

CHILDREN
of
VICE

J. J. M C A V O Y

Children of Vice

J. J. McAvoy

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Intro

Children of Vice

is the first spin-off novel from the bestselling

Ruthless People series,

and will follow the lives of

Liam and Melody Callahan's children.

You do not have to start with *Ruthless People*.

If you are joining the Callahan family just now,

all you need to know is that

Liam and Melody had three children.

Twins,

Donatella and Wyatt.

And

Ethan, who

is their oldest and first child

...this is his story.

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VICE

\ 'vīś \

a: *moral depravity or corruption :wickedness*

b: *a physical imperfection, deformity, or taint: an abnormal behavior pattern in a domestic animal detrimental to its health or usefulness*

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PROLOGUE

“Monsters make choices. Monsters shape the world.
Monsters force us to become stronger, smarter, better.
They sift the weak from the strong and provide a
forge for the steeling of souls.
Even as we curse monsters, we admire them.
Seek to become them, in some ways.
There are far, far worse things to be than a monster.”

~ Jim Butcher

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ETHAN

I'm not sure when it happened...

When it began to crack and alter shape...

Looking back, there are so many moments that could be the one, the origin.

If you asked anyone who wasn't family, they'd say it happened the day I was born.

That the moment I came into this world as a Callahan, the innocence, the morality, and the virtues that are normally common to everyone else, were defective. Like a house with fractured windows. If you asked anyone within my family they'd say the windows were not fractured but frosted and bulletproof because that is how it should be. After all, the people who were pointing at my windows were the same people who used blinds. That was my family all right...stupidly rich, dangerously powerful, unspeakably ruthless, and obsessed with extended metaphors. But the thing was...I didn't care if I was a house with fractured or frosted or bulletproof windows. If people were curious to know the type of man I was, they were free to find out at their own peril.

What I cared about was when.

When did it happen?

When did I understand what it meant to be a Callahan?

To be Ethan Antonio Giovanni Callahan.

Staring up at the waters above me until my eyes drifted closed, one memory, one moment came forward...

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ETHAN - AGE ELEVEN

He looked like what everyone said Santa Claus was supposed to look like... with everything but the long white beard, though, which made his red-faced, white-skinned, fat body, cloaked in red robes disturbing to see.

“Why is there a screen here if I can still see you?”

He laughed. “Is this your first confession, boy?”

I don't like him. I thought immediately and for three good reasons too.

One, he laughed, when I was being serious.

Two, he didn't answer my question.

Three, he called me “boy.”

“Yes,” I answered anyway but only because Mom told me to be respectful in church.

“By your seat there is a card. It will tell you what you have to say.”

I really don't like him.

Why would you put a card in a dark stall? It was stupid.

Reaching around me, I got the small little card and lifted it up, reading.

“Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned...but no, I haven't.” I looked back up at him.

“*Really now?*” he said, his voice going up. “You haven't done anything wrong?”

“Nope.”

“Sometimes we may think things aren't wrong or are so small that they aren't sins, but God cares about them all,” he replied.

“Okay, when I have something I'll come back,” I told him, putting the card down.

“So you’ve never said anything to hurt someone? Maybe pushed your little sister—”

“Why would I push my sister?”

“Or hit your brother?”

“Didn’t do that either.”

“Yelled or fought with your parents?”

“No. My parents would kill me and then bring me back to kick my ass to Ireland so every Callahan there could kill me again.” I laughed at that. I liked Ireland. Everyone was kinda like Uncle Neal.

“Callahan?”

The way he said the name made me pay attention to him. He said it like...like it was shocking or scary even. No. When I looked into his blue eyes they were wide-open and shaking. I didn’t know that was possible. Maybe his whole head was shaking and I could only really see his eyes.

“Yea.” I nodded, adding, “I’m Ethan Antonio Giovanni Callahan, first son of Liam Alec Callahan and Melody Nicci Giovanni Callahan. Are you new to this church?”

He didn’t reply, so I knocked on the screen.

“Why are you scared?”

When I said it he sat up more and focused in on me. “I’m not scared.”

“You’re lying...you should confess that.”

His whole jolly priest thing went away when he spoke again.

“Understanding who your parents are, I now see why you are so ill-mannered and pompous at such a young age.”

Hurt him!

I wanted to, but I kept talking instead. “Who do you think my parents are? I’m sure—”

“It’s not who I think they are. It’s who they are. Murderers.”

“So?” I asked him.

“So? So?”

I nodded. “Moses was a murderer. King David was a murderer. Actually almost everyone in the Bible is a murderer...except Jesus. But since he’s part of God, doesn’t that make him a murderer by connection? Because God tells people to kill people too and—”

His voice started to rise. “You are twisting God’s words.”

“No, it’s there. I’m sure.”

“You...” He took a deep breath. “In the Bible, boy, God is seeking justice, a righteousness for the whole world, in a world in which there are bad people who hurt people, because back then there were no jails. There was no way to stop people from continuing to hurt and cheat others. The church teaches us every life is precious and in a modern world jails do exist. As such murder is a sin.”

“What about the army?”

“It is for the overall well-being of the country and only approved by the church if it is absolutely necessary.”

Are all adults dumb like this?

“So then being a murderer is okay. You just need permission. And you can only get permission if it is necessary. My parents only do things if it is necessary—”

“Nothing your parents do, boy—”

“Stop interrupting me!” I snapped, glaring at him as I stood up in the booth. “Stop calling me ‘boy.’ I told you my name is Ethan Antonio Giovanni Callahan. I haven’t interrupted you once. I’ve allowed you to speak your mind. And you’re the one being rude. I told you they are my parents and you still want to talk bad about them to me. If gossiping isn’t a sin it should be and you should confess to it. My parents only do things if it

is necessary. People attack us all the time, and we defend ourselves, our families, and our people. If my parents weren't murderers...if I wasn't a murderer. We'd be dead!"

He gasped. "What did you just say?"

I didn't reply. The more I looked at him, the angrier I got.

"You've killed someone?"

"Yes, but I'm not asking for forgiveness."

Again, he made another huffy sound.

"What have they done to you? How old are you that they turned you into a monster?"

"Thanks be to God." I said the last line from the confession card he'd told me to pick up before, which meant we were done. Opening the door, I blinked a few times, adjusting to the light.

"Ethan, what took so long?" Dona popped up right in my face. Her dark brown hair was curled up a lot and it made her look funny, but she still liked it. She was grinning like she knew something I didn't. Dona's smile always made me smile no matter what, though.

But before I could say anything, she was already heading toward the booth I'd walked out of.

Grabbing her arm, I pulled her back. "Don't go to him."

She looked at me for a long time before nodding and stepping back next to me. "All the other ones are full. Daddy, Mommy, and Wyatt went in."

I looked around the cathedral and in the wooden rows were all of Mom and Dad's people. Two were directly behind Dona, speaking to each other, and a few others moved through the crowd to be closer to one of the stalls where I guessed Dad, Mom, or Wyatt were.

"Just wait for another one."

“Okay,” she agreed, sliding into one of the rows, her green dress puffing up when she did.

Just when I sat next to her to wait, another person moved to the stall, but jerk face Santa Claus came out. He didn’t look at me. Well, I think he couldn’t see me over all the other people. He apologized to the guy trying to go in next before going back. For some reason, I couldn’t look away. I had this feeling in me and I didn’t know what it was.

“Where are you going?”

I didn’t realize I was standing and moving until she said something.

“To the bathroom,” I lied and started to walk through the crowd.

“Ethan!” one of my dad’s guards called out to me.

“Bathroom!” I lifted my phone for him to see. I knew he was still following me, but I didn’t care. I wasn’t doing anything bad. Plus, all the people made it hard for him to catch up.

When I made it out of the main chapel, I looked to my left and right, but the fatso was gone. I went right because...well, why would he go to the church shop place? The farther down the hall I went the darker it became, and the light coming in from the blue stained glass made it look like the sky before it rained. I walked and walked until I got to a hall with a sign that said ‘Priests Only.’ Ignoring it, I walked down the hall. Most of the doors were closed and one cracked open the tiniest bit. I heard his voice.

“What do you mean the audio did not work?”

Tilting my head and looking through the slit, I saw Fatso near the glass window, trying to look out at someone, gripping the phone in his hand.

“Fine. Fine. That doesn’t matter. The boy confessed it. I heard him say with his own mouth that he and his parents were murderers.”

What?

It was only then that I noticed the wires on his desk.

It clicked.

Him being new.

Him being new and coming to this church, my parents' church, and hating my parents.

"So you're saying even if I testify it's not enough? What do you want me to do? Catch them in the act?" he yelled so loudly I guessed he didn't hear the door as I came in.

But then again it was even more quiet than I thought it was.

"Look, the deal was...no, you listen to me! The deal was I do this and no one finds out about Ohio. I will not—ugh—ahh!"

"—ugh—ahh!" Those were the sounds he made as my knife went into his back.

Thump.

The phone slipped out of his hands as he tried to turn. Pulling the knife out, I watched as his red robe got darker and darker as the blood came out.

"What...what...what did you...?"

"This." I stabbed him over and over again, anywhere I could, his huge body fell backward, trying to grab onto the desk but falling to the floor.

"Aww, man!" I groaned at my now broken knife. "I just got this one too!"

Sighing, annoyed, I picked up the phone, which was already disconnected. Stepping over him, I grabbed the wires and pulled and cut them.

"Mon...mon..."

"Monday?" I turned back to him.

He was trying to crawl, but to where I didn't know. "Mon..."

"Monkey?"

His belly rose and fell, rose and fell. He was in shock, I think. He was staring at me in shock. His blue eyes shone with tears, not sad tears. Or forgive me tears. Just another liquid coming out of his body.

“Monster,” I said to him. “That’s what you want to call me, right? This week in school they made us read Frankenstein. It was cool. I liked it. I like books that make me think. That’s why I’m in the advanced class. My favorite part is when the monster looks at Dr. Frankenstein and tells him it’s his fault. It kinda reminds me of now. You called me a monster. I walked away. Then you threatened the monster. And so if it comes down to you or me, I have to pick me.”

“Go to—”

Taking out my second knife...well, Wyatt’s knife, I stabbed him in the throat and pulled it out. When I did, blood went everywhere. Wiping my face, I moved to the window that was stained glass too, trying to see what he was looking at before.

“Ethan?”

Turning around, it was my dad’s guard. He looked between me and the guy in red...I wasn’t sure if he was cop or priest. Pulling out his phone, he dialed one number before speaking.

“Dozen Lilies delivered to my location,” he said, walking closer to us.

“From Ethan,” I added.

He just stared at me, and so I stared back.

“Yes, that’s right. A dozen lilies from...the second. Let the boss know.”

“Let them all know,” I whispered mostly to myself, staring at both of the knives in my hands.

Rule 103: always have a knife.

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ONE

“Begin, be bold, and venture to be wise.”

~ *Horace*

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ETHAN

It was only when my lungs began to burn, begging for air, did my eyes open again. When I did, I could see figures walking up to the edges. Sitting up from the bottom and swimming till my head broke the surface, I brushed my hair back, inhaling the cold air through my nose.

“Good mornin’, boss,” all four said.

Two to my left and two to my right.

Replying to none of them, already at the edge, I lifted myself out of the water, walking over to the shower to wash off. A maid, who was trying her hardest not to look at my cock as I rinsed off, dropped sandals at my feet once I stepped out. However, before I could reach for the towel, she made a move to dry me. Toby, saving her life, reached out and grabbed her wrist, gripping tightly as I took the towel for myself and tied it around my waist. When I looked up again I scanned her and then behind her, at the chair where my breakfast was waiting.

“Where is the second towel?” Toby demanded her, releasing her arm.

“Second...what?” She stared wide-eyed and back at me as I moved to my chair. “I’m sorry, sir. I only brought one.”

Ignoring her, I sat down, lifting the cover from my food only to wish I hadn’t. Annoyed, I dropped the cover back onto the plate.

“I’ll get another one—”

“Get out,” I spoke under my breath, speaking up for the first time, reaching for my phone and rising back from the chair.

“Sir?” She leaned in.

Scrolling through my messages, I started walking toward the elevator. “Toby, tell the head maid that if she ever tests my patience with halfwit

maids again, it will be her who will be seeking new employment.”

“Noted.” He nodded for her to leave, which she did as if she’d seen the devil himself, forgetting the bloody tray she’d brought in, the idiot.

“Today there is another Chicago City Honorary Brunch. Your grandmother wanted to remind you your sister will not arrive until tomorrow, so you’ll have to do the speech,” Greyson, the second in line of my men behind Toby, informed me as we entered the elevator. “The speech has been emailed.”

I’d already begun to read it before he spoke.

“Next.” I waited.

“Mr. Downey...he’s here.” I gazed up from my phone. He nodded, adding, “It’s starting just like you said it would.”

“Brilliant.” I couldn’t help the smirk that spread across my lips. “Let’s not keep the traitors waiting.”

Exiting the elevator on my floor of the family mansion, there were only two doors on opposite ends of the hall, and neither of them followed me as I reached my own. Pausing, I glanced back at them. Both of them stood shoulder to shoulder, as positive as either of them could be. Grey’s short orange Irish hair and large frame, and Toby’s shoulder-length brown hair and slimmer build.

“Sir?” Toby stepped up.

“The bodies are about to start piling,” were words I shouldn’t have had to tell them but did anyway. “And anyone who tries to stop me will find themselves buried alongside their families under that pile.”

They did not speak. However, there was nothing they could say...their actions would speak for themselves as would mine. Entering my master room, I took off the towel around my waist, tossing it onto the couch before my bed...a gift of my aunt’s, who’d done the whole remodeling of the

mansion after my father's death per my request and to the annoyance of both my siblings. By the time they'd finished breaking down walls, putting up new ones, and recreating the whole floor plan, the room looked unrecognizable. Gone was my parents' modern classic bedroom, and in its place, my rustic one, double in size with dark mahogany from floor to ceiling.

There were no doors, except a single one to enter and leave. Walking to my closet, the lights brightened in a row as I passed my suits, heading straight to the middle tabletop, and scanned my finger. The lid slipped back, allowing me to lift the very last gift my mother had gotten me before her death, a silver Diamond Back Colt revolver 38 Special, the words *Che sarà, sarà* engraved on the wooden butt of it.

Loading a single inside, as I did every morning, I put it to the side as I reached for a suit. It did not matter which; I'd be burning it at the end of the day.

Ringgg.

"Is she here?"

"Yes, sir," Toby stated.

Not replying, I hung up.

Not even a second later, I could hear her voice from behind the door.

"Ethan?"

"Here," I said as I buttoned up my navy shirt.

She entered, wearing a bright yellow tailored suit and black heels. Her hair was dyed a copper-blond and cut right above her shoulders.

"Nana, we've spoken about this. You're seventy-three. You can't go around upstaging twenty-year-olds like this."

"Flattery." She pursed her lips and crossed her arms. "I can testify all Callahan men have mastered it. Unfortunately for you, years of exposure

have made me immune.”

“Should I switch to insults?”

“Would you like to die?”

I smirked at that. “Are you threatening the Ceann na Conairte?”

“Is that what you’ve become now?”

My jaw clenched as I reached for my tie. “*Grandmother*, I haven’t had breakfast yet. I’d advise you to take heed and stop.”

“Oh well...” She gasped, taking a seat on the leather bench against the wall separating suits from the rest of my clothing. “Only because you’ve *advised* me.”

“I turn twenty-eight on Saturday.”

“I am aware.”

Was she? “That’s a year older than my father when he’d gotten married to my mother.”

She laughed. “Is that why you’ve been agitated...well, more agitated... than normal lately? Had your grandfather not forced him, he would have waited till he was—”

“Thirty.” No matter what, for him to be respected as head of the pack, the Ceann na Conairte, the rules, yes, rules set by my senile, also dead great-grandfather, and passed down from father to son, demanded we marry.

“You still have two years.”

“Aren’t grandmothers supposed to be worried they’ll die before seeing their great-grandchildren?”

She sucked her teeth angrily. “Are you saying I’ll die before you get married? Me, who’s lived to see your great-grandfather, your grandfather, great uncle, and father murdered? I’ll somehow have a shorter life than you?”

Turning around toward her, her eyes narrowed and eyebrows arched.

And it was funny to see her act so gentle and relaxed... “After almost twenty-eight years, you’d think you’d understand my sense of humor by now?”

“You’d think after almost twenty-eight years someone would have told you that you aren’t funny in any sense.”

To appease her as best I could, I tried self-deprecating. “As if a Callahan man would listen to the opinions of others.”

She didn’t want to, but she smiled anyway. “Why have you called me here?”

“I’ve found a wife—”

“Come again?” Her eyes went wide as she stared at me.

“A wife,” I said very slowly. “I’ve found one...well, her.”

“Ethan, a woman isn’t a cat! What do you mean you found her?”

“It’s a long story. Nevertheless, she’s going to need your help. She’s not exactly Callahan material—and before you ask, I do not know her. She is a tool in a very important game, a tool I need you to secure without a doubt so she’ll be ready by my birthday.”

She stared at me shocked, confused, annoyed until she finally snapped. “Ethan! I swear to God, if you do not stop being so cryptic—”

“You are aware that someone of the Irish in Boston isn’t pleased with this family, correct?”

She grinned, rising to her feet. “Jealously must be hard.”

“I would not know,” I replied, and she merely made a face as I continued. “*Nana*, that is all I can say for now.”

Sighing, she stood in front of me and reached out to place her hand on my cheek, but I backed away. Unfazed, she dropped her hand and spoke again, “You do realize marriage in this family is undoable, correct? You know nothing other than she isn’t Callahan material, which is the most

important thing for her to be, and yet are willing to sacrifice the rest of your life, privacy, and peace, simply so your grand plan can come together?”

“If it means protecting this family’s name and legacy, I’d set myself on fire.” I felt my whole body tensing as I spoke. “I will not be the son who inherited the kingdom only to let it crumble at my feet. That is not my fate.”

“You do know this is why your cousins are scared of you, correct?” She pouted. “They think you’d kill even me in order to win...let alone them.”

I stared at her a long time. She was testing me, wanting to hear what I’d say, and so I didn’t answer. Reaching over, I grabbed the gun and placed it in the concealed shoulder holster under my arm before grabbing my coat and offering her my arm.

“Would you like to join me for brunch, Nana?”

“Fine, you can tell me all about where to find this girl,” she replied, walking toward the double doors to exit.

“Ethan...” Her voice trailed off as she eyed me dangerously, when again I didn’t answer.

“Ricker Hill.”

“PRISON?”

“Didn’t I mention that?” I paused by my door, hand on the handle.

“NO, you fucking did not!” She cursed, and I couldn’t help but smirk.

“And here I thought you didn’t judge, Grandmamma—”

“Well, you were wrong for once.”

“Once out of a million is hardly a bad record. Shall we go?” I held the door open for her.

Her nose flared and she looked as though she wanted to smack me. However, she maintained her composure upon seeing both Toby and Greyson standing in wait.

“This isn’t over.”

How could it be? It hadn't even begun.

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TWO

“Does the walker choose the path, or the path the
walker?”

~ *Garth Nix*

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ETHAN

They all clapped as I stood before them, the camera flashes nearly blinding, and yet I was unfazed, far too used to this: speaking to other wealthy and/or important people, in a luxurious ball room, talking about how much we cared about this city, our beautiful Chicago, and all the ugly people who chose to live in it...myself included. Ugly because we all knew, what this city was built on, and we knew how hard it was to grow up here, how jaded it could make you. And yet we took pride in it.

“It is with great honor and privilege that I stand here before you all. Yesterday, TIME Magazine named me the most influential mogul of the decade, and because I am a Callahan I cannot *humbly* accept anything,” I said, causing a few of them to snicker.

“Especially when I know it’s not true. A decade ago I stood at the precipice of maturity, savoring the last few moments of freedom before responsibility dawned. Ever presently aware that the shoes I was to step in were impossible to fill for any human. The right foot, a size nine, four inch, white Prada heel with crystal embellishments just because...and the left foot, a size thirteen, custom Paul Costelloe Derby Shoe in leather and never suede because a man should always see his reflection when he looked down...”

Damn this speech. And I knew without a doubt who I had to thank for it.

“My parents revolutionized this city. My father reinvigorated the private sector, which is why, today, Chicago stands as the leading city in job creation. The policies my mother and her administration applied have made not just Chicago, but universities in all of Illinois, find ranking spots within

the top five schools in the country, with over eighty-seven percent of its residents holding high school diplomas. A percentage so shocking that Peter McBurg, one of my mother's greatest critics, wrote this morning: 'my hometown of Chicago, which was once synonymous with names like Al Capone and the Mafia, has now become synonymous with Mark Zuckerberg and Silicon Valley. I'm not sure if I should weep or sing.'"

More ugliness...now that the city had improved we didn't talk about that, we talked about the dark ages because they missed the chaos. The old Chicago. The irony of it all was almost too much to bear.

"We should honor the men and women here today, who worked relentlessly to push the vision of my parents long after they had passed and graciously allowed me to take all the credit for it. As their son and on the behalf of my whole family, I thank and applaud you all for your hard work and success."

Stepping back, I clapped. One by one, they all got up from their seats, whistling and cheering loudly. My grandmother leaned in as I did, my arm around her shoulder for the cameras, her face pressed against mine, causing me to tense, though I was sure she didn't notice.

"Donatella's speeches are getting far too self-deprecating for my liking," I whispered to her, hoping to distract her.

She smiled as we both turned to the cameras. "The girl has a gift. I almost cried."

I smirked at that. My grandmother hadn't cried since my father had died and nothing was changing that...she ate nails for breakfast just to keep her tongue sharp.

"Senator Forbes." She stepped away toward the balding man walking toward us.

It was at that point I felt myself go on autopilot, standing beside her and making small talk I wouldn't remember with people I could barely stand. Amused at how seamlessly I fit in with them...me, the man who said Chicago was rid of its beasts, while being the most beastly of them all. Amused because I could see it, the cracks in the elegance and nobility they'd all tried so hard to craft for themselves. Chicago was now home to the smartest people in the country...hell, the world...and the media praised us. Brutal, ruthless, Chicago now tamed. Ha. Tamed beasts were far scarier than wild ones...they knew exactly who they were killing and had the patience to wait. Yes, Chicago was still savage. It was just the arena of savagery that was changing.

"Mr. Callahan." Toby nodded at me.

I fought the grin trying to spread across my lips, drinking the rest of my champagne to mask it.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please excuse me. No rest for us moguls, it seems."

"You're always escaping us, Mr. Callahan." Senator Forbes pouted...it was ugly. "My daughter will be here any minute and she'll kill me for letting you escape."

"I'm sure I'll meet her one of these days, Senator Forbes, and if she's half as beautiful as your wife, I'm sure I won't be able to miss her."

"You are as good at lying as your damn father." Senator Forbes laughed.

"Walter!" Senator Forbes' wife scolded.

I kissed my grandmother's cheek, whispering, "Call when you are tired of wasting time with these senseless idiots."

"Of course, dear." She smiled, not even a little bit fazed.

As I walked from her and toward the exit, Toby followed along with Grey and two other guards, the rest staying with my grandmother.

“What did you get out of this...Mr. Downey person?” I said once we got on the elevator.

“He still refuses to talk to anyone but you,” Toby replied, pushing the button.

“And here I thought you could be persuasive.”

“If I were any more persuasive he’d be dead.”

I didn’t reply because there was no need to once the doors opened. We walked through the gold and ivory lobby, not toward the front or even the back doors but through the restaurant. The whole place was packed, which I guessed I couldn’t complain about. More money for me. Once in the kitchen, the chefs and staff pretended not to see us as we walked to the back room. Naked and tied to the wall with an actual fish head stuffed into his mouth, was Mr. Downey.

“Welcome to Chicago, Mr. Downey. I hear you’ve been asking for me?”

IVY

There were many rules to surviving in a prison. The first, and the most important was keep all your holes shut. You didn’t see anything, you didn’t hear anything, and you sure as hell didn’t smell anything either. That was the easy part... What you had to do in order to keep the holes below the waist shut, now that was hard...often times dangerous. But I saw what happened to the girls who didn’t take that risk and I was not interested in being broken like them.

“Aww, aren’t you pretty? Wanna be friends?” Dallas, one of the bigger, newer female inmates, laughed like a wild hyena, grabbing another new girl’s chin. They had been processed together so I’m guessing that’s why

she locked onto her so quickly. “Come on...it’ll be fun. Give me a little kiss.”

The girl tried to move from the cafeteria table, but Dallas grabbed her arm. I glanced over to the guards who, like always, pretended not to see anything.

It’s been thirty-seven days, they’re due for a reminder...but it’s mac and cheese day. I frowned back over at the golden dish that I could be happily eating, when Dallas’ voice reached me again.

“Believe you want to be my friend.” Dallas wasn’t looking at anyone else, which meant I’d catch her off guard. *Thirty-seven days without an incident was pushing it, Ivy.*

“Damn it!” I muttered then sighed stepping out of the lunch line bitterly. Walking over to their table and before Dallas could land her hot lips on the girl, I put my tray in between their faces.

“HEY!” Dallas smacked the tray.

“Leave her alone, Dallas. She’s just a kid.”

Dallas jumped onto the table, mostly because she needed to. Being four foot eight wasn’t going to even scare the cat in the yard, let alone me.

“What did you say to me?” she yelled at me.

“I said leave her alone—”

“Or you’ll do what, chica? Huh? You know who I am?”

I looked at the two other women...and I used that word sparingly...as they stepped up behind her. Rumor had it Dallas’ boyfriend was some real badass gangbanger on the streets. *Good time to remember that one, Ivy.*

“Yea, now you got nothing to say, do you, princess? You’re kinda cute. How’d you like to be my friend?”

The moment her short, stubby fingers pushed my head to the side, I grabbed her legs before she could blink and pulled her off the table, the

back of her head hitting both the table and the seat. On the ground, I took my tray and shoved it into her mouth.

“Bitch!” One of the masculine two came at me, landing a kick right to my ribs, as I pulled the tray out of Dallas’ mouth and hit the chick’s eye, punching right into her throat and again into her nose.

“You...” A second one came at me, but I was so lucky she was as dumb as she looked because she tripped over one of Dallas’ shoes. When they came off I had no idea, but damn...old girl went down harder than a ton, her chin hitting the edge of the table...damn.

“You crazy ass—” Dallas jumped onto my back like a damn monkey, pulling my hair, so I did the only thing I could. I jumped and allowed myself to fall back right on top of her.

“Ahh...” she cried out, letting me go. Rolling off her for only a second before turning around, I punched my hands into her face, over and over and over again, until my knuckles hurt so badly I grabbed the tray on the floor beside me and shoved it right back between her lips.

“Dallas, you’re new here,” I said, blowing my blond hair out of my face before continuing on, “but people don’t call me princess. They call me Psycho Ivy. It’s not very creative, I’ll give you that, but it gets to the point. You touch me, you end up in Medway. You come at me the wrong way, you end up in Medway. You disturb my peace, you end up in Medway! We clear?”

She tried speaking against the tray, but I held it hard.

“I’m going to need a yes or no from you, Dallas, before the riot squad enters!”

“Uhghghs!” She struggled, but I pinned her down.

“What was that?”

“EVERYONE DOWN!” The cavalry came in with their damn black suits and everything. Letting go of her, I laid down on the ground with my hands over my head.

“You’re so fucking dead,” Dallas muttered to me. “You. Your whole family. Everybody gonna die.”

Turning my head to her, I smiled.

“I got no family, Dallas. I’m in here for a long time. So unless your boyfriend cuts off his dick, he ain’t touching me. And we both know he don’t have the balls for that.” When I leaned in she tried to lean in. “Should I write out instructions for him?”

“You’re sick in the head.”

“Yea, I told you that...a few times in solitary will do that to you.” I winked just as they zip tied my hands and feet like always.

“O’Davoren! I should have known!” Jimmy yelled as he lifted me up with some other guy.

“I want it noted I didn’t get to eat lunch, boys!” I yelled, relaxing. “And seriously, it doesn’t take two of you to pick me up.”

“SHUT UP, O’DAVOREN!”

“Fee-fi-fo-fum, I smell the blood of a *Dallas* lass. Be alive, or be she dead, I’ll grind her bones to make my bread...hahaha! Dallas! Dallas!”

“That’s it! Shoot her up!” he yelled.

“No!” I screamed, struggling in their arms. “You can’t do that! No! No! Let go!”

They pinned me to something, rolling up my sleeves, and I tried to fight. Even knowing that it would do nothing, I tried to fight until I felt the heat of it as it entered my skin. It took a second until everything just became loose and I couldn’t even hold my body up anymore.

Before I knew it, I was back in the dark cell. They just dropped me... like I was trash. And because of that damn shot I couldn't really move. It was the scariest thing in the world. To be in a dark room...and be completely paralyzed.

What little strength I did have I used it to watch the door.

Nothing had ever happened to me. But I heard the other girls.

And I knew it was only a matter of time...especially with that new one. But if he came I had something for him.

What good does it do if I can't move?

Concentrate.

Breathe.

Calm yourself.

Concentrate.

Breathe.

Calm yourself.

"That's...it." I smiled when I felt my finger twitch.

I smiled. Though it was the most pathetic in smile the world. This is how I survived here. I wasn't insane...well apparently that was debatable because not many of the other girls acted like me. But this was the only thing I knew how to do.

This wasn't supposed to be my life.

Shaking my head clear, I did my best not to think like that. If I did, I'd get upset. If I got upset, I couldn't think, and if I couldn't think, I was as good as dead.

Act crazy. Act as if you aren't capable of thinking logically. Insanity is your friend. Fight. That is how you survived. That's how all the holes stayed closed. How you don't break...

ETHAN

When they opened the door to the big fridge in the hotel kitchen, a couple floors below the ballroom where police officers and politicians patted themselves on the back, a rush of frosted air blew across my face. There was a still naked Mr. Downey, hung from a crane, pale, purple and shivering.

“Help him down,” I said, leaning against the wall, enjoying the coolness of it. In order to ‘help’ the man they cut his ties, letting him fall down on his own.

“Mr. Downey...I’m not very fond of people who waste my time. So I do hope you have more to say to me now than you did ten minutes ago,” I said as he shook on the ground, his skin color slowly matching that of a smurf.

“I’ve always wanted to know, if you cut off a man’s hand when he’s going into hypothermia, will he bleed less? My brother is a doctor. You’d think I could ask him these things, but he’d get all pissy and accuse me of wanting to know for all the wrong reasons. Grey, please end my curiosity.”

“Yes, sir,” he said, holding on to a butcher knife.

“A butcher knife, Grey? Feeling nostalgic?” I asked him.

“Yes, sir,” he replied, pulling out Downey’s arm. “You know I never continued the family business, but put a knife in my hand and a butcher’s son is still a butcher’s son.”

“I’m sure your parents are proud. Go on—”

“No! Please! No! I’ll tell you! I’ll tell you,” Downey found the voice to beg.

“Well, get on with it then!” Grey hollered, the knife moving to the man’s throat.

“My name is Eamon Downey. I was sent by the Finnegan brothers.”

Pushing off the wall, I walked up to him. Kneeling in front of him, Grey released him and stepped back, leaving the butcher knife on the ground.

“I knew all of that already, Mr. Downey. I do not give a fuck about you or your name. My question was: what are they planning? Why did they send you?”

“Because...because...they wanted me to tell you, to lie and name some families that were turning on you.”

“When it’s really the Finnegan brothers who have betrayed me.” Did they really believe I’d allow them to determine who were my enemies and allies? Did I look like a dog?

“And—”

“And?”

Silence.

I grabbed the knife and brought it down onto his wrist. He screamed, trembling as he gripped onto his wrist in agony. “I’m glad you found your voice again, Mr. Downey. I’ll give you a second to compose yourself.”

“...s...sis...” He panted, weeping as the blood continued to flow from his wrist.

“Your second is up, now finish your speaking before I start to get violent...and believe me, you don’t want to see me violent.”

“They...he...they...”

“Mr. Downey.”

“Alliance.” He used all his strength to say.

“An alliance of what?” I asked calmly, spinning the knife in my hand.

“Your...your...sis—”

“Sister? They want my sister?”

“It’s all—that’s all I know,” he spoke quickly, his adrenaline pumping. Grabbing onto my arm with his good hand, he held on like a man on the

edge. "I swear. I swear. Spare me! Please! Please!"

Reaching down, I peeled his bloody fingers off of me. "God forgives. The Pope forgives. I am neither God nor the Pope."

"You can use me...I'll do anything you ask! I'll be a spy for you."

"A spy that flips sides is not a spy, he's a traitor. I have no use for traitors," I told him, taking the butcher knife and hammering it down between his head and shoulders. His blood splattered onto my suit.

Rising to my feet, I held my arm out. "Where is Dona?" I asked.

"She just got on her flight. She'll be here in the next hour," Toby answered, placing the towel in my hand.

"Get her on the phone."

Wiping my face and hands before dropping the towel over him, I undid my cufflinks and black tie before removing my shirt, throwing each one at Grey, who in return handed me a new replica pair.

"Got her, sir," Toby said, handing me the ear piece.

"Dona."

"You know, you really should give your speechwriter a raise. She's absolutely brilliant." Her smug came over loud and clear.

"Apparently I'll have to, seeing as how she's now flying commercial for some reason unbeknownst to me. What are you up to, baby sister?" I asked, buttoning up my shirt again.

Silence.

"Donatella."

"Do not call my name like that. I'm your sister, not one of your minions."

"I'm still waiting," I replied as I placed the tie around my neck. I knew Dona would never do anything to betray me, but I also knew when she was hiding something.

“Why can’t we ever have normal brother-sister conversations? Like ‘Hey, Dona, how was Boston?’ ‘Oh, not bad, a little chilly for August, but hey, what can you do?’ ‘Yea. Chicago’s still as windy as ever. And I’m bored shitless. When are you getting back—’”

“How long do you plan on keeping this little one-person play going?”

“How long do you plan on treating me like a baby?”

“Until you’re older than me.” I smirked, hearing her suck her teeth, trying her best to keep from snapping at me. Instead, she chose to annoy me.

“Where did we pause the play? Oh, right, you miss me. ‘Well, don’t be bored, brother, I’ll be back before you can say—’”

I thought for a moment as to why she was fighting me so much. It wasn’t like her...and then I realized.

“You went for Wyatt.”

She didn’t reply.

“This is your last trip to Boston for a while.” I waited for her to get the last word, placing my jacket on as I walked toward the metal door.

“No matter what Wyatt’s done he’s still our brother.”

“I wasn’t the one who exiled him. He left on his own. He abandoned the family, his family, on his own. Therefore—”

“You cut him out...of everything.”

“I thought so and here you are.”

“I’m a Callahan! I go where I damn well please.” She snapped at me and for a second she sounded like our mother.

I could feel a headache.

“I’ll see you at home,” I said to her before hanging up as I stepped outside in the breeze so painfully cold today it felt as if it sliced through flesh.

“Sir.” My driver nodded at me, holding the door for me.

“Take the scenic route.”

Sliding into the backseat, I reached in the fold of the chair in front of me, lifting the tablet. No sooner did it scan my thumbprint than I saw the file.

The name IVY O’DAVOREN appeared first.

Flipping onto the next page, the very first thing I saw was a mug shot, what looked to be a pale skinned mop with wild blond hair all over the place. I could hardly see anything her chart described.

Name: Ivy O’Davoren

Charges: Aggravated Assault. Assault with a deadly weapon.

Sentence: Twelve years

Age: Twenty-Seven

Eyes: Blue

Hair: Blond

Height: 5’11

Tattoos: None

None of that was as important as the next section. Her next of kin.

Stepmother: Shay O’Davoren

Stepsister: Rory Donoghue

Cousin(s): Cillian Finnegan, Elroy Finnegan

They say every great plan only needs 50 percent of thought, and the rest is a combination of skill, will, and luck.

Of all the places for the Finnegan brothers to have family, how lucky was I that it would be in my very own backyard? How lucky was I that it was her...

IVY

“Rise and shine—”

Sitting up off my bed, I backed up quickly as he walked towards my cell door.

His blue eyes sent chills up my spine. They weren't like mine. Or even my father's. They were dead eyes, like the color of fish eyes just after being caught. Shiny, slimy, unblinking, and unfeeling.

“Can I help you with something?” I sneered as he looked through the small window of the door.

“Everything all right, forty-four?” A voice came over his radio.

“All clear. Walking through—”

“Forty-four. Bring her up. She has 32-14.”

32-14?

“Body down now!” he yelled at me, and I did what he said. Placing my hands on my head, I heard the keys jingle before the heavy slab slid open. He patted me down, grabbing my breast tightly and then moving down my back. I bit my lip to try and stop from lashing out at him when he squeezed my ass...after all, us girls in solitary didn't have the right to request for female guards.

“Clear,” he called out and zip ties were on my hands. Chains cuffed to my feet.

Ignoring as they pulled and pitched and fucking shoved me, I followed them out of my cell, hobbling because of the weight of the chains on me. The walk was the same as always, long, dark, boring, and smelly. Finally, we got to a room. Two guards opened the door, and there standing in a gray suit, was an older black man.

“Please unchain my client.”

“No can do, she's in solitary. How she even managed to—”

“Unchain her or I’ll have to start inquiring about your prison’s overzealous use of solitary confinement, lack of female staff, and, just for the heck of it, each and every last one of you,” he ordered and the man cursed him under his breath, but he did as he asked.

“You seem like a good lawyer. Which means I definitely can’t afford you,” I said, taking a seat in front of him. “Are you sure you have the right person?”

“Ivy O’Davoren, born July 4th, sentenced to twenty-five years for motor vehicle theft, aggravated assault, and assault with a deadly weapon? Pretty freckled nose with blue eyes, Ivy O’Davoren.”

I smiled. “You made that last part up. I’m sure that wasn’t in my file.”

“It wasn’t, but it could be. In fact, if you want to, it could say Ivy O’Davoren, released for good behavior. Or have your conviction turned completely—”

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re kinda shady?”

He nodded. “Yes. So what will it be, ma’am?”

“Ma’am now?” I laughed. “No, seriously, who are you? Is this some sick new way to punish inmates? Draw them in here and tell them, surprise, you have a new lawyer, here’s your get-out-of-jail-free card.”

“Ms. O’Davoren, my name is Avery Barrow, and believe me, I know how shitty the Illinois State Correctional Facility can be. It’s one of the things in this state that refuses to bow to change.”

“So you’ve come to be fairy prison godfather?”

He snickered. “I’ve come on behalf of the Callahan family to make sure —”

“Wh...what?” I almost choked on air. “Who sent you?”

“The Callahan family.”

I laughed. I laughed so hard my stomach ached and my throat burned. I laughed like The Joker in the asylum because I was pretty sure that was where I was going to end up.

“The Callahan Family?” I repeated. “That nest of vipers and shit! Fuck the Callahan family! I’d rather spend the rest of eternity rotting in here being groped by the whole damn force than ever accept those people’s help.”

I spat to my left. “If they all drowned in their blood it wouldn’t be justice enough! Guards! I’m done here!”

“Ms. O’Davoren—”

“I’m not sure what those people have over you but really think of your own health before you come in here trying to sell me snake oil! Guards!” I yelled again, and they came in. This time much more willingly, I outstretched my arms to them.

Callahans...if I could kill them myself I would.

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THREE

“As usual, there was a story behind the story, and
that is where the truth was hidden.”

~ *Kenneth Eade*

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EVEYLN

“He’s in the dining room, ma’am,” the butler said to me as the maids took my coat off.

Once upon a time, I used to know all the butlers and maids within this home by name. However, death had taught me many lessons throughout my life. The first was to only remember those who only truly mattered. If not, you’d learn that the heart could break infinitely. And the second lesson came almost immediately after...heartbreak happened on different levels and all caused various scars, some so great they never healed. You just learned to manage the pain.

“Nana!”

Turning back, I saw nothing but a blur of dark brown hair before she was clinging to me. Smiling, I hugged her back, placing my hand on her head.

“The princess is back in the castle.”

“Finally, someone who misses me.” She laughed, pulling back, standing eye level with me. Apparently, our heel height was the same today too. Despite the smile on her face, I could see a twig of familiar sadness in her green eyes.

“How was Wyatt?”

“Long story.” She shook her head. “How has it been with the great one?”

“Long story,” I repeated, nodding my head. “Now come on, I’m sure he’ll want to yell at me before dinner.”

“What now?” She groaned, walking with me toward the dining room.

There, all the way at end of the white clothed table, sat Ethan, cutting into his steak, while the butler poured wine into his glass.

“You’re both late,” he stated, his voice almost as emotionless as his green eyes, a trait both he and Donatella had inherited from their father.

“Here we go,” Donatella muttered to herself, walking me to my chair on the left of him. When she kissed my cheek and moved to take her seat at the right side of him, he paused, the marinated beef still on his fork, only an inch from his lips.

“How is Wyatt?”

“Do you care or are you asking just to remind me that I broke your law?”

He pretended to think for a moment. “Both.”

Sighing, I lifted my glass for wine because I sure as hell was not getting through this dinner without alcohol.

“I don’t know, Ethan. Why don’t you call and ask? His number hasn’t changed and you still have it in your phone.”

“So he’s coming back to beg forgiveness then?” He went on, obviously missing her point. Actually no, purposely missing her point. “Because that is the only way he’ll ever get a call from me.”

“Funny, he said the same.” She just had to go stoking the flames.

“Dona.” Before either of them went down this path, I intervened. “Did you hear your brother is getting married?”

Her eyes widened and her face relaxed as she turned to Ethan. “You’re what?”

“Speaking of that, I asked you to go see her, not our damn lawyer. I could have called the damn lawyer.”

“You. Want me. To go to prison to talk to her?” I said slowly, just to make sure I wasn’t killing a child who had lost his mind.

“It is important.”

“Then go your damn self—”

“WAIT!” Dona hollered, glaring at both of us. “Prison? Marriage? What the fuck are we talking about? Why the fuck do I not know? And how fucking dare you let me find out like this?”

“I’m the one getting married. How does that involve you?” Ethan asked her, and I didn’t know if I should cry or scream at his idiocy.

“Ho—how?” She gasped as the server brought out our food. However, in her rage she grabbed the glass and threw it, nearly hitting Ethan in the face, but he didn’t even flinch, letting it shatter on the wall. “GET OUT!”

They ran so fast they almost dropped the food. Pity. I was actually hoping to eat sometime tonight.

Ethan sighed. “Dona—”

“I have a twin brother who hates being a part of this family so much he ran off to Boston to become a doctor. You and your infinite wisdom told me not to worry because he’d be back. Five years later and he’s still not back, Ethan. So whenever I’m feeling a little down, I have to fly my ass to Boston, just so he could tell me he’s busy and only meet up for coffee. I shared a womb with him for eight months and the bedroom for almost twelve years, and now I get twenty minutes over a shitty cup of coffee. You know why it’s shitty? Because I don’t drink COFFEE!” she hollered, snatching the bottle of wine the waiter left on the table and filling her glass. “I do, however, drink wine. Thank God, because if not, I’d actual want to kill you, big brother. You’re getting married? You? The same person who does not allow anyone to touch his skin? Really? How is that going to work —”

“Sex is always an exception—”

Oh God. I didn’t want to hear that.

“That is not the point!” she screamed. “You...goddamn it, Ethan. You are so busy scheming and moving everyone around like they are damn chess pieces you forget we are fucking human beings! I didn’t even know you were seeing anyone—”

“I’m not.”

“He’s not.”

Both Ethan and I said at the same time.

Rising to her feet and grabbing her glass, she marched toward the door, saying before leaving, “Did you ever think this kinda sucks for me, Ethan? That just because I know you’re supposed to be a grown up and get married, and prove to everyone you can be everything Father was, doesn’t mean I’m happy about it? That giving up my chair to some random woman, whom you’ll have to put above me, sucks? That knowing everyone but me gets to stay a Callahan sucks?”

She looked over her shoulder at him, and Ethan, to his credit, looked back at her for a moment, frowning before reaching for his glass.

“I guess not,” she said, leaving.

“Good night.” He had the balls to say.

And I shook my head at him, Ethan the iron heart. “You could at least pretend to com—”

“Comfort her?” He snickered at that. “Nana, in this family Dona is the last person who needs comforting. She isn’t pissed that I didn’t tell her. She does not care. She’s pissed because she is now confronted with the fact that she, as she said, doesn’t get to be the queen Callahan. Everyone thinks because she smiles and laughs and acts so sweet that she’s actually the best of us three. But the truth of the matter is she is the child of Liam and Melody Callahan, which means like all of us she is calculating, cold, and ruthless. It’s the reason why Wyatt left. He couldn’t handle being second all

the time and so he's gone off to play hero. Dona...she'd kill for this seat, to be where I am. I didn't tell her because I was saving her the pain of waking the fuck up and realizing no matter how much I care about her, she will never control me. Now, do you want beef or chicken?"

"Chicken," I answered and reached for the bell, ringing it before placing it down.

"Good choice," he said and repeated it for one of the servers.

"Right away, sir."

When he reached for his fork and knife again I just sat in silence. I wasn't surprised. In all honesty, I was tired. Tired of all of them. But I had a promise to keep...and this was the fastest way to do it.

"Ivy O'Davoren. I'll go see her in the morning." I reached for my napkin, unfolding it and placing it on my lap.

He nodded. "Expect her to be hostile."

"Why?"

"She hates this family."

He's a masochist.

"And why is that?" I grabbed my drink.

Again he thought for a moment, sticking a piece of steak between his lips. "She believes we killed her whole family."

"Did we?"

He smiled and when he did you could see how handsome he truly was. Tall, toned, ivory skinned, with the deepest green eyes, like his father, and dark brown hair that was almost too perfect and yet suited him nicely. Women fell at his feet and most of the time he'd just walk over them as if he hadn't noticed. The colder he was, the more they loved him...but when he smiled, he looked so...innocent and sweet.

"What?" he asked me.

“Nothing.” I leaned back, making room for the server to put the plate down. “I was just thinking how handsome you look when you smile.”

“I know, that’s why I try to contain it,” he joked and it was that...that twig of humor that always reminded me he had a heart, he just kept in locked under ten feet of steel in the middle of the desert.

“This woman better be worth it.” For his plan...and for his heart. Arranged, a pawn, whatever, she had one hell of a life ahead of her. “And you still haven’t told me how you plan on getting her to not hate us.”

“By telling the truth and lying.”

I thought back to his father and for the first time since...since losing him...I wanted to smack him for leaving me with this mess.

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FOUR

“Whether we are man, exile or angel - It doesn't matter. For us all, the nature of truth is unforgiving.”

~ Jessica Shirvington

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IVY

“Let go of me!” I hollered and kicked as they carried me back into the private room for my lawyer visit...the lawyer I didn’t ask for. “I said let go! I have the right to deny legal counsel! Do you hear me?”

What kind of bullshit was this?

They just ignored me, buzzing the door open, carrying me all the way to my seat, and dropping me down. When the asshat bent down to tie me to the podium, I noticed it wasn’t the black lawyer across from me, but an old woman sitting very calmly, dressed in a dark purple coat, black sweater, with pearls around her neck, along with a black sun hat.

“So they gave up on the black man and sent a grandmamma to try and sign my soul away. It ain’t happening. Guard!” I yelled and the door opened. However, the guard paid me no attention. He simply walked over to the old lady with a tea cup.

“I’m sorry, we had no cream,” Jimmy said in the politest voice I’d ever heard. “Is there anything else I can get you, Mrs. Callahan?”

My head whipped back at the old woman and before I could help myself I tried to lunge at her and I would have ripped her head off her shoulders if it weren’t for the damn chains.

“Sit down!” Jimmy snapped back to his old self, already pulling out his taser.

“I’m quite fine. You may leave.”

“Are you sure, ma’am—”

The look she gave him made him swallow unnecessarily. He glared at me as if to say *behave* and walked toward the doors.

“You have some nerve—”

“Don’t speak. You only make yourself look imprudent.” She dared to interrupt me, pressing play on a tablet I didn’t even notice was in front of me, until just now, before picking up her tea cup.

The screen was fuzzy for a moment before finally focusing perfectly on...

“Daddy?” I sat up.

“Hey, birdy...” He smiled even though he looked...he looked just like I remembered. Blond-graying hair, brown eyes, and in need of a shave. Before he spoke again she paused it.

“What is this?” I sneered, glaring back at her.

“You believe we killed your family? Well, you’re wrong. I figured you wouldn’t believe us...luckily, your father used to be more reasonable—”

“Don’t talk about my father.”

“Fine, you don’t want to hear his final words. I’ll leave.”

“Wait.” I reached for the tablet. “Wait.”

Without another word, she pressed play again and I heard his voice for the first time in...in what felt like a lifetime.

“If you’re watching this I’m probably gone. The boss told me to make a whole bunch of these videos for you just in case...just in case something happened...he comes off as this hard-ass, but he’s a good man, or at the very least he gets what it’s like having a daughter...wait, ugh...sorry. This probably makes no sense and...sorry.”

The screen cut off.

“No—” But before I even got the word out, he was back on the screen again, this time in a different V-neck shirt, his hair as messy as ever.

“So I’m going to make this one video. You know I ain’t that good with words, birdy.” He winked at me. He always did that when he was nervous. “First. I want to apologize. Apologize for making you grow up around all of

this. For letting you suffer. I never wanted this for you. I wanted better, much better. But I couldn't...knowing what that bastard did to your mother." He bit his bottom lip, and I felt my tears burning my eyes. "If it weren't for the Callahans, I would've probably been dead sooner. Maybe you too."

My whole body relaxed, my mouth dropping open. "W-wh-what?"

"Yea. You heard me. The Callahans. I ain't no traitor. Keegan." He spat to his left. "That's right, poor ol' Uncle Keegan Finnegan. All of this is his fault. And why? What reason did he have to kill MY WIFE? 'Cause he wanted what the Callahans have! He's got no money, barely a last name, or connections, and yet he keeps saying how he's going to change things. My pop always said poverty fucks with you...makes you think you can do things you really can't and start selling your soul for things that are priceless." Again, he rubbed his chin, tears coming down his face.

"He was right. I never listened to him. Though maybe if I did I'd know how to read people better. It's my fault, birdy. My fault. I wasn't careful. I didn't protect your mom or your aunt...hell, I can barely protect you. So listen to me, you hear?" He sat up, pointing to the camera. "I don't know how much time I've got. But you ain't ever listened to me in your life. Listen now. Remember the place where the one-eyed owl and cat live? It's real. Go there. I've got some money stashed away. Take it and get the hell out of Boston. Don't talk to any of them, not Shay, not your cousins. They'd cut out your own kidney and try to sell it back to you. And lastly, listen, birdy, if you ever, I mean ever get in trouble, call the Callahans and tell 'em you're Sean O'Davoren's daughter. Okay? They got you. What I always say..."

"They don't make them any tougher than those from the Burren," I said at the same time he did, wiping my face on the corner of my shirt. When I

looked up the old lady just stared at me and so I stared back, unsure, not wanting to believe any of this.

“How do I know you didn’t make him say this?”

She shrugged. “We could’ve...but why would he tell you some secret place to pick up the money we paid him and not use a code to tell you he was being forced?”

“This is some sort of trick.”

“This is the truth and because you’ve convinced yourself we are the enemy for so long your brain can’t accept it...but, Ivy, did your father ever once directly tell you in private that the Callahans were to blame?”

I immediately wanted to say yes but nothing came to mind. Nothing. All the times in which he’d spoken out against the Callahans in public he’d never said anything when we were at home.

“I guess not. Fine, did he ever let you around your uncle or your cousins?”

Again I wanted to say yes, but my voice would not let me. As if I were dying, my whole life flashed in front of my eyes. How he’d always cut in when Uncle Keegan was talking to me. Or told me to study when my cousins came over. How he always just wrote it off as “guy stuff,” which pissed me off more. I thought he was trying to protect me from knowing against the Callahans not...

“No.” I shook my head. “No,” I repeated again, and she honestly looked worried. Not pitying me.

“Seven years ago, you came to Chicago with your stepsister, looking for evidence your father was murdered.” She didn’t need to ask because somehow, a photo of me and Rory caught at a tollbooth appeared on the screen. “You look surprised. Why? You went to almost every corner shop, mechanic and barber, you didn’t think we’d hear back?”

“I did,” I whispered, staring at photos of me that just appeared on the screen. It sent chills down my spine. They could do this. They could spy me on the streets. “I knew you’d hear and I figured—”

“To fearlessly ask directly...a last-ditch effort, which didn’t work.” She didn’t have to remind me. Those days would haunt me for the rest of my life. “You then went back to a bar where you drank your pain, drove drunk, and hit a young girl, paralyzing her from the waist down. You lost your scholarship at Boston U, your family went into debt trying to get you out, your fiancé left you, all because you wanted revenge so badly.”

My throat burned, my jaw clenched. Inhaling deeply, I nodded, owning up to it. “Yes. Yes, to all of it. I’m sure you have a full transcript of it and could ask the judge personally. I did something wrong and I’m owning up to it. And it isn’t I *wanted* revenge. It’s *want*. Present tense.”

Finished with her tea, she put the cup down. “You’re owning up to someone else’s crime.”

I froze at that. She didn’t reply. I glanced down at the screen again. On the corner of Bank and 5th, I saw the black Mustang rush down the dark road, just as Sarah Foster, I’d never forget her name, crossed the street, listening to her music and reading.

“Ah...” I gasped when I hit her. Her body went up on the dashboard and then rolled off, hitting the ground. I wanted to close my eyes but couldn’t, waiting to see myself. However, it wasn’t my blond hair...it was red. It was Rory. She came out of the car frantic, rushing to the girl, then looked around...in horror I watched as she pulled my blacked-out self from the passenger seat and into the front, closing the door before getting into my spot.

“How is that ownership feeling now?” She gutted what was left of me. “Your family isn’t in debt, by the way. The lawyer was a family friend of

theirs and they barely paid him anything. Your former fiancé is now married to your stepsister.”

“What?”

She stared at me and then just snickered, shaking her head. “I apologize. I figured they told you, but I forgot your *family* doesn’t seem to understand the definition of family. From start to end you were set up and abandoned. Your cousins are even using you, saying that the Callahans had you locked up for asking questions...your sense of duty didn’t seem to come to play there...but hey, none of us are perfect.”

I sat in silence as she rose to her feet.

“That’s enough for the day. I’ll come back tomorrow.”

Frozen, the tears I held back for seven years, for seven long painful years, poured out of my eyes to the point that they burned. With each passing moment, I hurt more and more to the point that I wanted to...I wanted to die. I think *I was* dying...

I didn’t even realize they were walking me back, until I walked by the phone rooms.

“My phone call,” I whispered, brushing the tears off my face with my cuffed hands. “I haven’t taken one in months. I need to make a call.”

I looked at Jimmy.

He nodded for them to take me.

I wanted to run. But I waited patiently, as patiently as I could as they opened the doors, gave me the card, and sat me behind the table. I wiped my nose with my hands before pushing the buttons...praying they wouldn’t insult me by not answering.

“Ivy?” Rory’s voice came over the line.

“Hey...” I tried to say cheerfully, but my throat was dry.

“You have amazing timing! We’re having a get-together. The whole family is here. Do you want to say hi?”

Licking my lips, I nodded even though she couldn’t see. “Sure. Can you put me on the speaker?”

“Guys, it’s Ivy!”

“IVY!” I heard a chorus of cheers and I had to bite back the sob threatening to rip through me, my whole body shaking in rage.

“How’s the big house? You got any—”

“Shut up, Elroy,” Rory yelled.

“Stay strong, all right? It’s almost over,” Cillian’s deep voice spoke up.

“Yea. We can’t wait for you to get home,” Shay, my stepmother, spoke up next.

And I waited and waited...but he didn’t speak.

“Ivy? You there?”

“Yea,” I replied, gripping the phone tightly. “I was waiting for Pierce to speak.”

They were all silent.

“Pierce,” I called. “You aren’t going to say hi? I feel bad enough not being able to congratulate you and Rory on your marriage.”

Silence.

“For fuck’s sake, find your balls and speak!” I hollered.

“I—we—Ivy. I’m sorry,” his bitch ass finally said.

“Ivy, nothing happened before. We were both so sad about you—”

“Rory, do me a favor and shut your fucking mouth and stop insulting me, you little cunt.” I hissed.

“Ivy!” her mother yelled at me. “We didn’t want you to find out like this but don’t be like this.”

And I just laughed. “Be like what? Pissed? Oh no, Shay, I’m not pissed. I’m motivated. So fucking motivated I’m shaking with anticipation. Maybe you all have forgotten who the bloody fuck I am. But don’t worry, I’ll remind each and every one of you—”

“Ivy, I know—”

“I KNOW EVERYTHING!” I screamed, trying to keep calm. “You all know what you did to me. How each one of you betrayed me. We were family, but you betrayed me and now...I’m going to come for you all. I might have been blind when I came here, but believe me, now I see.”

“And what can you do from a prison cell eight hundred miles away?” Cillian asked. They weren’t even scared...I was worth nothing to them. That was what I meant.

“Seven years ago, I told you vengeance knows no boundaries and has no expiration date. I still believe that. So watch your front because I’ll be out real soon.” Slamming the phone on the receiver, I sat clenching my fist.

I want them dead.

I want them all dead.

I was already sitting and waiting when she came in. I couldn’t sleep. I just waited, sitting in the darkness, no food, no water. Nothing mattered but this.

“Good morning.” She sat across from me, wearing a long-sleeved, short, gray dress under her gray coat, and her pearls.

“What do I need to do?” I asked directly.

She frowned, accepting her new cup of tea. “The first thing is to politely greet people when spoken to. Manners aren’t just for appearances.”

“Good morning...how was your evening? What do I need to do?”

“Now that you know the truth, you can’t even apologize.” She smirked, taking a sip of her tea. “Which makes you already like so many people in my family.”

“You’ve shattered my whole world...excuse me if I hardly feel thankful.” I snapped, really wishing these damn zip ties were off my hands. “I just feel...so goddamn angry!”

“You are a mess, Ivy O’Davoren.” She smiled and nodded at me. “An angry, impulsive, reckless, lost, and utter mess of a woman. Whose life was ruined not by the people you’ve devoted yourself to hating but your own family. If you didn’t feel angry I’d worry about your sanity.”

“I’m sure you could have phrased that nicer.”

“I could have. But I don’t want you to feel good while you’re locked up like an animal. I want to see if you’re willing to do anything to get out of this hellhole and get justice. Because, Ivy, I can make you one of the most powerful women in this country. Anyone who hurt you both in the past and present will beg for mercy. You will want for nothing ever again. Your father will rest assured, knowing the people who killed him and destroyed his family have been so thoroughly punished, it becomes a cautionary tale. But I can only do that if you’re sure.”

“I am. I’m sure. What do I have to do?” I said for the third time.

“Give up your last name.”

It was then that I was sure the devil was an old woman with a spectacular taste in fashion.

“I know that look.” She smirked. “But no, sweetheart, I’m not the worst. I’m just the old woman who’s been tasked to prepare you for the worst. So get scared now, let it out of your system, throw up if you need to, and when you’re done, we’ll get started.”

I swallowed the pocket of saliva in my mouth, sitting up now. "I'm fine."

"Brilliant." She opened her purse, taking out her phone to press only one button before looking back up at me. "Things are going to start happening very quickly. Is there anything you need?"

"I need?" I asked her.

She nodded. "Other than the obvious shower, shampoo, condition, wax, and...a lot. I can have them set you up in a private room. At least then you can shower and get rid of those horrid raccoon eyes. Food? Is there anything you want?"

"Food?"

"Please stop repeating everything I say." She frowned and then shook her head. "Fine. Don't worry about anything. I'll let your brain catch up before I ask any more questions. Just make sure to eat and sleep...this you is over."

She stood up and when she reached the doors, Jimmy ran back over to her like a fox with its tail between his legs.

"Ivy." Her tone changed...eerily so and much politer. "This is Mr. Keely. Mr. Keely, this is Ivy. I'm re-introducing you to her because whoever she was to you before no longer compares to who she is now. If she stubs her big toe, I'll blame you. If she's uncomfortable in any way, I'll blame you. If anyone knows I came here, I'll blame you. Am I clear?"

"Yes, ma'am." He nodded at her.

"Brilliant. Please don't forget, my grandson handles reminders very messily. I wouldn't even want to imagine how angry he'd be if something happened to his fiancée."

"His what?" Jimmy and I both said.

She didn't reply to him and just patted my head gently. "Remember, eat, sleep...and maybe brush your hair, dear."

Just like that she walked out, her heels clicking as she went.

"What the hell just happened?" I whispered.

"How the fuck should—" He paused, eyes wide when he looked back at me. "Ugh...I'll arrange your room...ma...Ms. O'Davoren. How about you go eat? We can have something brought to you."

No fucking way. If he didn't look like he was in so much physical pain just getting the words out, I'd think I was dreaming. He didn't bother asking anything else. Instead, he undid the zip ties around my wrists before reaching down and undoing the chains around my feet. Rubbing my sore wrists, I couldn't stop staring at him, wondering what alien had hijacked his body. He didn't even lift me up out of my chair.

"What day is it?" I asked.

"Tuesday."

I smiled. "It's spaghetti and meatballs at the caf today."

"Suit yourself," he muttered before speaking into his mic next. "Door."

The door slid open in front of us.

I walked out first and immediately put my hands to my sides. When I stepped into the hall, I was convinced...this was the twilight zone. Three men had to carry me, handcuffed and chained, into that room not even an hour ago. I could see them, Mr. Muscle Head, Mr. Hot Breath, and the creeper with blue eyes, on the other side of the glass windows. They all looked at me as if I were the strange one. I hadn't changed. I was still Ivy. They were the ones acting weird. They stared at me until I made eye contact, then pretended to be busy with something.

"Door," Jimmy said again once we came to the end of the hall.

I didn't realize we were in some other section of the prison until the door opened and I saw the control room.

"Walk quickly," he said but didn't rush me.

Nodding, I walked through fast, keeping my head down until I got to the metal stairs, which spiraled down until I got to the bottom.

"Door. General. One in," Jimmy said and the door opened, and finally I knew where I was...the cafeteria.

He, thankfully, didn't follow me in. And it was normal here, no one staring, so I quietly grabbed a tray and walked toward the line. I'd just placed the milk onto my tray when a pair of short, stubby hands reached out and took it.

"If it ain't Psycho Ivy, everybody!"

Aww, come on! I didn't have the energy for a fight today!

"Who'd you have to blow to get out of solitary—"

Before she could finish her sentence, someone grabbed her wrist, and we both looked up at this...middle-aged woman with olive skin and wavy black hair.

"Who the fuck are—"

The woman squeezed tighter, and I glanced around for the guards, but they were looking away...

"Non ho male a nessuno dal 1984...ma posso," she said to her, and I would have guessed it was Spanish but judging from the confused look on her face I would've been wrong.

"Translation." Another woman stepped up behind her. "Sit down, shut up before you get hurt, dwarf."

"It will take more than you two Italian hags to—" Dallas froze when she noticed that the two women who were her backup...didn't back her up. Instead, they ate their food in the corner. "Hey."

“Two? Count again,” the first woman said to her, the grip on her wrist unmoving.

I wasn’t sure when it happened or how it was happening, but the whole cafeteria was silent, which would be terrifying enough, if it weren’t for the scowls...the clear warning that came across at least a dozen of the women, from what I could count at least. The warning was a simple one: do you have a death wish?

Stunned, I looked at the only person reacting normally near me: Dallas, who looked ready to piss herself. Which must have been enough for the women because they let her arm go.

“Apologize,” the second woman said.

“Sorry,” Dallas said to me.

“And her milk?” the wavy-haired one demanded.

“Right,” Dallas muttered, putting the milk back on my tray. When they didn’t say anything more, she walked as fast as she could back to her table. She wasn’t the only one. The Italian women did the same without a word to me either.

I couldn’t move. I didn’t really know what to do.

And apparently, I didn’t have to do anything either. Because no one walked in front of me. Instead, some other people put their dessert on my tray, causing me to move again, but on autopilot, not even blinking when the woman behind the counter gave me much more food than she normally does. Lifting the tray, I turned around to look for somewhere to sit when this voice entered my mind...

You can sit anywhere, Ivy.

Testing my theory, I walked to the fullest table I could find and just stood there. Not even a second later, they got up, not one or two, but all of them...every last one of them got up.

Sitting down, I took the straw and stuck it into my milk before looking back up. Just like the guards, they stared and avoided my gaze.

And as I drank, watching them as they watched me, something clicked.

Ah...so this is power, I thought.

Power. Influence. People feared and respected stuff like that. I knew that...

I'd just...never experienced it...

No. That was a lie. I had experienced it every time they'd thrown me into that dark cell, every time they'd patted me down, or when I'd lost a fight, or when the judge had thrown me in here, or when the shitty lawyer they'd given me had thrown me to the wolves, and when my dad had lost his life.

I'd experienced power and influence.

I'd just never had any myself.

Now I did.

So I took comfort in their fear. Because it meant one thing...the Callahans really were as powerful as everyone used to say. I could keep my promise.

They'll pay. I swear it, Daddy.

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FIVE

“She had not known the weight until she felt the
freedom.”

~ *Nathaniel Hawthorne*

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IVY

“Ms. O’Davoren.”

“Ms. O’Davoren?”

“Ma’am?”

“Huh?” I lowered my gaze from the sky above me and focused on the lawyer, Avery Barrow he said his name was, standing in front of the black Mercedes in his suit.

“I understand. It’s just the sky...but after years of seeing it through windows or wires it doesn’t seem like *just* the sky anymore?”

I didn’t reply, stuffing my hands into the pockets of my old hoodie they’d returned to me. He took a step to the side for me, and the driver of the car opened the door for me to enter. Glancing back at the fences behind me once more before closing my eyes, I counted to five and opened them again...

This isn’t a dream.

“Whenever you’re ready—”

“I’m ready,” I said softly, sliding into the backseat of the car, expecting him to follow, but the door closed once I entered.

Instead, he walked around to the passenger seat while the blond-haired driver got behind the wheel.

“Is there anything you wish to listen to?” he asked, and I looked at the lawyer, who texted on his phone.

“He’s talking to you, Ms. O’Davoren.”

I glanced back at the driver, who met my glaze in the mirror briefly, waiting. Shaking my head no, I watched as the prison building shrank in the

background...the fences stretched out. It wasn't until we got to the four-way stop did it finally come to the end, and I felt really...

"Yes, ma'am," the lawyer spoke into the phone. "Thank y—"

He stopped abruptly, obviously hung up on, and scrolled through his phone again.

"Was it Mrs. Callahan?" I asked.

"No. Ms. Callahan," he replied. "Mrs. Callahan won't call until you're ready."

Frowning, I shifted. "Are you trying to be vague on purpose?"

"No. Is there something you'd like me to clarify, ma'am?"

"Seriously? You've got like thirty years on me. Just call me Ivy. Enough of this Ms. O'Davoren or ma'am—"

"You still haven't gotten it," he stated, never once looking up. "You are no longer just Ivy."

"No, I get it, the Callahan family is rich and powerful and you don't want to upset them. But I'm not—"

"Not wanting to upset them?" He finally put his phone down and looked back at me. He looked like he was thinking it over for a moment before nodding. "You're right. Offending them is dangerous. However, that isn't why either I or Thomas here address you as we do. It isn't why you were suddenly protected in there...that wasn't fear, it was respect."

"Respect?" My lips turned up out of a mixture of amusement and shock.

He nodded seriously. "Seven years...that's how long you've been in prison. Whatever the reason, being so young, that is a tragedy...I'm sure just one of many in your life. And while you may feel like you have the worst, you do not. There are many people just like you. People cheated, victimized, abused, forgotten, the list goes on. Why? Because the world isn't black or white. Sometimes you need to do bad to do good and worse to

do even better. The Callahans made themselves the worst. The money, the fame, the power, was built on blood and bones. Why? Because no one else could do it. And in doing so, a kid who grew up living in Chicago's most ghetto neighborhood, with an abusive father and junkie for a mother, came out of prison, with a full ride to college, where he became a lawyer. In doing so, helped other kids, kids no one even looked twice at, get reduced sentences, off death row, a second chance at life. So when I say you are not just Ivy, I'm saying you are now part of a family, that yes, has hurt many people, most deserving, some debatable, and surely helping *many* more. Anything you'd like to add, Thomas?"

The driver just shrugged. "They ain't sent me to any college or anything. And I've heard things...but..." He met my eyes in the rear-view mirror again. "After what they did for my kids, I'd die if they needed me to."

"Sounds like a cult. They take care of you and your family so you'd give up your life," I muttered to myself, feeling ganged up on. The Callahans...I'd heard things too.

"By that definition, any government aid in America is also a cult."

I sulked at him. "You're definitely a lawyer, all right."

They both smiled at my obvious loss and said nothing more. I closed my eyes for what I thought was only a second. The car came to a stop, and Mr. Barrow was calling me again.

"Ms. O'Davoren."

I scowled, opening one eye.

"We're here." He nodded to his left.

Looking out the window, I saw the glass doors of a very fancy looking hotel. Sitting up, he stepped out of the passenger side, Thomas already standing outside. He didn't open the door until Mr. Barrow made it to my

side. Stepping out, the first thing I felt was the harsh wind, like ice pricking through me. Wrapping my arms around myself, I just watched as the valet took the keys of the Bentley in front of us and parked it near three Lamborghinis.

“Follow me. Don’t make eye contact with anyone,” Mr. Barrow stated, walking up the red carpet, and I did as he directed, but once we stepped into the warmth of the cream and gold marble lobby with a massive chandelier hanging above us, I couldn’t help but whisper.

“What are we doing here?”

He didn’t answer...so much for answering my questions.

I felt like a rat that had entered a five-star kitchen. People, not just any people, people who wore diamonds the size of doorknobs around their figures, stared at me confused as we walked toward the elevators. Mr. Barrow said nothing. He didn’t even look fazed as we waited for the elevator.

“Good morning.” A bellboy dressed in black and gold scared the shit out of me when the doors opened.

“What floor?” he asked, looking at Mr. Barrow when we entered, pretending not to notice me.

“Penthouse,” he replied, handing him a black card, which the bellboy used to swipe the reader before pushing the button.

“Thank you, sir.” The bellboy handed the card to him.

Mr. Barrow didn’t reply.

The ride was silent and fast. We went from the lobby all the way to the top in less than a few seconds, and when the doors opened, we came face-to-face with two men dressed in black suits, standing in front of the suite.

Mr. Barrow stepped out first and then moved for me to get off.

“Uh...enjoy your stay. Thank you for choosing the Troposphere Hotel,” the bellboy stammered, confused, but closed the door behind me once I was out.

The guards, both of whom were Asian, nodded at me before opening the double doors of the suite.

“This all screams shady—holy shit.” I gasped at the room—no, palace—which had the most stunning view of the city. Everything was gold. The chairs, the desk, even the lamp stands.

“Holy shit.” I turned as an Asian woman in a fitted burgundy skirt, diamond studded belt, and blue print blouse stepped inside from the patio. Her black hair was pulled back into an updo. There was not one blemish on her skin, like she was photoshopped in real life.

“Not the worst reaction my hotel has ever gotten.”

“Your hotel?” I repeated.

“Thank you, Avery. I’ll take it from here,” she said to him.

“No problem, Ms. Callahan.” He nodded at her and then at me. “Ms. O’Davoren, it was a pleasure.”

Just like that, before I could say anything, he walked out of the suite and I was trying to catch up. When I remembered what he’d said in the car.

“Ms. Callahan?” My head whipped back at her.

“Do I not look like a Callahan?” she asked, taking a seat in the throne-like chair, crossing her legs elegantly.

“No...I mean, not that...ugh. I’m sorry, do you mind letting me know what I’m doing here? I thought I was going to see Mrs. Callahan...well, the older Mrs. Callahan. Or...how many Ms. Or Mrs. Callahan’s are there?”

“We’ll get there. As for my grandmother.” She tilted her head to the side. “Do you really think you’re suited to meet her?”

The tone in her voice was sharp...and familiar.

Standing up straighter, I didn't back down. "Yes. I've already met her —"

"Incorrect. Grandmother chose to see you because she is nice like that and overlooked your obvious flaws."

Kind is hardly the word I'd use. "I'm sorry, what? Flaws? Just because I'm not all dolled up doesn't mean—"

"Incorrect again," she cut me off for the second time, glaring back. "How you present yourself now means everything...for you it is the only thing that matters. When my grandmother met you, you were no one. Now you are on your way to being someone. That means before she sees you again, you need to look the part and not like a starved teenager from 1985. Even I couldn't bring myself to walk you here."

"I'm sorry prison doesn't come with a Bloomingdale's card!"

"You're forgiven, that's why you were sent to me first." She smiled even as I glared at her. "Now, would you sit so we can get started?"

"I'll stand."

"I wasn't asking, Ivy."

"Is everything all right, ma'am?" A maid, dressed in some of those ridiculous French outfits, came out of the bedroom.

The woman looked at me, waiting, and so I did as she said and sat on the couch.

"Yes, tell them we're ready." She directed the maid.

"Are you going to tell me your name or do I have to call you ma'am too?" I asked, reaching for the apple from the bowl of fruits on the table.

"Don't be ridiculous." She smiled, adjusting the ring on her finger. "We're about to be family soon. You can call me Nari. I'm Ethan's cousin."

"Ethan?" I repeated. "Is that the grandson I'm supposed to be marrying or whatever?"

She stared at me as if I were crazy and then just shook her head. “One step at a time.”

And not a second later, the doorbell, which I didn’t even realize hotels had, rang. The maid walked to it and opened the door, allowing at least a dozen people to enter. They came like soldiers, standing in front of us for inspection.

“The first three will take care of your nails, waxing, and facials.” She pointed at the three women, who just nodded, and she went on directing them. “I want her nails an opaque cream color. You’ll need to add length but not much, oval-shaped. For the waxing and facial...”

She looked back at me, and I just stared at her, not sure what half of the words coming out of her mouth meant. So I bit into the apple...annoyed at how good it tasted and how much I enjoyed it. It was just a damn apple.

“Her eyebrows are full. Keep them that way with a slight arch. Nothing drastic or strong. Everything else removed. Luckily her skin isn’t the worst, thank Jesus. She’ll need a laser facial, though, and smoothing mask. Do you have bumps anywhere?”

“Huh?” I licked my lips, looking at her.

“Bumps? Acne? Zits? Anything on anywhere?” she asked again. “Don’t waste time and be embarrassed, just say it. They aren’t anyone.”

Jeez, they are standing right there. And yet when I looked at them they didn’t even look fazed, just waiting.

“Ugh, I have this ingrown hair under my chin—” I said. When I did, she grabbed my chin, lifting it up and nodding.

“Take care of it,” she told the women, who nodded. “Anything else?”

“Do bruises count?”

Her eyes widened. “Where?”

“My ribs and a few on my legs—”

“Make it a full body laser, and also add buttermilk to her bath,” she said to them. “I want it done every day she’s here and also send a message to the head maid at the mansion for the same treatment to be done once she arrives.”

“Yes, ma’am,” one of them spoke out, and when Nari nodded they took a step to the right and a slim, tall woman stood alone.

“Her teeth—”

“My teeth?” I put my hand over my mouth. “I hate dentists.”

“I can tell,” the bitch shot back and then looked at the woman.

“Whiten, and while I see nothing wrong with perfection, the Irish... well, they don’t need her to be perfect. Don’t cut her teeth to be seamlessly straight...but as close to it wouldn’t be bad.”

Did this woman just say cut? And teeth? What the hell?

Next up was one short man, who stood waiting for his orders.

“Drop your hoodie,” Nari said to me.

Doing what she asked, I watched as both of them grimaced.

“What?” I asked, running my hands through my blond hair.

“You can’t be serious.” Nari sighed deeply. “What have you been doing to your hair?”

“Wash, dry, repeat...again prison—”

“Isn’t an excuse for this one. I’m sure they have a comb at least.” She shook her head and looked at the small man. “Obviously, we’ll need to take care of the knots and length. If you must add, cut it and add extensions, but I’d prefer not. She’ll need whatever miracle you can pull but keep it long.”

He nodded and stepped to the side for the final four, two men and two women, to stand in front of her.

“Clothes,” Nari told me. “Stand.”

“You told me to sit.”

She stared, waiting, and I got up. When I did the two women came over.

“We’re going to measure you, ma’am,” they said to me. I made a face and just nodded, lifting my arms up and out, allowing them to do their thing.

“She’ll need shoes, heels nothing less than three and a half inches. Nothing more than five.”

“Five? I’m already tall for a girl!”

“Ethan’s six foot four.” She said it as if that was the only thing that mattered.

“And if I can’t walk in these shoes?”

“I’ll teach you. Can I continue now?” she asked but didn’t wait for me to reply before going on. “Also get her bedroom and bathroom slippers, monogrammed IC. For the clothes, enough for at least a month. I’m sure Grandmother will settle the rest. Have those sent directly to the mansion. She’ll need at least a week’s worth here. That includes nightgowns, underwear, and a few dresses. Our biggest priority now will be the gowns for Ethan’s party. I want those custom. Contact whomever and tell them we need them for Saturday. Any questions?”

No one spoke.

“Brilliant. Now please save her.” She smiled at me, leaning back in her chair.

“This way, ma’am.” The first three, in charge of the waxing and all that, said to me as they led me to the bathroom.

I couldn’t help but wonder.

What the hell had I signed myself up for?

And what in the hell would I look like after this was over?

NARI

“Well?”

Sighing, I poured myself a glass of scotch.

“Nari.”

“She’s not Callahan material,” I told him truthfully, looking out at the city lights. “That said, she’s not a pushover and has no problem speaking her mind even if she’s a little scared. And even though she’s scared she’s determined to do whatever she needs to do. Will she be loyal after she gets what she wants? I honestly don’t know. But she isn’t like other women, in that she’s blinded by the money. I could tell she was pretty, which is proof that she’ll look gorgeous when I’m done with her.”

“I hardly care about that.”

“You’re lying,” I muttered, sipping the liquid slowly. “Whether you realize it or not. There is no man who doesn’t want a beautiful woman on their arm. Especially the one who will be theirs permanently.”

“Anything else worth noting?”

I glanced back at the room. “She’s...”

“Are you going to finish your sentence or should I wait with bated breath?”

I faced the city again, replying, “She has no idea who you are. She knows the Callahan name. I’m sure she has some idea about the family, but other than that, she doesn’t understand the severity of it all.”

“Then explain it to her. I don’t have time to baby her.”

“No, you don’t...but you’re going to have to find time for a lot of things because she’ll be your wife, and that means for the rest of her life people will be after her. We all know how lonely the mansion can be.”

“So nothing else worth noting. Good night.” He hung up.

Putting the phone down, I finished off my drink and put the glass down.

“Ma’am?”

I turned around to see the hairstylist. “You’re done?”

“As much as I could do for the night. She demanded to sleep. She’s in pain,” he said.

“Fine. Leave.”

Nodding, he called the rest of them out of the room.

I waited for them all to leave before walking into her room. She lay on the bed, curled up in a ball, dressed in only her robe.

“Not bad,” I said as her legs were now smooth, along with her toes and fingernails. The mask on her face made it hard for me to see how her skin was there, but I was sure it would be better. Her hair was up in rollers.

“I was waxed in places I didn’t know needed to be waxed,” she whispered, staring up at the ceiling.

“You’re welcome,” I said back to her, taking a seat on the edge of the bed.

Tilting her head, her blue eyes, which looked so much more striking without her cat hair on her face, focused on me.

“So if I went to this Ethan the way I came here he’d think I was ugly.”

“He wouldn’t think of you at all,” I replied honestly. “For some reason women these days want men to love them the way they are naturally... while the thought is nice, in reality it means love me even if I put in no effort. Why? If you put no effort into taking care of yourself, even your own body rejects you and breaks down, so why demand that on another human being? Getting dolled up, as you put it, is only seen as negative by people who for whatever reason are unable to do so themselves. We judge books by covers. We judge restaurants and hotels by the décor. We judge. Accept it and make sure you are judged by the worth you believe you are.”

Sighing, she sat up, crossing her legs. “And by marrying him I’m worth a lot.”

“Today we spent almost a million on you.”

“What?” Her eyes went wide.

I nodded. “That million is like a penny dropped in the family vault...I only told you so you’d know that yes, you’re worth a lot.”

“I’ve hated your family for a long time.” She hung her head down. “I cursed you all every day of my life. I grew up with people who cursed you all. The Callahans, the Irish thieves, murderers...”

“Mobsters.” I finished for her.

“So it’s true.” She shook her head. “So you guys really sell drugs?”

“I own hotels,” I repeated back instantly.

And she rolled her eyes. “Yea. Yea.”

I smiled. “You’re just like my daughter.”

“You have a daughter?”

I lifted my finger for her to see the ring on my hand.

“But your name is—”

“Ms. Callahan?” I answered, nodding. “Yes. I’m Nari Callahan, the adopted daughter of Neal Callahan, Ethan’s uncle. My mother married him when I was young. He legally made me his daughter. My mother, who was once so poor she and her brother fought over food, rose to be the wife of a Callahan, a position she was often scorned for, and I was often harassed, of course only behind our backs. None of them dared say it to our faces. I knew the moment I got old enough I was never giving up my name. It was the only link I had to this family. Of course, my grandmother and cousins would always love me. However, the moment I changed my name I’d be no one again. My husband understands.”

“Ugh...” She groaned. “You know you’re the third person today who’s tried to make it seem like I was marrying into royalty or something.”

“Look around, Ivy,” I said, rising to my feet. “You are. If you struggle trying to merge the Callahan family you’ve always heard about and the one you’re seeing now, then just think of it that way. The Callahan family is American royalty. You are marrying the king. And in order to be a queen, you’ll need to get waxed in places you’ve never heard of, and get poked and prodded up and down and twice over. You’ll be expected to smile even though you want to scream and say everything is fine even when the sky is on fire...because that’s what queens do. They make beauty look effortless and fear pointless.”

As I walked toward the door, she asked, “When do I get the Callahan handbook to profound speeches? So far everyone has outspoken me, and my dad used to say I’m sharp-tongued.”

“It’ll be my wedding gift.”

Closing the door behind me before she could talk again, I glanced down at the ring on my finger and reminded myself that...

I loved my husband.

But I’d never let go of the name Nari Callahan.

Exiting the penthouse, both of the guards nodded at me. I entered the elevator, taking out my phone. It only had to ring once before he answered.

“And here I thought someone forgot about me.”

“I did not. Not all of us have free time to just lounge around all day.”

“Excuse you. First of all, after the stressful life I’ve lived, there is nothing wrong with resting a lot. Secondly, I don’t even get to rest now that I’m a bar and grill owner—ouch!” he hollered. “We own a bar and grill!”

Smiling, I shook my head. They never changed. “Dad, you and Mom might want to hold off on the opening. Ethan’s getting married soon.”

“When did you all get so old? Just yesterday you were all kids fighting over who got to get on the back of my motorcycle.”

“You let them on the back of your motorcycle?” My mom snapped at him.

“You can’t be angry about that now! It was ages ago.”

“Oh really, and not *just yesterday*?”

I could listen to them like this forever.

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SIX

“Whoever believes that great advancement and new benefits make men forget old injuries is mistaken.”

~ *Niccolò Machiavelli*

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IVY

“Holy shit!” I yelled, clasping my hands over my mouth, turning around to face the team behind me, and all I could say was, “Holy fucking shit!”

“Miracles do exist,” Nari replied, looking me up and down, then reaching into her purse to pull out debt cards and handing them to one of the people. “They go by the names Visa and Express.”

“The swelling really went down.” I leaned into the mirror, kind of scared of myself. It took three days for every single bump and blemish to be lasered away. All the bruises were gone too. I looked...I looked, well, like Nari, not physically but effortlessly beautiful like she said. “My hair bounces!”

“Okay, now you’re being embarrassing,” Nari said, signing the receipts as I ran my hand through my golden hair. I’d never used the word gold for my hair. But after they’d done their magic that was what it looked like, streams of gold sprouting out of my head. I was beautiful...really beautiful.

“Come on, let’s go.”

“Go?” I looked at her, everyone else already leaving.

She nodded, handing me a yellow clutch, which matched the yellow heels I was wearing perfectly. Both were “pops” of colors, added to the long-sleeved gray Carmen Marc Valvo Pleated Scallop Dress I wore. Words I still didn’t understand, but whatever.

“I’m glad you like it. However, right now I’d like to see how everyone else reacts. Come on,” she said, walking to the door.

“Everyone else?”

“People in the hotel. Think of it like a road test while we get brunch,” she said. When I stepped into the hall, the two men who stood guard behind

me moved for the first time in three days, or at least I saw them move for the first time, to stand beside us...me...while Nari called for the elevator. It arrived quickly, and the same bellboy stood waiting.

“Good afternoon.” He nodded at us and his eyebrows came together when he looked at me. He stared even as I walked to stand behind him, his gaze meeting mine in the reflection of the elevator doors. Finally, when we neared the ground floor of the elevator he shook his head as if he’d ridded himself of whatever he was thinking.

“Have a good day,” he said when we got off.

“That was good,” Nari replied, standing beside me. “He came to the conclusion there was no possible way you could be the same woman who was brought up three days ago.”

“He was the test?”

“Part one.” She nodded and then looked down the lobby. “This is part two.”

I didn’t know what she meant and followed her toward the hotel restaurant. I was so busy doing my best to match her pace and not twist my ankle that I didn’t pick up on the looks I was getting until she pointed it out.

“When you first came here people stared at you because you didn’t look like you belonged,” she said, and I nodded. “Now the men are staring at you because they’re attracted to you and the women are annoyed you’re stealing their spotlight.”

I glanced around and caught more of those stupid leers guys did when they thought you were interested in them. I didn’t notice the girls because they weren’t looking or looking out of the corner of their eyes. It wasn’t like everyone stopped to stare at me, but there were people who did. Some were even looking at her.

“Welcome, ladies,” the hostess said at the restaurant entrance. “Table for —”

“Two,” Nari replied, and the woman nodded, leading us back through the restaurant until we sat by a glass waterfall.

“Your server will be right with you,” the woman said to us before leaving as we sat.

“Do people not know you own this hotel?” I asked.

She lifted the glass, inspecting it, which should have been a dead giveaway, but then again she could just come off uppity. “We opened this hotel last year. I’m sure they don’t know and it’s better for me to inspect when...”

“What?” I asked when she stopped speaking.

She shook her head. “We aren’t here to talk about me. Congrats, you now look good enough to be seen out with me in public. Now we need to work on your education.”

Oh no. “Please don’t tell me you’re going to have to teach me about salad forks or something.”

“Hardly. Whatever you want to eat your salad with is your choice. This is far more important,” she replied, lifting her hand out, and one of the guards, who were surprisingly easy to forget about, handed her a tablet and me one as well.

“The family,” she said and a family tree appeared on the screen. The first photo of... “My grandmother, Evelyn Callahan.”

Beside the picture was a photo of a handsome young man, maybe in his mid-forties.

“Sedric. My grandfather. He was murdered when Ethan was a baby. None of us knew him, but Evelyn visits his grave every week,” she said with ease.

“She really loved him,” I whispered, seeing all the photos of them together.

“Yea,” she said as if it was nothing and clicked to the next picture of three men. “Sedric and Evelyn had three children. Neal, my father, their first son. I, as I told you, was adopted. And my parents later had a son, whom they named after my grandfather, Sedric. He is currently the starting pitcher for the Chicago Cubs, something my father will brag about to anyone who will listen.”

“He’s so—”

“We’re about to eat. Don’t say hot or cute. I’ll puke,” she said, flipping to the picture of another handsome man with brown eyes.

“This is Declan Callahan. He’s not Sedric and Evelyn’s son, but their nephew. However, they raised him after both his parents were gunned down. He’s married too.” She scrolled to this beautiful dark-skinned woman. “Coraline, they also have one adopted daughter, Helen. She is currently the head of technology at WaveTree and handles all cyber security for the family. Think Tony Stark, without Ironman...and, well, black and female.”

“So ingenious, cocky, and—”

“An infuriation to her co-workers but simultaneously also hard not to love.” She nodded, flipping to the next picture. “Her younger brother is Darcy, the starting point guard with the Chicago Bulls. He and my brother are close, obviously because of their love of sports, but also because they are rivals. Apparently, there can only be one number one athlete in the family and city.”

“People must love them.” I grinned, seeing a picture of them running through the city. They were both handsome with their number nine jerseys.

“Exactly,” she said.

I glanced up.

“Darcy and Sedric, by merely playing a sport, bring good press. People hear a negative story about us and then see them and think, ‘but they’re such good boys, they must come from good families,’ on top of the fact that they are both bi-racial, with their parents still happily married, people feel good. In their minds, racism is dead, equality is here, and anyone can fulfill their dream.”

“I was starting to feel good till you started shitting all over my rainbow.” I frowned. Jeez, it was like she had this unbelievable ability to ram reality down your throat.

“You don’t need to see this family through rose colored glasses. You need to see it for what it is,” she replied, and I leaned back into my seat.

“I hardly doubt they both play sports because they care about the family image.”

“And you’d be wrong. When both of them were young they went to Ethan after hearing he’d take over as the head of the family and let him know they’d always be loyal to him. You see, people are always looking for cracks in the family to get in through. My father’s first wife betrayed the family, and...she’s gone.”

“Did he—”

“Don’t ask, don’t tell,” she shot back. “Anyone could set them up. Make it seem like they are also betraying the family. Ethan, back then, told them simply, make me look good and have fun doing it. Play a sport. An arena, which can also have fans, be treated like superstars, and never be linked to anything they aren’t meant to be in. I inherited my father’s hotels. I don’t need people to fan over me, only respect. Helen is the same. We are all in our own spheres, so we don’t ever step on each other’s toes. It’s not a happy accident but by design...Ethan’s design.”

“All of you are doing careers he told you to do?”

She nodded as if that wasn't creepy. “He grew up with us. Our parents were busy. He watched over us all, and as we got older, as we got more worried about what our lives were going to be like when we were adults, he... he knew each of us better than we knew ourselves. He knew Helen was a computer genius and told her to keep at it. He knew the boys liked attention, competition, and sports. I'm bossy. *I like being bossy*. Why not be a boss? You think it's weird and yet we're probably the only family in America who has monthly dinners and never misses a birthday or holiday with extended family.”

When she said it like that it didn't seem as creepy.

“Finally,” she said and flipped to a photo of a gorgeous couple, the man with green eyes and brown hair, the woman with long black hair and big brown eyes. “Ethan's parents, Liam and Melody Callahan, the previous king and queen...both dead.”

I froze. Just staring at them, their photos, from what looked to be a magazine spread, I wasn't sure if it was fake or not, but they looked at each as if they were the only two people on the planet.

“Melody...total badass,” she whispered, and I looked up to see her staring at the photo on her tablet too. “If there was a glass ceiling within fifty feet of her it shattered automatically. She and Liam were arranged to be married because her father was the head of the Italian mafia...until she took over.”

“Wait...what?” I whispered and then remembered the two Italian women who'd protected me when back at the prison.

“It's a long story. If I started, I'd need at least four novels to finish,” she replied, tapping the photo. “To summarize, when they got married, they merged the Irish and Italian mafia, in doing so crushing everyone else in

their path. She later moved to public life, becoming governor, and was so loved, people hoped she'd run for president. But she said Chicago was her home and if she wanted to live in a giant white house she'd paint her house white. She died due to a sudden cardiac attack from a car accident...Liam, her husband, was crushed. It was the darkest time in our family. I can still remember him the week after. You could hear his screams throughout the house, and then it got quiet. He'd drink himself to sleep...my father and Uncle Declan kept suicide watch. After her funeral he barely spoke to anyone and visited her grave every day until he died a week after the twins turned eighteen. Ethan was nineteen."

I reached for my glass of water, not sure what to say. My throat hurt badly, even more so when I looked at the couple.

"They had three children. Wyatt Sedric Callahan, who's currently a trauma surgeon at Boston Medical."

I wanted to say beauty ran in the family but then again, seeing as how I'd been transformed, I couldn't really believe it was genetics. Either way, Wyatt was handsome. Tall, with deep brown eyes, brown bedhead hair, and a five o'clock shadow. He was rugged in a way and relaxed. So far, he was the only person I'd seen who didn't wear suits. If he wasn't in scrubs, he'd be wearing jeans and a sweater.

"His twin sister is Donatella Aviola Callahan."

Ugh... she was pretty much her mother but with green eyes. In other words, even more stunning.

"Let me guess, she's like a supermodel?" I muttered.

"No. Donatella is a novelist," she replied, completely catching me off guard.

"An author? Her?"

“No one knows. She writes under a pen name. Everyone thinks she’s just the family princess, but her work is pretty famous.” She tapped again, getting to the last photo. “Last but not least, your future husband, Ethan Antonio Giovanni Callahan, the head of the Irish and Italian mafia, and the Callahan family.”

Fuck me.

Ugh, not like that...well...no, I just meant. Holy shit. I glanced back up at her.

“Yea, that’s why I saved him for last.” She winked, turning off the tablet and handing it back to the guard, who once again I forgot was there. “Tell them they can bring the food now.”

What are you doing, Ivy?

I was getting sucked in and distracted...

It didn’t matter what he looked like or what any of them did.

“It doesn’t matter,” I whispered. “I’m not putting myself through all of this for him...for any of you. I’m here for one reason only...my father...for revenge.”

“Then you’re in the right place. We specialize in vengeance. But...” she said as the server put the plates in front of us.

“But?” I repeated when he walked away.

“Can you handle it?”

“What?”

“Ivy.” She leaned in. “Joining hands with Ethan doesn’t mean he’ll go in with a bat and hurt whoever hurt you...he’s a student of Machiavelli. He’ll tear them down slowly and then wipe them from the face of the earth.”

I leaned in as well. “I know my unsophisticated demeanor often makes people look down on me. I also know people think I am weak, but Nari,

I've read *The Prince* too. Machiavelli once said 'I love my city more than my soul.' And as such, no sacrifice is too small. Your grandmother asked me to give up my name. I said okay. You told me to cut my teeth and rip the hair from my body. I said okay. Marriage for the Irish is forever. Which means, a man I do not know will own every part of me, indefinitely, and still I said okay. I don't care how he does it...as long as he does it."

NARI

"Well, then I guess nothing else can be said," I replied, lifting the water to my lips, and she reached for her fork. I watched him, through the frosted glass of the waterfall, rise to his feet, button up his suit jacket, and walk toward the exit.

The king had heard what he'd needed to hear...

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SEVEN

“Tonight the world is yours, as am I.”

~ *Melissa de la Cruz*

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ETHAN

“Knock knock.”

I glanced toward her and she smiled, dressed in a long, tight black dress, the back of which was open, making it a little too revealing for my liking.

“Are you going to a funeral or auditioning for queen of the damned?” I asked, reaching for my bowtie.

“You’re being mean,” she stated, walking further into my closet and taking the bowtie from my hands. “And here I came to tie your tie for the last time.”

“If anyone heard you they’d think you had a big brother complex.” I smirked at her, and she rolled her eyes, lifting my collar up more in order to put the tie around. “Dona, you know—”

“Yea, I do.” She glanced up at me and smiled back. “You won’t forget about me.”

“Not that. I’m going to totally forget about you. Just like you’ve totally forgotten you are terrible at tying bowties.”

She paused and like always opened her mouth to curse me, but couldn’t bring herself to, closing her mouth and biting her lip. She tied the bowtie as if she were tying shoelaces.

“There you go, asshole!” She snapped, spinning on her heels and walking to the door.

“Dona.”

“What?” she hollered.

“If I ever forget about you, kill me.”

She crossed her arms. “Swear it.”

“I swear,” I said without hesitation, and she nodded, walking out. She didn’t need more than that. Undoing the mess she did and retying the damn bowtie, I stepped out of my closet to see Toby waiting with my suit jacket.

Walking to him, I slid my left arm then my right into it, standing in front of the mirror to adjust my cufflinks.

“Where is it?” I asked, and he lifted the velvet box for me to see.

Taking it from his hands and opening the box, I stared at the teardrop-shaped ring set in rose gold. I knew nothing about rings, but the diamond was big enough. Closing the box, I placed it back into my pocket.

“She’s in the guest room,” he informed, and I didn’t move. “Can I say something as...your friend?”

My eyebrow rose as I looked at him through the mirror. “My friend?”

“Forgive me. I meant the person who’s stood beside you for almost twenty years.”

“If you must,” I replied, noting his sarcasm.

“She’s terrified,” he replied, and I turned around, facing him. “I don’t care what she says. She has no idea who you are, and tonight you’ll be showing her off as your fiancée. Don’t be yourself.”

“Excuse me?”

“Or be less of yourself as much as you possibly can.”

“You do realize it’s because of the fact that you’ve stood beside me for almost twenty years that I’m not taking your head off right now, correct?”

He nodded. “Which is why I’m going to keep talking. You have a tendency to come off...cold, daunting, and threatening. She isn’t the enemy...she’s family.”

“Are you done?”

“No, but I’m guessing that’s all I’ll be able to get in tonight.”

“So you do have a brain,” I said as I walked toward the door.

He, still using that brain of his, walked over as well, opening it and allowing me to walk out first. When I did, I could see the guards standing outside her door only a few paces down the hall.

Daunting and threatening, I thought as I moved toward them. Neither of those words were bad things. I actually preferred them. However, this situation hardly called for either. Only problem was I couldn't change how people perceived me.

Reaching up and knocking, which made little sense seeing as how I knew she was dressed and it was my damn house, I waited until she spoke.

"Come in."

Turning the knob and stepping inside, I expected to see her waiting. However, she wasn't inside the room.

"Out here," she called from the balcony.

Following her voice, I headed toward the double doors, standing right where the door met the balcony, and where she sat on the railing, her blond hair brushed over her shoulder. Dressed in an emerald gown that hung off her shoulders and had a slit that went mid-thigh, I couldn't help but look from there down her smooth legs to her bare feet. She was stunning...as she should be.

"Ethan Callahan," she said, almost whispered.

"Ivy O'Davoren," I replied, leaning against the frame.

She nodded. "I'm guessing you know a lot about me."

"A criminal record will do that."

"True." The corner of her lip turned up. "But unfair. I'm not an actual criminal as you all have shown me. But you all are...and I couldn't get any information on you."

"First, you will be wise not to call my family...this family... criminals." I did my best not to come off as harsh as I would if it were anyone else.

“And secondly, Ms. O’Davoren, you have the rest of your life to get information about me but an occasion to get to tonight.”

“It’s your party. It starts whenever you show up, and so I’m not late,” she shot back, brushing her hair behind her ear. “Unless you don’t want to talk to me?”

“I’m not much of a talker.”

“Which makes you bizarre...I’ve never met an Irishman who didn’t like to talk...especially about himself.”

Smirking, I reminded her, “I’m only half-Irish.”

“Have you ever met a quiet Italian?” Her eyebrow went up.

She had a point. “Very well. I’m bizarre. Anything else?”

She sighed, hopping off the railing and stepping into her heels. Dressed, she stood straighter. “How do I look? Your cousin put a lot of effort into making sure I looked beautiful for you.”

“I know. I got the bill.”

She stepped right up to me, not stopping until there was barely a gap between our bodies. “You are making our first meeting very anti-climactic, Mr. Callahan.”

“Would you have preferred it if I grabbed you by the waist and kissed you the moment I laid eyes on you?”

She thought for a moment, honestly, before shaking her head. “Far too presumptive and threatening. But knowing that the thought crossed your mind is nice.”

“You are quite bizarre yourself, Ms. O’Davoren.” Not at all what I was picturing and I was normally a very good judge of character.

“How so?”

“Frankly, I’m wondering if you’re trying to seduce me. Which would be pointless because you already have me. Or if there is some other reason as

to why you're acting so...lucid and soft-spoken. From what I hear you tried to jump my grandmother when you first met her."

"That—ugh...that was my bad. I guess." She made a face and then shook her head like she suddenly remembered something. "No, I'm definitely not trying to seduce you! I'm just nervous and I don't want to make a fool out of myself...more than I already have."

I stared at her. "Then don't."

"Oh, thanks, I hadn't thought of that." She snapped at me and this time it was my eyebrow that rose. "Sorry. Just staring at me like that, it's only making me more nervous...you're just..."

"Handsome?"

"Cocky apparently!" She rolled her eyes and smiled. "And yes, handsome, but I was going to say daunting. I've heard so much about your family, so much about your position, as head of the family, and yet almost nothing about you. What you hate, what you like, what you love—"

"I hate disloyalty. I like and love loyalty."

She just stared at me, her blue eyes peering into me so...innocently, it was jarring.

"Are you a robot?"

"Do you have any questions left worth answering?" If not, then I would prefer to get this night over with quickly.

"So that's all you need from me then, loyalty?" she asked slowly, as if processing it. Why, I had no idea.

Reaching into my jacket pocket, I pulled out the ring box. Taking out the ring and dropping the box to the floor before I lifted her hand.

"I'm not romantic. I'm sure I'll do or say many things that will come off anti-climactic, robotic, and bizarre as you have said. However,"—I slid the ring onto her finger—"I'll never lie to you, nor will I abandon you. I'll

always be loyal and faithful. Everything I have will be yours always. In return I ask for the same.”

“What a ring!” She gaped down at the ring until a smile spread across her lips. “If this is you being ‘not romantic’ I’m curious to see what the romantic side of you is like. I can do loyalty... Happy birthday, by the way.” Her pink lips turned slightly.

Just like that she stepped back into the room, and I couldn’t help but think...if this was her not seducing me, what would the seductive side of her look like?

“Are you coming?”

Pushing off the door, I glanced back at her. “I’ve been informed it’s my party and as such I cannot be late.”

Her lips made a thin line. “Are you mocking me?”

“Yes.” I spun around and walked over. However, before she could open the door I closed it, spinning her back to face me and pinning her against it.

“Is this just nerves?”

“What?” Her eyes searched mine, probably as much as I searched hers.

“You told our lawyer, and I quote, ‘If they all drowned in their blood it wouldn’t be justice enough.’ Then upon meeting my grandmother, you tried to break free of your chains. And then immediately after she showed you a video, you called your family. The next morning you agreed to become my wife.”

“What are you trying to say?” she said calmly, though her blue eyes glared at me in rage. “I’m a spy? Are you fucking insane?”

“I’ve agreed to marry a woman with almost nothing to offer.” I leaned in, our faces barely an inch apart. “My sanity must be questioned. Just as your loyalty must be.”

“No,” she replied, doing her best to push me away. However, I didn’t budge.

“Your father was a liar—”

SLAP.

“Call my father a liar to my face and I will slit your throat!” she threatened, breathing through her nose.

“Your father was—”

SLAP. “Shut up!”

My cheek burned. However, I ignored it, grabbing onto her wrist before she’d make her third mistake.

“Your father—”

“My father loved my mother the same way your father loved yours!” She snapped, and I froze, just staring at her, so annoyed, I wanted to bash her head in.

“Don’t ever...” I squeezed her wrist. “EVER. Put my parents on the level of yours.”

“Why?” She stood up to me. “Because they were rich, famous, and powerful? While mine were poor, typical, and insignificant? Did it matter, though? My mother died suddenly like yours—”

“I’m warning you!” I grabbed onto her throat. However, she didn’t back down. She held her head higher.

“And my father was heartbroken like yours. He died with her and left me walking around with a shell of a person until he finally died too...at least you know your father went on his own terms.”

“ENOUGH!” I slammed her into the door.

She just glared at me. “If you got a message from your father and he told you the person who killed your mother wasn’t who you thought it was...but was someone else, would you question it? My father loved my

mother, and he'd rather die than lie to me. The moment I saw that video I knew it was the truth. I knew it with every fiber of my being. I just couldn't accept it. At first because it meant he allowed me to hate the wrong people. He allowed me to trust the wrong ones too and that is how my whole life was ruined! For the last seven years I've been in hell because he let me trust them. Because they were family. Do you know what that feels like? Believe me, it hurts much more than being slammed into the door by you."

Letting go of her neck, I took a step back. She inhaled deeply and then walked toward the vanity mirror, wiping the corners of her eyes and inspecting her neck.

"You don't trust me, fine," she whispered, reapplying her makeup. "But I'm sure the only reason you chose me is to stop the rebellion that's growing...so I'm not worthless. And I'm here because I want Cillian, Elroy, Rory, Shay, my dad's old friend Michael, along with a guard at the prison dead. That is my list."

Annoyed with her and myself, I lifted her chin up to see her neck.

"This won't happen again."

"I don't care," she shot back. "My list. Can you do it or not?"

I simply nodded, lifting my arm for her to take. She glared at me before linking arms.

"I should have believed you the first time. You're not romantic at all," she muttered when I opened the door...only to be met with Toby's confused stupid face as he glanced between us.

Just then his words came back to mind. "*You have a tendency to come off...cold, daunting, and threatening.*"

I didn't come off as anything...I simply was. I had to be.

IVY

The cameras were nearly blinding as we walked down the grand staircase, forcing me to grip onto him tighter until we reached the last step where we both posed for the photographer. Forcing myself to smile, I remembered what Nari had said about queens smiling even when they wanted to scream. Who'd think I'd have to do that so soon. I could feel everyone staring, whispering...

"Ivy, you look beautiful." His grandmother, Evelyn, was the first to approach us when the photographer moved aside, dressed in a champagne-colored gown. She hugged me, forcing me to release Ethan.

"Thank you. I'm so glad I'm worthy to be seen in your presence," I whispered, hugging her back. When we pulled back the corners of her lips turned up in a small smile.

"Do I get hello, Grandmother? After all, it is my birthday." He drew her attention to that, and Evelyn rolled her eyes.

"Always the attention king." She made a face at him.

"Of course, I learned from you," he replied, leaning in to kiss her cheek and when he stepped back, I put my arm back around his arm. I noticed once again he stiffened and then relaxed.

"And here I thought you learned from me?" The goddess that was Donatella stepped up next, dressed in black. "I tried so hard to be the show stopper. Ivy, you've stolen my thunder."

"Thank you, Donatella, I'm sure once everyone has gotten over the novelty of me you'll take your rightful place as the center of attention," I replied and our eyes locked.

She stared me down what felt like hours but were truthfully seconds before she laughed.

"You're forgiven. Ethan, bring her out more so she isn't so new and shiny anymore."

“I’ll take note. Wyatt?” he asked, and both women gave him a look, and he dropped it, moving forward, taking me with him.

We met his cousins, Nari standing among them in a red floral print dress.

“We aren’t worthy!” Darcy and Sedric, who both wore velvet suit jackets, mocked, bowing their heads at him.

“At least you know.” Ethan smirked at them.

“You know we meant it as a joke but...” Darcy started to say.

“But now you kinda feel shitty?” Sedric finished, nodding his head.

“Yea.” He nodded, obviously feeling it too.

“Me too.”

I laughed. They were cute. “Forgive him. He can’t help himself.”

“Forgot him, forgive me,” Darcy replied, taking my hand and kissing it. “I thought I was hallucinating, but here you are a real life angel among us mere mortals.”

I couldn’t help but grin from ear to ear even though it was so corny.

“Sorry.” Sedric put his hand over his heart. “What did he say? I couldn’t hear him over the sound of my heart exploding at the sight of you.”

Darcy rolled his eyes and again I laughed. “Bravo, I’m thoroughly flattered, guys.”

“Do either of you have any other one-liners you’d like to use on my fiancée or are you satisfied?” Ethan questioned them, his eyebrow rising.

However, Darcy and Sedric glanced at each other and then back at him. “His *fiancée*.”

“Helen, Nari, get your brothers before I do.”

I hadn’t noticed Helen, who wore a strapless midnight blue gown, the bottom of which was covered in gold. Her curly brown hair stopped at her shoulders.

“The point of them being adults now is I don’t have to worry about them as much.” Helen sighed and then looked at me. “So you’re the one.”

“I guess I am.”

“Welcome to the family.” She hugged me, which I didn’t see coming. When she backed away she replied, “I’m counting on you.”

“For what?”

“To make sure Ethan answers calls.”

“Helen, not even Jesus himself can make me sit and listen to you talk about heuristic evaluations and noncontiguous data structures,” Ethan replied automatically, making everyone laugh, with the exception of Helen, who pouted, and me, who was lost. But I smiled anyway.

Nari came up to both of us and looked at Ethan first. “Our parents have already sent gifts. Grandmother says she’ll present them to you, to make sure everyone knows all the family knows.”

“Knows?” I said, and she nodded.

“The reason everyone else is waiting is because Ethan is officially introducing you to the family. Everyone has to welcome you,” she replied.

“I’m waiting for my welcome then.” I grinned at her.

“Why do I have a feeling I’ve created a monster?” she muttered when she hugged me.

I didn’t say anything in return.

“So when do we eat?” Sedric glanced around for the food, and Darcy followed. One by one they left us, and I turned to him.

“Why does it feel like they are looking for reasons to leave us?” I muttered to myself.

“Because they are.” He faced me, his hand reaching up to tuck a strand of my hair behind my ear. “They’re making way for other people to congratulate us. So smile.”

“Haven’t I been?”

He thought for a moment. “Correction, look as though you’re in love with me.”

Again I forced myself not to smile, saying, “What does that look like?”

“That.” His gaze moved to the Jessica Rabbit look-alike, with the red hair and dress, walking up to us with a few others.

“Ethan!” She sounded a little peppy. “Happy birthday!”

“Thank you. Ivy, this is Klarissa Moretti,” he introduced us. “Klarissa, my fiancée, Ivy O’Davoren.”

“Nice to meet you, Klarissa, thank you for coming,” I said, knowing full well it would annoy her.

“Of course. Ethan and I go way back.” Her eyes flickered to him and then back to me. “Congrats. It’s not easy being the new Mrs. Callahan.”

“Maybe for some. For me it was love at first sight.” I leaned into him more, and her jaw clenched.

“You’re a lucky man, Ethan. It’s a pleasure, Ms. O’Davoren,” one of the men beside her spoke, followed by another.

“You’re an absolute vision.”

And another.

“Your dress is gorgeous.”

They circled us like sharks would a beach full of seals, speaking and laughing all at once, complimenting me left and right to the point that it became repetitive.

“Ethan,” Klarissa spoke up, and whoever she was, people lowered their voices, allowing her to speak, “your gift.”

She nodded for someone to come over and handed her champagne to one of the maids, as the box was handed to her. “Came in from Paris an hour ago.”

“From Paris? I’m excited.”

I turned to him, unlocking our arms for him to open it.

Stepping forward, he flipped the tabs open to reveal...

“A pistol of Napoleon I,” she said proudly, as Ethan lifted the thing from the padded box.

“La victoire appartient aux plus persévérants,” he read with a perfect French accent, and she smiled, nodding.

“Victory belongs to the most persevering,” she translated as he put it back into the box.

“Thank you, Klarissa, I’m sure we’ll find a place for it,” I said, lifting the box from her hands and turning to the same person who’d brought it to her. “For now, have the butler store it in Ethan’s study, please.”

He nodded, taking it, and when I faced her I could feel the rage flow off of her in waves and so I smiled.

“I couldn’t help myself. I love gifts, and I peeked at many of the ones that came early. All of you are so gracious, my gift pales in comparison,” I lied through my teeth and they ate it up...with her royal pain in the ass Klarissa, who was doing her best poke at me.

“Oh, don’t tease us. What did you get the man who can get anything?” POKE...poke. Poke...that was what each word felt like.

And they all waited to hear, even Ethan, who was doing absolutely nothing to help get his groupie off my back. “It’s slightly embarrassing...”

“Oh, thank God,” a man cheered, drinking. “A Callahan should be embarrassed every once in a while, just for the sake of our egos.”

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you all. I’ll be right back.” I stepped away from them, trying to think quickly, until I saw the small orchestra in the corner, ’cause you know rich people, and walked up to the director,

whispering the song to him. He looked over at me and grinned, which in return made me grin.

Thank you, Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!

One of the butlers took the microphone stand and moved it all the way to the damn staircase even though no one had asked his ass! And I wanted to throw my shoe at him. But instead I walked over to it.

“Ladies and gentlemen...” It was already silent. “The celebrant has asked for my gift, and I, like many of you, wondered...what in the bloody hell am I going to give to a man who lives in a house like this?” I said and thankfully they laughed. “Since being engaged...”

Aka since Monday.

“I’ve thought of my father often. He’d call me Birdy, because while I was quite terrible at a lot of things, I could sing my lungs off, and so tonight, I offer this song to you, Ethan. Happy birthday.” I nodded at them, took a deep breath, and prayed that my father wasn’t lying!

ETHAN

What in the hell are you doing? Was my first thought when she left my side.

If you truly embarrass me, you’ll regret it. Was my second.

And then she began to sing...and I couldn’t think anymore. They’d called her an angel, a vision of beauty before, and I merely thought Nari did well. But the more I listened, the more...I...the more captivated I became. She gave me chills, made my throat dry, and my whole body ached for her...and not just me. Everyone was beyond transfixed. They were...we were paralyzed by her magnificence.

The way her blue eyes sparkled under the lights of the chandelier as she looked only at me, the way her body swayed, because even she couldn’t

stop herself from being taken away by the song she sang, and each time she moved my eyes followed every curve of her body, from her hips to her breasts. Even the lips tempted, with every word she spoke.

Every time she said the words *take my heart*, it truly felt as if she were holding it up for me to take, and so I, who'd never once displayed any form of public affection, walked up to her when the ballad came to an end, stepping onto the stairs beside her, wrapped my arms around her waist, pulled her to me, and kissed her...with all the passion she'd just bestowed on me. Enjoying the way her body melted into mine and the taste of her tongue in my mouth, I wanted more...much more. The dress she wore frustrated me even more.

"Get a room!" The familiar voice of Darcy snapped me out of it.

Only our lips parting, I stared down at her, and she looked at me as if she had no idea what I was doing, like she hadn't caused this.

"And now you all see why the wedding is so soon." My grandmother laughed, saving us both. "Congratulations to you both on finding the other half of your heart," she added, clapping, which caused the rest of them to clap as well.

I felt her try to step back...however, I didn't let go.

My third thought finally came to me...

Mine. It was childish and simple, but sometimes one word was enough.

Ivy O'Davoren was *mine*, and now the whole world would know.

Luckily, between my grandmother, Dona, and her, most of their eyes were off me. Glancing over my shoulder, Greyson nodded, and I excused myself from their side. I walked with him toward the private section of the house. Parties like this were often used whenever other important business needed to be taken care of.

I stopped in front of Lisandro Castiglione's *The Redemption of Icarus*, the painting my mother had commissioned for my grandmother, apparently to replace a painting she'd destroyed. Icarus flying at night above a sleeping world, the painting was simple...however, that was the point.

Reaching behind it, the small light of the scanner moved as it looked over my finger, before the painting slid to the right along with the door. Stepping through it, I saw all three of them waiting in my private den, sitting on my couch, drinking my wine, and smoking my Cubans, just laughing among themselves.

"Thank you for coming, gentlemen," I said, taking a seat at the large chair, unbuttoning my jacket. "I'm sure you are all aware why I called you here—"

"Before we do, on behalf of us, many congrats on your wife. You did well with an *Irish* woman," Frank McShane cut me off, grinning at the Italian man sitting across from him, sucking onto his pipe as if it were an oxygen mask.

"Fiancée," Savino Moretti, Klarissa's father, corrected.

It caused old man Mahoney to laugh, sitting up and blocking my face to say to them, "Look at that, boys, he's all butt hurt, he ain't get—"

Grabbing his glass, I slammed it against his fucking head. The glass shattered everywhere and blood dripped down the back of his head and even got on my hand. He grabbed the back of his head and moved back into his fucking place.

"Have I got your fucking attention now?" I looked them over...each one of them silent. Mahoney held on to the back of his head. "If you ever sit up in front of me again, I will rip your tongue from your mouth and have it shoved up your own ass."

My eyes shifted to Frank. He took the pipe out of his mouth slowly.

“Let this be known and known well. My marriage does not bias me to either the Irish or the Italian families. The fact that you think a *woman* would be enough to influence me hurts, Frank, and when I hurt, everybody’s got to hurt.”

“I’m sorry—”

“Fuck your sorry and shut up.” I snapped, then turned to Savino. “Ivy O’Davoren, for all intents and purposes, is my wife. Which means you’ve insulted or threatened me. Either you believe I’m so fickle minded that I’d throw away women whom I’ve claimed, or you believe the woman I have claimed will not be around long enough to become my wife. Which I don’t see possible unless someone would try to do something very stupid. Are you planning on doing something very stupid, Savino?”

“No, sir—”

“Are you saying that I’m fickle?”

“No, I—”

“Then she’s my wife and you will respect that or you’ll end up in a much worse state than Mahoney here.” I looked back at Mahoney and the blood dripping down his neck. “Mahoney, you do know it’s rude to bleed on another man’s furniture, correct?”

“I’m sorry—”

“I don’t give a damn about your sorry. I want you to stop bleeding on my couch.”

He thought for a moment before taking off his jacket and draping it over the couch. When he was done I sat back.

“Can I continue what I was saying when I came in or would anyone else wish to disrespect me this evening?”

None of them spoke.

“Good.” Outstretching my hand, Greyson handed me the papers, which I simply threw onto the table in front of us. They were pictures of Sammy, along with two dozen people none of them knew.

“I don’t understand.” Frank lifted the photos.

“Greyson.” The moment I called him, he opened the second door of the den, allowing Toby to bring Sammy inside, who didn’t have a scratch, but looked ready to shit himself. Toby pushed him onto his knees next to my chair. “Sammy, tell your uncle what you did.”

Sammy dropped his head.

“Sammy? What did you do?” Frank pressed, but still the boy didn’t speak.

“Frank, you know how I hate when people ignore me when I speak,” I said calmly, taking the scotch Greyson handed me to drink.

“Sammy, this ain’t a game. Speak.”

Sammy finally lifted his head up as I drank. “I cut the product with Fentanyl.”

“You bloody cunt,” Frank cursed, groaning, then looked at me. “Sir, he’s just a stupid—”

“A stupid kid? He’s twenty. He’s not a kid and if he’s stupid it’s no one else’s fault but his own. Right, Sammy?”

“Yes...sir.”

“See?” I sat, putting my glass down and pulling out my revolver, holding it out to Frank.

He stared at it for the longest time then back at me.

“He degraded my shit to make a quick buck. In doing so nearly thirty people have died in the last month, and now I’ve got people asking questions no one has asked since my mother passed. It’s either you or him,”

I replied, and he took the gun, rising to his feet, walking around Savino to stand in front of his nephew, who of course began to cry.

“I told you, you had to be careful.” Frank shook his head, holding it to the boy’s skull.

“Any day now.” I drank, a piece of ice slipping into my mouth.

“Tell mama I’m sorry.” Sammy closed his eyes tightly and...Frank pulled the trigger. Sammy flinched. However, upon realizing he wasn’t dead his head snapped back up to look at his uncle, who was staring at the gun.

“Well, aren’t you lucky,” I said, holding my hand out for the gun. Frank quickly put it back in my hand and when he did I spun it in my palm then fired. “Your uncle not so much.”

“UNCLE!” he hollered, trying to get up from his knees, but Toby held him down. Frank’s body was already on the ground, the bullet going right between his eyes. Placing the gun back at my chest, I leaned back.

“You killed him,” Sammy finally spoke.

“I know. That was the point of the gun. Would you like us to ship his body or his ashes?” I asked Sammy, who was unable to look away from Frank’s body. “He wasn’t such a bad man after all.”

“His body,” he whispered.

“You’re free to go.” Which meant Toby was free to have him dropped off at whatever street corner they got him off. I waited till he was gone before turning toward Mahoney and Savino. “I don’t seem biased, do I?”

“Not at all,” they both said.

Grinning at the enthusiasm, I moved on to more important matters. “Did you know my grandmother wants almost four hundred people at my wedding?”

Savino snickered. “That’s nothing. You should have seen your parents’. People were tripping over themselves trying to get in.”

Irish and Italians. We knew how to drink and fuck a little too well...if our relations got any bigger we'd need to rent a small city.

IVY

My feet were killing me when it was finally over. Entering the guest room, the first thing I did was take them off, tossing them to the side. Hearing the door open and close, I didn't turn around, and he didn't come any closer.

I turned back to find Ethan, still perfectly dressed, leaning against the door, his green eyes traveling up my body until they stopped on my breasts and then finally my face. I couldn't lie. He was...fucking hot. The type of guy you'd see in magazines and secretly wish for a night with. His shoulders were broad, his jawline so sharp I was sure he'd cut someone with it, but weirdly enough, it was his lips that I couldn't stop staring at. They had felt amazing on mine...gentle and passionate...promising—

Focus, Ivy!

"You're staring," I said.

"So are you."

I was, but I didn't mean to.

"You disappeared and left me to fend for myself."

"I wasn't aware you'd need protection...I highly doubt anyone tonight was any worse than who you met in prison."

Ugh, he's annoying! He had a comeback for everything!

"Your kiss was unexpected," I whispered, reaching for my back zipper when his hands brushed mine away, unzipping the dress for me.

"I have a thing for singers...who knew," he said softly as I held up the front of my dress.

"And now what is your excuse?"

“My excuse?”

I nodded, staring at the giant bed only a few feet from us. “Entering my room without knocking, unzipping my dress without me asking you to.”

“Your room is my room. This is a guest room...in my house,” he stated, not backing away. “As for the dress...I believed you were struggling and I offered my assistance.”

“Translation...you were hoping I’d just let it drop and you could just take me.”

“Not the worst outcome.”

Annoyed, I turned around and faced him, wishing for a second I didn’t because the way he looked at me made my body hot...I just tried to convince myself it was the fact that I hadn’t willingly felt a man in seven years.

I let the dress drop. His green eyes traced every inch of me before looking me back in the eye.

“I’m here,” I said to him. “All pretty and smooth...but you haven’t earned me yet.”

“Earned you?” He snickered.

“What? Just because I came from prison and you’re the great Ethan Callahan I’d say have at it?” I pushed back. “We’re in a contract. I became a woman suited to be Mrs. Callahan. That’s why I paraded myself in front of all those shitty people and your ex-girlfriend Klarissa.” I waited for him to deny it and when he didn’t I went on. “I was charming, beautiful, and made you look good. I even kissed you back. Before you get anything else, some of my demands should be met.”

“Your hit list? I have a—”

“Michael Deans, Richard Doher, both formerly worked at the prison but retired. Kellyann Heaton was transferred, and one other man who works the

third and eight rotations. He has blue eyes and a buzz cut. He started recently. If I knew his name I'd tell you, but I did my best to block out the..." I closed my eyes, inhaling deeply before opening my eyes. "I did my best to block out the ones that were more beast than men. I want them hurt."

"Just hurt?"

"So hurt nothing can fix them," I said clearly. "They don't get to just die."

He stared me down. "And their families?"

I thought he was joking, but he waited for me to reply.

"I don't have anything against their families! Just them," I said quickly.

He reached up and grabbed my chin, lifting my head up to look at my neck again.

"I told you, I was fine."

"You never said fine. You said you didn't care." He frowned.

"Well, I'm saying it now." I brushed his hands away. I didn't want him touching me. "And my family should know about us now."

"First, they are not your family, Ivy." He reminded me and it stung.

"Second, let me worry about that—"

"First, family is always family no matter what they do or say. They are still blood. Second, revenge is the only reason why I am here," I replied.

"So excuse me if I don't just *trust* you either."

"Who are you, Ivy?" he asked, and I wasn't sure what he meant by it.

"You shouldn't hesitate. Good night."

"Who are you then?" I called out before he could leave.

"Ethan Antonio Giovanni Callahan, head of the Callahan family and your future husband."

And just like that he left.

I glanced down at the rock on my finger. *My future husband.*

Mine.

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EIGHT

“For in my way it lies. Stars, hide your fires;
Let not light see my black and deep desires.”

~ *William Shakespeare*

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DONATELLA

Swirling the wine in my glass, I stared up at the family portrait that hung above the fireplace, leaning back into the leather seat.

“One down, one to go, Nana,” I whispered, bringing the glass to my lips.

“How did you know it was me?” She walked up beside the chair, still in her dress as I was.

“Caron’s Poivre,” I answered. She was the only one who wore that perfume. She’d worn it for as long as I could remember. “Ivy and Ethan will get along well. Which leaves Wyatt the only one you have left to worry over.”

“And what about you, young lady?” She glanced down at me.

I was actually surprised by that question. “You and I both know that men need a woman for a variety of different reasons. Mostly they all desire to be loved intensely. Women validate them and make them look complete and capable to others.”

“And for women? You don’t think we also want to be validated and to look complete?”

I drank again. “Of course we do, desperately. But I also know that unlike men, women can function, can still rule the world with a hollow heart. Because we often have to choose between family or ambition, we learned to swallow the pain of whichever we gave up.”

“Your mother found a way to have both.”

“Did she?” I took a glimpse back at the woman seated, dressed in white, with the same olive skin and face as me. “She came close, closer than any

other woman, but in the end she failed too...she just happened to die before anyone else could notice.”

When she didn’t reply I knew she was staring at me. That worried look on her face she’d often give me whenever I spoke like this. I preferred not to see it tonight.

“What do you want, Dona?”

What a horrible question. Snickering, I answered honestly, “Everything. I want power, recognition, fame, and respect. I want to be a queen, not a princess. I want to walk into a room and watch every person bow their heads to me as I walk by. I want there to be books written about me. I want to be the topic of some university student’s final exam. I want to create change, lasting change. I also want to be a mother and wife...I want to marry a man who’s so in love with me it drives him to the brink of insanity and back again. A man who’s on par with me, who is also respected and feared, who understands my ambitions will sometimes overshadow his. Who can stand being the background to my foreground. I want everything, Nana, and every day I don’t get it I feel like I’m burning on the inside. Like there is a monster inside of me that will continue clawing at my heart until I give it what it wants.”

“That is the tragedy of women born with the ambitions of men.”

I laughed. She didn’t get it. “It’s not the ambitions of men, it’s the ambitions of me. And I will get it...everything I want...or die trying. I won’t give up like she did.”

I lifted my glass to the woman in the painting, not sure if she’d be proud or just as worried as my grandmother, and not caring either way. Ethan and Wyatt were still so wounded by their deaths...but I’d buried that a long time ago.

“I love you, Dona.” She kissed the top of my head before leaving, most likely because she had no idea what to say to me.

Finishing off the wine, I put it on the table before rising from my seat, turning around just as the doors opened again, this time revealing no one other than Tobias, aka Toby, my brother’s only friend even if he wouldn’t admit it.

“You really should stop sharing your darker thoughts with her. She worries over you,” he spoke frankly.

“She’s scared of me,” I corrected.

“Your grandmother has seen a lot. I hardly doubt she’s scared—”

“She’s scared not because of what I want, but because she has no idea how I’ll get it,” I clarified for him, though he should have seen it. “She’s worried that one day I’ll get so power hungry that I’ll end up betraying this whole family.”

“You wouldn’t.”

“Don’t be certain. Even I don’t know what I will do sometimes.” I winked, heading toward the door when he grabbed my arm, pulling me back.

“Yes?” I stared into his hazel-brown eyes.

“Don’t treat me like everyone else.” He sneered. “I know you better than them all. Your love for your brothers is the only thing that eclipses your aspirations.”

“I know you too, Tobias.” I reached up, brushing the loose strands of his brown hair. “I know you’re exactly the man I need, but won’t accept because you lack the status to stand next to me. I know you’re aware that the only reason you can grab my arm is because I’m letting you. And most importantly, we both know the only reason you count on my love for my brothers, which as you say, *eclipses my aspirations*, is because deep down

you're painfully aware that if I asked you to choose...if I asked you to betray the man you considered to be your brother, you'd do it. You'd hate me for making you do it and you'd hate yourself because you'd love me even afterward."

He flinched, his whole body like stone, as he scowled at me for simply speaking the truth.

"Donatella C. Valentino. It has a beautiful ring to it, doesn't it? Italian for brave and strong, which also suits me perfectly, but then again you knew that, didn't you? It is your name, Tobias." I verbalized his own desire, his own ambition, owning a woman who was out of his league.

Fuming, his nose flaring, he squeezed harder. "Do you truly believe that I'll be in love with you forever? That I'll do this with you forever?"

"Yes," I said without a shadow of doubt. "Atoms shall be infinite. The sun will rise in the east and set in the west. Time will go on in perpetuum. And Tobias Nikolai Valentino will always love me. Whether he'll be with me or not is completely up to him."

"You know that isn't true!" He sneered, baring his teeth at me.

"Just like you know that is your problem not mine, and I will wait for you to sort it out. Now release my arm before I get upset."

The look in his eyes was so heated, so furious. If they could, they'd burn a hole in my face.

"Last warning."

When he released me I walked out the doors simply saying, "Exactly why my name is still Donatella Aviela Callahan."

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NINE

“I am not a saint, unless you think of a saint as a sinner who keeps on trying.”

~ *Nelson Mandela*

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IVY

Coming out of the bathroom, I expected to see the maid who'd come to help me, but she was gone. Instead, Ethan stood in front of my bed, dressed only in silk black pajama bottoms, allowing me to see his bare chest, the perfect definition of...well, fucking gorgeous. Every single inch of him was toned and smooth as if he were carved out of marble just for me to gawk at.

Walking to him, I sighed. "I thought we had said everything that needed to be said—"

"Ivy." He placed his finger on my lip. "Stop fighting."

That single touch paralyzed me...I couldn't move. I didn't want to move. My mouth parted and my body leaned in as one of his strong hands cupped my ass, the other my breast.

"Say it," he whispered before biting the top of my ear.

I knew what he wanted me to say, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. Instead, I reached out, touching his chest, which felt so cold under my fingertips and yet made me feel so hot at the same time. He kissed down my neck, his tongue hot as he licked my skin, his hand squeezing me...we just met. We shouldn't...but goddamn it I wanted it so badly. I needed it badly.

"Please..." I swarmed in his arms, the aching between my thighs the only thing driving my mind at the point.

"Say it," he demanded again, lifting his head up, his lips just hovering over mine. "The moment you say it...you can have everything."

"I..." Before I could get the words out he was gone.

"Ma'am?"

"Ma'am?"

Eyes now open, I stared up at the face of an older woman, maybe in her late thirties or early forties, with brown eyes staring back down at me.

“Good morning, ma’am.” She smiled kindly, moving back as I sat up, running my hands through my hair.

It took me less than a second to remember where I was. It wasn’t hard as the room I sat in most definitely wasn’t a jail cell.

“There is mass this morning, and normally the family skips breakfast, but I was told to give you something light, to last until afterward,” she said, placing the tray on top of the bed over my legs.

I glanced down at the bowl of fruits, crackers, water, and orange juice she prepared for me.

“If you don’t like it I can have the kitchen prepare something else.”

My mind was a little stunned. This was how they started the day? Breakfast in bed? It was so vastly different from my own life that I was too stunned to do or say anything.

“Ma’am?”

“It’s fine...ugh...thanks,” I muttered, reaching for the water instead of the juice.

She nodded her head, walking to the front of the bed where she lifted two outfits. The first was a gray cap-sleeved dress with a sweetheart neckline and a wool burgundy coat. The second was a burgundy laced dress with long elbow-length sleeves and wool gray coat. Both of them screamed elegance. However, I preferred being a little more covered up...maybe that would keep me from dry humping anything within sight seeing as how I couldn’t keep my mind out of the damn gutter.

“The red one,” I said, stuffing a few crackers into my mouth.

“And your shoes?” She lifted up three different pairs already at the front of the bed. For a second I wondered what the hell I had taken that she was

able to prepare all of this while I slept less than a few inches away. I was a light sleeper...or at least I thought I was.

“You can pick whatever,” I muttered, still eating. I was sure they would all match perfectly and hurt like hell when the day was over anyway.

“I’ll start your shower,” she said, moving to the bathroom.

When she disappeared inside I fell back down onto the bed to freak out as I should have when I woke up. *Oh my fucking God!* I was dreaming about him. Ethan. I barely knew him and yet I wanted to screw him so damn bad.

It’s not your fault, Ivy! I tried to comfort myself. It wasn’t my fault. I wasn’t one of those sappy girls. I wasn’t *Klarissa Moretti*, who was ready to do a goddamn back flip just to get Ethan’s attention. It was just biology. I hadn’t been with anyone in so long my body was just reacting to attention...just biology. It had nothing to do with Ethan.

Ethan? Why did I keep thinking his name? “Ugh.” I groaned, placing the pillow over my head. And I wanted to cry at how soft it was. Like someone had picked wings of an angel and put them on the bed...*I slept on this?*

“Ma’am, it’s ready.” She stepped out, and I immediately sat back up, putting the pillow down beside me. However, she didn’t look at me any differently, just waited.

Lifting the tray and moving it to the side, I walked into the white marble bathroom. Everything from top to bottom.

“Would you like me to wash your hair?” she asked, following me inside.

“I’m good from here really. Thank you,” I said, quickly realizing then I didn’t ask her for her name. But if she was anything like the hotel people I doubted she would be very conversational. I didn’t want to become...to

become like them. All high and mighty as if they were better than everyone else. “What is your name?”

“Danielle, ma’am—”

“Please stop calling me ma’am. It feels weird.” I laughed, brushing my hair behind my ears.

Her eyes widened. “I’m sorry. No one told me you preferred Mrs. Callahan.”

What?

“No. I meant...” Fucking fuck man. She looked scared.

“Either is fine, don’t worry,” I said quickly, and she nodded, leaving the bathroom. Stripping, I turned to look at my reflection, but the glass was already foggy due to the steam. On the counter I saw the robe...the one with my new initials on it. IC, even though I wasn’t even married yet. Taking off the ring, I placed it on top of it before stepping under the shower...

Mrs. Callahan.

I was going to be Mrs. Callahan.

I knew that but hearing it said was...

“Dad, what am I doing?” I sighed, placing my head on the marble. Upon asking that question my heart ached...he was gone. I was doing this because he was gone. Because this was my only option.

“And what can you do from a prison cell eight hundred miles away?” Cillian’s voice snaked into my mind.

Slamming my hand on the wall in anger, I stood back up straighter.

That’s why I’m doing this.

Washing my hair and body as quickly as possible, I stepped out of the shower to find Danielle holding a towel for me along with the robe and ring. Startled, but it wasn’t like I wasn’t used to being watched so carefully,

I took it, drying down. From the start to finish she focused on making sure I looked and smelled perfect.

“Is there anything else you would like?” she asked, handing me a burgundy clutch purse that had nothing inside of it, and spread something on my face for the makeup.

“Danielle, is there a reason for the gray and burgundy?” I asked, staring at my reflection...I didn’t recognize myself...again. She’d even added soft waves to my gold hair.

“No. Mr. Callahan is wearing these colors today,” she said as if it were nothing, laying my hair over my shoulder.

“You had me match him?”

Knock.

Knock.

She rushed to the door, opening it partially. “She’s ready.”

Am I? When the door opened wider I thought I’d see him. But he wasn’t there, just one of the big guards.

“Good morning, ma’am. Mr. Callahan is waiting downstairs,” he said, moving for me to walk out.

“Thanks,” I said, stepping out. And when I did, I noticed for the first time that the only two rooms in the whole hall were mine and, I would guess, his as we walked toward the elevator.

“We’re coming down,” he spoke into the mic, and I couldn’t help but grin. It was like he was part of the secret service.

When we got off my heels clicked as I reached the grand staircase. At the edge I saw him scrolling through his phone, dressed in a dark gray suit and burgundy tie and shoes and I waited. I might have had to wait forever had one of the two men beside him not gotten his attention. He glanced up,

his green eyes solely on me. Placing his phone into his suit pocket, he walked up the stairs and offered his arm.

“Good morning,” I said.

“Morning,” he replied. Neither of us said anything, walking back down the stairs and out the front the door where a white Bentley sat parked. He took the keys from one of the men and opened the passenger door for me. Sitting in the red-colored seat, I watched as he walked around to sit beside me.

“You look nice,” he said, starting the engine.

“You had to wait until we were in private to say that?” I crossed my arms. “Why? You think your cronies will think you’re soft or something?”

He glanced over at me, one of his eyebrows going up as he asked, “Who the hell still says *cronies*?”

Seriously.

“Me.”

“And yet you call me bizarre.” He snickered, shaking his head as he drove past the gates.

“I never said I wasn’t either,” I muttered, leaning back into the seat. In the rear-view mirror I saw the black Range Rover following us.

“You are Catholic, correct?” he asked only now...as we were on the way to his church.

“Does it matter?”

“Is it impossible for you to answer me directly?” He frowned.

He was kidding me! “You hardly answer me directly either!”

“What have you asked that I haven’t answered?” His palm slid over the steering wheel with ease. And I caught the gold ring on his pinky finger.

“Last night when I asked you where you disappeared to...you distracted me and avoided the answer.”

“You never asked—”

“I did—”

“You stated I disappeared. You never asked me where I went.”

I thought back to that conversation and wanted to roll my eyes. “It was an implied question.”

“I don’t answer those,” he stated, pulling up at red light, staring down the street.

“Fine. Are you a gangster, Mr. Callahan?”

The moment I asked, he looked over at me. His eyes cut like knives through me but what really took my breath away was the smile that spread over his lips. He was...so damn beautiful.

“Remind me to get you an updated dictionary,” he replied, pressing down on the gas so hard my body jerked back as he accelerated.

“See, you’re not answering.”

“Yes.” He glanced at me through the corner of his eyes. “But a gangster with sophistication and morals.”

“What kind of morals could you possibly have?”

“A biblical one,” he said as we pulled up to the cathedral, and of course there was a spot dedicated for his family, which he easily parked in. He didn’t move to take off his seat belt, just glanced up at the church before saying, “Appoint as a penalty, life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.”

He thought he was so slick, so I reminded him, “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well.”

“And yet here you sit, a hypocrite.” He snickered. “Where is your forgiveness?”

Always had to have the last word. “I never said I was moral.”

“It was *implied*,” he said and though he was serious I could feel him tease me.

I shrugged. “Apparently those don’t count.”

“Apparently,” he replied, stepping out of the car and walking over to my side. When he opened it, I saw his eyes shoot down to my legs as I did my best to step out without opening my them. Taking his hand, he helped me out.

We must have come a little late because we were the only ones in the parking lot, and when I said we, I meant him, his shadows, and me. We walked through the doors as they held them open for us. And I realized we weren’t late, but perfectly on time. Mass hadn’t started yet, but everyone was already seated, and when the doors opened they glanced back at us... they were waiting for us. He wasn’t even fazed, walking to the very front where the rest of his family sat. Blessing myself before I entered the pew, Ethan sat on the end, sandwiching me between him and his grandmother, Evelyn, who looked me over and nodded, approvingly. Of what, I wasn’t sure. But I took the book she handed to me.

Not a second after we sat the music played, signaling for all of us to rise and turn back as the priest came in. Instead, on the other side of the church, I saw the brown eyes of Klarissa glaring at me, not just her but a few other women too, and I wondered just how many of them Ethan had actually been with.

“Don’t mind them,” Evelyn whispered as everyone else sang. “Each one of them would sell their souls to sit where you sit. Everyone knows now.”

Would one soul even be enough for this spot? Sitting back down, Ethan leaned into me, softly saying, “Would you like to turn the cheek or your list?”

My eyes widened as I stared at him. He chose now to bring that up? Now?

“Speak now or forever hold your peace.”

He was the devil. Fucking evil. He wanted me to say it, to reconfirm it here, in church, in God’s house.

“My list,” I muttered.

The son of the bitch had the nerve to smirk at me.

“It’s all right,” he whispered, looking forward again. “If we were sinless we wouldn’t come to church.”

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TEN

“All my life, I've understood the nature of where I
come from, but I never thought it might be wicked
until now.”

~ *Brenna Yovanoff*

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IVY

I exhaled, staring at my reflection in front of the bathroom mirror in the church. The whole mass felt like I was holding my breath, making sure I didn't make any mistakes. I didn't even really listen to the message... scratch that, I didn't listen to it at all. How could I when I felt a dozen glares like daggers shooting into my back, Ethan's thigh brushing up against mine, and his grandmother holding on to my hand.

"You looked overwhelmed."

My head shot up to fucking Klarissa Moretti, dressed in a cream-colored skirt and black blouse. She walked over to the counter and placed her clutch down.

"I have to give it to Ethan. He sure knows how to pick his women." She smiled, taking out her red lipstick. "Look at us, we're beautiful."

"I wasn't aware Ethan was into polygamy." I smiled, washing my hands. "But then again there is only one ring on the two pairs of hands here, so...you must be mistaken about whose woman you are."

She glared, and I could have sworn her eyebrow twitched. Calming down, she forced a smile. "Keep the ring. I can buy my own rock. At the end of the day, you may be his...but the moment shit hits the fan, as tends to happen in the Callahan family, he'll realize you aren't strong enough to be his woman."

"And you know how strong I am how?" I dried my hands and faced her.

She placed her lipstick back in her purse and turned to me. "You're right. Excuse me. I don't know you. I know me. I know what Ethan and I are. When his mother died, I was there. When his father died, I was there. And after making love to me in ways you can't even imagine, until the sun

came up, he told me he was glad he always had me. I also know, a girl with traitors for a family, isn't hardly worth even the purse you're holding. O'Davoren...nothing but a bunch of—"

I couldn't help it. I punched her right in the nose and when her head jerked I grabbed onto her neck, throwing her up against the wall, squeezing tightly until she kneed me in the stomach so hard I let go, backing up. She moved to slap me, but I grabbed her wrist.

"We should stop before this ends badly." I smiled at her, squeezing tightly. "I apologize for almost snapping your neck, but...Klarissa, if you step in front of me again and open your slutty mouth about either Ethan or my family, I won't be so gracious."

She glared, ripping her arm back. "Or we can have this out like any Callahan women should."

"And you know what about being Callahan?" Donatella stepped into the bathroom, dressed in a dark navy pant suit, walking to the counter where she pulled out a tiny bottle of lotion. Her eyes looked at us through the glass. "Well, Klarissa? What would any Callahan do?"

"Dona."

"Donatella. You aren't family. If you wish to address me, it is either Donatella or Ms. Callahan." She snapped at her. "And for the record, we Callahan women don't fight over men. What a waste of time to fight over what we already have. I, however, don't see anything wrong with hurting anyone who hurts my sister." Like a wolf she moved to stand in front Klarissa, who would have taken a step back had Donatella not grabbed her chin. "You aren't special. He knew you were waiting and even after sleeping with you, even though he's close with your father, he still chose someone else. Why? Because you mean nothing to him. And if he knew

you were in here trying to cause trouble in his name, to undermine him like this, what do you think he'd do?"

When Donatella let her chin go Klarissa closed her eyes and when she opened them tears were being held back by sheer willpower.

"I'm sorry. Please, let's drop it."

"I was just here to powder my nose." Donatella shrugged, walking toward the doors again. "I didn't see anything, so he couldn't possibly hear anything from me."

When she left it was just Klarissa and me.

And when she didn't speak I did.

"Aren't you going to apologize?" I said to her, walking back to grab my purse.

Silence.

"I guess not." I watched as she headed out.

"It won't happen again," she said, hovering right outside the door. "I'm sorry."

"No, you aren't...but you will be—"

BOOM!

My body flew back into the wall, the heat from the blast along with the smoke pouring into the bathroom from the hall...the hall I could clearly see now that the door was gone...no, not gone...shattered on top of Klarissa's body...a piece of wood in her thigh. Pushing my body off the ground, tissue, ash, and pieces of the wall fell off me as I got up. Reaching for my ears, I felt the blood but didn't believe it until I saw the crimson liquid on my fingertips. The ring in them didn't stop until I slowly moved to the door.

"...help...me..." I heard her voice.

Turning back to her, I watched as she reached out to me. I stared at her for a long time. She looked like a beautifully broken American Girl doll.

“No.”

ETHAN

“Where is she?” I asked Donatella as she stepped down the church steps toward me.

“Who?” She pretended not to know. Pushing up off my car, I stood in front of her, which only made her roll her eyes. “She’s having a chat with Klarissa in the ladies’ room.”

God damn it, Klarissa. “She and her father are both the same,” I muttered to myself, moving to the stairs when she spoke again.

“Let her handle it, Ethan. She’s not a child. Besides, she’d already got a good punch in when I entered. I highly doubt she’s not dealt with worse—”

BOOM!

Instinctively, I grabbed Dona, pulling her toward me and down, covering her head with my arms.

“Oh my God!”

“HELP!”

“FIRE!”

People screamed all around us, and for a brief second I felt a very familiar feeling, a moment of *déjà vu* as the chaos unfolded around us. Rising to my feet, I stared up at the flames coming out of the church, the bodies stumbling out, tripping over each other as they tried to escape, not caring as they pushed and trampled each other to save themselves.

“TOBY, GET HER HOME!” I hollered to the men behind me, pointing at Dona before pulling out my gun. I saw Greyson and three other men in the corner of my eye, nodding for them to go first. He pushed them out of

the way, clearing a path for me to get through the rubble all over the cracked floors, the bodies just lying there, unmoving.

“Who came out?” I asked him, using my handkerchief to cover my mouth from the smoke. They stalled. “WHO THE FUCK IS IN HERE?”

“Ethan? Uugh.”

Spinning around and stumbling through the rubble, with only one shoe on, her hair a mess and blood coming out of her left ear, coughing...was Ivy. Rushing to her, I lifted her up, her arms wrapping around my neck.

“I’m...fine...” She tried to say.

“Don’t speak.” I dropped the handkerchief over her mouth, holding on to her tightly as we made it toward the exit. Luckily it wasn’t far. She gripped on tightly, turning her head from the sun once we made it outside. Rushing to one of the Range Rovers, I put her inside.

“ETHAN!” Dona, who should have been gone, struggled in Toby’s arms, screaming until he picked her up, throwing her over his shoulder.

“NANA! ETHAN! NANA!”

The sheer horror in her eyes was only matched with mine as I turned back to the church...everyone had come out...except her. She always stayed back to speak with the deacon. Fuck! All the men were inside. Toby was already speeding out. There was no one else left I could trust to take her. FUCK!

“Go.” Ivy coughed, sitting up in the backseat. “Go...I’m fine.”

Clenching my teeth in rage, I slammed the door on her and moved toward the driver’s seat when thankfully, Greyson came holding on to... my...a woman who wore my grandmother’s clothes, but the burns on her arms...left me stunned. The paramedics came just as they made it within distance of me.

They rushed her inside the ambulance.

“She’s breathing!” Was the last thing I heard before the red and white doors closed on her.

“Sir!” Greyson rushed to me.

“Everyone’s out?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

“Yes, sir.”

Greyson got into the front along with one of my men as I opened the door, sitting in the back with Ivy, whose eyes were glued to the burning church.

“I want fucking names!” I sneered. “Theirs, their families’. Everyone!”

“Already on it, sir.” Lex, who usually drove my grandmother, sat in the passenger seat.

Ivy turned to me, her face covered in dust and dried blood. She stared at me wide-eyed, in shock. “This was about you.”

“Us.” I snapped, reminding her once a-fucking-gain. “You asked me if I was a gangster. This is fucking why! So people won’t fucking try this shit! But apparently some people have forgotten the definition, so it’s now my job to rebrand it into their skulls!”

Yanking off my tie, I grabbed the brandy from the back, pouring it over my tie before turning to her. She watched me, confused. Gripping onto her chin gently, I turned her head so I could see her ear. Taking it, I dabbed her ear, causing her to flinch as I wiped her blood. I did my very best to bite back the rage I was feeling...for now, at least.

“Sammy Shannon and a few friends of his, they’re currently heading out of the city,” Lex replied.

Freezing, I closed my eyes, inhaling through my nose. “Who helped them?”

“Sir?”

Taking the wet tie, I threw it away. “You want me to fucking believe a few twenty-year-olds who don’t even know how to cut coke properly did this?”

Even from a few miles you could still see the damn smoke.

“They had help. Call Helen to hack every damn camera in the country if she needs to and retrace their fucking steps from last night to this bloody morning.”

“Yes—”

“SHUT UP AND CALL!”

Sitting back in my seat, I stared out the window. You’d think losing his uncle would be enough for him to stay low. I should have known the damn twat was too stupid to be scared.

He’s going to—

I glanced down at my fist, to see a small scraped hand over mine. Glancing at her, she didn’t say anything, just rested her head on the window.

“How much farther?” I asked Greyson, calmer.

“Ten minutes. Traffic, sir.”

The image of my grandmother appearing in my mind, I swallowed the lump in my throat...

God, you can’t have my grandmother too.

“Boston, sir,” Lex said, and even though I already had a feeling hearing that it had gotten to this level...it got under my skin.

He handed me the tablet, allowing me to see the private messages between Sammy and the Finnegan brothers...just after I’d spared his fucking life.

“She’s really out? She’s with the Callahans?”

“Yea, everyone’s talking about the wedding.”

“We’ll see about that—”

“It was about me,” she whispered, and I hadn’t realized she was reading over my shoulder.

Turning off the tablet, I dropped it onto the seat.

“They did this...that.” She pointed at the smoke coming from the distance. “Because of me.”

She still wasn’t getting it.

“No.” It wasn’t about her. “Not you. Us.”

IVY

“Do you feel any pressure here?” the doctor asked as she pressed her fingers on my neck. But I just watched as Ethan stood, like a statue, at the front of my bed. Only partially listening and mostly waiting to hear if his grandmother was out of surgery. We’d been here for a little over two hours already.

Apparently I’d inhaled a lot of smoke and they checked up on me, every thirty minutes, even though it was supposed to be once an hour until I was given the okay.

“Mrs. Callahan?” she called and what startled me the most was how I responded to it. “Do you feel any pressure?”

“I’m fine.”

Ethan clicked his teeth and just took a deep breath, something I was starting to realize he did whenever he wanted to snap but calmed himself.

“Okay, you are in the clear. We’ll give something for the pain—”

“No meds,” I cut in, causing Ethan to finally look me in the face.

“Give her the meds—”

“I don’t like them. I don’t trust them. I don’t want them!” I snapped at him.

“TAKE THE DAMN MEDS!”

“NO!”

We both glared at each other.

“You aren’t too badly hurt. You’re very lucky. Over the counter will be fine,” she said, quickly interjecting, but neither Ethan nor I looked away until the door opened.

“Sir?”

He rushed out, and I got up as well, leaving the private room he’d unnecessarily gotten for me and following behind until we reached a private lobby where Donatella, Helen, Nari, along with Sedric and Darcy stood looking at the doctor.

“Mr. Callahan.” The older man nodded at Ethan.

“How is she?” he asked directly.

“She’s stable.” The moment he said it, everyone else relaxed. Even Ethan looked half a decimal point better. “However, the burns on her left arm and leg are severe for a woman of her age. She’ll need a lot of rest and care, while undergoing skin grafts. You all are free to see her, but her whole body is still in pain, there is only so much morphine we can give her.”

Donatella was the first to dart toward her room, followed by Darcy.

“Sir...” The big guy, Greyson, got his attention again, and before he could finish saying anything the elevator doors slid open. The tall man with familiar light brown eyes stepped out dressed in jeans and a leather jacket. Ripping his arm from one of the guards, he walked right up in front of Ethan, and they stood eye to eye.

“Where is she?”

“And you are?” Ethan shot back.

“CUT THE BULLSHIT, ETHAN!” he hollered into Ethan’s face, but Ethan didn’t budge. “Where is Nana?”

“You said you did not want to be a part of this family, Wyatt.” Wyatt! It was their brother. His brother. Now that he’d said it, the photo of him Nari had shown me came to mind. However, both of them looked far more handsome in person... *For fuck’s sake, that isn’t important, Ivy!*

“Ethan.” Wyatt dropped his head. “You’re going to make me fucking beg to see my own grandmother?”

“The doctors said family only. Again—”

“Please,” he cut in and it must have taken everything in him to say it. He clenched his fist and jaw and said it again. “Please let me see her. If not for me, for her.”

“You can wait here until she asks for you,” Ethan said, turning to go in the room.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Wyatt snapped, trying to move anyway, but the guard pulled him back. Ethan, ignoring him, paused, waiting for me to follow.

“I’m not family yet either,” I reminded him. His jaw cracked in the side in annoyance. “I’ll go when she calls for me too.”

He seemed ready to bite my head off but held it back, nodding. “Fine.”

Watching him disappear into the room, I sat down on one of the couches.

“I’ll wait! So get your hands off me.” Wyatt ripped his arms away. He looked ready to fight...anyone at that point before finally sitting down in the chairs across from me, running his hands through his brown hair. It was lighter, but not by much, than Ethan’s. Glancing up at me, he frowned.

“You’re the insane woman joining this family?” he asked.

“You’re the insane man who left?”

“I’m not insane.” He shook his head and pointed around the hospital. “Do you know how many times we’ve come to this hospital? This whole suite was designed not for high profile people, but us. Why? Because over and over again this family gets itself into shit so deep there is no avoiding this place...or the morgue. Normal people don’t live this way.”

“Yea.” I nodded, thinking about how I too wanted to be normal so many years ago.

“You don’t seem like the usual devoted worshiper,” he muttered, his eyes narrowing in on me.

“What?”

“Those fools.” He pointed to both Greyson and...Toby, I think. Both of whom didn’t even bother looking at him. “The idiots who would die for people in this family just because—”

“That idiot.” I pointed to Greyson. “He’s the one who found your grandmother and brought her out before...before it could have been much worse. I’m not a devoted worshiper like you said, but at the very least don’t call him an idiot. He’s a hero.”

He glanced back at Greyson, who still didn’t look at him, remaining kind of like those guards with funny hats in London...just without the funny hats.

“Greyson, apparently I owe you one.”

“Our *supreme leader* has told us not to acknowledge you, so you may keep your favor,” Greyson said like a robot, and I laughed.

I take it back! Nope, definitely not like the London Guards.

“Still as petty as always.” He snickered, shaking his head. Then he focused on me. “If you aren’t one of the followers, where are you from?”

“You don’t know?” I frowned at that.

“Don’t take it personally.” He leaned back into his seat. “I do my best to avoid any talk about the Irish, or the Italians, or any that involves this family.”

“I’m from Boston,” I said and his eyebrows came together in confusion.

“Boston, Massachusetts?”

“Born and raised,” I said with pride.

I could tell he was torn between asking more and not wanting to get involved, as he said, with this family.

“I have a question for you, as your future sister-in-law.”

“I make no promises I’ll answer, but you can ask.”

“I want normal too,” I said, so he knew I wasn’t trying to attack him.

“I’ve always wanted normal. I wanted my mom to do my hair for prom. My dad to walk me down to aisle. To graduate from Boston U with a degree in Biochemistry and Pharmaceutical Science and become famous for creating lifesaving medicine. Have a house with a porch so I could watch it rain or snow, with a pet, most likely a dog because my dad was allergic to cats. Maybe a Russell terrier?”

“Is there a question in all of this?” He smiled. I was sure he liked the thought of it.

“Yea.” I nodded. “What do you do when you become a victim?”

“What?”

“What do you do when you become a victim?” I asked him again. “You called me insane for joining this family. But I never dreamed my life would be like this. But my mother was murdered. Then my father was murdered. Then I was lied to, conned, and then I lost seven years of my life because not one person had my back. Not my family. Not the police nor the courts. No one. Your family didn’t do that to me. Life did. What am I supposed to do? Wait for karma? Wait for justice? Two hundred women were in my cell

block, who all wanted normal and something went wrong. Many of them by their own hands...far too many by the hands of others. If it were someone else, some other family that controlled instead of the Callahans, you'd be in that church too. No one would have carried your grandmother out. So tell me? What do you do? Because from what I've seen if you aren't the victimizer...you're the victim."

He shook his head, rising to his feet. "You'll fit in well, Ivy."

"You're leaving?"

"I'm going to check in with the hospital and see if any of the other *victims* need help. She'll most likely be out for another few hours. Let the *supreme one* know." He patted both Greyson's and Toby's shoulders before heading to the elevator.

There was no need to let him know because the moment the doors closed Ethan walked out into the lobby. I was sure he'd heard the conversation. And though he didn't seem fazed, there was something in his eyes as he stared at the closed elevator doors.

"Call the car," he directed at one of them.

"Are you going somewhere?" I asked, rising from the seat and standing in front of him. His gaze lowered down to me. Without my heels I felt very small under his stare.

"Yes. To be the victimizer," he replied, walking around me and toward the elevator. Obviously he listened in on our conversation. "Go rest."

"The moment shit hits the fan, as tends to happen in the Callahan family, he'll realize you aren't strong enough to be his woman."

Her words bothered me. I felt like if I went to bed as he went out I'd be proving her right. And so when the light came on indicating that the elevator came, I stood beside him.

"What are you doing?"

“Following you.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t want to hear about you from other people,” I said, stepping onto the elevator. He and his guards just stared at me, not moving.

“Are you coming?”

“Ivy, it isn’t a gam—”

“Oops!” I closed the doors, yelling, “Sorry, you’re going to have to catch the next one!”

I laughed, wishing so badly I could see the look on his face. He’d probably never had anyone do that to him before. When I reached the bottom floor, I realized I might have really been insane because that was when I saw it, the sheer chaos. People were still being rushed in, and doctors and nurses were everywhere. Wyatt, who’d only come down a few minutes ago, was somehow already on a stretcher working over a small girl, trying to put a tube down her throat. When he got it in he jumped down, yelling a few directions before rushing toward the next patient. Blood dripped all over the floors, which were quickly being cleaned by the janitors. In the waiting area people still dressed in their church clothes sat hugging onto each other tightly.

“Don’t go anywhere without letting me know and at least one guard.” Ethan appeared at my side, and I jumped, not even realizing how long I’d been standing there. He looked over at the lobby with not a single emotion. How, I wasn’t sure. “Let’s go.”

I followed behind him as he walked toward the glass doors and again I was so distracted by everything that I walked into his back, not realizing he’d stopped. He stood straighter, looking over his shoulder at me.

“Sorry,” I muttered, brushing my hair behind my ears.

Facing in front, I saw a small boy, maybe seven or eight, holding on to the arm of some stuffed animal...I couldn't tell what because he only had what was left of it...the arm.

"Yes?" Ethan asked him.

"You Mr. Callahan?" The boy frowned.

Ethan nodded, and the boy lifted the stuffed animal arm and held it up to him. "It was my brother's. He's gone now. Mom said you'd remember him. You'd make them pay for my brother."

"Tony!" A woman, who I could only guess was his mother rushed to him, grabbing onto him tightly. She looked up at us both, her eyes bloodshot. "Sorry—"

"Don't apologize, Mrs. Bellucci," he said, reaching down to pick up the stuffed arm and handing it back to the boy, telling him, "I don't need this to remember your brother." He took out a small pocket knife and cut his own palm, drawing his own blood before showing it to him. "This is how I remember."

Turning toward the doors, we stepped out into the cold air. It was only late afternoon, so part of me was expecting it to be dark outside. There were press and ambulances everywhere. The Range Rover pulled to a stop right to the side of the hospital to avoid blocking anyone. Toby held the door open, allowing me inside first. He sat beside me.

"You can't have them," he spoke into the phone, leaning back into his seat. "Chief Moen, this is personal. I'll give you one of them...you can make up whatever story you want...radicalism, satanism, pure insanity, I don't care. But you'll only get one of them alive."

He rested his finger on his lip, staring out the window. Rage...bloodlust came off him in waves.

“In Boston,” I spoke up softly and I couldn’t bring myself to look at him as I did. “They said the Callahans are greedy and selfish, power hungry thugs who don’t care about their own people anymore.”

“They’re right,” he said, to my surprise. “We are greedy, we are selfish, and hunger for power is second nature to us. It doesn’t matter if I care or not. They are our people. It’s my duty to make sure the whole survives at any cost. And so I do. Wyatt wants to help the victims. But it is Callahan money that expanded that hospital and Callahan money that will take care of those people when the government stops. What good is saving their lives if they can’t afford to live it afterward?”

I was starting to understand why everyone was so devoted to them. “A gangster with sophistication and morals.”

The corners of his mouth turned up.

“Exactly.”

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ELEVEN

“When a monster stopped behaving like a monster,
did it stop being a monster? Did it become something
else?”

~ *Kristin Cashore*

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WYATT

“Good job, Dr. Callahan.” A few of them patted me on the shoulder as they exited the scrub room. I glanced at the old man they were now taking to recovery.

“It’s a pleasure to have you here, Dr. Callahan,” Chief Shen said as she washed her wrinkled hands next to me. I already knew what she was going to ask.

“It’s only for a little bit, but I’m glad I could help.” I smiled politely.

“Your whole family is here, Dr. Callahan. I’m surprised you chose Boston over Chicago.”

“I needed a change of scenery,” I said, drying my hands, and pulled off the scrub cap.

“If you’d—”

“I’m happy in Boston for now, thanks.” Leaving before she and every other doctor in the hospital tried to recruit me to work with them, I followed the yellow hearts toward the older part of the hospital until I got to the stairs. I knew they only waited for me because they hoped more money would flow into the hospital. I was the ATM doctor, didn’t matter how good I was. People still looked at me, expecting me to just hand hundreds of thousands to their grant research or build a damn new wing of the hospital for them.

Stepping out into the cold, familiar alley, I inhaled the cold air, reaching into my pocket to grab the pack of cigarettes. Lighting one, I didn’t smoke it but left it on the stairs next to me...the mere scent of it reminding me of the many times I’d caught my father hiding in this very same alley for a

smoke break. I'd lost count how many hospital visits we'd had to endure. But I always remembered coming out here to sit with him.

"You'd think I was insane too, right, Pop?" I asked softly. I stared at the sky, the fading scar of smoke in the distance still evident. "Can't say I mind, though...I have peace."

Every time I came to this godforsaken city I felt as though my lungs were collapsing. It never ended. We'd get revenge, someone else sought revenge against our revenge, and over and over and over again until mothers were burying their children and vice versa. The circle of viciousness lived on from generation to generation. I just wanted it to end. And so I took myself out of it. I had to.

"Did you hear the Callahans got themselves some fancy suite?" Some idiot laughed right under the staircase. "Yea, they're all here. Half the damn Irish in the city are here."

Rolling my eyes, I stood up, moving to the door.

"Exactly. Ain't nobody at their fucking mansion."

I paused, looking up at the sky. *Really, God? Why? Whatever.* It wasn't likely they'd make it past the security anyway.

"Fuck the security. Well, fuck, you don't have to piss on my idea like that. Damn." He spat to the side of him and laughed. "Now you're talking! I'm sure we could hit up some of the houses...I'm looking through some of the dead's shit. I already got myself some nice watches."

Releasing the door handle and turning, I walked down the stairs, praying he'd hear me and at the very least run.

"Na, I got a few crucifixes and wedding rings but nothing much yet. I asked—" When his dark eyes met mine I stared at the man wearing blue scrubs. He hung up quickly. "What the fuck you looking at?"

I didn't reply. My gaze dropped to the watch on his wrist.

He looked at it. "A gift."

This disgusting shit.

"I got work to do," he said, turning around and trying to open the door to leave. Grabbing him by his shaggy hair, I pulled him back and slammed him against the brick wall right beside the door.

"The dead give gifts now?" I asked, not waiting for him to reply before I bashed his skull into the red wall over and over until it caved in, until blood splattered onto my face, until his body was dead weight, until I fucking felt better. Then I let him fall.

Bending down over him, I grabbed his phone, which was locked, but thank God for technology. Lifting his hand, I placed his thumb on the reader. Unlocked, I redialed the last number he'd called.

"Mark? How dare you hang up me, you bitch!" a female yelled so loudly I had to pull the phone from my ear. I almost regretted killing the dipshit. I was sure this woman gave him hell as it was.

"Mark can't come to the phone anymore," I said into the phone, looking down at the mess I'd made.

"Who the fuck are you?"

"Sweetheart, if you don't want to end up like your friend here I'd suggest you stop stealing from dead people and clean up your act." Hanging up, I threw it back onto his chest.

Chicago always brought out the worst in me.

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TWELVE

“I see your bleeding dark side. I feel your angry heart. It reveals forbidden places. More monster yet alive...”

~ *Static-X*

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ETHAN

Taking off my jacket and vest, I handed them to Ivy. She was so engrossed in what was happening, she didn't even argue. Rubbing the side of my chin, I took a deep breath, turning toward the three stupid fucks now kneeling in the grass in front of me.

My hands trembled.

"Do you know my family had a rule against killing on Sundays?" I asked them as wind blew through us, sliding the gold brass knuckles onto my hands. "I'm very particular about keeping to the rules. So I'd never broken it...not until today."

My fist struck, the brass hit into the side of the first, the oldest one's face. I grabbed onto his collar before he could fall over, hitting him again.

"YOU PIECE OF SHIT!" I hollered as my fist hit his face over and over, flesh ripping out. It took all of my strength not to keep going. Peeling my hand back, dark blood dripped off it. I let go of him, and he toppled over. Reaching up, I wiped the blood from my cheek...or maybe I was spreading it more. Trying to calm myself down, I turned to the rest of them. None of them spoke. Not that they could with the tape over their mouths. Kneeling down, I put my hand on the next man's face. "Do I really look like I'm the type of man who dies easily?"

He glared at me.

"I don't like that look." I frowned, pulling out my knife and stabbing him right in the eye.

"MIGHJ! MEH!" he screamed against the tape, writhing like a worm in pain.

“Much better.” I stepped back again. “You all must think you have balls of steel. You blew up a church. You all are so badass, right? Let’s see.”

One by one my men pulled them to their feet, all of them but Sammy, and pulled their pants down. The moment they did, the three of them panicked.

“Greyson, show them what type of men they really are.” I didn’t have to say it. He’d been waiting for it. His father was in that church. Grabbing onto the first one’s balls, he pulled on them before slicing through them. I was sure they were sobbing now, but I couldn’t hear anything over the thumping of my blood in my ears. The memory of Ivy, her first day out in the world as my woman, stumbling out covered in dust and blood, my grandmother burned, Donatella screaming. The more I thought about it, the angrier I became. I grabbed the balls on the grass and shoved them into its owner’s mouth before stomping on his mouth and face till he stopped writhing in pain and either died or gave in to the pain.

Taking the knife from Greyson, I grabbed on the second one’s hair, pulling his face back and carving the word *fhealltóir* into his face. He struggled, only making it worse on himself. Done, I slammed my head against his. No words could express my anger any longer and I was just roaring out in rage. “AHHH!”

Breathing heavily, each one of my men backed away from me as I reached into the back of the car, grabbing the rope and jar. Stomping back to Sammy, he just shook his head at me. Grabbing a fistful of his hair, I pulled him toward the tree, tying the rope around it and him, as well as any former Boy Scout should before I ripped his shirt open. His skinny white chest rose and fell over and over again and his fear kicked in. I ripped his jeans off him until he stood in just his formerly white underwear.

Flipping the blade in my hand, I then slid it deep into his stomach, making a gash deep enough to bleed him but not quickly.

Opening the jar of honey, I spread it over his face. “Your uncle once told me you were terrified of insects...how badass. Enjoy.” I patted his cheek, dropping the jar beside his feet and turning back round. I was not sure why or how. But I’d forgotten about her. Her big blue eyes only on me, covered in blood, surrounded by dead or dying men. And what was worse was the fact that I couldn’t figure out what she was thinking.

“Make sure they all die,” I said to the rest of them and turned, walking past Sammy toward the mansion farther up in the forest. I could hear her following me in silence.

We walked until I couldn’t stand it.

“THIS IS WHAT I AM!” I hollered, turning to face her, and she stumbled back. “Whatever juvenile thoughts you had about revenge, end them. Because this is the only way I settle things. Your cousins...pray they die quickly because if they don’t I’m going to chain them to my basement like the goddamn dogs they are until I decide I’m done torturing them and set them on fire.”

“Okay.” She nodded.

“Okay?” I took a step toward her, and she backed away. “Yet you’re scared.”

“No.” She frowned, pointing to my hands. “Forget the fact that you just touched some guy’s balls...I’m allergic to honey.”

She, still holding onto my clothes, walked around me and toward the mansion, leaving me so confused the only explanation for her half assed reaction was...Ivy was insane.

Why did that make me smile?

IVY

His room was massive.

And as I sat on his bed, I tried not to stare at him as he showered, because he didn't have a fucking door, just a glass standing shower he stood under.

Just one look wouldn't hurt, I lied to myself, glancing over to see his perfectly sculpted ass. It looked so hard from here. Tilting my head to the side, I leaned forward, now just openly gaping, until he turned and his eyes were on me as water traveled down an even sexier chest than I could have imagined.

Shit. Quickly, I faced forward again.

I'd cleaned up at the hospital and yet still felt dirty. I wasn't sure if it was really my body or my mind at this point. Hearing the shower stop, I pretended to be interested in my nails.

"Are you so horny you can't think of anything else?"

"Hey!" My eyes shifted to him and focused. He stood naked at the side of the bed, using the towel to dry his hair and not cover...his cock...his very big...thick...

"Hey?" He smirked, repeating me.

"Shut up!" I muttered, throwing his jacket at him. Why the fuck was I still holding it? It was annoying.

"I killed two men in front of—"

"I don't know. It's like Schrödinger's cat. They're both dead and alive until someone can confirm either."

He looked at me like everyone else did at the prison when I'd keep eating even as someone got stabbed at my table.

"They deserved it. You don't have to question if I'm okay or not. Because they deserved it."

“And if I killed someone undeserving?” he asked, moving to sit on his couch naked...still. Thankfully he’d dropped his towel in his lap.

I didn’t answer.

He didn’t respond.

So we watched each other until he spoke again.

“How long are we going to do this, Ivy?”

“What?”

“Fuck each other with our eyes,” he said, doing exactly that.

“We’ve only known each other for two days,” I said much softer...meeker than I wanted to, shifting on his bed.

“So?” His eyebrow went up.

He had a point. I didn’t even know him and I said yes to marrying him. Well, he’d never asked but still...

“Ivy.”

“Yes.”

“Come here,” he demanded, and I couldn’t. I wouldn’t...but he just had to look at me at that moment and say, “Please...”

Crawling forward on the bed until I got to the edge and stepped onto the wood, I stood between his legs. Sitting up, he placed his hand on the back of my thigh and rested his head on my stomach. Unable to stop myself, I ran my hands through his dark, wet hair.

“Today...was a mess,” he muttered. “I wanted to show you some of the better parts of this family before it got dark.”

“Why?” It’s not like my opinion mattered.

He lifted his head. “This is forever. You’re mine forever. Once your anger is gone, what will make you stay?”

I frowned at that and slowly leaned over him, allowing him to relax and me to sit on his lap. When I reached up to touch his face he pulled back

slightly. “You don’t like being touched.” I wasn’t asking. I’d noticed no one touched him other than taking his arm.

He nodded but didn’t speak, reminding me he only answered direct questions.

“Why?”

“I don’t like how it makes me feel,” he replied honestly, but I still didn’t get it. He must’ve seen that because he went on. “When my grandmother reaches out to touch me, she’s doing it because she sees my father. I’m not my father. My sister, she reaches out when she’s breaking down. I can’t always be there to save her. I don’t want her to feel like she can count on me for that too. The rest of my family, it’s like they are expecting something. If they aren’t family they don’t need to touch me.”

“And me?”

He thought for a moment and simply said, “I’m not used to you.”

Testing that theory, I reached out to touch his jaw, and this time he didn’t move away, allowing my hands to trace over his skin.

“I have no one else,” I whispered gently, lightly tapping his skin. “This morning I woke thinking I didn’t want to be like you and your family. And now...”

“And now?” He reached up, grabbing my hands.

“And now, everything is broken.” I’d watched it as it broke. “What I believed. The people I cared about. Everything is gone. And there is nothing else for me but being Mrs. Ivy Callahan. There is nothing for me but this. So I’m going to enjoy this. You brought me here...I hope you know what you’ve done because I’m not going anywhere now.”

He brought my chin down, stopping just as our lips hovered close. “What about earning you?”

“Shut up and kiss me, Ethan.” I didn’t have to ask again before his lips were on mine. Shifting in his seat, his hand grabbed onto my waist as my body pressed up against his bare chest. His hot tongue slid into my mouth, my tongue swirling over his, tasting him. I felt him harden under me. His cock rose, poking my thigh through the towel. We kissed until my lungs burned and even then I wanted more...sadly, he pulled away, not much, but enough for both of us to breathe.

Reaching up and behind me, I pulled down the zip of the dress, and he reached up, helping my arms out of the sleeves, and then taking off my bra himself. He tossed it off to the side, and free of the cups, my breasts bounced slightly in front of him. My dress was now in a pool around my waist.

“Ahh...” I gasped when his cold hand cupped me gently, his thumb flicking my nipple before he leaned forward and took it into his mouth. Licking my lips, I gripped onto his hair, allowing him to kiss wherever he wanted. His right hand slid between my thighs and he froze as he touched the lips of my pussy.

“You’ve been with me all day without underwear?”

“I’m a little insulted you only just noticed.” I grinned at the lust in his eyes, reaching down to pull the towel and throw it in the same direction he’d thrown my bra.

“Accept my apology then.”

“Oh...” I gasped out, grabbing onto his shoulder as he slid two fingers into me. Biting down on my bottom lip, my hips rocked against his fingers, completely under his control, to my annoyance. I tried to glare at him as his fingers pulled out only to rub my wet pussy lips. He didn’t realize two people could play this game. Reaching down, I grabbed him, causing his mouth to part slightly. The same look I’d given him, he’d give me, too...

“Ah...fuck.” I gritted my teeth as three of his fingers entered me. Closing my eyes, breathing through my nose, I wrapped my fingers around his cock, sliding them all the way down and back up, my thumb gliding over the tip of him.

“Open your eyes,” he whispered, kissing the top of my ear.

I couldn't. I could barely hold on as it was, let alone watch him watch me.

“Ivy.” He said my name so softly and kissed the side of my face so gently you'd never believe he was the same man who'd just killed three men.

Opening my eyes, his forehead rested on mine and my heart pounded against my chest as he took his fingers out of me, lifting my hips up slightly...waiting for me. Never looking away from his green eyes, I held his cock still, positioning it under my pussy. His grip on me tightened. I wasn't sure it was him or me who was trembling...

“Ahh...” Both of us moaned out as I slowly lowered myself on him.

“Ivy...” He gritted his teeth, his eyes dropping down to my waist. I could feel him stretching me out. It was...it was the best pain on earth. Placing my hands on his shoulders, trying to breathe, I stayed still as he entered me completely. His arms wrapped around me tightly, his hands reaching up to my hair, bringing my face closer to his as we kissed. Every part of me was humming. As our mouths locked I deliberately began to move on top of him. We started slow, both of us torturing each other and ourselves.

Pushing him against the chair, he stared at me hungrily as I rode on top of him, rising up slightly and then back down again. He watched and that turned me on far more than it should have. Reaching up, I held my hair up from my burning skin, moving faster, bouncing faster on top of his cock,

the sound of our skins slapping together and our moans the only thing I could hear.

“Fuck...” He hissed, holding on to me, thrusting up into me.

“Ethan!” I could barely stop from screaming as it was.

But he didn’t care. Holding on to me, he thrust up into me each time I came down, going deeper, making me crazier each and every time, to the point I didn’t care who heard me. Grabbing onto my breasts, I pinched my own nipples, crying out in pleasure as he filled every inch of me.

My toes curling, the pressure in my stomach begging for release...he was... “Oh...oh...YES!”

Coming on him, my body fell forward onto him, and he merely gripped my hips and lifted me from the chair with him. Wrapping my arms around his neck, my chest was on fire as he laid me on the bed. When he pulled out of me I missed him automatically.

“If you think I’m done with you...you’re sadly mistaken.” He kissed my lips. Lying behind me, he lifted my leg up.

I brushed my hair from my face. “I don’t mind being wrong...uhh...”

“Louder,” he demanded, ramming his cock back into me. My mouth dropped open and I was sure I was drooling at this point, but I couldn’t help myself. I held on to the sheets as he fucked me...the gentleman on the couch now gone as he held my thigh up, pulling out only to thrust back forward.

My mind was nothing much at this point. Whatever he wanted I’d give it to him just so he’d never stop.

“Harder,” I cried out, my nails digging into the sheets, grinning as the whole bed jerked with us.

“Fucking shit!” I laughed or cried...I didn’t know...but this was heaven. I came for the second time with him.

“Ivy,” he cried out, coming in me.

Both of us gasped for air. He let go of my leg and it dropped quickly. I lay there for a few moments before rolling over to face him. And the look in his eyes, like a wild animal after it just had its first kill, told me this was just the beginning.

ETHAN

Standing under the heat of the shower trying to calm myself, it took all my strength not to just fuck her mad. Not to wreck her. I was being fucking considerate...me. One of the things I'd never been...yet the reckless woman put herself in my path again.

“You come here, you won't be able to walk out,” I said to her when I heard her footsteps.

As if she didn't hear me, she stepped in the shower with me, lifting her head to enjoy the water as it poured down every inch of her body. Wiping her face, she turned to me and waited...proving she did hear me—

“Ivy.” I gasped when she dropped to her knees in front of me. Her tongue licked the side of me until she reached the tip. Her hands slid up my legs, up to my thighs as she took me into her mouth.

Damn her. Hunching over the water pouring on my head as I grabbed a fistful of her hair with one hand and braced myself against the shower wall with the other, I thrust my cock into her wet, hot, beautiful mouth. I couldn't help but give in, closing my eyes and enjoying the way she sucked me in, the sounds that poured out of her as I fucked her mouth. My cock hit so deep into her throat and yet she didn't gag like other women, she just took it happily, gripping my legs for support.

My whole body begged for it...to cum...to see if she'd take all of it. But when I looked down to see her gazing up at me through those long eyelashes of hers. *Fuck!* This wasn't enough. Pulling her hair, I forced her to release me.

"What's wrong?" she asked innocently.

"You." I snapped, turning her around and bending her over, spreading her thighs, as she braced herself against the wall, squeezing her sexy round ass, which had the most beautiful freckles on it. "You're what's wrong."

Breathing through my nose, gripping her waist, saliva pooled in my mouth as I rammed myself into her pussy.

"Uhh..." She gasped, her hands flat against the wall.

"I tried warning you," I said, clenching my jaw as I gave in...no, as I gave up controlling myself.

Nothing stopped me as I pulled out of her and slammed myself back in as hard as I could. My hips slapped against her skin...gasping for breath as I took her...hard. Slapping her ass till it was red and hunching over her back...I kissed her shoulder, her back pressed up against my chest as I reached under to grip her breasts, squeezing the both of them, pinching her pink nipples as I fucked her.

"Ethan..." Whatever she was trying to say was overcome by her moans. She trembled under me, crying out as she came.

My vision darkened, but I was unable to stop. *Fuck, she's tight.*

"Ahh..." I couldn't hold back any longer, going still as I filled her.

"Fuck."

"We just did." She giggled when I pulled out of her, collapsing onto the shower floor. "You kept your promise...no way I'm walking out of here."

Swallowing the saliva in my mouth and closing my eyes, I took a deep breath, the water now cold on my skin.

It's only day two.

In just two days of meting Ivy O'Davoren, soon to be Callahan, she had seen the very worst of me, of my family, and had me inside her anyway. Two days, and yet it felt like years had gone by.

Finally able to see straight again, I turned off the water, leaving her as I walked over to the white cast iron tub in the corner. I filled that up with warm water before turning back to pick her up and take her with me.

"Oh..." She smiled when the water touched her skin.

Leaning back against the tub, I watched as she stared up at the skylight, the day diming to night.

"We're getting married," I told her.

"I know. You kinda made a big deal about it." She snickered, lifting the ring I didn't even remember seeing on her.

However, that wasn't my point. "I mean, we're getting married tonight."

Her mouth dropped open. "Say what?"

"As tragic as today has been, it allows us to forgo a massive wedding on the grounds that our family church is no longer..." I bit the inside of my cheek. "My whole family is in the city. We'll do it in my grandmother's room and be done with it."

She turned to me and pouted. "You really aren't romantic, are you?"

"I told you that yesterday."

She rolled her eyes. "Fine! And even though you just fucked me all over your room, I'm still wearing white."

"I hardly fucked you all over my room. There is still the closet, the balcony—"

She put her hand over my mouth. "Are you trying to kill me?"

She was asking me? As if she wasn't the reason I was like this to begin with. Reaching up, I took her hands off my face, drawing her closer to me,

her lips just barely hovering over mine as I spoke.

“My father once told me history acknowledges four dangerous women: the woman who gave Adam the apple, the one who cast a thousand ships, the third who opened Pandora’s box, and the fourth...the wife of the Ceann na Conairte.”

She smiled from ear to ear and replied, “I’ve always wanted to be dangerous.”

Smirking, I leaned back, looking through the skylight. “That song you sang yesterday...sing it.”

She rested back against me, and I closed my eyes, hearing her voice.

She was made for me.

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THIRTEEN

“We live in a dark and romantic and quite tragic
world.”

~ *Karl Lagerfeld*

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ETHAN - AGE SIXTEEN

“Let me see—”

“I got it.” He snapped, yanking his tie away from me and walking toward my aunt Cora by the fireplace. She glanced at Wyatt and then back at me.

“Don’t mind him. He’s just—”

I know. I mouthed back. He was always at his worst this time of the year. There wasn’t much anyone could do but just let Wyatt do what he wanted. Seeing Dona writing, as always, sitting by the window, her black shoes on the ground beside her. She was concentrating so hard, wiggling her toes excitedly. She didn’t even notice me as I sat opposite her by the window.

“ETHAN!” she screamed at me as I took the book away. “Give it back.”

“I hate being ignored!” I hollered back at her, smacking her hands away as I flipped the book open. “What are you writing anyway?”

“Ethan, I’m going to kill you!” She lunged at me, but I dodged, getting up with the book. I hadn’t meant to actually read it but seeing Mother’s name written there I couldn’t help it. “Ethan.”

Ignoring her and running around the room as she tried to steal it back, I read quickly.

“Wyatt, get your ass out of bed!” Melody yelled, ripping the sheets from the sleeping idiot who was still dry humping his pillow.

“Mom!” he hollered back. “Get out!”

“You get out. I own the house!” she yelled back.

“Ugh, you’re so an—” Before he could say it she took the pillow and beamed it right into his head, sending him back on his ass.

“What was that?” She crossed her arms.

“Seriously, why must we always train? I want to sleep.” He took the pillow and threw it back at her. But being the great woman she was, she caught it with one hand. However, the pillow burst, sending goose feathers all over the place.

They both froze.

Wyatt looked at his mother, his eyes widening in shock before he couldn't help himself and broke out into a fit of laughter.

“You little...” His mother grabbed another pillow and began to beat him mercilessly until all of sudden a pillow was beamed at the back of her head.

Upon turning she saw the teenage reflection of herself with green eyes already in battle mode with two pillows in hand. She tossed one to Wyatt, who made his escape, quickly grabbing onto the pillow, spinning around to face her.

“Et tu, Dona?” Melody asked her daughter.

“Caesar must fall, Mother,” her daughter said, charging toward her. But before she made it a pillow hit her square in the face.

In shock, Donatella looked up at her brother, who glared down at her, trying his best to be serious, as was his nature, but even he couldn't help but smile.

“Not on my watch,” he said, standing by his mother, who handed him a pillow.

“And so the battle lines have been drawn,” Wyatt said, a fat grin on his face, pulling his sister up before bouncing on the balls of his feet.

Melody glanced at her first born, saying, “Remember...”

“Mercy is only for God and the Pope,” he replied, well versed in her battle strategies.

“FIGHT!” Dona yelled, charging once again.

All-out chaos ensued as the most epic battle of pillows began.

Feathers flying left and right in people’s faces, mouths, getting stuck in their hair. Neither would bow their heads in defeat. In the Callahan family victory was the only option. And part of victory, their mother had told them, was strategic planning. She knew her son and daughter would fight with their pillows until every last feather was out. However, she was wiser, much more cunning, with years of victories under her belt. While her first born kept them distracted and she half-heartily fought back with one hand...her right hand was gathering up all the other pillows and throwing them behind her. It was only when every feather had fallen out of Donatella’s and Wyatt’s pillows did they realize they didn’t have any other weapons.

“CHEATER!” Wyatt yelled, pointing at them.

“Ethan?” Melody called him. “What do we say about people who call others cheaters?”

“They have to be losers.” He smirked wickedly.

“Exactly.” She nodded. “And as the losers you must pick up each feather.”

“Mommmm,” Dona whined.

“Ethan?” she called again. “What do we call whiners?”

“Still losers,” he replied, the smirk on his face now a full-blown smile.

“You guys are...” When Dona saw her mother’s glare she shut up and got on her knees to gather up the feathers.

“This is going to take all day,” Wyatt grumped, getting down beside her.

“What is this?”

All four of their heads rose to see their father, still in his pajamas, his brown hair an epic mess.

“Victory,” Melody and Ethan said at the same time.

Liam glanced down at his two other children and shook his head. “You do not surrender.”

“They took all the pillows,” Wyatt said, looking up at him.

Liam sighed, walking over to his wife and kissing her cheek. “What are we going to do with these brats?”

“Hey!” Ethan snapped. “I was on the winning team.”

Liam raised his eyebrow, bent down, and took the pillow, smacking him upside the face so hard he landed on his ass next to Wyatt. Then he stepped in the same spot he once stood.

“That’s your team.” He pointed to his brother and sister. “The only team your mother is on is mine.”

Melody laughed, shaking her head. “So immature.”

“Try and deny it,” he said, waiting for her to speak, and she didn’t, rolling her eyes at him. But he ignored it and looked down at his kids.

“Enjoy cleaning. Your mother and I are going to—have adult time.”

“URGH!”

“SERIOUSLY?”

“JUST GO.”

The three of them yelled, completely grossed out.

Their mother bent down to Ethan, picking a feather out of his hair.

“Thanks for having my back, little man.”

“I’m taller than you,” he said back, sulking.

“Want me to cut you down to size?” She tilted her head to the side.

“I mean, no problem,” Ethan said quickly, causing both his siblings to snicker.

As Melody kissed her other children, Liam bent down in front of Ethan, smirking, the one Ethan had yet to master. “No hard feelings, kids. One day when you get married you’ll understand.”

Ethan didn't say anything to him.

Rising back to his feet, he ruffled both Dona's and Wyatt's hair before he and his wife left.

That is how the Callahan family spent today.

I'd gotten to her last words, the date today's date. When I glanced up, she had tears she wouldn't let fall built up in her eyes. She snatched the book from me and walked back to the window.

Rubbing the back of my head, my chest burned...I'd smiled. I'd wanted to laugh. It felt so real. Like a memory I'd forgotten. I could feel the pillows. I could see her...our mother. But it wasn't a memory. There were no pillows and I couldn't just see her. She was gone. She'd never have that moment.

That's what she's doing. I realized. Every year she'd taken out that same book and she must have made a story, an alternate ending.

"He's not coming." My uncle Declan frowned, standing at the door.

"Then I'm not—"

"We're going!" I hollered at Wyatt. "Mom at least deserves us."

Annoyed, I wished I'd never read it. It made it worse. I stomped out of the room and out through the hall until I got out of the damn house. The black cars were waiting. Turning back, I looked up at the office, his office. All I saw was his hand with a glass of wine...my mom's wine.

"Ethan?" Toby said in shock, immediately placing the roses behind his back.

"Why do you look shocked? It's my house." I looked him over and the roses still behind his back. "I told you last year my mom wasn't a fan of roses."

"It's the only flower they had ready at the flower shop."

That sounded like bullshit, but I didn't want to think anymore, opening the driver's side door.

"You comin'?" I asked him.

"Yea." He ran to the other side of the car, hopping into the front and throwing the roses into the back.

I pulled out. I didn't want to be near any of them right now. I was sick of it...all of it.

"Toby."

"Yea?"

I thought about how to phrase it and just settled on the simplest. "When I take over, I'm going to have to get married...don't let me fall in love with her."

"And how the hell am I supposed to stop you?" he asked seriously.

He had a point. "Fine...if I do, and she dies, kill me too...don't let me become like him."

"Fine."

I glared over at him, ready to kick him out of the car while I was still driving. "At least pretend to be conflicted about it, you fuck."

"How about you fall in love first? I'll worry it about it then," he muttered, closing his eyes and smiling. "I've never had a Callahan drive me before."

"Have you ever had a Callahan run you over?" I asked him and luckily he didn't speak. I drove, knowing full well a guard was following behind me. He wasn't needed. I dared anyone to start shit today...I'd kill him with my bare hands.

If my father wasn't going to be at my dead mother's side, I'd be there.

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FOURTEEN

“You and this world will remember me.”

~ *Bonnie and Clyde*

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IVY

I, like many girls, always dreamed of my wedding day. Being engaged once before, I'd already started planning.

My colors were going to be deep red, sunset orange, and cream.

I wanted roses. Not just any roses but deep red, just barely blooming pink, and white roses.

My dress was going to be made by Mrs. Crenshaw down on 2nd street.

The wedding was supposed to be huge. The whole block was invited to come.

It's funny how life works out, huh?

There were no colors. And we hadn't even thought of flowers until we'd gotten here and so we used the pink and purple tulips Ethan's aunt Coraline had brought for Evelyn. My dress, it was white, thankfully, and not by Mrs. Crenshaw, but Diane von Fürstenberg. And though Ethan's family was big, it was hardly huge. Nothing in my life came out the way I'd tried to plan it.

Nothing. And yet...

"Ethan Antonio Giovanni Callahan, do you take Ivy O'Davoren to be your lawfully wedded wife, to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do you part?"

"I do." He didn't hesitate, his eyes never leaving mine.

"Ivy O'Davoren, do you take Ethan Antonio Giovanni Callahan to be your lawfully wedded husband, to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do you part?"

"I do," I answered softly, frozen under the power of his gaze.

The priest went on. "Are you prepared, as you follow the path of marriage, to love and honor each other for as long as you both shall live?"

"Yes," he and I said at the same time.

"Are you prepared to accept children lovingly from God and to bring them up according to the law of Christ and his Church?"

Children!

"Yes," Ethan said alone and raised his eyebrow at me when I didn't speak. He squeezed my hand slightly.

"Yes." I nodded.

"Rings," he called for them.

And Wyatt, even to his surprise, was the one who gave it to him. Ethan gave him a strange look, but Wyatt ignored him, stepping back, and Ethan focused back on me.

"With this ring, I bind my life to yours, in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health. It is a symbol of my eternal love, my everlasting friendship, and the promise of all my tomorrows. An outward reminder of our inner unity. I forsake all others, I choose you, until death do us part," Ethan said, sliding the gold ring back onto my finger until it met with the engagement ring.

Taking the gold ring from Donatella, I slid it up his finger, repeating the words back to him. "With this ring, I bind my life to yours, in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health. It is a symbol of my eternal love, my everlasting friendship, and the promise of all my tomorrows. An outward reminder of our inner unity. I forsake all others, I choose you, until death do us part."

"What God joins together, let no one put asunder. May you both be blessed. Mr. Callahan, you may kiss your wife."

He kissed me as if...as if we'd spent the afternoon making love in his room. I tried not to give in...but damn his lips, they were sinful and drew me right in.

"Mr. and Mrs. Callahan," the priest called, forcing us to break apart, to the snickers of his family. Reaching up to the corner of my lip, I wiped it. "Congratulations," the priest added.

"Well damn, I feel old, the boy is married," his uncle Neal said, a big man, his beard hair grown out from the photo I'd seen of him and graying.

"Boy?" Ethan asked.

But Neal ignored him and was the first to hug me and whisper, "Try to love him and end his brokenness."

I was so stunned, and he let go so quickly, cracking a joke I didn't understand or follow before his wife, Mina, her hair cut short, kissed both sides of my cheeks.

Next up was his uncle Declan, whose dark brown hair had little flecks of white in it. He didn't hug me, just looked me up and down and then glanced back at Ethan. "She's far too pretty for you."

His wife, Coraline, whose brown skin had not a single imperfection, smacked his arm and hugged me tightly. She smelled like fresh rain and it made me relax.

"I was the closest to Ethan's mother," she said and for some reason both Neal and Declan scoffed and tried not to laugh. When she glared at them, both of them looked away. Her brown eyes back on me, she opened a box... inside was a Revolver.

"Of fucking course." Declan shook his head. "Excuse me, Father."

"I believe in the 2nd Amendment," he said with his hand actually on the Bible.

“There are two?” Ethan muttered, his eyes fixed on the gun. He reached into his jacket, picking out the same gun. It was only slightly bigger.

“Thank you,” I said, running my hand over the barrel. She closed the box, stepping back. Dona was next up.

She hugged a little too tightly, whispering, “You betray my brother, I’ll kill you with that gun.”

The wedding of my dreams, I thought sarcastically.

“Welcome to the family.” Wyatt nodded and didn’t bother hugging me.

However, his cousins made up for it, all of them surrounding me, making me laugh as they hugged me, lifting me from the ground.

“Guys...” Helen called out, standing beside Evelyn, whose arms were both wrapped in bandages. She lay there with an oxygen mask over her mouth but her eyes on me. I couldn’t imagine the pain as she raised her arm to push the mask off her face.

“Leave...but Ivy,” she said, and I looked at Ethan, who stared at her. I could see his body tensing up, his hands balling into fists, his rage returning. Not him nor his uncles or siblings or cousins even dared to disobey her.

One by one they all left me alone with her.

“Sit,” she said to me.

Listening to her, I sat beside her bed. She didn’t speak, and the longer I sat in silence, the more I swayed left to right anxiously before I couldn’t take it any longer and leaned forward, asking, “Did you want to threaten me too?”

She smiled, not a full grin, but a small smile.

“Look in the Bible.” She tilted her head toward her bedside table. Reaching for it, I nearly dropped it, causing a letter to fall out. “It’s for you.”

Curious as to how she wrote it, I put the Bible in my lap along with my...well, her flowers, reading.

To the woman who has come to replace me in my son's heart,

"This is from his mom?" My eyes shot up at her.

"Read, Ivy. The damn woman always knew exactly what to say." She frowned, annoyed, and it was kind of funny.

To the woman who has come to replace me in my son's heart,

Know you are not good enough. You will never be good enough. I went to hell with a smile on my face for my son. Ethan has a place in my heart no other human being can ever touch. And so you will never live up to the woman I'd imagine for him because the truth is no one will ever be good enough. Don't take comfort in that admission. Before you act, imagine if I were to judge...imagine that horrid mother-in-law in every film, know that I would be worse, and try to impress me anyway. You are now the head woman of this family. Act like it and make them talk about you as they talked about me. Make them remember you as they did me. Haunt the woman who will one day come and replace you as number one in your own son's heart as I did Evelyn and as Evelyn did Margaret. Make them fear you as much as they fear him. I trust my son enough to know he didn't choose a pretty idiot with a heart of gold...he does not need that. That will only lead him to death. No, instead, feed his dark side, enjoy being there with him. Don't change him. I made him and he is perfect. There is nothing to change.

If you can, maybe I'll hate you less...

Thought about it. I'll still hate you.

Melody Nicci Giovanni Callahan

"Well, she's just great." I couldn't help but smile. For some reason I could feel her anger, pain, and love through it perfectly. I could also see where Ethan got his personality from.

“Burn it,” she said.

“What?”

She nodded. “It’s for you only.”

I thought about it. I looked back down at the letter, at the woman I was, as she said replacing her, and stood up, placing the Bible and flowers back on the bedside table. Leaning over to her, I kissed the side of her head.

“Evelyn, thank you, but I’ll keep the letter—”

“You can’t...Ethan will see...”

“I know.” I nodded. I pressed the button for her morphine. “I’m going to show him. Like she said I’m the head now. Don’t tell me what to do with my letter. Just rest and don’t die for a long time.”

She glared at me, but I just winked at her.

“Sleep tight,” I said when the pain medicine started to work. Before getting up and walking toward the door.

“She’s sleeping,” I told them and walked up to Ethan, lifting the letter.

“She wanted me to burn this.”

His eyebrows frowned together as he took it. His eyes skimmed the first line before realizing who it was from...slowly he read until he relaxed and then that smug smirk of his returned to his face. I could tell from the expression on his face he held his mother’s words as gospel.

“You think you can do it?” he asked.

“I already am. Thank you very much,” I answered, snatching it back. I folded it, throwing it into my small purse. At least something else but a lipstick was there.

“Do what?”

Both of us, almost as if we had forgotten everyone was around us, looked at Donatella, whose eyes were glued to my purse.

“Nothing.” I obviously lied and I did it cheerfully, facing Ethan again. “Does this wedding come with food or am I supposed to just keep being a jewelry holder?”

Ethan looked at me as if I were mad, seeing as how I’d stuffed myself with fancy rich people pasta, bourbon meatballs, grilled scallops, popcorn, and ice cream at the mansion before coming over here.

“Say anything that I’ll take as you calling me fat.” I dared him to comment.

“And you’ll do what?”

“Oohh...dumb question.” His uncle Neal groaned, putting his hands over his mouth. Declan just covered his mouth with his hand, shaking his head at him.

“You’ll regret that one, believe me.”

“Is this secret marriage meeting done?” Sedric asked curiously before walking over to me and putting his hand over my shoulder. “If so, I’m totally liking where cousin-in-law’s mind is at with this food business.”

“Hands,” Ethan said to him.

Sedric made a face and lifted his hands up in surrender.

“It’s already here,” Coraline replied, checked her phone, and not a second later the elevator pinged. When the doors opened the guards, much more of them now that so many of us were here, scanned them before letting them forward.

“Set up in the room,” Coraline directed her private chefs.

I was thinking pizza but apparently I was still thinking small as I watched the men in white chef hats roll their carts toward the room. There was even a wedding cake with the initials E.I. on the top.

“Well, come on.” Cora looked back at the rest of them.

“What would we do without you, Mom?” Darcy tried to hug her, but Declan stuck his hand out, pushing him and taking his wife forward, making everyone laugh.

I saw Wyatt trying to make his escape. I was sure Ethan saw too but didn’t say anything.

So while everyone was walking forward, I said, “You said you’d help the victims, right?”

He froze and looked at me, dressed in his blue scrubs.

“Well, a church fell on me this morning. My wedding is being done in a hospital room and no one from my side of my family is here. You’re adding insult to injury by leaving...do no harm, Doc,” I said, trying to act really hurt.

“You’re going to be a pain. I can tell,” he muttered to himself before walking past me toward his grandmother’s room.

“Takes one to know one.” I spun back on the balls of my feet.

Ethan watched him go in.

“Don’t glare at him. You know you want him here,” I whispered, taking his hand.

He glanced down at it and then at me, saying, “How the fuck are you still hungry?”

“I almost forgot I was annoyed with you. Thank you, dick.” I snapped, pulling my hand away and marching to the room by myself.

ETHAN

I was confident if my mother were still alive she’d have no idea how to handle Ivy. The woman was the very definition of a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma. She didn’t react or say anything the way anyone

else would. I'd had a man's balls cut off and she'd slept with me. I'd mentioned she'd eaten too much and she was ready to never speak to me again. She smiled when she was supposed to be scared and judged complicated things simply. There was no due north with her. However, she reacted purely based on her own moral code, which was just as skewed as mine.

"A delivery." Toby came in with a giant basket of sunflowers.

"From?" I asked. Everyone paused eating to look up at them.

"The Moretti Family. They were also in the church. All of them came out alive, though."

"All of them?" Ivy questioned, and Toby nodded, making her frown as she spoke again. "That's weird."

"What is?" my aunt Mina questioned.

"I was sure I left Klarissa bleeding out on the floor before leaving the church. She asked for help, but I left, and smoke was pouring in there. I guess some people really have nine lives." She shrugged, licking marble cake off her spoon. Her eyes lit up and she turned to me. "This is really good!"

Everyone else was silent, trying to process what she'd just causally admitted to.

"You left her bleeding out?" Mr. In-His-Damn-Feelings, asked her.

Ivy looked at him and nodded. "A piece of the door went into her thigh."

"And you just left her?" Wyatt still pressed.

Shaking my head, I reached for the wine as she went on.

"What did you want me to do? Carry her on my head?" she questioned, and I snorted, fighting back a laugh. Me. They were all just as shocked as I was, looking at me. Ignoring them, I wiped the corner of my mouth.

“You could have—”

“Next time a church falls on top of you, you can let me know what I should have done. But in all honesty I left her not because she would’ve been heavy and obviously slow me down from saving my own life, thanks for asking, by the way.” She made a face at him, and I really was dying to laugh inside, but held my composure as she went on. “I don’t like her. I’m kinda disappointed. I really wished the big guy had handled that one for me.”

No one said anything, just stared at her, and she shifted uncomfortably in her seat, sighing before turning back to Toby.

“Is she at least okay?” she asked him, but her tone clearly not giving two shits.

“Both her legs are broken,” Toby replied.

“Well, that’s something, I guess.” She shrugged and then turned to me, pointing her spoon at me. “Are you going to eat your cake?”

Lifting the plate, I handed it to her and you’d think I’d given her a gold bar.

“Thank you.” She ate happily, either ignoring or not noticing the looks everyone around the table was giving her.

Both my uncles glanced at me. I knew that look. Approval.

Who I chose to marry wasn’t just my business, it was family business. And while they seemed like happy-go-lucky married men...they were Callahans. They accepted my choice, because they had to. Approval was why my Aunt Cora set up this dinner, the last time we would have together for a long time, as they’d leave Chicago again. Once my father had died and I took over, they wanted no confusion to who the head of the family was... and they were tired. Burnt out. Uncle Declan and Aunt Cora lived on a boat. Yes, a damn boat. They’d spent the last couple of years sailing together.

They were almost always unreachable, only making exceptions for emergencies. While Uncle Neal and Aunt Mina lived in the outskirts of some place in South Korea, like normal people.

“Just this once I’m going to pretend to go to the ladies’ room so you all can have a moment to talk about me,” she replied, acknowledging the fact that she did notice their gazes, then got up to do just that.

Nari’s brown eyes shifted to me and I nodded for her to follow Ivy out of the room.

“Well, she’s honest.” My aunt Cora grinned.

“That’s what makes her so…” My aunt Mina drifted off when she looked at me. “Perfect for you.”

“Nice save.” Uncle Neal snickered and shifted forward, placing his elbows on the table, stroking his beard as he eyed me carefully.

“Yes?”

“Out of all the women in the world you found one who’s crazy enough to put up with you, and cold enough to make your mother proud. On top of that a looker. Call me crazy, but it seems like one hell of a coincidence, especially since your father didn’t believe in them.”

“Luckily I’m not my father.” Something I’d been repeating for far too damn long.

“Neal, did you think of all that on your own?” Uncle Declan gasped in mock shock, applauding him.

Uncle Neal reached for the silverware and would have stabbed him had Aunt Mina not grabbed his arm and Aunt Cora already smacked Uncle Declan… I’d seen this clown act almost as many times as people compared me to my father.

“Didn’t you know?” Donatella cut a glass of wine at her lips. Her face was expressionless, her voice almost numb. “She came from prison… I’m

sure seven years will mess with a girl. As for being pretty, Nari helped with that.”

“Prison?” Uncle Declan’s voice became serious. However, I ignored him and focused on Dona.

“What mess is she, Dona?” I asked. “I don’t see anything wrong with her. Am I a mess also?”

Aunt Cora grabbed her arm, squeezing it, trying to warn her to drop it, but Dona being Dona could never back down.

“Yes. All of us are a fucking mess!” She snapped.

“Here we go.” Aunt Cora sighed, taking her napkin and putting it on her plate. Dinner was over...it was almost midnight anyway.

“Look at us! We’re having a wedding dinner inside a hospital room, our grandmother’s hospital room, laughing it up as she’s drugged up—”

“You’d rather we laugh while she was in pain?” I pushed back.

“Goddamn it, Ethan!” she hollered right before rising to her feet.

“Uggh, forget it! Forget all of it. I’m heading home—”

“SIT DOWN!” I roared at her. I’d only yelled at her one time in all of my life, and so she jumped slightly. “SIT! Or you’ll make everyone question if I really am your brother.”

Fist clenched, she sat back into her seat.

“Listen, and listen well, because if I have to repeat this someone will get hurt,” I said through my teeth. “Ivy is now my wife. You insult her, you insult me. I do not stand for insult from anyone, blood or not. You will respect her; you will not treat her like she’s a goddamn alien for saying every fucking thing you all think. I have far too much shit already on my plate to start getting on your emotional roller coaster, Donatella. If you want to be pissed, be pissed in silence. If you want to judge...” I looked at Wyatt.

“Judge in fucking silence. Because if I see it, I’ll answer Grandmother’s last

question to me...would I hurt family? Didn't Father answer that question already? It is wife first, family second, clan third. Remember that order."

Rising to my feet, I walked over to my aunt Cora, placing my hand on her shoulder.

"Thank you for dinner and everything else," I said to her before heading toward the door, glancing one last time at my grandmother, who slept silently.

In the morning she'd be gone. Uncle Declan and Aunt Cora would stay with her in Ireland. I hated goodbyes. She knew that. She'd understand.

IVY

Sitting on the bathroom counter, I looked at my hands...thin gold band that sat next to the diamond...I was married just like that. Reaching for the letter in my purse, the one from his mother, I smiled. She had horrible handwriting...just like me.

"Melody wrote God only knows how many letters to her kids before she died," Nari said softly as she came into the bathroom. "I got one the day I gave birth. It was my only ever letter from her." She thought back, leaning against the sink next to me. "She really knows how to gut people and empower them at the same time."

"You really look up to her."

"Yea," she said as if it were obvious. "She changed everything. Before, the Callahan women were just pretty accessories on their husbands' arms. The daughters like prizes to close families. That seems so...it's all medieval, but that was the tradition."

"And in the post-Melody era?"

She giggled at that. “We’re still accessories, but we are...like one of those gadgets in a James Bond film. On the outside we look like a lipstick, but really we’re a bomb. We have the ability to do things they can’t and because of that a lot more women are now a part of everything or at least from what I hear.”

She wasn’t being coy. She really didn’t know much.

“Huh.” I didn’t really know how to reply.

“I’m going to tell you something and I was going to wait until it wasn’t your day but might as well lump all the shit together—”

“What is it?”

She sighed, opening her purse to pull out her phone and show me a medical report...Klarissa Moretti’s medical report.

“She’s pregnant,” she said as if I couldn’t read.

Looking away, I tried to think, but my mind went blank.

“I can—”

Jumping off the sink counter, I walked out of the bathroom, trying to figure out where to go.

“Ma’am.” Greyson, the hulk, stepped in front of my face. “Are you all right?”

When I didn’t answer he reached for his phone, but I shook my head.

“Stop.” My voice was barely over a whisper as the wheels began to turn in my mind. “When Ethan isn’t around you have to listen to me, right?”

“Yes, ma’am.” He nodded, putting the phone back in his pocket.

“He’s not here. So take me to Klarissa Moretti’s room.”

“Ma’am—”

“Now.”

He looked over his shoulder and around us, but no one else was there, with the exception of the guards. Nodding, he led me, not to the elevator,

but to the stairs.

“Ethan knows, doesn’t he...about her,” I said as we walked down the white staircase, which led to her level of the hospital. But I answered my own question. “Of course he knows. If Nari knows, he has to know.”

He said nothing as they walked down only one floor. The guards in the staircase moved for us as we went down. Opening the door to her floor, I followed him, noticing for the first time how late it was since all the lights in the rooms were dimmed. There was only a nurse on the whole floor. All the doors were closed and blinds down, but I knew no one was in there. Grayson stopped in front of a room 9219.

“This is it.” He nodded to the door.

I thought for a long time how this would go, making him say “Ma’am, don’t do it, it won’t make you feel better.”

“Grayson, ninety-percent of the things I do now aren’t to feel better.”

Hearing the nurse get up and start to leave, I turned back to her. “Excuse me!”

“Ma’am.” Grayson tried to stop me from talking to her, but I ignored him, walking over to her. She was an older woman, maybe a few years older than Evelyn. Her dull gray-blond hair reminded me of how mine was before it was *fixed*.

“Did you need something Mrs. Callahan?”

Mrs. Callahan already? Apparently word got around quick. I pointed to the golden Claddagh brooch, the heart was made of a bright white pearl, that was pinned on her deep blue scrubs. “Where did you get this? I love it a lot.”

She looked down brushing her fingers over it; “This old thing? I bought it for a dollar at my neighbor’s yard sale.”

“Can I buy it from you? I’ll pay a hundred thousand for it.” I said with a smile on my face.

Her eyes widened. “What?”

“The brooch. I really like it.” I repeated it.

She looked at me as if I were insane, but took it off and gave it to me. I looked it over before telling her.

“Thank you. Grayson, please pay her,” I said, turning around, placing the brooch into my open purse and heading straight towards room 9219. The wooden door squeaked when I stepped inside. Making the woman inside, who wasn’t even looking towards me, say, “I knew you’d come.” She turned, the grin on her face deflating as she saw me instead of the man she hoped would come.

Her hair was brushed over her shoulder, and she had cuts on her arms and face, including the one from the punch I’d given her. She sat up on the bed earlier...she’d been waiting.

“How did you know he’d come?” I asked as I walked further into the room, closing the door behind me.

“Because he values family more than anything else. Once he knew, he’d have to come,” she said proudly, placing her hand on her stomach. “Aren’t I lucky? Our son’s a fighter just like his father.”

I glanced at her stomach and then at her again. “You aren’t scared of me, are you?”

“Why would I be?”

“Yeah, most people say that.” I sighed.

She snickered, even popping her head to the side. “You don’t belong in our lives. This is proof. Congrats, you may now be Ethan’s wife, but I’m going to be the mother of his child...he won’t let anything happen to either of us.”

“...hmmm.”

“What?” She glared at me. “There’s nothing you can do. Other than get used to me, that is.”

Without a word, I turned to the machine beside her, reaching inside my purse I pulled the card I’d stolen from the nurse as she gave me her brooch, swiping it on the machine.

“What are you doing? Stop!” She tried reaching over to smack my arm away but she couldn’t reach and I did what I needed to do.

“I’m sure you really love Ethan.” I said, turning to her. Picking up her morphine drip and pressing down hard, the limit was taken off it and the drug flooded into her system. “And I can’t say I do...so this may seem unfair. But life has been unfair to me too. In the past...I just let it go. Good will win out at the end of the day. That’s what I told myself...But I was wrong. Now I have a second chance, Klarissa. I can’t wait for the end of the day. I can’t be the better person. I can’t be left behind.”

Her body weakened, her arms fell back onto the bed, I swiped the nurse’s card once more, getting out of the system, setting the dose back to normal, and moving over to her, I put the control for the drip in her palm.

“Burn...in...hell.” She sneered at me as I returned the room back to normal, even moving the machine back into place.

“I already did,” I whispered back, petting her cheek before moving back to the door.

When I opened the door, Greyson looked at me and then back at the woman glaring at my back.

“She doesn’t want to talk,” I said to him.

He frowned but nodded, moving for me to walk past. I stopped near the station, the nurse now gone, most likely happily celebrating. I dropped her card on the desk before we walked across the cream-colored lobby, towards

the door. There, standing in his all black suit at the very top of the white staircase, was Ethan himself. The guards were gone, and he didn't move, he didn't say a word, but merely watched me.

"Was she supposed to be a mistress while I was the happy Irish wife to help get Boston's support back?"

"The Callahan men don't have mistresses." He said unmoved and emotionless as always.

"I heard that once," I replied stepping up and up until I stood on the same level as him. We turned to face each other. "I was kid, we were having a cookout, my parents just had their anniversary and my grandma said, 'Say what you want about 'em Callahan boys but ain't none of them ever step out on their wives.' Her voice was the first thing that went through my mind as Nari told me about Klarissa."

"Is it—"

Before he could say anything I punched him as hard as I could. His head went back, but he took it, lifting his hand to wipe the blood from his nose.

"Dona was right. You know how to throw a punch," he muttered.

"And you know how to use people." I snapped back at him. "The second thing that went through my mind was whether you knew. I quickly realized you did. And if you were going to keep her as your mistress, you would have made sure Nari had no chance to speak to me. But you didn't and she did. So that means you must have told her to tell me. You did this so I'd kill her and you didn't have to have that on your hands. You didn't kill your unborn child, your wife did."

He didn't bother trying to deny it. "It was only three weeks old. It wasn't a child. It was a bunch of cells."

"And yet you still couldn't do it."

Again he didn't deny it.

“Don’t EVER use me without my consent again!”

“I’ll handle it then—”

“In another two minutes she’ll be dead,” I whispered bitterly.

“What?”

“I knew what you’d plan by the time I got to that door. I knew and I was pissed, and you were wrong to use me, but it would be worse if you’d actually done it.”

His eyebrows came together in confusion. “I thought you drew the line.”

“Neither of us has a line,” I whispered, resting my head on his shoulder. “Her IV was part sodium chloride, sucrose, bicarbonate, and vitamins. That and the increased morphine I gave her will cause her to go into heart failure, if the doctors get to her on time and try to use panels she’ll die instantly. If not, she’ll die from lack of oxygen.”

By the time I finished speaking I looked to the door, hearing a doctor and nurse running and shouting. Greyson came into the stairwell looking at me first.

“She’s dead?” I asked.

He nodded.

“How sad,” I said, walking back up the stairs, leaving Ethan to stand alone. But not before adding, “Don’t be surprised if I do not speak to you for a while.”

I didn’t look at anyone. I didn’t speak as I reached the Callahan floor. One of the guards opened the door to the Evelyn’s room, the whole family sat around the suite, as if it were their home. Some of them resting on the couch. Some by the window, but my eyes went to dining table we had all just eaten at. Cora was packing away what was left of my wedding cake. Her brown eyes glanced over to me. I looked away, walking over to

Evelyn's bedside. Her eyes barely open. But a small grin was on her face as she looked over her family. Siting on her bed, I took the brooch out of my purse.

"A Claddagh." I told her even though I knew she was aware what it was and what it meant. "Hands in loyalty."

The corner of her mouth turned up and she nodded.

ETHAN

He handed me the ice for my face, which I took, siting on one the stairs.

"Exactly as you planned, sir," Greyson said to me.

"No, Greyson." I grinned. "This was much, *much* better."

She knew I used her. She knew everything. This was guilt free, something I didn't even think to achieve.

I didn't want Klarissa.

She'd chosen to steal a condom and play God herself.

She played the game and lost.

She was never meant to be my wife.

Eleven fifty-eight p.m...Klarissa's time of death. Ivy's time of rebirth.

"She's cold, sir," Greyson said, partially terrified, partially impressed.

"Wrong again," I replied. She was a Callahan and like all Callahans...

"She's ruthless."

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FIFTEEN

“The road to hell was paved with the bones of men
who did not know when to quit fighting.”

~ *Paulette Jiles*

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ETHAN

“The list you wanted,” I said, handing her the tablet as I read the messages coming in on my phone. In the chaos of the previous day I’d almost forgotten I’d given her my word, and I was a man of my word. Not feeling the weight lifted from my hand, I paused, looking over at her, thinking she’d fallen asleep. However, she merely stared out the window as we drove toward the house.

“Ivy,” I called out to her.

Silence was what I got in return. And I was sure she’d heard me because she shifted even more so toward her door and away. I hated many things, but nothing pissed me off more than being ignored.

“Mrs. Callahan,” I called out to her again.

This time she merely wound down the window, taking a deep breath of the cold air, her gold-blond hair blowing all round. Part of me thought to leave her alone but...

“Wife!” I snapped at her.

And she snapped back, not in words. She grabbed the tablet from my hand and flung it out the window. Sitting up, she tapped Toby on the shoulder.

“Yes, ma’am.” The bastard was a little too happy.

“Can I get a phone?” she asked him softly and her face was far too close to his for my own liking.

“And who are you seeking to call?” I asked her.

Still silence.

“Toby, I don’t need to call anyone, just so I can listen to music and get Internet, please,” she said to him then sat back, closing her eyes.

The corners of his mouth turned up into a small smile and I had half the mind to beat the shit out of him. However, knowing him, he'd only laugh outright seeing me get worked up over a woman. Fine. She didn't want to speak. I wouldn't speak to her then.

"Toby, get her whatever she wants. One less thing I need to concern myself with," I muttered, putting the phone back into my coat jacket and leaning back into the seat as well.

The car was silent the whole way back to the house. And no sooner had we gone through the gates and pulled up at the door, the butlers already waiting, had she jumped out on her own, slamming the door behind her as she stomped away, like a child. Rolling my eyes, I stepped out and rounded the car, stopping right beside Toby, again with that ill-advised look of humor on his face.

"Next time my wife refuses to speak with me and thus addresses you... your next words should be 'You'll need to speak with your husband, ma'am.' Understood?" I didn't wait for him to reply and walked up the stairs into the house myself. Taking off my coat and handing it to the butler, I prepared myself for our most likely fight. I highly doubted she'd be able to keep her anger bottled inside for long.

When I got to our wing, she was pulling the doorknob to her former room in confusion. Hearing my footsteps, she glanced up at me as I already began to take off my cufflinks.

"We were attacked. The house is still on lockdown. Only a Callahan's fingerprints and voice can open the doors till I unlock everything...like this." I grabbed my doorknob of my door. "Ethan Callahan."

The door beeped before opening. She glared at me and lifted up her middle finger, only her middle finger, to show me her wedding ring.

“Right, you’re a Callahan now.” I smirked. “Whenever you’d like to be added to the system, let me know. Until then you can either come inside before I close the door, or you can sleep in the hall, like a dog not a wife.”

She cracked her jaw to the side, and I waited. When she glared at me and didn’t move I shrugged, walking into my...our room, closing the door behind me.

Insane woman.

Pushing her out of my mind, I walked to my closet, throwing my coat onto the couch and pulling out my pistol. I thought back to my mother’s gift to her. It was just like her. If there was anything my mother loved, it was a good gun. If there was anything my father hated, it was my mother with a gun, most likely because she’d end up shooting at him. She’d actually shot him twice.

Wait... Taking out my phone, I called my aunt.

“Ethan?”

“Make sure no one ever tells my wife that my mother shot at my father. I’d rather that tradition die with my mother.”

“I’m sorry, sweetheart, but what’s spoken between the Callahan women are secrets even to their husbands—”

“I bet he’s regretting that food comment now.” I heard my uncle Declan snicker over the line.

“Tell Uncle I don’t have regrets,” I said.

“Tell him yourself,” she said. I heard her hand him the phone.

“Ethan.”

“Uncle.”

“I’ve always wondered what I’d say to you when this day came,” he said as I put my ear piece in my ear and threw the phone to the side.

“And what day is that?”

“Your wedding day. Well, I’m a little late on account of the fact that you threw that wedding without much warning, but luckily good advice never expires.”

“And how are you sure it’s good?” I asked, taking off my shirt.

“Because I’m happily married. So was your father and so was your grandfather. Obviously we got it right.”

“Very well, impart your sage knowledge if you must, but please not now. I’d like to get some sleep before someone else gets on my bad side,” I said, pulling off my shoes.

“So damn hardheaded.” He sighed as I heard what sounded like a bottle opening.

“Don’t you think it’s a little early for scotch?”

“Nope,” he replied, and I smirked. Obviously he wasn’t next to my aunt anymore. “Ethan, the secret to being happily married, no matter to what type of person, is losing.”

“Come again?”

“I know it must be difficult for someone like you, who’s done everything to always win. However, wives are different. They have the ability to let you know they are pissed even when they aren’t speaking.”

I paused, glancing at the camera in the upper room of my closet. “Have you been spying on me, Uncle?”

“No, why?” He sounded honest, which made me doubt him more.

“Anyway, what I’m trying to say is you will have no peace with an angry wife. Fighting is good, it’s healthy, makes for good sex too—”

“Goodbye—”

“However, there comes a point in every battle you must concede to defeat. Did you know Aunt Coraline thought it would be a good idea to go see the aurora borealis and sleep in a fucking tent? She hates tents. She

fucking hates being in the forest. The last thing I wanted was to haul my ass up to the ice block that is Canada, to see the sky change fucking colors, on top of which listen to her bitch about how damn cold she was or how many bugs there were. She'd love it for about ten minutes and then want to leave. A younger me would have tried to explain this to her rationally. We'd fight. She'd ignore me for days until my blue balls and I gave in. We'd go to where she wanted and she'd do exactly what I knew she'd do and we'd spend time looking for a hotel. Thank God I'm no longer the younger me. I said, sure, honey, let's go. She was all excited packing while I looked for a hotel. So when we got to the fucking ice capital of the world and she had her magical moment I was the hero who already had a hotel waiting. No blue balls. No fighting. Just us in a well-heated suite. Why?"

Because you're a whipped bitch? I thought. But waited for him to go on.

"Because I lost the battle and won the war. There will be many moments you know to high heaven and back that you are right with evidence. None of that means shit to a pissed off woman and you'll be dragged off to crazy land with them. In their minds you're the dick who's not getting pussy. So just lose. It's easier. You'll live longer."

"Thank you for your wise advice. However, Ivy is different. She's more rational—"

"Who are you talking to?" I heard my uncle Neal join him.

"Ethan. He believes his wife is different and rational."

They both laughed, and I hung up. They should thank God they are family.

Dressed for bed, I walked into my bedroom and closed the blinds as the sun came up before walking over to my bed. I was just about to lie down when she knocked just as I knew she would.

Sighing, I pressed the button next to my desk table to open it.

“Glad to know you aren’t a—”

“YOU FUCKING BASTARD!” she hollered, throwing one of my own vases at me. It shattered over the bed and as the shards fell onto my bed I wondered two things. First, how the fuck did I think she was rational, and second, why the bloody hell were there vases in my room? Those were the only two thoughts I was able to have before she started to throw more shit at me and I was forced to dodge. “How the fuck can you just leave me outside!”

“I...” I ducked a book. “I told you to come inside!”

“ON YOUR TERMS!”

“IT’S MY FUCKING ROOM!”

“OUR FUCKING ROOM!”

“THEN YOU SHOULD HAVE COME INSIDE!”

“YOU PISS ME OFF!” Before she could grab anything else I caught her wrist, pushing her up against the door.

Taking a deep breath...why I was yelling, I had no idea...it hit me; I was in crazy land. Closing my eyes, I tried not to hear both of my uncles’ laughter in my head.

“ARE YOU—”

I kissed her, and she struggled until I pressed my body firmly up against hers. I wasn’t sure if she even realized, but she relaxed into me, her breasts brushing against my chest, her mouth opening more for me, but I pulled away. She stared up at me wide-eyed, somewhat dazed, and before she remembered she was pissed I spoke up.

“If this is about Klarissa—”

“It’s not about her!” She snapped.

And now I was confused. “What else if not her?”

“You really are slow.”

“Would you like to go back outside?” I couldn’t stop myself from saying.

“You—”

“Get on with it so I can sleep.” I fought out.

She just glared.

“Ivy.” I sighed, dropping my head. *Lose the battle.* “I’ll apologize, but I should know my mistake, *dear.*”

“You’re mocking me.”

“No. Just tired.” Tomorrow was back to war and I needed her to focus her rage elsewhere.

“It’s about me. I don’t have the time or the energy to be pissed for the sake of others. The most important person to me is me,” she declared, pulling her hands from my loosened grip and crossing them over her chest. I tried to ignore the fact that it made her breasts rise up, but they were hard not to notice.

“And what about you?”

Frowning, she muttered, “Never mind.”

KILL HER! I wanted to throw her out the damn window! What the fuck did she mean never mind? If it wasn’t important, what the bloody hell was all of this for?

Stepping back and away from her, I moved to sit at my desk, not sure if I should go to sleep when I had a maniac now sharing my room. She marched over to the bed, throwing her purse to the ground before stripping down completely. Grabbing the comforter, she flagged the broken shards onto my side of the bed before curling under. Just as my eyes were closing and I was relaxing into my chair, that was when the mad wench decided to find her voice.

“Would you kill me too?” she whispered.

“Not the wisest question right now.”

I expected her to flip out again, but instead she just lay there.

“If you didn’t need me for whatever plan you’re coming up with, you would have married Klarissa. However, you want too badly to win, so you’d rather stick to your plan and have her killed...so what about me? What happens when I’m not useful to your plan? What happens if you need some other woman for your support? Will I end up dying? I heard your uncle Neal...he killed his wife so—”

“Uncle Neal’s wife betrayed the family. She almost got the whole family killed from what I was told. He chose blood over her. She was in the wrong for making him make that choice,” I cut in before she actually did piss me off.

“Fine, but—”

“No buts. I married you. I chose you...I knew that meant till the day I die. I told Klarissa the first day she appeared in front of me that I was never going to marry her. That I would never love her. She dared to hope somehow I’d see the light and fall. However, I am a man of my word. Always have been.”

“A gangster with sophistication and morals.”

“If I knew you would keep repeating that I would have tried to make it catchier.” I yawned.

She snickered. “What is your word to me?”

She wasn’t serious.

Rising off the chair, I walked over to her side of the bed. She stared up at me and I down at her until I reached down and lifted her up, lying down on my back with her resting on top of my chest.

“When I put that ring on your finger I believe my exact words were: I bind my life to yours, in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health. It is a symbol of my eternal love, my everlasting friendship, and the promise of all my tomorrows. An outward reminder of our inner unity. I forsake all others, I chose you, until death do us part.”

She held her hand up for us both to look at. “It doesn’t count if there is a lie in it.”

“What lie?”

“When you say my eternal love and my everlasting friendship...when did you fall in love with me? And when did we become friends?”

Of all the women in the world... Sighing, I closed my eyes. “Ivy...no one is taking your spot at my side. I am not abandoning you, so for the love of God, shut up and let me sleep.”

IVY

He fell asleep just like that, with his arms wrapped around me.

“Who says you aren’t romantic?” I whispered softly.

Closing my eyes...and there was the familiar feeling in my chest. One that I hadn’t felt in a very long time.

Rolling over in his arms, I stared up at him. He looked so gentle when he slept. With those long eyelashes and his hair, a slight mess. Like he had not a care in the world. Even though his heart was right under my hands. Putting my head on it, I closed my eyes. He didn’t realize how scary it was...knowing that your lifeline was attached to one person and that person had no reservations in getting rid of people he found no use for.

But I believed him.

Or at the very least I wanted to believe him.

There was no other option but doubt and that led to pain and I was tired of pain.

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SIXTEEN

“They slipped briskly into an intimacy from which
they never recovered.”

~ *F. Scott Fitzgerald*

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ETHAN

BEEP.

BEEP.

BEEP.

“Make it stop,” she whispered, but since she was on top of me her lip brushed against my skin with each word. That and the feeling of her naked body pressed on mine didn’t really help my cock, which grew harder every time she shifted.

BEEP.

“Ahh,” she whined and then pouted, lifting her head and resting her chin on my chest. “Your phone.”

“You’ve pinned me down,” I told her and then glanced at the other side of the bed where my phone was.

Sighing, she sat up, either forgetting she was naked or not caring, and sitting on my waist she stretched out, allowing me to watch her breasts rise up as she did. Brushing her messy hair behind her ears, she leaned over, and I knew then she was tempting me on purpose.

“Ahh.” She gasped when I bit her nipple. Licking and sucking, she jumped slightly when my hands gripped onto both of her breasts, squeezing them. “Oh...”

I didn’t stop, moving my mouth from one nipple to the other. Watching as they turned from pink to red, the more I bit and sucked, her moans filled my ears.

BEEP.

BEEP.

Releasing her breasts and removing my hands, I sat up, taking the phone from her hands.

“What is it?”

She sat on me in shock. Her blue eyes glanced down at her marked breasts, as if she wanted to make sure she hadn’t imagined it, then at me. Slowly, a wicked grin spread across her lips.

“Sir? Did you hear me?”

“I—”

She snatched the phone from me and spoke, “Thank you for calling Mr. Callahan. He’s currently on his honeymoon and will not be available...until he’s available. Please don’t bother him unless it’s an emergency. Thank you, bye.”

She threw my phone over her shoulder, sending it onto the ground. Wiggling herself from my waist onto my cock, however, she didn’t let me in her. Instead, I was tortured with the feeling of her pussy rubbing onto my cock.

“For all you know that...” I closed my eyes, inhaling at the feeling of her before speaking. “That could have been an emergency.”

“More of an emergency than your wife?” she said softly, placing her hands on my chest, leaning forward, her hips never stopping. “When you fell asleep I made a decision to get to know you better...right now I just want to know the many different ways you can make me cum.”

“It’s always about you, correct?”

She had declared so only an hour ago.

“Yes.” She kissed my lips softly. “I don’t care how you do it, *husband*...just make me cum.”

We were both dazed. Half asleep. Half awake...and horny. I knew that was the only reason why we were both like this...why I didn’t give a damn

about whatever it was Toby had called to ask me...and why I wanted nothing more than to do exactly as she asked.

Flipping us over, pinning her underneath, she held her breath, the eagerness in her eyes only matching my own. Sitting up onto my knees, I lifted her hips to me. Her eyebrow rose and before she dared speak and further tempt my restraint, I lifted her thighs higher, so high her back came off the bed and her hands branded themselves on the sheets under her, as I placed her legs on my shoulders, licking her pussy, already wet for me. My tongue darted, teasing her slowly.

“Ahh...” She moaned, rocking into my mouth. Reaching up, I spread her wide to lick her clit, sliding my middle finger into her.

“E...”

Seeing the way she clenched onto my finger, she desperately wanted my cock instead and yet was paralyzed each time I sucked on her.

“Oh!” she cried out, and I ignored her, finger fucking her, teasing her with my tongue until all too quickly she came in my hands, crying out my name, “Ethan!”

Pulling out of her, letting her fall onto the bed, her chest and breasts rose as she tried to breathe. “That was quick, *wife*. Don’t ask for what you cannot handle.”

She opened her eyes, I was sure to bark at me, but froze when she watched me as I licked her off my finger. Surprising me, she pushed herself up off the bed, her hair already sticking to her body, and on her knees she licked my middle finger slowly before taking it into her warm mouth and slowly letting go of it.

Licking her lips, her eyes met mine as she spoke, “Don’t get cocky. My first one is always my easiest.”

I could feel her challenging me and reacted, pulling her hair back and to that she grinned, adding insult to injury by saying, “If you can bend me, then break me.”

The one thing I’d been trying not to do she’d just asked for by name.

Rising from the bed, I felt her eyes on me. Turning back, I offered her my hand. She took it, eyeing me, but said nothing as I led her to my closet. When she stood in the middle of the room, I left her, walking over to stop the cameras from recording. A dozen things went through my mind, but remembering she’d just left prison a little over a week ago and our minor confrontation only hours ago, made me realize that what her mouth said and what her mind was ready for were two different things. Thus...we’d need baby steps. Grabbing one of my re—yellow ties, red making me feel far too much like a cliché—I walked back over to her.

“What are you doing?”

“Breaking you.”

IVY

I felt my heartbeat quicken and time slowed as he walked back in front of me. The tie he had in his hands already spoke volumes to what was about to come next and...I kinda wanted to tell him I wasn’t 100 percent serious about the break me thing.

“Do you trust me?” he asked and the way he looked at me sent a chill down my spine. Like the whole world could fall away and he’d still be standing there looking at me like this.

Feeling a little awkward, I tried to lighten the mood and said, “Enough to sleep with you...and marry you.”

However, he wasn’t having it. “Yes or no, Ivy?”

“Yes,” I admitted even though I had no idea why.

“Good. Because I trust you.” He kissed my forehead.

I closed my eyes, preparing myself for whatever he was going to do. However, when I peeked them open to see what was happening, I wasn’t prepared at all for the sight of him taking the tie and wrapping his own eyes.

“Do your worst, wife.”

“This is breaking me?” I scoffed, not really sure what in the hell he was thinking.

“Yes, wife,” he answered directly.

I stood there, not sure what to do, and he just stood there too, like a naked Greek statue, perfectly relaxed.

“So I can do whatever I want to you?” I asked, stepping up, waving my hand in front of his face to really make sure he couldn’t see.

“Yes, wife.”

Grinning like an idiot, I really wanted to see if he’d do anything I wanted. “Kneel...and kiss my feet.”

His face was hard and he hesitated.

“I knew—”

Before I could get the words out he’d taken a step closer to me and forced me to look up at him until he put his hand gently at my waist and went down onto his knees. His hands trailed down until he touched my feet and he kissed them. The moment he did, for some reason, I felt my chest tighten and I wasn’t sure from what. He just waited, still kneeling.

He was Ethan, asshole, cocky, know-it-all, Mr. Center-of-the-World, big bad Callahan, and now he was kneeling at my feet, waiting for me to tell him what to do.

“Why are you doing this?” I whispered.

“Because you...we need it, wife,” he replied, calling me wife for the fourth time since doing this. “You need to feel like you control something. That you are different than every other woman. I need you to know you do. And you are. You control me, something no one else has ever done.”

It felt hard for me to breathe, so I had to look away from him, and I wished I hadn't because it was then I saw his gun sitting on the center cabinet.

Reaching up, I placed my hand on his hair, which felt much softer now that I wasn't tugging on it.

“You know I could kill you right now.”

He smiled. “If it makes you feel better, wife.”

WHAT IS WRONG WITH HIM! My mind screamed and yet my body was shaking. Worst of all I was confused over whatever the hell I was feeling.

“Rough sex would have been just fine,” I muttered.

“Break your mind, wife, and your body will come soon enough.” He smiled.

“Thank you, Aristotle,” I mocked, not that he could see my face. Why was I the one all riled up? He was the one who was supposed to be listening to me. I didn't have to keep thinking.

Leaning down over him, I wasn't going to let him keep messing with me like this. “Kiss me...passionately, like I'm your first, last, and only true love.”

I was expecting him to call me wife again, but instead he reached out, grabbing the side of my head and bringing my lips onto his hard. My mouth opened immediately for his tongue, rolling over mine, his free hand pulling me to his chest, where he wrapped his arms around me, holding me tightly, preciously, his hands never moving down to grab my breast or my ass. He

just kissed me with everything I'd asked for. I was defenseless even though I demanded for it. My body relaxed into his and we both fell back to the floor of his closet. He rolled us onto our sides, my leg over his thigh, no space between our bodies. The passionate kiss he'd given me only seconds ago morphed into gentle ones. He'd break away slightly just to leave one soft kiss after another on my lips and each time he did I was eager for the next one.

"Make love to me," I whispered against his lips.

"Show me how, wife," he whispered back in the small distance between us. "I've never made love to anyone."

He isn't playing fair. I hadn't even realized what I was asking until the words came out of my mouth and he replied. Because if I did I would have realized I didn't know what that meant either...not until he kissed me.

Reaching up, I tugged on his tie until it came undone. He blinked a few times before his beautiful green eyes focused on mine. Swallowing back whatever sound was trying to come out of my throat, I smiled and replied, "Look at me like that, hold on to me like this, kiss me like you did, and take me slowly."

"Yes, wife," he said softly, shifting on top of me and kissing me again. Closing my eyes, my arms wrapped around his neck.

"Oh..." I moaned against his mouth when I felt him enter me as if I were a virgin...as he buried himself into me deeply, each time leaving me aching for more.

"Ivy," he whispered, resting his forehead on mine.

"Y...yes?"

"Why are you crying?"

I didn't even realize I was. And now that I did I tried to look away from him, but he just kissed my cheek and the side of my eye. Until his lips were

at my ear again.

“You don’t play fair...”

Me? I don’t play fair?

“I can barely control myself when you smile...seeing you like this...”

He kissed my ear again. “You even cry beautifully...it makes me weak.”

I held on to him tighter, trying not to become even more of a mess than I was.

“Who said you could talk?” I choked out. “I thought I was the one in control here.”

When he didn’t say anything again I glanced back up at him, and he was smiling at me gently, a light layer on top of him.

“Forgive me, wife,” he said before kissing me again and as he filled me I never wanted to leave the floor of the damn closet.

ETHAN

For the first time since I met her she was quiet as we ate on the floor of our bedroom. After my closet experiment, we lay there wrapped in each other’s arms for almost an hour until her stomach growled and I called for an early dinner. It was already four in the afternoon. I did my best not to watch her as she ate her yogurt, still dazed, but failing. However, it proved I made the right choice. Did I want to tie her up and have my way with her...yes. Did I hate taking orders from anyone...also yes. But Ivy was used to rough, and while that thought pissed me off to no end, I tried to think of it only in the context of her life and not anyone she’d been with before me. *Yes, I am chauvinist, what-fucking-ever.* Either way, I figured if I’d done what I wanted she wouldn’t have been fazed much.

“Wife,” I called, and she jumped slightly, staring at me. “Are you all right?”

“Huh...yea...I mean, yea, I’m fine. Just hungry,” she lied, eating again and looking back through the phone that came up along with the food.

This is better, I thought, taking a bite out of my chicken. I realized she wouldn’t stay this soft-spoken and reserved for long. But that didn’t matter.

“Here.” I lifted the yellow tie and handed it to her. “For whenever you need control again. Don’t go abusing your power, wife.”

She smiled, taking it from me. “I’ll try, but you’re the one who gave power to a novice.”

“Not a novice. My wife.” I’d keep saying it until she understood it.

“Why do you trust me so much? I hated you only until a little while ago...” She put her cup and spoon down. “And don’t tell me it’s the vows again. Despite being a jerk when we first met, you’re still considerate and kind to me.”

I wasn’t sure how to phrase it to her other than, “Rule four: no bloody divorce. Rule forty-eight: love your wife above all else...after all, she is the one who can either keep you warm at night or make sure you never wake up. Rule forty-nine: never cheat. Affairs destroy the family. No face or body is worth it.”

“What? What are those rules?”

“The Callahan family rules,” I said, taking another bite of my food as she focused all her attention on me. “From my father, which came from his father and his father before him. Rules are very important to this family because they have kept us on top. We respect them. We acknowledge they may be contrary sometimes. However, the point is the same, take care of your family, your people, and do it while looking ungodly handsome. Something I was luckily blessed in spades with.”

“Wow....” She stretched out. “If your ego were food it could end world hunger twice over.”

Ignoring her, I went on. “Why do I treat you this way? Because this is how I’ve been taught to treat you.”

She frowned, inching closer to me until she rested her chin on my shoulder. “I feel like there is more.”

“Everyone feels like there is more,” I muttered, taking the glass of water, her eyes still on me. “But it is the truth. Would you prefer if I come up with something romantic?”

“Do you know how?”

I scowled at that. “Sorry, that was my father’s forte.”

“Your father?”

I nodded. “The man who loved his wife so dearly he’d nearly killed himself. My parents’ love affair was renowned and blinding for us growing up.”

“My parents loved each other too,” she said, but I didn’t think she understood.

“I’m sure. However, my parents were obsessed,” I told her, thinking back on it, though it was not hard to remember. “They were like two magnets. The minute one of them came into the room they automatically knew, and when they were close they were almost inseparable. They fought with each other physically and verbally just for the sole purpose of making up. If my mother went more than an hour without speaking with him she’d become irritated. My father refused to sleep until she came home. They walked at the same pace. Their eyes met at the same time. They even breathed evenly. I thought it was normal for the longest time, until I watched Toby’s parents get a divorce. I didn’t even really understand what that meant then. I thought it was maybe just them. But soon I came to

realize that almost half of marriages failed and I was shocked. It was never in the realm of reality for our family.”

I hadn’t noticed I’d trailed off until she lifted her chin from my shoulder.

“Do you want a love like your parents’?”

“No.” I snickered, drinking, then remembered who I was speaking with. Of course she wasn’t pleased. “It sounds great to be loved like that. I’m sure it was great. Until my mother died. And, like you said, my father became a shell of the man he was. But that wasn’t even the worst. If he’d simply self-destructed I could have understood. Instead, he was...horrifying. He took out his anger on us, his children, like he blamed us for keeping him alive and not dying. He ripped us apart with vengeance. He sent Dona to a boarding school. And contently drove Wyatt and me against each other when we were together. And when I was with him, he’d blame me for defeating Wyatt. He’d ask me how I’d let my brother fail, meanwhile he’d asked me to make him fail. There was no peace. The day he died we all took a deep breath again. That is what his love did...and I want no part in it.”

“So never lov—”

“The point isn’t not to love...it’s not to obsess.”

She smiled and nodded. “I’ll let you know if you start obsessing over me.”

“I’m not the problem,” I said, grabbing my yogurt.

“Are you saying I am?”

“Have you seen me?”

She groaned, rolling her eyes and getting up. “I’m going to take a shower. Feel free to marry your own reflection or something.”

“I tried. Apparently it’s not legal in the state of—”

“Oh my God, you are annoying!” she yelled and laughed, stomping over to the bathroom. Smirking, I didn’t move and kept eating.

“I do hope you know this story is not for free,” I called out, grabbing an apple as I rose to my feet.

“What?”

Walking toward the shower, I watched as she stood under the water and as it rolled off the curve of her breast.

“My eyes are up here.”

“I know where your eyes are. I wasn’t looking at them,” I said, taking a bite out of the fruit in my hand.

“As you were saying?” She reached for my shampoo, just pouring the hundred-dollar bottle on her head.

“Give and take. You hear about my past, I’ll hear about yours once we get to Boston.”

“What?” She paused, her hands tangled in her hair.

“We leave for Boston first thing in the morning. Sorry, wife, but I like business with a side of pleasure.” I wanted to join her...badly. But the look of horror, anger, and anticipation kept me at bay. Leaving her, I walked back to my bed, picking up my phone, long since forgotten. Only three missed calls from Dona and one from my aunt Cora, which was followed by a text that they were gone with my grandmother.

Dialing, it rang once before he picked up.

“Sir?”

“Is everything ready?”

“Yes. I’ll be flying out—”

“No. You’ll stay here in Chicago. Report to Dona, let her know I’m leaving her to look over the house.” She’d know what that meant and hopefully it would cool her head off some. Dona wouldn’t fail. The problem

was, just like a dog that had tasted blood, it was almost impossible to cage them again. “However, Tobias...don’t let her out of your sight.”

“Of course.”

“Good.”

“Ethan,” he called out before I could hang up. “Congratulations on your wedding, my friend.”

“You keep calling me that, but we are not friends.” I hung up, throwing the phone onto the bed.

Turning around, Ivy stood in my robe, which was so big on her it almost seemed as if she were drowning in it, her hair dripping wet and sticking to her face.

“Who’s dying first?”

“Anyone who won’t bow.”

The corner of her lip turned up, as did mine.

Boston was about to get very ugly.

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SEVENTEEN

“I wanted movement and not a calm course of existence. I wanted excitement and danger and the chance to sacrifice myself for my love.”

~ *Leo Tolstoy*

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TOBIAS

There are people in this world who refuse to walk the easy path. They see it in front of them. Many times they are even set upon it, given directions and simply told to walk. Yet they refuse. They prefer to struggle. They prefer to fight. They prefer to scream out in frustration and nearly die, going a much more painful route. Outsiders call them masochists. However, those people didn't realize what people like me realized...there is nothing at the end of the easy path. Why? Because those who created that path stripped it of all it was worth on their way. Where the glory and wealth and power came from, that only came from the path of no return.

I chose that path long ago.

To be this person, to get this close...

It meant pain, but it was worth it. She was worth it.

"You said the pool house was the place things go to die," I said, watching as she drank her red wine, her gaze never breaking from the pool in front of her. Small ripples spread through the surface of the water as she gently kicked her foot back and forth.

"You think I'll kill myself?" she asked, drinking again.

"You love yourself far too much to die," I replied, walking up the side of the pool toward her.

"True." She nodded...finishing off her glass and picking up the bottle next to her and refilling her glass.

"Don't you think that's enough?"

"Would you ask my brother that question?"

"No." I knew what she was trying to imply. "But only because I'm not in love with your brother. He can drink himself to death if he wants."

She sighed, finally looking over at me. “What do you want, Toby?”

God, she fucking drove me up the wall sometimes. Standing beside her, I handed the cell phone over to her, which she took and read the message on it before dropping it in the water in front of her.

“I thought you’d be happy he’s leaving the keys to the kingdom to you.”

She scoffed. “Why would having my brother’s errand boy sending me a message from my own brother make me happy? In fact, if I had the strength I’d be furious. He can’t find me himself anymore.”

Do not let her pull you in. She wanted to fight. She was just itching to belittle someone to make her feel better. If I reacted I allowed her to choose me.

“He’s on his honeymoon with his wife. He hasn’t come out of their room all day.” Which was shocking in and of itself.

“Honeymoon.” She laughed bitterly. “The man who avoids love like the plague sure is adjusting well.”

“He’s never not loved you.”

“I’m family.”

“So is she.”

“Are you trying to make me feel better or piss me off?”

“Neither, just trying to make you see reason.”

She rose up to her feet, and though she was shorter, the way she looked at me you’d never realize it. “You think I’m being a brat.”

I didn’t reply.

She nodded to herself, finished her wine, and threw the glass to the ground, shattering it on impact before she dove into the pool. Turning, I watched as she didn’t even bother to swim, just sank to the bottom, closing her eyes.

The minute she hit the water, without even trying I already started timing her. She could last nine minutes and forty seconds on her best day... and today she was not at her best. When I saw the bubbles and she'd bothered to move, I still waited, hoping she'd snap out of it, but fucking shit, man!

Taking off my coat, I dove into the water, reaching down and pulling her up with me. She gasped for air as we broke through the surface and pushed my arm away.

"I did not ask for you to save me!" She snapped, lifting herself out of the pool.

"No, you prefer to torture yourself!"

"I was thinking!"

"Thinking and drowning!" I hollered at her as I got out too. Soaked and pissed I'd bothered AGAIN, I found myself cursing her in Italian. "I swear to God, Donatella, if I didn't love you I'd throw you back into the water and hold your head down!"

"I'd like to see you try!" she hollered back in Italian as well. "You keep trying to save me! I am beyond your help, so go! Like everyone else, GO!"

Moving to the towel rack, I grabbed one before marching back over to her, placing the damn thing on her head.

"I'm not going to marry you. I'm not going to be with you. I told you, you aren't what I want." Was it wrong her words didn't even sting anymore? I was that used to them.

"You are going to marry me. You are going to be with me. I am what you need," I replied, drying her hair and face. "Ethan is married...finally. That means you only have me."

"You're forgetting a brother."

“The one who ran away.” I snickered. “I didn’t forget. He just doesn’t count.”

“You are far too smug.” She pushed me and the towel away, walking to get her own. “And waiting for my brothers to be out of the picture to try to take me is weak. I don’t do weak.”

Is that what she thinks?

“Dona.” I laughed, using that same towel to dry myself off. “I would have confronted Ethan at any time. Ethan isn’t my problem. You are.”

“And how so?”

“What are you doing?” I hated seeing her like this. She was the one being weak, not me. “You always knew Ethan was going to get married. That Wyatt would get married someday too. You always knew this day would come. So why are you acting like—”

“Because he didn’t tell me!” she screamed. “He, like Father, like Mother, like every other goddamn person, dictated to me what the plan was and expected me to just go with it. The pool house isn’t where things go to die, it’s where I go to die! I was seven when my mother picked me out of bed and threw me into the pool and told me to swim! For hours I swam until I felt like my arms were on fire. Why? Because she thought I was weak. So I pushed myself every day for hours. And one night I was swimming and Ethan came to tell me Mother was dead. And Father told me not to get soft. I pushed myself hard and then one day while I was swimming Father came and told me I was going to a boarding school for the next four years. They threw *my life* into chaos with no warning, with no respect, and then called me a brat for being upset!”

Her chest rose and fell over and over again as she tried to calm herself down, running her fingers through her wet hair. “Ethan wants to get an ex-convict, that’s his choice. But he didn’t trust me enough to let me know...

until the day before he got married? I have plans too. I have shit I need to do too and when I don't know what is going on I look like a fucking idiot."

"Dona—"

"I come here." She pointed around her at the pool house. "To drown myself. To kill the Dona of that moment and restart. To re-plan, to rethink, to re-everything. Excuse me if I'm a little brattish as I do so. But I didn't ask for you to come in here with me. I did not ask for your love—"

"That's where you are wrong," I cut her off, too stunned to yell. For a second I almost believed she was hurt that her brother had moved on. No, at the end of the day, she was still scheming for herself. "You did ask me to love you."

"When did you get that idea?"

"September 8th," I reminded her, even though from the look in her eyes I did not have to. "The night before you left for Italy. After your brothers, your aunts, uncles, and everyone else begged your father not to send you and failed. You called me. You told me I better not fall in love with anyone because—"

"Shut up." She glared. "I remember. You don't have to say it."

"Because I belonged to Donatella Aviela Callahan."

She frowned. "I was fifteen and stupid."

"You are selfish, power hungry, frantic one moment and cold the next. You drink far too much wine and break even more glasses—"

"You're supposed to add positive traits in there—"

"And you always have to get a word in even when we are legitimately talking about you." I laughed. "I could write a novel on all the shit you do that annoys me. However, the one thing you will never be is stupid. You weren't then and you aren't now. You told me to love no one else and for

over a decade I've done just that. So if you want me to stop, tell me to stop."

Her green eyes bunched together as if she didn't understand me. "You could stop loving me if I simply told you to? When did you become so fickle—"

"Don't pussy foot it, Dona. You want me to go, then say it. Tell me to go find another woman...someone, as you say, on par with me."

I could see she was going to call my bluff and so I kissed her, like I'd been dying to since she came back, wrapping my arms around her and hugging her body to mine. And only when she kissed me back did I pull away again.

"Sorry. Now tell me."

"Fuck you. I don't take orders." She snapped, grabbing her bottle of wine and marching out of the pool house.

"Jesus," I muttered to myself, wishing I'd kissed her longer, my pants getting tighter as my dick hardened.

Eleven years.

That was how long I'd been walking on the path to her.

And I'd keep walking for another eleven. Hell, even twenty-seven years. It didn't matter as long as in the end she'd be mine, in front of everyone.

I was willing to do anything...be anything for her.

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EIGHTEEN

“Shattered legs may heal in time, but some betrayals
fester and poison the soul.”

~ *George R.R. Martin*

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IVY

“I didn’t know it was possible for a person to bum a ride on a private jet,” Ethan spoke out loud as he read through the paperwork in front of him.

“I didn’t know it was possible to be a bum on your own jet,” Wyatt replied, biting into his granola bar.

Both of them sat on opposite sides of the plane, neither looking at each other and pretending to talk to me when they were really talking to each other.

And here I thought my family had issues.

“Translation.” I sat up in my seat as I decoded their childish conversation. “Wyatt, what Ethan means is I’m glad you chose to save money and fly with us. Ethan, Wyatt said, of course, seeing as he inherited the jet he’d use it from time to time. Thank you for taking care of it for me.”

Both of their eyes shifted to me, to which I smiled. “Please don’t stop on my account. I think I’m good at this.”

I wanted to laugh outright when they both rolled their eyes at the exact time and went back to what they were doing. Since they wouldn’t talk to me, I leaned over the arm of my chair at the men sitting in front of us. There were three of them, Greyson I knew, and Lex, I believe, the man who’d been in the car when we rushed to the hospital, and one tall, slim man who wore a golf hat and had a toothpick in his mouth.

“Pssst.” I tried to get their attention, but none of them noticed. Instead, Ethan and Wyatt both glanced at me. Ignoring them as they did me, I took one of the sheets in front of me, folded it into a triangle and then flicked perfectly, knocking the toothpick out of his mouth. “Touchdown!”

“Does she have the mental capacity to consent to marriage?” Wyatt frowned, looking over at Ethan.

“Whether she does or not is no concern of yours,” he said, reaching for his scotch as he went back to reading.

“Wowwww. You’re both assholes.” I frowned, looking between them. “Coming from you, Wyatt, the guy who chooses to piss his brother off because he’d rather fight than sit in silence and pretend he doesn’t care, you insulting my maturity is funny. And you, Ethan, I’m a little hurt. What happened to treating me the way you were taught to treat a lady? I guess it only counts when you’re fucking me.”

Wyatt’s mouth dropped open.

Ethan coughed, choking on his drink.

“Hey, guys?” I waved at the men, trying very hard not to laugh. “How much longer until we land?”

“Another half hour, ma’am.” Greyson checked his watch.

Groaning, I rested back into the tan leather seat. “I’m not sure how much longer we can remain in a metal box at 41,298 feet without someone dying.”

“Uh, 41,298 is a little specific, isn’t it?” Lex asked.

Checking out the window for a second and then sitting back, I shook my head. “No. That should be right considering when we took off and how much longer we have to go.”

They all just stared at me.

“You’re shitting us, ma’am,” Mr. Toothpick said, pulling out the toothpick from his mouth and leaning over the chair to get a better look at me.

Now I was annoyed. “I really fucking hate it when people think I’m kidding when I’m being serious. It feels like you’re calling me stupid. Are

you calling me stupid?”

Before he could reply or beg for forgiveness Ethan pressed the call button next to his chair.

“Sir?” A voice came over the intercom.

“What’s our current altitude?” Ethan asked, his eyes trained on me as well.

“It’s 41,298 feet, sir.”

“Thank you!” I threw my hands up.

“Holy shit,” Wyatt muttered under his breath.

“Sir?” the pilot called.

“It’s fine,” Ethan said, releasing the button.

I smugly nodded at him. “You’re all just like Ms. Lisowski.”

Ethan shook his head. “Should I even ask?”

“Ms. Lisowski was a fourth grade teacher at my school.” I went on as if he hadn’t spoken. “However, the fourth grade teacher I was assigned to told her I was smart and so I should be in her class. Ms. Lisowski took one look at me and laughed, saying I wouldn’t fit in with her class.”

“Until you stunned them all with your brilliance?” Ethan added, and I could feel the dry sarcasm rolling off him in waves.

“No. Though that is how the story should have ended. Instead, Ms. Lisowski never spoke to me again until she substituted for my teacher during test day. I finished early, *like I usually did*, and went to sleep, *like I was allowed to*, only to be woken up by her ruler on my head. She didn’t believe I’d finished so quickly and when I showed to her, and *got everything right*, she still didn’t believe. She said I must have cheated and made me sit in the corner with this sign that said God doesn’t like cheaters.”

Wyatt laughed.

“Not funny!” I grabbed one of the papers on the table and threw it at his head.

“Did she put a cone on your head too?” he joked.

“No.” I pouted, though I was sure if there had been one she would have. I turned to Ethan, who listened, though looking bored. “Anyway, she told me I’d have to sit there every day for the whole week until I admitted to cheating. I kept telling her I didn’t cheat and on the third day one of the boys threw glue at me.”

Wyatt stopped laughing at that. The smile on his face slowly faded.

But mine didn’t. “It got all over the shirt my mom had bought for me, so I came out of the corner and picked up my chair and threw it at him.”

Ethan snickered. “I’m guessing that didn’t make school any easier for you.”

I shrugged. “Ms. Lisowski said I was a wild animal that would end up pregnant, living in a trailer park, eating out of plastic plates for the rest of my life since I couldn’t act like or look like a lady. I told her she didn’t look like a lady either because she had a mustache. All the kids started laughing at her then. We called her Ms. Whiskers.”

“I don’t know who to feel bad for anymore,” Wyatt muttered.

“Me!” Did he even really have to ask? “She is the one who judged, humiliated, skipped school almost every day...can we put her on the list?” I looked at Ethan eagerly, sitting up.

“Let me get this straight.” He sat up as well. “You want to add your fourth grade teacher, who is most likely an old woman at this point, to the list of people you want revenge on?”

I didn’t like how he said it or the hypercritical high horse he was sitting on. “Yes, does it make me sound petty?”

“Very,” both Ethan and Wyatt agreed.

Look at them. They were now ganging up on me.

“Excuse me. I was *traumatized*, thank you,” I said, placing my hand over my heart. “I had no friends, was already being teased. In fact, I barely blocked out most of childhood because it was so bad. She could have made me retake the test, but *noooooo* she had to be like everyone else and make my life hell.” I crossed my arms.

“As you wish,” Ethan answered, and I cheered, trying to think of anyone else.

“Wowww.” Wyatt stretched out just like I had done. “You both have no shame.”

“Screw shame,” Ethan and I both said. And when we did both of us locked eyes for a moment. Reaching over to Ethan’s work, I grabbed another piece of paper, but he grabbed my wrist.

“You do realize this isn’t for paper football, right?”

I nodded. “It’s information about Boston, and the big wigs in town. You’ve already read and memorized them, firstly, and secondly, half of this shit is wrong. You should shoot the person who got it for you ’cause they’re shitty at intel gathering.”

“Bye-bye, Hugh.” Wyatt waved behind him and all eyes were on Mr. Toothpick.

“Oops.” I didn’t really think that person was on the jet. What was worse was how terrified he was, now staring at Ethan’s back. Ethan cracked his jaw to the side, gripping on tightly to the glass in his hand.

“I—”

“Please inform me how bad the information in front of me is so I may know whether I’m shooting to maim or kill,” he said a little too calmly.

Something is off.

Everyone's attention was now on me and from what I'd seen about Ethan, he didn't make threats lightly.

"Ivy," he said seriously.

Reaching over, I took the papers from him. "First of all, why the fuck is Mattapan one of the places you wanna go to? Ain't no Irish in the Pan. In fact, it was..."

I stopped and my gaze shifting over to Hugh. *Oh, he is dead.*

"Finish your statement," Ethan said, staring out the window at the heavy thick clouds, darkening as the storm came in. It looked like gray waves rolling over the sky.

"It was the place people joked and said they'd make their relatives go stay because they only wanted to see their asses from afar," I said.

"What?" Greyson questioned aloud.

"The population of Mattapan is mostly black," Wyatt clarified.

"Go on." Ethan nodded to the paper in front of me, not at all fazed, but then again I doubted he'd show it if he was. Lifting the paper, I nodded. "McNardy is always the money cleaner and he's only in my neighborhood of Southie—South Boston, not East."

"There has to be thousands of McNardys in South Boston," Wyatt spoke again, and for someone who didn't want to be a part of this family he really fit in with ease. However, I didn't comment because I knew he'd realize that too.

"That's the point. You go round askin' for McNardy and not the right McNardy you're either a fed or an idiot. Both are grounds for your ass being handed to you one day when you're walkin' your dog." I scanned through the rest of the paper. "Everything else ain't that bad. It's just you end up lookin' like a hahdo boy from Milie, and believe me, you don't wanna look like a hahdo boy from Milie." I laughed.

“Translation?” Ethan asked.

Wyatt spoke up before I could. “A person trying too hard that comes from a rich neighborhood, aka Milton.”

“How long have you lived in Boston?” I asked him.

“Five years. After the first year you catch on quick, especially at the hospital.” He smirked to himself.

“Oh.” I could see that. “But yea,” I spoke to Ethan again. “People in this city don’t like showie. Everyone wants money, but they don’t want to see you with it. There was this guy, Jimmy, who lived across the street from us and he stole things. Nothin’ from anyone in the neighborhood, like jewelry shops and stuff. One of those things where everybody knew but nobody knew. His wife started showing off...buying things, real nice things and hiding them from him. Jimmy found out. Soon the whole neighborhood knew ’cause he chased her down the street with only one shoe. Not one person let her into the house when she knocked. My grandmother turned up the TV then.”

Wyatt frowned. “He killed her?”

“No. They are still together last I heard, livin’ in Back Bay,” I said, sliding the paper back to him.

“Thank you,” Ethan said, and he really seemed to mean it. He looked me up and down, a tiny grin creeping up on his face. “I must ask. Is the Boston accent going to be a fixture or only while we’re here?”

I didn’t even realize it just slipped out. “Do you have a problem—”

“B—Bos—” Hugh choked out, interrupting me, grabbing onto his neck as his face slowly turned purple-blue.

“No, actually, it’s a strange turn on.” He winked at me, which only briefly distracted me from the man falling out of his seat.

“Boss—”

Realizing whatever he did to Hugh had to have been prepared ahead of time, I couldn't help but get annoyed. "Why make me go through all of this if you already knew he was fucking with you?"

"Firstly, no one fucks with me," he said seriously and the man now gasping out for air behind him really hammered that point home. "Secondly, I wanted to see how much you knew about the darker parts of your city."

"So you were manipulating me again?"

He shook his head. "I had no idea you were going to speak but went along with it. Truthfully, you killed my dramatic traitorous death scene."

I pointed to the man now shaking on the floor of the jet behind him. "That's not dramatic?"

"I told him to stop with those damn toothpicks," he muttered, avoiding my question, and then looked over at Wyatt, whose eyes were closed. "You aren't going to be a hero?"

"My shift doesn't start for another two hours," he replied, placing his headphones over his ears.

Ethan shrugged, reaching for his drink again. "Guess he's shit out of luck then."

Was it odd that I found this refreshing? It felt like a family to me. I liked them. All of them. Even though they looked at me weirdly, they never acted as if I were some *wild animal* as Ms. Lisowski did and people all through my life did. I knew I was sometimes a little bi-polar, even though I wasn't actually. The warden had me checked. But still, I didn't feel like I couldn't be myself.

Catching my mood shift, Ethan said softly, "What is it?"

"You know what I've always wanted?" I looked outside as we started to lower, splitting through the clouds hovering over the city. "I've always

wanted to be a somebody, to prove they were wrong about me. The moment I got locked up I thought I'd dreamed too high."

"Are you saying thank you to me then?" he said in humor, teasing me, but I wasn't joking about that.

"I guess I am." I left this city an ugly duckling and now I was coming back as a swan.

ETHAN

She was nervous yet enthusiastic, serene yet vengeful. I could tell she loved her city the way I loved Chicago. I didn't know how I'd feel if I had to leave for almost a decade without knowing when I'd come back. Even more so if I had debts to repay. Part of me was so intrigued by the many, *many*, thoughts that might be crossing her mind at any given second. I wanted to know what she'd do next. I wanted to see how far she'd go. What her plans were or if she had any of them at all. I had no doubts about the level she'd go to if she needed to know. But still...

"We'll give you both a moment," she declared to the rest of the plane, grabbing her red coat and scarf from her chair and squeezing herself between us, mouthing 'talk to him and be nice.' Then she walked toward the doors of the jet with Lex. Greyson tried to stay behind, but the look she gave was apparently anything far more fearsome than myself because he didn't even bother to double-check with me before stepping out with her.

"You have been married less than a day and she already has everyone under her thumb." Wyatt stared blankly at the exit, his bag over his shoulder, before he turned to me. "Even you...does she even know—"

"When are you coming home?" I asked, ignoring his comment.

"I am home, Ethan."

“You were born and raised in Chicago. You are a Callahan. No matter how badly you want to erase it, that is who you are.”

“For the love of God! We are not in the 16th century, Ethan!” He clenched onto his bag tighter. His once blank stare began to narrow on me, a look I’d become familiar with. “We aren’t princes or gods or wolves or lions or beasts or whatever the fuck Mother and Father filled our heads with. Do you ever listen to half the shit that comes out of your mouth? Or anyone else for that matter? We’ve deluded ourselves into believing we are all powerful, but, Brother, we are not! Didn’t Mother’s death prove that? Didn’t Father’s? Grandfather’s? For fuck’s sake, Ethan, a church fell on top of our grandmother! Does that look like power? I know you truly believe in the greatness that is our family but outside your bubble, the Callahans are just like *the hahdo boys from Milie.*”

It took all my strength not to beat the shit out of his little ungrateful bitch ass. “Get the fuck off my jet.”

“Like I told you, it’s—”

BANG!

BANG!

BANG!

BANG!

BANG!

The shots seemed never-ending and the only thing that crossed my mind was to run toward the door, toward the bullets...Ivy!

I was prepared for the worst, for blood, for death.

However, by the time I got outside I saw neither blood nor death. Ivy rose slowly by the side of the old black Dodge, Greyson shielding her.

“Apparently, we got jokers in the city,” Lex yelled to me, lifting up a string of homemade fireworks still smoking.

Still gripping the gun in my hand tightly, I silently walked over to Ivy. She dusted off her scraped up hands.

“I’m fine,” she answered, though I did not ask the question. However, I was not. This made the second time I’d let her out of my sight for merely a moment and she’d gotten hurt. And there would not be a third.

“Ethan, I’m fine, really.” She laughed it off, though I could tell she wasn’t fine. She was shaken.

“Sir.” Greyson handed me the phone as it rang, both of us knowing who it was.

“Welcome to Boston, Mr. Callahan,” Cillian spoke on the other line. “I hope you didn’t mind the fireworks.”

I didn’t speak.

“Huh.” He snickered. “I guess you did not. And here I thought, what are a few sparks between friends? Let’s not dwell on it. In fact, we’re having a block party this afternoon. You and my cousin should come. She should remember the way.”

When he hung up, I handed the phone back to Greyson, just as Wyatt placed the gun back in the holster around his ankle and rose back to his feet. He walked past me, toward a silver-gray 1960 Alfa Romeo Giulietta Spider, a redhead in tight jeans and one of his shirts leaning against the driver’s door, waiting for him. I had no more words for him because I knew he understood. He wasn’t running from me. He was running from himself. When he realized the only way to lose your shadow was to die, he’d be back. So there was nothing left to say.

“Give her the keys,” I spoke up, opening the driver’s side door of my own car for Ivy. Just like that, the spark in her blue eyes returned as she looked between them, eager for the key. When Lex handed it over she jumped in, rubbing her hand on the steering wheel.

“It’s so pretty.” She giggled.

Walking over to the passenger side, I looked back at them both. “Go back to Chicago.”

“Go back?” Greyson asked. “What about the p—”

“It’s evolved. Go home.” Seated next to her, I pulled off my tie, unbuttoning the top collar. However, she didn’t move. “Drive, Ivy.”

“To where?”

I didn’t answer.

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NINETEEN

“My mother told me I had a chameleon soul, no moral compass pointing due north, no fixed personality; just an inner indecisiveness that was as wide and as wavering as the ocean.”

~ *Lana Del Rey*

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IVY

As I drove I found my whole body relaxing, not minding the silence, watching Ethan out of the corner of my eye every moment I had a chance. He was breathtaking, and I couldn't explain it other than thinking of that moment right before it rained. The way a slight chill would fill the air and instinctively you would look up at the clouds, only to see them darken, lightning flickering through as it crawled over the sun and blocked the light. It was beautifully frightening and romantically catastrophic...that was Ethan when he became silent like this. It made me hold my breath. It made me sensitive to every move he made. From the way his eyes would shift from one person to another on the sidewalk to the way he'd tilt his head to the side, his arm rested on the door, every once in a while tapping his knuckles on his bottom lip, then gently rubbing his lip over the side of his finger.

I wasn't simply turned on, but desperate. I wanted to know what was on his mind. I wanted to fall into the world he was losing himself in.

"There." He pointed to the store. Confused but not arguing with him, I parked in front of the local Masters and turned to him. "Let's go."

Nodding, I followed him out. He stood in his navy suit and light purple shirt, sizing up the place. Without looking at me, he stretched out his hand, and I put the key in it. He glanced down at it and smirked, locking the car, placing it in my purse and taking my hand.

Oh.

"Look who's all sweet again. You could have just asked for my hand," I said, trying to ignore the heat radiating through his hand to mine and the rest of my body.

“Noted,” he said, swiftly killing my attempt to engage in conversation as we entered the store, the bell at the front door ringing as we did.

“Can I help you...?” the blonde teenage female started to say automatically until she looked at Ethan and she gawked for a moment, then became very...smiley, brushing her hair behind her ear. “Welcome to Masters. Do you need help finding anything?” she asked him because apparently I was invisible.

I was going to say something, but Ethan, letting go of my hand, walked past her like...well, like she wasn't there, moving to the rack of clothes and looking through them.

“We'll let you know.” I smirked at her, and for the first time she looked at me.

“Uhh, yeah, okay,” she muttered, a little embarrassed as she stepped aside, moving the cart of clothes she was hanging up for me to go through. Walking up next him, I watched as he grabbed a few things.

“We're changing.” He let me know, reading a tag.

“Why?”

He paused and looked at me like he was confused as to why I was asking. “Because we look showy.”

“I'm pretty sure your cousin Nari lectured me on the importance of dressing showy.” Hence the reason for the painful pretty heels always on my feet.

“Chicago rules don't apply here,” he said, pulling out a black wool men's coat, and moved to another rack, but I grabbed his arm. He paused, allowing me to step in front of him.

Looking directly at his green eyes, I asked him the question that was starting to eat me up inside.

“What is going through your mind, Mr. Callahan?” I asked softly, reaching up to touch his hairline, and he didn’t back away or flinch, allowing me to do it. “When you change moods like this I’m not sure what to say or do.”

Leaning forward, he kissed my forehead and my heart started to race. “Find clothes, Mrs. Callahan.”

Just like that he walked around me.

Swallowing the lump in my throat and running my hands through my hair, I did what he asked. Grabbing some dark skinny jeans in my size along with a blood red blouse, black sneakers, and jacket, by the time I’d finished he was already standing beside me waiting.

“Take my hand,” he said this time when he outstretched his hand.

“That wasn’t asking,” I told him, taking it anyway.

“Noted,” he repeated, leading me back into the dressing rooms. I tried to go to the women’s side, but he pulled me to the bigger one with him, locking the door behind us. He tossed the clothes onto the small bench, reached into his jacket, and put the gun down there as well. Kicking up his foot, he undid the laces of his shoes then reached around his ankle, pulling out the slim knives. From the left ankle he took out a smaller gun.

Jeez. How did I not notice? All his clothes were always fitted and...my mind trailed off when he started to unbutton his shirt. Watching him work down the buttons quickly made my ears hot.

“Damn it, Ivy.” He sighed.

“W—”

Pushing me up against the mirror, his hands at the sides of my face as his lips covered mine, his tongue was already in my mouth, rolling over my own, tasting every corner of my mouth. His body pressed up between my legs and I wanted more, eagerly pulling at his belt, but he grabbed my

hands, pinning them over my head. Only then did we pull back from each other and just barely, huffing, trying to catch our breaths.

“I’ve never had such a hard time thinking before you, do you realize that?” He snapped at me, squeezing my wrists a little tighter. “I could feel the lust rolling off you from the moment we drove off.”

“It is your fault! I’m burning and you’re the one who set the fire. So either you let me burn or you do something about it!”

He inhaled through his nose, and reaching under my dress, he yanked my underwear to the side and with no warning or remorse he rammed himself into my pussy.

“Uhh!” I cried out, gripping onto his shoulders, my eyes struggling to open as he pulled out and did so again. In the back of my mind I was well aware that the girl outside the stall could hear me moaning like a porn star and see the stall shaking, my bare ass pressed up against it as he fucked me so hard the heels fell off my feet and my toes curled, my arms wrapping around his shoulders.

“E...than.” I gripped his hair, my mouth wide-open as I came along with him. Frozen with both our chests pressed against each other, I could feel his heart racing...or maybe it was mine. He unlocked my legs from his waist, setting them on the ground, and stepped away. He put his arms up at either side of my head and hung his own.

“Ethan...”

“I’m going to need you to support me,” he muttered and finally looked up at me, and I swear it was like his eyes were glossed over with something. “Trust that when I choose what I’m going to do, you’ll be the first to know.”

“You ask for a lot of trust from someone you barely know.”

“Do I?” He kissed my lips and pushed away, completely taking off his trousers and pulling up the jeans meanwhile I was the one with cum

between my legs. Luckily, I still had facial wipes in my purse. It took a lot to embarrass me...it rarely happened. But there wasn't anything attractive or sexy about the after-sex cleanup part. Another thing guys got away with —

“What are you doing?” I asked, startled as he took the wipe from my hands and pressed it on my inner thigh, sliding it up between my legs.

“I’m surprised you of all people are embarrassed in front of me.” He smirked.

“Me too!” I really was...until I realized I didn’t want him to see me as anything but sexy.

“Oh...” I moaned at his hand.

He bit his lip and kissed the side of my cheek. I loved how he kissed wherever he wanted over and over again. “*Baby*, I’m begging you...calm down until after we are done for the day. I’ll fuck you first and make love to you second, but I need to work, so please stop moaning, and for the love of all that is holy, stop screwing me with your eyes.”

He always blamed it on me. “You’re the one who keeps coming back.”

“I’m weak for you. What can I say?” He winked, throwing the wipe into the small trash can in the corner.

I was weak for him too. Much weaker than I thought. This time when he backed away I was able to focus enough to strip down and get dressed up again. Putting on the jacket, I grinned, loving the way it fit, especially the jeans.

“Beautiful,” Ethan said to me, already dressed and putting his second gun back around his ankle, standing far hotter in his outfit than me. He’d gone with dark blues and blacks, even with combat boots.

“Ditch the suit for this as often as you can,” I said, pressing my hand on his V-neck shirt.

“Nothing is better than a three-piece suit,” he reminded me, taking my hand again before opening the door.

“Our clothes—”

“Leave it,” he replied, leading me to the front counter where three girls, all of whom were blushing, well, two were blushing, one of them smiling as if she’d been the one he’d fucked, stood.

“For the clothes,” Ethan said, placing a couple bills on the table, and then added more. “And the noise.”

“*Babe.*” I pulled him toward me and the door when I could see the stars forming in their eyes. “Let’s go.”

“Thanks for shopping. Come again!” the one who smiled shouted as we got to the car. Ethan glanced back at her and winked before getting into the passenger side.

After changing, and fucking, it finally felt like I could breathe easy again.

“Where are we going next?”

“A block party. Apparently, you already know where.” He yawned, reclining in the seat. “I’m looking forward to meeting your cousins, much more now.”

Was he out of his mind? “You want to go—”

“Shh...” He dared to cut me off, eyes still closed. “I’m preparing to be dramatic.”

“Fine, trust the girl who was locked up for a DUI and has a suspended license to drive herself to a party. Hopefully, it doesn’t rain.”

“I will,” he said, and I was sure he drifted off.

I felt a little spoiled, but I really wished he hadn’t sent his guys off. I wanted them to drive so I could just lie on top of him.

I was becoming that obsessed.

I tried to keep my road rage in check as I drove toward my old neighborhood. Luckily nothing ever really changed around this side of town. The closer we got, the more I felt my heart thumping. It happened too fast. One minute I was trying to prepare myself, the next I was pulling to a slow stop at the end of the street. The neighborhood was full with food, beer, and the Irish, all of them walking up and down the street between rows of townhouses, to the yellow two-story house at the end of the block.

“Welcome home,” I whispered to myself, holding on to the steering wheel tightly.

“Don’t think of it as home,” Ethan whispered, still with his eyes closed.

“Just because I married you doesn’t mean I’m just going to throw—”

“A home is where you’re always welcome. It’s where you don’t have to whisper to yourself ‘welcome home’ because you’re worried no one else will. It’s where you come back and they throw the block party for you, not invite you to one already happening,” he said, surgically cutting out what was left of my heart.

“Thanks,” I muttered, slowly driving down the lane toward the house.

Sitting up, he checked the watch on his wrist. “Don’t thank me until I make you feel at home here.”

I wasn’t sure what he meant and he didn’t bother explaining. Once I parked, his eyes were cold again.

“We won’t be staying long. No matter what, don’t show fear. They aren’t going to do anything tonight,” he said to me, opening the door, and I followed him out. He didn’t take my hand this time, but stood close, walking a pace in front of me, past the iron fence, toward the back of the doors.

“Oh, my bad,” some guy stated, knocking into Ethan’s shoulder, his beer spilling a bit on his jacket.

Ethan glanced down at it and then at him. His friends were all rushing to get inside. He looked no older than twenty-two. Maybe.

“You’re good,” he said, though it was of no use.

The guy was gone, wandering inside. People passed us, no one really recognizing either of us.

“Musha ring dumb a do dumb a da.” Elroy stood on the table, already drunk, his brown hair in a faded in buzz cut, singing with four other men around him. His father’s dog tags hung off his neck as always.

I scanned the yard, looking for them...Pierce and Rory. I was sure they’d be here. Rory would come if only to tell me to get over it and show off how happy she was in my face.

“Ethan!” Elroy yelled, putting his hand over his eyes to see better.

“Ethan Callahan, that you? Well, lookie here, everyone, we got a Callahan on the block!”

He jumped off the table and it became so silent even I didn’t believe it. Everyone’s eyes were on us, leaning over tables and each other just to see better. Elroy came over to us first, stopping only a few feet from Ethan and bowing. “Your royal assness, welcome to our humble abode.”

People snickered.

Someone even yelled, “Kiss the ring!”

While another yelled, “*Say hello to my little friend.*”

Which only made people laugh now. However, Ethan ignored them, all of them, including Elroy, walking around him toward the cooler. He took one of the beers, popped it open, and handed it to me before taking a second one. He drank it in one go and threw it to the side, letting it shatter on the ground before taking another and sitting at the same picnic table Elroy had just danced on.

“You grew up here. Tell me the beer gets better after the second one,” Ethan spoke but only to me.

“It’s actually around the third,” I said, taking a sip and then bunching my face. “Correction. If you’re used to it, after the second one it’s gold, but take a break for seven years and it tastes like rat piss.” I cringed, staring at the bottle.

“When I was eight,” he said and went on pretending as if everyone wasn’t looking, “my father took me to this pub in Ireland. When he went to the back to...get work done, I sat at the bar and mixed some Guinness and Irish coffee and moonshine together.”

“You didn’t.” I wanted to puke.

He nodded, taking a drink. “Tasted exactly like this. I was drunk off my ass.”

“You drank all of it?”

“I had to. My father told me I couldn’t bitch out. Next time I’d be careful playing Mr. Scientist.”

“ARE YOU FUCKIN’ DONE?” Elroy hollered at us, and we both looked at him.

Ethan glanced around and then back at him. “Are you talking to me?”

“You know I am—”

“Why?” he cut him off, which would only piss off Elroy more. “As far as I know, I’m just a guest. I didn’t realize I needed to make a speech or somethin’.”

Elroy stepped into his face and again Ethan didn’t move, just drank. “You think you can come into my neighborhood—”

“Your neighborhood?” A very familiar voice came to the right of us. Shifting, I saw him. Cillian with his brown-red hair shaved at the sides and thick beard. He came out of the house holding a rack of steaks in both

hands. Behind, Pierce Donoghue, my ex-fiancé, was carrying the ice on his shoulders. Once Cillian gave the steaks over to the man at the bar, he grabbed a towel, wiping his hands as he came over to us. “Little brother, you seem to forget the neighborhood belongs to everyone. It’s our neighborhood right, Ivy?”

“Ivy?” Elroy frowned, looking me up and down. “I don’t believe it. Who would have known there was such a pretty face under that dog hair?”

“Elroy, how about you let Shay know her daughter is back,” Cillian told him, and Elroy looked between him and Ethan, shaking with rage. Apparently he wasn’t only spoken down to because of his height.

“I thought you said your mother died?” Ethan asked me casually as Elroy walked away.

I nodded, moving to sit next to him. “I have no idea who they’re talking about.”

“Hmmm.” He glanced back at him. “*Fgory*, you hear her? She doesn’t know who you’re talking about.”

Elroy threw the beer on the ground, ready to jump. Cillian pushed him back. “Go cool off!”

“You just gonna let him disrespect me like that in our house—”

“Sorry.” Ethan kept pushing his buttons. “Was that not your name?”

“Cool off.” Cillian sneered at him again.

He ripped his arm away from him, turning back and marching toward the fences, kicking them as he went. I noticed a few others following after him. I was sure Ethan noticed too.

“Cillian Finnegan.” Cillian outstretched his hand. “Seeing as how introductions are needed.”

Ethan glanced at his hand then back at him, the bottle hovering over his lips. “Ethan Callahan,” he said and drank afterward, not shaking his hand.

He nodded at me when he was done. “My wife, Ivy Callahan.”

“You don’t need to introduce her. Ivy’s family.” Shay walked out of the house, her hair pulled back into a ponytail, her square face and micro-thin brows even more pronounced. Rory came out dressed in short shorts, a plaid shirt around her waist, and a sweater tank. She hugged Pierce first, her brown eyes on me.

“I thought you said you had no more family?” Ethan asked again.

“I thought I answered this question.”

“Right.” He nodded to himself then looked at her. “She doesn’t know what you’re talking about.”

I snickered at that.

“Ivy, I know you’re upset,” Rory said in this weird, childlike voice.

“About Pierce and I really loving each other—”

“I’ll honestly pay you to stop talking like that.” I cringed then looked at Pierce. “Are you really into that kind of voice shit? Dodged a bullet with that one.” I lifted the beer and tapped it over his.

“Oh, now that you married into money you think you’re better than us?” She put her hands on her hips. “You think you’re too good for your own family now?”

“Family?” I said and looked at Ethan, who grinned with the beer at his lips.

“She doesn’t know what you’re talking about.”

We both snickered.

Cillian tried to cut in. “Seeing as Ivy’s memory is on the short end, how about we all just enjoy—”

“She doesn’t know what we’re talking about?” Pierce spoke up and when he did I groaned, putting my head on Ethan’s shoulder, already knowing where this was going.

“Forgive him, for he knows not what he does,” I said just loud enough for everyone to hear and soft enough that I could still speak closely in his ear.

“Oh, pretend now, but seven years ago you were the one begging and crying about how you didn’t know how you were going to live without me. How no one understood you but me—”

“And I only ever think about having sex with you,” I said aloud, adding, “Oh my God, when I’m with you I see stars...yep, all of those were lines from Katharine Duong’s novel *So What, I Faked It*.” I spoke up to the rest of the observers, who’d spend the next decade making up shit to add to this story. “It’s a great novel, ladies, especially when you’re dealing with a micro.”

They couldn’t help it; all of them started to laugh and covered their mouths. Even Ethan snickered, glancing over at him.

“I thought you liked me jealous. You should have let him at least pretend.”

“You little—”

“SHUT UP!” Cillian finally broke his cool, hollering at them. “Goddamn, can I get a word in or are you two buffoons going to keep trying to make a psychopath feel something for you two?”

Psychopath. I’d been back here less than an hour and the label was already stuck back on my forehead.

Rory wrapped her arm around Pierce, pulling him closer to her.

“Now, are you two done pretending as well?” Cillian glared at me.

“Pretending?” Ethan questioned.

“Sorry to break it to you, Ethan, but we aren’t as stupid as you think we are. Ivy called us from prison two weeks ago, and now all of a sudden she’s

married to you? Why?” He didn’t direct that question to us, but to the crowd he was trying to win over.

“Do tell,” Ethan interjected, but Cillian overlooked him.

“For years now some has-been and his has-been family is trying to wiggle himself back into Boston. Trying to make us bow the fuck down. Like his pop. His father’s pop and his great-granddad before him. All to pay taxes out of our own businesses to a family that ain’t lived here for generations.” There were grumbles over that. A few of the older men spat to the left of themselves and stood taller, as if they were ready to fight if needed.

“All of us getting called up when your family gets itself on the brink of ruin.” His eyes shifted to Ethan. “Pretending to be Irish when we all really know you’re nothing but mutts.” He wasn’t done. No, he had to get a clean shot at me too. “Ivy, I loved you like a little sister. I promised your father I’d watch out for you—”

“Was that before you killed him? Or did you make that promise in prayer while Rory framed me for a crime she committed?”

More people began to mutter, but Cillian just rolled it off. “Were you so desperate to get out that you’d believe any lies he told you and whore yourself out to him?”

My fist clenched and Ethan shattered the bottle in his bare hands, the glass cutting his hands, the little of the beer that was left pouring onto the patchy grass. Eyes narrowed, he glared at him. “If you want to insult someone, keep it directed at me, not my wife. You don’t speak to a woman like that and you sure as fucking hell don’t talk to my woman like that.”

“The woman you’ve been with for what, three days?” He snickered. “Excuse me if I don’t take your shame seriously. You played her. Fine, but you aren’t—”

“For some odd reason all of you are under the impression that I married Ivy for Boston.” He took my hand, stepping onto the grass and standing with me. “That I’m so desperate to hang on to all of you, and this city, I married a woman I didn’t know. How arrogant can you all be? I didn’t marry Ivy from Boston. I married Ivy, daughter of Sean O’Davoren, the same Sean O’Davoren, who, when me and my siblings were kidnapped, kept us safe until we could get back home. I married Ivy, who was once the freakishly tall ten-year-old who fed the cats in the basement.”

He actually laughed, but I was frozen, his grip on me tightening. Just as quickly as he laughed it was gone and he was deadly serious again.

“Everyone likes to think my family spends our days scheming and plotting...that is whenever we aren’t taking milk baths and eating with diamond forks. But the truth is, I’m just a guy who married his long-time crush. If you all want the Callahan family out of Boston, fine, that is your right.” He took out his phone and dialed three numbers. “And it’s done. We’ll leave as soon as Ivy finishes up some business and our honeymoon is up. Thank you for the shitty beer.”

He pulled me along. I could feel my legs walking, but my mind was elsewhere...it was on his previous confession. I knew him? Before now I knew him?

“Do you really expect me to believe that?” Cillian called out from behind us. “Especially after what you did to Eamon Downey?”

“Mr. Downey was a personal messenger, but since you didn’t get it, let me be clearer. Neither you nor your shit-faced brother is good enough for my sister. Look at her again and I’ll bust your teeth in personally.”

BANG!

BANG!

BANG!

BANG!

I jumped, startled, refocusing on him again only to see the power lines around us start to explode, sparks flying off all of them one by one, raining over us like dying fireflies.

“That’s going to be a pain in the ass to fix,” Ethan said, unbothered. “But then again that is no longer my problem. So what are a few sparks between neighbors?”

I didn’t understand what he meant until I walked out from the house, Elroy and his gang sitting on the front porch, some of them lifting their phones, trying to get the signal working, as we walked past the car toward the house across the street. Finally, after holding it in since we’d landed, the sky, as if it knew Ethan was finished with them, unleashed the rain it had been holding back. The thunder rippling through the clouds, the rain beat the earth with a vengeance just as we made it to the only house on the block that now had power.

Note to self. Ethan has a flair for the dramatic.

ETHAN

When we stepped through the door, the light immediately coming on, she pulled away from me gently. In a trance-like state, her blue eyes scanned over the foyer and the horrid wallpapered walls, the old couch, the pink shaggy carpet, and the television...a box television. The whole house was frozen in whatever my mother said the ’80s left behind. It was as tacky as tacky could be, like the house of someone’s dead great-grandmother coming back to haunt them...it was all of that and yet comfortable.

Turning to the left, she walked into the kitchen, directly toward the sink cabinet, pulling out a bottle of wine. She lifted it up, tilting her head to the

side like she didn't expect it to be there. Blinking a few times, she put it down on the counter then reached up, opening the cabinet and taking out two mugs. The first had an owl winking and the other what looked to be a drunk cat. She put them down next to the wine and put her fingers against the back of the cabinet until it opened, revealing a hole in the wall from where she pulled out stacks upon stacks of dusty bills. She didn't stop until she had about half a million sitting on the counter. Something that would have made a normal person happy, but instead she started to tear up when she turned back to me.

"I remember now." Her bottom lip quivered. "Everyone called me crazy, they threw rocks at me, and even my father denied it...denied that I ever met a boy in the basement of this house...that boy was you, wasn't it? This is a safe house, isn't it? My father hid you guys here, didn't he...that's why they died? Because of you...because of me?"

Before the truth came the painful removal of ignorance...my wife was living proof of that.

I'd told my grandmother we'd have to tell her the truth and lie to her. Well, the truth was my family didn't kill hers. But they did die because of me.

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TWENTY

“The future for me is already a thing of the past.”

~ *Bob Dylan*

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IVY – AGE TEN

“Why doesn’t anyone believe me?” I yelled from in front of the house. “I do have a friend! He lives here!”

“Does not!” Rory yelled back at me.

“Does too!”

“DOES NOT!” she screamed, pushing me into the fence.

“DOES TOO!” I pushed her back and started to run. “I’ll show you!”

Climbing over the fence, I looked back over at them, but none of them were coming. “Come on!”

“No, we’re going home.” Rory crossed her arms.

“Yea! We don’t want to be seen hanging out with you.” Megan, one of her friends, along with Rachel, laughed at me, crossing their arms too.

Smiling, I put my hands on my hips. “Fine, but you have to tell everybody you were wrong.”

“We aren’t wrong. Look, it’s all dusty!” She pointed out the house behind me. “No one lives there—”

“I bet you’re wrong.”

Rory paused, thinking about it. “Bet what? Your earrings?”

My hands went up to cover my ears. “No! My mom just gave me these!”

“See, knows she’s lying.” She laughed with everyone.

“I am not!” I yelled again, stomping my foot. “Fine! I bet my earrings, but when you lose you have to say sorry in front of everyone.”

“Fine!” she yelled, climbing over the fence with the rest of them.

Smiling, I ran to the corner of the house where the window was, trying to pull it open.

“If anyone is here, why don’t you just knock?” Rachel whispered.

“’Cause she’s lying,” Rory said again, and I wanted to yell, but I pulled harder. It still wouldn’t budge.

“What are you all doing?”

They screamed, but I just turned around. There was an old man holding on to a cane with one hand, his black and brown dark dog barking at us, making them jump.

“She said a boy lives down here.” Rory pointed down at the window. “She told us to come see.”

The old man frowned. “Sorry, ladies, there isn’t any boy—”

“YES, THERE IS!” I screamed at the top of my lungs. Why didn’t anyone believe me? “He’s been here—”

“Sweetheart, I think you’re a little confused. I’d know if someone was living in my own house. I just sold it yesterday and had the whole place cleaned the day before that.”

I didn’t know why, but I started to cry.

“A bet’s a bet!” Rory reached for my ears, but I ran. I ran as far away as I could, climbed over the fence, and kept running.

IVY

I don’t know how I ended up on the kitchen floor, but I just sat there with my knees tucked to my chest. Ethan sat quietly beside me and began to confess.

“My brother, sister, and I came to Boston with my uncle Neal when I was eleven. My parents wanted us to be safe while they were handling some issues back in Chicago. However, when we got here, we were attacked. That’s how my uncle lost his leg. We came to this house in the

middle of the night. It was pitch-black and they told us to stay in the rooms, stay away from the windows, and don't talk to anyone. I didn't listen to any of those rules," he whispered softly, and I just squeezed my legs tighter. "Your father and another man would often sit in the kitchen or move to the living room, keeping watch. I got bored waiting around day after day, so I snuck into the basement."

"Where I snuck off during school," I added. I picked that place one day after seeing this fat cat fall through the window. I laughed so hard at it but went to make sure it was okay. I started to stay because I thought it was close enough to my house that I was safe and that my dad would stay away because he was allergic. "That's when I met you."

He nodded. "We hung out down here day after day for a week."

"Until you just disappeared one day," I said angrily. "I crawled inside and waited for you to come down, but you never did, so I went up, just as my father was closing the door to the cabinet. He yelled at me for being here. At first I didn't say anything. I thought you were skipping school too. But when you didn't come back the next day I thought something had happened and tried to ask my dad, but he said no one lived there."

"I didn't know it then, about the growing issues between Boston and my family," he replied, taking my hand. "I didn't know your father was putting everything on the line by protecting us."

"So when I babbled about the boy in the basement—"

"Your uncle figured it out and bombed your father's car, killing your mother." He nodded, and I couldn't breathe...I tried to pull my hand away, but he didn't allow it. "He begged my parents to set it right. And we helped him kill your uncle. Cillian and Elroy killed your father in revenge and not just for that, they wanted to follow their father's dreams, making the Finnegan family the new Callahan family. And now they want my head—"

“A...” I tried to speak, but I couldn’t. I hurt. I hurt so badly my whole body began to shake.

“Ivy!” He grabbed me when I began to choke, but I didn’t know what I was choking on, my guilt, my rage, the pain, or was it all burning me alive from the inside out. “IVY!” He grabbed the sides of my face, now kneeling next to me. “Breathe! It’s not your fault.”

It was, though! I shouldn’t have pushed! I should have kept my mouth shut. I knew my father was hiding something back then. But I just didn’t want to be called crazy anymore!

“Come on, breathe, okay? Please.” He kissed my lips quickly. “Breathe, baby.”

Inhaling and exhaling, blinking the tears in my eyes away, I tried to push away, but he held on again. He wouldn’t let me move.

“Breathe in.” I did. “Breathe out.” I did.

We were like that for God only knows how long before I could finally speak again.

“Wyatt’s right. It never ends—”

“WYATT IS WRONG!” he hollered into my face. “The problem is not us! The problem is never us! The problem is those who want to be us! Your mother’s death is not your fault. Your father’s death is not your fault. It’s Keegan’s! There is always a beginning and it started with him. But the ending comes from us. Don’t put your rage anywhere else. Don’t let your need for vengeance burn out. We came here to kill them all, remember?”

I nodded, still crying but nodding, holding on to his wrist as he held on to my face. “You were my first friend, you know? That is why I wanted everyone to know.”

“You were the first and only girl I ever loved and the first and only girl to break my heart,” he whispered back, putting his forehead on mine.

“I thought you didn’t want to love anyone.”

“I said I didn’t want to be obsessed, not love.”

“And yet after all these years I’m still the first and only girl you ever loved. Isn’t that obsession?”

He frowned and this time when he tried to pull away I held on tighter. “Till I was seventeen I wasn’t with anyone. Then you started to date Pierce Donoghue. When I found out I was so pissed, so jealous...I slept with six out of seven girls on the cheerleading team during homecoming week.”

My hands and my mouth opened as I sat in shock, and he stood back up. The smirk on his face pissed me off so damn much, I kicked his shin. “You little shit!”

“Ahh!” He bounced away from me, grabbing his shin before yelling, “What? If you weren’t going to wait for me, why the hell was I going to wait for you?”

“I didn’t think you existed! I thought you were a figment of my imagination. I was a kid! You knew I was here?”

He rolled his eyes. “You should have stood firm and remembered me!”

“Oh, you are—”

“You forgot me twice!” He shot back, and I froze.

Twice? “What?”

“You are the most infuriating woman I have ever met in my life and you’ve met the women in my family, so that truly is an accomplishment.” He shook his head at me, brushing me aside to take the wine off the counter next to the money.

“When else did we meet?”

He glared at me, using a knife to uncork the wine, and poured it into the owl mug. I outstretched my hand to take it, but he drank instead.

“Now you’re just being petty.”

“Takes one to know one.” He...oh my God, he was pouting. He poured the wine into the cat mug, giving it to me. “I can’t believe you still don’t remember. When I met you in the basement back then, I thought you’d figure it out, but you never did.”

“WHAT?” He was just messing with me now.

“You came to Chicago weeks before I came to Boston! We were volunteering once at the shelter, and you came up, unable to choose between the—”

“Chocolate and lemon cakes.” I remembered, clapping my hands, then pointed to him. “That was you!”

He snickered. “I called you picky.”

“And I said maybe you weren’t picky enough.”

“And you called me short.”

“I was leaving that part out on purpose.” I grinned, finally gripping my cat wine. “You grew, though, so I guess it didn’t matter.”

“It did matter.” He leered at me. “I’d never been so upset with a girl in my whole life. When you told me ‘so what?’ after I called you fat I was livid. My father...he laughed. Everyone laughed because I’d never lost a fight before.”

“Aww, poor Ethan,” I teased, and he rolled his eyes. “If it makes you feel better, I never felt like I won a fight.” Most times, even if I used my fist, I ended up punished in some way or shape.

“It doesn’t,” he said honestly.

We sat in silence for a while, just holding our mugs.

He felt so far standing only a few feet from me, so I put the cup back down and walked around to where he stood. His eyes dropped down to mine. Reaching over, I took his cup and put it down too, then just hugged

him, nothing more. Just a hug. He wrapped his arms around me, his chin on my head, my cheek on his chest.

“You’re making me soft,” he whispered.

I smiled, squeezing tight. “Only for me, though.”

He didn’t reply, so I kept talking.

“You’re never allowed to say you aren’t romantic again.”

“That’s what I’ve been told.”

“Well, duh, they weren’t me.”

He snickered, and I felt his chest shake. “You’re really going to let this go to your head, aren’t you?”

“Absolutely.”

He cared. He remembered. He came back for me. He loved me. I wasn’t letting go. I’d follow him this time, no matter where he went.

“Now that I know everything, will you tell me what you’re planning? Why we’re here?”

“I thought the revenge was obvious.”

He thought this was obvious?

“Ethan, we’re in a house across the street from the people we want to kill and they want to kill us. You have no one else but me here—”

“I have everyone here,” he said, pulling back slightly to look at me.

“When they realize they need me, they need this family, we will stand here and watch as they crawl on their bellies from his house to this one, begging for mercy. Humility forced on the prideful is the very best kind of revenge for them. Everyone else who resists will find the people standing beside them will be the very same that will slit their throats.”

Before I could speak something smashed against the window behind him. I tried to go see what it was, but he held me still.

“Let them throw or shout what they want. No one can get into the house,” he replied. “For now let’s forget about them...I do believe I made you a promise this afternoon.”

I grinned when he zipped down my jacket, but I stepped back.

“Go play with your cheerleaders.”

His mouth dropped open slightly, and I stuck my tongue out at him.

“You’re right. I am petty.”

“Ivy...” He took a step toward me, and I bolted, causing him to chase me up the stairs.

How was it possible for one man to make me feel a hundred different emotions in one single day?

ETHAN

Her head rested on my lap, her naked body in between my legs, the sheets barely covering her as I leaned against the headboard. For some reason she preferred sleeping on me rather than the bed...but at least she could sleep. I, on the other hand, sat in wait, staring at the security feed on the screen mounted on the wallpapered wall before the bed. My plan would look insane to most people because for most people it would mean putting themselves in potential danger at all times. However, I was not most people, and I already lived in constant state of potential danger...so why not do it in front of them all. They thought I was just the boy who inherited the reign from his father...that I lived surrounded by bodyguards, in a mansion in some far away city so they could do whatever the fuck they wanted, they could disrespect me because they did not know me, they did not fear me. But when the devil moved into the neighborhood they’d know what true fear would be like.

Ringgg.

Ringgg.

Glancing at my watch, I smirked before reaching over and answering my cell phone. “Brother.”

“What have you done?”

“The first time you call me in five years, Brother, and that is what you ask me?” I tried to get up, to leave her to rest, but she just held on tighter, so I gave in and stayed put.

“I saw you this morning, so spare me the bullshit. I’ve gotten five ODs this evening. Two of them had GHB in their systems, the third had PCP, and the last two had ketamine mixed in with heroin.”

“Did you say five? That can’t be right—”

“I know how to do my fucking job. When did you start slacking on yours? You’re mixing shit now?”

“I trust you can do your job, Brother.” I tried not to let him kill my mood. “I just figured the death toll would be much higher by now... apparently, I need to lower my expectations.”

He was silent, but I merely laughed. GHB? PCP? They mixed date rape drugs with smack? Were they just excited or stupid?

“You’re doing this on purpose—”

“Being a doctor in this city is going to get a lot more stressful for a while, so good luck, little brother,” I replied, hanging up, and when I did she shifted under me.

“I think that is the most civil conversation I’ve heard you and your brother have,” she muttered.

“You’re right,” I said. She rolled over and I missed the feel of her on me immediately. Grabbing her arm, I pulled her back on my lap. “Where are you going?”

“It’s a little hard to have a conversation with you when your cock is inches from my face,” she said, shifting until her ass was right on top of me. “Better.”

“Not for me. I liked where your face was.” I grinned as she made a face at me. Pulling her closer to me, she put her arms around my neck. “Let me guess...my wife wants to know what my brother and I were being civil over.”

She nodded.

“Drugs.”

“What?” she asked, surprised by the answer.

Nodding, I repeated it again. “Apparently the doctor didn’t like that his drug dealer brother had a bad batch of drugs on the street causing people to OD before reaching his hospital.”

“He can’t blame you for every drug dealer on the street,” she said as if that was obvious, and it proved how innocent she was to this.

“Yesterday he could,” I told her honestly. “Because yesterday I supplied every drug dealer on the street. But not anymore. I told Cillian the Callahans pulled out of Boston, which means he’s now the supplier. However, over the years more and more people in the Northeast have become addicted to heroin. The demand is high and because my family also controls 99 percent of the heroin coming into the port here that means the Finnegan brothers don’t have enough and they’re mixing anything they can to sell. The money will rain on them for a little bit and they’re going to think they are kings, but the demand will only worsen as people’s highs are cut short and they come looking for more.”

“And I doubt the Callahan family will give up their 99 percent,” she said, connecting the dots. “Which means they’ll have to mix more and more and people will start to die faster and faster.”

“Also causing the government to have to step in and face that ugly secret no one wants to admit...there is a drug problem in Massachusetts. The druggies don’t give a fuck where their high comes from as long as they get their fix. The government can ignore it if there isn’t a high death toll. People don’t complain if they get rich. It’s a system that has been perfectly regulated by us to give them all what they wanted and now we’re gone.”

Her eyes widened as she realized the logical conclusion. “It’s going to be like the old days! Like in the movies with gangs at war trying to get the best drugs. The cops on a chase. People dying with needles in their arms. It will be chaos.”

“Keep going. Think what happens when most of those inner city hospitals no longer get those mysterious donations?”

The smile that crossed her face gave me chills. “You’re evil, Mr. Callahan.”

“I’m just getting started, Ivy,” I told her, the plan in my head coming together. “Everyone needs to remember their roles. This city. Those who hurt you. The Finnegan brothers. Wyatt—”

“Wyatt?” Her eyes widened. “What do you plan to do to your brother?”

“How much do you want to know?”

“Everything,” she said, staring deep into my eyes. “Tell me everything. You promised not to use me without my permission.”

I placed my hand on her cheek, stroking softly. “Once you get into my mind, Ivy, there is no escaping.”

“I know.”

I smirked...then I told her.

My family revolutionized organized crime. We created a balance. We made them need us, and they became so comfortable they forgot what it

was like without us...what a bunch of ungrateful little bastards. I wondered if this was what God thought about the Israelites.

If so they were going to need to repent.

To repent they must be sorry.

To be sorry they must feel pain.

So let there be pain.

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TWENTY-ONE

“My fault, my failure, is not in the passions I have,
but in my lack of control of them.”

~ *Jack Kerouac*

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TWO DAYS LATER

ETHAN

I saw the car slow next to me as I ran down the street.

I knew who it was. How could I not when he'd called almost three dozen times in the last two days?

He apparently didn't get it.

Running faster, I missed my turn toward the house, running instead around the block once more, the wind pushing through to me, filling my lungs with the air that smelled like coffee and bagels. My heart pounded against my chest, out of synch with the sounds around me: people rising from their beds, throwing out the trash, talking on their phones. I preferred swimming for this reason. I didn't want to hear anyone. I didn't want to smell anything. I sure as hell didn't want the goddamn mayor tailing me.

Stopping, I took another deep breath, checking my watch before walking into the local corner deli. The old man behind the counter glanced up from his tablet, tilting his head down to look over his small framed glasses. Realizing it was me, he nodded and picked up his tablet, heading toward the back.

"Kitty, you know where the damn newspaper app is on this thing?" he yelled out as he went. A few seconds later power lights beside the camera switched from green to red.

Grabbing a basket, I went to the fridge with the milk in it. No sooner did I move that the bell chimed behind me.

"Two percent or whole?" I asked him, staring at the milks.

“Wife usually says two, but I’m a whole kind of man,” his deep voice said, and I reached for the two.

“Can’t be going against the wives, now can we, Takahashi?” I looked at the gray-haired man who stood beside me with dark eyes, almost eye level with me. “How is Kyoko?”

“Good. She’s taken up pottery,” he said.

“Pottery,” I repeated, moving to see the cereals and he, of course, followed. “Interesting hobby.”

“It’s the only thing that relaxes her now...now that...”

“Your son has died.” I finished for him, taking the cornflakes and placing it in the basket. “Well, that’s good for her.”

“She took up arts. I took up the job of protecting the people of Boston. To make sure no one else would lose their child to drugs—”

“Spare me the speech, Mayor,” I cut him off, looking between the chicken and chunky tomato soups. “I already voted for you...I mean, I got the votes for you. Chunky tomato or chicken?”

He didn’t reply or even bother looking at the cans.

“To hell with it. I’ll live a little and get them both,” I answered, throwing them into the basket also.

“And in return for that vote I’ve made sure your business has run smoothly in and out of the city,” he shot back. I paused in the middle of the aisle. “However, whatever is going on is starting to cause the bodies to pile up far too quickly.”

“Mayor.” I did my best to keep calm. “You were brought into the fold to spread the usual bullshit, not for you to start eating it too.”

“This new drug, Ethan, it—”

“IT IS MR. CALLAHAN!” I snapped, turning back to him. “Everyone has forgotten their place, *Mayor*, and I will take the blame for that. I’ve

allowed you all to take credit for my achievements, *my family's* achievements, for so long you've all begun to believe they are yours. Before me you were nothing but a detective, so in debt you would roll over and play dead for a few grand, with an unfaithful manic-depressive wife and a junkie for a son. I picked you out of the gutter, I dusted you off, I gave you that shiny pedestal you now stand so proudly on. You didn't allow *my business* to do anything, it supersedes you! Whatever happens here, you are to do as you are told—"

"I will not let people die—"

Dropping the cart, I grabbed him by the neck, shoving him up against the glass doors and squeezing.

"Never interrupt me, Mr. Takahashi. I'm up to my neck in disrespect and I won't take it from you too. You will go back to your office, you will sit in that nice big chair of yours, you will remember who bought you that chair, and you will wait as patiently as I am being with you until you get your orders. Am I being clear?" I squeezed tighter, forcing his chin up.

"Am. I. Being. Clear?"

"Y...es..."

Letting go, he coughed and gasped for air, bending to the side as I moved back to my cart. "People like your son will always die. You didn't lose your child to drugs. Yoshiro lost to himself. People like you always come around, always saying they will clean up the cities and will choke the drug supply, forgetting that it is the very same people in those cities who are letting the filth get in. Why?" I asked, bending down to reach for the jelly. "Because they cannot cope. Whether the pain is physical or mental it doesn't matter. They want to escape so badly they'll take anything. You cannot stop drugs from coming in until you stop the pain. And pain never stops. I thought you understood that. I thought you understood that we

supply the safest poison and therefore respected your role. But I thought wrong. You, too, think that the evil begins and ends with the Callahans. So watch well and see how this city, the city I gave you, changes when I'm not the gatekeeper."

I walked to the front counter, placing my basket on the counter and ringing the bell. I turned back when I heard him walking toward the door, adjusting his neck tie. "When this is over I just might have to get a ring so you can kneel down to kiss it out of gratitude."

Pushing the door open, he said, "Have a good day, Mr. Callahan."

"I always do."

He turned back to me once more before getting inside the town car, the black door closing behind him.

"The moment I heard you were in town I sent Kitty and the girls to my sister's in Florida."

"You mean she's not in the back helping you find the newspaper app?" I replied, turning back around to him as he shuffled in behind the back of the counter.

"Thankfully not. I told them, look, if the Ceann na Conairte is coming here himself, that means some people are going to lose their heads, and I don't need them in the crosshairs. No, sir." He chuckled, ringing up the items in the basket. "It's \$41.97."

"\$41.97? You're killing me, McNardy."

"Girls, three of them, Callahan, do you know how much tuition costs nowadays? And of course they all got to go to the expensive ones." He groaned, lifting a thick purse and placing it on the table, sliding it to me.

"I think you mean Ivy League," I said, opening it to count the cash quickly before pulling out a few twenties and placing them on the counter.

“I mean bloody expensive. Couldn’t one of them have the decency to only care about makeup and boys like everyone else?” he grumbled, giving me change, and I just threw it back into the purse, sliding it back to him.

“Keep it and anything else trickling. Spread it among the boys too. Things will be slow for a while. I’m sure it will help with your girls too.”

He smiled like he’d been resurrected from the dead. “You’re too kind, Callahan.”

“Aren’t I!” I agreed, moving to the doors. “If everyone thought like you I would still be in Chicago, blissfully ignorant to the ridiculously high cost of jelly.”

“I got it from the Amish. Everyone loves that stuff. Can’t get it anywhere but McNardy’s.”

“I’ll let you know, then, if it was worth it.” I stepped back into the light breeze, tossing the bag over my shoulder as I walked back.

IVY

“Oh my God, what is this?” I said, taking a bite of the bagel in front of me, reaching over to get more of the jelly.

“Amish gold, apparently,” he replied, reading through the messages on his phone, lying almost naked, nothing but a towel around his waist, beside me on the bed. He’d come in with breakfast for me before taking a quick shower only a few minutes ago. “Give me some.”

He tilted his head to me, and I broke off a piece of the bagel to put in his mouth. Watching as he chewed, I waited for a reaction, but all he did was nod. “Good, but still not worth the price.”

“Shh.” I gasped, putting my hands over the jelly. “It will hear you.”

He finally glanced up at me and then at my hands before snickering. He tossed his phone on the bedside table, sitting up, and grabbed the knife to spread the jelly onto my lips before licking them off with his tongue.

“Now it’s too good for me,” he whispered. His lips, however, hovered over mine as his fingers brought down the small strap of my nightgown until it no longer covered my right breast. Taking the knife and the jelly, he smeared it over my nipple, causing me to jump slightly when the blade touched my skin. Dropping the knife back on the tray, he grabbed my breast tightly, squeezing it before his head dropped down and licked the jelly from my nipple. My mouth parted as I took hold of his hair, closing my eyes, leaning in more to him as he kissed and sucked and bit my nipple and breast.

He kissed and sucked up my chest, to my neck. “Oh...” I moaned, licking my lips. He kissed all the way up to my lips and only broke away to rest his forehead on mine.

“Now it’s priceless,” he whispered, bringing his hand up to stroke my cheek.

“I want it priceless for me too,” I whispered back, undoing his towel, reaching in to stroke his cock, feeling as it got hard and stood proud in my hands.

“Umm...” He closed his eyes and took the very same knife, dipped it in the same jelly and slowly ran it up the length of him, and then once more over the thick vein, begging for me to run my tongue across it, and who was I to deny it. Bending down, I licked him like he was ice cream on my spoon, candy made only for me. I sucked so forcefully on the side of his dick, he cried out, placing his fingers in my hair.

“Ethan, you...you taste so good.” I licked the tip of his cock before taking him into my mouth. My body bent over as I took as much of him into

my mouth as I could.

“Fuck...ahh...Ivy...” He hissed.

I smiled. I loved when he lost his composure like this. Lifting my head back up, I licked the tip of him once more and said, “Yes, baby?”

His eyes snapped open, lust shining through. He didn’t say anything. Instead, he reached for my leg and pulled it and me over, lying on his chest...backward.

“I didn’t realize you were as hungry as me...*baby*,” he said, lying back on the bed, my ass and pussy completely exposed to him. He gripped my thigh with one hand and used two of his fingers to spread the lips of pussy for him to eat—

“Oh...my...Ethan. Ahh!” I gasped, my body trembled as his tongue tickled my clit. Unable to stop myself, I rocked my hips into his mouth, my eyelids feeling heavier as my body temp rose.

“Eat, *baby*,” he said, and feeling his lips vibrate against me as he spoke was almost too much for me.

“Yes.” Was all I could say before taking him back into my mouth, my hands caressing his balls, both of us moaning against each other.

Yes!

God, yes!

More!

I wanted more of him.

I wanted all of him.

I never wanted this to end.

ETHAN

Fuck. Why was she so damn beautiful?

Her moans were intoxicating.

The way she looked while being fucked, a thin layer of sweat on her white skin causing her blond hair to stick to her body, was divine.

I wanted to lose track of time kissing every part of her body. I wanted to see how many ways I could make her legs weak.

“Ethan...ah...please...oh...” she cried out, her palms so sweaty she was starting to slide on the kitchen floor...

The kitchen? Why are we in the kitchen?

Right. We’d come to get more food, but she had to tempt me with that cute small robe of hers. Which didn’t cover her ass when she bent over to get something from the fridge. Which led to this. Her on all fours and trying to stay that way as I rammed myself into her ass. Sweat rolled down my face, off my chin and onto her back with each thrust forward.

“I can’t—” Her hands slid and she went down, her breasts on the tiled floor, but I couldn’t stop. No, I needed her to scream out more. I wanted to be in her more, much more. So I sat up on my knees more and pulled her hips to me, holding them in place with my arm as I leaned on top of her, chest on her back.

“Ethan.” She drooled, lost in her sexual daze. “So good.” She kissed my chin, until her mouth got to my lips, and from there, our tongues roamed each other’s mouth.

“You are mine,” I said when we broke away, my hands wrapping around her neck. “Always...say it.”

“I’m...” She tried to close her eyes, trembling as I slammed into her ass.

“Say it.”

“I’m...yours...”

I pulled out slightly, trembling with her before thrusting back in, swallowing the saliva in my mouth to ask her, “For...how long? For how

long are you mine?”

“Always,” she muttered.

“Louder!”

“I’m yours always!”

“Whose?” My grip tightened on her, my pace quickening.

“YOURS!” she screamed out and once she screamed she gave into the pleasure, the lust, the wildness in herself and kept screaming. “I’m yours! I’m yours, Ethan Callahan! Oh, fuck...yes...baby, yes! OH! ETHAN!”

She cried as she came forcefully, her legs bucking, taking me with her as she collapsed. Bracing myself onto my elbows, I kissed the side of her sweaty cheek.

“Never forget that,” I whispered into her, slowly calming down as I too was at my limit. “Never forget you belong to me and me alone. I’ve waited for only you, Ivy, dreamed only of you, and now that I have you, I’m going to fuck you like this until...ugh...until I figure what the hell you’ve done to me. UH!” I grunted, gripping her waist as I came deep inside her.

I held myself up on my hands on either side of her.

I closed my eyes, trying to both breathe and calm myself down.

I don’t know how long we both stayed like that, naked, sweaty, pressed together, breathing heavily, and I didn’t care.

It was only when I found the will and the strength to move again did I slowly push myself up and gently pulled out of her, both of us covered in each other. On my feet, the world felt like it was spinning for a moment, before I felt upright. Moving to the open fridge I’d pulled her from, I reached for the milk and drank it from the bottle, bracing myself against the kitchen counter when I was done.

“Ethan.”

Her voice was so soft I thought I’d imagined it.

Turning to face her, she'd rolled over onto her back, her hand over her eyes, and I didn't realize why until she spoke. "Ummm...fuck...I mean... I...whatever I did...whatever I've done...don't figure it out."

She was crying.

Not sobbing.

Just tears flowing out of her eyes.

"Why are you covering your face?"

"Because my eyes are leaking and they shouldn't be!" she shouted in frustration. "I should cry when I'm sad. Now this wasn't sad...this was the best...I've never felt like that before."

Putting the milk down, I walked back over to her and even when I picked her up into my arms she wouldn't let me see her face, even though I could feel her tears on my chest.

"Say it," she whispered.

"What?"

"Say you'll never try to find out why me?"

"I'll never question why I fell for you."

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TWENTY-TWO

“Fear of a name increases fear of the thing itself.”

~ *J.K. Rowling*

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SEVEN DAYS LATER

IVY

“Twenty more dead as of this morning. City council members and doctors are warning that many more will die due to the flood of miscellaneous drugs being distributed in heroin. Dr. Rioja, head trauma surgeon of Boston Medical, says that over the last week they’ve seen more deaths due to heroin overdose than in the last eighteen months—”

Switching the station and lowering the volume, Ethan leaned back into his seat, speeding up as the light changed.

“Do you want to get anything to eat on our way?”

“On our way where?”

“Somewhere,” he replied, and I wanted to jump him, but he just put his free hand on top of my thigh.

“You—ugh.” I sighed, crossing my arms and leaning back. I could tell he was amused...no, not just that. He was also content. Content with the state of the city, with the way we’d been living.

For the last week we’d pretty much stayed inside the safe house, falling into our own routine in that short time. Ethan would wake up at some ungodly hour in the morning, kissing my forehead and telling me to go back to sleep before leaving the house to go for a run. Something he did for no other reason than he knew it was dangerous. Because he knew they’d be watching him. And because I felt paranoid when he was gone I’d watch the cameras until I started to see him come back around the corner before getting the shower started. We’d have breakfast together, eat, make love, talk or watch a movie, end up back in bed, where he’d either fuck me like

his own personal whore or gently make love to me like I was his wife. Whichever really depended on his mood. Luckily I hadn't cried again! Oh my gosh, that was embarrassing. Luckily he hadn't brought it up.

After finding out how we were connected, he'd opened up a little bit more, but not as much as I'd like. Ethan lived in his head. I'd wanted to get in there at first, but it was a maze even he was lost inside of, so I could only pull him out, forcing him to read to me, watch old movies, or draw me, a secret talent of his. He was an artist, obsessed with classical works of literature, art, and people. I'd ask questions only to keep him from falling back into the abyss of his mind. I was sure he knew, but he went along with it. The one thing he did not talk about was his childhood or his parents. All he'd say was that his parents loved each other, loved him and his siblings, and never wanted them to be weak. That was it.

Each day I tried to pry more and each day he changed the subject. Today I was determined to get him to speak up about it. However, of course we were now going somewhere...the both of us.

Glancing over at him as he drove in the rain, his hand was like a heater on my thigh, stroking back and forth gently.

"Yes?" he asked, not needing to look at me to know I was staring.

"You still haven't told me where we're going." He just said 'out' when I asked him before. "Or will you not know until we get there?"

"We're here," he said, pulling up in front of a barbershop, the name "Carofiglio" elegantly written on the windows.

"I thought you cut your own hair?" I'd seen him perfectly cut and style his hair yesterday with nothing but scissors and barber razors.

Of course he didn't answer me, instead stepping out of the car and coming around to my side to open the door for me. Stepping out, I eyed him carefully.

“You’re very interested in my childhood, and I prefer not to talk about it,” he said, shutting the door behind me and taking my hand. “This is a compromise.”

I didn’t understand how until we stepped inside on to the checkered floor, the wooden walls covered with dozens if not hundreds of photos, some faded to black and white.

“Ethan!” An old man, who had more wrinkles than the bunched up shirt, pure gray hair, which was parted and styled with waves in it, and a small gut, put his scissors down to come up to Ethan, who bent down to the man who was a few inches shorter than me, to kiss his right cheek, then his left. When they backed up the man grabbed his shoulders. “Mio caro! Che piacere vederti. Mi sei mancato molto! Come sta?”

Ethan actually smiled at the old man. “Non posso lamentarmi con una bella moglie così.”

The old man’s brown eyes finally shifted over to me. “Una vera bellezza!” he said before pulling me into a hug and kissing the sides of my cheeks so quickly I didn’t even have time to process he’d done it till I was standing apart from him.

“Ivy,” Ethan called, finally back in a language I could understand. “This is Giovanni Carofiglio, my former boss. Giovanni, Ivy Callahan, my wife.”

“It is a pleasure, my dear.” Giovanni smiled at us, crossing his arms to look at us together. “For shame your wedding was so private.”

“Oh, yes, for shame you missed free wine and food.” Ethan snickered at him then nodded to his stomach. “Though, I see you are preparing for two —”

Giovanni sucked his teeth and raised his hand. “Do not forget your mother gave me permission to smack you if needed.”

“How could I forget?” Ethan rolled his eyes. “You find a way to mention it each time we meet.”

“Former boss?” I cut, looking between them before they continued merrily down memory lane.

“Oh, yes.” He nodded to the seventh and only barber chair not occupied. It sat in the corner, like a well-polished leather throne. The name Ethan C. was engraved on the upper corner of the glass next to pictures. Mesmerized by it, I walked toward it. Sure enough the photos were of him when he was a teenager, still tall, his hair a little shorter than now but ever the epitome of cool. There were pictures of him cutting hair of small children and of older men, and even women too. The most shocking was Wyatt, both of them laughing. Ethan looked ready to bust his gut, while Wyatt used a piece of hair to make a mustache over his upper lip.

“When was this?” I whispered, looking at each picture on the corner of the mirror.

“Ethan started working in my shop when I lived in Chicago. He was twelve,” Giovanni said, now standing beside me, looking at the pictures with pure pride. “He wasn’t anything but a sweeper when he first got started.”

“And in no time I had more regulars than you,” Ethan said, walking around to the other side of the chair and taking off his leather jacket, picking up a gray button-down uniform shirt. His name was also stitched onto it.

“The bitter part of me wants to blame it on your last name.” Giovanni huffed angrily. “Of course people would want to get their hair cut by a Callahan...”

“But my skills spoke for themselves,” Ethan said, pulling out a box filled with barber tools that shined beautifully.

“Humility goes a long way, boy,” Giovanni replied.

“Humility is not in the Callahan dictionary,” I said, laughing. This was amazing. Who would have ever thought Mr. Richie-Rich, silver spoon-fed Ethan had a part-time job growing up?

“Aww, true.” Giovanni nodded, looking at me. “It would help too if they were bad at some things. Did your husband not tell you he’s my greatest student?”

“Auhmmm!”

We both turned, and it was only then that I realized how packed the barbershop was. A few men and even young boys sat waiting on the benches by the wooden wall. They were all eyeing Ethan as he set up. However, the one who’d fake coughed loudly was a man about my height with brown hair that was faded on the sides but thicker and smoothed back on top. He looked up at us from the sideburns he was shaping up.

“And here I thought I was your greatest student, pa,” he said.

“He meant the greatest student he didn’t teach, Marco,” Ethan said, cleaning off his blades. “Didn’t you, Giovanni?”

Giovanni groaned. “I forgot you were a smartass. I might have guided your hands, but you still learned from watching me, didn’t you? Hmh... speaking like you just woke up a barber one morning.” He caused both Marco and Ethan to snicker.

“Good to you have back, Ethan, now help us get rich too.” Marco laughed, nodding to the line of people waiting.

“How rich we talkin’?” Ethan turned his chair.

“Very,” both Marco and Giovanni said at the same time.

“Greedy bastards,” Ethan muttered, though I could tell he was enjoying it.

“So be it,” Giovanni said, walking back to his chair and his very, *very* patient client apparently. “Gabby, bring out a stool for Mrs. Callahan! And say hello to your godfather!”

He shouted, and a young girl, no older than eight or nine, with curly blond hair, stuck her head out from behind the door of the shop. Her hazel eyes stared at me and then she turned to Ethan. A huge grin spread across her face as she burst out of the doors fully and hugged him.

“Uncle Ethan!”

“She’s still a hugger, I see,” Ethan said to Marco.

Marco frowned. “Only to you, it seems. No loyalty, that one.”

“I haven’t seen Uncle Ethan in forever!” She squeezed tighter, and Ethan raised his arms, staring down at her.

“Is that why your Christmas list gets so bloody long every year?” he asked her.

She flashed her teeth at him, one of them missing on the bottom. “Yep!”

“So now that you’ve seen and hugged me near death, you won’t need anything this year.”

Her hands dropped along with her smile and all the men within the barbershop laughed as she looked heartbroken.

“Uncle, you’re mean.” She pouted.

“So I’ve been told.” He put his hand on her and turned her until she was facing me. “Luckily my wife is much nicer. Send her your lists from now on and she’ll handle it.”

“REALLY?” She brushed Ethan’s hands off and walked over to me.

“Hold on, Aunty, let me get you a chair.” She rushed behind the curtains.

“You’re right. No loyalty at all.” Ethan shook his head, staring at where she had disappeared behind the doors.

“Here, Auntie.” Gabby put the black padded stool just off to the side of Ethan as he called up a boy who looked about twelve. He took off his baseball hat when he sat on the chair.

“Thanks, Gabby,” I said to her, sitting down.

“You’re welcome—”

“Oh no, you don’t.” Marco pointed at her. “No gift-getting, or wish-making until I see that C- morph into an A.”

Gabby pulled out a piece of paper, lifted it up, and showed how if you turned a ‘C’ onto its side and put the ‘-’ inside it made an A.

I laughed so hard my sides hurt.

“Did you just forge your grades in front of me?” Marco asked her.

“No.” She hid the paper behind her back. “You didn’t say that a C- needed to be an A for me to make wishes.”

“She’s right,” Ethan replied, placing a white strip around the boy’s neck.

Marco sighed. “Just go.”

“We’ll talk later,” Gabby mouthed to me, and I nodded to her.

“Go!”

“I’m going!” She groaned, making a show of having to go back.

“So you all are family,” I replied when she was gone. That made more sense. I doubted Ethan would be so comfortable with people if they weren’t family.

“Very distant relatives of my mother,” Ethan said, not looking up at me as he concentrated.

“Very distant or not,” Marco said to me, “we’re still the only relatives Bloody Melody ever acknowledged.”

“Bloody Melody?” It sounded like a bad horror movie.

Ethan snickered. “My mother’s nickname. Apparently the Irish gave it to her after she married my father. And it stuck on the count of the fact that

my mother was, well...not slow to use her fists.”

“Ha!” Giovanni scoffed. “Or gun. How many times did she shoot your father? Twice, correct?”

“Your mother shot your dad?” My jaw opened as I looked at him.

Ethan made a face. “I was hoping no one would ever tell her that. She is already temperamental as it is, and my mother left her the gun.”

“Hey!” I frowned, turning back to the guys. “She sounds like a hell raiser.”

“She was. May she rest in peace,” Giovanni said seriously as did almost everyone else in the shop, everyone but the kids, far too young to know her. And I remembered the letter she’d left me, where she said, *You are now the head woman of this family. Act like it and make them talk about you as they talked about me.*

I realized why Ethan had asked me if I could do it. The more I found out about his mother the bigger her heels became.

“So your mom was Bloody Melody. Did your dad have a nickname too?” I didn’t ask that. Instead, Gabby stuck her head back out.

We all just looked at her for a moment before looking back at Marco, who took a deep breath.

“His name was the Mad-Hatter,” Marco spoke through his teeth. “And I used to think it was because the man thought of the most insane ways to harm people, but now I’m thinking it must have been the stress of parenting.”

“Can’t be,” Gabby said back smugly. “If it were, you’d have a nickname too, right, Dad?”

Ethan paused from cutting the boy’s hair to laugh, actually out loud, in public.

“Get back in there and do your science homework!” Marco pointed his clippers at her.

“Science is boring!”

“GASP!” I put my hand over my heart, and she turned to me. “Science is amazing. What are you talking about? You can create almost anything through science. When I was nine, I won the science fair by creating an incandescent voltaic receptacle to hasten the growth cycles of potatoes.”

“A what?” her father asked before she could. And not just him. Everyone else was confused too. Even Ethan looked at me for a quick second.

“It was like an umm...” I tried to think. “It was a greenhouse that made potatoes or any other vegetable grow faster.”

“Oh...” They all said like a light bulb clicked in their minds.

“See? Look at that. At your age people were already creating incandescent voltaic receptacles,” Marco said to her, making her pout.

“I can’t gift to people who hate science,” I told her, crossing my arms.

I heard her gasp. “Uncle Ethan...”

“What the wife says goes,” he said, snipping the back of the boy’s hair with two different scissors.

She hung her head and turned around, marching back to her homework, but before she got there she turned to him.

“Do you have a nickname, Uncle?” she asked.

The whole room seemed to have frozen, everyone a little stiff, everyone a little wary, glancing at each other. Ethan, on the other hand, simply spun the boy in his chair, wiping him down before taking the cape and neck tape off.

“I do,” he said to her when the boy got up, checking his hair. “It’s *Mani di forbice*.”

“Cause you cut hair?” she asked him even though I didn’t understand.

“Sure.” He nodded at her.

She thought about it for a little bit. “It’s kinda long but cool, I guess. Dad, I’m going upstairs to call Mom!”

She waved at me as she ran back into the back.

“Mani di forbice?” I asked him as an older man sat in the chair, pointing to his chin for a shave.

“Scissor hands,” Giovanni answered when he didn’t.

“Oh.” I understood if he worked here why that would fit. But I also understood from the way they reacted, and from the way Ethan wasn’t communicating anymore, that it was much deeper than that. He told me we’d go out so I could find out more about his past, so I wasn’t going to back down.

“Why, though?”

Giovanni was the only one speaking now and it wasn’t as cheerful as it had been earlier. “Rumor has it that when he was young he went to confession with his family for the first time. The priest told him to confess his sins to the Lord, and Ethan said he was sinless and would only confess when he was no longer sinless. They got into a long argument until the priest could no longer remain with him and left. Ethan, sensing something was wrong with the irate priest, followed him into his chambers, where he found the priest was breaking his vows of silence. He was trying to use Ethan as a way to get information on his father and mother in order to save himself from prosecution. He was a child molester. Upon discovering this, Ethan stabbed the priest with two blades, one a gift from his father, and the other he was holding for his brother. When they found him, he stood over the priest, holding both blades, covered in blood, and confessed to God his sins then.”

“As far as I see it, any man touching children deserves to die, and it isn’t a sin,” Marco muttered under his breath, shaping up the edges of a man’s forehead.

My eyes shifted to Ethan, but it was as if he wasn’t here anymore. He just carefully glided the razor up the man’s neck, who either had balls of steel or didn’t believe the “rumor.”

“What happened after that?”

Marco shrugged. “The church was closed for a few hours, but news broke he was a pedophile. Everyone was furious with the detectives who tried to use another child as bait. Other people were so terrified of him they blessed themselves when he walked by. His mother made him work for her afterward. People got used to him being around, but no one ever let go of the name Ethan *Mani di forbice* Callahan.”

I looked at Ethan, who still pretended not to hear or care that they were talking about him.

Feed his dark side, enjoy being there with him. Don’t change him. I made him and he is perfect. There is nothing to change. Melody’s words came to me.

“Bloody Melody and The Mad-Hatter,” I said aloud, spinning slightly in the chair. I made it obvious I was thinking. “That follows together so nicely. How the hell am I going to find a name that flows with *Mani di forbice*?”

That was the only time Ethan paused, standing up straighter, his green eyes piercing into mine so intently I had to look away from him at Giovanni.

“Great names are given. You can’t choose them yourself,” Giovanni said to me.

It was then I looked back at him.

The man who’d loved me since we were children.

The man who'd pulled me out of the pit of hell and sat me on the right seat of him.

The man I was falling more and more in love with as each day passed.

"Give me a name." If it was something people would still call me even after I died, I wanted it to be from him, no one else.

"Belladonna," he said, still staring at me.

"Ivy the *Belladonna* Callahan," I whispered to myself and then smiled, nodding happily.

The *Belladonna* and the *Mani di forbice*.

The beautiful poison and the duel blades.

ETHAN

"She's real special that one, isn't she?" he asked me as I swept around his chair. Pausing, I glanced as she and Gabby went over her homework. She sat in my chair spinning slowly, flipping through old photo albums, while Gabby wrote down whatever it was she said. She looked far too happy just seeing pictures, but then again Ivy was a person who loved the little things.

"She is," I finally replied, but changed the topic to more serious matters. "Do you all have everything you need?"

He grabbed his Birch Leaf tea and sat in his chair, relaxing. "No. But what I need isn't something you give. The rest of the family is good. I've heard Dona has made an impression with people in Chicago."

"She is my mother's daughter." I knew she would, which is why I left her to it.

He nodded sipping, but cringed at the taste, his face bunching up even more. "I just remembered I hate tea."

"But you hate the pain more," I reminded him, sweeping under his feet.

“I do.” He sighed heavily before taking another bitter sip, cringing once more. “*Porca miseria...*” he cursed under his breath before reaching into his jacket and pulling out a flask. He checked over his shoulder before he poured it in and shoved it back into his hidden pocket.

“I’m sure your doctor would be pleased,” I said sarcastically, bending down to sweep up the hair.

“Screw him and cancer,” he muttered to himself, drinking.

Emptying the dust bin into the trash can by his table, I placed the broom by the wall and leaned against his work station, thinking of how to phrase what I needed to say to him.

“Just come out with it.” He waved at me, proving just how well he knew me at this point. “I’m guessing this has got something to do with the chaos happening in the city?”

I nodded. “I’m going to need something from you.”

“What can an old dying man give you?” He snickered, drinking.

“Your life.”

He coughed into his cup, shocked, and due to this condition once he started he couldn’t stop, causing the tea to spill a little.

“Grandpa?” Gabby looked at him, but he waved her off. Taking the cup from him, I handed him a napkin.

Taking it, he wiped the corners of his mouth and looked up at me. “Seeing as how I’ve always been loyal to you and your mother, I’m guessing when you say my life—”

“I need you to die,” I said clearly. “I want many things, Giovanni, and the path to get it starts in blood.”

“And so why not mine.” He rested his elbow on the armrest. “At least you’re polite enough to ask first...or do you have a backup?”

“I trust in your loyalty.”

“You trust no one.” He chuckled and nodded to where Ivy was sitting but not looking at her. “Does she know your plan?”

I didn’t answer because it was none of his business.

“Exactly. We should have called you *il burattinaio*.”

“We don’t pick our names.” Besides, the only way to be a *puppet master*, as he put it, was to make sure no one realized you were pulling the strings to begin with.

“Have you set the day you’re going to kill me then?” he asked, glancing up at his shop.

“It won’t be me.” I pushed off the counter, placing my hand on his shoulder. “But I’ll give you time, of course. The information will be set the usual way.”

I tried to lift my hand from his shoulder, but he put his over mine. “I’ve always wanted to ask you something, Ethan.”

“Go on.”

“The burden on your shoulders, how do you carry it so well? In all the years I’ve known you, I’ve seen you sacrifice whatever is necessary for the bigger picture. Each time unflinching and unwavering in determination. What is it that makes you such a warrior?”

“I was born a warrior. My name keeps me one,” I answered him but didn’t wait to hear his response, already walking toward Ivy and my chair. I took off my uniform and hung it up for the last time, then took my coat.

“You looked happy working at his shop.” Ivy smiled, rising up, holding on to the photo album and finally looking at me, and when she did her smile faded as if she could read my mind. Turning from me, she gave Gabby a one-armed hug. “Good night, Gabby. I hope I helped.”

“Yep, your wayyyy is better than my teachers.” She hugged back, releasing her and moving to me. “Bye, Uncle! Come more.”

I patted her head. “Why don’t you come to Chicago?”

“Uncle, I’m a kid. I can’t go by myself,” she said as if I were stupid.

“Fine. We’ll wait for your list to come in your place,” I said to her, taking Ivy’s hand and walking toward the door.

“Bye, Giovanni, thank you for the stories.” Ivy smiled at him, and he nodded, waving us off.

Neither Ivy nor I spoke until we got into the car.

I glanced at the window with his name upon it. Giovanni walked to the sign on the front window and flipped it to Closed.

“They are...normal,” she whispered. I understood what she was implying.

“By some cousin to a cousin we were related,” I whispered, starting the engine. “I didn’t understand why my mother wanted me to work for them. She only mentioned them once before I started to work. And she mentioned them as if they were so distant they were the afterthought of an afterthought.”

“Did you ever understand then why she made you work there?”

“Because my mother...saw the big picture,” I said, pulling onto the street. “Make Italians see her son was still one of them. Make them get close enough to see how dark my heart could get. Make them respect me. Make them fear me. Let me see how much they were jealous. But also to remind me, that if I were meant to be a barber, I would have been one. I was born into my family not theirs. My name is a constant reminder of that. If I felt like my life or path was so burdensome, to ponder why everyone else wants it so badly.”

It took me much too long to realize that.

Glancing down and placing her hand on my thigh, I looked at her as she said, “Gabby. I like her.”

“Like no one but me.” It would be easier.

That was the cruel fact of life.

The weak will die.

The strong will live.

I made sure we, the Callahans, were always strong, at any cost.

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TWENTY-THREE

“If I am an angel, paint me with black wings.”

~ *Anne Rice*

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ELEVEN DAYS LATER

IVY

“Today, while high on what police are calling the Cocktail, a batch of heroin that was mixed with various drugs, a middle-aged man walked into oncoming traffic naked and—”

Click.

“The Cocktail, the highly deadly drug sweeping the city claimed the life of an innocent pizza man who arrived at the house of two users, only to be beaten to death—”

Click.

“This drug contains only about 2 percent of actual heroin, giving users that similar high but causing them to crash much faster. When they do they often get very violent—”

Click.

“What is the government doing? Where is the police? People are dying out here! The bus driver who drove into a local McDonald’s was the last straw. My kids and I are staying home. You don’t know who’s on that trash —”

Click. Ethan pressed the button on the remote once more, as I lay on top of him, listening to his heartbeat. He wasn’t even watching the screen. His eyes were closed, his hand with the remote dangling off the couch lazily.

“Doctors across the city have reached out to other states for the drug naloxone, commonly used to reverse the effects of an overdose due to heroin or other various types of painkillers, such as morphine, oxycodone, methadone, and fentanyl. However, many states have refused, due to a

growing fear this is just the beginning and the deadly cocktails will spread to other parts of the country—”

Click.

“Police say they have a lead on the drug dealers behind the Cocktail, though no other details can be shared at the—”

Click.

“How much longer?” I asked him.

“As long as it takes,” he replied.

I sighed, sitting up. “Ethan, Rory waved at me today. She waved. And I wanted to break her little hand. You told me to wait and I’ve waited. However, she’s not getting punished by this. I need to do it.”

His eyelids lifted slowly and he glanced up at the ceiling. “You’re right.”

“I am?”

“Yes. Now let’s go grocery shopping,” he said, beginning to sit up, and I moved so he could.

“Is that code for something—”

“It’s code for the fridge is empty and we can’t live on kettle corn, alcohol, and sex,” he said, pulling me off the couch.

I smiled. “Then we can talk over what we’re going to do.”

Before he could reply the doorbell rang. The first time since we’d moved in.

“Stay here,” he said to me as he walked out to the living room. But being the nosey person I was, I stuck my head out to see. At the front door he slid the panel beside it, opening the camera, then relaxed. He opened the door and stepped aside, allowing Wyatt, who was still dressed in his burgundy scrubs, into the house. Wyatt stepped inside, his hair disheveled, circles around his eyes.

“Where is the alcohol?” he asked us.

“Kitchen.” I pointed, and he walked there, helping himself.

Ethan started heading back toward the living room when I got in front of him. “What are you doing?”

“Going to listen to the news—”

“Your brother is in there and he looks like shit.”

“And?” he asked.

I wanted to kick him.

“And he obviously came because he wanted to talk—”

“I doubt it.”

Again I stepped in front of him. “If you don’t open that door, I swear, no sex, no alcohol, no kettle corn.”

“Is that a code for something?” he mocked me, so I punched his arm.

“Go—” I stopped when Wyatt walked out holding a bottle of scotch, Ethan’s scotch, drinking from the bottle with one hand and holding the bag of kettle corn in the other. Ignoring us, he walked into the living room, slipped out of his scrubs, and sat his ass on the couch comfortably. Reaching for the remote, he switched to a random movie and just watched, eating and drinking quietly.

“I think he’s broken,” I whispered to Ethan.

“He’s hiding,” Ethan corrected, moving to the living room, pushing Wyatt down to the floor to lie back down on the couch. Wyatt didn’t even argue. He just kept eating.

Nope, not doing this shit.

Picking up the remote, I turned off the television, causing them both to look at me.

“Wyatt, your brother and I were about to talk about something important until your Gollum ass came over. So unless you have a good

reason to be here I'm going to ask you to leave—"

"My girlfriend died today," he said blankly, staring at me, and I froze. "Some high lunatic stabbed her. I tried to help her. He slashed my arm. I wanted to blame Ethan. But what was I going to say? Why did you stop supplying drugs to the city? It sounded senseless even to me."

I looked at Ethan, but he was still just playing dead.

"Wyatt, I'm so sorry—"

"I need a place to stay for a few hours." He went on, holding his hand up for the remote. When I gave it to him Ethan asked.

"Why not your own place?"

"Because people would come to check up on me. That is what happens when people like you," he said, stuffing popcorn into his mouth. "Anyway, I really don't have the energy to pretend to be sad in front of them, thanks to the crazy shifts I've been pulling."

Wait, what?

"Pretend to be sad?" I repeated. "She was your girlfriend."

"I slept with her a few times, we went out when I was bored, but I didn't love her or even know her. Everyone else called her my girlfriend, so it would seem a little cruel to deny it now that she's gone," he replied, and I just stared at him as he drank and ate. "I came here because no one would find me and no one is dying here, so I can rest in peace, while I get the chance."

"You aren't even a little sad?"

He finally tore his brown eyes from the television to me. "Kind of. Like in a way you watch a deer get hit by a car sad. But that's not sad enough. I think they expect me to be bawling or something. And if we must cry, we cry for family."

“And if we must cry, we cry for family,” Ethan said, perfectly in sync with him.

Okay then. Walking over to him and lying back on Ethan’s chest, I just watched the movie with them.

“When are you going to kill the Finnegan brothers and get out of my city?” Wyatt took another long gulp of the scotch.

“If it’s your city, why the fuck are you asking me to save it? Why don’t you kill them yourself?” Ethan said under his breath.

“The Hippocratic oath,” Wyatt replied, and Ethan smacked the back of his head.

Wyatt paused for a moment and turned back. However, seeing me on his chest just smiling, he faced front again.

“The great Ethan Callahan, a man so dangerous people die even when he does nothing,” Wyatt muttered.

“Wyatt Callahan, a man so cunning he’s convinced the world he is an angel,” Ethan shot back.

“I—”

“Everyone but his siblings, of course. We know what you did in Boston,” Ethan said, and Wyatt froze, the bottle just at his lips. “I’m sure you did it for a good reason. Doesn’t change the fact that you did it, now, does it? That you’re just like the rest of us...both hero and villain. Savior and destroyer.”

Wyatt put the drink on the table, picking himself off the floor. “I’m going to sleep in the guest room.”

With that he walked away, but Ethan being who he was, needed to give the final blow. “One day, brother, you’re going to find out that you are much more villain than hero. Where will you hide then?”

Wyatt didn’t answer.

“You’re relentless,” I said to him when Wyatt was out of earshot.
“Someone has to be.”

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TWENTY-FOUR

“Have I played the part well?
Then applaud as I exit!”

~ *Emperor Augustus*

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FOURTEEN DAYS LATER

ETHAN

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, it’s been another heartbreaking day in Boston, with twelve more deaths, three of those due to a shoot-out with the police in Hyde Park, while the other nine were again the outcome of heroin overdoses, bringing the death toll to a ground-breaking eighty-seven people in the last twenty-one days since doctors at Boston Medical reported there might be a bad batch of drugs on the street. That means on average this drug has claimed four lives a day. Despite the warning, there hasn’t been an obvious drop in drug use. This morning Mayor Takahashi, along with Governor Vieira in a joint press conference have called for the FBI to intervene. This has already come on top of the massive push for stricter policing, a measure that has left many minority communities feeling even less protected...”

“Bagels...bagels...” I muttered to myself, opening the cabinets as the television blared in the background. “Ivy, where the hell are the bagels?” I yelled up at the ceiling.

“They’re finished!” she yelled back down.

“What do you mean they’re finished? We just bought them!”

“Well, we are going to have to buy more—”

“The reason why we just bought them is because we wanted to buy more for not having bagels the last time I asked!” How the hell did we go through so much so quickly?

“Why do you want bagels so badly?” she screamed down at me.

I just stood in the middle of the kitchen, baffled. She was insane. My wife was insane. “Why? Why? ’CAUSE I WANT TO EAT A SANDWICH, IVY!”

“STOP YELLING AT ME!”

Clenching my fist and jaw, breathing in, I spoke softer, “You can’t hear me unless I yell.”

“WHAT?”

“YOU CAN’T HEAR ME UNLESS I YELL!” I hollered because obviously now I was insane. Just fucking brilliant. Brilliant! Twenty-one days she and I had been on our own here. No, we weren’t locked. We went out, but still, every day it was just her and me. Some days it was paradise, while the next I was ready to pull my own hair out. This was how normal people lived? Fighting over food, the small as fuck master bed, on top of the even smaller bathroom, having to get tissues and her damn tampons? No wonder spouses killed each other so often. They seemed small issues, but after dealing with them day after day, it really started to nag at you. If I ever wanted to eat something, the most effort I had to make was a damn phone call...apparently that made me spoiled, so be it.

“Don’t get your knickers all in a damn twist. Jeez,” she muttered, coming into the kitchen and when she did the anger I had melted away. That easy. She was stunning. The white dress she wore clung to her breasts perfectly before flowing out at her waist. She even managed to curl her blond hair at the ends. Placing her purse on the counter, she walked to one of the drawers and pulled out...

“You can’t be serious,” I said, looking down at the tortilla.

“Do not discriminate against wheat,” she replied, placing it right in front of me. “And we’re about to go out. Why do you want to eat now?”

Frowning, I undid the tie for the damn tortilla. “Isn’t it common to sneak food into a show?”

She rolled her eyes at me and then took a step back, spinning. “How do I look?”

“Like you don’t want to go out,” I said, placing the ham down.

“Perfect.” She giggled, kissing my cheek as she stole a piece of bacon. “This looks good! Make me one too!”

Again I paused and then looked down at her. “Society has progressed just far enough that I am now making my own sandwiches without bothering my wife. Don’t push it.”

“Fine, let me starve.” She had the nerve to say as she ate one of the tortillas by itself.

“I’m sure you’ll make it, somehow.”

Reaching me, she grabbed a slice of tomato, holding it over her mouth and saying, “You married your first love. You should be more loving, don’t you think?”

I bit the side of my jaw in order to keep my mouth shut as she ate. Rolling the tortilla, I grabbed the knife and slammed it down in the middle, placing one in a baggy for me and the other for her.

“Thank you!” She smiled, opening her massive purse—at this point it was like a backpack—to put both of our food inside.

“What are you doing—”

“You can’t hold the snacks when you go. You look uncool. You have to pull it out when the good part begins and then enjoy it,” she instructed, moving to grab some juice boxes, yes, juice boxes, because yes, she wanted them. When I told her it made more sense to buy the jug of juice she told me ‘when did rich people start warning about buying logically?’

“Do you need anything else?” she asked meanwhile she’d eaten 90 percent of it.

“Let’s just go,” I told her, wiping my hands.

“Napkins!” She snapped her fingers. Done arranging the napkins inside, she wrapped her arm around mine and followed me to the door.

“Do you have everything?” I asked.

“Yes, dad.” She groaned.

Rolling my eyes, I opened the door, stepping out first, and just like on the first night we’d arrived the street was crawling with people. Only a couple of the houses now had light...the electrical bills had gone up almost every year, but since my family knew how much people loved being here, we covered the cost and let them pay what they thought was fair price.

“They all notice us now,” Ivy whispered as we walked past the gates onto the street. When we did people moved, most out of fear, others just not wanting to be too close to us. It was of course a short walk, but it told a lot about how everyone was feeling tonight. Arriving once again in the backyard of the Finnegan brothers, where most of the neighborhood was once again, this time not drunk, nor nearly as cheerful as they were almost a month ago, I smirked when Cillian glanced over his shoulder, when the men around him all looked away from him.

“Nice suit.” I nodded at the black suit, shirt, and tie he wore.

“I knew you wouldn’t miss the chance,” he said emotionlessly.

“Of course, it’s a neighborhood meeting and we’re part of the neighborhood.” I bloody owned the neighborhood as it was anyway.

“About that...” His glare shifted onto Ivy, who was scanning the crowd carefully. “How much longer until you finish your business here, Ivy, and return to Chicago?”

Still not looking at him, she said, “The good thing about it being *my business* is that it’s my business and as such you can go fuck yourself.”

“Careful, cousin.” He stepped into her line of vision. “You forget whose house you’re in.”

She ignored him and turned to me. “Why did you say he had a nice suit? It looks like he stole it out of the morgue.” She then turned to him and asked, “Did you steal it from the morgue?”

“Would you like to go to the morgue and find out, bitch?” Elroy asked, pulling out a switch blade. He had a hockey mask that he held through the eye sockets with his knuckle gloves.

“Mr. and Mrs. Callahan,” Cillian cut in before I could, “let’s not waste any more time.”

“Of course,” I replied, walking over to the picnic bench. The teenagers there didn’t move. They even made a point to relax more. Looking away from them and above their heads at the trees, I really wondered why it was that people felt the need to test me. “Will you make them get up or will I have to?”

“Ask nicely like everyone else,” Cillian replied.

At that I shifted my eyes from the leaves to him. “I don’t get nicer than this.”

“How sad for you then.” He snickered. “You can stand in the back or leave.”

Ivy squeezed my arm to remind me why I was subjecting myself to this level of disrespect. Why the fuck were they all still breathing? If they only knew how that one action had spared them their lives tonight they’d kiss her feet.

“Babe,” Ivy said, reaching into her bag to pull out a red and white checkered picnic blanket.

Why the hell—let me not even ask. Though as she spread it out on the ground, the people she put it in front of glanced down at her like...like I was in my head. When she finished she stepped out of her heels, placing them by the side of the blanket, and sat down, crossing her legs. I sat beside her as she reached into her bag, pulling out the juice box and handing it to me before taking one for herself.

“I thought we weren’t trying to waste time?” Ivy asked him before sucking on her straw.

“Let’s get started.” Cillian nodded at the man beside him, ignoring her. Finally sipping on the apple juice, I watched as Cillian stepped forward to address the growing crowd. “Our neighborhood is nothing new to anyone here, and while I know many of you have found it to be a little primitive at times, you’ve never spoken out against it. We all know who founded this tradition. While we may not be fond of them”—he looked directly at me—“we must acknowledge that they have merit. However, seeing as we are no longer subjects of that family, we should decide here, does anyone wish to put an end to the meetings?”

Ivy flinched and I placed my hand on her thigh to calm her down. She needed to have faith. They wouldn’t vote to end the meetings.

“Are other neighborhoods stopping?” a woman with short brown hair asked.

“We aren’t other neighborhoods. This is all about you. It’s your choice. Not mine. Not the Callahans’. If we want to move away from this, that’s fine,” Cillian replied.

No one spoke for a moment.

“We can’t stop! I’m still waiting for that motherfucker to pay me back,” some man yelled, pointing to a man a couple people over.

“She almost killed my son! You stupid drunk whore!” a woman screamed.

“Tyler, I know it was you! Where is it? You stole it, didn’t you?”

From there, anarchy unfolded quickly with everyone screaming about the insults the others had inflicted on them.

“LET US VOTE!” Cillian had to yell, which made them calm down.

“Yea, let’s vote!” a few of them repeated.

“All for ending the meets?” he asked and no one raised their hands.

“All for continuing?”

Seeing their choice, I leaned over Ivy and whispered, “When you allow the majority to have a voice, the ones who are the angriest speak the loudest and when put between doing the right thing and being self-serving they will always choose themselves, which makes everyone else do the same.”

Everyone was ruthless. They just didn’t realize it.

“Fine, who’s first?” Cillian stepped back, and Elroy stepped up.

“Me!” Ivy rose, while I sat.

Elroy snickered. “You? Really, and while you’ve both been huddled in your little safe house, like cowards, who managed to harm you?”

Ivy lifted her finger to point to her right. “Her. Rory Donoghue, and now I’m seeking justice.”

The people around her shifted, allowing everyone to see her. There was not a sound...with the exception of me as I sucked the last of the juice and the crickets.

“I knew it!” Rory hollered, dressed in tight jeans and a blue Red Sox jersey. “I knew you’d still be pissed about Pierce! You weren’t even here!”

Pierce smugly shook his head. “Ivy—”

“Shut up. No one is speaking to or about you.” She put her hand up and then turned back to Cillian. “Seven years ago, Rory Donoghue, then Rory

O'Davoren, hit and paralyzed a young dancer in Chicago. Instead of owning up to her crime, she framed me for it.”

“I did not.” Rory crossed her eyes, glaring.

“Do you have proof?” Cillian asked her. “Or are we all just supposed to take your word for it?”

“Babe.”

Reaching it my jeans, I pulled out the remote and pressed the power switch. All of their heads snapped up at the sudden light, which projected the car accident video onto the leaves of the tree. They watched, just as Ivy watched, as Rory framed her.

“Satisfied?” Ivy asked when I stopped it as Rory got into the passenger seat. It was then they all turned to Rory.

“It was an accident,” she said to them. “Ivy, it was an accident.”

“What is justice for you, Ivy?” Cillian asked her.

Ivy lifted her purse and flipped it over, dumping everything onto the picnic table. She picked the black baton, squeezing the handle for it to expand.

“IVY!” Rory yelled at her.

However, Ivy ignored her. “Three broken ribs, four broken fingers, busted jaw and eye socket, strangled and groped, which at the time I felt relieved it didn’t go further...that was my first year at Ricker Hill.”

This is hers.

This is hers.

This is her justice. I had to remind myself because the rage that was pouring into my soul was almost too much for me to bear.

Cillian walked up to her. “You want her to feel all of that? She’s your sister.”

“Stepsister,” Ivy corrected him, her face hard, eyes unflinching. “And no, I want her to feel seven years’ worth of that.”

“You’ll kill her—”

“THEN SHE DIES!” Ivy screamed at Pierce as he stepped up.

“Cillian! She doesn’t have proof that she was hurt that badly!” Elroy yelled from behind him. “I hear that they give you three square meals and you’ll get TVs and what not. I’m sure it ain’t as bad—”

“Babe!” Ivy yelled to me, and I pushed the button once more. Photos of her appeared on the screen, all of which I had to force myself to look at. The bruises that covered her face, those on her sides, they were all time stamped, but then you didn’t even need them to see her progressively get older...hopeless.

Cillian tore his eyes away to glare at her. “Aye, and the man who loved you from childhood never came to save you.”

“After she began to date a certain pig I pushed her out of my mind and never looked at her until recently—”

“IT DOESN’T MATTER!” Ivy screamed, shaking now. “He does not matter right now! I matter. I didn’t know him then. I thought like everyone else he was worse than the devil. He owed me nothing. But you did.”

“Ivy—”

“Do not call my name!” She pointed the baton at Pierce then faced her cousins again. “Cillian, where were all of you when it was me? WHERE WERE YOU? I wasn’t a Callahan then. I was an O’Davoren! I was part of the neighborhood then. I stood by you then! I was your cousin! Your blood and you did not protect me. So I protected myself. Now I ask for justice and you stand in my way again? Have the rules changed? When Jimmy stole Mrs. Renshaw’s wedding rings he had both his hands broken. Justice isn’t equality, it is punishment. We voted for that, didn’t we? Or was that you just

showboating? Are you going to let your personal vendetta against my husband ignore the vote? If so, tell me now and I'll get justice another way. And it won't just be her but all of you."

She turned to the crowd and the rage that radiated from her left no one else air to speak. She walked around the circle, stopping at a woman with curly red-brown hair that was tied up into a ponytail.

"Hi, Rachel." Ivy leaned toward her.

The woman, Rachel apparently, nodded at her, her arms wrapped around herself. "Hi, Ivy."

"Remember that time when we were going to homecoming and you thought it would be funny to mix honey into my shampoo? I ended up covered in hives so badly I had to go to the ER."

You fucking cunt, Rachel.

"I used the bathroom. I didn't realize you were—"

"Liar," Ivy whispered, leaning in more. "You're lying, like you did then, and I could never do anything because I never had proof. People said I did it for attention. Apparently I'm no longer allowed to get justice in these meetings, which is why I wanted proof to begin with. Thank goodness, because I'd like to pay you back for that now."

"Ivy," Cillian called out to her.

However, Ivy moved over to the woman with the bob next to her, who was just as tall as Ivy.

"Megan," Ivy spoke to her. "Where should I even begin?"

Megan shook her head. "We were stupid kids—"

"Well, I'm a stupid adult. You want to see how stupid?" Ivy smiled, making the woman's eyes open wider as she took a step back.

"Cillian." Rachel stepped up. "We voted. Rory needs to own up."

Megan, seeing the chance to save herself, spoke up as well, “She was old enough to know better.”

Savages. It’s how I knew we were all kin.

Ivy turned on the balls of her feet upon the grass toward Cillian, who now had to bear the weight of the crown he’d tried to put on his small head.

He looked at Rory, who hid behind Pierce, wide-eyed and shaking, gripping onto his hoodie. “We voted.”

“No. You can’t—”

Cillian nodded at Elroy and the men behind him, who pulled them apart. “NO! STOP!”

Rory stood in shock, looking, searching, desperate for help, and one by one they either looked to the side or just stood, uncaring.

Ruthless savages, my people were.

When she saw no help she got down on her knees. “Ivy, I’m so sorry! I’m—”

WHAM!

Ivy struck her so hard across the face with the baton that all I saw was Rory’s hair spin in the air before she landed on the ground.

“This is the good part,” I whispered over to the teenagers on the bench, taking my sandwich out of the baggie and taking a bite.

“I’m s—” She tried to get up, blood coming out of her month.

Ivy didn’t stop. Over and over she beat her into the ground, her hands, her legs, her face, blood splattering onto her white dress like a Jackson Pollock painting come to life.

“HELP!” Rory screamed, kicking her. She tried to run for help and no one offered it, nor did she get far due to the pain, and Ivy merely reached out, grabbing a fistful of her hair and pulling her backside back on the grass.

“Ivy, please! IVY!” Pierce yelled, begging as he was being held back by Cillian’s boys no more than a foot from me. “Cillian, stop this!”

“Shhh!” I motioned over to him, still holding on to my sandwich.
“You’re not supposed to talk during the show.”

And that is what this was.

There was no greater show on earth than watching a person get exactly what they deserved.

It was only out of sheer exhaustion that Ivy had to stop, and when she looked up from the woman now curled up into a fetal position, trembling, her face was covered in blood. Her hand was sore from gripping the baton so tightly. It slipped from her fingers, though I didn’t think she noticed. Instead, she wiped the blood on her face with her arm, which only smeared it. Reaching under the skirt of her dress, she pulled out the revolver.

“My mother-in-law gave me this—”

“IVY!” Cillian finally spoke up. “You have gotten a just—”

“No.” Ivy shook her head, her eyes wide and hollowed out, and she pointed at Rory. “This will all heal. In a few months she’ll heal. Not like Sarah Foster, the paralyzed girl—”

“Sarah Foster is not part of the neighborhood. This isn’t about—”

“You don’t get it.” Her voice became softer, and everyone watching in silent shock could all hear her clearly. “It’s always about me. Sarah Foster cursed me in that courtroom. She screamed and cried, and I took it all because I thought it really was me who did that to her. I told myself I’d go to apologize when I got out. But then Sarah Foster killed herself. And the weight of that along with everything else...part of me died that day. Rory did that. So...I’m getting justice for me...still. She should live with something that haunts her too, right? Mental abuse is still abuse. It is either this or she comes to see me every day until that same part of her dies too.”

“IVY, if you—”

“Don’t give me a reason,” I warned Pierce as he struggled. “At least she’ll live.”

Cillian said nothing.

“Ivy...” Rory reached up, grabbing her dress with her bloody hand.

“Please...please...” She sobbed out.

“Do you know what I learned in prison?” Ivy asked, staring down at her. “That everything that happens to you is your own fault.”

“I...v...y...we’re...sis—”

“Stepsisters,” she reminded her, ripping her hand away and then looking at the revolver to read the inscription. “*Che sarà, sarà*. My husband says it means *what will be, will be*.”

She spun the barrel once before she stepped on her shoulder, holding her down.

“IVY!”

She fired.

People jumped, gasped, turned away. Startled, one man even puked, but it was in vain.

“Apparently this is willed to be,” Cillian stated when no bullet fired.

Ivy smirked and so did I.

“My mother meant what *I* will be, shall be. That at all times the choice is mine. If you live it is our will,” I said, reaching for her bag, and her heels, before rising to my feet. “If you die...it is our will.”

Ivy fired once more, this time the bullet hitting her in the spine. Kneeling, I placed the heels in front of her. She took her bag and said to all of them, “Now I’m done. We won’t take up any more time.”

She stood at my side, and I looked at him.

“How much longer do you think *I’ll* let you stand in that spot, Cillian? How much longer will *I* let you believe everyone here thinks the Callahans should leave Boston? When will *I* show you just how many people have turned against you? How much longer will *I* let this city destroy itself?” I asked before glancing down at my watch. “How about until dawn?”

“Any man who believes a word you say is a fool. You really think you’re God, don’t you?” He huffed, chuckling, though I could see the concern in his eyes. And the fact that I could see it meant he was nowhere as strong as he thought he was. But that was again my doing...I allowed his confidence to grow.

“Simon,” I called out to the teenager who sat at the picnic table, who wouldn’t move before. He rose to his feet.

“Yes, sir,” he asked, now much more respectfully.

Cillian looked at him obviously.

“How’s your grandfather?” I asked, though I hardly cared.

“Good, sir, thank you for your help.”

“You little disloyal bastard—” Elroy charged at him, but the boys around him all stood up, pulling out brass knuckles, a knife, one even a gun.

“Plot twist.” Ivy smiled at Cillian.

“Rory?” We heard her voice. Shay, Ivy’s stepmother, walked forward, people parting for her, in her hands two bags of groceries. Her eyes were large as she stared at the woman in the grass, in shock. “RORY!”

She screamed, dropping the bags and rushing toward her daughter.

“Rory!” Her hands shook as she touched her. “Call for help,” she said softly at first until no one moved. “SOMEONE CALL FOR HELP.”

“Call, but will they come?” Ivy asked her.

It was then that she saw the blood on Ivy. She tried to lunge forward, but Cillian grabbed onto her, pulling her back, and so all she could do was

scream.

“Your crazy bitch! What have you done? WHAT DID YOU DO? I’ll—” She started to cough, collapsing. “I’ll kill you for this.”

“If you don’t die from the water first. I hope you didn’t fill those with the water from your houses...” Ivy said to her, and she froze. All of their eyes looked over at the pitchers of water out for people. The man getting himself a cup dropped it and stepped back.

“We did bring our own food for a reason,” she added.

Everyone who held cups in their hands dropped them.

“What can I do from a prison cell eight hundred miles away? You asked me that, remember? And I told you to watch your front,” Ivy said to Cillian as one man began to cough gently at first but much more violently, grabbing onto the people around to stand up straight. “This. I could do all of this.”

A Belladonna indeed.

“For these enemies of mine, who did not want me to reign over them, bring them here and slaughter them before me,” I said, picking up the bag of bagels Shay had dropped out of the grocery bag. “I may not be God, but that does not mean I can’t take lessons from his playbook, now, does it?”

After all, if anyone knew how to seek retribution it was the Lord. “Dawn, Cillian. That is how long I’ll wait for your apology. For you to remember you were nothing but a puppet king who forgot he was on strings.”

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TWENTY-FIVE

“Find what you love and let it kill you.”

~ *Charles Bukowski*

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AN HOUR UNTIL DAWN

IVY

Fury.

Wrath.

Rage.

Death.

Ethan, at this very moment, was all of those things, personified in silence, as we, and everyone else within the neighborhood and beyond, stood outside, watching as the Boston PD and the FBI raided my former childhood home alongside that of Cillian and Elroy. The whole place looked like the ending to a Christopher Nolan action movie. Helicopters hovered in the air as their spotlights beamed down on the street below, camera crews and reporters recording from off to the side, cops putting up yellow tape, dogs sniffing around the houses...and like the movies, no crime scene was complete without a body. There were a few in the street, people who'd supported Cillian who'd chosen to go firing at the police. Some were young, probably teenagers, teenagers who so badly wanted to have a purpose and be rich. Most of them were older, around Cillian's age...all of them following him...straight to the grave. Who'd killed him, no one was saying, not with the feds all over the place, at least.

"Thank you, Cooper," a female reporter spoke loudly into the light and camera in front of her just off to the side of us. "Right now, I, along with many other reporters, are standing at the home base of the notorious ringleaders behind the infamous drug known as the Cocktail. Shortly before five forty-six this morning, the DEA, FBI, and the BPD descended on South

Boston where a shoot-out between the Boston police and the assailants occurred no less than a few feet from where we are standing. Another one of the attackers drove right into a yard of bystanders in the neighborhood, leaving multiple dead and injured. The whole area is on high alert. There has been no word yet on who has died and if this puts an end to the deadly drug. But we will not be leaving until we find out what exactly happened here.”

He took it all in. His gaze shifted from the reporters to the police, the dogs, the burning car crashed into the house next door, everything...until he reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone. He pressed only two keys before putting it to his ear.

“Enjoy this moment, Takahashi, burn it into your mind, because when I find you, you’ll never show what is left of yourself again. You are the mayor of nothing and no one now,” he said, hanging up and heading into the house quickly.

He walked into the living room and waited till the door closed before he grabbed the fire poker and began to destroy any and everything.

“FUCKING SIMPLETONS!” he roared out, swinging into the television set, shattering the glass. “I BUILT UP EVERYTHING AROUND THEM AND YET NO ONE LISTENS!” He shattered the coffee table. “THEY CALL ME A GENIUS FOR PLANNING. DON’T THEY HAVE BRAINS? CAN THEY NOT FUCKING THINK?”

He hammered into the wall, breaking the wood.

“GET POWER! GET RICH! STAY POWERFUL! HOW? HOW?” He swung at the lamp. The bulb exploded on impact and there was a giant flash before the light went out. “THEY DON’T FUCKING KNOW HOW? THEY ARE GREEDY MOTHERFUCKING COCK SHIT!”

Nothing left to break, he threw the bent, deformed fire porker to the ground. Pinching the bridge of his nose, he rubbed the corners of his eyes.

“How many people died in the street?” he asked, and I wasn’t sure he was talking to me or himself. Dropping his hands, he looked at me.

“Thirteen, correct?”

I nodded.

“Plus Cillian. Makes fourteen.”

I nodded again.

He paused, tilting his head to the side. “Which means Elroy escaped.”

I didn’t know the answer to that question, so I didn’t move at all. He didn’t seem to notice or even care. He was thinking quickly.

“There was no word, no chatter of the raid, which means my people in the department either didn’t know until the very last moment or all communication was shut. If I didn’t know, then how the fuck did Elroy escape?” He paused again and looked up at me, but the way his green eyes looked through me was eerie. “He didn’t escape. He betrayed Cillian. Cillian was going to bow, surrender to me. At least for now to get me to leave. Elroy’s pride wouldn’t have it. He killed Cillian, took whatever money there was, told the men outside to stand watch and then left. No.” His eyes shifted back and forth as he pieced it together. “They both could have escaped, *if* that was Elroy’s end game. Cillian wanted to wait to strike...Elroy wanted to fight. Which means—IVY!”

He tried to reach for me, and I didn’t know why until a gun was pressed up against the back of my head and his eyes went wide.

“Damn, you really are a slick one, Callahan.” Elroy laughed behind me, gripping onto my arm. “You figured me out...just a little bit late. Ain’t that a bitch.”

ETHAN

When I'd heard the sirens and the gunfire we left the house, but didn't close the door behind us. While we were watching his house and the police, he'd snuck in and waited. Trapping himself in the safest location possible, the one place where my guard was down, and holding the weapon he could kill me with...her.

"I was kinda expecting this place to be more...luxurious, you know?" He looked around the shattered room, his grip on Ivy tighter, tapping the mouth of the gun on the back of her head over and over again. She didn't look bothered, just stared at me blankly. "I mean, a little paint could have gone a long way."

I said nothing and didn't dare look away from her. "You're going to be all right."

"Maybe you don't understand the situation here!" he yelled, and I still didn't look at his face.

BANG!

I flinched, for the first time since I was a child when he shot into her shoulder. She bit her bottom lip hard, swallowing her screams and her pain. The blood soaked through her blouse.

"LOOK AT ME!" he hollered, and I did then, unable to stop my hands from shaking. "That's right. I'm in charge. Disrespect me again, I'll shoot other body parts. How much can you take, Ivy?" he asked, squeezing her jaw. She pulled away, turning her head to spit the blood out of her mouth. "A little warrior, ain't she? She's always been like that. Getting into fights, not letting people see her cry or weak. She'd just run. But I gotta say, if you weren't my cousin I'm sure we could have put on a nice show for your hubby here." He stroked her neck and brought his nose to smell her hair.

"Such a shame...but."

“Let. Her. Go,” I said through clenched teeth.

“He speaks!” He guffawed, rolling his eyes. “But that sounded a little disrespectful to me, didn’t it, Ivy?”

“Don’t!”

BANG!

“FUCK YOU!” I hollered out, watching as her leg buckled and she fell forward, muted whimpers the only thing coming out of her mouth, but he caught her and held her tight to him.

“Ha-ha!” He laughed, stomping his foot into the ground. “This is great! I was planning on waiting till you both went to bed before killing you all, but this...this is so much better. Who would have thought I’d get a front row seat at your own undoing, first the mistake, then the temper tantrum, the shaking, now this...watching you as you watch me slowly kill your beloved childhood sweetheart. All your big talkin’, all your planning, and this is how it ends. How does it feel to be the dumbest man in the room?”

“Hum...hah...” Ivy laughed gently in his arms. “It’s funny because I was just going to ask you that same question.”

“You must have lost your—”

Before he could finish she brought her free hand up, holding a shard of something I’d broken, and swiped it across his face, over his eye as quickly as she could. “I have long arms, motherfucker!”

“AH!” He let go, his hands going to his face, causing her to slump onto the ground. The moment she was free I lunged from the window over the couch, tackling him on the ground, my fist colliding with his face.

“YOU LITTLE—”

BANG!

I froze on top of him and glanced down at the blood now staining my shirt.

“ETHAN!”

I gripped his neck and reached for the gun with the other hand, tossing it to the side. I squeezed, and he punched the wound over and over, both of us now struggling on the ground.

“Ah!” I hissed when he managed to get another punch in, rolling onto my side. I gripped my side, the blood warm over my arm. Ignoring the pain, I rose to my feet just as he did. The slash across his face was bleeding a deep red. His good eye shifted to the gun and when he made a run for it I kicked his head into the wall and took the gun, pointing and firing, but there were no bullets.

“It just ain’t your day!” He laughed and then charged at me, my back hitting the back beam when he moved to strangle me. My head hit his, causing him to back up before I punched his jaw.

“JUST DIE ALREADY!” he yelled, grabbing a shard of broken glass.
BANG!

“Fucking shit—” he cried out, grabbing on his shoulder.

“Hurts like a bitch, doesn’t it?” Ivy said, pointing the pistol at him. He froze, staring at her. “You’re right. I’m a little insane. You shot me and my husband, Elroy. You threatened to rape me...IN OUR FUCKING HOUSE!”

“Cousin—”

“SHUT UP!”

“Run,” I said to him.

“Ethan—”

“Run. Let’s call this one a draw. Head down the stairs, to the basement, get out through the window. None of the cops will get you. This is between us men. You really want her to kill you? Go. And pray we don’t meet again.”

“ETHAN!” Ivy screamed.

“Ivy, do not shoot him!” I snapped at her. “He’s mine to kill.”

He snickered and walked backward, Ivy still pointing the gun at him. “Until next time, Callahan, then.”

“Watch to make sure he leaves,” I said to her, reaching into my pocket for the phone. She limped backward, carefully scanning around her, still holding the gun tightly before lifting the phone. She glanced down a few times before finally relaxing.

“Lock down the house,” I said to her.

When she did, the bars extended over the windows, and she turned to me. “I wanted to kill him. I could have killed him.”

“You only had one bullet,” I reminded her.

“What?”

“You cleaned the gun last night, remember? And only put one bullet in. Didn’t want to come down to get the rest, remember?” I snickered lazily and looked at her. “If he realized he would have kept attacking and I’m—”

My legs buckled under me and I slid onto the ground, staring at my own blood in my hands. Today really wasn’t my day.

“Ethan!” She ran to me, taking off her shirt, ignoring whatever pain it may have caused her, and placed it over my wound. “Put pressure on it! I’ll get—”

“G...et...get Wyatt...no one else.”

“Ethan, he could be anywhere right now. You need to go to the hospital!”

Putting my hand on her cheek, I brought her forehead to mine. “*Wife*, I need you first to keep calm, go upstairs, clean up as best as you can—”

“Ethan!”

“LISTEN TO ME!” I yelled more because I hated the way she said my name, with fear, with pain. “We are Callahans, baby, we do not fall and we

do not show weakness. All eyes are on Boston right now. I cannot be wheeled out of here on a stretcher. You can't run out crazed screaming for help. Half of our power is perception. I'd rather die here than look weak out there."

Tears fell from her eyes. "You'll bleed out."

"Then stop arguing with me." I smiled, bringing her forehead to kiss it. "Go. Wyatt is out there somewhere. My brother pretends he doesn't like the madness, but the truth is he became a doctor so he could always be in it and still act innocent."

She kissed my lips. "If you die I will kill you!"

"Noted." I smiled, relaxing against the beam. "Go."

My vision was starting to blur and I didn't want to pass out in front of her. Luckily she was already moving. The truth was, there was a high chance I'd bleed out before she made it back. I was sending her to the only person I trusted to get her out of the city into safety if needed.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, knowing she wouldn't hear...I'd broken my promise. I'd manipulated her again.

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TWENTY-SIX

“Family is family, and is not determined by marriage certificates, divorce papers, and adoption documents. Families are made in the heart. The only time family becomes null is when those ties in the heart are cut. If you cut those ties, those people are not your family. If you make those ties, those people are your family. And if you hate those ties, those people will still be your family because whatever you hate will always be with you.”

~ *C. Joy Bell C.*

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IVY

Be calm, he said.

How, I should have asked him.

My heart was on fire.

I was scared. I was scared because I didn't realize how much I loved him until that moment. How much I couldn't live without him now. He was...my whole world now. I'd go anywhere. I'd do anything for him. Which was why I stepped out the front door without looking back, worried if he didn't answer I'd break down or he'd waste energy telling me to go once more and I'd let him down.

I'd pulled my hair into a side ponytail over my shoulder just in case the padding there didn't hold and blood stained it. My leg was in so much pain each step I took outside made it burn, but I just imagined Ethan's pain and kept walking. The black pantsuit I wore made it look as if I were one of the many reporters on the scene. Southie had become hell on earth, the sky filling with thick clouds of orange and gray smoke piping out of the car and the house it had crashed into. I didn't know where to look. There were far too many people, EMTs, police, the FBI, medics, each one running from fire trucks, squad cars, or ambulances. In the back of my mind I felt the ever-present threat of time working against me.

"Where are you?" I whispered, pulling out my phone again, but all the lines were busy.

"Sorry, ma'am, no reporters." A police officer pushed me back.

"I'm not a reporter," I said, trying to think quickly. "I'm a doctor. I was close by and rushed over when I heard the news." I patted the side of me.

"Shit, my bag. I'm with Dr. Callahan. Do you know where he is?"

“I got no idea, but thank God more of you are here.” He lifted the tape for me to come under. “Hey, Charlie, we got a doc!”

Shit! He nodded me over to the man on the EMT wheeling over a cop to me. *Fake it.*

“What have we got?” I asked, rushing over to the man’s side.

“GSW to in hip.”

Suck it up, you little pussy-bitch! I thought, glancing at the man breathing heavily and shaking, though he just seemed to be in shock. “Keep both his legs stable, he’ll make it to the hospital. Do you have gabapentin?”

“No. Is he about to have a heart attack?” he asked, glancing down at him.

I didn’t fucking know. He was breathing heavily and gabapentin was the only thing I could fucking think of to help his weak nerves.

“Yes, get him to Sharon Med, Boston is filling up fast!” an older woman said, dressed in scrubs and a mask over her mouth, her brown eyes familiar as she glared at me. “*Doctor*, a little help here!” she yelled at me, rising to pour water over a firefighter’s neck, his brown-gray hair covered in ash as he coughed down.

“You’re a Callahan not a doctor. I’ve seen your face on the Internet.” She frowned, packing something in the man’s coat. “This smells like you all’s doing—”

“Ouch...” the man grumbled and she bared her teeth at him.

“All? You mean more than one? Is Wyatt Callahan here? Where?”

She nodded, leaving the firefighter and reaching into her own truck, pulling out a med bag. “He’s going to need this and you.” She pulled back my jacket, seeing the wound. “The bullet is still in. You’re going to need this.” She pulled off the paper towel, putting a pad on the wound and it burned before freezing. “Ambulance six.” She nodded toward one of the

other ambulances across the street. I didn't even wait, gripping onto the bag, and rushed.

I ignored the other calls until I saw him, dressed in scrubs, trying to feed a tube down some man's throat.

"Wyatt!"

His head snapped up and he looked at me, confused. "Ivy, what the hell are you doing over here? Get back across the tape!"

"Where the hell is the police? We can't have people just running around." The female EMT grabbed me, but I pulled back.

"La famiglia viene prima di tutto," I said the line I'd seen written on one of the photos in Giovanni's shop.

"Seriously, ma'am."

"Let her go." Wyatt was already up, taking off his gloves. "He's gone."

"You can't just g—"

"I can. I have. The patient is dead. There are a dozen more I need to see, so unless you've gone to medical school in the last five minutes move." He snapped at her, jumping out of the van and walking with me as I did my best not to run back across the street. "What happened?"

"Not here," I said gently, trying to make sure no one was looking at me.

"HELP, PLEASE!" A man ran toward us, but I stood between him and Wyatt. "Ambulance seven, he's injured."

I didn't care about anyone else. I just needed to get him to the house.

Thankfully to the side, the burning house began to collapse, drawing the attention of everyone, including the reporters. It felt like hours had passed since I'd last touched the door.

"Ivy Callahan," I said, feeling the doorknob vibrate once before unlocking.

“What is going on? Where is he?” he asked, but I just closed the door and locked down the house again.

I took a deep breath before yelling, “ETHAN!” I ran back into the living room, seeing the pool of blood now beside him, the body slumped over. “ETHAN!” I dropped the bag I’d forgotten I was holding, kneeling in his blood, my hands shaking as I touched him. He was so pale...so very pale.

“Ethan...look, I got him. I got Wyatt,” I whispered, touching him. “Ethan, open your eyes, come on. WYATT, HELP HIM!”

Flinching first before moving his hands, he moved far too slowly toward Ethan’s neck, so I grabbed them and put them to his pulse.

“He’s not dead. He’s not, so fucking save him instead of everyone else.”

He took a deep breath thankfully, before rolling him over to see the gunshot wound. “He’s lost a lot of blood, but if we get him to the hospital —”

“No hospital.”

“Have you lost your mind? He is barely hanging on!”

“THEN FIX HIM! SAVE HIM!” I screamed. He wasn’t doing anything I couldn’t do! “Did you forget who you are? Who he is? He is a Callahan! You are both Callahans. How bad will it look if he goes out like this barely hanging on? He knew you’d be out there. He told me to find you. So I did. Shot...and...ugh...” I cried out, reaching over to place my hand on his wound. I bit back the pain.

“Ivy—”

“Shot, bleeding, in pain, and having a miscarriage, I found you. So save him, please...please, Wyatt, please. Save him, please,” I cried, putting my head on Ethan’s chest. Everything hurt and I didn’t want to say it out loud. I didn’t want to think it. How could I tell Ethan when he was in that state when I hadn’t even told him I was pregnant to begin with?

“Get off him, Ivy,” Wyatt said and when he did, he started to rip Ethan’s shirt, exposing his bare abs and chest. “Are you strong enough to move?”

“What do you need me to do?” I wiped my face and nose.

“Dump out what is left in the med kit,” he said, on his knees, pressing around Ethan’s wound. “Hopefully there is a scalp—”

He paused, hearing the mountain of shit that poured out on the ground.

“What do you need?”

“Everything,” he muttered, somewhat amazed. “First the gloves. You put on a pair.”

I handed them to him. But he didn’t put them on, instead reaching for something else. “Pour the antiseptic, the one in the brown bottle, over his wound first then the rest on his stomach. He’s going to need blood, and since that’s the one thing this bag doesn’t have, I have no other choice.”

He muttered, tying a tourniquet over his own left arm. He tore the small alcohol pad on his arm before sticking the needle and tube into his vein, doing the same to Ethan. “You’re going to live and I’m going to hold this shit over you for the rest of your life,” Wyatt muttered, pinching the tube for a moment before blood began to flow. “Wyatt, grow up. Wyatt, remember who you are. My reply to any of your shitty one-liners will now be, do you remember that time when I became your human blood bag while I operated on you?”

He put the gloves on and then reached for a small vial of liquid. “Can you hold this up?”

My arm was on fire, but I nodded anyway, taking it as he switched hands. Then he reached for scalpel, bent over Ethan’s wound and ground out, “Till you’re old, gray, and senile I’ll tell the story about how I left a patient to die to come to save your damn life. And just in case I’m senile too, I’m making this scar a little bigger, so you’ll at least have something to

trigger a memory. I'm going to be so damn petty, you're going to wish I'd just let you die."

"I'm sure he'll love that," I whispered, tired, watching, one hand in the air.

"I don't care if he loves it or not," Wyatt muttered to himself. "He's just going to have to deal."

"Yes, Doctor."

He glanced up at me, shaking his head before looking back down, rubbing the blood on his two gloved fingers.

"What is it?"

"For some reason his blood has thickened. It's the only thing keeping him from bleeding more. Was he taking anything?"

"Does your brother seem like the person to take anything?" I asked him and then thought for a second.

"He must have had something with a lot of protein then..." he whispered to himself, leaning over to see more. "Ivy, see if you can hand me the thing that looks like tweezers," he said, reaching to the side of him.

"You mean the *forceps*? Sure." I reached over to him.

He smirked, reaching inside and pulling out a fractured bullet. He stared at it for a moment. "Who did this to him...to the both of you?"

"My cousins...cousin. It's only Elroy now."

"Is he dead?" he asked, never looking away from the work in front of him.

"Wounded but not dead."

"Good," he said, pulling out the second fraction of the bullet and dropping it beside him.

"Good?"

He nodded, picking up a suture needle. “There are only so many things a cadaver can teach you. I’m curious to know how many ribs you can take out before the body concaves. Or how long someone can stay awake during an open heart surgery with no painkillers...you know, the painful questions.”

“Ethan might have some painful questions to ask too.”

“Well, *Ethan* is shit out of luck,” he said loudly, tying his suture. “Because his younger, smarter, better looking brother, who is sharing his precious blood with his stubborn ass, has already called dibs. And as such he must, without bitching, take a step back. After all, what would he do if he didn’t have a doctor in the family?”

“You both are ridiculous.” I smiled, wincing at the ache in my shoulder.

“Just a little longer,” he whispered.

“I’m fine.”

“You are not.” He frowned, cutting the second suture and looking up at me just a little bit drowsy. “When he wakes up, don’t tell him that. He’ll feel worse.”

“You want me to tell him—”

“You suffered. You suffered for him. You’d suffer again, but you prefer not to,” he answered sharply, grabbing a vial of something and injecting it into his IV before moving back to close the wound back again. “If you say fine, he’ll know he failed you so seriously, you can’t even share the mental pain with him. Protect your wife...he failed...just like our father.”

“He didn’t fail me.”

“And that is your job. To defend him to your dying breath against any and every one.” He smiled sadly, slowly working down the side of the wound, his eyes a little droopy. “But call out the bullshit between you both privately.”

“And what is your job, Dr. Know-It-All?”

He paused, running his hand over the stitch before looking up at me.

“Set a timer for ten more minutes. I’ll take a break and then eat before looking you over, and give another round too. Give me the bag and go rest.”

“I can—”

“Go rest. You’ve done more than enough.”

I frowned. “You do know I’m older than you.”

He smirked, taking the bag and lifting it up. “No, you aren’t. Callahan years are different...but any more days like this and you’ll be an old lady in no time. Go, Ivy.”

Go, Ivy. It felt like the slogan for the night. Putting the phone down, I peeled myself off the ground, feeling...feeling utterly disgusting. I took myself to a room, the evidence of my desperate search for clothes everywhere. Ignoring it, I walked into the bathroom, stripping down and turning on the showerhead. Not caring about the temperature, I sat down and cried, sobbed, wept, just broke down.

WYATT

“Boss? We’ve been expecting your call.”

“It’s me, Greyson,” I said, watching the security video play on Ethan’s laptop, which he’d left in the kitchen.

“Where is—”

“None of your business. I need you to get Elroy Finnegan’s photo out to everyone, let them know I don’t care how, but I want him caught and I want him caught alive. Anyone who kills him will die in his place.”

He was silent.

“Do not make me have to repeat myself.”

“Is the boss—”

“It is none of your business...look, you’ve made me repeat myself. If you don’t respect it coming from me, just know it’s what my brother wants and wants now. Do not ask questions. Do not speculate. Do not act like this is an odd request. A member of the Callahan has asked for a body...bring me the fucking body.” I hung up, dropping the phone to the left of me and leaning back against the wall beside him. Thankfully color was finally coming back to his skin and barely any blood had gotten onto his bandages. I’d already changed them twice.

“It’s your fault. If your sister trips, it’s your fault. If your brother gets a paper cut, it’s your fault. If the sky falls and harms anyone within this family as it crashes down, it is your fault. That is what it means to be family!” I whispered to him. “Remember when Father first said that to you...he almost killed you because I decided to go over to a friend’s house and you didn’t realize I’d left. It wasn’t your fault. And yet you stood there and never once pointed out it was me who snuck out. It pissed me off. Anything I did you’d get blamed and you just told me not to be stupid but never once complained. Ugh. It was like living with a robot. The day we were at school...and the shots rang out, I didn’t even see you outside, but after the first bullet you’d already had both Dona and me, covering us with your body under the table. Why isn’t he scared? How does he know what to do?”

I rubbed my chest as the pain came back. I wasn’t hurt. I wasn’t sick. But I was in pain. “This is how you knew, right? This...” I bit my lip, inhaling, which hurt, and exhaling hurt worse. “This pain, that’s how you knew. It’s why you never blamed me, why you hovered, even when I came here. Don’t think I’m dumb enough to not notice your moles. I’m sure you even paid off people in the hospital. I told myself to ignore it and you. And

I could because I never felt this. You've never been the one down before. In fact, have you even gotten the flu, you freak?" I snickered bitterly, again swallowing the lump. "You've scared me, you know. I'm never going to get this out of my mind. If Father were alive, would he curse me for this?" I didn't even need to ask.

He would.

And I should too, I thought, drinking the juice in my hand.

"Sorry for taking so long."

Ivy walked in wearing a long loose-fitting black dress...she purposely didn't want anything too tight as her body had just...

"How is he—"

"Were you shot?" I pushed myself off the ground, but I had to brace myself against the wall.

"Careful!" She moved to catch me if necessary, the idiot.

Amused, I leaned back, sliding onto the ground next to him. "Brother, you better wake up quick. You know I have a thing for wounded chicks with big hearts."

She smacked my head. "I'm your sister! That's like saying that about Dona."

"Ugh..." I cringed, wanting to puke. "Forgive me and never make that comparison again."

She laughed and winced, reaching for her leg, lifting it up, hopping on one foot as she slowly brought herself onto the ground.

"Let me see," I said, already reaching for it.

"Save your energy. You need to make sure he's—"

"If he wakes up and you're not taken care of he'll kill me, blood bag or not." He'd finally blame me for something too. Taking her leg, I got the disinfectant, antibiotics, along with a few bandages. "You're lucky it was a

clean through wound. You shouldn't walk on it and you definitely shouldn't let it air out like that."

"And the other one?"

"The other one?" I looked up at her.

She nodded, lifting her blonde hair and showing me her shoulder. "The doctor out there gave me the patch. It helped with the pain, but she said the bullet is still in."

I was now sure my father would kill me if he were alive. My mother too...and I was her favorite, but even she couldn't accept this. This woman, who had only been family for a few short weeks, had suffered and fought more for my brother than I had my whole life. She'd walked through hell with a bullet in her shoulder and wound in her leg just for him.

"Wyatt?"

"Is this the same doctor that gave you the med kit for me?" I asked, peeling the patch off her shoulder. It was good for keeping the pain down and pumping emergency antibiotics in.

She nodded. "She looked kinda pissed, though."

"I could think of a dozen reasons why any doctor would be pissed to be here at the crack of dawn." I snickered, reaching for the vial of morphine.

"I don't like taking drugs," she muttered, looking at the vial. "They gave us stuff all the time at the prison without explaining. I was scared I'd end up a vegetable or comatose with no way of protecting myself."

"First, that was illegal. Second, you have a family to protect you now always," I replied.

She closed her eyes as I injected her, then grabbed a second, smaller pair of forceps to pull out the bullet, which luckily hadn't fractured like Ethan's. Those things were used by gangs in order to make more damage.

“Can you do me a favor?” she whispered, her eyelids dropping as the drug kicked in. “You know, as your sister...as family.”

“Between you and Dona, I’m sure I’m never resting again.” I smiled, picking up the suture kit.

“Can you tell him for me?”

I froze, staring down at the needle in my hand. There it was again. That...liquid fire spreading from my chest to my throat.

“I never want to speak about it—”

“I understand.” I resumed picking up the suture and moving to her wound. “Just rest, okay?”

She inhaled thankfully and did her best to stay upright. I worked quickly, bandaging the wound in her shoulder first. Then I lifted her up as she drifted off, grabbing a few more things with my other hand before heading up the stairs with her.

She at least looked peaceful as I laid her down on the bed.

Grabbing a pillow, I lifted up her leg and propped it on top of it, cleaning it out gently before doing what I could to bandage her up without moving her too much. Finished, I grabbed all the scrap around me. I rose to my feet only to see the room an utter mess. Angrily, knowing how much of a neat freak Ethan was, I threw away the junk in my hands before moving to pick up the clothes. One by one, gathering them into my arms, I walked into the small closet, where all his shit was hung up perfectly without a wrinkle...everything but a familiar looking black garment bag.

Dropping the clothes, I reached for it. Zipping it down, sure enough, there was a white card with his initials monogrammed in red on the front. Taking it and flipping it over, I read the same message he’d sent every year.

*Another year. Still a **Callahan**. So dress like one and maybe you’ll start to act like one. –Ethan.*

Grinding my teeth together, my eyes burned as I crumpled the letter, fighting the...the roar that wanted to rip through me, for her sake as she slept.

“It’s your fault! If your sister trips, it’s your fault. If your brother gets a paper cut, it’s your fault. If the sky falls and harms anyone within this family as it crashes down, it is your fault! That is what it means to be family!”

I understood now...why our father would yell just at him, why he made sure we’d all be there to witness, Ethan, the perfect one, get a tongue-lashing for something we’d done. It was so we’d realize it was him who’d suffer if we failed, not us, and be thankful because if it weren’t for him it would be us, and could we take it like he could?

“I’m sorry I took so long, Pa,” I whispered, walking out with the bag over my shoulder.

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TWENTY-SEVEN

“I Am Not. And Then I Am.”

~ *Amie Kaufman*

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ETHAN

I must be alive. I thought, grimacing in pain. I thought that because I was not in enough pain to be in hell.

“You awake?”

Wyatt?

I lifted my eyelids open only to shut them again due to the brightness.

“Hold on,” he whispered before I heard the blinds close. “Try again.”

Opening them again, I stared up at the ugly popcorn ceiling at first before trying to get up. “Don’t.” He pushed me back down. “I can’t have you popping a stitch.”

I reached to touch my side, feeling the padding on it. “Ivy? Where is she? Is she—”

“Drink,” he said, shoving a cup in my face.

“Ivy—”

“She’s resting. I’ve taken care of her, so drink.” He shoved the cup back at me.

Taking it, I drank, not realizing just how sore my throat was. Lying back on the couch, I closed my eyes, breathing slowly.

“She found you in time.”

“No, she didn’t,” he said softly.

Opening my eyes again and shifting my head to the side, I finally got a good look at him. He sat on the frame of what was once the coffee table beside me, slipping the cufflinks into the wrist of a light blue shirt.

“That was a gift,” I muttered, remembering the suit.

“For me.”

“For your birthday.” Panicking for a moment, I lifted my wrist to make sure two weeks hadn’t gone by.

“I’m taking it early this year,” he replied, finishing and finally glancing at me. “I saw how Elroy got in and out. I got only two questions. First, where are the guns? Second, do you have a plan I need to work within or am I ad libitum?”

Gripping my side again, I dropped my foot on the ground, and then the other one before sitting upright. “Elroy is mine—”

“I’m going to tell you something,” he cut me off once more, something he knew annoyed me, but from the look on his face I couldn’t find the will to argue. “You will...I need you to remember that right now your wife is sleeping, and she’s gone through a lot to make sure you didn’t die, so you’ll remain calm even though you want to die. You will not rip your stitches, you will not bleed over me again and go into shock, so I can help you get upstairs to her.”

I looked him in the eyes and he looked back, unwavering in whatever he was determined to tell me.

“The guns are under you. 4373. My plan...doesn’t matter now, so you’re ad libitum, but I want him alive...” I told him, watching as he rose off the frame, tossing it to the side before lifting up the rug to reveal the keypad. The vault split open wide, the guns and weapons rising up from the ground. He grabbed a few of the guns, putting them into...my shoulder holsters, under his arms, along with a pair of brass knuckles...

“Put those back. We didn’t send you to medical school so you could end up not being a doctor.” I smirked, leaning into the couch.

“You obviously didn’t hear me when I was performing a blood transfusion from myself to you, *while* operating to save your life.” He dropped the brass knuckles, reaching for knives. “But I promised, in front

of your wife, that each time I hear one of your smartass comments I will remind you that not only did I save your life, brother, but I did so while giving you my blood.”

Closing the vault, he stood up, turning to me.

“That’s the second time you’ve brought Ivy into this conversation by force—”

“She had a miscarriage.”

For some reason everything went black. I looked to the side of me as if I expect to get some clarity.

“I don’t know when it started, or how long it went on for. She told me as she held on to your chest, sobbing—”

“Stop talking!” I snapped, gripping onto my side as I pushed myself off the couch. He grabbed onto me. “Let go!”

“You need a moment.”

“I need to go to her.”

“Not like this!” he hollered, and I bent over in pain, but not from the side, no, this one hurt in places I didn’t think could hurt.

My mind.

My soul.

My...my heart.

“I didn’t know.” How didn’t I know? I always knew! “Ugh...”

Squeezing his shoulder, I bit my cheek closed and stood straighter.

“Go to Carofiglio’s.” I sneered through clenched teeth. “Giovanni will know how to draw him out.”

“Let’s go.” He turned, putting my arm over his shoulder.

Slowly, we walked one by one up the stairs.

Neither of us speaking.

Neither of us needing to.

The moment I saw her lying on her side, there was nothing left to talk about. On the bed, I rolled over onto my good side and pulled her closer to me, resting my head on hers.

“I’ll get it done,” he said, closing the door even though he didn’t have to. The moment he put on that suit he’d already done what he need to do.

Gripping on firmer, I kissed the back of her head.

“He’ll pay for this,” I whispered to her. “I swear it.”

“Good,” she whispered back, placing her hand over mine, squeezing. I hadn’t realized she was awake.

“Are y—”

“Don’t,” she whispered, leaning against me. “Not now or ever. None of this ever happened.”

IVY

I didn’t know how long we both lay there holding on to each other, neither of us sleeping. Just lying in the darkness together.

“Ethan.”

“Yes.”

“I...I...lov—”

“Don’t.”

“No...I—”

“Don’t say it today,” he whispered into my ear. “The day none of this ever happened.”

And so we kept silent.

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TWENTY-EIGHT

“Monsters can't be reformed.”

~ *John Geddes*

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WYATT

“Tell your brother he owes me one 1998 bottle of Cuvee Cathelin Chave *AND* a 2005 bottle of Romanee Conti DRC Magnum,” Giovanni grumbled angrily, brushing off his clippers as I Googled quickly, drinking from another damn juice box.

“Holy shit.” I coughed. “They’re both almost fifty thousand fucking *pounds*. Who gave it to you, the Dalai Lama? The Queen of England? Jesus!”

“Your mother.” He snapped, immediately shutting me up. “Do you know what it meant to be gifted wine? *GIFTED* wine. I got two. And because of your damn bother now I got none. The little shit.”

I snickered, leaning back in the seat as he came back to me with a comb, running it over my hair before cutting.

“What made you drink two bottles of wine? I’m sure it was not worth the price,” I asked, tilting my head for him.

“It was worth every penny.” He sighed happily, then remembering his anger, took a step back to scowl. “That’s not the point. The point is I drank it too goddamn early, all because your brother planned to have me killed in order to—”

He stopped right at the best fucking part as the front door chimed.

“Sorry, son, we’re closed today.”

“And the man in your seat?”

“Family only....” Giovanni’s voice trailed off, the scissors in his hands dropping when he looked up.

“Perfect. I’ll pay with her then. Now go where you need to go and bring me the package.”

When I turned, there he stood, sweating, hunched over...over Gabriella, Giovanni's granddaughter. Her bottom lip quivered as she fought back tears, but she was trying her best not to make a sound.

"Lookie here." He grinned, pressing the gun into her skull as I pulled the cape off of me, rising to my feet. "If it ain't the good doctor. Callahan. I smelled something fishy. Good thing I brought my own bait."

"Let her go." I sneered.

He laughed like a mad man, hunching further over her, shaking her around. "It's déjà vu! You know, your brother said the same thing before I shot my pretty cousin."

Gabby flinched, starting to panic. "Gra—"

"Don't worry, sweetheart." He put his chin on top of her head. "You're my little shield."

He yelled before shooting. Ducking behind the chair, I grabbed the gun.

"COME ON, CALLAHAN!"

The glass shattered around us, glass falling on top of me like rain.

"GRANDPAPA, HELP!" Gabby finally gave in to her fear and started to struggle. But he held her tighter, lifting her up from the ground with him.

"Get your filthy hands off my grandbaby!" Giovanni stood up, pointing his own gun at him. And that moment Elroy's eyes and arm shifted to him.

I dropped down onto my stomach, shooting straight into his knee. His leg buckled as he kept firing, and I waited for his arm to stretch out once more before shooting right into his wrist, forcing him to drop the gun and when he did, I barely pushed myself up before rushing at him. He still held on to Gabby, but I didn't charge into them both. His body went flying out the glass door.

"Move!" I screamed at Gabby, who was still dizzy, confused, bleeding, and scared. She rolled off of him, crawling over the broken glass on the

sidewalk. Stepping on his bleeding body, I shot into his other hand.

“You bastard—”

“I know who my father is, thank you.” I snapped out, stretching my arm and shooting in his other knee.

“I’m your fucking package.” I shot into his right foot. “I come with the note: if you fuck with this family, we fuck back.” Then again in the left.

Then his chest twice.

He grinned up at me, a dark red mark over his face. “How’s your brother?”

I shot again at his crotch. “How’s yours?”

“FUCK YOU...”

“You think you’re going to die, that’s why you’re so brave right now. Why you can even smile. You think this is as bad as it gets...but, Elroy.” Crouching down beside him, I pressed the gun into his bullet wound. “I’m a very good doctor and an even better shot. Which means I’ve missed all of your most fatal organs and know how to keep you alive just long enough to see what my brother will do.”

His eyes widened.

“Do you know what this is?” I said, taking out a vial from my coat pocket along with the syringe, slowly filling it up. “I guess you don’t and it doesn’t really matter. Just know it will hurt, and no one will hear you scream. You walked into the wrong barbershop today.”

Forcing his eyes open, he shook, but it didn’t matter. It only made it hurt more as I injected it into his eye.

“My brother has saved my life more times than I can count and you almost took him away before I could say thank you.” I rose back to my feet. “Pray he recovers fast enough to kill you himself because if it were me...I’d

make sure you never died. I'd take you to the edge and bring you back over and over...and over again."

He passed out either from the pain or fear...maybe both.

When I rose back onto my feet I looked around at the neighborhood, and of course there were more than a few people, all of them staring at me.

"GRANDPAPA!"

Rotating back toward the shattered store, looking through the broken glass door, I watched as Gabby, just as Ivy had done for Ethan, crouched down beside her grandfather crying, holding on to him. Rushing back to him, he grinned up at me.

"G...ood...thing...I drank...the wine...huh?" He laughed and coughed up blood.

"GRANDPAPA! GRANDPAPA!" Gabby screamed, shaking his arm, looking up at me. "HELP HIM!"

I couldn't. There was nothing that could be done.

He knew that and just kept smiling at me, hugging her with one hand while he reached up for me with the other. Kneeling down, I took it.

"Your brother...*Il bur...attinaio...*" He laughed, and then he was gone.

Your brother, the puppet master... His words seeped into my mind like poison and I stared down at his blood...as it crept over the black and white checkered floor.

No.

Slowly rising from the ground, I just watched the blood as it rolled over the ground toward my feet. Gabby's sobbing was fading into the background as I tried to deny this feeling coming over me.

He didn't plan this.

Not with Gabby.

Not with Ivy...no.

But then I thought about how I had everything I needed to save his life. How everything was so tightly cleaned up. How he'd gotten everything he wanted.

Boston was on its knees.

The Finnegan brothers...were dead or dying.

And me... I glanced up into the fractured mirror, staring at myself, dressed in a blood-covered suit, looking just like...Father.

And the longer I stared, the longer I started to see those strings, over me, and those strings turned into a web. I thought I'd escaped. I thought I'd become a better person. I thought it was Chicago that brought out the worst in me...But this time...I chose to let people die. I chose to wear the suit. I chose the go after Elroy. I chose family.

I chose family because I could never not choose family.

Ringggg.

Pulling out my phone, I saw his name on the screen. Hesitating for a moment before answering, I put the phone to my ear but couldn't speak.

"Ask me," his deep voice said on the other line.

"Is this all a game to you?"

"That isn't the question you want to ask."

"Fine. Did you plan this?" I asked him in Irish so Gabby wouldn't hear.

"Yes. Do you really think I left my city, my home, to chase after a pair of senseless, undisciplined, wannabe Whiteys? If I wanted them dead, they could have been dead in a second. I could have had them all packed, shipped, and delivered to Chicago to let Ivy have her revenge there. If I wanted Boston to be torn to pieces, it could be done overnight with or without me here. This is a fucking game, Wyatt. It's called the survival game and there are no rules. There are no take backs or time-outs. You do whatever you need to do to win by the widest margin."

“All of it? Ivy—”

“Between my wife and me...the only one with a secret was Ivy.” Her pregnancy...he didn’t plan for that. Which meant Ivy still went along because she wanted him to win.

“I told her the truth.” He went on. “I told her everything and because she understood the importance of having all of us united, she took the bullets for the both of us. She hid the truth for the both of us. Family united cannot die. We survive because we all understand the game, and now you do too. Bring Elroy. We leave in the morning.”

With that he hung up.

And so there was the truth. His truth and mine. We were both monsters. He was the Ceann na Conairte because he was much more monstrous than me but that didn’t absolve me of anything.

I was born Wyatt Sedric Callahan.

Medical school didn’t change that.

Boston didn’t change that.

Nothing could change that.

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EPILOGUE

“I'm asking, what's your vice and what brand of
trouble does it lead to?”

~ Neal Stephenson

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IVY

“A new dawn has risen over Boston, but sadly the dark cloud that hung over the city still lingers as many residents in Southie awoke to find the head of Cillian Finnegan, the dealer behind the infamous drug commonly known as the Cocktail, hanging over Old Northern Avenue Bridge. The BPD currently have no leads as to who committed this heinous act nor how the perpetrator was able to get into the coroner’s office undetected. We reached out to the mayor for comments only to be told that the mayor Toma Takahashi has resigned and can no longer be reached for comments. Leaving many of us wondering what now? Are we safe or not?”

“Safe...for now,” I whispered to myself as I lay on the bed inside the jet. My slinged arm was resting on my stomach as I looked up at the ceiling. I heard the door open but didn’t move.

“You still asleep?”

“Nope,” I whispered, feeling the shift on the bed.

He lay down next to me, groaning. “Walking was a bad idea.”

I giggled, titling my head to the side to look at him, but he just kept his eyes closed. “Did he get on the plane?”

I’d fallen asleep and next thing I knew I was here. I heard his voice talking outside, so I knew where I was, just not what was going on.

“He’s quiet. I think he’s in shock, but he’s here,” he muttered, inhaling deeply, his chest rising as he exhaled.

“What did you tell him?”

He turned his head to me, his eyelids lifting, allowing me to see those striking green eyes of his. “The truth, some half-truths, and a few lies. He’ll be warier of you now...everyone will.”

“I’m on my way to being legendary.”

“Only if you swear never to hide anything from me again,” he whispered, and I knew he’d bring it up at least once.

I nodded. “I swear.”

“Good.” He leaned over, taking my hand and bringing it up to his lips, kissing the back of it. “No one will ever forget the day we came to town.”

No. They wouldn’t.

I tried to think over everything that had happened in the last thirty-five days. But it only left my head spinning. The fact that he could think so far ahead was scary. Everything seemed to line up perfectly except...

“There was no medical kit in Wyatt’s ambulance. Who was the doctor who gave me...” My voice trailed off when I looked at him again, watching his chest rise and fall gently as he slept. He really did look so innocent when he did that...

No one would guess he, a man so prideful he walked like a king, would be willing to take a bullet for no other reasons than to let his wife get closure, teach his baby brother a lesson, and let his little sister taste the little bit of power he believed she needed in order to move forward. What he meant by that? I wasn’t sure. But to say everything went smoothly would be a lie. It wasn’t easy. Seeing him so hurt scared me.

Ethan put everyone in his family first.

Which was why I put his plan first.

A big part of me regretted that choice.

However, the other part of me...wanted him to know I put him first. That I was his and I wouldn’t back down from anything. It was the two of us, Ethan and Ivy’s world. People needed to get used to that. I’d never be useless to him. For as long as we both lived I’d protect him too.

ETHAN

I never thought I'd miss wind as much as I did when I stepped out of the jet.

"Welcome back, big brother." Donatella stood in front of the Ranger dressed in a white pantsuit, with no shirt inside, sunglasses over her face, though there was no sun. The day was overcast. Beside her, Toby, his face hard, void of any emotion, and beside him, Savino Moretti and a few more Italians.

"This doesn't feel like a welcome, little sister."

"You're right, big brother." She smirked, taking off her glasses, staring at me with the same green eyes. "I believe the correct word for it would be a coup d'etat."

"The correct word for it would be a betrayal," I said to her.

Tobias handed her a gun, which she pointed right at me. "Let's call it betrayal then."

It was in that moment I remembered the story she'd written all those years ago.

"Et tu, Dona?" Melody asked her daughter.

"Caesar must fall, Mother," her daughter said.

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