



# *Redemption*

A DARK MAFIA ROMANCE

FAYE PARKER

REDEMPTION: A DARK MAFIA  
ROMANCE

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BLOOD & LOYALTY BOOK 1

FAYE PARKER

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*Please note: This story has been adapted from a short story, Vengeance, that was previously published and unpublished many years ago.*

*For my husband.  
I love you.  
You weirdo.*

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## PROLOGUE

KATE (ELLIE)

“Thank you once again. I’m really excited to be starting. Yes, I’ll see you on Monday morning.” As I said my goodbyes to my new boss over the phone I made my way through the maze of cardboard boxes in the house we had shared and flicked the switch on the new kettle Toni had bought. Time for a cuppa.

Toni smiled at me as she reached into the cupboard and pulled out two mugs. We had become close in the six months we’d spent together since she had moved in. I only hoped she understood why I needed to leave her in my past when I moved.

I may have been going back to my hometown, but I fully intended to leave the pain of the last decade here. Firmly behind me.

“So, tell me exactly how you will get all this into my car?” she laughed.

She had a point; even after clearing out everything I could, I’d gathered more things together in the last ten years I’d lived here than I thought. “It’ll be fine... I think.”

“Yeah, yeah. But where are we going to fit? Are you sure you don’t want me to make two trips – it would be a lot easier? If we only put half in for the journey tomorrow morning, then I can bring the rest down again next weekend? Y’know, just take the essentials this time.” She was trying to be helpful, and I honestly appreciated it. But it was bad enough allowing her to make the 200-mile round trip

once, never mind twice. Especially as I barely had enough to cover the gas money once and I still owed her my part of last month's rent.

I looked around the place I'd called home and felt a pang of sadness to be leaving it behind. I moved here to follow the man I'd loved, and now I was moving back home to lick the wounds that same man had given me as he left.

"Hey, Earth to Kate!" Toni's manicured hand swept past my face, her pristine, bright red nails catching my eyes and attention. She must have read my thoughts as her face turned serious.

"This place was a stepping stone to bigger and better things. Don't you go for one second thinking about that idiot. He's not worth one more second of your time, honey."

She knew that this house held more memories for me than I'd like to admit. Some good, but the more recent ones were certainly less so. My hand instinctively reached across my tummy, as if touching it could take away the memories of the bruises he'd put there so many times.

I blinked away tears. The sharp "click" of the kettle couldn't come quickly enough. I plastered my best smile on my face, a single tear betrayed me as it slipped down my cheek. I wasn't sure whether I had been quick enough to wipe it away before Toni noticed but as I glanced at her to check she was staring out of our kitchen window, intently interested in something in our bland, concrete back yard.

A little while later I made my excuses and went to bed. This room felt so much bigger with everything out. Empty. Barren. Now that was ironic, I laughed wryly to myself. Seems like this room actually had suited me.

I shook myself from my morbid mood and checked the time. It wasn't too late, she would still be awake. I dialed the number from memory out of habit. I had deleted it when I realized he had checked my phone and I never really got around to saving it into the phone again.

"Hello?" The old voice wrapped around me, soothing me, the aural equivalent of being wrapped up in a warm blanket after a day spent

in the cold and blustery winds.

"Hi, Grandma." I smiled.

"Oh, Kate. Are you ready for the big move? Do you need anything?" My Grandma was ever the practical woman. I guess it had skipped a generation.

"No, no. Everything's ready. I wanted to phone and say hi."

"Now it's not too late. Are you sure you want to move back? You can always get a job wherever you go. You're a smart girl, any place would be lucky to have you."

"I'm sure they would." I rolled my eyes at her faith in me. "I'm ready to come back. I'm coming back home."

"Really?" she probed. She was sharper than any seventy-five year old should be. There was no denying the tickle of excitement in her voice. She'd missed me as much as I'd missed her.

I shook my head to myself. "Really, Grandma." I took a deep, steadying breath. "Look, I've been thinking. I know I'm going back, but I'm not the same."

"Sweetheart, none of us are." She said sadly. "I guess it is part of what makes us human. We all change." Her voice trailed off for a moment before she added, brightly, "But Londonderry has changed too – it's not the city you once ran from."

"I guess." Was all I could say. "Do you think anyone will remember me?" I asked, hoping that the city had forgotten me. It was safest that way.

"I don't know, honey. But they won't recognize you. Not that you weren't always beautiful. You're too skinny now if you ask me."

"Grandma, listen, please." I tapped the side of the bed in frustration. "That's not what I'm getting at..." though I had lost the puppy fat I'd had as a teenager. At first, it had thrilled me to shift a few pounds, regardless of the reasons.

"I've decided not to call myself Kate anymore." I blurted.

Silence loomed over the phone. She was not pleased and I knew why.

The silence continued and I felt the urge to fill it, to explain.

"Grandma, the people at my new job and my new flat know my other name, my middle name... Eleanor. I'm calling myself Ellie now."

"But you are named Kate after your mother..." The hurt in her voice was palpable.

"And Eleanor after you."

And I wanted to channel the strength and grit of my grandmother. I wanted her to see she was the woman I'd looked up to – ever since she'd taken me and my brother in. Social Services would have split us up; hell would have frozen over before she would have allowed that.

"Grandma, I'm going back to be there for Ryan when he gets out... but I need to be strong. I've been away for ten years. No one will recognize me now, with my new hair." I glanced in the mirror, trying to get used to the image that gazed back.

"And what have you done to your hair?" she demanded.

I cringed.

This wasn't going well. Then again, I hadn't imagined it would.

"Well, um..." I felt very nervous. "It's not its usual color." I squirmed.

"And what have you done to your beautiful, blonde hair, girl?" I imagined the pictures beside her chair, filled with a chubby girl with blonde hair that flowed down her back standing beside a skinny little boy with freckles and a missing front tooth.

"It's not blonde anymore grandma, it's brown." I squirmed as I heard the sharp intake of breath over the phone. I couldn't go back now and tell her I had cut it into a bob too.

"My beautiful blonde-haired granddaughter, Kate's gone and Ellie, my brunette-haired granddaughter has taken her place..."

I heard Freddie, her German Shepherd bark at something in the background. Grandma scolded him before speaking again. She was thinking and I'd give her the time she needed.

"And would this mean that Ellie and Kate would both be safe and happy?"

"Yes, Gran."

"Ellie." She said it like she was trying out the name. "I think I understand now why you've done it, Sar... Ellie. He won't find you, you can still be there for Ryan's parole, and you hope no one will link you with the frightened and angry girl who left Londonderry at 15?" My grandma was smart.

"That's pretty much it, Grandma," I confessed.

"Well, why didn't you say so dear? I'm honored you kept my name, dear, but did you really have to ruin your hair?"

A weight lifted from my shoulders... until I realized I hadn't told her how short I'd cut my hair.

## CHAPTER ONE

DANIEL

“*Y*ou need to get a fucking grip, Nev! That blonde has you pussy-whipped!” Raucous laughter echoed out of the changing room as I walked towards it.

For once, I agreed with Mathew’s taunts. They had been wingmen for each other for years and now that Nevan had got serious with his latest woman, it had cut into their nightly adventures to hook up with anything female that had a pulse.

“Don’t you know I need your ugly-ass face to be beside mine when I go out?” Mathew continued. “You make me look irresistible to women. Will you at least *ask* if you’re allowed to come and play with the boys tonight rather than sit at home playing house-y?”

“Oh, I don’t think he’ll ask,” I said as I walked into the changing room, smiling as I noticed they all sat up a little taller. I doubted they knew how they always reacted to my presence. That was fine. I was their boss, it was the way it should be.

“How can he ask that if he hasn’t been able to ask if he can have his balls back?” I teased.

“Hey boss, maybe you could ask for him? I’m sure she’d say yes for you.” Mathew committed himself to the cause at least. But I had seen how bad it was at picking up women on his own so I could understand why he was so desperate.

“I’ve never asked a woman if I could go out so why should I ask for him? Besides, Mathew, you’re so shit at getting laid you should ask her yourself. I get enough pussy with no need of your help.”

A lie: a constant lie they never questioned me on – but who would dare question me? After Cassie, I swore off ever committing to anyone. Mostly, I could cope without a woman and content in my existence. Besides, I had too much responsibility now was easing up on the daily running of the Kindred Sons.

Every now and then I’d be sure to bring someone with me to one of our events so that Da and Ma would stop their constant questions. They’d been married by my age and there were expectations.

Officially, I was the underboss of the Kindred Sons, but everyone knew that Da had all but handed over the entire mob’s business. That meant that all the women had dreams of becoming a mafia wife. The first lady, even.

Never gonna happen.

I’d take them home and fuck them raw as a one-time thing.

You loved me? Great, fuck off.

You hated me? Great, fuck off.

I didn’t need women in my life to fuck things up.

I had a good thing going here and I didn’t anyone to mess it up. One thing having a woman in your life guaranteed was that things – no matter how innocent – always got messed up.

The others finished dressing and left for the night, whilst I chatted with my two deputies. What started as light-hearted banter turned to real business. We all knew that the peace between Kindred Sons and the Doyle’s was fraying – no matter how much dad wanted to believe that we could keep a “gentleman’s” agreement. We weren’t gentlemen and they certainly weren’t.

Nevan was first to speak. “Do you think the training we’re doing now is enough? I mean, some of our guys are too soft. We need the killer instinct to be ready to kick in and the brute force to back it up.”

The guy was a deep thinker and honest. When he spoke about things like this it wasn't to challenge, he was as committed to the Kindred Sons as any who ever took our oath – including me. I've seen this guy take bullets for us. He's killed and nearly been killed for our cause.

"Yeah," I mused. "But getting them hyped up too much won't help either." I paced the floor. "I agree with you though, we'll step up the sessions in here, but it needs to be outside gym hours. I still need this place to front as only an actual gym, not a mafia training camp. The last thing we need is more fucking cops poking around."

With a preliminary start of what training sessions would run, I left them to figure out their extra-curricular activities for the night.

I would try to figure out when we could up our training without it being spotted by the police that seemed to keep a constant vigil across the street. I knew what they were doing, they knew what we were doing – it was only a matter of time before they'd try to raid us again or try to pin something on one of us.

And that would never happen on my watch. Not a fucking chance.



## CHAPTER TWO

ELLIE

The drive had been long, and every so often I'd catch Toni glancing at me as she drove. She had thought I'd gone mad and begged me to dye my hair back as soon as possible. I felt less guilty about spending the last of my rent money on getting it done professionally. I could tell, as a hairdresser herself she wanted to get up close to it but knew better. Then again, she'd never expected to get that close... I didn't let people that close anymore.

The one thing I allowed Toni to do was to help me buy more colorant so I could touch the roots up by myself. I let her show me how to do it too. I just hoped I wouldn't color the top of my forehead at the same time too.

I liked the length and color more than I imagined. The girl with the silver-blond hair stood out, especially with the ice-blue eyes. But I didn't look like her anymore. Toni would have noticed if I tried to wear the brown contact lenses too, so I'd have to get used to them fast... I started work in just two days and I needed to be ok with repeatedly poking myself in the eyes.

I didn't sleep well on Sunday night since I couldn't settle. The noises were different in the flat I now lived in, and the walls were thinner than in my old place – I could hear my neighbors' televisions from both sides and the woman who lived above me seemed to enjoy walking around in stilettos... at least that was my thoughts at 3 am this morning when I heard her move around upstairs. I pulled the

duvet over my head to dampen the noise and closed my eyes. I couldn't expect a two bedroom flat in my price range in the city to be anything spectacular. With thoughts of Ryan's parole hearing at the end of next month, I tried to get back to sleep.

I rose early on Monday morning, hoping a shower would refresh me as the night certainly hadn't. I dressed quickly and was ready for work an hour earlier than I needed to so I took a moment to practice before facing what was to be my new life.

After twenty minutes of unsuccessfully trying to put my contacts in, my eyes were watery, sore and looking a little red. I had to make a choice: keep trying to get these fucking things on, or hope I'd be fine without them.

Having one last try and almost losing the contact inside my eye confirmed that my choices were down to one. I'd have to be OK with not wearing contacts. They were too much hassle for me to do on my own. What if one fell out at work and I'd have to slip it in again with no one noticing? I knew I couldn't do that. No, the contacts would become more trouble than they'd be worth.

The woman in the optician's had made it feel so easy, now, I'd be unlikely to ever wear them again. I doused my face with cold water, to relieve the stinging in my eye and practiced how I'd introduce myself to my new workmates.

"Hi, I'm eh-Ellie... Hi, I'm Ellie; I'm the new administrator..." I streaked a smile across my face and tried again. "Hi, how are you? Yes, I'm Ellie." After downing a large gulp from my now lukewarm mug of tea I tried again. "Pleased to meet you, I'm Ellie, the new administrator." Yes, that sounded more confident – like I'd been calling myself Ellie for my entire life.

I locked my door and made my way towards the town center. With my backstory memorized I was feeling more confident. I'd left Londonderry when I was 15, I now looked very different from the teenager I had been. The girl I had been was gone. Sure, someone might pick up on the surname, but that was unlikely... I had hoped. The CV I'd sent which got me this job didn't link me to Londonderry.

I felt queasy thinking about the white lies I had told to get this chance. The many white lies I'd told.

I had the qualifications I said I had. Sawyer & Co didn't even query why my certificates all said Kate Eleanor, thank god. I could explain away that Ellie was the shortened version of my middle name, Eleanor. I *had* the experience too, but I couldn't let my past employers be references. It was too much of a risk as *he* could trace me. It turned out that renting two postal boxes for a few weeks and some creative computer work had paid off for me. I had taken a big risk in creating the references for this post and if I got found out then Sawyer & Co would sack me immediately. But putting that thought to the one side I walked along the riverside, exploring it with new eyes – Gran was right, it had changed so much over the last decade. Then again, so had I.

By the time I made it into my new office, I wasn't sure I could be this Ellie woman I had created. I stood in the crisp white foyer for a moment, looking around and considering whether I could get enough money in some other way so I could keep myself going to be here for Ryan.

"Excuse me, can I help you? You seem lost?" The friendly voice came from beside me and I swung around in surprise.

"Sorry! I didn't mean to make you jump." The petite brunette came to about my shoulder. She wore a light grey trouser suit and held a pink travel mug. A messenger bag that looked crammed full of papers draped heavily over her shoulder. A phone rang from somewhere inside the bag.

"I... uh..." Was the clever response my head supplied.

"Are you the new administrator?" She said with new understanding.

"Yeah. I'm eh-Ellie." I stammered.

I shouldn't have come here, I can't do this.

I should leave. Right now.

She offered her hand and shook mine firmly. "Well Ellie, you're very welcome here. I'm Louise. I'm one of the junior accountants."

She wasn't much younger than me, but the bags around her eyes and the way she fiddled with the handle of her travel mug definitely told a story of someone under stress. At least that was what I saw.

I hoped that everyone was really busy. That meant that the job would be too. All I really wanted was to sink into my work and forget everything else. And if everyone else was too busy to pry me with small talk with me? So much the better.

"Ah, there you are!" I heard a man's voice as his shoes squeaked over from me. I didn't miss the flash of something across Louise's face before she composed herself again.

"Hi Rory, I was just on my way up to get prepped for the morning meeting. This is Ellie, she's the new administrator."

Turning back Louise smiled, "If you go to the reception, they'll point you in the right direction. I'll see you around the office." She left, with her messenger bag making her look clumsy as it flopped about every time she took a right step. Her phone rang again as she disappeared around a corner.

"So, you're Mildred's new start?" Rory spoke smoothly as he walked me to reception and in front of the visitor book. "I'm about to go up to her office anyway, if you sign in here, then I'll show you where to go." His smile seemed friendly, and as we made our way to the stairs I caught the scent of his cologne. Musky and rich.

I had no interest in guys right now, but his cologne was divine. *Nothing wrong in enjoying a masculine scent.* I inhaled again.

*Get a grip, Kate!* I scolded myself before feeling pleased that I'd scolded myself using my new name. Jesus, I was already going mad with these lies and I hadn't even started my first day's work.

We chatted briefly as we made our way to Mildred's office. To my relief, my story held up and he didn't out me as a fraud, which I felt was a good omen for the rest of my day.

Mildred was exactly as her picture from LinkedIn, and had stalked her a little on social media and having spoken with her exactly four times: in my interview; to be conditionally offered the post, and I had received a phone call to confirm my references and that she would be delighted if I could start as soon as possible; and the phone call she had made late last week to tell me to come to her office this morning.

“Ellie, it’s great to see you again.” She looked up from her computer and judging by the mound of paper already on her desk and the three stained and empty mugs in front of her, I decided that my new boss was someone who came into work early. And someone who may have had a caffeine addiction. “I’m so glad to see you. Let me get you settled in, and then I have a mountain of work for you! But first things first, have you had the tour yet?”

I expected to be answering phones and sending emails, but instead, I spent the first week working alongside Mildred collating files and putting together information for her. The learning curve was steep and I found the work quite intense to start with, but as I had nothing else to distract me, I enjoyed having something I could really get lost in. I arrived to work early and spent all my time with Mildred - apart from my lunch breaks, where I often met Louise in the office kitchen, I didn’t really speak to anyone else apart from Rory every now and then.

Mildred was in the small meeting room, on a conference call with a client when I was clearing up in Mildred’s office on Friday afternoon. Rory popped his head into the office, “Hey Ellie,” he said smoothly, his voice dripped like honey in my ears. “Have you any plans for your first Friday night after work?”

I didn’t and by the time I was leaving the office, I’d agreed to go with him to a local bar where we’d have dinner. Louise mentioned she worked with him but didn’t go any further than that. I got the impression she didn’t really like him but wasn’t about to say why.

He’d been nothing but polite to me, so I imagined that whatever their differences it was none of my business. After Louise and Mildred, he was the only other person in town that knew “Ellie” so it would be nice.

He was easy on the eyes, and whilst I certainly wasn't after any sort of relationship, it was good for my bruised and battered ego to spend time with a cute guy.

He'd moved here only a few years ago, so in keeping with my story, I let him tell me a bit about Londonderry and show me some of the local sights; some tips he'd learned along the way. I let him take me to Flanagan's where we ate, drank and chatted for a couple of hours. It was when he wanted to walk me home and I declined that things faltered a little.

"I've had a really great time, Rory and thank you for dinner – honestly, I wasn't expecting you to buy mine!"

"Nonsense!" His hungry eyes roamed over me, "Ellie, you're a very beautiful woman – you should never have to pay for dinners and you should never be eating alone." He stopped walking, turning to look at me, giving me a smoldering look.

"I'm parked close by so I can drive us back to your place." He moved closer to me, draping his jacket over my shoulders; his hands lingering over my shoulders just a little too long.

Immediately my stomach did a little flip-flop.

*Too close! Too soon! Too much! Run!*

I felt the panic rise in my tummy. "Ah, um, Rory, I really am exhausted. This first week has been very busy. Thanks for the offer but I'm really not far from here. I can walk it if I take the shortcut between Sackville Avenue and Abberfield."

He raised his eyebrows suspiciously. There was an edge to his voice, "I see." He started walking again, stopping after a couple of steps. The congenial expression had returned and he spoke in his usual, friendly tone.

"I just don't like to think of you heading back to your apartment to spend the weekend alone. How about I take you sightseeing tomorrow – get the extended version, maybe a little lunch?"

Feeling colder with his jacket around me than without it, I handed his it back to him. "Look, Rory, I'm sorry if you thought this was something more than what it is. I'm sure you're a really great guy, but I'm not looking for anything right now... I hope you understand."

He smiled lightly and draped the blazer over his shoulder, hooking it with his finger, "Hey, of course not. I *am* married, you know! God, I'm not trying to come on to you, just being friendly, Ellie."

There was a professional tone in his voice now; I'd managed to hurt his ego.

Well, crap.

Why did men always think that we would fall at their feet just because they bought us food? Even if he was single which he wasn't. I was so not into being someone's mistress.

"It's not like anything could happen anyway. I mean, with Mildred being on holiday soon, I'm going to be line managing you. It would be entirely inappropriate, Ellie."

"Oh, I didn't realize..." Shit.

"I'm *sure* you didn't. I'll see you on Monday, Ellie, have a nice weekend." With that, a black BMW in front of us beeped and he stepped in alone; leaving me standing on the street, dumbfounded. What just happened?

As much as I tried to avoid confrontation I knew, deep in my bones, that I'd have to say something. To Rory? Maybe if I explained to Mildred about the misunderstanding?

All I knew was that I needed this job. Had it just been me, I would have been tempted to disappear again but I needed this job for more than just me: Ryan was counting on me. And I wouldn't be the next person to let him down. I'd done enough of that in the past.



y the time I had walked home I had decided that I would speak with  
*B*Rory on Monday morning. having replayed the brief conversation through my head I decided I didn't like that he'd implied I didn't know he was going to be my manager for a while. In fact, I was furious about what was between the lines of what he said – did he think I was going to dinner with him because he'd be my manager? What exactly did he think I would do?

What the fuck had just happened?



## CHAPTER THREE

ELLIE

*I*t took until Saturday afternoon before I was actually able to relax for the weekend.

As it turned out, Rory was at a meeting across town on Monday morning so I couldn't get to speak to him before work. The client and deadline that Mildred was working on last week had been met and from today she had me doing the more typical administration work that she needed. Before lunch, she asked me to gather some files from some other accountants and various offices within the building, and then put together a mountain of invoices that I was to leave into the post room. By the time I gathered about thirty of them, I took my first trip to the post room.

I had walked in and within two seconds, I realized I shouldn't have been there. Even the air felt wrong. Louise was in there with a guy. And he certainly didn't look like he worked in Sawyer's. Steel blue eyes met mine the instant I walked in, his gaze penetrating me and making me feel like I wanted to run out of the room, the building, and the entire city just to be sure. Louise immediately took two steps back from him, creating space between them where there hadn't been before. There was such a stark contrast between her petite figure, standing in her crisp blouse and pencil skirt outfit to him: a muscle-clad mountain standing proudly in his tracksuit and trainers.

"Oh, uh, hi Ellie." Louise stammered.

"Hey. I'm just leaving these invoices down to be posted out?" The urge I had to want to explain myself was crazy. Especially when it

was crystal clear that it was they who *definitely* shouldn't have been in here.

Pink rose on her cheeks. "Jason's on his lunch break, I'm sure he'll look after them when he gets back." I *knew* she shouldn't have been here.

"I can take them for you. Here," she rushed over to me taking the big bundle out of my hands and placing them into the post-out-tray.

"They'll get stamped and posted from here." She gave a slight squeaky laugh.

His gaze slid over me the whole time, I knew: because not only did I feel it, but when I plucked the courage to peek at him again, his eyes were still on me and stayed there even when he was caught.

I felt the heat rise within me as his eyes continued their slow journey over my body. I felt naked in front of him. I hadn't felt so exposed in my entire life, yet I was standing in a professional office, fully clothed.

"You must be new." It wasn't a question; it was a statement of fact. His voice commanded authority without booming. It was obvious when he spoke that he was used to everyone listening.

"Yes, that's right. I'm Ellie. I'm the new administrator." I said, as confidently as I could muster. I even did a little internal hi-five, proud of myself for keeping the eye contact going.

Ellie was confident... or at least I was trying to make her look it.

He slowly strode towards me, holding his hand out. Fuck, what was he going to do? I don't know why, but part of me was disappointed when I realized he was just going to shake my hand.

"Ellie." It was the name I was getting used to everyone calling me, but the way he said it made me feel that he knew it wasn't right. "Well Ellie, I'm Daniel." Instinctively I offered my hand to shake. He took it into both of his making me feel like I was so tiny in comparison to him; enveloping mine and wrapping it in heat.

*I guess Louise has a little secret of her own here.* I mused.

This guy had just been caught in the post room with his girlfriend – who was keeping him firmly under wraps – yet I was the one who felt like I had done something wrong.

*You have done something wrong!* my inner critic reminded me.

“It’s been great to meet you. I hope they’re looking after you here.” As he released my hand, I felt like I was being released from a trance. I forced myself not to look at his pert ass in those tracksuit bottoms as he turned back to her. But who was I kidding, I looked and instantly chastised myself for ogling my only friend’s boyfriend.

“Louise? I’ll speak to you soon?”

“Um? Oh, yeah, yeah, sure. Speak soon, Daniel.”

Louise looked more flustered than I did. With that, he left by the exit door that led to the car park and not the one I had just come in from.

“Wow,” I said as the door shut behind him. “You’re a dark horse – sneaking your boyfriend in here!” I laughed, giddy that the tension had dissipated. “Thought you said you weren’t dating?” I teased.

“I’m not.” She said firmly, batting the notion away. “He’s just a client who doesn’t really do the whole office thing.”

“Oh yeah?” I didn’t buy that for a minute. “You two looked pretty guilty when I came in. Don’t worry, I won’t say to anyone, though.”

“Thanks. He doesn’t like the whole office thing.” Her shoulders relaxed a little. “But he really is a client – nothing else.”

“Alright then.” I handed her the brown envelope she’d dropped with a cheesy smile. “I just I didn’t realize guys built like brick outhouses needed accountancy services.”

“Of course!” she laughed like she finally understood something, “You wouldn’t have heard of the Armstrong family. They’re a pretty big deal around here. Daniel runs Armstrong’s Gym, he’s the owner.”

And with that, I knew it was only a matter of time before the truth would come out.

## CHAPTER FOUR

DANIEL

The drive from Sawyer & Co to Chester House took too long. I couldn't shake the feeling that I was missing something.

"Think, dammit!" I said aloud as I hit the steering wheel in frustration. I recognized that Ellie from somewhere, or did I? I didn't like when I felt like this. What I couldn't usually control, I beat the shit out of until I could control. Was there was something familiar about her... some resemblance... an echo of something I couldn't place or was I imaging it?

One thing I knew for certain was that we hadn't fucked. I would have remembered those lips and I would have definitely remembered that voice.

As I walked into dad's office and smiled to myself. He was old-school. You could easily imagine his office as a bank manager's office or something until you took a closer look. He had family pictures on the walls beside photos of meetings with other mafia bosses. The only thing missing was the little brass nameplate, Carrick Armstrong, Mafia Boss.

I sat down on one of the chesterfields, the leather squeaking beneath my tracksuit bottoms. "I handed the file to Louise today, she says the payments will be processed and into all the accounts in a couple of days."

"Good son, never forget the families of those who have died for the Kindred Sons." The same spiel every month.

"Yeah, I know. Blood and Loyalty." I said it internally even as he spoke.

*Yadda yadda yadda.*

As if I hadn't been reared by our motto.

"Don't take the piss, Daniel. I'm serious." He peered up over his glasses, his accent thick with disdain. "I'm getting older and I want to know you can handle everything and be content you're not going to fuck the whole thing up because you're gonna forget about the people who split blood to put you here."

"Ok, ok." I rolled my eyes as I stood up. "Just keeping you in the loop, Da." I felt his eyes piercing my back as I walked out the door. I fought back the urge to call him Carrick rather than recognize his place as my Da. Outside of what fatherliness he showed in front of the Kindred Sons, to say we had a relationship might have been an exaggeration.

Moments like this were when I caught a glimpse of the man who my father had been; the man who pulled the Kindred Sons together when the threat had been very real and very deadly. The man my father was when I was growing up – the man I rarely saw as a child because he was too busy protecting us.

The slivers of grey hair and the wrinkles around his eyes didn't change a thing. Anyone who thought differently was a fool. He may have been older now, but he was no less the ruthless or unforgiving monster he'd always been.

## CHAPTER FIVE

ELLIE

A few days later and I still hadn't been able to speak discretely with Rory. I had decided that I didn't care how he responded to what I had to say to him – if he wanted to get me into trouble, then so be it. I was done with being bullied and belittled by men who thought they could imply things, cruel and hurtful things, about me.

If I lost this job, I prayed that Ryan would understand. I just hoped that it wouldn't affect his parole date. Surely it couldn't?

I'd spoke with Louise earlier and agreed we'd take our lunch break together. Even though she practically begged me not to mention the post room incident, she was still insisting that her relationship with Daniel was entirely professional.

The girl had been good to me, so I didn't have a problem not mentioning it. I had my own secrets too; besides, I had no one really to tell it to anyway.

Mildred was not the type for gossip choosing to focus her entire life into work. That meant that she usually either in a meeting or on the phone and I didn't really associate with many of the other workers here. They eyed me suspiciously. Or at least it felt that way.

Perhaps it was my fear of them finding out that I'd been pretending about who I really was.

Gah! I was tormenting myself. Maybe it was my subconscious telling me that I was starting to feel like I needed to look for work elsewhere.

At 12:30 I grabbed my lunch and went to the staff kitchen on the third floor. It was strange for the kitchen to be empty at this time of day, but I heated my pasta leftovers in the microwave and filled the kettle to make some tea. In all honesty, I was glad of the little bit of alone time. I closed my eyes and tried to relax; this mindfulness thing I'd heard about was actually pretty good.

That was when I heard the kitchen door click shut behind me.

"I heard you've been looking for me, Ellie." Rory's voice was suddenly behind me. He was right behind me, jamming me between the sink and himself. He grabbed my hips and rolled his body against me. I could feel him behind me.

"I hope you've been thinking about me, I've definitely been thinking about you." His warm breath tickled at my ear. A familiar, sickening fear crawled up my stomach.

I grabbed his hands to try to take them off me. Tears welled in my eyes.

"I've told you I'm not interested and this is sexual harassment, you prick." Stronger than I was, his hands didn't move, they just dug into me harder.

*No!*

Somewhere within I remembered I was wearing my heels. With a quick stomp, my left heel pounded into his shoe leaving him cursing and almost head butting me from behind and he buckled from the unexpected pain.

Those two seconds were enough for me to get away from him, open the kitchen door and get into the hall... and straight into a huge suited man chest.

I tried pushing him away from me, ending up pushing myself back from him.

"Jesus." Oh no, I recognized that deep voice even though I'd only heard it once before.

"Are ya alright there, missy? Oh, it's you."

"Hi, um, Daniel. I mean, Mr. Anderson." I gave him one of my brightest, most professional smiles.

It didn't fool him for a second.

When he realized I was upset his whole demeanor went from laid back to high alert.

I saw his eyes move from mine to behind me, where I heard Rory had come out, muttering to himself about "Stupid fucking bitch."

Louise appeared from nowhere and dragged me away from being between the two men. My head was reeling and flashbacks from my past threatened to turn me into a shaking mess of tears and snot.

"I see you're still preying on the defenseless then." Daniel took a step closer to Rory who was looking between Daniel, Louise and me.

The air around Daniel changed. I had no doubt why. If it was even possible, he stood taller, looming over Rory. He was preparing for a fight.

The set of his strong, chiseled jaw; the way his already huge, muscled chest expanded further, making him look twice the size of his opponent; the frosty look of pure hatred he was shooting at Rory; the way he rolled his neck and shoulders, limbering up for what was to come.

He truly was lethal, I saw that now.

As Daniel's body shifted to take the first step towards Rory, Louise, with her petite frame, pushed herself right in between them.

"Gents! This is an office. This is not the place to have a brawl." Her determined expression set, eyeballing both of the guys. Having to tilt her head way back to do it only emphasized how small she was in comparison to either of them.



The girl had balls, I'd give her that... but either of them could have swatted her away in an instant. She was either the bravest or the dumbest person I'd ever seen.

The interjection was enough to distract both guys for a moment, easing some of the massive pressure that had built up in such a short time. Daniel seemed to get a better grasp of his surroundings, but when I saw how white his knuckles were on his clenched fists, I wasn't sure it was over. *They have history*, my mind suddenly realized.

Rory took no chances in case things becoming physical and took the opportunity to disappear as quickly as possible. "Mr. Armstrong, it's *always* great to see you."

His voice was dripping with sarcasm, "I'm sure I have no idea what you're on about. Maybe you should lay off the 'roids for a while, huh? Now if you'll excuse me, I'm meeting my wife for lunch." He gave me a sneer as he mentioned his wife before walking towards me.

It must have been the pure shock of the whole event, but somehow but I didn't react as Rory winked at me as he sauntered past - probably because Louise's arm was now firmly holding me. Thank god Daniel hadn't seen him; otherwise, I thought that his fuse really would have blown.

"Louise, you need to keep a better watch on him... for both of you."

"Of course." She took a deep breath; "I didn't realize he was up here." she looked ashamed. Had I missed something here? Yep, I was certain I'd missed part of this conversation.

An important part.

"Are you ok?" He asked me, more tenderly than I would have thought possible for such a huge guy, especially one that just moments ago looked like he was about to tear another person limb from limb with his bare hands.

For the first time, I noticed how well he filled the suit he was wearing today. So much sexier than the gym clothes he'd worn the

other day.

"Yeah, I'm ok." My pride kept me talking, babbling aimlessly. "I've had to contend with bigger bastards than him before." The swear word slipping out. Despite what happened I was at work and should never have said that particularly when it was both in front of and two one of our clients.

"You're welcome." He said, watching me closely.

I raised my chin in defiance. "Thanks for what you did."

That's where I should have stopped because I knew it was wrong to speak about an altercation with another member of staff to someone else – a client of all people.

"But I got myself away from him. I mean, I know a bit of self-defense. I only wish I hurt him more than I did."

"I'm glad to see you're ok, Ellie." He said, almost apologetically.

"I'm glad you guys were up here," I said to them both. Louise's chagrin met me as I looked at her.

"Louise, I need to cancel our meeting today. We will rearrange." There was an unquestioned authority in Daniel's voice and Louise took that as her cue to move away from us. She disappeared into the kitchen, closing the door behind her with a *click*.

Right then I wanted to smack her in the face for leaving me alone with him. "Ellie," he stepped closer to me. "That guy is dangerous and not to be trusted. He's a threat. Be careful around him."

"I have kept myself in one piece so far."

"Well Ellie, I guess I'm actually glad that fight never goes away, no matter what name somebody calls themselves."

He smiled knowingly and walked away. Leaving me speechless for the second time in a row.

*Fuck.*

## CHAPTER SIX

DANIEL

*I* stalked into my home gym and straight to my treadmill.  
I wanted to kill someone. I knew exactly who, too.

I pictured myself wrapping my hands around his neck and squeezing until his vile little life left his body. Rory was a slippery bastard who would get what was coming to him – and I would be the one to happily provide the service.

I increased the speed on my treadmill in the vain hope that the punishment my legs were now taking would help to release the anger I still felt. The worst part about today had been seeing that smug look on the bastard's face, he knows the agreement between Doyle's and the Kindred Sons was weakening and just wanted me to bite.

No chance.

We were bigger than them with more power and more reach, but dad had let that power become lazy. Both gangs had worked together to push the triad threat out of the neighborhood, simply because our combined force and intel outweighed theirs. If our "peaceful" agreement ended, then right now, I doubted if either Family would survive. What I was certain of was that Chang was waiting for us to fight each other: it would not be my doing. Rory Doyle was pussy enough that he'd happily bow down to the Chinese and take whatever scraps they'd give him.

I was playing the long game: my quiet plans of bringing more talent into our ranks meant that once the Kindred Sons finally came into my control, we would be strong enough to not only annihilate the Doyle's but the triad too. This was my neighborhood and everyone would know it.

I pressed the increase speed button again and the belt of my running machine screamed in protest as did the muscles in my thighs. I didn't care. If I didn't exhaust myself here I'd either end up punishing the next poor bastard who walked in front of me or finding where she lived, spreading her legs and fucking her into next week.

I needed this; I had responsibilities to the Kindred Sons now, so doing the only thing I wanted would not be the answer. Besides, her face when she saw me today told me that she was not interested.

Ellie.

Fucking Ellie.

My hunch was right – it wasn't her real name. The way her eyes widened in shock, the sharp intake of breath and the slight redness that came to those cheeks all only confirmed my suspicions. But how did I recognize her? We definitely haven't slept together – I would have remembered that body beneath me, those sweet lips wrapped around my cock, those eyes watching me as I'd fill her.

I smiled in satisfaction as I remembered the shock on her face when she literally bumped into me today. I affected her... ok, maybe not in the way I wanted to, but it was a start.

The fear that replaced her shock destroyed me. Somehow, I didn't want her to see me as the monster that everyone else believes I am. Even though I really was a monster.

I'm the underboss of the Kindred Sons for God's sake and I had to let him leave. I held back today because I couldn't be the one to break the treaty.

Regret and shame smothered me. I should have offed that cunt. No treaty is worth the fear I saw today in her eyes.

*And what would she have thought of you if you had killed him, then? Yeah, that's real boyfriend material, asshole.*

I shook myself. I'd only cast eyes on her twice, what the hell has happened to me? I'm the guy that swore off women and I was worried about what a woman who didn't like me and that I didn't want. She could already be with someone else for all I knew, but that thought only seemed to enrage me more.

I screamed in frustration before hitting the stop button on the machine. I put my weight on my arms and rested my feet on the sides of the treadmill as the belt came to a halt. It wasn't long until I hit the shower, still frustrated I needed to try another tack to ease this frustration.

I stood under the blistering hot water as it poured over my neck, shoulders, and back. Her face came back to me again, only this time, she was smiling, feigning shock at the dirty little things I was whispering in her ear and pushing herself against me regardless.

"You'd love my cock inside you, baby, I just know it." I'd whisper to her, "Let me try."

For some reason in my fantasy, we were back in the Post Room where I first laid eyes on her. I'd unbutton her white blouse and her perky tits would be busting out of a white lace bra. Reaching inside the bra I'd lift both of her tits out of the lace, hearing her moans as I'd nibble on the pink buds, already hard in my mouth.

Suddenly my fantasy shifted to the shower, this shower. Her hair was soaked and her wet blouse was plastered to her creamy pale skin. I imagined making her step out of her skirt to see the rest of the lace underwear ensemble: stockings, suspenders, and white lace panties. An intoxicating mix of sweet and sexy.

I wouldn't let the notion that she was unlikely to dress in such a way at work disrupt my fantasy. Fuck, she looked amazing.

I couldn't help myself. The thought of her body beside mine, hot, wet and ready for me was too much.

I reached down and started stroking my shaft, imagining her mouth as she accepted it in its entirety in her mouth. I imagined her mouth accepting me at the same pace as my hand pumped around my cock.

In my mind's eye, I was stroking her hair away from her face so I could watch her cheeks rise and fall with her efforts. She then stood up and pulled the white lace of her delicate underwear to one side, giving me a glimpse of the sweet heaven beneath. In my mind I felt as her hand reached around and her hand grabbed my ass cheek, pulling me closer. "Fuck me, Daniel. I need you inside me."

My fist pumped even harder around my cock, a relentless and punishing pace. I felt my whole body tensing as I thickened even more. The water running over my skin only adding to the sensations. I imagined sliding into her tight wet hole.

Her legs spread her wider for me, wanting more of me, wanting me deeper. The dark expression of pleasure on her face as she tried to turn around to face me made me groan in satisfaction. The sound echoed over the hard tile surface.

Of course, in my imagination I'd honor her unspoken request: she was hungry for me and she would be satisfied. Well fucking satisfied. I fucked her harder, feeling a wicked satisfaction as I imagined her lifting her hands to the tiles in a desperate attempt to find a way to hold herself steady against the uncompromising pounding. As I heard moans of joy escape from her, my balls tightened and I cum in the shower. spurts of hot white release hitting the tiles where my fantasy Ellie had just been.

Holy hell.

Breathlessly, I cleaned myself up before smiling darkly.

*Oh, Ellie. You will be mine and I will fuck you right here.*

All I had to do was to convince her that she'd want me, too.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

ELLIE

After Daniel walked off Louise rushed out of the kitchen and over to me again, fussing over me and apologizing that she hadn't been in the kitchen when I'd first arrived. Nothing made much sense.

We slipped into an empty meeting room so I could collect my thoughts and clean myself up – apparently, I had been shaken up more than I thought.

“How can a guy like that work here?” I spoke, not really expecting an answer. “I mean, it’s like he’s some sort of...”

“Shh... Ellie, you can’t let anyone hear you say anything bad about Rory.” Louise looked over her shoulder. “I mean it’s a miracle no one saw that little... episode.”

Before I responded she moved closer. “He’s *connected*.” Gave me a knowing look at that. “And that makes him pretty untouchable.” She shook her head. “The last girl who reported him ended up with a burned-out car and a dead dog when she got home. Suddenly Sawyer’s didn’t need her anymore and she was let go.”

“So I’m supposed to just let him get away with that?” I said through gritted teeth.

“Fuck no!” she replied hotly, “I just need you to bide your time. Haven’t you noticed that practically no one actually talks with him unless they have to for work stuff?”

She stood, moving to the door to peek out. "Yeah, he's got a couple of lackeys who think he's great, but you won't see one woman speak to him unless she needs to - even Mildred doesn't like him."

"Seriously?"

"Well, their offices are at opposite ends of the floor and even though they both do similar jobs, have you seen her going out of her way to speak to him at any time?"

I thought for a moment. "No. She's phoned him a few times but that's it." Understanding poured over me. "Why is she letting him act like that? Surely she has a duty to report him?"

"It's not common knowledge but I happen to know that he's got something on her eldest daughter - that's why Mildred is keeping quiet."

"Oh." I thought the woman had more nerve than to allow herself or her family to be treated in that way. Although, I had no idea what it might have been. "Whatever he has on her must be pretty bad then?"

"Not a clue." She said dismissively as she picked an imaginary piece of lint from her clothes. "I really wanted to warn you about him the first day we met, but I couldn't get a chance. Then when you'd met him, I knew he would suspect if you changed the way you were with him. Ever since I've been trying to be nearby if I can." She released a big breath. "I feel like I've let you down."

The pain on her face was clear; she really did think that somehow it had been her job to keep me safe here. That made no sense.

"Hey, it's not your fault! You've been a good friend to me since I started here. It's not your job to protect me, and anyways, I've learned a few self-defense moves."

"I'm glad you have. Most people freeze the first time they need to defend themselves, but you didn't."

"I guess so," I said as I stood up and tucked my chair back under the table, thankful to be able to avoid Louise's eye contact for a moment.



I only wished that had been the first time I'd had to defend myself. I shuddered as thoughts about the last time I saw Robert ran through my head. Louise must have assumed I was still thinking about Rory.

"Do you want me to say you've gone home sick? I can cover for you?" She offered, placing a supportive hand on my arm. I bit the inside of my lip so I wouldn't flinch. She meant well, and the action had been intended to be supportive. I just wasn't the touchy kind of girl anymore.

"Nah, I'm fine... honestly. Besides, I have a shit-ton of work that needs doing. I'll be busy all afternoon."

When I finally got home that evening I took a long, hot shower. The scalding water still didn't help me feel that his sweaty hands were still all over me.

I kept myself distracted from my thoughts by tackling the grout between the bathroom tiles. I felt surrounded by mold and dirt: I needed everything to feel fresh and clean. The smell of the bleach and the job itself helped keep me preoccupied until it was time to fall into bed and try to sleep.



Louise was waiting for me a few doors down from the office as I walked in the next morning. "Hey, how are you? I was gonna phone last night but didn't want to smother you." She had a regretful smile on her face, eyes surveying my eyes for signs of tears or weakness.

"Me? I'm fine..." I gave a little laugh. "Tough as old boots, in fact. That douche isn't going to stop me doing my work – besides, I *really* need this job." I replied as lightly as I could muster.

I needed to change the direction of this conversation, otherwise, there would be more tears and I'd promised myself that I wouldn't cry again.

"Anyway, you never said why you were with your non-boyfriend again yesterday."

"Ha! As if. He's so not my boyfriend." She joked. Glad we had moved on from talking about me I teased her more.

"Ok ok, if he's not your boyfriend." I said with air quotes around the word, "I bet you want him to be. God those eyes and the muscles. You've got to admit he's easy on the eyes... if not a bit..." I struggled to put a word to describe Daniel.

"Intense?" she offered.

"Crazy?" she thought again. "Built like a big old brick shit house?"

We laughed and I got the impression we were both relieved that the conversation was no longer a serious one.

We dropped any mention of Rory or Daniel as soon as we got into the building but were still laughing by the time she left me to go to her desk. There was a note waiting for me on my desk. Mildred had already been into the office and left again since her youngest was ill, but my duties for the day were scrawled on the page in front of me.

"Shit." I said aloud to myself, "I'll never get that all done today!" With that, I removed my jacket and turned the tower of my work computer on.

I only stopped to grab a quick bite at lunchtime, devouring my entire packed lunch in minutes and returning back early to get my work finished. About twenty minutes before home time, I got a phone call from Rory.

"Good afternoon, Ellie." He cooed, innocently.

*Bastard*, I thought.

"Yes Rory, how can I help you?"

"My assistant, Jessica has had to go home early today; she was supposed to make up some empty files for me to bring with me to the meeting on Monday. Spare 10 minutes from your work and do them for me?"

Not even so much as a "please". I gave the phone a dirty look.

What I really wanted to say was, "Do them yourself, dickhead." But my actual response was, "Sure! No problem! I'll get right on that now for you."

I really couldn't afford to lose this job and as a partner in the business, Rory could really mess things up for me. I just needed to keep the boat very un-rocked until I got a job elsewhere.

Louise stopped by my desk as I had the folders in my hand, ready to leave into Rory's office. When I explained what I was doing her mouth formed a flat, grim line across her face.

"I don't like it," she bristled. "I can take them for you." She reached for the files.

"No!" I said a bit too loudly before continuing at a loud whisper. "Look, if he thinks he can intimidate me, I need to show him that he can't."

"Well at least let me come with you."

"And how would that look?" I questioned. "I'll be fine; it's a two-second job."

"Well, if you're sure." She didn't look convinced but brightened, she'd had an idea. "Hey, how about meeting up with us when you come out? I'm going for drinks with a couple of others. You're very welcome to join us in Flanagan's?"

I didn't like the thought of going straight back to my lonely flat so I agreed that I'd see her shortly. I would have one drink and then leave. I needed to save as much money as I could but after the last week, I deserved at least one strong drink.

I allowed myself to be excited. Flanagan's would be a nice end to the day. It would only take a few moments to give Rory his files.

As I made my way to his office door, I could see that it was shut, so I took a deep breath and squared my shoulders before knocking.

"Come in."

## CHAPTER EIGHT

ELLIE

I held my breath as I went into the office. I'd half imagined something overly opulent, or something creepy, but I was disappointed as it was neither. His office was just an ordinary office, filing cabinets against the walls, mismatched folders resting about them, and a large desk with a computer and overflowing with papers.

"Thank you, Ellie," Rory said as he looked up from his computer screen.

"You're welcome." I just about managed not to spit the words out.

"Y'know Ellie," he gave a big sigh, "I was just being polite. Putting together some stationery isn't exactly the hardest job in the world... I mean, just about *anyone* could do it."

He steepled his fingers and rested his chin on them. "I mean, yes, it seems like you've worked well, but what true value do you bring to Sawyer's or are you easily replaced?"

My resolve wobbled – was he threatening my job?

"Mildred has been very happy with my work." Although the uncertainty in my voice didn't match.

"Yes yes," he said dismissively. "But Mildred's planning to be away for a little while now, isn't she?"

I didn't speak, I couldn't breathe. What was supposed to be an in-out job to leave some files into his office was taking a turn for the worse.

Eventually, he broke the silence.

"I believe you have some keys."

"Keys?"

"Yes, dear, keys." He rolled his eyes at me. Patronizing bastard. Yet I already knew what he was talking about.

"The ones Mildred gave you for her office that you've had since you started here?" There, he went straight to the point.

"What about them?" I asked as innocently as I could. My mouth was Sahara dry and I thought I could guess what was coming. In fact, I was sure I knew what was coming.

"You'll make me a copy of the full set." He demanded.

The arrogance! Not only did he demand copies, he expected me to present them to him on a silver platter.

"Mildred made it very clear my keys were for emergencies only. That her office contains many confidential client files."

"Tsk, tsk. You are a slow learner, aren't you?" he shook his head slowly and retrieved his mobile phone from the table. A few seconds later he'd brought something up on the screen. "Look, Ellie, do you recognize anyone?"

The sound was low, but I heard the moans before I even saw the screen. A sex tape? What the fuck? Why was he showing me a sex tape?

"Mmm, Rory!" a woman's voice whimpered out of the phone's speaker. The camera was shot in the first person, from behind the woman who was bent over a table, her dark hair covering her face.

"Yeah, baby, you like that?" Rory's voice spoke on the video and the shot moved to pan over the back of her head, down to her naked back and further down to where her skirt was hitched up and where

the person taking the video was watching himself slide into the woman.

I looked away in disgust, handing the phone back to him as I heard the video version of Rory telling the woman she was a dirty girl, then the sharp sound of a smack and her moaning in pleasure.

“What the fuck are you showing me that for?” I raged. The fact I was unable to keep my language in check at work paled in comparison to him showing me his homemade pornography.

“Well, baby,” he smiled innocently, “You’re here after work time... the guys knew we met last week and had drinks, they were in one of the other booths when we arrived.” He stood up, stretching. “Even watched us leaving together. So what if we’d decided to stay a little late at work tonight? I mean, it’s easy to change the time and date on this so everyone thinks it’s you.”

“You wouldn’t...”

“Well, you see, I need the keys.” He shrugged at me.

“Are you trying to blackmail me?”

He ignored the question.

“Or, you could just give me the Chester file and we could have a little fun when we’re here.” He leered at me. “I promise I’ll not to make a video this time.” He moved around the table, resting on the edge of it. “I hear it’s a comfy table to bend over – just the right height.”

“Go fuck yourself, Rory.” With angry tears in my eyes, I stormed out of the room, glad that the only one in the building now was the domestic who was out of sight. I heard vacuuming one of the meeting rooms. I quickly collected my things at my desk before running home.

I was reeling, but the walk home helped me keep distracted enough that I didn’t cry. I thought over all the work I’d done with Mildred since I had started but I had no idea what the Chester file was. It had

never been mentioned, at least not that I had remembered. I'd no idea of its significance.

I thought of the local businesses that I knew of since I grew up around here, but that was no help.

*What was the Chester file?*

My phone vibrated across my kitchen counter at the same time my microwave pinged. Louise.

"I'm sorry I didn't meet up with you guys," I said as I answered the phone. Shit! With everything that had happened, I'd forgot to meet her.

"Are you ok?" her voice sounded urgent. "I went back to the office but you were gone."

"I'm fine." I sniffled, the adrenaline leaving me to my tears now. I was just thankful I was alone.

"I'll be over in 10 minutes." With that, she hung up the phone and I let myself sob.

## CHAPTER NINE

ELLIE

I heard the knock at my door within minutes of putting the phone down.

When I answered, Louise, took one look at me and pulled me into a hug. Even though I didn't *do* hugs, for once, I really appreciated it, clinging to her tiny frame as I swallowed back the remaining tears. When the ache eased a little, she finally spoke.

"What did he do?" she was trying to speak calmly, but I knew there was fury beneath it.

"I'm going to lose my job." I sniffed. "He's got a video of some woman having sex with him in his office and he says he's going to show it and imply that it's me. That I've been sleeping with him."

I sagged down onto the sofa and Louise followed. "If he does that, everyone will think I got this job by fucking one of the partners... a married one at that. Any respect for me or chance of my job lasting will be gone."

"Blackmail?" she pondered, before turning to look at me. "So, what does he want? You to actually sleep with him or he shares this?"

Somewhere inside, my intuition screamed not to tell her the truth. As much as I liked Louise and I wanted to trust her, I wasn't sure how to process what Rory had actually wanted from me. I needed to buy some time. I hated myself for doing it but I lied to her.



"Yeah," I nodded. "But it doesn't make sense, he's the married one - surely spreading a video that he says is me would get him in trouble?"

"You'd think that." she said, unconvincingly, "But the thing is... he's involved in some messed up shit."

That made no sense to me, but I was relieved that was the point she was focusing on and not calling me out on being such a terrible liar. "Eh?"

"Look, I promise not to say anything to anyone about what he's trying to do to you... Please, you can't tell anyone about this."

I listened in shock as Louise told me that Rory and his wife were very much a respectable couple, doing respectable jobs, living in a respectable neighborhood and with tidy, respectable lives.

Yet, he and his wife were involved with the Doyle gang. She said that although there was no proof, some even thought Rory had close links to the head of the Doyle gang. Louise was pretty sure that Rory's wife was one of the madam's for their gang's sex trade.

"Are you saying," I laughed, "that Rory and his wife are pimps?" I laughed incredulously. "There's an actual underground sex business in Londonderry and Rory isn't just customer - he's *running* it?"

"And doing very nicely at it, or so I hear." the bitterness in her voice took me back. "His wife makes sure the girls keep in line. He deals with the buyers and handles the transactions."

"So it's not a brothel?"

"No, there are brothels, but Rory and she are involved with the high-class buyers and selling on the broken women. Of course, Rory likes to make a little extra by blackmailing the married businessmen who enjoy the darker games he lets them play."

"And where better to see how much they can afford and to move it painlessly from their accounts than working in the biggest accountancy firm in the area?" Finally, the penny had dropped for me.

That was why he works at Sawyer's. He could easily make up invoices to receive the blackmail payments and they would all be hidden in plain sight.

That's what the Chester file was for. It had to be.

Maybe Mildred was just biding her time until she uncovered Rory for the bastard he really was.

"It makes sense now," I whispered to myself.

"What does?" keen eyes surveyed me; "Do you know more than you're letting on?"

I couldn't say it. I didn't say it. I knew what I had to do: keep quiet for long enough until I could get another job and away from Sawyer's. As much as Rory was trying to blackmail me, what did I care about another one of his john's getting blackmailed?

I came back here for Ryan, he needed me to keep a flat going to he can move into it and be supported when he's released. Ryan is finally clean and sober - if all I have to do is hand over one file to Rory to keep my own head above water before leaving my job, then so be it.

I had no sympathy for the men that Rory was blackmailing. They'd used women against their will, they deserved whatever they got. And Rory would get his eventually too.

Just hopefully after Ryan was living with me and I'd settled in a different job.

"Rory had seemed so nice," I played for time. "I can't believe it all, but looking back now it makes sense... was he grooming me to be one of their girls?" I doubted that would be the case, the only thing he really wanted from me was the set of keys for Mildred's office.

"Possibly," she said unconvinced. "More likely that he wanted you as one of his own collection," she admitted. "He has a real thing for dark hair and blue eyes like yours."

It would be later that I'd find it ironic that Rory's unwanted interest was because of my bottle of hair dye and inability to get used to the

brown contacts I'd bought. Now they were the assumed reason why Rory had taken an interest in me in the first place.

"He's married!" I said in shock.

"Maybe so, but apparently they're both fine with the other having... varied tastes away from home."

I laughed hysterically at the way she'd explained it. Once I'd stopped she was looking at me, and I had a feeling I wouldn't like what she was going to say.

"I think we should tell Daniel."

"Why on earth would you even suggest that? Not your boyfriend my ass."

"He's not!"

"So why do you think he needs to know? You just said you'd keep this to yourself." I felt betrayed.

I stormed over to my sink and poured myself a glass of water. "What's he going to do?" except get in the way of me being able to do what I need to do and move on.

"You don't like him, do you?"

That was a question.

There were things about him I didn't like, but that was because it felt too soon, I didn't know what to do about the flicker I felt when I saw him, or the fear I had now that I suspected he might know who I was - or at the very least that he knew I wasn't called Ellie.

I couldn't let him get near. It was too risky and all those routes lead to me losing my job and therefore my flat, and how could I help Ryan then?

"It's not that I don't like him," I lied, "I don't know what he could actually do." I rolled my shoulders, trying to ease the tension I now felt. "Yeah, he owns a gym and is one huge motherfucker, but what's he gonna do - frighten Rory again? I don't think that worked the first time."

"I can't go into it, but I promise I won't say anything right now. Think about it over the weekend, we'll talk about it again on Monday - let's see how Rory plays this with you at work. If he's trying to get you into his bed, then he'll want to play nice."

This time I wasn't convinced.

Louise insisted that we got some food for me to eat and we spent the next couple of hours watching a chick flick on TV that we'd both seen before. I was glad of the company and that she'd dropped the conversation about Rory and Daniel.

Yet I knew it was only a matter of time before she'd find a way to get Daniel involved in this mess.

## CHAPTER TEN

ELLIE

*A*lthough I met Louise as planned on Monday, I still begged her to keep everything from Daniel. I could guess what he'd want to do. The Armstrong family had always been trouble, even as a youngster I knew to give their children them a wide berth at school.

It didn't surprise me that an Armstrong ran a boxing club and gym in the slightest, what did surprise me was that it sounded like they'd cleaned up their act somewhat. With what I'd seen and the rumors I'd heard about their family as I grew up, I would have expected Daniel to have beaten the shit out of Rory without even thinking about it.

They were the family that didn't need an excuse to fight with someone else... I remembered one time when I was about ten that even my mother in her most drunken states learning the lesson everyone else seemed to know.

I just didn't need another guy in my life thinking he knew better. Especially not an Armstrong. They were too well known, too close to my past.



ummy isn't home yet and I'm the boss when she's not here!" I screamed. "Now go to bed or I'll tell her you ate all her favorite

biscuits." Ryan's face paled and tears welled in his tired eyes.

"M "No, Katey! Mummy will be cross with Ryan." He pouted. "Ryan doesn't want to go into the naughty box again." He lifted Fuzzy and held the tattered and smelly bear close for comfort and moving his little body away from the airing closet.

"Well then, go to bed." I tried to shoo him in the direction he should be going but he refused to move.

"I'm hungry." He whined.

Damn.

I knew he was hungry his tummy had been rumbling for an hour. The only thing left in the cupboard was some dry pasta and I wasn't allowed to use the cooker.

"If you go to bed I'll go see if Mrs. Conway has locked her gate." She always threw so much food out for the birds. Most of it was ok to eat but last time mummy found out I'd took some she called me a dirty thief and took her shoe to me. I just won't get caught this time.

"But..." I saw the fear in his eyes too. "It's ok, Katey. I'm not *that* hungry." His tummy growled again in defiance.

I pulled him close, "Now, let's get you into bed. I bet Fuzzy is tired." I bent down and spoke into the bear's only ear, "Fuzzy, are you tired? What's that? You are? But you don't want to go to bed on your own? What? Ok, I'll ask him." The sound of Ryan's giggle as I talked with Fuzzy was the only warmth I had.

"Ryan," I said deliberately, "Fuzzy says he is tired, and he wants you to go up to bed with him. Just until he falls asleep." He giggled.

"Fuzzy can't talk!"

"Well, that's what you think... he tells me things, you know." I gave Ryan a knowing look and shot a dramatic wink to the tattered bear.

"What things?" he asked, letting me walk him towards our bedroom.

"Well, things like how much better he liked it when daddy was still here." I pulled down the bed covers as he crawled in. "And how rumibly his tummy is." I tickled the bear's tummy and tucked Ryan in. He smiled. I reached for my school coat, draping it over the thin covers as usual. "And... that he's glad we ate mummy's biscuits that time!" I was rewarded with another sparkling giggle.

I wished that Ryan had more reasons to laugh like that.

I wished I had too.

But I was ten now, and I had to be a grown up because he was my little brother and he depended on me.

It only took a few minutes for Ryan to fall asleep. Once his breathing was deep and slow I slipped out of the room and tiptoed down the stairs and out into the space behind the flats.

On tiptoes, I checked the flickering lights in Mrs. Conway's ground floor flat bedroom window. She'd gone to bed and was watching TV. Her fence was easy to climb and as usual, the scraps are on her bird table, just waiting for me.

Ryan was still asleep when I came back so I hid the scraps in my school bag for the next morning. We'd share them as I walked him to school before going to my own. I slipped into bed beside him, snuggling behind him for the heat we both would need on such a frosty night.

It was still dark when I was awakened by her return home. This time, she wasn't alone. I held my breath as I listened... a *woman's* voice?

I peeked through the crack in the door to seeing Veronica, mum's drinking buddy dabbing mum's face in the bathroom. "You know she's an Armstrong, Kate, so why did you try it?"

Mum slurred her response, "I dunn giva fuck... bitch wass tryin it awn wif Charlie."

Veronica, swayed as she stood. She was drunk but not in the stupor my mum was in. Veronica rinsed the cloth and kept dabbing at my

mum's eyebrow.

"Yeah, I know. But he's left you, he's not yours anymore..." she eyed my mother cautiously, kneeling beside my mum who was slumped on the side of the bath. "They're together, or at least from what I've heard."

The one and only image of my mother's tears burned into my soul. Mum's face crumpled as her shoulders bobbed and sobs wracked through her. "But I sstill luv-im."



The rest of the week at work was, thankfully, entirely uneventful... except for one phone call from Rory. His professional voice oozing over the phone. "I'm calling to confirm the file I requested." I swallowed the bile that pooled in my mouth and listened. "So, my colleague, Barry will be meeting with you in Flanagan's. I'll confirm time in due process. Have it ready." With that, he hung up.

*Ok, ok, it's one file. One piece of paperwork... it's not that big of a deal. Big companies like this loose more paperwork than that. And why try to even protect those guys?*

I assured myself that it was a once off, that I would apply for other jobs, any jobs, to get out of here. He won't blackmail me again.

I even thought that if the file was small enough and if I was quick I could make a photocopy of the file – give him the copy rather than the original, or maybe give him the original and hide the copy elsewhere.

In truth, I didn't really know what to do for the best.

What I did know was that I'd give him the file. Why Louise is so uptight about this guy? Yes, he was greasy, yes, imagined himself as a big-shot, but what hold could he have over me once I left this place?



Worst case was he'd share a video that wasn't me and by the time he'd do that, I'd be gone from here anyway so that couldn't hurt my job. He overstepped when he got physical in the kitchen that day, but my guard will not be down again - he wouldn't get that chance to sneak up again.

I didn't believe he had the balls to actually attack me now. The pocket knife I had tucked into the side of my bra was my insurance... and I prayed to God I didn't need it.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

ELLIE

Mildred, my manager, arrived at work shortly after I did, which was a surprise since she was supposed to be on holiday leave for another few days.

"I was about to go to sleep last night and I remembered that the McMasterson's case needed signing off by the end of the month." She smiled.

It was nice to see her looking so relaxed, in the short time I'd been here, it seemed that she worked at warp speed so it was good to see that the dark bags under her eyes were somewhat faded today. I hoped she was enjoying family time.

"I need a favor, though," she peered at me over her reading glasses, "Can you pop round to their office, please? They have some paperwork waiting for us to process."

On the way back, I passed a deli and decided to grab a sandwich for lunchtime. I walked along with my sandwich in one hand and the large file in the other. I almost dropped both when I caught a glimpse of Daniel as I left the deli.

*He's walking straight towards me, fuck!*

A flash of electricity zipped through me in excitement, and I instantly scolded myself - *girl-code*, even if Louise denies there's anything going on... but damn, that chiseled jaw, the slight stubble,

and those smoldering grey-blue eyes. Jeeze, just looking into those eyes could get you into trouble.

I would have bet those eyes alone managed to get a lot of girls into trouble over the years.

I scrambled to think of something coherent to say but when we meet on the street, the words poured out before my mind had the chance to filter them. What I hadn't seen on his face from afar was painfully clear at this closeness.

"Oh my God, Daniel, what the fuck happened?!"

His right eye was swollen and the skin was a curious shade of purple. His other cheek was reddened and I'm pretty sure he wasn't holding his arm that way before.

He laughed dryly, "Nice words for a lady."

"Jesus, are you ok?"

I couldn't breathe; I didn't care what my words sounded like.

Why did I feel so angry at seeing him like this?

"I'm fine, it's nothing." He brushed my concern off like I brushed off compliments.

He watched me, searching my face. I shivered knowing he was looking at me, but somehow, the fool I was, I wanted him to keep looking.

"Not working in the office today?" he asked casually.

"I'm on my way back now."

"Great," he said, turning the opposite direction to what he had just been going, "I'll walk with you."

I felt the air frizzle between us, I was suddenly nervous, and my mouth was dry. If only I'd bought some water in the deli too. As we walked, Daniel explained that the gym was going very well and that he was building on his MMA training. The gym was putting forward

a couple of guys into competition soon and that he was sparring with them.

He laughed, a sound that was deep and felt like home. He also promised that the other guy looked a lot worse than he did. I truly hoped he did but he was a brave guy to fight with Daniel.

It was the first time we'd spoke more than a few words to each other, the first time we'd been alone together. In spite of myself, I had to admit I could see what attracted Louise to him. I wasn't ready for a relationship, after what had happened before, but if I had met Daniel in six months' time and he wasn't secretly dating my work friend, then he would be exactly what I would look for.

Tall, strong, very much an alpha, and that air surrounding him that told you he always got what he wanted. God help me, and I knew it was a betrayal to Louise, but a dark, deep and unsatisfied part of me wanted him to want me and not her.

We reached the street corner beside the office too soon. He said his easy goodbyes and left me feeling giddy from being so close to him but also disappointed that after what had been a friendly conversation, he would obviously never see me as anything more than an acquaintance.

Who was I kidding? He'd never see me as anything more than an acquaintance.

Mildred disappeared with the Chester file as soon as I gave it to her and a few moments later my mobile phone pinged.

I'm dying to share our little video... or did you get that folder?

An unknown number and no name - and I needed neither. Rory had my personal number now. As a partner in the company that was entirely within his remit. It also meant he'd know my home address, be able to read my CV and see the faked references. Shit.

I swallowed back any reactions and prayed that ignoring him would be the best course of action. At least until Mildred went home.

At 4 o'clock Mildred popped a lever arch folder on my desk, her face etched with stress. "I need another favor... I really need to go. My daughter's waiting on me." A pained look crossed her face before she could hide it. "That's most of the final paperwork for the Chester file completed. Can you get this form signed by their CEO tomorrow then print the invoice, put a photocopy inside here and then put this back into the cabinet in my office - just use your key, and lock up again when you're done."

No one would have questioned me being in Mildred's office whilst she was off anyway, but I'd just been given a valid excuse for being there today. I would take the Chester file tomorrow.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

DANIEL

Meeting Ellie like that was an extremely pleasant surprise and one that was needed after the aches my body felt.

I was in shape, so the problem had been my brain.

The planned Kindred Sons training was starting in earnest and last night's session had been heavy going: I wanted everyone to realize we're not as ready as we should be. Six guys at a time in a boxing ring, the last one standing was the winner. Then the winners fought each other. I'd been distracted lately so I deserved the couple of swipes that came my way. I was pleased that no one pulled punches if they thought they had the opportunity to take me out - I certainly didn't hold back with mine.

They all ended up on their asses regardless. Every last one of them.

I hadn't liked lying to Ellie about it: hiding the one thing I am most proud to be. But the Kindred Sons don't discuss internal affairs with anyone outside the Family. The MMA thing was a real thing anyway and was on the gym's website so at least if she cared enough to look, she'd buy it.

I went back to the business I needed to do, and by 4:30 I was finished up, so waited in the coffee shop around the corner from Sawyer's until Louise arrived.

"Thanks for agreeing to meet here, Daniel." Her eyes darted around the room, "With Ellie spotting you that day in the post room and what with Rory being an asshole, I thought it was better to keep more of a low profile."

"I see your point," I said neutrally. Though I would have liked to have accidentally-on-purpose tried to bump into Ellie again.

"Rory wouldn't lower himself to come into a dive like this and Ellie doesn't go home this way." She sipped her coffee before continuing. "This'll make you laugh..." she looked at me uncertainly, "Ellie thinks you're my secret boyfriend."

I almost spat my coffee in her face, swallowing it instead.

"Fuck off," I said, shocked.

"But you're my cousin - what kind of sickos does she think we are?"

"Duh, she doesn't know that... idiot."

She shook her head. "Where's your head anyway - you know that no one in there knows we're related."

*Shit.* Of course, that's where my head should have gone first.

"Does it help us with her if she continues to think that?" I asked, praying that the answer might give me some idea of whether that was why Ellie clearly didn't like me.

"Why don't I ask Aunt Jennifer if she's happy for me to pretend to be your girlfriend?" she said sarcastically. "Pull your head out of your ass, Daniel. I'm undercover here; linking me publicly with you will not help - remember why I'm here?"

I nodded, scratching at my stubble. If anyone else spoke to me like that, they'd be in a choke hold now but Louise was basically a little sister to me. Mum and I would stay at Louise's mum's every summer. Blood and Loyalty.

Always Blood and Loyalty.

"You don't fool me, you arse." She said, eyeing me skeptically. "I remember the way you were the last time you fell for a woman." She

tapped my head, "Think with this for a while."

We sat in silence for a moment as she watched the passers-by and drank her coffee. I could deny that I had feelings for Ellie, and I would deny it to any other person. With Louise, I just wouldn't broach the subject at all.

She leaned in closer, an action I instantly mirrored, knowing she had something important to say. "I'm certain that he's targeting her." Her hushed tones turned serious, "I'm reckoning she has another couple of weeks before she disappears too - if we don't keep an eye out... a proper eye out for her."

"Like Cassie?" I asked, as quietly as I could, forcing my voice to say her name. I bit the inside of my cheek to keep myself together. This would not happen again. She reached her hand over to mine, giving it a quick squeeze before taking it away again.

"Let me protect her, I've already made friends with her - I think she trusts me now."

I looked at Louise, her small frame belied the assassin she was trained to be. She looked like a gym-bunny rather than the mafia trained undercover agent she really was. The fierceness in her eyes now was the only thing that gave her away.

Give her a handgun or try to fight her and you'd quickly change your mind.

I stood, needing to move and to break the eye contact, "Do what you need to do, Louise. I want daily updates and immediate texts about anything you think is important. If Rory so much as blinks the wrong way anywhere near her, you have my go-ahead to take whatever means necessary."

Her eyes widened in shock as she looked up at me. I cut her off before she was able to speak. "Yes, that's an order. You follow your orders, if anything happens, I'll deal with the fallout."

I tapped her on the shoulder, I needed to get out of this coffee house, it was suddenly too small. "Whatever means necessary," I repeated. "Take any protective action... keep safe, Lu-bell."





I wandered the neighborhood for a while before going back to my car. Somehow I found myself standing at the riverside near where Cassie's body was found. Her family had placed a little plaque on the railings in her memory. It had been three years since her death and by the looks of it, they still brought fresh flowers.

Cassie, the woman I thought I could love.

Except, a few hours before she disappeared I found out she hadn't felt the same. I couldn't prove what had happened after that, but I was certain Rory and his bitch had been involved.

Our relationship may have been brief, but it was no secret: the Kindred Sons and even the Doyle's knew we were together. My father had warned me that something didn't seem legit about her. I had just enjoyed six weeks of non-stop, mind-blowing sex. But I guess she'd expected more, even in that short time. Probably diamonds, fancy clothes and long-haul holidays. Fuck knows that when I think back, she had continually dropped hints about things she'd wanted me to buy.

It didn't take long for me to find out she'd been playing me to get to the money but before I was able to confront her and break everything off, she disappeared. Initially, I didn't try to contact her, thinking she'd beat me to making the break. I had believed she'd left in the hopes of making a clean break. But when she didn't come back for her personal things - even her purse - I knew something was wrong.

Rory swore that his prostitution business was not involved in any way, but frankly, the girl was not smart enough to be able to disappear without a trace; especially without her phone, cards or any money from her bank accounts. When she turned up six months later, badly decomposed and face down in the river, it didn't take a genius to realize she'd been killed. The Post Mortem confirmed she was eleven weeks pregnant at the time. From the estimated time of

death compared with when she disappeared, the baby could never have been mine.

I'd eventually found my peace with that.

Toxicology reports also said she must have overdosed and fallen in. I didn't buy the "accidental overdose" for a second, she never took drugs in the short time we were together. The Kindred Sons would have reported finding her and never given her drugs, so the only other place she could have got them was from Rory's scumbag dealers. Her stance had been firmly anti-drugs, so taking them of her own free, while knowing she would have been pregnant was very suspicious to me.

With no proof, I was forbidden to reap any revenge for her death. Cassie was not the woman for me, but she didn't deserve how things had ended for her.

I imagined Ellie and the possibility of her being pregnant in the future. I even allowed myself to think about how it might feel if it was my child inside her. I unclenched my fists and made my way back to my car.

The agreement between the Kindred Sons and the Doyle's can go to fuck if there is any possibility that Ellie could get harmed too.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ELLIE

Louise arrived to work at the same time as I did, exactly ten minutes early. We hadn't chatted much lately so agreed we'd go out for lunch today. Burritos... my guilty pleasure.

I must have thought about the Chester file all night, and no matter how I reasoned, I knew to give the file to Rory was wrong but I was doing it for all the right reasons.

Ryan's parole hearing was in a few weeks. I needed to do whatever it took to make sure that I could be the big sister he needed when he got released. I prayed to God that he would get parole; it would kill him if he was refused again. This time, he had a responsible sister who could provide a roof over his head and a safe bed to sleep in.

Sure, finding a job after prison was difficult, but he was clean now. I'd find a way to support us both until he could get on his feet.

The burrito sat heavy on my stomach all afternoon, until four thirty when I decided to just get on with it. Carrying the Chester file and a second empty file deliberately, I went into Mildred's office.

My heart thumped in my chest and I swore I could actually hear it in my ears. I was convinced that each person who walked by was going to come in and catch me, so I locked the door. Even the pictures of Mildred's kids around her desk were watching me with suspicion.

Getting the Chester file was simple; it was under C... Duh. I grabbed the empty file I'd brought and stuffed the Chester file's contents

inside. The file was too big to photocopy, at least in one go. Maybe I'd find a way to photocopy sections and a time. But that added to the risk too.

It wasn't looking like I was going to be able to take a copy of the file.

*You're doing this for Ryan, the voice in my head reasoned, it's only his welfare that matters. Do what Rory wants and you won't get caught.*

Quickly, I did the only thing left to do: lock the cabinets and leave, pretending that none of this ever happened and that I wasn't breaking the law or giving in to a blackmailer. Back at my desk, I stuffed the file into the extra-large handbag I'd brought today. If anyone was to ask, I'd simply say I was going to catch up on some training paperwork tonight for my probation interview next week.

The probation interview that would have Mildred and Rory.

By hometime, I was keen to get out with my forbidden cargo. My heart sank as Louise was waiting around on the ground floor. I don't want to lie to her again.

"Have you seen the rain?!" she said, as I looked out the full-length windows to what looked like a typhoon. Someone's pink umbrella flew past all by itself.

"C'mon, I'll give you a lift home... I can't have you getting pneumonia on my conscience." With heavy feet, I followed her to the staff parking area, thankful that it was covered. I jumped into her car after the indicators flashed. I nursed my handbag, wrapping my arms around it to hide my decision. I just hoped it wasn't something I'd live to regret.

We chatted lightly as she slowly made her way through the rush hour traffic. When we finally arrived near my apartment block, I thanked her for what must have been the twentieth time and went to rush out of the car. In my haste to find my keys, the bag flew open and the folder came into view. "Jesus, you doing homework now? I didn't think Mildred was that bad?" Louise joked.

My face fell, "Um, well, no. I've got my probation meeting next week, so I wanna be ready." I lied... badly.

Louise reached for the file before I had a chance to grab it. "Well, I can help with that! Why didn't you just say?!"

"Wait!" I pleaded. Her smile dropped as soon as she opened the file.

"Are you fucking serious? What the hell are you doing, Ellie!" she snarled at me, rage radiating out of every pore.

She shook her head and watched out of the window, unable to look in my direction.

"Two fucking years undercover, two years of fucking mundane working and watching for you to come in for a few weeks and put the whole thing in jeopardy!"

Angry tears spilled from her eyes as she turned back at me.

"Have you any fucking idea what carnage you could create with this file - how many lives depend on the contents of this... I mean, did you even look in it?"

Two years? Doing... what? Working and watching?

The woman beside me was not the girl I'd made friends with on my first day at work.

I could barely speak, so it came out as a whisper. "Who *are* you?"

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

ELLIE

I gathered my things and got out of the car, fuck the folder - Louise can keep it now. I made a dash in the rain to get inside and was joined by Louise as I slid my key into my front door. She must have slipped past the main front door before it closed shut behind me.

Her voice was firm but low, "We need to talk."

I opened my door and she pushed past me.

"What the hell are you doing?" My gut screamed at me that something bad was going to happen.

"I thought we were friends," she started. "I can't believe you were going to give this to Rory and say nothing to me. I thought you trusted me?"

A fine sentiment for someone who just said something about two years' work. "Undercover? Fine way to trust me? I mean, what the fuck, Louise?"

She was already on the phone. "Yeah, I need you to come over... Ellie's house... yeah, I texted it to you... No, he's not here... They're not outside either... I'm fine... see you in five."

"Sit down." She spat the words at me. Even though I was in my own flat, I obeyed the command, for that's what it was. I watched in stunned silence as she filled my kettle, put it on to boil and gathered three mugs.

A loud knock came to my door before the tea was even made. Louise went to my door and answered it.

I heard low murmurs in the hallway before a man's voice. "Chester?!"

*Oh no. I recognized that voice.*

I stood up as I met him.

"Jesus, Louise! Why did you bring Daniel here?" I looked from one to the other: angry, confused and feeling outnumbered in my own home.

The baseball bat I kept for protection was hidden under my bed, and they were blocking my way to it.

"This isn't an excuse for you to phone him of all people."

"Sit down," Louise said, frostily.

"Here." she handed me a steaming mug.

"What have you told her?" Daniel spoke directly to Louise, the authority in his voice made me shake.

They were both ignoring me while in my home.

Louise paced, jaw clenching. "Nothing. I've not said anything, but she needs to know. That file would have sent over thirty families to their deaths."

"What?!" I said incredulously. That's not what it was about... Rory was blackmailing a few sleazy businessmen who kept dirty little sex secrets from their wives.

Daniel raked his hands over his still-sore looking face.

"Fuck it, you're right. She needs to know."

He turned to look at me, eyes piercing me so intensely I thought he could see into my soul and read all the secrets I ever held. "Have you heard of the Kindred Sons?"

"Aye, your family's involved... you're an Armstrong."

*Shit.*

I tried to backtrack.

"I mean, that's what I've heard."

*I can't let him know I came from around here as a kid.*

"Well, you've done your homework." Louise quipped. "Any idea who the Doyle's are?"

"Heard they're a rival gang. You said as much to me yourself."

I was going to stick to minimal talking, surely that would be my safest strategy right now.

"No shit, well Rory's one of them, and the file you were about to give has the list of all the families that get support money from the Kindred Sons for their fallen."

My mouth must have gaped open because I remember closing it and swallowing. The implications of what I was going to do hit me like a steam train.

Daniel continued, "That file keeps a record of who and when all support payments are made. With those details, the Doyle's would have paid a little visit to every single family and..." he didn't need to make the gun shape with his hands... I already knew where he was going.

Louise finally sat down. "How'd you get involved in all this?" I asked. She'd told me she grew up nowhere near here. She definitely didn't have a local accent either, so I'd believed her without question.

Daniel answered for her. "Her father, my uncle, was a Kindred Son. He fell many years ago. We protect our own."

"I'm sorry." I knew what it was like to grow up without a father.

My eyes flashed back to her with shame as that revelation sank in fully.



"Oh my god, I didn't realize you were related - after me teasing you about him being your boyfriend!" Embarrassment flamed up my cheeks.

She was calming down but hadn't forgiven me. "My mum's on that list, you know. You would have been handing Rory the bullet to shoot her."

Daniel was quick to defuse Louise. "Look, she didn't know what was in the file... but this puts us at an advantage." We both looked at him in confusion.

"He's expecting you to deliver a file." He looked at me and then around the room, eyes searching for the next part of his idea. "I can put together a nice little list for him... you'll give that to him."

"Thank fuck you were there Louise," he said, his tone softening, "Uncle Steven would be proud of you."

The affection between them was clear now; I saw it for what it was... a family connection. The look he gave her took me back to watching my Grandma look at Ryan and me.

Was it wrong for me to feel so relieved?

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

ELLIE

Louise wrapped her hands around her mug as if the heat brought her comfort. "Most of the Kindred Son's business accounts are handled through Sawyer's. I do a fair bit of them - including working on the Chester file." She breathed deeply.

"Mildred thinks is a pensions contract for a logistics firm and Rory doesn't realize my connection."

She gave me a lopsided smile. "He thinks he's been blackmailing me about it for about a year and a half now, but the info I've been feeding him is all false - leading them on goose chases and letting the Doyle's think we're not as... comfortable... as we really are."

"He didn't..." I felt the pit of my stomach lurch. I was taller, heavier, and probably stronger than her. If she had been in the kitchen rather than me, I doubted she'd have been strong enough to get away.

"No, no." She said reassuringly.

"He did try to sweet talk me at the start, but I already knew enough about him to keep under that particular radar.

That was something, at least.

"Mum was pregnant with me when dad was shot." She said, her expression blank as if recounting facts that had not torn her world apart.

"He died about six weeks before I was born, so he saw my ultrasound pictures, and I have seen photos of him, but that's what we were to each other - photos."

She pulled up some images on her phone: the first of a smiling couple, the woman looking particularly like her, the man's hand gently touching the woman's pregnant belly; the second, of the same man standing beside another man that I assumed to be Daniel's dad; then a picture of two young children.

"That's mum and dad, see, she's about 6 months pregnant with me there. This next one is our dads - Daniel's and mine - they were brothers; that last one is Daniel and me... you were ten there, I would have been, what? Six?"

"Aye, that was Manchester, Mum always took me over there for the summer," Daniel confirmed.

"Without the Kindred Sons and their protection, my mum would have been penniless and more than likely killed. They protected her when we were most vulnerable. I've committed to do whatever I can to keep bastards like the Doyle's from getting anywhere near ours. Blood and Loyalty."

"Blood and Loyalty." Daniel automatically echoed.

A grim smile crossed her face. "The bastard that killed my father is dead, but his son is very much alive. I can only hope to be there when that changes."

After his fling with one of the Armstrong's - something I wasn't about to tell - my dad had left and was never seen again.

As for mum, when Social Services threatened to take Ryan and me, Grandma stepped in as guardian, being awarded it easily with her grandparent status. That and the fact it meant there were two fewer kids for social services to try to re-home when there was already a willing family member to shoulder the responsibility.

Mum managed to drink herself into an early grave a couple of years later. The only ones who were my blood and where my loyalty lay were Grandma and Ryan. In truth, I felt jealous of what Daniel and

Louise had. A family, somewhere they belonged that protected its own. Blood and Loyalty.

I could have said I wouldn't hand over any file, but how could I not help them protect their families? This was what I needed to do for mine: blood and loyalty.

I went to business: "Rory has said that I'm to meet with a guy called Barry in Flanagan's, but he hasn't given me a day or time yet. How soon can you get me the fake file?"

Both of them seemed to breathe for the first time. Although how they would have imagined I could have done anything other than deliver a fake file after hearing the truth was beyond me.

I wasn't exactly in a position to *not do* what they'd asked. Since I'd almost unwittingly provided Rory with Louise's mother's information which would have likely seen him discover her true identity, I definitely did not have other options, nor would I have taken them.

"I'll have it with you by tomorrow morning before you leave for work." Daniel stood and stretched.

"Obviously, you won't tell anyone about this - or anything we've discussed. I have your mobile number. Make sure to answer when I call you."

"You have a lot to think about," Louise said as she hugged me, "I don't believe you're in any danger right now since Rory doesn't know you know about the Kindred Sons. He'll want to leave you alone right now as he'll be thinking you're getting the file for him."

She stopped at the door before leaving. "He won't want to spook you. You'll be safe tonight."

"If you feel in any danger call Louise. Immediately. Stay on the line with her until she comes round. Keep talking about what you see, hear or smell. Worst case, that can help us find you more quickly if needs be."

The way he said it made me suddenly feel very vulnerable. He must have picked up on it and he placed his hands on my shoulders.

"You're part of us now; we'll protect you, but know this: I cannot protect you if you squeal. I will find you though, and am honor bound to bring you back to the Kindred Sons for trial."

I shivered under the weight of his words and the feel of his hands on me. Electric fizzled despite the obvious threat he'd given me. I couldn't tear my eyes from his.

"By the way, Louise couldn't be further from my type..." he shook his head, laughing at some unknown joke, "Secret Boyfriend... as if anyone would dare hide me."

"I'll be back tomorrow morning. Make sure you're up. Wouldn't want to walk in on you still sleeping."

The wicked glint in his eyes made me wonder exactly what time he would return in the morning.

To my shame, I didn't want him to leave.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

DANIEL

I'd made my excuses about phone calls and watched as Louise pulled away from Ellie's flat. Da needed to know, but I could do that from anywhere. This was the only spot where I could keep an eye on Elle and batter anyone who went anywhere near her.

When I'd first arrived, the urge to bend her over my knee and spank her for being so naive was almost overwhelming. Seeing how distraught she was eased me a little. Louise had already filled me in on the fake sex video.

I wanted to make Rory pay just for that - as if that greasy asshole could ever satisfy a woman. Jealous that someone else dared to imagine touching her made me want to sneak Ellie into my own office and make our own little recording.

But it would be for my eyes only.

*Focus, idiot.* I reprimanded myself.

I unlocked my phone and called Da. He answered on the fourth ring.

When I finished the call with him, I gave Nevan the call to get started on the fake information. He was a genius at that kind of stuff - I suggested he used names of people we knew were Doyle supporters, which he loved - double agents were deeply hated. This was a perfect opportunity to bring a little chaos and mistrust to Rory's world.

Dad wanted me to bring Ellie to Chester House... tonight. Just thinking about it made me swear aloud in the car. There was a party planned for tonight for Mathew's dad, George had turned 45 and there was always an excuse for a party as far as my mum was concerned. I'd have to sneak Ellie in by the back door unless I wanted everyone to see her. Part of me liked the idea of that, but no, I got the impression that she would be terrified enough without meeting the full tribe.

She answered on the second ring. "Hello?" a nervous Ellie said.

"Hey, it's Daniel."

"Is something wrong?" Straight to high alert despite me telling her not to worry. What? Did she think I couldn't take care of her?

I could it in her voice, the girl was seriously stressed... same as me. I could remedy that for both of us.

"Relax, all's fine. I'm coming round in ten minutes. Just wanted to give you a chance to make yourself pretty." I smiled to myself and hung up.

*Let's see what she makes of that.*

I knocked on her door exactly ten minutes later, she answered immediately. Her hair was straightened and she'd changed out of her work clothes. Jeans looked good on her.

"I see you took my advice then," I said as I walked in before being asked.

"I had changed out of my work clothes before you rang." She said defiantly.

"I've just been watching TV."

A lie, I'd watched the lights flicker on and off in the few rooms in her tiny home since I hung up our call.

*I guess she regularly straightened her hair to just watch tv then.*

From this angle, from above her, I could make out the faint line of where her hair dye had started to grow out. I'd seen enough girls

with bleach blonde hair and dark roots but never blonde roots.

Clearly brown was not Ellie's natural color.

*There's always one way to find out.* I pushed the thought away, it was already hard enough to behave well in such a confined space without thinking of that.

My earlier fantasy replayed in my head again, this time, she was blonde. Everywhere.

I felt my cock twitch in appreciation. He liked, he liked a lot.

The last thing she needed to see right now was my growing hard-on. I walked towards the kitchen area of the room, raking my fingers through my hair as I paced, trying to focus on something, anything, that would distract me from imagining her tight wet pussy.

"Well, fix your lipstick. We're going to a party." I called back to her.

"I don't know anyone having a party tonight." Her tone was full of innocence and rebellion. She eyed me suspiciously before lifting the TV remote and roaming through channels.

I reached behind the TV, killing the power to the set. "Well, now you do. When Carrick Anderson, the Boss of the Kindred Sons wants to see you, you go."

Did something flash across her face - *disappointment*?

"Oh, ok, I just thought you..." that beautiful blush rose on her cheeks again. "Never mind."

I called it. "You thought I was asking you out?" I bit back the laugh that threatened to rumble up my chest.

She'd been serious and I wouldn't laugh at that. I wouldn't belittle her. But really, she'd actually thought that I'd take her to a party?

I sat down beside her. Those pink cheeks deepened to a hue of scarlet that I suddenly adored. "Ellie, I don't do dates. If I did, I would do it a lot better than some party."



"That's fine Daniel, I um, it's not like you'd ask me out anyway. You've probably got a nice little harem of mafia princesses to pick from." She jumped off the sofa and disappeared into a bedroom. I followed, of course.

She was brushing her hair as I walked in. I knew my presence made her a little uneasy, but I kind of liked the sass she was starting to give me. "If I was asking you out on a date, it wouldn't be to a stupid birthday party. A woman like you? I'd keep you all to myself."

She froze and the slightest gasp escaped her lips before a sarcastic expression covered her face.

*Oh, Ellie, whatever has happened to you?* I wondered.

"You don't see yourself properly." I took a step closer, feeling the pull inside me wanting to take her right there on her own unmade bed. *If you only knew...* I thought. And for the briefest of seconds, the image from my shower fantasy played in my mind.

My cock hardened again at the thought. He'd liked that little adventure and he was all for me pushing her onto her own bed.

Blonde or brunette? We could find out for certain.

But I had more respect for her than that. More respect for any woman than that.

She moved away a little, still facing me but unintentionally in front of the mirror. I could see the reflection of her ass in those jeans and I just wanted to bite it. As if I would trust any of my lackeys to be within twenty foot of her right now. My jealous streak just wouldn't take it.

She caught what I'd been staring at and for a second I saw what she was so desperately trying to hide - there was something there. Attraction.

She did like me. She just didn't want me to know.

*Women.*

Her cheeks flushed and the slightest smile played with the corners of her mouth. But then the veil rose again and she raised her eyebrows asking a question her mouth would never say. "Can't blame me for looking at it. *You've* got on helluva of a sweet ass. Now let's move it - you're keeping the boss-man waiting."

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

ELLIE

I couldn't believe the front of this guy. Openly following me into my bedroom and then gawping at my ass in the mirror... only to *blame* me! Shameless. God, I shouldn't like it, but heaven help me, it made me feel all kinds of things to my very core.

*Hot, sweaty, breathless, dirty, fun things.*

I knew now he wasn't with Louise, but that didn't mean he was single, or that he wanted anything more from me than this file handover. And even if he did, he was the kind of guy who just wanted *one* thing from a woman.

Perhaps his actions were all a ruse to keep me sweet. That was a very real possibility too.

"I'm not waitin' all night." He strode out of my bedroom and into the tiny hall as if he owned the place. "You're fine as you are, come on." I gave myself one last glance in the mirror and was surprised at how flustered I looked.

*Get it together, Kate.* I gritted my teeth, fuck; I shouldn't be calling myself that anymore - even if it was only in my own head... *Get it together, Ellie.*

The torrential rain from earlier had died down to a fine mist, the kind that played havoc with a girl's hair. I had to keep reminding

myself that it wasn't a date, but I still wanted him to see me at my best.

How he'd thought that giving any girl ten minutes warning was ever enough was well beyond me.

*Men.*

"We're nearly there," he said as he slowed onto a quieter avenue. Then he turned the car into some space.

He reached for a black key fob that was sitting on the car's console. He pointed and clicked in the direction of a large set of gates. He slowed in front of them, waiting only seconds for the gates to be opened, electronically.

Made sense I suppose. Even though we were in a more rural area now, further out from the city center, this area was full of grand houses, all in their gilded cages of high walls, gates, and hidden security cameras.

"Wow." I murmured to myself more than to him. "Beautiful." And it was: the fountain at the front, the soft glowing way the house was lit, the weeping willow that was bedazzled in twinkling lights. Then I swallowed. I saw the dozen or so cars parked to the side we were passing - none of which I could ever afford to rent for an hour, never mind own.

I watched as a man opened the door of one of the cars and watched a middle-aged woman in effortless glamour glide out; so demurely she almost floated. Her hair and makeup were perfect, her dress was clearly designer, and the shoes were easily more expensive than my month's wages, if not more. I looked down at my best jeans and felt very inferior.

"So, as I said, Carrick wants to meet you." Daniel said, entirely comfortable in his own ripped jeans and a vintage tee shirt. I suppose if you had a body like that, it didn't matter what you wore - you always looked great.

*I bet he looks great without those jeans too.*

“He’s not one for the big party scene, so he’ll probably be in the library. We’ll just go straight up there. OK?”

He parked in the corner, away from the other cars and ushered me in through a back door where the caterers were busy preparing what smelt like food for the gods. My tummy rumbled in appreciation. Thank god for the noise in the room. The appetite I’d lost earlier was back with a vengeance.

He directed me, the heat of his hand radiating from the small of my back to my core. I heard laughing and music come from somewhere beyond but then he directed me up a flight of stairs to dark quietness.

He opened the door to what I realized was the library; simply due to the number of books... who owned these?

Did they ever get read? I wondered.

*I could spend a lifetime in here.*

“Wait here a sec,” he said with mild irritation. “He knew we were coming.” With that, Daniel closed the door and I was alone in the room.

A couple of minutes later he returned, and I instinctively stood up from the plush sofa I had perched on. His irritation had grown. “He wants us to go to his office. It’s only down the hall.” He gave me a tight smile. “C’mon.”

Carrick was standing as I walked in. “Ellie, nice to meet you.” He greeted me with an outstretched hand that I shook. “You’re very welcome to me home. Why don’t you sit down?” his heavy Belfast accent jarring even to my ears, I’d often thought of it as a menacing accent, but on him, right now, it sounded homely – comforting even. I felt my shoulders relax ever so slightly. *Don’t forget who he is.* The pressure returned.

“So Daniel here tells me that you’ve been havin’ a bit of bother.” I liked that he just got straight to the point rather than too much small talk. “But he also tells me that you were going to deal with that

bother in a way that would have ended badly for everyone. Very badly."

I swallowed. This was the Boss, the Don of the Kindred Sons - *and was that a poorly veiled threat?*

"She didn't know what was in the file." Daniel said simply, "She was under the impression Rory wanted to blackmail a businessman who used Rory's women."

Carrick's eyes threw daggers at Daniel. "Aye, and that makes it better then? Sure, she didn't know what she was doing?" He stood up and looked directly at me, "You're very lucky, wee girl, that Daniel here was able to come up with a way of turning this around."

I winced. Daniel muttered something under his breath that I couldn't make out.

Carrick moved over to the side table and poured himself what seemed to be whiskey. Sipping it before returning his death stare to me. God, this man went from kindly and kind of fatherly to mafia boss in a split second. "Do you know who we are?" He asked plainly.

I cleared my throat before I spoke. "Yes," I said, as loudly as I could. "I do. I'm so sorry for what could've happened - I didn't know. I'd never do that."

"Louise has told you that her ma's in that file?" He said, "My brother's wife?!" It took a second for that to sink in... his brother's wife? The resemblance dawned on me from the pictures on Louise's phone earlier. The two men who were together: one was her father and this guy, Carrick, now that I looked closer, was the older version of the second guy.

"I'm so sorry." I felt the heat radiate from my cheeks as I burned with embarrassment. I bit the inside of my cheek in the hopes it would stop the tears that threatened to fall.

Then it hit me, and for yet another time in my life, my mouth ran unfiltered before my brain had a chance to stop it.

"Then you're Daniel's dad!" I looked to Daniel, his face expressionless, then I saw the picture on the wall - the same one that Louise had on her phone.

"Aye, Ellie, that I am." He looked back at Daniel, "Though how I haven't managed to teach you a single thing, I'll never know."

I was the only one sitting and I couldn't help it, my eyes flicked from one man to the other. The likeness was there, I just hadn't noticed it. Although Carrick was an older man, with the finest wisps of grey at his temples, he was still physically fit. Still built. But that was nothing in comparison to the young, jacked body of his son.

Daniel was the one looking uncomfortable now.

"I won't say anything or tell anyone," I said earnestly. "Daniel's told me what I need to do." I stood up.

"I know what could have happened and I'm so sorry, but I'll make it right." I had to fix this and he had to believe me. I knew what the Anderson's were like and from the glare I'd just got from the boss (*Daniel's dad!*) if I didn't get this right it would be the last thing I'd do.

I stood up, accepting my fate, "I promise."

The air shifted in the room, "That's a good girl." He said, cooling instantly.

"I knew you would, I just had to speak with you meself to put me mind at ease. I'm sure you know what I mean."

"I won't let you down, Carrick, um Mr. Anderson." I wouldn't, but as soon as I did the handover with Rory's friend. I would be gone.

Ellie would disappear and Ryan would have to move away to live with me. He'd be disappointed as he'd wanted to move back to Londonderry, but he'd get over it.

No matter how much I'd want to hope, everyone knew there was no way out once you're involved with the mafia, I just hoped we could both disappear safely.

Carrick swirled the brown liquid in his glass, the nice guy was back, "Well, now we've got that sorted, why don't you slip downstairs and grab yourself a bite to eat?"

As we left the room, Daniel's hand was again at my back, but it didn't bring the same comfort as before. I knew now that he was the son of the Don, that brought responsibilities, I was sure of it - and the knot in the pit of my stomach told me that whatever I felt for him wouldn't matter now.

I couldn't be involved with the Kindred Sons and the risk of being known.

I needed to leave him behind.



## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

DANIEL

I was glad she'd figured out I was Carrick's son. I didn't have to lie - not that it usually bothered me, but I reasoned that it was easier if she knew enough so she'd do her job. Not that she could do much else. The security cameras would now have her image and measurements on file. If she disappeared, we could find her - provided we had enough time and she went somewhere we could get their camera footage. No one could really go off-grid in 2019.

There was no way in hell that I was taking her to the actual party. It would have been like taking a lamb to the slaughter. Plus, mum would have thought I'd brought her as my date.

I needed *that* headache even less.

I spoke to one of the servers and had them bring us a couple of plates of food to the den. Ellie followed me, quietly until we'd sat on the sofas. "Are you upset with me?" I'd only asked because I knew it would be important for her to trust me for the drop, but now I'd asked, I really wanted to know, to ease her - and to ease myself.

The food and the beers I'd asked for arrived within a few moments. She still hadn't spoken, she just watched the ground and shook her head occasionally.

"Here, I'm sure you're hungry." I offered.

"Oh," her reverie broken, she spoke politely. "Thank you." She took the plate to her lap and started eating.

"Mmmm! This is gorgeous!" her surprise amused me.

"Yeah, they do all sorts of food for the parties, but they always make a big pot of stew too." I hid my smile with another bite.

"This is fantastic!" She ate greedily and I was both happy and displeased at the same time. I loved a woman who enjoyed her food, but I got the feeling she hadn't been eating properly and the way she was wolfing the piping hot stew down was something else.

"My Grandma used to make it all the time - always used Doherty's mince, though." Now, why wasn't that a surprise?

Because Ellie has a history in this area.

I knew it. I fucking knew it!

*Give her time, the voice in my head reasoned, she'll tell you herself when she's ready.*

We finished our food and our bottles of beer in a relative calm but I could see she felt out of place here. I agreed, I didn't like these affairs either - too much gossip and mundane conversation for me. Out there she'd be given cocktails or champagne, something frilly with no substance.

At least she looked comfortable as she sipped from her bottle of Bud, *I need to remember she likes Budweiser.*

She was the best-dressed woman in the whole house, the rest all style but in reality no substance. The blouse brought out the blue in her eyes, making me revisit my shower fantasy once again, those wide eyes looking into me as she'd demanded I'd fill her.

Her eyes caught me watching her again and I knew she was uncertain of me. I'd be a fool if I didn't know why. I was everything a good girl like her had been told to avoid. Warned about even. If she hadn't already figured it out, she definitely knew now. I was Daniel Anderson - Under Boss of the Kindred Sons.

“Well, I’d better get you back home. You’ve got an early start in the morning and I’ll be around with the files before you leave for work.” I stood as I spoke, she took the nonverbal cue and obeyed.

“Sure thing, I just need to um... visit the bathroom first.”

I watched as her body moved, god she was sexy as hell.

Those hips, that ass, even the push-pull of how I knew she liked me, maybe even wanted me, but wouldn’t admit it.

There was a fighter in her, one I could only hope to tame.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

ELLIE

*H*e directed me to the bathroom beside the mudroom. I was glad I didn't need to go into the actual party but at the same time I felt a tinge of hurt - was he really that embarrassed to be seen with me.

*Not embarrassed, disgusted. He's just using you for this blackmail thing.*

My inner critic took joy in trying to bring my mood lower. I looked at the woman in the mirror as I washed my hands and I couldn't help but think my critic had a valid point.

My inner critic also pointed out that my roots were beginning to show. *Classy, girl.* It teased.

*I bet none of those ladies out there have roots, and I bet that none of Daniel's girlfriends ever have roots.*

I should have touched up those roots last night.

I dried my hands on the plush hand towel and left the bathroom feeling defeated. If he didn't want to be seen with me, then he didn't have the slightest interest in me.

*In this state, who would want to be seen with you?* Again, my inner critic was my worst enemy and I hated her for it.

I took a deep, steadying breath.

*It's for the best...* I consoled myself.

After all, it was better this way: I had to protect Ryan and make up for not being there when he had truly needed me.

As I opened the door I saw his attention move from the door to the guy he was talking to. I'd been watched as closely as was appropriate. He'd been leaning against the jamb of the door to the kitchen but had stood up and was leaving the other guy.

"Right, Nev, sure I'll catch up with you later." He slapped the guy on the arm as he left. Turning his focus on me, "Y'alright?" he was too handsome for words, it physically hurt to think about how he was only being nice in any way to me was because of the file drop. All I could do was nod.

The way home again started off in silence, he must have sensed I didn't want to talk and to his credit, he didn't force a conversation. When the houses got closer together and turned into high rise flats, he spoke. "You'll be home soon, Ellie." He paused, his mouth opened to say more then he stopped short. A sigh. Then he gripped the steering wheel.

I heard "Fuck," under his breath, then he started to speak to me again.

"Look, I know it's not an ideal situation, it's not what you want to do. I get that you didn't know what was in the file, but Jesus, not to look at what you were giving away..."

His head shook dismissively, "That's not even the point." Another sigh.

"I won't let Rory hurt ye, I suppose that's all I'm trying to say." His lips formed a flat line across his face. "He'll pay for what he's done already. I should've kicked the shit out of him for what he tried that day in Sawyer's alone."

Shock kept me from speaking, but he used the opportunity to talk more.

"A woman like you... it must be hard to be on your own, y'know, keeping yourself safe. I don't know why you picked Londonderry to move to, it's dangerous. It's not right." Another pause.

"At least you know now that I'll... I mean, the Kindred Son's, will protect you." He laughed a dry laugh to himself. "Someone should be watching that back of yours, at least to admire that jiggle as you walk."

Was he making fun of me? "You don't have to say that y'know. I get you're just being polite." His head shot round in confusion.

"I know I'm not a size zero, ok? I don't need false compliments that we both know aren't true, ok?"

He pulled the car in to the side of the road, we'd reached my place already.

"I meant what I said earlier, you really don't see yourself as you are. When I look at a woman, she should be just that: a woman. Tits, ass, soft, sweet..." his eyes met mine, "That's how I see you."

My defenses stormed up. I didn't want them to, but there they were.

"Nice... no brain in there?"

Were women really only in his life for that one thing?

His hand reached for my chin, holding it firmly so I could only look into his eyes.

"Without a brain, the rest counts for nothing." I felt the electricity surge at his touch. I couldn't help it; I wanted to believe him.

I heard two clicks, the seatbelts being opened, and then he moved closer. "You don't know the effect you have." His hand moved to touch the side of my face and then to stroke my hair. "Ellie, you're a very beautiful woman."

Heat pooled in my core and involuntarily I clenched my thighs together. We both understood it was a line, but I was happy to pretend we both thought it was true.

I'd be leaving this place again soon anyway. Once this handover was finished, I'd never see him again anyway.

For once, I gave into exactly what my body wanted. *Needed.*

I leaned into his hand, putting my own on his. He moved closer, placing the sweetest kiss on my lips. Then he broke off the kiss, to look at me, "Never think you are anything less than beautiful."

I watched his tongue flick over his own lips and then he kissed me again. Deeper this time, and then I felt his tongue. The floodgates opened from somewhere and I kissed him passionately. My hands roamed his body of their own accord exploring the strong powerful muscles as far as I could, still sitting in the car.

His hands were better behaved than mine to start with, then I felt the buttons on my blouse being popped enough for a hot hand to slid inside. He cupped my breast before sliding his hand beneath my bra. A moan escaped my lips involuntarily, he'd found my nipple and was shamelessly teasing it.

Tormenting it would have described the sensation better.

Even as I spoke the words, I couldn't quite believe it was me saying them - or who I was saying them to.

"Would you like to come in... for... coffee or something?"

## CHAPTER TWENTY

ELLIE

*W*e walked quickly back to my flat. Ran, practically. Me, because I wanted to do this so badly, and before I could talk myself out of it. Fuck, it had been so long since I'd even *wanted* to be with a man, never mind actually being with a man.

*He's only doing this to keep you sweet, you're a pity fuck.* The inner critic got swiftly ignored.

I was so hot for him that I would take him any way I could get him. Ignorance could be bliss.

He playfully slapped my ass as I unlocked the communal front door, then properly grabbing it as he kissed me again as we went inside. "I need to be inside you." He breathed into my ear as I felt his jeans push against mine - fuck, the straining bulge beneath was huge. By the time we'd got to my front door he was holding my hand and rushing me forwards.

Then everything changed.

*I thought I'd locked this door.*

A confused thought drifted through my head. His demeanor changed and he pushed me back. "Stay here." I watched as he moved through my door.

He arrived back to me with a serious expression. "I don't think anything has been stolen, but you should come in and check."



He was right, nothing was stolen but the place was messed up and the mood was well and truly gone.

"Want that coffee?" I asked, the humor not lost on me that *coffee* was the whole reason he had come with me.

*Thank god Daniel's here.*

I had no idea what I would have done if I'd found the place alone... Christ, what if they had come in whilst I was still here?

I went to grab some milk from the fridge and froze. Daniel was beside me in an instant. "What is it?" concern thick in his voice.

"That," I said, simply. Pointing to the white envelope on my fridge door. "That's not mine."

He moved the dolphin magnet and took the envelope. "Do you want to...?" I shook my head, petrified of what could be inside.

His strong hands held the envelope for a moment before one of his thumbs tore along a side to open it. He looked inside and as he pulled the contents out, I saw the tick in his jaw that I already knew meant he was ready to kill something.

Or someone.

He threw the contents onto my small kitchen table in disgust.

"Fuck."

He grabbed his phone from his pocket and started to make a phone call.

"Fuck's sake." he swore again.

Daniel moved to my hallway and absently I heard him talk quickly with someone. Curiosity steadied my hands enough to lift the card from the table. It was a simple, white sympathy card, with a picture of a white Lily on the front. The inside was empty. Strange.

"You're leaving with me. Now. You've got two minutes to grab whatever you want to bring with you. Do you have a rucksack? Get

it for me." Daniel's command brought me out of my head and was the poke I needed to get into action.

I went to Ryan's room and retrieved my backpack from the empty wardrobe. To my sheer horror, Daniel was already in my room, emptying drawers of socks, bras, and panties onto the bed.

"I can do that!" I rushed over immediately taking over - just who the fuck did he think he was?!

"You're staying with me till I fix this." He appeared back into the bedroom with handfuls of my toiletries - toothbrush, toothpaste, shampoo, the unopened box of hair dye, tampons... *oh lord, does he have no boundaries?*

I felt my face blazing with embarrassment. Who was he to grab such personal items? I'd never felt so exposed.

"It'll be OK once I get my lock changed." I'd been broken into before, they didn't take anything that time either - I honestly had nothing of value to take.

"The fuck it will." He said angrily. "C'mon," he grabbed the bag and started zipping it. "We're leaving now."

"Hold on," I said angrily. "This is my home, some drug addict isn't going to scare me - besides, now they see I've got fuck all to take, they'll move on to someone else."

He stopped, raking his hands over his face. "I forget that you don't understand how this operates." He stalked over to the table, lifting the card. "This is a sympathy card, sweetheart," he looked at it in disgust, "Why do people get them? And look," he reached down and lifted something from the ground. "What do you think this is?"

A Polaroid picture had been inside the card and must have fallen to the ground. He held it for me to take. When I turned it over to reveal the picture, I felt my legs turn to lead.

It was of Daniel and me leaving my flat earlier.

*Had someone been watching me? But who?*

I knew the answer before I'd even asked myself the question.

*Rory was involved in this.*

"As I said, I'll protect you, but we need to play for time right now."

He stepped closer to me, and put his arm protectively around me, enveloping me in his heady mix of cologne, musk, and spices.

"Ellie, sweetheart, this is a death threat from the Doyle's. *You're leaving with me, now.*"

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

ELLIE

I left my flat in a daze, letting Daniel lead me back to his car and I noticed absently that the windows were still steamed up. Daniel muttered and grumbled to himself, every so often I'd hear some sort of expletive being cursed under his breath.

I certainly didn't claim to know him very well, but I could feel exactly how seriously pissed he was about this.

Me? I was shellshocked. Even when Ryan had managed to ring up thousands of dollars of debts to the Doyle's, they'd threatened to beat the shit out of him, but never openly threatened to kill him... or had I been too naive? No wonder Ryan did what he did.

Firstly I had made my peace with what I thought I was going to do by giving Rory the file, who I now knew for certain was part of the Doyle's. That's every bit as bad as what they'd made Ryan do - except I can't get caught as he'd been.

Now I'd managed to go full circle, so instead of helping one mafia group, I'm helping another. The Kindred Sons were still Irish Mafia, no matter how you dressed them up.

*How long before they find out about you and you get two death threats, eh, KATE?*

I shook my head to clear my critic away. I couldn't think like that or I wouldn't live long enough to regret it.

Daniel must have noticed my head shaking, as he placed a comforting hand on my leg as he drove.

"Don't worry, sweetheart. Those cunts will pay for this. Mathew's already got someone changing the lock - do you want anything else from the flat?" I shook my head.

I'd made sure to pack my work things - they were the only things I needed for tomorrow morning, everything else can get sorted after that... *when I get back to my flat for long enough to grab everything I need to really disappear.*

The things I'd hidden underneath the floorboards in my bedroom: both mine and Ryan's birth certificates.

The high rises were fading into the distance again. "We're not going back to your dad's, are we?" I really hoped not - Carrick might see me as too much bother. I didn't want to be on any mafia radar, especially if they thought I was a problem.

"Nope." Was all he said. "I'm hungry. Did you get enough to eat earlier or could you eat again?" His eye flicked between me and watching the road ahead as he drove. "I fancy a KFC."

Fried chicken had never done me wrong before but I didn't want to appear too keen - women were supposed to be pretty little things that picked at their food. Besides, we'd already had the stew. "I could eat. I suppose." I said as nonchalantly as I could muster.

We went around the drive-thru. "We're nearly there, so we may as well eat in the house." Five minutes later we'd pulled up outside a high wall, waiting as Daniel pressed a second key fob he retrieved from his pocket.

A detached house came into view and although it looked empty in the darkness, I noticed a few blinking lights. Security.

*This must be a safe house.*

Again, we entered by the back door which led into a small hall and then a large kitchen. The appliances were expensive, as was the furniture but it felt... empty.

Functional but not personal.

I grabbed a couple of plates from a cupboard and we ate greedily at the table.

"I like a woman who enjoys her food." He said. I stared, ready to leave.

He shook his head, "No, I don't mean that in a bad way, sweetheart. I love my food, it's good to see someone else who enjoys theirs the same way."

I went to open my mouth but he leaned over and I was met with a brief kiss. "That's all I meant, and you know it."

He stood up, taking all the rubbish with him and dumping it into the trash can outside. I heard him wash his hands in the utility room before coming back in.

"Right. I think a little nightcap is in order." With that, he showed me the bottle of Bushmills Whiskey he'd been hiding behind his back. He retrieved two glasses. "Come on."

The lounge was almost as plain as the kitchen. Filled with what was obviously expensive furniture, but with minimal cozy touches.

*A man decorated this place,* I mused.

He handed me a filled glass and clinked it to his own. "Slante."

"Cheers," I responded as I watched him, his Adam's apple bobbed once as he swallowed the whole drink in one go. I followed suit.

"Good girl, yourself." He said, somehow pleased I'd drank all of mine.

"Here, let me get that for you." More brown liquid refilled my glass.

By the third refill I had stopped caring that I felt like I was glowing all over; kind of like a Christmas tree. The smooth whiskey had massaged all my stress away and I was feeling great.

In fact, I was feeling pretty fucking awesome.

"I was sixteen the first time I got a death threat." He said, his tone matter of fact. Changing the direction of the conversation I an instant. "Da said you weren't a real man until someone wanted to end you."

"Guess I must be a real woman now then," I giggled, even though it really wasn't funny.

"Ah, now, sweetheart. You're a real woman alright."

His eyes roamed over me. From his spot on the sofa, I could see the front of his jeans and remembered what I had felt hidden beneath the material.

"Do you like what you see, then?" he asked confidently - almost goading me.

"Yeah." I said, the drink giving me the courage I sorely lacked.

He lifted his hand to his ear, cupping it. "Sorry, love, I can't hear you from all the way over there... maybe you should come over here." He said cockily.

I stood up, steadied myself a little as the room tilted - *how strong had that stuff been?*

It might have been a little wobbly, but I walked over, snuggling myself beside him and into the crook of his arm where he'd lifted it for me.

"So, were you saying you liked what you saw?" His accent seemed even stronger now, now he was talking softly into my ear.

"What's not to like?" I asked, "Look at you. Not just the muscles but fuck, you have the sexiest eyes. Those eyes could really get a girl in trouble."

"Nothing about a brain then?" he teased.

I had been through so much lately, and today had been a disaster. I didn't want to play mind games with this hulk of a man. I needed him to pound me into tomorrow so I could wake up sore but satisfied. I took a deep breath to give myself courage.

"I'm not interested in your brains, I just want you to fuck me."

He eyed me suspiciously, "And just how much have you had to drink there?" his hands stroking my face. "Is Ellie there or is that my whiskey talkin'?"

I slid on top of him, feeling like I needed to do this. "Yeah, I've had a couple of drinks but I know what I want... I just need a little courage-juice to help me say it." My hands roamed over his broad chest then down to find the bottom of his tee shirt and crawl underneath.

The movement made him roll his head back and close his eyes, giving me ample opportunity to truly take his face in. The whole time, my hands journeyed over his rock-hard abs, his pecs and I couldn't resist playing with his nipples like he had started to with mine earlier. His eyes sprung open and I loved how it was me he was looking at - like he wanted to devour every single part of me.

"Awh, sweetheart, you're too much." He smiled wickedly, "C'mere," I leaned down and his mouth claimed mine with a deep kiss. He moved and suddenly he was on top of me, opening my blouse. He stopped for a second to look at my breasts as they spilled over my lace bra. Next thing I knew, he had my top and my bra laying on the floor, his mouth trailing a line of kisses down to my nipple where he took it into his mouth and the sweetest torture.

He moved to the other breast, "Ohh, Daniel." I was such a cliché but I couldn't have cared less.

"Lift up for me, sweetheart." His hands hand unbuttoned my jeans and he wanted them off me. I obeyed instantly, I suddenly felt too hot and too constricted with them on anyway.

I heard him hiss when he saw the scars. Yep, they were bound to be a passion killer.

"What happened?" his voice was full of concern.

"Operation a few years ago," I said quickly. "Doc made a bit of a mess, but it's all ok now."



I prayed he'd believe me and not go into questioning how I had really got the deep pink scars.

Besides, I needed him to fuck me, not ask me about things I'd rather forget.

*"Just fuck me,"* I begged.

He removed my underwear with the jeans, throwing them onto the bundle where my blouse lay. He was completely clothed, yet I was completely naked.

His eyes roamed my body and with the greedy smile on his face I didn't feel ashamed of my body or my scars for once, I felt proud - he seemed to like what he saw. He moved me on the sofa until my ass was at the edge, the low armrest underneath me, and my legs dangling over the side.

He sat on his knees and moved towards me, spreading my legs apart as he kissed up one leg, making his way towards my core.

I nearly buckled with that first touch. A simple, long lick of his tongue over my clit was everything there was. I heard another desperate moan escape my lips but I didn't care - I needed him to do that again.

*Please!*

He lapped at my pussy, surprising me by taking his time, slow circles mixed with his tongue flicking me shamelessly. Fuck, he had me going crazy with need.

I felt my legs shudder and my breathing hitch, I was close. "Mmm, baby, I wanna make you come."

Both his hands had been holding my ass, one moved and two fingers slipped easily into my wet pussy. His mouth continued to build me up, but those fingers drove me over the edge. I felt myself clamp down around his fingers as I rode the wave of sheer pleasure.

I was met with a wicked, wet smile. "You are so fucking sweet, Ellie." He stood and took his tee shirt off. "I could eat you all day long." I should have been shocked at his crudeness, but it made me

want him more. I watched in anticipation as he unbuckled his belt and his jeans fell easily to the floor.

"What was that you were saying earlier... you wanted me inside that tight wet pussy?" A shiver of excitement went alone. I had just come but I was greedy for more.

He held out a hand, gently pulling me up from the sofa. We stood together, breathless and filled with lust. My hands roamed hungrily as I couldn't stop touching him.

My fingers traced over the tattoo on his chest, just over his heart.

"Blood and Loyalty." I said, reading the words beneath the chained heart and rose.

"Always." He said, simply.

Renewed courage helped me to just reach down and touch his hard cock. I wrapped my hand around his girth and stroked him. He let out a hiss in pleasure so I started pumping him.

A slight fear trickled over me too as I grasped exactly how sizeable he was. Holy hell, he was even bigger than I had thought in those jeans.

He pulled me into a deep and frenzied kiss, only releasing me when gasping for air. His eyes met mine with a smirk.

"I need to be inside you."

And I couldn't have agreed more.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

DANIEL

I hated to see the deep scars that ran across the pale skin between her hips. She'd known pain, that much was true. But I took her at her word, it had been something from long ago and I wanted to have a little conversation with whatever doctor thought they could leave such a young woman with such painful looking scars.

Couldn't they have gone easier on her? Or had they needed to work quickly and hacked at her because it was urgent? That was exactly how it had looked.

Scars were one way that memories engraved themselves into our bodies. A truth of past journeys that had to be taken. Whatever Ellie was hiding, whatever gave her reason to dye her hair and fake her name, if it had anything to do with whatever had broken her body, then not only would I find out, but I do whatever I could to break it so she could heal completely.

I loved those curves and that cunt... a man could lose himself just thinking about it. She was tight, wet, sweet and so responsive to my touch... what more could a guy ask for?

And yes, she was definitely not brunette. Those light curls were mesmerizing. I could have happily lost myself in her blonde pussy for days.

*Except you know what happens after this one time, don't you? Nothing - that's what.*

*Remember? Boy-o? Fuck 'em and forget 'em?*

In the past, sex would never happen here, in my home. This was my sanctuary. I'd never brought a woman here before.

I should have taken her to one of the safe houses, but it felt right to bring her here. I wanted her here with me.

She was so receptive, so willing, in spite of herself. Part of me wanted to bend her over the sofa and pound her from behind, but the other part of me wanted to take her to bed, and if this was only happening once, spend the entire night drawing orgasm after orgasm from her sweet, wet lips.

It would be something that neither of us would forget.

*Well, that's new.*

We padded down the hallway into one of the spare bedrooms. I wouldn't take her to my room, I wouldn't fuck her on my dirty sheets. No one could see into my windows but regardless, I already knew that all the curtains were closed, as they did every evening when it started to get dark - I loved my tech.

Anticipation prickled me. I wanted to watch her face as she felt me fill her.

I kissed her again. Not something I usually did but as a playmate, she gave as good as she got. My cock twitched... begging me to remember what it needed. I guided her into the room and moved her towards the bed, lifting the covers for us to get under.

"Kiss me," I demanded and she instantly obeyed. I moved over her and slid my hand down to touch her again, her hips rocking as my fingers found their home again. Her hand wrapped around my cock, pumping it steadily in her tight grip. Moments later, her breathing was heaving - as was mine, I realized.

"Please," she whispered. "I need you, Daniel."

"I'll go grab a condom," I said, not wanting to leave, but respecting her - the last thing we needed was that.

"I'm clean." She said, her hand found my balls, playing with them and making me delirious.

She bit my lip and whispered into my ear, "Fuck me, Daniel. I need your cock. Can't you feel how wet I am for you?" she took my hand and brought it back down to her pussy.

It was true, she was slick and ready for me. She would need to be, my erection was huge. It was all I could do not to blow my load just listening to her dirty little mouth.

She spread her legs wider as I moved on top of her, the tip of my cock just touching the wetness around her entrance. I reached down and kissed her tenderly, sliding into her as we kissed.

The rhythm was slow and sensual, I took her deeply as I filled her. Her cunt swallowed me, tight around my cock. She rocked her hips to drive me deeper.

Before I knew it, my pace had become unrelenting, crazy, and I felt a fine sheen of sweat on my skin.

"I wanna be on top." She said breathlessly and I raised my eyebrows in shock - most of the women I'd been with were off the sack-of-potatoes variety which meant they liked to lay back and enjoy the fuck.

Not my Ellie.

Ellie rose even further in my estimations.

I kissed her again, "Anything, sweetheart." I winced inside - *don't make promises.*

I lay on my back and watched as she threw the covers onto the floor and brazenly looked over my naked body - her eyes full of anticipation. She licked her lips and then moved down to take my cock in her mouth, spinning circles with her tongue and then swallowing me as fully as she could. I hissed and almost lost it right there.

I looked down with what, pride? As I stroked the hair away from her face to watch her pleasuring me. My fantasy replayed in my mind

and I held her head as her mouth fucked me. I quickly stopped - women didn't like that.

But my Ellie, she carried on the same hard-fuck pace until I begged her to stop. She mounted me apprehensively, maybe regretting the idea? But as she slowly lowered herself onto me she bent down and kissed me again.

"I'm gonna enjoy this." She told me.

She started slowly, and then I almost thought I was dreaming. She started touching herself as she fucked me. Her head tilted back in pleasure as she rode me, her hands playing with her own breasts.

*Damn right she was enjoying this.* I thought. And I fucking loved it.

She came quickly and I smiled in satisfaction, watching her face as I felt her come. "That's it, baby," I coaxed, "Come for me." As she was coming I rubbed her clit as she ground on my cock, pushing her further over the edge and coming harder.

Physically, she was spent but I wanted to tease one more release from her. I pulled her down towards me then rolled us over until she was beneath me again, her legs now wrapped around me. Hair clung to the sweat on her face, and she trembled with the aftershocks of her release.

"That's it, baby, you fuck so good, are you ready for more?"

Her eyebrows shot up in shock. "More?!"

"Yeah, baby, I want you to come for me, one more time."

"Oh my god!" she said, "I don't think I can..."

I quietened her with another deep kiss, her mouth accepting me as I explored with renewed energy.

This time, I really did screw her slowly, her release tipping me off the edge. I couldn't help but wonder if she'd like to share a shower with me tomorrow morning.

*She'll be sore tomorrow, but she'll know she's mine.*

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

ELLIE

I could hear the alarm from my phone in the distance. Surely it wasn't *that* time already? I reached over to my bedside table but instead of hitting the wobbly table, my arm flopped down. The table wasn't there.

*What the...*

Then I opened my eyes, instantly alert when I realized I hadn't wakened in my own bed. I clambered out of the bed and retrieved my phone, placed neatly on the top of my clothes which were all neatly folded and sitting on the top of a blanket box. My backpack was on the floor beside them.

The room went silent; I was alone. The bedroom door was closed tight, but after a few moments, I could hear someone opening and closing cupboards downstairs. I slipped into the en suite with my things and started getting ready for the day.

Memories flooded back after the initial confusion of waking up in a place that I didn't know.

Last night was amazing. I gave myself a couple of moments to relive what we'd done... what *he'd* done. It was a bitter-sweet memory though because I knew that once I passed the folder to Rory, I would need to disappear.

By the time I'd got out of the shower my plan was complete: I'd squirrel away what I could. I'd go back home today and pack -

everything that I could carry would disappear with me.

What I couldn't carry would be left, lost to me.

I'd paid a deposit and I'd paid rent in advance, they'd both be lost to me too. I didn't have enough time to try to get either of them back, but I didn't have enough money for many choices either. Maybe Toni would let me move back in with her again for a while?

I heard footsteps lightly move outside the room before a knock came to the door. Why should he knock now, he'd seen everything last night?!

"Ellie? Are you dressed?"

I was glad she was on the other side of the door because if Louise had seen my face, she would have seen it drop.

"Yeah, come on in."

She slid in around the door, her eyes full of concern. Louise moved closer to me, taking me into a heartfelt hug.

"How are you?"

"OK." *Sore. Deliciously sore.*

For the craziest of seconds, I thought she was asking me how I was after sleeping with Daniel.

*No, idiot, it's because she knows you got a death threat last night... most normal people wouldn't then jump into bed with the next bad boy they laid eyes on after something like that.*

I let out a pained sigh. I must have been crazy.

"I'm so sorry you've been brought into all of this." She gave me a last squeeze before releasing me.

It had been so long since I had allowed someone this close - even Toni somehow had sensed I didn't like to be touched. Then again, when Toni first met me, she saw the bruises from my last breakup.



Louise offered me a sad smile, "I knew you'd be up now, so I've made some breakfast. You ready to come downstairs?"

It was fair to say that she wasn't the best cook. Louise's idea of making breakfast was to set out two bowls, some cereal, milk and two steaming mugs of coffee. Not that it really mattered, even though I felt empty, my appetite was gone.

Louise ate in silence whilst I picked at my food. "So, I was thinking, why not throw a sick-day today?" her voice was calm but I felt her watch me with the corner of her eye - desperate not to let me see how much she was struggling to keep the conversation light.

I'd struggled to keep many conversations light in my time, I recognize when someone else was trying to do it.

"No can do," I shrugged. "I've still got bills and I need to keep my job. My first probation appraisal is next week."

"That's a pity." She said, casually spooning another mouthful, "Because I've already phoned for you."

"Louise! That's not your call to make!" Anger filled me, it wasn't her decision.

"And how's that going to look - that I didn't even phone in myself?" I stalked away from the table, reaching for the phone in my pocket.

"Where are you going? It's already sorted."

"I'm calling Mildred to try and stop any trouble you've already made."

Thankfully, Louise knew better than to follow me into the lounge.

Mildred delivered the news that, although my level of work had been extremely competent, unfortunately, Sawyer's & Co no longer required my services as an administrator.

All monies owed to me would be processed within three working days. Her tone was extremely professional - too polite, too professional, too courteous.

I sat, speechless on the sofa that had brought me so much pleasure last night. The fact he'd disappeared without so much as a goodbye felt like a slap in the face, the sting hurt.

Now that my job was gone, the Kindred Sons would have no use for me. I was expendable and knew too much. Unbidden tears streaked down my cheeks as the hard, cold reality sank in: No job, no more money, linked to the Kindred Sons, death threat by the Doyle's, and used for a cheap fuck by Daniel. And as I heard the footsteps come to the door, I knew one last thing.

*No escape.*

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

ELLIE

I was always proud of the way I could hide my tears. "Never let the bastards see you cry." My mother had told me from I was old enough to remember. It was how she'd lived her life. Right now, I knew my mother would have been disgusted with the sight of me.

"Shhh," Louise said as she put an arm around me, rubbing my back.

Louise must have thought I was over-distraught about a job I'd only had for a few weeks, but I cried for more than the job. My new start, the one where I'd make it up to Ryan. I was going to be the big sister I should always have been before leaving him for a man who not only used me but chipped away at my spirit until I thought it was acceptable for him to abuse me.

It wasn't until he'd battered me so badly that he took away the last thing I thought I could truly love, that would maybe love me, our child within me when I finally didn't care if I lived or died.

Only when I reached that moment, that point, where I finally stood up to him - to push him to finally put me out of my misery, that he left me. Leaving me so badly beaten, physically and mentally, that leaving me alive and barely breathing felt like his last "fuck you".

Louise sat quietly, keeping me company as I was overcome with the emotions I'd been hiding, fighting and denying for so long. It was like something had broken within me, and I supposed that should fill me with fear.

Now I'd opened the floodgates, *what if I never stopped crying?* I wept until I was sore: haggard breaths and stinging eyes.

"I don't know what else is going on for you, but I can feel your pain. You don't have to tell me, but you should talk with someone." She took a steadying breath.

"I've been to counseling and it really does help - it won't fix anything, but usually things that make us cry so sore can never be fixed, nor should they."

I nodded, the nurses took every single chance they got to encourage me to go to therapy too. But nothing could ever bring me to a place where I could be at peace with what had happened.

Twenty minutes later, when I'd finally came to an empty silence, the words came, "I really hoped that once I'd come back to Londonderry that things could work out."

*Shit.*

"Back to Londonderry?" Louise straightened as she sat.

*Fuck.*

"Yeah, I was born here, and I grew up here until my early teens." I peeked over at her, her face expressionless.

"It was easier to let you think I'd lived in Enniskillen for all my life."

Her expression had turned to stone. "And why would you do that?"

"I wanted to make a fresh start," I said as if that explained everything.

"I know, I should have said."

"Moving for a fresh start's fine, why lie about it?" there was an edge to her voice now.

"It wasn't lies, exactly. I just didn't say." I hoped that would help. "I was trying to get away from an ex." It actually felt like a relief that someone knew.

"And he wouldn't have thought of looking here?" she said sarcastically. "I don't buy it."

"Well, um, getting away from him was part of it. My brother's hoping to get parole in a few weeks and I wanted to be here to support him."

I picked at the fluff on my work trousers, not daring to look at her again. "By the time I was going to tell you, it was a bit too late."

"Brother? So you've got family and friends around here?!" She let out a dry laugh, "Have you all been laughing at me? How I've been feeling so sorry for the new girl?"

"No!" I shook my head, "Nothing like that. I'd managed to alienate any friends I had before I left. They haven't spoken to me in years." I remembered Robert as he turned me against each of them, pulling my strings until I pushed each of my childhood friends away.

"No, Ryan's the only one left. But I wasn't here for him when he got into drugs, ended up owing a lot of bad debt and got caught when trying to repay the debt."

She stood up and paced. "Who does he owe?"

She stopped dead when I told her it was the Doyle's.

She slumped into the chair beside her. "You should have told me that was why Rory was trying to blackmail you."

My eyes met hers, "It wasn't, he doesn't know. I swear that's not what happened. He doesn't know me, and he couldn't know Ryan." I hoped. I had tried not to think about it ever since she'd told me about the link Rory had with them.

Louise waited for a while longer, eventually blowing out a deep breath. "You should have said a lot sooner, Ellie. This is a huge fuck up." She chewed on her bottom lip before continuing, "The Kindred Sons honor their promises, and by bringing you here, Daniel has assured you that this threat will come to nothing. We need to tell him - you should have told Carrick as soon as you met."

A car arrived in the driveway and I recognized it immediately. Daniel was back. I wiped my eyes and blew my nose again, I looked a mess but I would not let him see my tears.

The door slammed and two heavy feet pounded into various rooms, looking for us, then he began to roar. His face turned to pure fury when he saw us sitting together.

*"What the fuck is that bitch still doing here?"*

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

DANIEL

I lay in serene peace, listening to Ellie's slow, deep breaths. We'd just had the best sex of my life and I was content, knowing the woman lying beside me was so deeply satisfied. Ellie, I loved the sound of that name, it was calming, almost soothing.

*Ellie.*

I started to drift over to sleep myself, but was woken by the vibrations of my phone on the floor.

"Nev."

"I've got your file ready, Daniel. Do you want me to drop it over tonight or in the morning?" Nev, as always was straight to the point.

I made my way quietly out of the bedroom and down the stairs. "Well bud, is that woman of yours gonna let you go out to play at this time of night?"

We'd agreed to meet early the next morning at the gym. I lifted Ellie's rucksack and gathered her clothes from the lounge. I'd be gone before she'd rise tomorrow morning and I was pretty sure she wouldn't be as keen to walk around my home naked to retrieve her things then. I put her clothes in the room and took one last look at her pert, round ass as she slept.

A selfish part of me wanted to stay, to slip my hands around her through the night and make her moan again... but doing that was

unfair on her - she would assume I would want a relationship - women always did if you *actually* slept with them.

No, I would go back to my own room.

There was a chill in the air so I pulled the covers around her, closing the door behind me as quietly as I could before going to my own bed.

In the morning I dressed and left as quietly as I could; I'd be back with the file before she'd be awake. As soon as the Bluetooth connected in my car, I phoned Louise. I knew my home was secure, Ellie would be fine for the hour I'd be gone, but with the death threat last night, I wanted her to feel safe - with company.

When I arrived at the club, Da's car was already there. That wasn't normal - he didn't come around here, let alone this early. I walked into the back office, where he was milling around.

"The girl is playing you, son," he said regretfully.

"You're too young to remember them, but I recognized her when I saw her. Those eyes. She's the picture of her mother. She's Kate White's wee girl, Kate's her real name too. Not Ellie."

The name didn't mean much to me, but I'd known I'd recognized her face at the start.

I'd seen her around... school, maybe?

*Was he right?*

*Why would she lie about her name? She looked like an Ellie - Kate was foreign to the woman I knew, the woman I'd made love to.*

"And what?" I didn't like his tone, and sure as fuck, I wasn't going to let him see that he'd hit something I'd already wondered about.

So what if she'd changed her name - *I'll still call her Ellie though*, I mused.

"And, Daniel, it wouldn't mean a fucking thing... except that she's lied to you." He raked his hands through his hair.



“Oh aye, and except I remember reading about Ryan White, her brother, getting put away a few years ago for his part in a bust on a Doyle robbery.”

The hurt felt like a massive punch to my stomach. She would have known all about us, about them, yet acted so innocent to it all when Louise and I went to her flat.

*She must have known Rory, the thought bubbled in my mind, in fact, she probably wasn't being blackmailed by him at all - she staged the whole thing.*

I replayed the images of last night through my head. I was played, she knew exactly what she was doing last night.

Probably even knew when they'd ransack her home - maybe even tipped them off that I'd been there.

And to think I'd actually thought she could be anything more to me than a fuck.

I'd actually considered...

Rage practically blinded me. My fists found the table in the office, beside him. “I'll fucking kill her, and then I'll kill that cunt, Rory.”

My office door made the mistake of being closed and it nearly came off its hinges as I stalked through it and back to my car.

*She had better be gone before I got back.*

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

DANIEL

Louise looked at me in complete shock with her mouth gaping open. Ellie didn't even have the good fucking grace to look me in the eye. She sat there, head down with her hair covering her face.

Blood pounded in my ears, beating a furious rhythm. "Do I have to lift you myself and throw you out?" I felt my hand fist in anger. "Or are you waiting to get some more info to feedback to your wee buddies."

I looked at Louise as I nodded towards Ellie. "I don't suppose she's told you that she's involved with the Doyle's? Her brother did a bit of work with them a while back? Isn't that right, *sweetheart*?" My focus returning to the only person who had managed to hurt me so deeply in years.

*That's because you let her in, asshole.*

*You forgot the rule: fuck 'em and forget 'em.*

"Never thought to mention your waster of a brother, did you? Surely you're not embarrassed?" Resentment and bitterness clawed up my chest. "Was it really a burglary he was sent down for or was there a deal done with the cops? I hear the boys inside don't take to well to dealers who sell that shit to kids? That's what the Doyle's do, isn't it?"

"He never..." I cut her off by lifting my hand up, signaling her to stop speaking.

She had the good fucking sense to stop.

"Don't you even fucking dare try to lie to me in my own fucking house." I roared.

Pacing the floor did not help, "Are you gonna sit there all fucking day? Get the fuck out of my house and you'd better hope I never see your face again."

"Daniel..." Louise said softly, "Daniel, I think you might have things a bit wrong."

She was still sitting beside Ellie - how could she? Louise was not easy to fool, but she'd swallowed whatever rubbish this bitch had spun her - I watched as Ellie lifted her hand to wipe her still hidden face.

Tears: the ultimate woman's weapon.

*Bitch.*

"You think?" I said, sarcastically. "Well, did you know about her brother then?"

"Yes," Louise said simply. "We'd been talking about him - what he'd done and his upcoming parole. She's told me that she grew up around here too."

"Convenient that it comes out now, isn't it? It's a bit late to start telling the truth."

Louise, my cousin, but who I held as a sister, still remained sitting beside Ellie. "Go on, you need to tell him... everything."

For the first time since I'd come in, Ellie lifted her face to look at me and a tiny part of me twisted.

Apart from a couple of tears she'd just wiped away, she hadn't actually cried since I came in. But her face told a completely different story - puffy eyes and red cheeks showed that she had been crying

long before I'd come in. There was fear in her eyes, but how could I know that wasn't fear of having being found out?

She'd have known what the Kindred Sons did to informants - even women - not that it was something I agreed with, but the family came first. Always. Blood and Loyalty.

I wanted to believe her as she found her voice, talking about her childhood in this very area. Her stories about her parent's breakup, her grandmother taking custody of her and her brother, Ryan, how her alcoholic mother drank herself to an early grave.

She cried as she told me about meeting a guy - someone her grandmother disapproved of and her brother hated, but Ellie had decided to leave her family for him. She didn't even come back when Ryan had phoned her for help when he'd owed the Doyle's money.

Ellie told me about how the guy she'd been with ended up knocking her about. I wanted to kill the bastard myself. To do that to an innocent was unforgivable.

Something shifted in the way she spoke about how she ended up in hospital - she was still hiding something. That incensed me again, for a moment I had wanted to believe her, despite myself... but she never said any of this before - what makes it true now?

Knowing she was hiding something more still made me lose complete trust. What a great little actress.

"Aye, sure that's a real tear-jerking story, *Ellie*. Had me choked up." I stood up again, "Look, I only listened to you for Louise's benefit. Now, *Ellie*, it's only for Louise here that I'm being so nice to you, so thanks for your little stories but I want nothing more to do with you. Get your stuff and get out."

She rose quietly and fumbled around, gathering her things together. Louise spoke quietly with her, asking where she was going and what she'd do, all the time, Louise was flashing irritated expressions at me - she clearly had bought everything "*Ellie*" had said.

When Louise asked if she needed any money, “Ellie” shook her head and straightened her back, the last bit of pride and defiance coursing through her.

“I don’t need anything.” As she made her way towards my door, to leave forever, I felt the urge to hold her, to kiss those lips for one last time and to somehow forget the lies and deceit that had brought us to here.

My father’s image came into my head, I knew what needed to be done.

I had followed her to the door, drawn to her even as I knew she needed to go. Then one last thought passed through - if there was any hope for redemption here, if she truly was being honest, then she’d tell the truth on one question.

“I’m gonna be nice and ask you one last question before you go. We both know the honest answer to it and if you have any sort of decency, to tell the truth, now’s the time to do it. Now’s the time to try and redeem something. So, *Ellie*, are you working for them?”

She looked me in the eyes as she lied to me: “No.”

“You’d better leave now, *Kate* White. Before I have to do something you *really* wouldn’t like.”

I walked away, watching as Louise’s face filled with confusion as she looked at the woman she’d taken as a friend. “Ellie? Kate?”

I chose to walk away, uninterested in what words were then exchanged between them, but voices were raised, then I heard Louise opening the door and throwing her out, the door slammed shut straight after. I put my earbuds in and began another tormenting workout in my home gym.

I needed to forget this Ellie/Kate woman, I needed to forget everything about her.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

DANIEL

In the week that followed, I'd expected Ellie to resurface from somewhere. I couldn't bring myself to calling her Kate when I thought about her - which was often. Louise had stayed at the house for the rest of the day after I'd threw Ellie out, but I'd seen very little of her since and spoke with her even less. I reasoned that was because I'd been busy - I'd worked on the plans for even more intense Kindred Sons training.

The guys were getting beatings from me every night, but on the plus side, the training was getting better.

From what I understood, Rory still had no idea that Louise was linked to us, but even still I had made sure the guys kept a close eye on her just in case. Nev had been assigned to watch Ellie's flat. That had not gone as smoothly. It turned out that she never returned to it, and as she hadn't collected the key for the new locks on her doors I was certain she hadn't slipped in and out without our notice. I was disappointed, believing that she must have been with the Doyle's, but an email that was sent to my work account from a throw-away address raised my concerns.

Subject: BW - return to original condition

Daniel,

Regarding the assistant that you intercepted recently, I would insist you return this person to their original condition and back to their original abode. I am aware that their venue is being watched and should this person not appear in public, safe and well, of course. I will have no other option but to report them missing. I'm sure you are well aware that images such as what were previously shared are not the only ones from the final night this person was seen alive and well.

It has been a week. I expect her to be safely returned to the destination discussed above within five days.

Further, you'll remember the agreement, which I strongly believe extends to this person. I believe Carrick would concede that any disappearance would constitute your withdrawal from the said agreement, leaving the responsibility of repercussions wholly with yourself.

Regards.

My head reeled. If Rory had her, he was now trying to frame me for her disappearance and possible death. The Polaroid he'd left in Ellie's flat clearly wasn't the only one showing us together - but it would prove nothing to the police. It was circumstantial evidence at best; something our lawyers would swat away but would bring unwanted police attention.

The Doyle's would believe that I had something to do with Ellie's disappearance, bringing the Kindred Sons and Doyle agreement into meltdown. This would be enough to break the uneasy alliance, and it would all fall on me. Yes, I wanted a fight with them, to remove their blot from my manor, but hell, it would be on my terms: the only way to fix things right now was to find Ellie.

A small voice within me kept repeating the things I didn't want to think.

*Maybe she really wasn't working for the Doyle's.*

*Maybe she'd told the truth.*

*Maybe she really was dead.*

*Maybe it's happened again...*

I couldn't just sit around, waiting for something to happen. I went for a walk as I called Nev, again. Still nothing from around her flat. I'd already redoubled the number of guys I had looking for her. We'd been searching the street and in hostels too - if she was still around here and had no money, we would have found her. Even our bent cops were on it, as were the tech guys who were running traces. It started to feel a bit too much like before and I found myself walking along the riverside again.

I thought of Cassie - she just hadn't been the girl for me but she didn't deserve how things ended up for her; her bloated body retrieved from the water. I gritted my teeth against the mental image of Ellie's limp, lifeless body. That can't happen again.

*It won't. I won't let it.*

My head was so mixed up with everything that had happened: Ellie's lies and what might have been truths. She made me feel so angry that I wanted to find her safe and well just to kill her myself. Well, not kill her exactly, a good hard punishment fuck for wrecking my head would be a good start.

*Stop it.* I reprimanded myself as my cock took an interest in the memories flicking in my head like a cinema screen.



That evening I sought out Rory. I decided it was time to face him once and for all.

He walked with his usual arrogance. Fucker.



I took satisfaction in the brief stutter in his stride when he saw me, even though he still continued to his car. When I heard the click of the doors unlocking, I got into his passenger seat.

"Jesus, it smells like shit in here, or is that your wife's perfume?" My stomach lurched as I was greeted by an overly heavy floral scent, making a poor attempt to cover the stench of sweat that assaulted me.

He stared out of the window, "Don't get my car without an invitation. Say what you need to, then fuck off."

"Ever the gentleman, eh? Rory?" I goaded him, dramatically waving my hand to waft the smell away.

"Or have you put that much coke up your nose that you can't even smell anything anymore?"

His soft hands gripped the steering wheel, even though we weren't moving, his knuckles white already from the tension. "I bet you don't get much action in this car or do they have to be comatose before going anywhere near you?"

"Mr. Anderson," he said professionally, "What are you doing in my car?" I knew I got to him - I always had, which made me smile grimly.

I hated him.

The only thing keeping him alive right now was the treaty and the fact he might have Ellie. For the Kindred Sons to be the ones to break their honor, their word, would have killed Da, and then he would have killed me himself.

"I got your email."

For the first time since I'd got into his car, his eyes darted in my direction, confirming exactly what I knew already. "Email? I'm sure it was from one of my assistants, probably about your *returns* I assume? Really, you could have just phoned." He said innocently.

"You know the email I mean, and I thought it deserved a little face to face."

He shrugged, "No idea what you're talking about."

"I think you know which exact "return" I'm talking about, and I wanted to let you know, in person, that I'm watching you. If you think for one minute you're gonna pin something on me..."

He lifted his hands off the wheel in, palms facing out. "You've got me very, very wrong, Mr. Anderson, I can assure you I have no idea what you're talking about. I have no interest in your affairs... maybe your conscience has finally got to you."

"Like fuck you don't you asshole." I unclenched my jaw, "Last time I saw your..." I struggled for the right word, "*Acquaintance*, she was alive and well, and walking away from me."

His stoic face gave nothing away... except it told me everything.

He really had believed that I had Ellie.

*So where was she?*

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

DANIEL

I had been so angry with Ellie the last time I'd seen her. No one lied to me, people have paid a heavy price for doing that.

She had lied, so that would only mean one thing if the family found everything out - and Da, the only one that really mattered, was the one who'd told me.

But was lying by omission really lying? Sure, she didn't tell us that she'd grown up around here; that her brother had been involved with the Doyle's; or even that what I'd later found out was that Ellie, or rather, Eleanor, was her middle name, not her actual name.

We weren't exactly close - except for that one, glorious night, so why would she tell me everything? She never *said* she'd grown up elsewhere, instead, she just talked about where she'd lived just before coming here and then let us come to our own conclusions. How bad must things must have been for her in Enniskillen that coming here was even an option to consider?

I didn't want to believe she'd been trying to play me, even though the facts were there.

*She couldn't even tell you that her real name was Kate.*

I winced at that thought. I would find her, pull the full truth from her in whatever way I needed and find out once and for all what her deal really was.

The only thing I knew for certain was that she wasn't with Rory.

I came back home to find Louise's car parked in the driveway. Not often, but sometimes I regretted giving Louise a set of keys and the codes to my home. I really just wanted to be alone, to figure out a plan on how to find Ellie.

I wandered into my own kitchen, the smell of food enveloped me, and my stomach gurgled in appreciation. Guess I'm hungry now. After a ping, Louise removed a plastic container from the microwave with a curse. Shortly after there was a plate of steaming hot potatoes, chicken, vegetables, and gravy on the table. A glass of milk beside it as she stared at me from another chair.

"Eat." She demanded.

"How long have you been here?" I said between mouthfuls. This tasted good - better by far than anything Louise made, then I spotted the caterer's name on the side of the discarded plastic containers in the sink. She always was looking out for me, thankfully, this time that meant she'd bought food rather than trying to cook.

"I visited Barney today," she said, coming straight to the point and getting my instant attention. "Had a very interesting conversation, so we did."

"You don't normally do prison visits," I said as I forced myself to keep eating calmly. "How's he doing?"

"He's fine. Gave me a bit of info on that Ryan guy."

That got my full attention. I had asked Nev to make contact, but he hadn't got back to me yet. I couldn't pretend or hide my interest: I needed to know any information that might tell me something more about Ellie.

"Thought you'd want to hear."

She smiled smugly, "He's confirmed that Ryan is quite the loner actually, avoids the Doyle's as much as everyone else. Barney was shocked when I told him that Ryan had been linked to them, he

reckons that guy is about as far away from gang material as you could get."

A glimmer of hope sprang within me. It wasn't much, but at least it proved one thing that Ellie had said to be true: her brother wasn't working for the Doyle's.

If he had, the prison was the one place he would have needed their protection. Everyone needed protection in there.

She waited as I felt the cogs go around in my head, then she ruined my moment. "And how long do you reckon Ryan's going to stay neutral once he finds out his sister's missing?"

"Did you follow up with the work on the Enniskillen links Ellie... Kate had mentioned to you?"

"Yeah, I went there this morning... got speaking to a woman, Toni, who said Kate had lived with her." Louise's face dropped, looking uneasy she said. "Toni told me a few things. They met when Toni responded to an ad about sharing a flat. Kate was trying to get back on her feet, just out of hospital..." her eyes flicked to me and then away again. She didn't think I'd like to hear this.

"Go on."

"When Toni first met her, Kate... Ellie was recovering after her boyfriend had beaten her so badly that she had ended up in ICU."

"What?!" A wave of cold anger slid through me. She had said he'd beaten her, but not that he hospitalized her. Not that she'd ended up in intensive fucking care.

"It gets worse," she said, "Rumors were that Ellie had been six months pregnant at the time."

The revelation sank in. No wonder she was trying to hide so much. "And the baby?" I said, wondering where the kid would be. Louise looked at her hands and just shook her head.

The scars suddenly made a lot more sense. That bastard had beaten her within an inch of her life, forcing doctors to hack into her beautiful body to retrieve her child.

It was a wonder she had survived at all. Mentally or physically.

I hated him even though I didn't even know how he was!

How could so much have happened to the woman I loved, and I didn't even realize.

Her evasion made sense now.

I was disgusted with myself: I'd thrown her out at a time she needed somewhere safe. Rory had preyed on her. I had used her and pushed away.

*Where the fuck was she now?*

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

### DANIEL

Louise played with her phone as I continued to eat. She dialed a number again, I didn't have to ask which one. When she shot up from the table I knew Ellie had finally answered the continuous calls. I grabbed the phone off Louise, a bit harder than I really should have, but that didn't matter right now - Ellie was alive and talking on the other end of the line.

"Where are you?" It came out sounding harder than I had planned, and as the phone went silent, I thought she might have hung up. I tried again, willing my voice to be softer, "Ellie, are you OK?"

"I'm fine." she said defiantly, "I only answered 'cos I'm fed up of Louise ringing me every ten minutes."

"Are you sure?" I coaxed. She didn't sound like she was under duress, but I needed to hear more of her sweet voice.

She sighed, "Yes, Daniel, I'm absolutely fine. Do you have such a high opinion of yourself that you think I'd fall to pieces after you threw me out of your house?"

She was angry, and angry meant that she felt *something* to me. Angry also meant that she was unlikely to be in immediate danger... I hoped.

"Where are you?" I said, as softly as I could.

"Far enough away that you won't have to see me again." Damn. "Look, I know you think I'm involved with the Doyle's and that I

was trying to spy for them, but I'm not."

"I know." It came so easily to my lips and I knew in my heart that I could trust her with my deepest secrets.

The confession surprised her and I heard the slight stutter in her voice. "Y... you know?"

"Yes, baby, I know. I know you're not a rat. It, uh, it just took me a while."

My pacing had taken me upstairs and I found myself in one of the spare bedrooms, ours. I looked at the bed, remembering how small and fragile she'd looked as she lay sleeping. "Where are you now?"

"I needed to clear my head. I thought I could come back to Londonderry and live, but it just looks like there are too many ghosts there for me."

*No, no, no. You have to come back.*

"Can I see you?"

I held my breath.

"Please?"

I could hear the hesitation as she Umm-ed and Ah-ed before giving her response. I would go to the ends of the earth to see that smile again and kill everything in my way to get there if I had to.

"Please, pet, I'm sorry for how things were last time we spoke," I begged.

"What if I say no, will you hunt me down anyway?" There was a softness in her voice. There was hope.

"Probably," I answered honestly. "But please, can we meet just once. If you want out after that, then I'll honor your request." It killed me to say it, but if she truly wanted nothing more to do with me, I would let her go. I just wouldn't fight fair.

The time without her felt like a vacuum and even now, just speaking on the phone, felt better, but still kind of hollow. I needed her by my



side, close enough to protect, close enough touch and close enough for her to know she was mine. "I can come and get you if you just let me know where you are, pet."

"I'll meet you." Relief flooded through me, "But it's on my terms."

"Anything you say, babe." God, I sounded soft. But I didn't care: Ellie was alive, safe (apparently), and had agreed to meet me.

She agreed to meet later that evening, insisting on meeting at the local bus depot. I didn't like that, I wanted to collect her myself - I would have taken the Jaguar. She deserved luxury, not a rundown bus.

As I went to leave the room, I caught my reflection and did a double take. It was me, I just didn't recognize the silly smile plastered all over my face. My Ellie was coming back home.

I would bring her here, she'd be safe here. I'll have Louise organize catering so she could pop in for five minutes. I saw how the two of them were together in spite of the events.

When I came back downstairs Louise was curled up on a sofa watching what appeared to be a reality TV show. The television was on, but she just stared at it blankly, biting her nails. Suspicious eyes turned to watch me as I lifted the remote from her side and went to the sports channels. I winked at her as she waited impatiently for me to speak.

"Well?" she asked, unable to wait any longer.

The laugh that erupted from me took even me by surprise, "Guess who's got himself a date tonight!?"

Her eyebrows shot up in surprise before she recovered. "Aye, right." Louise rolled her eyes.

"No, I'm serious." I countered. "She's agreed to meet me." Suddenly I felt uncertain. Maybe things weren't going to be as easily resolved as I'd just let myself think. "That's a start, right?"

I sat down beside Louise, not enjoying the quizzical look on her face.

“Considering how you treated her the last time you guys spoke, yep, that’s a start.” She eyed me.

“But I wouldn’t go assuming too much.”

“A start is all I need. I’ll show her how much she means to me.” If anyone else had been in the room, I would never have allowed myself to say the words, but I could trust Louise.

And since she was a woman herself, she’d have some idea of how a woman’s mind worked. I nodded to myself.

*Yes, this would work.*

Seconds later Louise tiny framed launched itself on me in a massive bear hug. "I'm so happy for you, Daniel. This is your chance at love."

She sat back again, “But you're an idiot - don't fuck this up.”

What if I did fuck it up, and she left? Ellie had managed to outmaneuver my best guys, they still couldn't hunt her down. If she wanted to disappear again, she could.

I have one chance with her and I need to make it count: I couldn’t let her walk out of my life again.

My heart wouldn’t take it.

## CHAPTER THIRTY

ELLIE

I arrived at the depot early, about an hour earlier than I said I'd meet Daniel. Even at that, I felt them watching. I didn't recognize the man, but he recognized me, even under my baseball cap and hoodie. He carried on drinking his coffee and slowly, so slowly, reached for his phone.

I should have got an earlier bus. I kept telling myself that it was pride that had brought me here - to prove to Daniel Anderson once and for all that I wasn't a snitch, and to tell him to stay the hell away from me. Honestly, I thought I had just had about enough of men and their arrogance to last a lifetime.

I didn't even fool myself, though. I knew there was only one reason I'd come back - pride be damned, I came back to see Daniel again. I felt his pull over me when we spoke on the phone... and I wanted to come running back in the hopes he would take me in those huge arms and shelter me from all the pain I've been running from for most of my life.

Heat pooled within me as we had spoken, "Baby," he'd called me.

He probably called everyone woman he'd fucked that, but it felt divine. I wanted to be his.

That same heat filled me now as I waited in the draughty depot. I looked around, embarrassed someone might know.

The bus journey hadn't been that long, but long enough for my mind to wander over the times I had met Daniel: in the office, at my home, at Chester house, on his sofa, in his bed... I relieved the sensation of his hot breath against my skin, his smoldering eyes watching my every move, and I nearly melted into the seat as I remembered how he had filled me completely, taking me right to the brink.

The sensible part of my head continuously scolded me for even considering coming back here, that it would be a death wish; and it may well lead to my death, I thought. But every fiber of my body needed to be near him.

I scraped together enough change and decided to buy tea to drink as I waited for Daniel. With the way his little friend was watching me, I knew Daniel would be here soon.

I was about to pay for my drink at the counter when I felt him approach from behind. I saw his reflection in polished steel around the kiosk. He sat down at the table where I'd been, apparently waiting for me. That was... well, I wasn't expecting him to do that. I'd half expected him to arrive in and sling me over his shoulder.

But he'd given me space. I could respect that he was already making an effort.

A faint smile played on his lips as he watched me walk back to the table. Heat scorched out of me as his eyes appraised me: he was looking me over to see if I'd been hurt, but after a few seconds the intensity of his stare changed and I saw a glint of a raw hunger within him. My core responded, unbidden.

"Hey." was all he said as I sat down beside him.

"Hey, you." I couldn't stop the grin that I felt on my face.

"Are you ready to go?" He stood as I nodded, lifting my rucksack to carry it for me. God, he really was being on his best behavior. "I thought we could get something to eat at my house, if that's alright with you?"

"Sure." I said, amused at the thought of him in a pinny. "Have you been slaving away at a hot stove all evening then?"

"Awh, darlin' I'll cook you something special another time, I've arranged a nice meal for tonight."

I floated out of the bus depot and five minutes later he was driving me to his home. I recognized this car as the other one I'd seen in his double garage when I walked out of his place that last time... and once again shook away the feeling of rejection I'd felt that day.

But it was a good reminder to keep at least some of my defenses in check.

"Are you regretting meeting me?" he said lightly, pretending not to be watching me from the corner of his eye. I opened my mouth to respond but he spoke again. "I know I'm not great with words, like. But you've no reason to regret this. I'll keep you safe and sound, and if you want to leave, I'll get you back to wherever you want to be."

At that, I was dumbfounded, which he took as an invitation to carry on talking.

"I like you, Ellie. And that's all there is to it. You've got under my skin and you wrecked my head when you disappeared." he shook his head as he continued to drive, "But I know why you left and why you did what you did - same as me, I suppose, we all do what we have to. I respect that."

I blinked as the road went blurry and a solitary tear escaped.

"Awh, now, don't be crying, pet, I don't want to make you sad." The indicator clicked and he pulled into the side of the road. Once he parked, he turned his body to face me, taking my hand into both of his.

"Are you alright?" he asked softly. "Do you want to go back?" his eyes looked down at my hand as she stroked it.

I sensed hesitation in him, he wanted me to stay - he wanted me? My heart soared and I dared to believe that he could actually want me.

"No," I said, his eye searching mine for answers. "No, I don't want to go back anywhere - I want to go with you." He brought my hand to

his lips and kissed it softly, closing his eyes as his warm lips touched my skin. When they opened the spark was there.

"Well then, I'll get us back home. I hope you're hungry."

I liked the idea of him taking "us back home". I liked it very much.

*Remember... defenses.* My mind cautioned.

Louise greeted me with a bone-crushing hug as soon as I went into Daniel's home. I was glad to see her, really, but part of me had hoped we'd be spending the time together without anyone else. "I needed to see you with my own eyes to believe you were safe." She said as she held me out and looked over my body.

Did I really appear that defenseless?

"I'm not staying, but I need to speak with Daniel here before I go."

I went to the bathroom and when I came into the kitchen Daniel was pouring me a glass of wine. "Here," he offered, "You don't normally have wine with this but sure, we're not your average people."

On the table were two steaming bowls of stew and I recognized exactly why he'd chose this - that's what we'd eaten the night we were at his father's home. As soon as it touched my lips I remembered the depth of flavor and the comforting hug the dish gave me the last time. It tasted exactly the same, meaning he had ordered this especially for us, for tonight.

He fidgeted awkwardly and then sat his glass down on the table. "We've got about five minutes. I'm sorry about this - but dad's found out you're here and he's coming over." He saw my reaction and reached his hand over the table to touch me. "I can make him leave quickly, but I couldn't stop him coming over in the first place."

Regret filled his eyes, "I didn't want him to come and I don't know how he found out."

My stomach sank and my hunger disappeared. Carrick would not approve of my being here: when I was taken to see him last time, he'd been pleasant enough but I knew there was granite beneath the friendly facade he'd shown me.

Car lights lit the kitchen as three or four cars drove around the side of the house. "He won't believe me," I whispered.

"This was such a bad idea."

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

ELLIE

Daniel all but lifted me from the chair, kissing me deeply on the lips. "Don't worry, pet, let me take care of my Da." The kiss, our first since he'd thrown me out of his house, melted my fears away. I believed him: he would keep me safe. His expression serious: I could happily drown in those wonderful eyes. Could he be the strength to my weakness? My reverie was broken by a knock on the back door, which, apparently was unlocked as I heard people step inside.

"We're in here, Da." Daniel said, giving me a cheeky wink.

Carrick appeared through the door, his presence filling the room. "I see you were eating." He said flatly. "I do hope we're not intruding." Glumly, I looked along the row of men that had accompanied Carrick; I counted four of them. Two of the younger men positioned themselves around the room, one standing beside each of the two exits from the kitchen diner: one blocked my escape out of the house, the other blocking my way towards the hall.

Well, fuck. I was trapped.

"Not at all, Da." Daniel said lightly, "Do you want a cup of tea?" He looked around to the others, "Lads?" Each one shook a solemn head, *no*.

"We were visiting a friend of ours, Barney, today." Carrick started. "He says he knows your brother." I thought I might throw up, I



wanted to hide behind the huge mass of Daniel and pretend I wasn't in the room.

When I didn't respond, Carrick looked to Daniel, "What's wrong with your friend, son?" he raised his eyebrows at me expectantly. "You *are* Ryan White's sister, aren't you?" I nodded like a child and I felt my eyes starting to burn. *Don't cry!*

My mother's slurred words floated through my brain again, "Never let the bastards see you cry." I swallowed hard and straightened my back. If I was in trouble with the mafia, crying was not going to help. I heard Daniel's feet shift underneath the table.

"Yes, Ryan's my brother. He's doing time for getting into a bit of trouble." Keeping it short and sticking to the facts couldn't hurt, right?

"He got into drugs and ran up a huge debt. The Doyle's called in the debt and he couldn't pay with money - so they made him work it off and he got caught the first time." Carrick smiled grimly, he'd already known all this.

"Ryan's not involved with the Doyle's. He's clean now, thank God, and serving his time as quietly as he can." I looked him straight in the eye. "He's not working for them and neither am I."

For what felt like an age, Carrick just stared me down.

If he didn't believe me right now, whatever else I did wouldn't matter - I would disappear very soon and no one would hear from me ever again. As I held his gaze I wondered how he'd do it. Would he do it himself or make one of his lackeys do it? Daniel maybe?

Daniel was now standing closer beside me but didn't interject in the conversation, to support his father or me. Abstractly, I wondered what that meant, and I was unsure if I liked it or not. Did it mean he felt I was strong enough not to need his support or had he been playing me to get me back here?

The silence grew unbearable but I wouldn't break it.

A dry bark of a laugh escaped Carrick's lips. "You've got balls, wee girl, I'll give you that." He looked between me and Daniel.

"I already know your brother isn't working for them. I needed to be certain you weren't either." My shoulders loosened and I let go of a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding.

"I hear Ryan's a good kid by all accounts." He continued, as he sat at the table. "Not too smart, getting wrapped up in that shit, but I guess he's learned his lesson."

Daniel had been too quiet, and when I looked at him he was still focusing on his dad. I saw his clenched jaw and felt my anxiety levels rise all over again. "Don't look at me like that, son. You know exactly why I had to come here. With the... circumstances, it was best that I came here and had a little chat with your friend myself."

"Her name's Ellie." He growled, "And you'll never speak to her like that again." The possessiveness in his voice appealed to a very deep, dark part of me. My heart soared, whatever misunderstandings we'd had before, he was very much with me now.

Carrick held his hands up in mock surrender.

"Danny boy, I'm only looking after the family. And with the way Ellie held herself, she's unlikely to have any more problems with me." He nodded at me, "So long as she behaves herself." I swallowed as he continued.

"You know the score, Daniel, you know how we do things. Anyway," he stood as he stretched, "Me and the boys will be leaving you two in peace now."

The others started to filter their way out and the room immediately felt like a stadium from the sheer lack of huge male bodies. Carrick turned to me just before he left, "I can see why he's soft on you, Ellie... That's if you don't kill each other." After a couple more steps, he stopped again.

"Can I talk to you alone for a wee minute, Ellie?"

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

ELLIE

*R*eluctantly, Daniel showed Carrick and me into the lounge. The third time I'd sat on this couch and each time couldn't have been more different from the last. The first night with Daniel as he took me straight to heaven; the second time, when I sat with Louise as he sent me to hell; and now - with his father, the Mafia Boss, wanting to talk... alone with me.

"I'll not keep you long," he started, "You'll be back to having your dinner in a minute." He jangled the change in his pockets as he spoke. "I had a phone call today from Alexander, you've maybe not heard of him?" I knew the name, I remembered the fear that name had instilled in Ryan.

"The Doyle Boss?" I asked.

Carrick smiled dryly, "I'm impressed." He paced the floor. "Anyway, Alexander seems to think that we've harmed you because of the thing with the Chester file." He silenced his phone. "I've agreed to meet him to try to smooth things over, but..."

"He wants to see me in the flesh." The solemn words escaped me as I thought them.

"Aye." Another silenced phone call.

The door knocked and Daniel came in. He'd knocked on a door in his own house? Daniel thrust his phone towards his father's face. "Da, you need to take this."

Daniel led me away from the room, but even in the kitchen, I could hear Carrick's outbursts. Angry swearing echoed around the walls. When Carrick appeared he spoke to Daniel.

"You're not going to like this, I couldn't tell you, son." Then his focus turned to me.

"I don't have time to explain now, but Alexander has tracked your grandmother down. I know that's where you've been. I've had a couple of guys keep an eye on the place since I heard you had disappeared, but his men arrived about twenty minutes ago and took her."

The one woman who'd kept me safe for so many years and had looked after me when I appeared on her doorstep a week ago, was now in the hands of the Doyle's because of me. If anything happened to her I would never, ever, forgive myself. Later, I would think about how this was all too close to the fate I had almost sealed for Louise's mother.

Daniel exploded with fury, "You *KNEW* where Ellie was? This whole fucking time?"

I placed a shaking hand on his back, "That doesn't matter right now." I leaned into him. "Focus Daniel, they've got my Gran." My touch brought him back to me and he enveloped me in a protective embrace.

He spoke into my ear. "I will kill every last one of them to get her back." I felt him shift to speak to Carrick.

"Tell me what you know."

## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

### ELLIE

Even after Carrick had talked at length with Daniel about the plans for the next day. Daniel still came back to the same thing, and I actually thought that Daniel was going to punch his own father. "Are you telling me you've known where Ellie's been and didn't so much as think I'd want to know?" A blood vessel pounded on the side of his head, if he didn't calm down, I feared it might just burst.

Carrick stiffened, clearly irritated by his son's actions. His response was calm. "If I'd told you, what was the first thing you'd have done?"

"Are you stupid? I would have gone straight over to her!" He walked away, searching for some way to release his anger.

"Mmm hmm, and if she *was* working for the Doyle's, you'd have played right into their hands, you idiot." Carrick walked over to the window Daniel was looking out of, neither acknowledging I was in the room anymore.

"She left cos she thought she had to but came back because she *wanted* to. If you hadda went over there all guns blazing, wouldn't you wonder if she'd really *wanted* to come back?"

They looked so alike from behind, two big, built men. Carrick was not the sheer size of his son, but then Daniel was a lot younger. They both looked out the window, and I looked at their backs: they even held their heads the same way.

"I was looking out for you, son. I'd had Andy keeping watch over the place since I remembered who her grandmother was. I mind Eleanor, Ellie's grandmother, when I was growing up, I knew of her mother too."

The smallest of whimpers escaped my lips when I heard him mention my mum and my grandmother. "Eleanor was a strong woman in her day and I bet her tongue is still as fierce as it ever was. Andy said that he'd seen a car drive past the lane about 15 minutes before they all arrived, it slowed down and the woman inside took a picture."

Carrick turned back to the room, to face me, "Andy phoned for backup cos he thought something was up, but before the rest of our guys arrived two cars speeded up to the farmhouse and watched her leave peacefully with them."

Carrick shook his head, smiling ruefully. "They had no idea Andy was even there. He managed to follow them back to Alexander's house."

"What?" I gaped at him.

"That's good, lass." He said. "At least Alexander respects her senior age, better there than some warehouse. It'll be warmer for your Grandmother. To have attacked her in her own home, even with the dozen guys who went, would have been a huge mistake. He's showing her respect."

"Respect!?" I spat.

Gran may have left the house peacefully enough but I was certain it wasn't exactly willingly. There was no respect in coming anywhere near an elderly woman.

"Aye, respect." Carrick continued. "I know how he works and he won't harm her, I'm sure of it. Remember I said that he'd wanted to meet me and you to prove you're still alive - even after we found out you were going to leak files?"

Daniel's eyes bored into me, hurt shone through them.

"I was going to tell you, Daniel. Christ, I didn't get a chance."

*The conversation with Carrick had literally been a few minutes ago.*

"My money now is on him wanting a swap. You for her."

"Well fuck that." Daniel's fists tightened, "I'm going over there."

"Easy son... For once you'll need to actually trust your old man."

It took a lot of convincing, but eventually, Daniel agreed that the meeting Carrick and Alexander had planned would happen. I was to go with Carrick the next day to a warehouse where Carrick said his men would make sure that both my grandmother and myself would come out alive.

I was anxious about my safety, but I was going out of my mind with worry about my grandmother.

She was my rock, my place of safety. And it had been because of me that she now faced danger.

I didn't like the plan, but I really had no say. If it came to it, I would swap myself for my grandmother and take whatever punishment they wanted to give out. I even thought of Ryan... perhaps if I surrendered myself, they'd forget about any outstanding debts he might still owe too.

When Carrick eventually left, I had just about run out of adrenaline. I felt weak, small and completely vulnerable. I was too small to do anything useful in their plan, and too wired up to stop thinking about how I could help. Daniel put his arm around me as we sat on the sofa.

"This isn't quite how I'd hoped tonight would turn out." he said, matter-of-factly.

I smiled sadly. "You've got that right. I shouldn't have left her alone."

He squeezed me. "You can't blame yourself, pet. We'll get her back. Even if I have to torture and kill every last one of them to get her, you'll see. The family is the only thing worth fighting for. You're *both* parts of our family now: Blood and Loyalty." The set of his jaw and

the determination in his eyes left me with absolutely no doubt that he truly believed that.

I snuggled into him, letting his large chest support me. We sat together on the sofa like that for the longest time. The heat from his body and steady pace of his breathing soothed me. It wasn't until a door closed that I realized I must have fallen asleep that way. But I was lying down now and I felt warm - *a blanket over me?* A few moments later, or maybe a few hours, I didn't know. I felt the bed move under the weight of someone else getting in.

A body curled in behind me and the now familiar scent of Daniel's cologne steadied me.

Gentle fingers ran through my hair as I drifted back into a dreamless slumber.



## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

DANIEL

*I*t didn't matter how much my cock pleaded, I was not going to try anything tonight. Ellie had been so brave, facing my Da like that. Not many people could look him in the eye as she did.

My beautiful, brave woman.

How could I have allowed myself to get so mistaken? I now knew the reason why no woman had ever held enough interest for me: I just hadn't met Ellie.

When Andy phoned, I knew instantly that something was seriously wrong. My first instinct was that it was one of the drop-offs or another police seizure. When he started darkly with "It's about your woman." I tore into the lounge to where Da was with Ellie. I knew it had to be something to do with her, and if she hadn't been under my own roof I would have thought that he was ringing to say the Doyle's had taken her.

Thank fuck Da had known about her grandmother and sent Andy to watch the house after Ellie had disappeared, otherwise the Doyle's would now have both of them and I wouldn't have known a thing.

As angry as I was with Da for not telling me he knew Ellie was safe and well, I was glad he'd been keeping an eye on her. The old guard had really closed ranks when he'd told them to, and I didn't like that - I would be their boss soon: it didn't do well to hide things from me.

When this was over, I would remember the guys who said they knew nothing.

I knew when Ellie had fallen asleep, I'd felt it rather than seen it. The tension in her body gradually eased. I'd never enjoyed sitting with a woman before, it had felt forced. Idle chit-chat. But having Ellie snuggled into the crook of my arm, sleeping peacefully as I supported her, made me feel like a king.

I wanted this woman in so many more ways than to just be between her legs. We had the rest of our lives. I wanted to tear Alexander limb from limb to prove to her that no one else would ever harm her - or those she cares about.

Before he left, Da said that Barney had already been under orders to get into a fight with Ryan. He'd been instructed to do just enough so that Ryan would be taken to the hospital wing to be checked over medically. He'd be there already.

Since the Doyle's would now know the connection now between Ellie, her grandmother, and Ryan. The safest place for Ryan was in the medical unit and having one of our boys throw a couple of punches his way was far better than the Doyle's getting hold of him. He'd just been a minion before this, and his risk had just become significantly higher.

I had decided that I would tell Ellie about it in the morning, rather than giving her one more thing to worry her tonight. He'd be fine anyway, bruised and a bit sore, but better than the body bag the Doyle's would have put him into.

As I sat there, holding Ellie close to me, I felt my phone vibrate in my pocket - Ellie didn't even stir when I lifted it to look. Louise must have found out about everything because she'd sent a text.

All will work out. U & B keep safe.

After an hour with my thoughts, I decided it was time to take Ellie to bed. No spare room for her this time, she'd sleep in my bed tonight, with me beside her to keep her safe. As I scooped her up from the

sofa she frowned in her sleep. I didn't like that one fucking bit. The woman I loved should never have a reason to frown, awake or asleep.

Once this was over, she'd be my princess... no, she'd be my queen; if she'd agree, that was.

*But who was I fooling? In my head she already was.*

The guys would have had a field day if they'd knew I'd fallen asleep spooning a woman. Daniel Anderson: the guy you warned your daughters about liked to spoon.

Ellie must have started to awaken before me because it was the feeling of her stretching her body against me that brought me back to consciousness. The feeling of her ass rubbing against my crotch as she stretched her back felt wonderful. I stiffened further as the material of her clothes rubbed against my boxers once more.

I moaned in pleasure, reaching to touch her instinctively. Maybe she was half asleep too as she wiggled her body back towards me, obviously feeling my erection. It was a bolder move than I'd expected and fuck if it didn't turn me on.

I leaned over and slid her hair away from her shoulder to kiss it and was rewarded with the sound of a moan from her own lips. She turned around and started to kiss me, her hand moving along my arm and up to knot her fingers into my hair as she deepened her kiss.

The air sizzled and I needed to be inside her.

I hadn't undressed her last night before getting into bed - it hadn't felt right. But now I was helping her out of those jeans. Seconds later she was pulling at the waistband of my boxers, her eyebrows shooting up in delight as my cock sprung free. She moved her hand to cup my balls as she kissed me again, but as she went to start stroking me I lifted her hand above her head. "I need to be in you, pet."

I felt the shiver of excitement that went through her, she wanted me too.

Her eyes found mine, "I missed you so much, you're all I thought about. I'm so sorry..."

I quietened her with another kiss. She did not need to apologize. I had been a bastard to her. I was the one who should be apologizing for the rest of my days.

"Shhh," I whispered into her ear as we were both gasping for air after another kiss.

"You never need to say sorry." I felt her legs spread wider beneath me. "You're mine, pet." I felt her ass lift up for me, with one quick thrust I slid home. She was already so wet for me.

It took every fiber of my being now to pound her into the mattress. I knew I didn't have the right words so I wanted to show her how I felt, make her understand how I needed her. An errand thought passed through me, you should wear something, the last thing she needs is your child inside her on top of everything else.

*But would it really be that bad?*

I kissed her forehead as I listened to her breath hitch each time I stroked her from within. It killed me to say it, but I needed to do right by her: "Baby, I should put a condom on."

She spoke breathlessly, her tone urgent, "No need, I'm clean." she bit her lip as her eyes rolled. "Trust you're clean too. Can't get..." then she kissed me desperately.

That threw me... that piece of shit had beaten her so badly that she'd lost the only child she could ever bear. Those scars would not only be a constant reminder of the child she'd lost, but of the potential for any more.

I couldn't even begin to imagine how she lived with that. The pain she had endured. I would take all that pain away, the best and the only way I knew how.

I reached for her leg, pulling her thigh up and intuitively, she wrapped herself around me. I could go deeper this way. My hand grabbed her ass cheek to pull her even closer and I felt her buck

beneath me, the sensations of me filling her so completely clearly overwhelming her.

I watched her face. I wanted to remember every detail of the first time we'd made love. The expressions that flickered over her face, the smile that crept over it, and the way she tilted her head back as she got close to her release. I slowed to almost a stop, taking pride in the little pout that formed on her lips... my sweetheart loved me being inside her as much as I loved filling her. She rocked her hips to try to satisfy her need, and it was then that I drove home, making her gasp as she took everything of me.

"You're mine," I growled, my body looming close to the edge.

"Aye," she groaned, "And you're mine too."

She came as she spoke, her cunt milking me. The sensation bringing me to my own climax as my balls clenched and my cum spilled inside her. Stars appeared before my eyes for a moment, the release more intense and intimate than I'd ever experienced.

I looked down at her, sweat beaded her forehead. As gently as I could, I leaned towards her, lifting her chin up so I could kiss her lips.

It was a sweet kiss, a tender one between two lovers who shared more than just a good time.

She was mine, and I was hers.

A slow shy smile spread across her lips as she looked at me. "I should wake up like that every day."

We lay together in peaceful silence until I heard a fraught breath escape her lips.

"I'm such a whore. My grandmother was kidnapped and what do I do?" her hands pointing up and down her body, "Spread my legs for some mafia guy."

"Hey!" I took her in my arms, maybe a little roughly, but there was no way she should be so hard on herself. "One: you are not, nor could you ever be a whore. If you call yourself that again I will put

you over my knee and smack that sweet ass until it is raw. Two: we're getting your grandmother back today - everything is being done that can be."

I rubbed her shoulders, trying to ease the tension that had returned to her. "And three: I'm not just *some mafia guy*. I'm the next in line. I'm the Under Boss." I said it with mock pride and was rewarded with a small dry chuckle.

"I didn't come back last night just to jump into bed with you. I'm not like that, you know."

I knew she wasn't, but I could see she had a dry wit, and being cheeky seemed to make her laugh. I wrapped my legs around her and wiggled my eyebrows, "Yeah, you did. How could you resist me?" She smiled and playfully slapped my arm.

"Self-praise is no recommendation." She joked.

I heard my phone vibrate from the bedside table. It would be Da.

I kissed her again, "We need to get ready."

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

ELLIE

I really hadn't planned on sleeping with Daniel. A hidden, deep part of me had wanted to, but the good-girl within me kept denying that was the real reason why I'd come back. The bad-girl had the hope and foresight to pack a couple of overnight essentials into my rucksack. By the time Daniel was finished on the phone with Carrick, I was dressed and ready.

His face betrayed the fact he was not happy with the plans his father had made. The meeting with Alexander was planned for this morning, with a dozen Kindred Sons already scoping out the venue and keeping watch.

When Carrick arrived with us, there was a convoy of three cars. Carrick was in the first car, being driven and accompanied by two of the men I recognized from the night before. The second car was filled with the other guys that were here last night too, Daniel was to go with them. The third car was driven by a man who was introduced as Andy - the man who'd watched and followed as my grandmother went with the Doyle's.

Louise was to accompany me in Andy's car.

If the kitchen had felt cramped the night before, it was positively claustrophobic now. I watched distractedly as each one checked and holstered their guns. The sight was surreal to me: this was a country where carrying any firearm was basically illegal and owning ones like they had certainly was.

Louise tried to keep me focused on mundane things, asking if I had breakfast yet and whether I wanted some tea. I knew exactly what she was trying to do and I loved her for it, but it didn't stop me worrying. With all those guns, someone was going to get hurt... I just prayed that no one I cared for, my gran, Daniel or Louise, got caught in the crossfire.

In fact, all the men stood before me could be going to war to save an old, frail woman that until yesterday, most didn't know existed. That made them people I cared for too.

They would do this for her because of one thing: family.

*Blood and Loyalty*, I mused to myself.

*What a good way to live.*

"Thank you." I stood as I spoke. I held all of their attention. "Thank you for going to help my grandmother." I wrung my hands with the worry. "I'm sorry that don't know most of you. You'll never know how thankful I am that you're doing this..." tears threatened and in the second it took me to swallow them back, Carrick spoke.

"Ellie, dear, no one fucks with my family. And you *are* family now." Serious faces nodded in agreement. "And if someone fucks with you, they fuck with all of us."

I felt Daniel beside me, his hands rested on my shoulders, lightly rubbing some of the tension away.

Carrick reached a hand towards me, which I took, unsure of what was happening. He pulled me into a fatherly embrace. "My eldest son is soft on you, and that makes you special to us. You're part of the Kindred Sons family now. Alexander is going to regret so much as speaking to Eleanor."

He gave me a final tap on the back, which I instantly took to mean our hug was over, and as he released me from his embrace I stepped away. As I did, I caught the look of approval between father and son. Any remnants of distrust in me was gone.

Carrick looked around to his finest, "Let's get this over with."



As the cars drove to the meeting point, Louise withdrew into herself. When Andy spoke, I saw that his eyes met hers through the rear-view mirror, an unspoken conversation going on that I didn't understand. Louise seemed to resign herself to something. She pulled something from her coat pocket, "I'm sorry," she said, simply, before stabbing me in the leg with what had been a concealed syringe. I felt my legs turn to lead as my body went to jelly. In the distance, I was vaguely aware of someone handcuffing me to the handle inside the car door. Something went over my mouth and I heard a muffled woman trying to talk... *was that me?*

Then everything went black.

When I came back around I was alone in the car. Not only was I handcuffed and my mouth taped shut, but my legs had also been taped together too. In the distance, I could see several people meeting in the center of the disused car park. The warehouse was derelict, completely abandoned and in the middle of nowhere.

*Perfect, I thought. Just perfect.*

I heard a scream and my eyes moved in time to see Louise being pulled by her hair out of one of the other cars.

Confusion, as well as nausea, swept over me.

*She'd been here a minute ago.*

She was putting up a fight until a man I recognized from earlier backhanded her and used the moment to overpower her. He held something to her throat, it glinted in the sunlight and I realized it was a knife. With her head slumped, she complied with him by walking in the direction she was being forced.

The men started a heated discussion then, with lots of swinging arms and shouting. A sliver of light amongst the weeds behind their argument took my attention.

Then everything slowed down. A man slumped to the ground as I heard a gunshot.

The guys who had dragged Louise moments earlier had now pushed her to the ground. Her hands hadn't been handcuffed as they'd looked and she pulled a handgun out, shooting one, two, three of the Doyle men.

Carrick and most of the others had run for cover, but another Kindred Son was still near Louise, covering her as she reloaded.

*Where was Daniel?*

*Where was my grandmother?*

Two cars sped off, Doyle's I presumed, given that the Kindred Sons were firing shots at their tires. The second careered and sped straight into a tree. A thin trickle of smoke started to trail up from the car - but no one got out. I tore my eyes away when the smoke thickened.

I screamed when the tap on my door came. Andy was pulling open the door that I was handcuffed to. With the tape around my ankles, I landed awkwardly on my ass. He un-cuffed me quickly, slicing the tape from between my ankles with one stroke of a stubby knife. He forced the handcuff keys and the knife into my hand. "We've got your granny out - she's already on her way to a safe house, but there are a few more fuckers that want to play. It's too dangerous here for you. Go to that car there," he pointed to another of the convoy, "and let Daniel out. I'll cover you from here."

Adrenaline surged through my body and I ducked as I heard the whistle of a bullet close by. It was followed by several coming from where I'd just been. Andy was true to his word because no more bullets came near me. When I opened one of the car's front doors I found Daniel in the same way I had been in the back of the other car.

Thankfully they hadn't taped his mouth. I spoke to rouse him and only then realized the tape was still over my mouth. I didn't even feel the sting as I ripped it off. "Daniel! Wake up!" I needed him conscious, he was too big to open his door without him carrying his own weight.

Nothing.

"Daniel! Wake UP!"

Still nothing.

They must have given him a really heavy dose.

Carrick clearly didn't want either of us to know his real plan to use Louise as bait.

Having seen the close relationship between Daniel and Louise, I couldn't say I was surprised at that.

She was a trained fighter, every bit as lethal as any other Kindred Son.

What had surprised me was Carrick's willingness to allow his niece to be used as bait. I didn't doubt her willingness to do it.

I reached back and started shaking Daniel, which brought him back almost instantly. I crawled through the seats and reached over him to release his handcuffs before slitting the tape around his ankles as Andy had done for mine. The look of confusion on his face would have been comical if it wasn't for the situation.

"What the..."

"Andy says they need you," I spoke quickly. "He says Gran's ok, but they could do with your help."

The warrior within him rose. "These cars are bulletproof, stay here." he reached under the seat and pushed a handgun towards me. "The safety's off, just point and pull the trigger if you need to." He looked at me with crazy eyes before kissing me roughly. "I love you."

And then he ran towards them.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

ELLIE

I'd never seen a firearm in real life before - except for the ones the cops carried. I did the only thing I knew how. I crammed as much of my body as would fit onto the floor of the car and closed my eyes, praying the Kindred Sons would be alright. I didn't know that everything was over until Daniel came back to the car, shouting as he did.

It was a good idea because, in my panicked state, there was every chance that I would have shot the first person who came anywhere near me.

Cautiously, he pulled the half-shut door open and lifted me into his arms.

"It's over, baby." He held me so close, and so gently. I swore it felt like I was made of the most delicate crystal.

Andy ran over to us, "Daniel, one car almost made it away, but our guys further along the road got them." He spoke proudly, "We knew all the other faces, except for one guy - thought you'd wanna take a look in case you can place him."

I didn't want to go, but Daniel refused to let me out of his sight. As we walked, I tried to cast the images of the blood and the fallen bodies from my mind.

*This isn't real.*

I tried to convince myself, but I already knew there'd be nightmares over the small part of the fight I'd witnessed.

I recognised a face, "Rory." I stated.

"No, honey, but that's his brother." God forgive me but I was disappointed.

I had wanted the guy to pay for the things he'd tried to make me do - the things I knew he'd blackmailed so many other vulnerable and desperate women with.

He spoke with pride, "Rory is over there," he pointed to a bundle laying further away, "Piece of shit. I made sure to give him your regards."

We walked to the corner of the warehouse, where a bullet-ridden car had been driven into the building. What once might have looked like an empty place to me now seemed to be a space for... encouraging someone to talk.

Wrenches, hammers, and an odd chair lay strewn inside the vast echo-y structure. When I walked around the car, I saw two guys on the other side of the building preparing to do just that. They had their backs to me and appeared to be tying the arms and legs of a man to a chair. The guy was putting up a fight - it just wasn't enough.

I recognized the sick laugh before I saw him, and I knew exactly who was in that chair before I looked him in the eye. But the sound didn't have the hold on me that it once did. I had no reason to fear him anymore. He'd lost control over me a long time ago.

The Kindred Sons looked to Daniel to see if he recognized the man, which, as I already knew, he wouldn't. It was as if they didn't see me as they discussed whether it was worth trying to get information from him.

"I have one question for him." The place fell silent and everyone turned to me in shock. "I'd like to ask him something."

Daniel looked at me blankly. "Do you *know* this man?"

"Oh yes," a twisted smile played at my lips as I moved closer to the captive.

"Oh yes, Daniel, I know this man. I've known him for a long time... in fact, I haven't seen him in a while."

I spoke directly to Robert. "I remember you being bigger... you're a bit disappointing really when I look at you now."

I watched the fear build in his eyes, as he looked at me and back to Daniel.

"I'd just love to ask him one, teeny, tiny, question."

I stood again, right in front of the chair. Daniel moved right beside me, towering over him. I regretted leaving the handgun behind, but that would have been too quick an end for this vile fucker.

There was laughter from a corner when someone noticed the wet patch beside the chair.

"He's pissed himself!" I looked down to the gathering pool and laughed dryly.

"What do you want to ask him, babe?" Daniel was serious, ready to do whatever was needed.

"I'd like him to tell us why he tried to kill me."

Daniel seemed to get bigger as he loomed over him. "That's an excellent question, pet." He put his arm around me, kissing me on the forehead.

"Why don't you tell us all about why you tried to kill the woman I love?"

Shock rippled through me - he'd just referred to me as his love?

I thought I'd heard him say the word earlier, but that had been in the middle of all the chaos.

I hadn't dared believe it to be true.

But this time I knew it. A huge grin exploded on my face as the realization hit.

Daniel reached a rough hand down and tore the tape off the captive's face.

"Love that bitch?" Robert spat. "That whore's had more cocks in her than I've had hot dinners."

I stepped forward before Daniel could react.

I tutted.

"Ahhh, Robert, you know what happens to little bitches that talk back, don't you?"

The memories flooded back of him saying that to me so many times. "Mouthy little bitches get lots of stitches.... isn't that what you always said?"

I remembered the stubby knife Andy had given me earlier and took it from my hip pocket.

"So where first then?" I felt a sick pleasure as he saw what I held. "How about your stomach? Or..." I laughed, "Your back, or your legs?" I spun around.

"Wouldn't want to pick somewhere that lots of people could see, eh?"

I held the knife close to his jaw. "Maybe, just this once, it should be somewhere that people do see. Y'know, for a change." His face was ruddy with anger, there was no remorse there. Not even the slightest bit.

I thought about the baby he'd killed inside me when he'd beat me last.

"I do have another question."

My words echoed off the concrete and metal of the building.

No one so much as breathed.

Absently, I realized there were no other noises in the area. Even after all the gunfire, I didn't hear a single police siren in the distance.

The people in the warehouse stood, silent, behind me.

"Why did you kill a defenseless child, still growing in her mother's belly? What did she do to you?"

He laughed manically. "Because that thing was the product of you spreading your filthy legs with dozens of other men. Think I was going to be tied down to some bastard you threw out of your cunt?" he coughed, "Besides, did that thing a favor - imagine having you as it's mother... be even worse than that excuse of a whore that was your mother."

Daniel punched him, knocking Robert to the floor, still tied to the chair. I looked at my hand in shock, the knife was gone.

A sick gurgling sound came from him, and I realized the knife had been knocked into his neck. It didn't matter how it happened, but with the amount of blood now pooling around him I knew it was done.

Desperate gasping noises spluttered from Robert's mouth and from the area around the knife. Blood bubbled and spurted from both too. His hands were still bound but despite that, he was still fervently trying to break free.

I wanted to be a good person. I'd always tried to be good.

But I felt nothing as I watched him gurgle and struggle.

We all just stood there, in ambivalent silence as the life ebbed from his body.

Later I would wonder if it was me or Daniel who had killed him.

Later still, I'd realize that I wouldn't care.

Eventually, after the rest had quietly left, Daniel pulled me into his arms. "He's gone."



## CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

DANIEL

Da had left the scene before Robert had been brought to the warehouse. He'd insisted on going with Eleanor as our doctors checked her over. It wasn't until that evening that I actually got to meet her.

And I had never been as nervous about something in my entire life.

This woman had known of our family for decades. She would have heard the many rumors over the years. Knew how things operated.

How could she honestly approve of me for her granddaughter?

Usually, we clear up our messes - no bodies left behind. But when so many of the Doyle's died, we decided to just leave them where they lay... let them collect their own. It would also serve as a reminder to the Triad of our strength. The only one who was disposed of was Robert.

We have a specialist guy, a trained butcher, who works well with making sure bodies that may be of particular interest disappear.

I watched Ellie for any signs of shock, and yes, she had been shaken up, but nowhere nearly as bad as I expected. I phoned Da on the way back to my house and he let Ellie speak with her grandmother. That pacified her enough that we didn't have to go around right away, which was just as well. We both looked like hell after the fight. Well, I looked like hell, Ellie, even covered in muck and blood, still looked beautiful to me.

We showered and changed quickly... but not too quickly. I got to experience the real Ellie in my shower and the way she wrapped her lips around me was infinitely better than what I had fantasized. When we were dried off and dressed I came up behind her and wrapped my arms around her. I loved how big she made me feel - big and strong. I would kill everything that stood in her way.

"So I've decided you're staying here with me, then." I smiled into her hair.

"Oh, really?" she spun around, looking at me playfully. "And what makes you think I'd want that?"

"Simple, it's because I love you, that's why." I shrugged my shoulders. "And I'd do anything for you, and I'll do everything to make you mine."

It felt freeing to say it out loud. It felt right.

And I wouldn't have cared whether the entire world heard me saying it.

She shook her head and looked away, "You're forgetting something there." Panic shot through me and my heart stopped. Had today been too much for her, was she really going to leave as I said I would let her? I didn't think I could.

My heart stopped in my chest.

*No.*

*Please no.*

*Don't leave me.*

A smile played on her lips before taking over completely, "I'm already yours, and you're already mine." Her hands reached around my neck to pull me down for a kiss. "I love you, Daniel."

Relief and love filled my heart that I thought it might burst.

*She loved me.*



When we arrived at Chester House, Eleanor was already holding court, regaling anyone who'd listen - which was everyone - with stories about Ellie as she grew up.

"Gran!" Ellie squealed and she rushed to the old woman, all but crushing her with a hug. "Are you alright? What did the doctor say? What did they do to you?"

"Give the critter a chance to breathe!" Da laughed. He'd taken his old chair in the corner of the room and was swirling what looked like whiskey in a glass. Mum was standing close by him. "She's had several once-overs by three different doctors, the woman's in as fine fettle as she was when she used to clip me over the ears as a wean." I looked at him in shock.

"Aye, son, I see you looking at me." He stood and walked over to me. "Do you mind your Aunt Agnes' old house? Long before it was hers, and long before your time that was your grandmother's house. In them days, Eleanor and her late husband, Mervyn and us were neighbors. I used to sneak into her garden to eat her strawberries."

Eleanor mocked scorn and shook her finger at him. "I always knew it was you, I just wasn't fast enough to catch you."

Da laughed just as heartily as she did.

"Aye, they were very different times then."



Later, the women were chattering away and I walked into the kitchen with da. "Da, can I..."

"Here." he held his hand out to me, "Thought you might be wanting this." He dropped the contents of his hand into mine.

"How'd you know?"

"You're me son, I know everything there is to know about you. And it doesn't take much to see how much you mean to her." He shook his head.

"And it was your Ma that thought you'd want it."

## CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

DANIEL

When the conversations had died down, I took my chance to speak with Eleanor alone, part excited and part fearful that an old woman held the answer to such an important question. "I think a lot of your granddaughter." I started, more nervous than I'd been in years.

"I would hope so." she said, giving nothing away.

With a deep breath and steeling myself for her answer I spoke quickly, "I love her, and with your permission, I'd like to ask her to marry me."

"I see that you love her, Daniel." she spoke quietly, "And I respect you asking me. You probably only see an old woman in front of you, an old woman who doesn't know much." I didn't know how to answer that, so I remained silent.

"I'm not stupid; I know what your family is. I knew about the Kindred Sons long before you were even born. You have my permission under one condition."

"Anything," I said instantly.

"You see that smile on her face right now?" Ellie was chatting easily with Louise and a few of the other women. Louise said something that made them all burst into laughter.

"Aye."

"If she ever lands back out to see me with anything less than a smile like that on her face, you'll be hearing from me. And if you ever make her cry as sore as she did when she did land back at mine, I'll kill you myself. You got that, son?"

"Aye." I smiled, a new respect for the woman who had looked after my sweetheart - and a new realization of precisely where Ellie got her fire from.

The women laughed at another joke, and I took the distracted moment to kiss Eleanor quickly on the cheek. "Thank you. I will do everything in my power to keep her happy - it will be my one duty in life. That and to protect her."

I stood tall, patted my clothes down and walked straight over to her. From the corner of my eye, I saw my Da wink at me, mum smiled from behind her tissue, already dabbing at her eyes beside him. I took Ellie's hand and pulled her from her seat to stand in the center of the room. Everyone quietened, knowing I had something to say.

"Ellie, I've never been great with words, and I'll probably say something wrong here." Her eyes looked up at me in confusion. "You're everything to me." I dropped to one knee and I heard excited murmurs amongst my family.

"I love you. I always will love you. I swear to protect you, look after you, and to always make you happy. It would be my greatest honor if you would be my wife."

I pulled my own grandmother's engagement ring from my back pocket and held it up to her. Her eyes shone and she smiled even though one tear over spilled and ran down her face.

"Daniel, I love you too." She sniffed, "Of course I'll marry you!" the crowd cheered and once I slipped the ring onto her finger all the women in the house flocked to see it. The men came to congratulate me, shaking my hand and giving me celebratory pats on the back.

Ellie went to her Grandmother, wrapping her in a hug. Eleanor looked at the ring and then to both of us. "That's your grandmother's ring." I nodded as her eyes grew misty. "Your grandmother was a great woman, and I saw how happy they were. I wish you both

nothing but the very best for the future." She reached for a tissue and a mischievous grin played across her lips, "And may all your troubles be little ones."

Louise burst over to hug us both. "Oh my god! Congratulations! I hear April is a great month for a wedding..." She smiled with raised eyebrows.

I looked at Ellie and couldn't see why not. "Sooner the better as far as I'm concerned."

She giggled, "As in April - next month, April?" I laughed and Louise practically bounced. "I guess I need to get planning!"

Ellie lifted her left hand to her face, making a show of rubbing her chin with her hand.

Pride filled me as the diamonds glittered.

"I wonder who would be able to help me plan something like that?"

## CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

DANIEL

The weeks that followed after the fight were filled with fighting and fucking. During the daytime, I'd either be at the gym, putting our men through their paces or at home with Ellie.

Either way, I always worked up one helluva sweat.

The treaty had been seen to be officially ended between the Kindred Sons and the Doyles. We pulled Louise from her undercover job at Sawyers and with both her knowledge and Ellie's fast learning, we were pretty sure that they would be able to run the payments operation alone.

That was when they weren't knee deep in bridal magazines. They'd become close friends now and I couldn't have been happier. Firstly, because Louise was like a little sister to me and it was important to me that she and Ellie would get along. Secondly, because I knew that Louise was more than capable of protecting them both if it came to it.

We didn't anticipate any further attacks or reprisals. There'd been two pathetic attempts, both of which saw even more Doyle's meeting their bloody fates. Their head guys, the ones that weren't already dead, disappeared.

My guess was that they'd went over the water to lay low for as long as it took. It didn't matter whatever length of time they thought that might be because it would never be long enough.



If I, or any of the Kindred Sons, lay eyes on them, the order was to kill them on sight.

As far as their foot soldiers, reports had come in about a few sightings but no further disturbances or attacks. Their gang had all but disappeared. I would have done the same: regroup, refocus, renew energy and re-strategize.

Both Da and I knew that would mean it was only a matter of time before they'd come back at us.

What was the bigger concern was how the Triad had so easily taken over the drugs and sex trades that the Doyle's had ran. Word on the street was that they'd fought each other for it, but we knew that was the Triad's attempt to take the glory for bringing the Doyles to their knees.

It was, of course, utter bullshit. Yet their lie had been convincing enough that the cops barely bothered to question us.

My focus should have solely been on the increased training that all of the Kindred Sons were now doing - not just the guys who answered to me. When I had told Da about the training I'd set up, his first instructions were to roll it out with everyone - old boys, new recruits; everyone. Nevan got the shitty end of that stick as I delegated that responsibility to him so I could monitor but keep Ellie as my main focus.

The guys had initially been hurt when I said I wasn't going to have a Batchelor Party, however, that was short-lived. When I said that they should go on ahead and celebrate in my honor without me, they were happy again.

I believed there'd been three stag parties so far: the first had been a stag weekend in Holland; next came a rally driving stag weekend at home; and the only one I did attend: the massive men-only dinner my mum insisted on having at Chester house.

Ellie, my Ellie. She was already mine, and everyone knew it. As much as I'd always insisted to others that marriage was the end of a sexual relationship, right now I thought there would be nothing

better than slipping away for a month or two with my new wife and fucking in every possible position imaginable.

Coming up with new places and positions had become my favorite hobby.

*Our* new favorite hobby.

Ellie had not been keen on a church wedding and in light of the potential security risks, having the ceremony in the hotel's best room was a safer option. The minister had enthusiastically agreed to whatever we'd wanted.

Mum had insisted on us attending Sunday School as children, so I had the impression part of his interest in doing the ceremony was to actually confirm I had got married.

To ONE woman. One who I'd settle down with.

Andy joined the rest of the men at the front of the room, speaking briefly to me before taking his place. "Congratulations mate. Ellie's as mad about you as you are for her." He nodded at the woman sitting behind the baby grand piano in the corner who changed the piece of music she was playing.

I heard everyone gasp in awe as they turned to watch the woman I would love for the rest of my life. I heard her quietly thank Ryan, and his "Love you, sis." My wife-to-be was by my side. It wasn't until then that I turned to look at her.

Tears pricked my eyes - she really was beautiful.

The ceremony, whilst not exactly old-fashioned with this setting, still felt traditional - if that made sense.

I'd never cared about the service before, but since it was Ellie's and mine, the words were so important, none more so than the vows. I would love her forever - there would be no such thing as death us do part.

We would spend the rest of our lives together, facing a future that was free from the ghosts that haunted us. In killing Rory, not only

had I somehow set Cassie's memory free, I had helped Louise - she knew it had been Rory's family that killed her father.

Since Robert met his end, Ellie didn't frown in her sleep anymore.

I watched her sleep each night, ready to soothe her nightmares away.

But with me by her side, she didn't have any more need for nightmares.

## CHAPTER FORTY

I woke up early, with butterflies in my tummy. Today was the day! I was going to become Mrs. Kate Eleanor Anderson... Well, Mrs. Ellie Anderson.

Mrs. Daniel Anderson!

It was 6am, and I really should have another hour's sleep - it would be a long day. Yet, when my eyes sprang open I knew that I couldn't just lie there any longer. The excitement and anticipation had me grinning to myself even as I still lay in bed.

I stretched out in the super king bed; loving the feeling the luxurious Egyptian cotton sheets as they wrapped me in warmth. The bed was far too empty for my liking, but tradition dictated that I did not sleep with Daniel last night. It was a stark change to my recent sleeping habits since I'd never left Daniel's side since we'd got engaged.

Even though he'd come with me to the hotel last night, insisting he'd check that the room they'd offered me for my last night as an unmarried woman was to his standard. Really, he didn't want to be away from me any more than I did him.

His mum had known exactly what he'd planned to do once we were alone, so she made sure not to be too far away from us, refusing to leave this suite until he went with her.

I hadn't had the opportunity to be nervous before I met Daniel's mother for the first time, it was a day I would never forget. The

kitchen-full of mobsters, the attack, the guns, Robert's death. Daniel's proposal.

Life moved fast in these parts, faster than I remembered.

But the life of a mafia wife was ahead of me now. There were responsibilities for me. I was part of a family and I was needed.

Daniel had confessed he had been curious about meeting my grandmother – he'd never really admitted he'd been nervous about it, but I would let him have that.

My grandmother, like his mother, was a strong woman who said exactly what she needed to. All in all, this was probably the one thing that made things easier for Daniel. His expectation for people to say exactly what they thought may have been refreshing, but it was just like my Gran's.

As for Jennifer, Carrick had given her a lot of background about me, and ultimately, she had approved of me before even talking with me. Jennifer had been the previous keeper of the diamond ring that now had pride of place on my left hand. It was the ring Daniel's grandfather had "acquired" to propose to his grandmother - I didn't ask how he'd got it, but I had guessed.

When Carrick was going to propose to Jennifer, his frail mother insisted he used her engagement ring. Now, the third generation along, it was my turn to wear the row of three diamonds with pride: I Love You.

When I first learned of my ring's heritage I felt so guilty. Giving up your engagement ring had been a huge ask, but when Daniel had reassured me that Jennifer had been the one with the idea, I truly felt like I had been accepted not just by him, but by his whole family.

Blood and Loyalty.

I thought again about the tattoo over Daniel's heart and what it represented. All the men bore the same tattoo somewhere on their body, some of the women had even adopted the symbol for themselves too.

Perhaps I'd get a tattoo too. I mused.

I stretched in the bed, looking again at the ring and how it sat on my hand. Within all the happiness I felt was a pang of sadness that I would be the last in the line. Unless, I passed my engagement ring on to one of Daniel's younger brothers when their time came, but that felt very wrong to me right now.

I could never give Daniel a child to continue his line.

It would be the one last "gift" from Robert that even his death could not erase.

When the doctors did the emergency cesarean, they had tried to save my daughter's life. I hadn't cared that they'd butchered me to get to her, as the scars across on my belly showed. They were too late though, she hadn't survived the procedure. After I started to recover from the surgery a grey-haired doctor visited. He'd pulled the curtain around my bed for privacy, but I knew that a thin curtain would never dull the words enough. The other women in my ward would hear what he had to say.

The doctor spoke softly told me that, from seeing the shape of my uterus and the damage Robert had caused would mean my body was extremely unlikely to be able to conceive a child again and even less likely to carry a child to full term.

Even in the days and weeks that had passed since my Grandmother's capture, Daniel had never talked about children to me, even though he knew I'd lost my daughter by Robert's hand. But I saw the way he looked at the other Kindred Son's kids.

Carrick had insisted Daniel, my Gran and I went to Chester House every Sunday, where many of the families would gather to eat. As much of an alpha as Daniel was, and as commanding he was with his guys, I saw the look in his eyes as he watched the young children as they tottered around the house.

How he lifted them and twirled them around. As frightening as he was to adults, none of the children feared Daniel. Their chubby little faces light up when they saw him. As did his too.

*Please God, if I could only ask of you one thing...*

## EPILOGUE

Louise was staying in the adjoining suite, but it was still too early to wake her. She was the only one I had confided in. I'd skipped periods before, for no reason, so I'd put down the first period I'd missed to all the stress and excitement of the last few weeks. I'd been due to come on last week, and that was the second period in a row.

Something felt different this time... *Could I...*

I'd made myself a promise that I wouldn't test until after our wedding. If a pregnancy test was negative now, part of me feared it would break my heart.

I had about an hour before everyone would descend into my hotel room to help me prepare.

But I couldn't wait any longer. I just couldn't.

I was going to do it, but I'd need to be quick.

I dressed quickly, flinging on the pair of jeans I'd worn the night before. I was impressed that Andy was milling around in the hotel corridor at this time of the morning. He'd obviously taken his duty to keep watch very seriously.

Then again, Daniel had basically already been running the Kindred Sons, now that Carrick was giving more responsibilities to him, Daniel was practically the Boss already.



I greeted him as I walked quickly past, "Morning Andy," I scraped my hair back into a messy ponytail.

"Oh... morning Ellie!" he ran to catch up, "Where're ya goin'?"

I'd already thought of that, "It's my wedding day, the most important day in my life and you're going to ask me where I'm going?" I walked with purpose.

"I... um... I mean I can get whatever you need."

"Great!" I stopped and smiled brightly at him. "I just need your car keys for five minutes." That threw him and I saw the confusion on his face. If I pushed too hard he'd ring Daniel.

Daniel had been overprotective of me ever since the shoot-out since so many of the Doyle's were gone, the remaining ones were unpredictable.

I looked at the indecision on his face and decided to ease it. "Well, that or you can drive me round to the service station."

He relaxed. "You're not surely looking them god-awful pickled onion puffs at this time of the morning?!"

Nope... but now he mentioned it, I could definitely eat some of them yeah.

*Only thing I could eat recently.*

I pretended to be embarrassed. "Um... yeah. My appetite has gone a bit weird lately with the nerves. Could you take me around, please?"

Andy was happy to wait in the car for me since the only other person in the shop was the assistant. I made sure to lift a couple of bags of Monster Munch before quickly swiping the real reason I left the hotel. I paid quickly before stuffing the real reason for my visit up into the sleeve of my hoodie as I walked back to the car.

I practically ran away from Andy when we got back to the hotel. I'd always known that the first sample of the day was the best for what I wanted to do and if I didn't get back to privacy now, I would pee myself.

Literally.

I had waited to keep that particular event until I had a stick beneath me.



Once I'd done what I needed, I slipped out of my bathroom, checking again that the inter-room door between my suite and Louise's was firmly locked on my side. After what felt like an age, I went back to check my result.

Then I heard the knock on my suite door and Louise's irritated voice leaking through. "You locked me out!" More rapping. "Let me in, I've got the camera rolling on my phone - I'm documenting the whole day here!"

"Just a minute!" I wrapped the stick up in its plastic and panicked - someone would see it in the bathroom bin, so I took off my trainers and hid it inside one of them, and then stuffed my trainers into the overnight bag.

Louise's face was flickering between excitement and confusion, "Why'd you lock me out?" The cistern in the bathroom was refilling and the sound helped me come up with my excuse. Daniel would be the first to hear our news so I had to stall her questions.

"I, ah, I had a bit of..." I couldn't look her in the eye, "An excited tummy. I didn't want you to, um." I wasn't sure quite how to say it.

"Disturb you in the middle of something?" she turned the camera to herself as she exaggerated pinching her nose, relieving me of having to say more to my lie. She turned the camera back to me before pausing the recording.

"Are you alright now?" her eyes assessed me with her usual intense scrutiny. "Do you want some tablets?" She turned to face Andy who had taken a step into the room.

Dammit I thought I'd locked that door.

Had he a spare key? Yeah, probably.

“Can you nip down to the reception and ask for two pints of water, please?”

Clearly uncomfortable at the thought of discussing my bowels, he made a hasty retreat.

Louise marched over to the still blacked-out windows, opening the curtains and the blinds quickly.

“Let’s get a proper look at you. We can’t have you looking anything less than spectacular today! I’ve invested too much effort into your wedding.”

“Do you have any idea how many women would kill for your natural hair color?” She touched my hair. “I’m so glad you dyed it back to blonde again. Brown just didn’t suit you.”

There was a compliment in her words, somewhere.

Louise had taken to the role of chief (and only) bridesmaid with so much gusto I started to suspect she’d had spent a little too much time binge-watching all the wedding reality TV shows she could find. It was a side to her that was as much of a surprise to me as the discovery that she’d been training to be an active part of the Kindred Sons since she was 16.

In fact, whilst living in Manchester, in relative safety and protection away from Londonderry and the Doyle’s, she’d been following the training regimes alone.

I assumed that she'd had a lot of training to become the sharpshooter I now knew she was. But I tried not to think too much about that, as somewhere in the back of my mind was the knowledge she was almost always concealing a gun. Carrying a handgun, concealed or not, was illegal here – even if it was licensed, which I knew hers certainly weren’t.

I had thought that people only carried guns in two situations: in the America that my TV showed me, where it was legal to carry a gun;

and with the stereotype mafia guys that most of the Kindred Sons lived up to when they were going on a mission.

A five foot four slimly built woman who normally walked around in six-inch heels did not fit into either bracket. How wrong could I have been? I shook away the idea of where she'd hide her gun today... probably holstered to her leg under the lavender dress we'd chosen for her.

Grandma and Ryan were both staying in the hotel too, and after they'd made their way to me the four of us ate breakfast together in the room.

I had almost called everything off when I found out that Ryan's trip to the hospital wing had been intentional. Visiting him to see the damage for myself only made me worse. But the reassurances from Daniel and Ryan that the bruises looked worse than they really were eventually eased me – it had been a preventative action. Even Ryan had said so.

The parole hearing had gone ahead and Ryan had been released the week before the wedding. I debated between walking up the aisle alone or with Ryan and when he had offered, I could not refuse the hope in his eyes. It was only after I'd made the decision that I knew it had been the right one.

It felt right that my little brother should play such a big role in opening the next chapter of my life.

All our lives really.

Carrick had taken Ryan into his family every bit as much as either me or my grandmother.

The other guys had welcomed Ryan with open arms, too. Both giving me a feeling of relief and trepidation. Ryan was not a fighter, if he was to be involved with the Kindred Sons, it would have to be on a non-action basis. If at all.



t wasn't until after the ceremony and the photographs that I could steal a few moments away with my new husband.

His eyes sparkled and the smile on his chiseled face was breath-taking.

*I can't believe he's married to me!*

I kept imaging it was all just a dream. Daniel kissed me deeply, and as I gasped for air I inhaled his cologne.

God, I loved that smell.

Tears overwhelmed me and his eyebrows creased in concern. "Sweetheart?" a strong thumb wiped away the tear that escaped.

I'd never had much reason to shed happy tears before and I didn't care that Daniel saw them. "What's wrong, sweetheart?"

I shook my head, "Nothing's wrong." I smiled as I closed my eyes to clear them. "Everything's perfect."

"Then why are you crying, pet?"

"They're happy tears." I was huddled into a warm embrace.

"Ahh," he kissed my forehead. "I feel that way too."

I laughed, "I bet you're not feeling *exactly* the way I do." His breath altered and his voice changed.

"Eh?"

I moved back a little to look into his eyes. We'd barely been apart since the shoot-out, so I'd got to know every little detail of him, and right now, in those beautiful blue eyes with the smallest flicker of grey, I saw fear.

The smile beamed from me and the tears rolled down my cheeks. "I'm so happy, Daniel. This has been the perfect day, but there's one thing I just haven't been able to tell you yet." His body stiffened.

"It's good," I tried to reassure him, "In fact, it's the best news ever." I took a deep breath and I could see the vein in the side of his temple

pound.

“Daniel, we’re having a baby!”

He lifted me into his arms, and I heard his voice crack. “But I thought you couldn’t…”

“Well,” I chuckled, “Apparently I can, and I very much am.” His laughter matched mine.

“The test says 3+ weeks, which I already thought I might have been, so for it to be positive like that I’d need to be pretty pregnant.”

His lips met mine with a gentle kiss. “You’re everything to me, and you always will be, but somehow I love our baby…” he took a shuddering breath, “Our baby, even more.”

He shook his head in amazement. “My god, you’d already made me the happiest man on earth – now I’m the luckiest too. I already swore I’d be the best husband to you I could, and I mean it, I’ll be the best Da there can be too.”

We decided not to share our news with anyone else just yet, and every time we could sneak away together through the rest of the celebrations all he could do was kiss me sweetly and grin at my tummy.

The doctors had given the changes of this happening to be less than slim but I refused to do anything but stay positive. I already knew everything would be fine.

I could feel it in my bones.

Daniel, our baby and me: our little family.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

By day, Faye Parker lives a regular life and has a regular job. It's not that exciting. But by night, she dreams up wonderful stories bad ass bad boys and the wonderfully strong women they love. Hot, naughty, dirty stories that make her blush even as she writes them.

She's of the firm belief that every one should be a bit of a bad ass, and that every woman is wonderfully strong in her own way.

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