delicate feel of her bones under her skin. Strong legs wrapping around my waist.

"Inside me," she whispered as she bit my bottom lip. "Now."

It didn't take much for me to do as she asked. We both groaned as we came together. She was hot and tight, her body fitting perfectly with mine. We moved together, finding a mutual rhythm that had friction and pressure in all the right places. Perfection.

Deep, lazy strokes. Thorough kisses. Muscles bunching and relaxing. Moans and whispers.

When I rolled my hips, a little whimper escaped her, so I did it again.

"More, more," she begged.

She clutched my shoulders, used the leverage to bring us together harder, faster, and I was happy to match her as my own urgency grew. Together, we raced toward climax, pleasure running through my veins, filling me. I fought off my own orgasm, needing to make her come first, and she did, crying out my name. It was the sound of her voice that tipped me over the edge, and I had only one thought in mind as I came.

Home.

THIRTY-NINE

EOIN

IF ALINE HAD TO GO THROUGH ANOTHER SUMMER PREGNANCY, I WAS PRETTY sure she'd give me a vasectomy herself. She'd been so miserable the past two months that she'd actually cried happy tears when her doctor had recommended inducing labor a week before her due date.

Our son was big, and she was definitely not, so it was the best course of action, and I had to admit that it did a lot to help with my nerves since I didn't have to worry about her going into labor when I wasn't home. That particular nightmare slash panic attack had been in my head since June.

Instead of a frantic 'my water broke,' we'd packed everything yesterday morning and headed for the hospital. Both of our families had wanted to come to the hospital, but with my family being so big, we'd asked my siblings to stagger their visits instead of filling up the entire waiting room the entire time she was in labor. That meant, after the delivery was over, I went to the waiting room to tell both sets of parents, Freedom, and several of my siblings that everything had gone well.

"Eight pounds, three ounces. Twenty-one inches." I was exhausted after having spent every minute of the last twenty-five hours with Aline, but the adrenaline that had rushed through me at seeing my son continued to keep me going.

Mom reached me first, and everyone else followed, even my brothers and Aline's dad. And Freedom.

A lot had happened since that explosive Christmas Day when she'd gone off on me, not the least of which had been an absolutely crazy explanation of what had been going on in her life last year. Things were good now between all of us, and I couldn't have asked for a better family for my son to be born into.

While Paris and Brody had volunteered to make the calls to the rest of the family, there was one call I was going to make myself. Two people who would be Leo Allen McCrae's grandfather and great-grandmother in every way that really mattered.

When I'd told Israel and Nana Naz that Aline and I planned to name our son after both Leo and my mother, they'd cried. Packed into our hospital bag was a baby blanket that Nana Naz had crocheted for 'her first grandson.'

I made that call while Aline was taken to her room, and then I went with her parents and sister to see her. The rest of the family rotated in and out, spending only a few minutes each with her before heading to the nursery to see Leo. Everyone understood how tired Aline was, so it wasn't long before she and I were alone.

I leaned over Aline and kissed her forehead before sinking down in the chair next to the bed. We were both crashing hard, but I could see her fighting it.

"Sleep, sweetheart," I said. "Someone will wake you up when they bring the baby. Alec says the most important thing to remember as new parents is to sleep whenever you can."

She smiled and reached for my hand. My thumb automatically moved over her ring finger even though she'd taken her engagement ring off a few days ago, her fingers too swollen for her to wear it.

"It's time," she said, squeezing my hand.

"Time?" I gave her a puzzled look. "Pretty sure we're past that now. He's already here."

She laughed. "No, that's not what I meant. Sorry. My brain's a bit foggy."

I raised her hand and kissed it. "I think you can get a pass on clear communication for a while."

In the months since we'd had our big discussion, we'd needed a few small talks here and there, but we'd avoided a lot of possible conflict by talking things out before they caused problems.

“Well, I'm clear on this,” she continued. Her expression turned serious as tears filled her eyes. “Eoin McCrae, will you marry me?”

For a moment, I couldn't figure out what she was saying. We were still engaged. Why was she proposing to me?

And then I remembered what she'd said that day. That when she was ready to pick a date and start planning our wedding, she'd ask me to marry her.

So, I gave the only answer I could possibly give to that question.

“Yes, Aline Mercier, I will marry you.” I moved to kiss her. “Every day for the rest of my life.”

By the time I sat back down, her eyes were closing, but before she completely drifted off, she murmured three important words, “I love you.”

I smiled and told her that I loved her too. She probably hadn't heard me, but that was okay. We had the rest of our lives for me to tell her and show her just how much...over and over again.

THE END

***The Scottish Billionaires continues in Brody McCrae's story, coming
spring 2021.***

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