CHLOE WALSH

Binding 13

BOYS OF TOMMEN #1

ALSO BY CHLOE WALSH

Boys of Tommen

Binding 13
Keeping 13
Saving 6
Redeeming 6

Binding 13

CHLOE WALSH

Bloom books

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Contents

Front_Cover
Title Page
Copyright
Dedication
Author’s Note
Name Pronunciations
Glossary

1. High Hopes
2. Everything Has Changed
3. Flying Balls
4. Face-Planting
5. Laying Down Laws and Breaking Them
6. Awakened Hormones
7. Midnight Blue
8. Explosive Diarrhea
9. Birthday Bashes and Broken Glasses
10. Boy’s Gonna Shine
11. A Fist in the Face: Preferable to a Pie
12. Confession Time
13. Creeping and Winging
14. Provisional Licenses
15. Bathroom Breaks and Propositions
16. Keep Your Hands Off
17. You’ve Got a Fast Car
18. Overreactions and Fading Dreams
19. Late-Night Reality Checks
20. Mother Knows Best—Only in the Movies
21. Closure
22. Borrowed Time

23. Exes and Hell Nos
24. I’m Taking You Home
25. Trouble
26. The Boy’s a Hero
27. Keep the Head
Extended Scene: Booster Seats and Beating Hearts
28. Substitute Parents
29. Shifting Jackets
30. We’ll Manage
31. Bitchy Girls and Burger Breath
32. Days Off and Demon Brothers
33. King Clit Is a Liability
34. Mauled by Dogs and Feelings
35. Answers
36. Bad News
37. It’s Your Birthday
38. She’s So Lovely
39. Bad News and Worse News
40. Lines and Bulldozers
41. Block It Out
42. Catching Shoes and Feelings
43. Meddling Mothers
44. So, This Is My Room—Again
45. I’m a Virgin
46. The Consequences of Kissing Boys in Bedrooms
47. Crying Girls and Burning Hearts
48. You’re Okay
49. I Fucked Up
50. Period Leaks and Hero Boys
51. Losing the Run of Myself
52. Rude Awakening
53. Sticky Gifts
54. Unexpected Field Trips
55. Calm Your Tits
56. Loaded Threats
57. Unexpected Field Trips

58. Where’s My Head at?
59. Hushed Whispers and True Colors
60. Cupid’s Choke Hold
61. Breathe, Shannon, Just Breathe
62. Time’s Up, Lad
63. Oops, I Did It Again
64. Waiting Game
65. Find the Girl
66. I Won’t Leave You
67. Plan B
68. Frustrated Fears

Song Moments
Playlist for Shannon
Playlist for Johnny
About the Author
Back Cover

I would like to dedicate Binding 13 *to anyone who's ever had a dream they dared to chase with insatiable hunger and drive. This story is for you.*

Author’s Note

Binding 13 is the first installment in the Boys of Tommen series and the first book for Johnny and Shannon.

Some scenes in this book may be upsetting; therefore reader discretion is advised.

Because of its sexual content, violence, mature themes, triggers, and bad language, it is suitable for readers age 16+.

It is based in the south of Ireland, set during the time frame of 2005, and contains Irish dialogue and slang.

A detailed glossary can be found at the beginning of the book.

Thank you so much for joining me on this adventure.

Lots of love,
Chloe xxx

Name Pronunciations

Aoif: (like *reef* without the *r*)
Aoife: E-fa
Caoimhe: Kee-va
Eoghan: Owen
Gardaí: Gar-dee
Neasa: Nasa
Sadhbh: Sigh-ve
Sean: Shawn
Sinead: Shin-aid
Tadhg: Tie-g (like *tiger* but without the *r* at the end)

Glossary

A&E: emergency room
the Angelus: Every evening at 6:00 p.m. in Ireland, there is a minute of silence for prayer on the television.
bluey: porno movie
bonnet: hood of the car
boot: trunk of the car
burdizzo: castration device
camogie: the female version of hurling
Child of Prague: a religious statue farmers place in a field to encourage good weather (an old Irish superstition)
chipper: a restaurant that sells fast food
cooker: oven/stove/hob
corker: beautiful woman
cracking on: hooking up
craic: fun
the craic was ninety: having a lot of fun and banter
culchie: a person from the countryside or a county outside of Dublin; usually used as a friendly insult
daft: silly
daft as a brush: very silly
Dub: a person from Dublin
eejit: fool/idiot
Fair City: popular Irish television soap
fanny: vagina
feis: a traditional Gaelic arts and culture festival/event
fortnight: two weeks
frigit: someone who has never been kissed
GAA: Gaelic Athletic Association
garda: policeman

Gardaí Síochána (or just Gardaí): Irish police force
gas: funny
gobshite: fool/idiot
grinds: tutoring
hatchet craic: great fun
hole: often said instead of ass/bottom
hurling: a hugely popular amateur Irish sport played with wooden hurleys and sliotars (wooden sticks and hard balls bigger than tennis balls)
Jackeen: a person from Dublin; term sometimes used by people from other counties in Ireland to refer to a person from Dublin
jammy: lucky
jammiest: luckiest
jumper: sweater
junior cert: the compulsory state exam taken in third year, midway through the six-year cycle of secondary school
langer: idiot
langers: group of idiots and/or to be extremely drunk
leaving cert: the compulsory state exam taken in the final year of secondary school
lifted: arrested
messages: groceries
Mickey/Willy: penis
mope: idiot
on the hop: skipping school
on the lash: going out drinking
on the piss: going out drinking
poitín: Irish version of moonshine/illegal home-brewed alcohol.
pound shop: dollar store
primary school: elementary school, junior infants to sixth class
playschool: preschool/nursery
- **junior infants:** equivalent to kindergarten
- **senior infants:** equivalent to second year of kindergarten
- **first class:** equivalent to first grade
- **second class:** equivalent to second grade
- **third class:** equivalent to third grade
- **fourth class:** equivalent to fourth grade

fifth class: equivalent to fifth grade
sixth class: equivalent to sixth grade
Rebel County: nickname for County Cork
ridey: a good-looking person
Rolos: popular brand of chocolate candy
rosary, removal, burial: the three days of a Catholic funeral in Ireland
runners: trainers/sneakers
Sacred Heart: the name of Shannon, Joey, Darren, Claire, Caoimhe, Lizzie, Tadhg, Ollie, Podge, and Alec's mixed primary school
sap: sad/pathetic
Scoil Eoin: the name of Johnny, Gibsie, Feely, Hughie, and Kevin's all-boys primary school
scoring: kissing
secondary school: high school, first year to sixth year
first year: equivalent to seventh grade
second year: equivalent to eighth grade
third year: equivalent to ninth grade
fourth year, transition year: equivalent to tenth grade
fifth year: equivalent to eleventh grade
sixth year: equivalent to twelfth grade
shades: police
shifting: kissing
shifting jacket: lucky piece of clothing, usually a jacket, worn when trying to pick up a girl
slab of beer: box of twenty-four bottles of beer
solicitor: lawyer
spanner: idiot
spanner: tool, a wrench
spuds: potatoes
St. Bernadette's: the name of Aoife, Casey, and Katie's all-girls primary school
St. Stephen's Day: Boxing Day/December 26
strop: mood swing/pouting/sulking
swot: nerd/academically gifted
tog off: change into or out of training clothes
Wellies: rubber boots worn in the rain

wheelie bin: trash can
yolk: nickname for an illegal drug

1
High Hopes

SHANNON

It was January 10, 2005.

A whole new year, and the first day back to school after Christmas break.

And I was nervous—so nervous, in fact, that I had thrown up no fewer than three times this morning.

My pulse was beating at a concerning rate; my anxiety the culprit of my erratic heartbeat, not to mention the cause of my upchuck reflex abandoning me.

Smoothing down my new school uniform, I stared at my reflection in the bathroom mirror and hardly recognized myself.

Navy jumper with the Tommen College crest on the breast with a white shirt and red tie. Gray skirt that stopped at the knee, revealing two scrawny, underdeveloped legs, and finishing with tan tights, navy socks, and two-inch, black court shoes.

I looked like an implant.

I felt like one, too.

My only consolation was the shoes that Mam bought me brought me up to the five-foot-two mark. I was ridiculously small for my age in every way.

I was thin on the extreme, underdeveloped with fried eggs for breasts, clearly untouched by the puberty boom that had hit every other girl my age.

My long brown hair was loose and flowing down the middle of my back, pushed back from my face with a plain red hair band. My face was free of makeup, making me look every bit as young and small as I felt. My eyes were too big for my face and a shocking shade of blue to boot.

I tried squinting, seeing if that made my eyes look any more human, and made a conscious effort to thin my swollen lips by pulling them into my

mouth.

Nope.

The squinting only made me look constipated.

Exhaling a frustrated sigh, I touched my cheeks with my fingertips and exhaled a ragged breath.

What I lacked in the height and breast departments, I liked to think I made up for in maturity. I was levelheaded and an old soul.

Nanny Murphy always said that I was born with an old head on my shoulders.

It was true to an extent.

I had never been one to be fazed by boys or fads.

It just wasn't in me.

I once read somewhere that we mature with damage, not with age.

If that's the case, I was an old-age pensioner in the emotional stakes.

A lot of the time I worried that I didn't work like other girls. I didn't have the same urges or interest in the opposite sex. I didn't have an interest in anyone: boys, girls, famous actors, hot models, clowns, puppies… Well, okay so I had an interest in cute puppies and big fluffy dogs, but the rest of it, I could give or take.

I had no interest in kissing, touching, or fondling of any sort. I couldn't bear the thought of it. I suppose watching the shitstorm that was my parents' relationship unravel had put me off the prospect of teaming up with another human for life. If my parents' relationship was a representation of love, then I wanted no part of it.

I would rather be alone.

Shaking my head to clear my thunderous thoughts before they darkened to the point of no return, I stared at my reflection in the mirror and forced myself to practice something I rarely did these days: smile.

Deep breaths, I told myself. *This is your fresh start.*

Turning on the tap, I washed my hands and splashed some water on my face, desperate to cool the heated anxiety burning inside of my body, the prospect of my first day at a new school a daunting notion.

Any school has to be better than the one I am leaving behind. The thought entered my mind and I flinched in shame. *Schools,* I thought dejectedly, *plural.*

I'd suffered relentless bullying in both primary and secondary school.

For some unknown, cruel reason, I had been the target of every child's frustrations from the tender age of four.

Most of the girls in my class decided on day one in junior infants that they didn't like me and I wasn't to be associated with. And the boys, while not as sadistic in their attacks, weren't much better.

It didn't make sense because I got along just fine with the other children on our street and never had any altercations with anyone on the estate we lived in.

But school?

School was like the seventh circle of hell for me. All nine—instead of the regular eight—years of primary had been torture.

Junior infants was so distressing for me that both my mother and teacher decided it would be best to hold me back so I could repeat juniors with a new class. Even though I was just as miserable in my new class, I made a couple of close friends, Claire and Lizzie, whose friendship had made school bearable for me.

When it came time to choose a secondary school in our final year of primary, I had realized I was very different from my friends.

Claire and Lizzie were to attend Tommen College the following September; a lavish elite private school, with massive funding and top-of-the-range facilities—coming from the brown envelopes of wealthy parents who were hell-bent on making sure their children received the best education money could buy.

Meanwhile, I had been enrolled at the local overcrowded public school in the center of town.

I still remembered the horrifying feeling of being separated from my friends.

I'd been so desperate to get away from the bullies that I'd even begged Mam to send me to Beara to live with her sister, Aunty Alice, and her family so I could finish my studies.

There were no words to describe the devastated feeling that had overtaken me when my father put his foot down on moving in with Aunty Alice.

Mam loved me, but she was weak and weary and didn't put up a fight when Dad insisted I attend Ballylaggin Community School.

After that, it got worse.

More vicious.

More violent.

More physical.

For the first month of first year, I was hounded by several groups of boys all demanding things from me that I was unwilling to give them.

After that, I was labeled a *frigit* because I wouldn't get off with the very boys that had made my life a living hell for years.

The meaner ones labeled me crueler slurs, suggesting that the reason I was such a frigit was because I had boy parts under my skirt.

No matter how cruel the boys were, the girls were far more inventive.

And so much worse.

They spread vicious rumors about me, suggesting that I was anorexic and threw my lunch up in the toilets after lunch every day.

I *wasn't* anorexic—or bulimic, for that matter.

I was *petrified* when I was at school and couldn't bear to eat a thing because when I did vomit—and it was a frequent event—it was a direct response to the unbearable weight of the stress I was under. I was also small for my age—short, undeveloped, and skinny—which didn't help my cause in warding off the rumors.

When I turned fifteen and still hadn't gotten my first period, my mother made an appointment with our local GP. Several blood tests and exams later, our family doctor had assured both my mother and me that I was healthy, and that it was common for some girls to develop later than others.

Almost a year had passed since then and, aside from one irregular cycle in the summer that had lasted less than half a day, I was yet to have a proper period.

To be honest, I had given up on my body working like a normal girl's when mine clearly wasn't.

My doctor had also encouraged my mother to assess my schooling arrangement, suggesting that the stress I was under at school could be a contributing factor to my obvious physical stunt in development.

After a heated discussion between my parents where Mam pled my case, I was sent back to school, where I was subjected to unrelenting torment.

Their cruelty varied from name-calling and rumor spreading to sticking sanitary pads on my back, then to full on physically assaulting me.

Once, in home economics class, a few of the girls sitting behind me hacked off a chunk of my ponytail with kitchen scissors and then waved it around like a trophy.

Everyone had laughed, and I think in that moment I had hated the ones laughing at my pain more than the ones causing it.

Another time, during P.E., the same girls had taken a picture of me in my underwear with one of their camera phones and forwarded it to everyone in our year. The principal had cracked down on it quickly and suspended the phone's owner, but not before half the school had a good laugh at my expense.

I remembered crying so hard that day, not in front of them of course, but in the toilets. I had bolted myself into a cubicle and contemplated ending it all. Just taking a bunch of tablets and being done with the whole damn thing.

Life, for me, was a bitter disappointment, and at the time, I had wanted no further part in it.

I didn't do it because I was too much of a coward.

I was too afraid of it *not* working and waking up and having to face the consequences.

I was a fucking mess.

My brother Joey said they targeted me because I was good-looking and called my tormenters *jealous bitches*. He told me that I was gorgeous and instructed me to *rise above it*.

That was easier said than done—and I wasn't so confident about that gorgeous statement, either.

Many of the girls targeting me were the same ones that had been bullying me since preschool.

I doubted looks had anything to do with it back then.

I was just *unlikable*.

Besides, as much as he tried to be there for me and defend my honor, Joey didn't understand how school life was for me.

My older brother was the polar opposite of me in every shape of the word.

Where I was short, he was tall. I had blue eyes, he had green ones. I was dark-haired; he was fair. His skin was sun-kissed golden. I was pale. He was outspoken and loud, while I was quiet and kept to myself.

The biggest contrast between us was that my brother was *adored* by everyone at Ballylaggin Community School, a.k.a. BCS, the local public secondary school we both attended.

Of course, landing a spot on the Cork minor hurling team helped Joey's popularity status along the way, but even without sports, he was a great guy.

And being the great guy that he was, Joey tried to protect me from it all, but it was an impossible task for one guy.

Joey and I had an older brother, Darren, and three younger brothers: Tadhg, Ollie, and Sean, but neither of us had spoken to Darren since he walked out of the house five years previous, following yet another infamous blowout with our father. Tadhg and Ollie, who were eleven and nine, were only in primary school, and Sean, who was three, was barely out of nappies, so I wasn't exactly flush with protectors to call on.

It was days like this that I missed my eldest brother.

At twenty-three, Darren was seven years older than me. Big and fearless, he was the ultimate big brother for every little girl growing up.

From a small child, I had adored the ground he walked on, trailing after him and his friends, tagging along with him wherever he went. He always protected me, taking the blame at home when I did something wrong.

It wasn't easy for him, and being so much younger than him, I hadn't understood the full extent of his struggle. Mam and Dad had only been seeing each other a couple of months when she fell pregnant with Darren at fifteen.

Labeled a bastard baby because he was born out of wedlock in 1980s Catholic Ireland, life had always been a challenge for my brother. After he turned eleven, everything got so much worse for him.

Like Joey, Darren was a phenomenal hurler and, like *me*, our father despised him. He was always finding something wrong with Darren, be it his hair or his handwriting, his performance on the field or his choice of partner.

Darren was gay and our father couldn't cope with it.

He blamed my brother's sexual orientation on an incident in the past, and nothing anyone said could get it through to our father that being gay wasn't a *choice*.

Darren was born gay, the same way Joey was born straight and I was born empty.

He was who he was, and it broke my heart that he wasn't accepted in his own home.

Living with a homophobic father was torture for my brother.

I hated Dad for that, more than I hated him for all the other terrible things he had done through the years.

My father's intolerance and blatant discriminating behavior toward his own *son* was by far the vilest of his traits.

When Darren took a year off from hurling to concentrate on his leaving cert, our father had hit the roof. Months of heated arguments and physical altercations had resulted in a huge blowout where Darren packed his bags, walked out the door, and never came back.

Five years had passed since that night, and aside from the annual Christmas card in the post, none of us had seen or heard from him.

We didn't even have a phone number or address for him.

He as good as vanished.

After that, all of the pressure our father had put on Darren was switched onto the younger boys—who were, in our father's eyes, his *normal* sons.

When he wasn't down at the pub or the bookie's, our father was dragging the boys off to training and matches.

He focused all of his attention on them.

I was of no use to him, what with being a girl and all that.

I wasn't good at sports and I didn't excel at school or any club activity.

In my father's eyes, I was just a mouth to feed until eighteen.

That wasn't something I had come up with, either. Dad told me this on countless occasions.

After the fifth or sixth time, I grew immune to the words.

I'd long since grown tired of begging for love from a man who, in his own words, never wanted me.

The pressure he put on Joey concerned me though, and it was the reason I felt so much guilt every time he had to come to my aid.

He was in sixth year, his final year of secondary school, and had his own stuff going on, with GAA, his part-time job at the petrol station, the leaving cert, and his girlfriend, Aoife.

I knew that when I hurt, Joey hurt too. I didn't want to be a burden around his neck, someone he was constantly having to look out for, but it

had been that way since as far back as I could remember.

To be honest, I couldn't stand to look at the disappointment in my brother's eyes another minute in that school. Passing him in the hallways, knowing that when he looked at me, his expression caved.

To be fair, the teachers at BCS had tried to protect me from the lynch mob, and the guidance teacher at BCS, Mrs. Falvy, even organized fortnightly counseling sessions with a school psychologist throughout second year until funding was cut.

Mam had managed to scrape together the money for me to see a private counselor, but at eighty euros per session, and having to censor my thoughts at my mother's request, I'd only seen her five times before lying to my mother and telling her that I felt better.

I didn't *feel* better.

I never felt *better*.

I just couldn't bear to watch my mother struggle.

I despised being a financial burden on her, so I sucked it up, slapped on a smile, and continued to walk into hell every day.

But the bullying never stopped.

Nothing stopped.

Until one day, it did.

The week before Christmas break last month—just three weeks after a similar incident with the same group of girls—I had come home in floods of tears, with my school jumper ripped down the front and my nose stuffed with tissue paper to stem the bleeding from the hiding I'd taken at the hands of a group of fifth-year girls, who'd vehemently suggested that I had tried to get with one of their boyfriends.

It was a bold-faced lie, considering I'd never laid eyes on the boy they accused me of trying to seduce, and another in a long line of pathetic excuses to beat me up.

That was the day *I* stopped.

I stopped lying.

I stopped pretending.

I just *stopped*.

That day wasn't just *my* breaking point; it was Joey's, too. He'd followed me into the house with a week's suspension under his belt for

beating the living daylights out of the brother of Ciara Maloney, my main tormentor.

Our mother had taken one look at me and pulled me out of the school.

Going against wishes of my father, who thought I needed to toughen up, Mam went to the local credit union and took out a loan to pay the admission fees for Tommen College, the private, fee-paying secondary school fifteen miles north of Ballylaggin.

While I worried for my mother, I knew that if I had to walk through the doors of that public school one more time, I would *not* be walking back out.

I had hit my limit.

The prospect of a better life, a happier life, was dangled in front of my face and I had grabbed it with both hands.

And even though I feared the backlash from the kids on my council estate for attending a private school, I knew it couldn't be worse than the shit I had endured in the school I was leaving behind.

Besides, Claire Biggs and Lizzie Young, the two the girls I'd been friends with at primary school, would be in my class at Tommen College. The principal, Mr. Twomey, had assured me of that when my mother and I had met with him during the Christmas holidays to enroll.

Both Mam and Joey encouraged me with relentless support, with Mam taking extra cleaning shifts at the hospital to pay for my books and new uniform which included a *blazer*.

Before Tommen College, the only blazers I'd ever seen were the ones men wore at mass on a Sunday, *never* on teenagers, and now it would be part of my daily wardrobe.

Leaving the local secondary school in the middle of my junior cert year—an important exam year—had caused a huge rift in our family, with my father furious to be spending thousands of euros on an education that was free in the public school just down the road.

When I tried to explain to my father that school wasn't as easy for me as it was for his precious GAA-star son, he shut me down, refusing to hear me out and letting me know in no uncertain terms that he would not support me attending a glorified rugby prep school with a bunch of stuck-up, privileged clowns.

I could still recall the words *"Get off your high horse, girl,"* and *"'Tis far from rugby and prep schools you were reared,"* not to mention my

favorite, *“You’ll never fit in with those cunts,”* coming out of my father’s mouth.

I wanted to scream at him, *You won’t be paying for it!* since Dad hadn’t worked a day since I was seven—fending for the family was left to my mother—but I valued my ability to walk too much.

My father didn’t get it, but then again, I had a feeling the man had never been subjected to bullying a day in his whole life. If there was bullying to be done, Teddy Lynch was the one doing it.

God knows he bullied Mam around enough.

Because of my father’s outrage at my schooling, I had spent most of my winter break holed up in my bedroom and trying to stay out of his way.

Being the only girl in a family with five brothers, I had my own room. Joey had his own room, too, though his was much bigger than mine, having shared it with Darren until he moved out. Tadhg and Ollie shared another larger bedroom, with Sean and my parents residing in the largest of the bedrooms.

Even though it was only the box room at the front of the house, with barely any room to swing a cat, I appreciated the privacy that my own bedroom door—with a lock—gave me.

Contrary to the four bedrooms upstairs, our house was *tiny*, with a sitting room, kitchen, and one bathroom for the entire family. It was a semi-d, and situated at the edge of Elk’s Terrace, the largest council estate in Ballylaggin.

The area was rough and riddled with crime, and I avoided it all by hiding in my room.

My tiny bedroom was my sanctuary in a house—and street—full of bustle and madness, but I knew it wouldn’t last forever.

My privacy was on borrowed time because Mam was pregnant again.

If she had a girl, I would lose my sanctuary.

“Shan!” Banging erupted on the other side of the bathroom door, dragging me from my impervious thoughts. “Hurry up, will ya! I’m bursting for a piss.”

“Two minutes, Joey,” I called back, then continued my assessment of my appearance. “You can do this,” I whispered to myself. “You can absolutely do this, Shannon.”

The banging resumed so I hastily dried my hands on the towel hanging on the rack and unlocked the door, eyes landing on my brother, who was standing in nothing but a pair of black boxers, scratching his chest.

His eyes widened when he took in my appearance, the sleepy expression on his face turning alert and surprised. He was sporting a roaster of a black eye from the hurling match he'd played in at the weekend, but that didn't seem to worry a hair of his handsome head.

"You look…" My brother's voice trailed off as he gave me that brotherly appraisal. I braced myself for the jokes he would inevitably make at my expense, but they never came. "Lovely," he said instead, pale-green eyes warm and full of unspoken worry. "The uniform suits you, Shan."

"Do you think it'll be okay?" I kept my voice low so I didn't wake the rest of our family.

Mam had worked a double shift yesterday, and she and Dad were both sleeping. I could hear my father's loud snoring coming from behind their closed bedroom door, and the younger boys would have to be dragged from their mattresses later for school.

As per usual, it was just Joey and me.

The two amigos.

"Do you think I'll fit in, Joey?" I asked, voicing my concerns aloud. I could do that with Joey. He was the only one in our family I felt I could talk to and confide in. I looked down at my uniform and shrugged helplessly.

His eyes burned with unspoken emotion as he stared down at me, and I knew he was up this early not because he was desperate to use the bathroom, but because he wanted to see me off on my first day.

It was 6:15 in the morning.

Like Tommen College, BCS didn't start until 9:05 a.m., but I had a bus to catch and the only one passing through the area was at 6:45 a.m.

It was the first bus run of the day leaving Ballylaggin, but it was the only one that passed the school in time. Mam worked most mornings and Dad was still refusing to take me.

When I asked Dad about taking me to school last night, he had told me that if I'd get off my high horse and go back to Ballylaggin Community School like Joey and every other kid on our street, I wouldn't need a lift to school.

“I’m so fucking proud of you, Shan,” Joey said in a voice that was thick with emotion. “You don’t even realize how brave you are.” Clearing his throat a couple of times, he added, “Hang on—I’ve got something for you.” With that, he padded across the narrow landing and into his bedroom, returning less than a minute later. “Here,” he muttered, fisting a couple of five-euro notes into my hand.

“Joey, no!” I immediately rebuffed the notion of taking his hard-earned money. He didn’t make much at the petrol station to begin with, and money was hard to come by in our family, so taking ten euro from my brother was unimaginable. “I can’t—”

“Take the money, Shannon. It’s only a tenner,” he instructed, giving me a no-nonsense expression. “I know Nanny gave you the bus money, but just have something in your pocket. I don’t know how shit works in that place, but I don’t want you going in there without a few quid.”

I swallowed the lump of emotion fighting its way up my throat and squeezed out, “Are you sure?”

Joey nodded, then pulled me in for a hug. “You are going to be grand,” he whispered in my ear, hugging me so tight I wasn’t sure who he was trying to convince or console. “If someone gives you even the hint of shit, then you text me and I will come over there and burn that fucking school to the ground and every posh little rugby-head fucker in it.”

That was a sobering thought.

“It’s going to be fine,” I said, this time putting some force into my voice, needing to believe the words. “But I’ll be late if I don’t get going, and that’s so not what I need on my first day.”

Giving my brother one last hug, I shrugged on my coat and grabbed my schoolbag, shouldering it onto my back before heading for the staircase.

“You text me,” Joey called out when I was halfway down the steps. “I’m serious. One sniff of crap from anyone and I’ll come sort it out for you.”

“I can do this, Joey,” I whispered, casting a quick glance at where he was leaning against the banister, watching me with concerned eyes. “I *can*.”

“I know you can.” His voice was low and pained. “I just… I’m here for you, okay?” he finished with a heavy exhale. “Always here for you.”

This was hard for my brother, I realized, as I watched him wave me off to school like an anxious parent would their firstborn. He was always

fighting my battles, always jumping in to defend me and pull me to safety.

I wanted him to be proud of me, to see me as more than a little girl that needed his constant protection.

I needed that for myself.

With renewed determination, I gave him a bright smile and then hurried out of the house to catch my bus.

2
Everything Has Changed

SHANNON

When I climbed off my bus, I was relieved to discover that the doors of Tommen College were opened to the students at seven in the morning, obviously to accommodate the different schedules of the boarders and day-walkers.

I hurried into the building to get out of the weather.

It was pouring rain outside, and in any other circumstance, I might consider it a bad omen, but this was Ireland where it rained an average of 150 to 225 days out of the year.

It was also early January, typical rain season.

I discovered that I wasn't the only early bird to arrive before school hours, noting several students already wandering through the halls and lounging in the lunch hall and common areas.

Yes, common areas.

Tommen College had what I could only describe as spacious living rooms for each year.

To my immense surprise, I discovered that I wasn't the immediate target for bullies like I had been in every other school I had attended.

Students whizzed past me, uninterested in my presence, clearly caught up in their own lives.

I waited, with my heart in my mouth, for a cruel comment or shove to come.

It didn't. Transferring halfway through the year from the neighboring public school, I had been expecting a tirade of fresh taunts and new enemies. But *nothing* happened. Aside from a couple of curious glances, nobody approached me. The students at Tommen either didn't know who I

was—or didn’t care. Either way, I was clearly off the radar in this school and I *loved* it.

Comforted by the sudden cloak of invisibility surrounding me, and feeling more positive than I had in months, I took the time to look around the third-year common area.

It was a large bright room with floor-to-ceiling windows on one side that looked onto a courtyard of buildings. Plaques and photographs of previous students adorned the lemon-painted walls. Plush couches and comfy chairs filled the large space, along with a few round tables and matching oak chairs. There was a small kitchenette area in the corner with a kettle, toaster, and microwave.

Holy crap. So, this was what the other side lived like. It was like a different world in Tommen College.

I could bring a few slices of bread and have tea and toast at school.

Feeling intimidated, I slipped out and wandered through every hall and corridor, trying to get my bearings.

Studying my timetable, I memorized where every building and wing that I would have a class in was.

I was feeling pretty confident by the time the bell went at eight fifty, signaling fifteen minutes before the start of the school day, and when I was greeted by a familiar voice, I came close to crying with sheer relief.

“Oh my god! Oh my god!” a tall curvaceous blond with a smile the size of a football pitch squealed loudly, drawing my attention and everyone else’s as she barreled through several groups of students in her bid to reach me.

I wasn’t nearly prepared for the monster hug I was enveloped in when she reached me, even though I should have expected nothing less from Claire Biggs.

Being greeted by actual smiling, friendly faces instead of what I was used to was overwhelming for me.

“Shannon Lynch,” Claire half giggled, half choked out, squeezing me tightly. “You’re actually here!”

“I’m here,” I agreed with a small laugh, patting her back as I tried and failed to free myself from her lung-crushing embrace. “But I won’t be for much longer if you don’t ease up on the squeezing.”

“Oh, crap. Sorry.” Claire laughed, immediately taking a step back and releasing me from her death hold. “I forgot you haven’t grown since fourth class.” She took another step back and looked me over. “Make that third class,” she snickered, eyes dancing with mischief.

This wasn’t a dig; it was an observation and a fact.

I was exceptionally small for my age, dwarfed even further by my friend’s five-foot-nine frame.

She was tall, athletically built, and exceptionally beautiful. It wasn’t a demure form of beauty, either. No, it shot out of her face like sunbeams.

Claire was simply dazzling with big puppy-dog brown eyes and ringlets of light-blond curls. She had a sunny disposition and a smile that could warm the coldest of hearts.

Even at four years old, I’d known this girl was different.

I could feel the kindness radiating out of her. I’d felt it as she stood in my corner for eight long years, defending me to her own detriment.

She knew the difference between right and wrong and was prepared to step in for anyone weaker than her.

She was a keeper.

We had drifted apart since going to separate secondary schools, but one look at her and I knew she was still the same old Claire.

“We can’t all be beanpoles,” I shot back good-naturedly, knowing her words were not meant to hurt me.

“God, I’m so glad you’re here.” She shook her head and smiled down at me. She did this adorable happy dance and then threw her arms around me once more. “I can’t believe your parents finally did the right thing by you.”

“Yeah,” I replied, uncomfortable again. “Eventually.”

“Shan, it won’t be like that here.” Claire’s tone was serious now, eyes full of unspoken emotion. “All that shit you’ve suffered? It’s in the past.” She sighed again and I knew she was holding her tongue, refraining from saying everything she wanted to.

Claire knew. She witnessed how it was for me back in primary school. For some unknown reason, I was glad she hadn’t seen how much worse it had gotten.

It was a humiliation I didn’t want to feel anymore.

“I’m here for you,” she continued to say, “and Lizzie, too—if she ever decides to drag her ass out of bed and actually come to school.”

Smiling brightly, I banished my demons to the back of my mind and said, “Here’s to a fresh start.”

“Yes, girl!” Claire said with keen enthusiasm, fist-bumping me in the process. “A fresh start with the sunny side up.”

The first half of the day went better than I could have ever anticipated. Claire introduced me to her friends, and while I couldn’t remember the names of most of the people I had met, I was incredibly grateful to be included and, I dared say, *accepted*.

Inclusion wasn’t something I was used to, and I found myself working hard to keep up with the constant flow of conversation and friendly questions aimed at me.

Spending as much time as I did in my own company made it difficult for me to integrate back into normal teenage society. Having people other than Joey and his friends that were willing to sit with me, talk to me, and walk with me at school was a mind-blowing experience.

When my other primary-school friend, Lizzie Young, eventually showed up to school halfway through the third class of the morning, blaming a dentist appointment for her absence, we immediately fell back into the familiar friendship we always had.

Lizzie rolled into school in a boy’s school trousers and runners, uncaring of what anyone had to say about her appearance. She honestly didn’t seem to care what people thought. She dressed according to her mood and projected vibes the same way. She could show up tomorrow in a skirt and with a full face of makeup. She did what she wanted to do when she wanted to do it, unaware and uncaring of anyone else’s opinion.

She oozed a lazy sort of confidence with her long dark-blond swishing ponytail and makeup-free face, emphasizing those big blue eyes of hers.

I also noted all through our classes that Lizzie received plenty of male attention regardless of the baggy trousers and messy hair she was sporting, proving the point that you don’t need to strip down and paint your face to attract the opposite sex.

A genuine smile and a nice personality went a long way.

Lizzie was a lot like Claire in many ways, but starkly different in others. Like Claire, Lizzie was blond and leggy. They were both tall for their age and both sickeningly beautiful.

But where Claire was outgoing and, at times, a little overly excited, Lizzie was laid-back and slightly introverted.

Claire was mostly unfiltered and Lizzie took her time to make a decision on something.

Claire was pristine at all times with a full face of makeup and a perfectly coordinated outfit for any given occasion, while Lizzie's style was unpredictable.

Meanwhile, I was the tiny brunette who buddied up with the best-looking girls in class.

Sigh.…

"Are you okay, Shan?" Lizzie asked after big break.

We were walking toward our next class, English in the south wing, when I stopped midstride, causing a pileup of students.

"Oh crap," I muttered, suddenly realizing my blunder. "I left my phone in the bathroom."

Claire, who was on my left, turned and frowned. "Go and get it; we'll wait for you."

"The bathroom in the science building," I replied with a groan. Tommen was ridiculously large, with several classes taking place in different buildings around the vast property. "I have to get it back," I added, feeling anxious at the thought of someone finding my phone and invading my privacy. The mobile phone itself wasn't worth anything. It was one of the cheapest prepays on the market and didn't even have a camera, but it was mine. It was filled with private text messages and I needed it back. "Dammit."

"Don't panic," Lizzie interjected. "We'll walk you over."

"No." I held a hand up and shook my head. "I don't want to make you both late for class, too. I'll go and get it." I was new. It was my first day. I doubted the teacher would go hard on me for being late to class. Claire and Lizzie, on the other hand, weren't new and didn't have any excuse for not being in their seats on time.

I could do this. I didn't—or at least I shouldn't—need a babysitter to walk me across the school.

Claire frowned, her uncertainty evident. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah." I nodded. "I remember the way."

"I don't know, Shan." Lizzie chewed on her bottom lip. "Maybe one of us should go with you." Shrugging, she added, "You know, just in case…"

The second bell rang loudly, signaling the start of class.

"Go on," I urged, waving them off. "I'll be grand."

Turning on my heels, I hurried down the hallway to the entrance and then broke into a run when I reached the courtyard. It took a solid nine minutes running at full speed in the lashing rain down a laneway that circled several sports training pitches to reach the science building—not an easy feat in heels.

By the time I reached the girls bathroom, I was breathless and sweating.

Thankfully, my phone was exactly where I had left it—on the sink next to the soap dispenser.

Sagging in relief, I swiped it off the sink, quickly checked the screen, sagged again when I saw the unperturbed locked screen, and then tucked it safely into the front pocket of my schoolbag.

If this had happened in my old school, a phone left unattended in a bathroom wouldn't have survived fifteen seconds, let alone fifteen minutes.

You're walking shoulder to shoulder with the wealthy now, Shannon, I thought to myself. *They don't want your shitty phone.*

Splashing some water on my face, I shouldered my bag onto my back, using both straps like the nerd I was. I hadn't been to my locker yet, and I was carrying what felt like four stone in there. Both straps were entirely necessary in this situation.

When I stepped out of the science building and looked at the long unappealing trek back to the main building where my class was, I bit back a moan.

I wasn't running again. I physically couldn't. All of my energy was zapped.

Forlorn, my gaze flickered between the unappealing uphill laneway and the training pitches. There were three pitches in total on this side of the school. Two smaller fields, neatly tended, which were empty, and one larger

pitch, which was currently occupied by thirty or so boys and a teacher shouting orders at them.

Torn, I debated my options.

If I cut across the training fields, it would shave several minutes off my walk.

They wouldn't even notice me.

I was small and quick.

I was also tired and anxious.

Cutting across the pitches was the logical thing to do.

Sure, there was a steep grassy bank on the far side of the pitch that separated the fields from the courtyard, but I could make it up that without any problem.

Checking my watch, a surge of dismay rose inside of me when I saw that I had already missed fifteen minutes of the forty-minute class.

Decision made, I climbed over the low wooden fence that separated the training grounds from the footpath and power walked toward my destination.

With my head down and my heart hammering violently against my rib cage, I hurried through the empty fields, hesitating only when I reached the largest of the training pitches—the one filled with boys.

Huge boys.

Dirty boys.

Angry-looking boys.

Who were glaring at me.

Oh crap.

"What are you doing?"

"Get off the fucking pitch!"

"Jesus Christ!"

"Fucking girls."

"Move, will you!"

Panicked, I ignored the shouting and jeering as I hurried past them, obviously disturbing their training. Mortification seeped through my body as I upped my pace, breaking into a clumsy jog.

The ground was wet and muddy from the rain, so I couldn't move as quickly as I—or those boys—would have liked.

When I reached the edge of the pitch, I felt like crying in relief as I hobbled up the steep bank. However, my relief was only a momentary, fleeting feeling that was quickly replaced with a searing pain as something very hard and very heavy smashed into the back of my head, taking the air from my lungs and my feet from beneath me.

Moments later, I was free-falling backwards, tumbling down the muddy bank, the pain ricocheting through my head making it impossible for me to think clearly or break my own fall.

My last coherent thought before I hit the ground with a thud, and a thick cloud of darkness cloaked over me, was this: *Nothing changes.*

I was wrong, though.

Everything changed after that day.

Everything.

3
Flying Balls

Boy Wonder Captivates the Coaching Staff at the Academy— *Young Johnny Kavanagh, 17, a native of Blackrock, Dublin, currently residing in Ballylaggin, County Cork, sailed through his medical evaluation to secure his position at the prestigious rugby academy in Cork. Nursing a chronic groin injury since the start of last season, the youth has been given the all clear from team doctors. The Tommen College secondary school student is set to win his fifteenth cap for the Academy this weekend, having been named as starting 13 for the esteemed youth team.*

The natural center has been drawing attention from coaches at the international level, including clubs in the U.K. and Southern Hemisphere. When asked to comment on the schoolboy's accelerated rise through the ranks, Ireland's U20 team's head coach, Liam Delaney, had this to say: "We are excited about the level of caliber in the up-and-coming players throughout the country. The future looks bright for Irish rugby."

When asked specifically about the Cork schoolboy, Delaney said, "We have been aware of Kavanagh since his playing days in Dublin and have been in close talks with his coaches and trainers for the last eighteen months. U18s' coaches are impressed. We are keeping a keen eye on his progression and are impressed with the level of intelligence and maturity he naturally exudes on the pitch. He's certainly one to watch out for when he comes of age."

JOHNNY

I was exhausted.

Seriously, I was so tired I was having a hard time keeping my eyes open and my focus on point. My day from hell was turning into the week from hell, and that was a special feat considering it was Monday.

Falling straight back into school, not to mention training and the gym six nights a week, did that to a guy.

To be honest, I'd been running on empty since last summer, having returned from an international campaign with the U18s, where I was playing alongside the best in Europe, only to head right into an intense six-week conditioning camp in Dublin.

After that, I had a ten-day break before returning to school and resuming my commitments with my club and the Academy.

I was also hungry, which didn't bode well for my temper.

I didn't do well with long intervals between meals.

My lifestyle and intense training regime required me to eat at regular allotted time frames. Every two hours was ideal for my body when I was consuming a 4,500-calorie-a-day diet. Leave my stomach waiting longer than four hours, and I was a moody, pissy bitch. It wasn't like I was particularly looking forward to the mountain of fish and steamed vegetables waiting for me in my lunch box, but I was in a routine, dammit. Fucking with my regimen was a surefire way of waking the hangry beast inside of me.

We'd been on the pitch less than half an hour, and already I'd taken out three of my teammates and had taken a bollocking from our coach in the process.

In my defense, every tackle I made on them was a perfectly legal one, if not a little ruthless.

But that was my point, dammit.

I was too aggravated to take it back a notch on boys who weren't anywhere near my level of playing.

Boys was the appropriate word in this instance.

These were *boys.*

I played with men.

I often wondered what the point was in playing on the school team.

It didn't do shite for me.

Club level was basic enough but schoolboy rugby was a fucking waste of my time.

Especially this school.

Today was the first day back after Christmas break, but the school team had been training since September.

Four months.

Four fucking months and we looked more disorganized than ever.

For the millionth time in the past six years, I found myself resenting my parents' move. Had we stayed in Dublin, I would be playing on a quality team with quality players and making some actual goddamn progression.

But no, instead I was here, in the middle of bumfuck nowhere, picking up the slack for a less-than-adept trainer and busting my bollocks to keep our side in sights of the qualifiers.

We won the league cup last year because we had a solid team with the ability to actually *play* decent fucking rugby.

With the absence of several players from last year's squad, who were now gone on to college, my agitation and concern for our chances this year were growing by the minute.

I wasn't the only one who felt like this, either.

There were six or seven exceptional players left in this school who were good enough for the division we were playing in, and *that* was the problem.

We needed a bench of twenty-three decent players to excel in this league.

Not half a dozen.

My best friend for example, Gerard Gibson—or Gibsie for short—was a prime example of exceptional.

He was, without a shadow of doubt, the best flanker I'd played with or against in this level of rugby and could easily move up the ranks with a little commitment and effort.

Unlike me, though, rugby wasn't Gibsie's life.

Giving up parties and girlfriends for a few years was a small price to pay for a professional career in the sport. If he laid off the drink and cigarettes, he'd be phenomenal.

Gibs wasn't quite so convinced though, choosing to spend quality training time fucking his way through the female population of Ballylaggin

with a relish, and drinking until his liver and pancreas cried out in protest instead.

I thought it was a dreadful waste.

Another overthrown pass from Patrick Feely, our newest number 12 and my partner in midfield, caused me to lose my ever-loving shite right there in the middle of the pitch.

Yanking out my mouth guard, I flung it at him, socking him straight in the jaw.

“See that?” I roared. “It’s called hitting the fucking target.”

“Sorry, Cap,” the center muttered, red-faced, addressing me by the on-pitch nickname I’d earned since becoming captain of the school team in fourth year and earning my first international cap the same year. “I’ll do better.”

I regretted my actions immediately.

Patrick was a decent lad and very good friend of mine.

Aside from Gibsie, Hughie Biggs and Patrick were my closest friends. Gibs, Feely, and Hughie had already been in a tight circle at Scoil Eoin, an all-boys primary school, when I was injected into their class for the final year of primary.

Bonding over our shared love of rugby, we’d all remained good friends throughout secondary school, although we had paired off in the sense of best friends—with Hughie aligning himself with Patrick, and me with the gobshite himself.

Patrick was a quiet lad. He didn’t deserve my wrath, and the poor guy definitely didn’t deserve to have my spit-laced mouth guard launched at his head.

Dropping my head, I jogged over to him and clapped his shoulder, muttering my apologies.

See, this was exactly why I needed to be fed.

And maybe given an ice pack for my dick.

Fill me up with enough meat and veg and I’d be a different person.

A tolerant person.

Polite even.

But my sole focus was currently on *not* passing out from hunger and pain; therefore I had no time for niceties.

We had a cup qualifier match later this week, and unlike me, these lads had spent their free time being, well, teenagers.

Christmas break was a prime example.

I'd spent my time working like a maniac to get back to the pitch, having been out on injury, while these guys had spent their break eating and drinking the shite out of life. I had no problem losing a match if we were genuinely the poorer side. What I could not accept was losing due to lack of preparation and poor discipline. Schoolboys league or not. That wasn't fucking good enough in my book.

I was perturbed beyond all rationality when a girl strolled across the pitch—fucking strolled right through the training grounds.

Irritated, I glared at her, feeling a rage inside of me that bordered on manic.

This was how fucking bad this team was.

The other students didn't even care that we were training.

Several of the lads shouted at her, but that only seemed to rile me up further.

I didn't understand why they were shouting at her.

This was *their* fault.

The fools ranting and shouting were the ones that needed to either up their game or put their rugby dreams to bed.

Instead of concentrating on the game, they were focusing on the girl.

Fucking eejits.

"Great display of captaincy, Kavanagh," Ronan McGarry, another one of our latest recruitments, and a piss-poor excuse for a scrum half, taunted as he jogged backwards past me. "Overrated much?" the younger guy taunted.

"Keep fucking running," I warned him while I debated how much trouble I would get in if I broke his legs. I really didn't like that guy.

"Maybe you should take your own advice," Ronan taunted. "Dublin scum."

Deciding I didn't care about punishments, I reclaimed the ball and threw it at his head. Accurate and precise, the ball socked McGarry in the desired region—his nose.

"Settle down, hotshot!" Coach barked, jogging over to check on Ronan who was cupping his face.

I snorted at the sight.

I hit him with a ball, not my fist.

Pussy.

“This is a team sport,” Coach seethed, glaring at me. “Not the Johnny show.”

“Oh, it is?” I shot back, snarling, unable to stop myself from taking the bait. Mr. Mulcahy, the school’s senior rugby coach, didn’t like me much and the feeling was completely mutual.

“Yeah,” Coach bellowed. “It damn well is.”

Jogging over to where the ball had landed, I swiped it up and stalked over to him and McGarry, unwilling to let it go. “Then you might want to remind these fuckers,” I snarled, gesturing around to my teammates, “because I seem to be the only eejit that showed up to training today!”

“You’re skating on thin ice, boy,” he seethed. “Don’t push it.”

Unable to stop myself from pushing it, I hissed, “This team’s a fucking joke.”

“Hit the showers, Kavanagh,” Coach ordered, face turning a dangerous shade of purple as he slammed a finger in my chest. “You’re out!”

“I’m out?” I shot back, taunting him. “Out of what exactly?”

I wasn’t out of shit.

Coach couldn’t drop me.

He could ban me from training. He could suspend me. Give me detention.

It didn’t make a blind shit of difference because come match day, I would be on that pitch.

“You’ll do nothing,” I sneered, letting my temper get the better of me.

“Don’t push me, Johnny,” Coach warned. “One call to your fancy little coaches up the country, and you’ll be in more shit than you can dig yourself out of.”

Ronan, who was standing beside Coach, grinned darkly, clearly delighted at the prospect of me getting into trouble.

Furious at the threat but knowing I was beaten, I let rip at the ball in my hands, drop kicking it with an unsated fury thrumming through my veins and no care for direction.

The minute the ball whizzed off the foot of my boot, the anger inside of me dissipated in a rush, ejecting itself from my body in defeat.

Dammit.

I was being difficult.

I knew better.

Coach threatening me with the Academy was a low blow, but I knew I deserved it.

I was losing my shit on *his* pitch, with *his* team, too emotional and overworked to pull myself together.

Never in a million years would I ever feel so much as a hint of remorse for hitting McGarry with the ball—that fucker deserved a lot worse—but Feely and the rest of the lads were a different matter altogether.

I was supposed to be this team's captain and I was acting like a tool.

It wasn't good enough, and I was disappointed in myself for my outburst.

I knew what was wrong with me.

I had spread myself too thin these past few months and had come back too soon from injury.

I had been cleared by my doctors to return to training this week, but a blind man could tell I was off my game and it was pissing me the hell off.

The prospect of juggling school, training, club commitments, and the Academy while nursing an injury was a strain on both my mind and my body, and I was struggling to find the pristine discipline I usually displayed.

Either way, it wasn't an excuse.

I would apologize to Patrick after I'd eaten, and the rest of the lads, too.

Coach, noticing the change in my temperament, nodded stiffly.

"Good," he said in a calmer tone than earlier. "Now, go clean up and for fuck's sake rest up for one damn day. You're only a kid, Kavanagh, and you look like shit."

The man didn't like me much and we clashed on a daily basis like an old married couple, but I never doubted his intentions.

He cared about his players and not just our ability to play rugby. He encouraged us to succeed in all aspects of school life and was constantly chanting about the importance of exam years.

He was also probably right about me looking like shite; I certainly felt like it.

“It’s an important year for you,” he reminded me. “Fifth year is more crucial to your leaving cert than sixth year and I need you to keep your marks up—oh shit!”

“What?” I demanded, startled.

Following Coach’s horrified gaze, I turned around and locked eyes on the crumpled ball on the edge of the pitch.

“Oh shite,” I muttered when my mind made sense of what I was seeing.

The girl.

The fucking girl who’d been prancing around the pitch was laid out on her back on the grass. A ball lay on the grass beside her.

Not just any ball.

My bleeding ball!

I was horrified, my feet moving before my brain could catch up. I ran toward her, heart hammering against my rib cage every step of the way.

“Hey—are you okay?” I called out, closing the space between us.

A soft female groan came from her lips as she attempted to get to her feet. She was trying to stand up and failing miserably, clearly startled.

Unsure of what to do, I reached down to help her up, but she quickly slapped my hands away.

“Don’t touch me,” she cried out, tone a little slurred, and the jolting caused her to fall onto her knees.

“Okay!” I automatically took a step back and held my hands up. “I’m so sorry.”

Achingly slowly, she climbed to her feet, swaying from side to side, confusion etched on her face, eyes unfocused.

Clutching the side of her muddy skirt with one hand, and balancing the rugby ball in the other, she looked around, eyes wild.

Her attention landed on the ball in her hands and then shifted back to my face.

A glazed-over sort of fury blazed in her eyes as she half staggered, half stalked toward me.

Her hair was a total mess, tumbling loosely down her small shoulders, with pieces of mud and grass caked to the tendrils.

When she reached me, she slapped the ball against my chest and hissed, “Is this your ball?”

I was so struck down by the sight of this tiny mud-covered girl that I just nodded like a fucking eejit.

Jesus Christ, who *was* this girl?

Clearing my throat, I took the ball from her and said, “Uh, yeah. It’s my ball.”

She was tiny, seriously fucking small, barely reaching my chest in height.

“You owe me a skirt,” she growled, still clutching the fabric by her hip. “And a pair of tights,” she added, glancing down at the huge ladder in her skin-colored tights.

Her gaze roamed over her body, then landed on my face, eyes narrowed.

“Okay,” I replied with a nod, because in all honesty what the hell else was I supposed to say?

“And an apology,” the girl added before collapsing on the ground.

She landed heavily on her ass and grunted out a small cry from the contact.

“Oh, shite,” I muttered. Tossing the ball away, I moved to help her. “I didn’t mean to—”

“Stop!” Again, she batted my hands away. “Ouch,” she moaned, cringing when she spoke. Reaching up, she clutched her face with both hands and breathed heavily. “My head.”

“Are you okay?” I demanded, unsure of what the fuck to do.

Should I pick her up against her wishes?

It didn’t seem like a good idea.

But I couldn’t exactly leave her here.

“Johnny!” Coach was bellowing. “Is she alright? Did you hurt her?”

“She’s grand,” I called back, wincing when a hiccupping sound tore from her chest. “You’re grand, aren’t you?”

This girl was going to get me into trouble. I was in enough trouble as it stood. Almost decapitating the girl wasn’t going to look good for me.

“Why’d you do that?” she whispered, clutching her small face in her even smaller hands. “You hurt me.”

“I’m sorry,” I repeated. I felt oddly helpless, and it was a feeling I didn’t like. “I didn’t mean to.”

She sniffled then, blue eyes watering, and something inside of me snapped.

Ah, shite.

Horrified, I threw my hands up and blurted out, “I’m so sorry,” before crouching down and scooping her up from the grass. “Christ,” I muttered, helpless, as I set her on her feet. “Don’t *cry*.”

“It’s my first day,” she sniffled, swaying on her feet. “My fresh start and I’m covered in shit.”

She *was* covered in shit.

“My dad’s going to kill me,” she continued to choke out, clutching her torn skirt. “My uniform’s ruined.”

A pained hissing sound tore from her throat then, and the hand she was using to hold her skirt shot to her temple, causing the scrap of fabric to fall away from her body.

My eyes widened of their own accord, an unfortunate reaction of seeing a female’s underwear.

Wolf whistles and cheering erupted from the lads.

“Oh god,” she cried out, scrambling clumsily to retrieve her skirt.

“Go on, gorgeous!”

“Give us a twirl!”

“Fuck off, you assholes!” I roared at my teammates, stepping in front of the girl to block their view.

I could hear the lads cracking up behind me, laughing and talking shite, but I couldn’t concentrate on a word they were saying because the sound of my heart hammering in my chest was deafening me.

“Here.” Reaching for the hem of my jersey, I pulled it over my head and ordered, “Put that on.”

“It’s filthy,” she sobbed, but didn’t stop me when I pulled it down over her head.

She slipped her hands into the sleeves and I felt an immense amount of relief when the hem fell to her knees, covering her up.

Christ, she really was a tiny little thing.

Was she even old enough to attend secondary school?

She didn’t look it.

Right now, she looked very, very young and…sad?

“Kavanagh, is the girl alright?” Coach demanded.

“She’s grand!” I repeated, my words a harsh bark.

“Take her to the office,” he instructed. “Make sure Majella checks her over.”

Majella was the school’s first respondent. She worked in the lunch hall and was the go-to woman when a student sustained an injury.

“Right, sir,” I called back, flustered, quickly swooping down to snatch up her skirt and schoolbag.

I stepped closer and she flinched away from me.

“I’m only trying to help you,” I stated in as gentle a tone I could muster, holding my hands up, as if to show her I meant no harm. “I’ll take you to the office.”

She looked at bit dazed and I worried I might have given her a concussion.

Knowing my luck, that’s exactly what I’d done.

Fucking hell.

Flinging the bag over my shoulder, I tucked her skirt into the waistband of my shorts, placed a hand on her back, and tried to coax her up the hilly bank separating the pitch from the school grounds.

She wobbled on her feet like a baby foal, and I had to resist the sudden urge I had to wrap my arm around her shoulders.

A couple of minutes later, that was exactly what I had to do anyway because she kept losing her footing.

Panic surged through me.

I broke the fucking girl.

I was going to get a suspension for losing my temper and a warrant put out for my arrest.

I was a cunt.

“I’m sorry,” I continued to tell her, glaring daggers at every nosy bastard who decided to stop and gawk at us as we walked at a snail’s pace.

She was in my jersey and it fell around her like a dress.

I was freezing my tits off beside her in nothing but a pair of training shorts, socks, and studded football boots. Oh, and the pink fucking schoolbag slung on my back.

They could look all they wanted; my only concern was getting this girl’s head checked out.

“I’m seriously fucking sorry.”

“Stop saying sorry,” she moaned, clutching her head.

“Right, sorry,” I muttered, feeling her lean her weight on me. “But I am sorry. Just so you’re clear.”

“Nothing’s clear,” she croaked out, stiffening against my touch. “The ground’s spinning.”

“Ah Christ, don’t say that,” I strangled out, tightening my arm around her rigid frame. “Please don’t fucking say that.”

“Why’d you do that?” she whimpered, so frail and small and covered in shite.

“I’m an asshole,” I informed her, shifting her pink schoolbag back onto my back as I tucked her in closer. “I fuck up a lot.”

“Did you do it on purpose?”

“What?” Her words threw me enough to cause me to halt. “No.” Twisting my body so I could look down at her face, I frowned and said, “I would never do that to you.”

“You promise?”

“Yeah,” I grunted, hitching her up with my arm and melding her body to my side. “I promise.”

It was January.

It was wet.

It was cold.

And for some strange, disconcerting reason, I was burning the fuck up on the inside.

My words, for whatever reason, seemed to ease the tension inside this girl because she released a huge sigh, loosened her rigid frame, and allowed me to take her entire weight.

4
Face-Planting

JOHNNY

With a great deal of effort and a surprising show of otherwise absent self-control, I managed to respect her wishes and walk her to the office—when all I wanted to do was scoop her up in my arms and run for help.

I was panicked and worrying, and the more she groaned or sagged against me, the higher my anxiety grew.

However, having spent the last ten minutes outside the principal's office, listening to Mr. Twomey rant and rave, I was all out of that precious patience.

Why wasn't he taking her off me?

Why the fuck was I still standing outside his office holding up a half-comatose girl?

He was the adult here.

"Her mother is on the way," Mr. Twomey announced with an exasperated sigh, sliding his phone into his pocket. "How could this happen, Johnny?"

"I already told you. It was an *accident*," I hissed while I continued to hold the girl up, keeping her small frame tucked into my side. "You need to get Majella to check her over," I repeated for the fiftieth fucking time. "I think she has a concussion."

"Majella is out on maternity leave until *Friday*," Mr. Twomey barked. "What am I supposed to do with her? I have no first aid training."

"Then you better call a doctor," I shot back heatedly, still holding on to the girl, "because I broke her fucking head."

"Watch your language, Kavanagh," Mr. Twomey snapped.

I rolled off the standard "Yes, sir," not really giving a shite and not feeling particularly sorry either for that matter.

My role in the rugby academy meant that I was given a lot of leeway in this school, a lot of preferential treatment that other students didn't get, but I wasn't going to push it on my first day back.

Not when I'd used up my quota by maiming the new girl.

"Are you okay, Miss Lynch?" Mr. Twomey asked, prodding her like she was an uncooked turkey he didn't want to catch salmonella from.

"It hurts," she moaned, sagging into my side.

"I know," I soothed, pulling her closer. "I'm so fucking sorry."

"Jesus, Johnny, this is all I need," Mr. Twomey hissed, running a hand through his salt-and-pepper hair. "It's her first day. Her parents coming here tearing up the school is the last thing I need."

"It was an accident," I bit out, angry now. She groaned and I made a conscious effort to lower my voice when I said, "I hardly meant to hurt the girl."

"Yes, well, tell that to her mother when she arrives," Mr. Twomey huffed. "She was already pulled out of Ballylaggin Community School for being verbally and physically attacked. And what happens on her first day at Tommen? *This!"*

"I didn't *attack* her," I spat out. "I made a bad kick."

Shifting her under my arm, I glared at the so-called authority figure.

"Hold up," I snapped, registering his earlier words. "What do you mean she was *attacked*?"

I looked down at the tiny little female under my arm.

Who could attack her?

She was so small.

And frail.

"What happened to her?" I heard myself ask, attention back to the principal.

"I think I'm going to fall," she croaked out, distracting me from my thoughts. Reaching up, she clutched my forearm with her small hand and sighed. "Everything's spinning."

"I won't let you fall," I automatically replied in a soothing tone. "It's okay." I felt her slip and pulled her upright, holding onto the tiny thing for all I was worth. "I've got you," I coaxed, tightening my arm around her. "You're good."

“Look, sit down with her,” Mr. Twomey ordered, gesturing to the bench that lined the wall outside of his office. “I’ll go and find a compress or something.”

“You’re *leaving* me with her?” I demanded, mouth hanging open. “*Alone*?”

The principal didn’t answer me.

Of course he didn’t, the fucking coward, because he was already miles down the corridor, desperate to get away from the type of responsibility he was paid to stand over.

“Spineless eejit,” I growled under my breath.

Frustrated, I walked us over to the wooden bench.

Dropping her schoolbag on the floor, I carefully lowered our bodies onto the bench until we were sitting side by side. I kept my arm wrapped around her bony little shoulders, not daring to leave her side for fear of her falling.

“This is just great,” I tutted, sulking. “Fucking wonderful.”

“You feel so warm,” she whispered and I felt her cheek nuzzle against my bare chest. “Like a hot-water bottle.”

“Okay, you *really* need to keep your eyes open,” I told her, panicked by her words.

Knees bouncing nervously, I turned her in my arms and caught hold of her face between my hands. “Hey,” I coaxed, giving her face a little shake with both hands.

“Hey…girl?” I added lamely because I didn’t even know her name. I’d almost killed the girl and I didn’t know her fucking name. “Open your eyes.”

She didn’t.

“Hey, hey!” I said louder now. “Look at me.” I shook her head. “Look at my face.”

This time she did.

She opened her eyes, and fuck me, I unintentionally sucked in a sharp breath.

Jesus, this girl was *beautiful*.

I’d noticed it earlier of course. She had a striking look about her. But now, seeing her up close like this and being able to count the freckles on her face—eleven by the way—it was hitting home just how striking she was.

Her blue eyes were big and round and fucking beautiful, with small hues of yellow dotting through them, rimmed with thick long lashes.

I wasn't even sure I'd ever seen that shade of blue before. It certainly didn't shake anything up in the memory bank.

Hands down, she possessed the most gorgeous pair of eyes I'd seen in my life.

She had long, elbow-length dark-brown hair that was thick and curled at the ends.

And hidden behind the mountain of hair was a small heart-shaped face, smooth, clear skin, and a tiny dimple in her chin.

Perfect-shaped dark eyebrows that arched above those killer eyes of hers. A tiny button nose, high cheekbones, and these puffy, swollen lips.

Lips that were a natural rosy red and kind of looked like she had been sucking on an ice pop or something—which I knew she hadn't because I'd spent the last half hour trying to keep her awake.

"Hi," she breathed.

I blew out a relieved breath. "Hi."

"That's really your face?" she asked, eyes drooping, as she studied me with a vacant expression. "It's so pretty."

"Uh, thanks?" I offered uncomfortably, still cupping her cheeks in my hands. "It's the only one I have."

"I like it," she whispered. "It's a good face," she added just before closing her eyes again, sagging forward.

"No, no, no," I coaxed, jolting her roughly. "Stay with me!"

Moaning, she blinked awake again.

"Good job," I praised with a heavy exhale. "Now stay *awake*."

"Who are you?" she croaked out, depending entirely on my hands to keep her head upright.

"I'm Johnny," I told her, biting back a smirk. "Who are you?"

"Shannon," she whispered. Her eyelids drooped a little but quickly sprung back open when I nudged her cheeks. "Like the river," she added with a small sigh.

I chuckled at her response.

"Well, Shannon *like the river*," I said brightly, desperate to keep her focused and talking. "Your parents are on the way. They're probably going to take you to the hospital for a checkup."

“Johnny,” she groaned and then winced. “Johnny. Johnny. Johnny. This is bad…”

“What?” I urged. “What’s bad?”

“My dad,” she whispered.

I frowned. “Your dad?”

“Can you save me?”

I frowned. “Do you *need* me to save you?”

“Mm-hmm,” she mumbled sleepily. “Rub my hair.”

I balked at her request. “You want me to rub your *hair*?”

She nodded and sagged forward. “It hurts.”

Shifting closer, I adjusted her body so that her head lolled against my shoulder, and while cupping her face with one hand, I used the other to stroke her hair. It was an awkward position, but I managed.

Jesus, what the fuck was I doing?

I shook my head to myself, feeling like an eejit, but continued to do what she asked anyway.

It was going well—right up until she face-planted on my dick.

Jerking at the insanely intimate contact, not to mention the sudden jolt of awareness in my dick and the scorching pain in my groin, I attempted to move her face from my crotch, but she groaned loudly in resistance.

And then she pulled her legs up on the bench and settled herself down for a nice old kip on my cock.

Fuck my life.

Holding my hands up in the air and far away from her body, because I needed a sexual harassment accusation like I needed a hole in the head, I looked around for someone to help me, but no one came.

The hallways were conveniently void of adults.

Fuck this school.

I thought about making a run for it, but I could hardly throw her off me.

Yeah, because breaking her head wasn’t fucking bad enough.

So, I just sat there with her head in my lap and her cheek nuzzling my dick and prayed to God to give me the strength to ignore the feelings growing inside of me and *not* get an erection.

Other than the obvious reason of horrendous timing, my cock was broken.

Well, it wasn't so much my cock being broken as it was the surrounding area, but getting hard could result in me passing out right alongside her.

But then she whimpered and the sound brought back the worry and concern, disaster averted.

Like it had a mind of its own, my hand moved to her face.

"You're okay," I coaxed, battling down my anxiety, the urge to nurture this girl both a new and equally terrifying feeling for me. "Shh, you're okay."

Brushing her hair back off her cheek, I tucked the dark-brown tendrils behind her ear and then I resumed stroking her sore head.

There was an impressive lump forming on her scalp where the ball made contact, so I stroked the area with my fingertips, using a featherlight touch. "Is this okay?"

"Mmm," she breathed. "It's…good."

"Good," I mumbled, relieved, and continued with the stroking.

A faint scar caught my eye where her temple met her hairline.

Without thinking about what I was doing, I trailed a finger over the inch-long indent of skin and asked, "What happened here?"

"Hmm?"

"Here." I trailed my finger over the old mark. "What's this from?"

"My dad," she replied, breathing out a heavy sigh.

My hand stilled as my brain registered her fucked-up answer. "Come again?"

When she didn't respond, I used my other hand to gently shake her shoulder. "Shannon?"

"Hmm?"

I tapped the old scar with my fingertip and said, "Are you telling me that your dad did this to you?" I tried to keep my tone calm, but it was a challenge with the sudden urge to maim and kill bubbling up inside.

"No, no, no," she whispered.

"So, your dad *didn't* do this?" I asked for confirmation. "He definitely didn't?"

"Of course not," she mumbled.

Thank fuck for that.

I released the breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding.

“Jimmy?”

“It’s Johnny.”

“Oh. Johnny?”

“Yeah?”

“Are you mad at me?”

“What?” The question, spoken so quietly, threw me and I stared down at her, feeling a pang of protectiveness in my gut. “No. I’m not mad at you,” I told her, pausing for a long moment, fingers stalling, before asking, “Are you mad at me?”

“I think so,” she whispered, nuzzling resuming.

My eyes rolled back and I bit back a moan.

Ah fuck!

“You can’t do that,” I bit out, holding her head still.

“Do what?” She sighed contently, then rubbed her cheek against my thigh. “Be mad?”

“No,” I choked out, holding her head still once again. “Be mad all you want, just *stop* grinding your head on my lap.”

“I like your lap,” she breathed, eyes closed. “It’s like a pillow.”

“Yeah, uh, well, that’s nice and all—” I paused to still her face with my hands once more. “But I’m sore, so I need you to *not* do that.”

“Do what?”

“Rub me,” I croaked out. “*There*.”

“Why are you sore?” She sighed heavily and asked, “Are you broken, too?”

“Probably,” I admitted, shifting her face onto my good thigh—well, good being the one that hurt less. “Stay there, okay?” It was more of a plea than an order. “Don’t move.”

Complying, she didn’t move her head again.

Using my free hand to press against the tension forming at my temple, I thought about how much shite I was going to be in.

I was missing class.

I was hungry.

I had club training tonight.

I had a gym session arranged straight after school with Gibsie.

Physiotherapy with Janice after school tomorrow.

I had a school match on Friday.

I had another training session with the youths at the weekend.

I had a busy fucking schedule and I didn't need this drama.

Several minutes passed in pained silence before she moved again, and in that time, I debated all the ways Mr. Twomey was an incompetent principal.

I had a list as long as my arm when she tried to sit up again.

"Be careful," I warned, hovering over her like a mother hen.

I helped her into an upright position and managed to slide off the bench in the process.

Every muscle south of my navel screamed out in protest, but I didn't move away.

Instead I continued to crouch in front of her, keeping my hands on either side of her waist, waiting to catch her. "Are you okay, Shannon?"

Her long brown hair fell forward, cloaking her face like a blanket.

She nodded slowly, brows furrowed deeply. "I–I think so."

I sagged, my relief palpable. "Good."

She leaned forward then, resting her elbows on her thighs, eyes open and staring into mine, and all at once she was far too close for comfort—and that was saying something, considering no less than two minutes ago she'd had her face in my lap.

We were too *close*.

Suddenly, I felt very exposed.

My hands moved from her waist to her thighs, an automatic reaction to having a female lean her face toward mine. I quickly checked myself, pulling my hands away to rest on the bench instead.

Clearing my throat, I forced a small smile. "You're alive."

"Barely," she whispered with a wince, blue eyes burning holes in mine, studying me with more clarity now. "You have terrible aim."

I laughed at her words.

They were so far from the truth that I couldn't help it.

"Well, that's a first," I mused. "I'm not used to being criticized about my ability to kick a ball."

I wasn't a natural ten, but I had a decent aim and the ability to kick from long range when necessary.

"Yeah," she croaked out. "Well, your ability to kick a ball almost killed me."

“Fair point,” I acknowledged, cringing.

Without thinking twice about what I was doing, I reached up and tucked her hair behind her ears. I felt her tremble from the contact and quickly scolded myself for the move.

Don’t touch her, dickhead.

Keep your hands off.

“Your voice is strange,” she announced then, blue eyes locked on mine.

I frowned. “My voice?”

She nodded slowly, then groaned and cupped her face once more. “Your accent,” she clarified, breathing hard. “It’s not a Cork accent.” She was still clutching her head but she was more alert now.

“That’s because I’m not from Cork,” I replied, unable to stop myself from reaching up and smoothing back a piece of her hair. “I was born and raised in Dublin,” I heard myself explain, tucking the rogue tendril behind her ear. “I moved down to Cork with my parents when I was eleven.”

“So, you’re a Dub,” she stated, clearly amused at the information. “A Jackeen.”

I scoffed at the term and tossed back one of my own. “And you’re a culchie.”

“My cousins live in Dublin,” she told me.

“Oh yeah? Where about?”

“Clondalkin, I think,” she replied. “What about you?”

“Blackrock.”

“The south side?” Her smile widened, eyes more alert now. “You’re a posh boy.”

I cocked a brow. “Do I look posh to you?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know you enough to say.”

No, she didn’t.

“Well, I’m not,” I added, uncomfortable at the thought of her making a preemptive judgment of me.

I shouldn’t care.

Hell, I never normally cared.

So why was I sulking over it now?

“I believe you.” Her small voice broke through my thoughts. “You could never be posh.”

“And why’s that?”

“Because you curse like a sailor.”

I laughed at her reasoning. “Yeah, you’re probably right about that.”

She laughed right along with me, but quickly stopped and groaned, clutching her temples.

Regret soared inside of me.

“I am sorry,” I told her, tone gruff now and thick.

“For what?” she whispered, seeming to lean closer as she chewed on her bottom lip.

“Hurting you,” I replied honestly.

Christ, my voice didn’t even sound like it belonged to me. It was strained…raw.

I cleared my throat and added, “It won’t happen again.”

“You promise?”

There she went with the promises again.

“Yeah,” I said, tone thick now. “I promise.”

“God,” she groaned, grimacing now. “Everyone’s going to be laughing at me.”

Those words, that small fucking sentence, brought to life some weird fucking emotion I hadn’t experienced before.

“I’m so embarrassed,” she continued to mumble, eyes cast downward. “I’ll be the talk of the school.”

“Look at me.”

She didn’t.

“Hey—” I paused and tipped her chin up with my thumb and forefinger. Once I was satisfied I had her attention again, I carried on. “No one is going to say a word about you.”

“But they all saw me—”

“Nobody is going to open their mouth about it.” Realizing my tone was bordering on angry, I brought it down a notch and tried again. “Not the team, Coach, or anyone else. I won’t let them.”

She blinked her confusion. “You won’t let them?”

“That’s right,” I confirmed with a nod. “I won’t let them.”

“You promise?” she whispered, a tiny smile pulling at her swollen lips.

“Yeah,” I replied gruffly, feeling like I would promise all the fucking promises in the world just to make this girl feel better. “I’ve got your back.”

“No, you got my head,” she croaked out. She glanced down at her body and sighed. “Actually, I think you ruined all of me.”

Thank fuck for that, because you’re ruining all of me right now, I thought to myself.

Jesus, where the hell did that come from?

Blinking away the thought, I settled on a safer “I’ll have my people call your people to work out the bill” comment instead.

That drew a smile out of her, a proper smile, not a shy one or a small one.

It was an honest-to-god megawatt smile.

She was just so fucking *pretty*.

I hated that word. *Pretty* was a pussy word used by women and the elderly, but that’s what she was.

Fuck, I had a feeling that her pretty face would be cemented in the fore point of my mind for a very long time.

But it was those wild eyes that really struck me, and I had this crazy urge to google eye color charts just so I could figure out the fucking color blue in her eyes.

I would do that later, I decided.

Creepy or not, I needed to know.

“So,” I pressed my luck by asking, “it’s your first day?”

She nodded again, smile faltering ever so little.

“How’s it going for you?”

A small smile tipped her lips upward. “It *was* going just fine.”

“Right.” I cringed. “Sorry again.”

“It’s okay,” she whispered, studying my face with those big eyes. “And you can stop saying *sorry* now. I believe you.”

“You believe me?”

“Yeah.” She nodded, then exhaled a sharp breath. “I believe you when you say it was an accident,” she squeezed out. “I don’t think you’d intentionally hurt anyone.”

“Well, that’s good.” I had no idea why she would think otherwise, but I wasn’t about to question the girl. Not when I had half mauled her. “Because I wouldn’t.”

She grew quiet again, withdrawing from me, and I found myself racking my brain for something to say.

I had no explanation for why I wanted to keep her talking to me. I guess I could scratch it down to needing to keep her conscious.

But deep down I knew that wasn't the reason.

Scrambling through my brain to find something to say, I blurted out, "Are you cold?"

She looked up at me with a sleepy expression. "Huh?"

"Cold," I repeated, resisting the urge to run my hands up and down her arms. "Are you warm enough? Should I get you a blanket or something?"

"I'm…" She paused and glanced down at her knees. Releasing a small sigh, she looked back to my face and said, "I'm actually hot."

"Completely fucking accurate assessment."

The highly inappropriate response was out of my mouth before I had a chance to filter myself.

I quickly followed it up by touching her forehead, my pathetic attempt at checking her temperature, and then nodding solemnly. "You're definitely warm."

"I told you." Her big eyes were wide and locked on mine. "I'm really, really hot."

God.

Fuck.

"So," I tossed out casually, trying to distract myself from my wayward thoughts. "What year are you in?"

Please say fifth year.

Please.

Please.

Please, God, make her say fifth year.

"Third year."

Yeah, and that was that.

She was in third year.

And just like that, I watched my five-minute dream float out the window.

Fuck. My. Life.

"What about you?" she asked then, voice soft and sweet.

"I'm in fifth year," I told her, distracted by the sudden and prominent pang of disappointment churning around inside of me. "I'm seventeen—and two thirds."

“And two thirds.” She giggled. “Are the thirds important to you or something?”

“They are now,” I muttered under my breath. Sighing in resignation, I looked at her and explained, “I should be in sixth year, but I repeated sixth class when I moved to Cork. I’ll be eighteen in May.”

“Hey—me too!”

“*You too* what?” I asked cautiously, trying not to get my hopes up, but it was a hard thing to do with her sitting so close.

“I repeated a class in primary school.”

“Yeah?” I straightened up, a sliver of hope sparking to life inside of me. “So that makes you how old?”

Please be seventeen.

Please fucking throw me a bone and tell me you’re seventeen.

“I’m fifteen.”

Fuck my luck.

“I can’t think what the fractions are for turning sixteen in March.” She frowned for a moment before she added, “I’m bad at math, and my head hurts.”

“Ten-twelfths,” I reeled off glumly.

Ugh.

Just fucking ugh.

I would turn eighteen in May and she’d still be sixteen for another ten months.

Nope. No way in hell. Not happening.

Bad fucking plan, Johnny.

“Do you have a boyfriend?”

Now why in the holy hell did I have to ask that?

You are almost two years older than this girl, asshole!

She’s too young for you.

You know the rules.

Stand the fuck down.

“No,” she replied slowly, cheeks turning pink. “Do you?”

“No, Shannon.” I smirked. “I don’t have a boyfriend.”

“I didn’t mean—” Pausing, she exhaled a sigh and gnawed on her bottom lip, clearly flustered. “I meant—”

“I know what you meant,” I filled in, unable to stop my smile from spreading, as I tucked that wandering curl back behind her ear. “I was just messing with you.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah,” I teased. “Oh.”

“Well?” she pressed, voice small. She glanced down at her lap before returning her attention to my face. “Do you—”

“Shannon!” A panicked female voice called out, distracting us both. “Shannon!”

I swung my gaze to the tall dark-haired woman hurrying down the corridor toward us, sporting a small baby bump.

“Shannon!” she demanded, closing in on us. “What happened?”

“Mam,” Shannon croaked out, turning her attention to her mother. “I’m okay.”

Highly uncomfortable at the sight of her mother’s protruding stomach, I took this as my cue to get the fuck away from her minor daughter.

Pregnant women made me nervous, but not nearly as much as Shannon *like the river* did.

I stood up and made to move away, only to be cornered by what I could only describe as a deranged mother bear.

“What did you do to my daughter?” she demanded, prodding my shoulder with her finger. “Well? Did you think it was funny? Why in god’s name are children so fucking cruel?”

“What…? No!” I shot back, hands up in retreat. “It was an accident. I didn’t *mean* to hurt her.”

“Mrs. Lynch,” the principal coaxed, stepping between the woman and me. “I’m sure if we all just sit down and talk about this—”

“No,” Mrs. Lynch barked, voice thick with emotion. “You assured me this kind of thing wouldn’t happen at this school and look what happened on her first day!” She turned to look at Shannon and her expression caved in pain. “Shannon, I don’t know what to do with you anymore,” the woman sobbed. “I really don’t, baby. I thought this place would be different for you.”

“Mam, he didn’t mean to hurt me,” Shannon stated, pleading my case. Her blue eyes flicked to me for the briefest of moments before returning to her mother. “It really was an accident.”

“And how many times have you spun me that line?” her mother asked wearily. “You don’t need to cover for him, Shannon. If this boy is giving you a hard time, then say it.”

“I’m not,” I protested at the same time Shannon shouted, “He’s not.”

“Shut up, you,” her mother hissed, shoving me hard in the chest. “My daughter can speak for herself.”

Gritting my teeth, I did, in fact, shut up. I wasn’t going to win any verbal disputes with her mother.

“It was a complete accident,” Shannon repeated, chin jutting out defiantly, still holding her head with her small hand. “Do you think he’d be here helping me if it was on purpose?”

That gave the woman pause for thought.

“No,” she finally admitted. “No, I don’t suppose he would… *What* in god’s name are you *wearing*?”

Shannon looked down at herself and flamed scarlet. “I ripped my skirt when I fell down the bank,” she said with a deep swallow. “Johnny…uh, gave me his jersey so everyone didn’t see my…my…well, my knickers.”

“Uh, yeah, here,” I mumbled as I pulled the scrap of gray fabric from the waistband of my shorts and held it out for her mother. “I, uh, broke that, too.”

Her mother snatched the skirt from me, and I took a safe step back.

“Let me get this straight,” her mother demanded, her gaze flickering between Shannon and me. Recognition flashed in her pale-blue eyes, of what I had no fucking idea because I was feeling clueless right about now. “He knocked you over, tore your clothes off, and then he put his jersey on you?”

I muttered a string of curses and ran a hand through my hair.

It sounded so fucking bad when she said it like that. “I didn’t—”

“He *helped* me, Mam,” Shannon snapped.

She moved to stand up, and like the asshole I was, I moved to help her, catching a narrowing glare from her mother.

I went to her anyway.

Fuck them all.

I’d seen this girl half-mindless an hour ago. I wasn’t taking any chances with her.

“Mam.” Shannon sighed. “He was football training and the ball hit me —”

“Rugby,” Mr. Twomey interjected proudly. “Our Johnny’s the finest rugby player Tommen College has seen in fifty years.”

I rolled my eyes.

This was not the time to be talking me up—or the company.

“It was an honest mistake,” I added with a helpless shrug. “And I’ll pay for her uniform.”

“And what’s that supposed to mean?” her mother demanded.

I frowned.

“It means I’ll pay for her uniform,” I repeated slowly. “Her skirt—”

“And tights,” Shannon interjected.

“And her tights.” I flashed her an indulgent smile, then quickly sobered my features when I was met with a death glare from her mother. “I’ll replace everything.”

“Because we have no money?” Mrs. Lynch barked. “Because I can’t afford to clothe my own child?”

“*No*,” I said slowly, confused as fuck by the human incubator declaring silent war on me. “Because it’s my fault they’re ruined.”

“Well, no, thank you, Johnny,” she huffed. “My daughter is not a charity case.”

Christ.

This woman was something else.

I tried again, “I never said she was, Mrs. Lynch—”

“Stop, Mam,” Shannon groaned, cheeks burning red. “He’s only trying to be nice.”

“The *nice* thing to do would have been to not assault you on your first day,” Mrs. Lynch huffed.

I stifled a groan.

I wasn’t going to be winning any popularity contests with this woman, that was for sure.

“I’m sorry.” I rolled off the word for the hundredth fucking time.

“Johnny,” Mr. Twomey said, clearing his throat. “Why don’t you go back and change into your uniform and get to your next class.”

I sagged in relief, delighted at the prospect of getting away from this crazy fucking woman.

I took a few steps in the direction of the front entrance, then paused, hesitating.

Should I leave her?

Should I stay?

Walking away didn’t feel like the right thing to do.

Unsure, I moved to turn back but was shot down with a barking order.

“Keep walking, Johnny!” her mother ordered, pointing a finger at me.

So I did.

5
Laying Down Laws and Breaking Them

JOHNNY

By the time I made it back to the changing room, after a detour trip to the lunch hall to speak to the vice principal, Mrs. Lane, the team was finished with practice and most of the lads had finished showering.

Ignoring the muffled remarks and stares when I walked in, I went straight to Patrick Feely, apologized for being a prick to him earlier, shook it out, and then skulked over to the bench.

Sinking down beside my gear bag, I kicked my feet out, rested my head against the cool slabbed wall behind me, and exhaled a heavy breath as my brain went into overdrive, obsessing over every detail of the day's events.

What a fucking day.

Bullying.

I wasn't a *bully*. I'd never laid eyes on the girl before in my life.

Apparently, that little gem of information was lost on our vice principal, who'd been called in by Mr. Twomey to help dispel the drama.

After a ten-minute bollocking off Twomey's right-hand woman, I'd been given strict instructions to stay away from the Lynch girl. Her mother thought I was fucking bullying her and didn't want me going anywhere near her daughter. If I went near her again, I would face immediate suspension.

It was complete and utter bullshit, and I hoped Shannon had the decency to straighten it out—and stand up for me.

Fuck it.

Whatever.

I would keep a wide-ass berth. I didn't need the hassle. Girls were a fucking complication I didn't need, even little ones with wild blue eyes.

Dammit, now I was thinking about her eyes again.

She still has your jersey, I mentally noted, which made me sad for a whole different reason. It was new and I'd only worn it this one fucking time.

It looked better on her though, I begrudgingly acknowledged.

She could keep it.

I just hoped she didn't throw it out. I would have to pay eighty quid to replace the bleeding thing.

"You alright, Johnny boy?" Gibsie asked, interrupting my thoughts as he dropped down on the bench beside me. He was freshly showered and clad in a pair of boxers. "How's the girl?" he added, bending to root in his gear bag.

Shaking my head, I turned to look at him. "Huh?"

"The young one," he explained, retrieving a can of deodorant. "Who is she?"

"Shannon," I mumbled. "She's new. A third year. Today's her first day."

"Is she okay?" he asked, spraying each armpit with Lynx before tossing the can back in his bag and reaching for his gray school trousers. "She looked out of it."

"Fuck if I know, man. I think I really did a number on her brain," I muttered with a helpless shrug. "Her mother's taking her to the hospital to get checked over."

Gibsie paused, frowning. "Shit."

"Yeah," I agreed grimly. "Shite."

"Jesus, that must have been mortifying for her." Slipping his feet into his pants, he stood up and dragged them up his hips. "Having your ass on display for the rugby team on your first day."

"Yeah," I replied, because what else could I say?

It was humiliating for her and I was responsible for that.

I blew out a frustrated breath. "Was anything said about her?" I looked around at our teammates and then back to my best friend with only one thing on my mind. *Damage control*. "Were they talking about her?"

Gibsie raised his brows at my question.

Actually, I think the raised brows and surprised expression had more to do with the tone of my voice.

"Well," he began slowly. "She had her pussy and ass out, Cap—a very nice ass that matches the *very nice* rest of her—so yeah, lad. There's been

talk.”

“What kind of talk?” I bit out, feeling an irrational surge of anger boil inside of me. I had no fucking clue where the agitation was coming from, but it was there, it was strong, and it was making me feel half-demented.

“Interest, lad,” Gibs explained calmly—much calmer than me. “A *lot* of interest.” Reaching into his bag, he withdrew his white school shirt and shrugged it on. “In case it slipped your attention—and going by your reaction, I know it didn’t—that girl’s a corker.”

He buttoned up his shirt with steady hands.

Meanwhile, I was trembling with energy that needed to be worked out of my body and quickly.

“She’s gorgeous and she’s new and the lads are… *curious*,” he added, choosing his words carefully. “New is always fun—” He paused, grinning, before adding, “Gorgeous is better.”

“It stops,” I growled, agitated at the concept of my teammates talking about her.

I saw that look in her eyes. I heard it in her voice.

That vulnerability.

She wasn’t like the others. This girl was different.

I barely knew her, but I could tell that this one needed minding.

Something had happened to Shannon Lynch, something bad enough that resulted in her switching schools.

It didn’t sit well with me.

“Yeah,” he chuckled as he finished with his shirt and slung on his red tie. “Good luck with that, man.”

“She’s *fifteen*,” I warned, tensing.

Sixteen in March, but still.

For the next two months, she was still very much *fifteen*.

“She’s too young.”

Gibsie snorted. “Says the eejit who’s been sticking his cock in anything with a pulse since first year.”

Gibsie hit the nail on the head with that statement.

For Christ’s sake, I lost my virginity in first year to Loretta Crowley, who was three years older than me—and had a lifetime more experience than me—behind the school sheds after school.

Yeah, that was some clusterfuck of disaster.

I was all nerves and clumsy movements, well aware that I was too young to be sticking my dick in anything but my hand, but I must have done something right because Loretta happily joined me behind the sheds most days after school for several months before I got too busy with training and called time on our meetings.

If I had to say what type of female I was interested in, it wouldn't be blonds or brunettes, curvy or skinny.

My type was *older*—with every girl I'd ever been with having at least a couple of years on me. *Sometimes* many *more*.

It wasn't a fetish or anything.

I simply enjoyed the drama-free aura that older girls brought to the table. I enjoyed them when I was with them, and then I enjoyed it even more when I wasn't. That wasn't to say I didn't fancy the shite out of the girl I was with when I was with her.

I did.

And I was loyal, too. I didn't fuck around.

If a girl wanted exclusive, no strings, then I was more than happy to oblige. I didn't enjoy the hunt or the chase that appealed to most of the lads. If a girl was expecting me to chase her, then she was looking to the wrong guy. I wasn't in the position to be boyfriend material right now. It wasn't that I didn't want a girlfriend; I just didn't have time for one. I didn't have the time for consistent dating or any of those demands.

I was too busy.

It was another reason I preferred older girls. They weren't expecting miracles from me.

Right now, for example, I was fooling around with Bella Wilkinson from sixth year and had been since April last year.

In the beginning, I liked Bella because she didn't breathe down my neck. At nineteen, she had a couple of years on me, she didn't hold me to some invisible standard I couldn't or wouldn't meet, and afterward, I could walk away and concentrate on rugby while she left me to my own devices.

But after a few months, I quickly realized that it wasn't *me* that Bella was interested in. It was the bullshit that came with being with me.

It was all about status with Bella, and by the time I realized it, I was too comfortable and too lazy to do anything about it. She wanted my dick. That was it.

Well, my dick and my status.

Now, I stayed because she was familiar and I was lazy. Bella had one expectation from me, one requirement that, up until a couple of months ago, I was more than capable of providing.

I hadn't been doing much of anything with Bella since before my surgery—I hadn't laid a finger on the girl since early November when it had become too painful to even contemplate it—but my point was that before it happened, it was just sex for me.

A steady release.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I acknowledged that this was an unhealthy attitude toward life and relationships with the opposite sex, and that I was probably deeply jaded, but it was hard to remain a boy when I was living in a man's world.

It also didn't help that I was playing rugby at a level where I was surrounded by men much older than me.

Conversations that were meant for people much older than me. Women that were meant for men much older than me.

Not girls but *women*.

Jesus, if my mother knew the half of the woman who'd offered themselves to me—grown-ass women—she'd pull my arse out of the Academy and lock me in my room until I turned twenty-one.

In a way, my childhood was robbed from me because of my ability to play rugby.

I grew up very quickly, taking on the role of a man when I was little more than a boy, coached and pushed, pressured and championed. I didn't have a social life and childhood.

Instead, I had expectations and a career.

Sex was the reward I allowed myself for being, well, *good*. For controlling everything else in my life. For balancing my school and my sport with pristine control and an iron will.

I wasn't the only one like this.

Aside from a couple of the lads with long-term girlfriends, the rest of the lads in the Academy were as bad as me.

Actually, they were worse.

I was discreet. They *weren't*.

“We’re not talking about me,” I told Gibsie, dragging my attention back to the present, my anger growing by the second. “She’s a fucking kid, too young for all you horny little pricks, and every asshole in this room needs to respect that.”

“Fifteen is a *kid*?” Gibsie countered, looking confused. “The fuck are you talking about, Johnny?”

“Fifteen *is* young,” I barked, frustrated. “And illegal.”

“Oh.” Gibsie grinned knowingly. “I see.”

“You don’t see shit, Gibs,” I shot back.

“Since when did you start giving a shite about what any of us do?”

“I don’t. Do whatever and whoever the hell you want,” I countered heatedly. “Just not *her*.”

Gibsie grinned widely, clearly goading me, when he teased, “Keep that talk up and I’m going to start thinking you’re going soft for the girl.”

“I’m not fucking around here,” I countered, taking the bait.

“Relax, Johnny,” Gibsie said with a sigh. “I’ve no intention of going near the girl.”

“Good.” I released a breath I hadn’t realized I’d been holding.

“I can’t vouch for the rest of them, though,” he added, gesturing his thumb behind him.

Nodding stiffly, I turned my attention to the busy changing room and stood up, bristling with agitation.

“Listen up,” I barked, drawing everyone’s attention to me. “That girl on the pitch earlier?”

I waited until I had my teammates’ attention and then I waited for understanding to cross their features before bursting into a rant.

“What happened to her out there today? It would be embarrassing as hell for anyone and *especially* for a girl. So, I don’t want to hear one word of it repeated around school or town.” My voice took on a threatening hint when I said, “If it gets back to me that any of you have been talking about her…well, I don’t have to explain what will happen.”

Someone snickered and I turned my glare on the culprit.

“You have two sisters, Pierce,” I snapped, glaring at the red-faced hooker. “How would you feel if that happened to Marybeth or Cadence? Would you like the lads talking about her like that?”

“No, I wouldn’t.” Pierce reddened further. “Sorry, Cap,” he muttered. “You won’t hear it back from me.”

“Good man,” I replied, nodding before facing the team. “You don’t bring up what happened with her clothes to anyone—not your pillow pals or friends. It’s gone. Erased. Never fucking happened…and while we’re on the subject, don’t talk to *her*,” I added, on a roll now, my commands this time for entirely selfish reasons I didn’t dare think too much about. “Don’t get any notions about her. In fact, don’t look at her at all.”

To be fair to them, most of the senior players on the team just nodded and went back to whatever they’d been doing before my outburst, letting me know that I was being irrational about this.

But then there was Ronan fucking McGarry and his mouth to contend this.

I didn’t like this guy—couldn’t stand him if I was being honest.

He was a loudmouthed third year who pranced around the school like he was king of the hill.

His cocky attitude had only magnified in annoyance this year when he was brought into the senior team at school after an ACL injury had finished Bobby Reilly’s season early.

McGarry was a mediocre rugby player at best, playing scrum half for the school this season, and a goddamn pain in my arse to cover on the pitch. He was only on the team in the first place because his mother was the coach’s sister. It certainly wasn’t for his talent.

It gave me great pleasure taking him down a peg or ten at any given opportunity.

“Why?” he taunted from the safety of the opposite end of the changing room. “Are you laying claim?” The blond little fucker, encouraged by a couple of his benchwarmer buddies, continued. “Is she yours now or something, Kavanagh?”

“Well she’s certainly not yours, prickface,” I shot back without hesitation. “Not that I was including you in that statement.” Sniffing, I looked him up and down slowly with feigned displeasure before adding, “Yeah, you’re not an issue for me.”

Several of the lads erupted into howls of laughter at McGarry’s expense.

“Fuck you,” he spat out.

“Ouch.” I feigned hurt, then grinned across the room at him. “That hurt so much.”

“She’s in my class,” he tossed out.

“Good for you.” I clapped, not liking this new information one bit, but burying my annoyance with a heavy dollop of sarcasm. “Do you want a medal or a trophy for that?”

Turning my attention back to my team, I added, “She’s young, lads, too young for any of you. So stay the fuck away.”

“Not for me,” the little prick piped up. “She’s the same age as me.”

“No. It’s not a matter of age for you,” I countered evenly. “She’s just too good for you.”

More laughs at his expense.

“Everyone might act like you’re some kind of god at this school,” he growled, “but she’s fair game as far as I’m concerned.” Puffing out his chest like a defected gorilla, he smirked at me. “If I want her, I’ll have her.”

“Fair game?” I barked out a laugh. “If you want her, you’ll *have* her? Christ, kid, what world are you living in?”

Ronan’s cheeks turned pink.

“I live in the real world,” he spat out. “The one where people have to *work* for what they get, and not have it handed to them because they’re in *the Academy*.”

“You think so?” I arched a brow, tilting my head to one side to take his measure. “Apparently not when you’re deluded enough to think I’ve been *handed* everything in my life—and especially when you refer to girls as *fair game*.” Shaking my head, I added, “They’re girls, McGarry, not Pokémon cards.”

“God, you think you’re so great, don’t you?” he snapped, jaw clenched. “You think you’re so fucking amazing! Well you’re not.”

Growing bored of his antics, I shook my head and gave him an out. “Sling your hook, kid. I’m not playing this game with you today.”

“Why don’t *you* do us all a favor and sling *your* hook, Johnny! I wish you’d just fuck off to the youths and be done with it,” he roared, face turning an ugly shade of purple. “That’s what you’re in the Academy for, right?” he demanded, tone furious. “To be conditioned? To move up the ranks and get a contract?” Huffing out a breath, he snarled, “Then fucking

move. Leave Tommen. Go back to Dublin. Take your contracts and go the fuck away!"

"Education is very important, Ronan." I grinned, relishing his hatred of me. "The *Academy* teaches us that."

"I bet the Irish heads don't even want you," he tossed back angrily. "All this talk about you joining the U20s in the summer is all bullshit you made up yourself."

"Kid, you need to walk away now," Hughie Biggs, our number 10, and a good friend of mine, interjected with a sigh. "You sound like a fucking clown."

"*Me?*" Ronan barked, glaring across the room at Hughie. "He's the asshole walking around this town like he owns it, getting special treatment from the teachers, and ordering all you around. And you just take it!"

"And you are stinking up the room with your jealousy," Hughie countered in a lazy drawl. "Pack it in, kid," he added, dragging a hand through his blond hair, as he came to stand beside me and Gibs. "You're making a right eejit of yourself."

"Stop calling me kid!" Ronan roared, voice breaking, as he charged toward us. "I'm not a fucking kid!"

Neither Gibsie, Hughie, nor I moved an inch, all highly entertained at his tantrum.

Ronan had been a problem for the team since September, defying orders, breaking rank, pulling stupid stunts on the pitch that almost cost us several games.

This little outburst of his wasn't the first one. It was just another in a long list of many tantrums.

He was ridiculous and needed reining in. If his uncle wasn't prepared to do it, then I was.

"He's your captain," Patrick Feely piped up, much to my surprise, as he and several members of the team came and stood in front of me, blocking McGarry's pathetic attempt at exulting power, and showing their support for me. "Show a little respect, McGarry."

Well, shite.

I felt terrible now.

I looked at Feely, my eyes full of remorse for my earlier on-pitch antics. The look he gave me assured me that, for him, it was long forgotten.

It still didn’t sit well with me.

McGarry was right about one thing; I did get preferential treatment in town. I worked like a dog on the pitch and was rewarded fabulously off it. I would use that pull to buy Feely a pint in Biddies at the weekend—Gibs and Hughie, too.

“Run on home to Mammy, Ronan,” Gibsie ordered, shoving him toward the changing room exit. “Maybe she’ll get your Legos out.” Swinging open the door with one hand, Gibsie pushed him out with the other. “You’re not ready to play with the big boys.”

“I bet yer one Shannon won’t be saying that,” Ronan snarled, forcing himself back into the room. “Or should I say, she won’t be able to,” he grinned darkly, eyes locked on my face, “when my cock is buried down her throat.”

“Keep talking about her like that,” I seethed, fists forming into tight balls at my sides. “I would love a reason to tear your fucking head off.”

“I sat behind her this morning in French, you know,” he taunted, grinning widely now. “Had I known what she was hiding under that skirt, I would have been *friendlier*.” Winking, he added, “There’s always tomorrow.”

“And that, folks, is how you sign your own death certificate,” Hughie muttered, throwing his hands up in resignation. “You stupid little bollox.”

Not one person tried to stop me when I barreled toward Ronan. No one dared. I had hit my quota of bullshit for the day and the lads knew it.

“Now listen to me, you little fucker,” I hissed, hand wrapped around his throat as I dragged him back into the room, closing the door from witnesses with my free hand. “And listen good, because I’m only going to tell you this one more time.”

Slamming Ronan against the concrete wall, I stepped in front of him, towering over him by a good six inches.

“You don’t like me. I get it. I’m not particularly fond of you, either.” I clutched his throat tight enough to make it hard for him to breathe, but not enough to cut off circulation and kill him. I was trying to make a point, not commit a crime. “You don’t have to like me, but as your captain, you sure as shit will respect my authority on the pitch.”

At five foot ten and sixteen years old, Ronan wasn’t small by any means, but at seventeen, six foot three, and growing, I was a big bastard.

Off the pitch, I rarely used my size to intimidate anyone, but I would use it now.

I was sick to death of this kid and his mouth. He had no goddamn respect, and hell, maybe I could handle his crappy attitude and aggression toward me.

But *not* her.

I didn't like, couldn't cope, and wouldn't put up with him talking about *her* like that.

That haunting look of vulnerability in her eyes drove me forward, causing me to lose what little grip I had on my temper.

"When I tell my team something," I added, snarling now, the memory of her lonesome blue eyes clouding my judgment. "When I fucking *warn* you to leave a vulnerable girl alone, I expect you to heed my goddamn warning. I expect your submission. What I don't expect is your lippy back talk and defiance." A faint choking sound came from Ronan's throat and I loosened my hold but kept my hand there. "Are we clear?"

"Fuck you," Ronan strangled out, spluttering and wheezing. "You can't tell me what to do," he rasped, breathless. "You're not my father!"

This fucker.

He was determined to defy me even when he couldn't win.

"I'm your daddy on the field, bitch." I smiled darkly and squeezed, cutting off his air supply. "You don't see it because you're a jumped-up, narcissistic little spanner." I squeezed tighter. "But they do." I waved a hand behind us, gesturing to the team, who were all standing down, not one of them intervening. "Every single one of them. They all get it. They all know I *own* you," I added calmly. "Keep pushing me, kid, and it won't matter who you're related to; you'll be off this team. But go anywhere near that girl, and God himself won't be able to save you."

Deciding I had terrified the young fella enough to get my point across, I released his throat and took a step back.

"Now…" Folding my arms across my chest, I glared down at him and asked, "Are we clear this time?"

"Yeah," Ronan croaked out, still glaring at me.

I didn't mind.

He could glare at me all he wanted.

He could stick pin needles in a voodoo version of me and go on hating my guts for the rest of his life for all I cared.

All I needed from him was his submission.

“We’re clear,” he spat out.

“Good boy.” I slapped his cheeks with my hands and smirked. “Now fuck off.”

Ronan continued to mutter his misgivings, but since he was doing so under his breath, I turned my back on him and headed straight for the now-empty showers, choosing to scald the temper out of my body with water.

“Johnny, can I have a word?” Cormac Ryan, our number 11 winger asked, as he followed me into the shower area.

I swung around and glared at him, my fingers slipping away from the waistband of my shorts.

“Can it wait?” I asked, tone tight, jaw clenched, as my gaze traveled over him.

Annoyance flared to life at the sight of him, and I knew full well what he wanted to talk to me about—or should I say *who* he wanted to talk about.

Bella.

The time for talking was months ago.

Right now, with the mood I was in, the chances of us just talking was slim.

Cormac seemed to realize that because he nodded his head and retreated from the doorway.

“Yeah, no bother,” he replied, swallowing deeply as he backed up. “I’ll, uh, catch up with you another time.”

“Yeah,” I deadpanned, watching him leave. “You will.”

Shaking my head, I stripped off and stalked into the shower stall.

Twisting the chrome nozzle, I stepped under the steady stream of ice-cold water and waited for it to heat.

Pressing a palm against the tiled wall, I dropped my head and exhaled a frustrated breath.

I didn’t need another fight under my belt.

Keeping my nose clean this season was paramount, even in the shitty school league. It would be bad publicity to beat the shit out of my own teammates. Even when my fingers twitched with the urge to do just that.

The lads were long gone back to their assigned classes by the time I finished showering, leaving me alone in the changing room.

I didn't bother rushing back to class, prioritizing my time with hoofing down my lunch and a premade protein smoothie instead.

It wasn't until I was finished eating that I noticed the blue ice pack on top of my gear bag. There was a small note perched on top that read, *"Ice your balls, Cap."*

Fucking Gibsie.

With a shake of my head, I sank down on the bench and grabbed the ice pack. Wrapping an old T-shirt around it, I freed my towel and did exactly what that note instructed.

When I was done icing my balls, I took my sweet-ass time assessing a few of my long-term injuries, the most worrying being the angry-looking scar on my inner groin.

The skin was hot, itchy, swollen, and fucking disgusting to look at.

Playing with an injury was a common ailment for a guy in my situation, but after eighteen months of suffering with a chronic groin injury, I'd thrown the towel in and agreed to the surgery in December.

Spending four days on the flat of my back in the hospital writhing in agony, having caught an infection was bad enough, but the last three weeks of postsurgery rehabilitation had been pure fucking torture.

According to my GP, my body was healing nicely and he had signed off to let me play—mostly because I had lied through my teeth—but the bruising and discoloration on my thighs and around my *area* was a sight to be had.

I was also sore as shit down there. Cock, balls, groin, thighs. Every part of me ached. All the damn time.

I wasn't sure whether my balls hurt more from the injury or the need for release.

Aside from my parents and coaches, Gibsie was the only one who knew the details of my surgery—hence the ice pack. He'd been my best friend since moving down to Cork. Even though he was an overgrown blond eejit with a penchant for fucking school admins and the ability to drive me batshit crazy with his blasé attitude, I knew I could trust him to have my back.

Knowing he could keep stuff to himself was the only reason I told him.

Normally, I kept that kind of shit to myself. Sharing details of an injury was a dangerous move and a surefire way of having that injury targeted by oppositional teams.

Besides, it was *embarrassing*.

I was a confident person by nature but walking around with an out-of-commission dick—with no endgame in sight—meant that my self-esteem had taken a battering. I'd had more people poke and prod at my bollocks in the last month than I cared to remember—and not in a fun way, either. Getting it up after the operation wasn't a problem for me; it was the horrible searing pain that came with having an erection that I had an issue with. That particular piece of information I had learned the hard way after a shitty porno marathon one Saturday had resulted in an embarrassing trip to the A&E.

It was St. Stephen's night, ten days postsurgery, and I had been wallowing in self-pity all day, having received countless texts from the lads asking me if I was coming out to the pub, so when I went to bed that night, I'd thrown on a bluey to cheer myself up.

The minute the actress's tits were out, my cock had shot to attention. Feeling a slight amount of discomfort that was overshadowed by the realization that I still possessed a working dick, I had stroked myself off, careful to avoid the stitches on my groin.

Two minutes into my wankfest, I realized what a terrible mistake I had made.

The problem arose when I was close to coming. My balls tightened, like they always did when blood rushed to the head of my penis, but the muscles in my thighs and groin began to contract and spasm—and not in a good way. The scorching pain that had rocketed through my body was so severe that I'd screamed out in agony before unceremoniously vomiting all over my bedsheets. The pain was like nothing I had ever experienced before.

The only way I could describe it was to say it was like being kicked in the nuts repeatedly while someone stamped a red-hot cattle prod on my dick.

Unfortunately, the visual of the plastic-breasted woman getting dicked on the screen and the loud audio of her "*fuck me harder*" sexy-as-hell screams made it virtually impossible for me to get it down.

Dropping to floor, I had crawled on my hands and knees over to television set with the intention of putting my fist through the screen.

That was the exact moment my mother had burst into my bedroom.

She ended up having to help me get dressed, raging hard-on and all, and then rush me to the hospital, where I was scolded by the doctor on call for interfering with myself.

I shit you not, she used those exact words before delving into a deeply disturbing rant about the dangers of masturbating so soon after the surgery I had, and the long-term ramifications it could have for my penis—with *my mother* sitting next to me.

Seven hours, a round of blood tests, a shot of morphine, and one testicular exam later, I was sent home with a prescription for a new round of antibiotics and strict instructions to leave my penis alone.

That was two weeks ago and I still hadn't touched my dick.

I was traumatized.

I knew I should be grateful I didn't have any long-term nerve damage in the area, and I would be once everything healed and *worked* again, but for now, I was a pissed-off almost-eighteen-year-old with a broken dick and a deflated ego.

Fucking Ronan McGarry thought I had everything handed to me. If he realized the sacrifices I made, and the limits I pushed my body to, I doubt he'd feel the same way.

Then again, maybe he would.

He had such an issue with me that I reckoned nothing could sway him from his I-hate-Johnny campaign.

Not that I gave a single fuck.

I had less than two years left in this school, and possibly a further one year with the Academy. After that, I would be leaving Ballylaggin and all the begrudging Ronan McGarrys behind me.

Stretching my legs out, I gently rubbed down the area with my prescribed antiinflammatory gel, biting down on my lip to stop myself from screaming in pain.

Clenching my eyes shut, I forced my hands to move over my thighs, performing the exercise my physio had instructed I do after every training session.

Once that was completed, and I was confident I wouldn't pass out from the pain, I worked on my shoulders, elbows, and ankles, packing and strapping every old ache and injury like the dutiful apprentice I was.

Believe it or not, my body was in great condition.

The injuries I had sustained from playing rugby for the past eleven years, including a ruptured appendix and a million broken bones, were miniscule in comparison to the injuries some of the lads in the Academy were carrying.

It was a good thing for me, considering I was on the cusp of a lucrative contract and a career in professional rugby.

In order to achieve that, I needed to be as close to perfect in every aspect of my life.

That meant performing on the pitch, maintaining optimal health both physically and mentally, and keeping my nose—and my dick—clean.

Protection was an impossible thing to forget with the Academy breathing down our necks, lecturing on how this was a pivotal time in our careers and how we were not, under any circumstances, to let a girl turn our heads or saddle us with a baby.

Like fuck.

I'd rather cut my poorly functioning cock off than I let myself fall into that trap. Condoms and birth control were an absolute necessity. I *always* carried one, I *always* wore one, and if the girl I was with wasn't on the pill or the bar, or if I didn't trust she was being honest with me, I *always* pulled out.

No risks. No exceptions.

Not that it matters now, I thought to myself, as I stared down at my bruised balls.

Aside from remaining childless and STD-free, I had to keep my marks up.

It was all about perception for the scouts and potential clubs, and they wanted what was perceived as perfection. They wanted the best players from the best schools and the top universities in the country.

They wanted merits and silverware, both on the pitch and academically.

It was tiresome work, but I did the best I could.

Luckily, I was good at school. I didn't fucking like going very much, but I was good at it. My classes were all honors subjects and I had always

been A+ to A– average in all of them with the exception of science, where I was a reluctant C student.

I just hated that fucking subject.

Man, it gave me the heebie-jeebies just thinking about periodic tables.

It came as no surprise to my parents that when the time came for me to choose my leaving cert subjects this term, I had avoided the three science subjects like the plague.

No, they could keep their biology, chemistry, and physics for the hard-core braniacs.

I would stick to business and accountancy.

An unlikely passion for a rugby head but it was right up my street.

I would get a standard degree in business, play until well into my thirties, retire before my body completely gave up on me, and then pursue my master's.

See, I had it all planned out.

No room for change. No room for girlfriends.

And no goddamn room for injuries.

My life choices and strict routine pissed my mother off to epic proportions.

I knew Mam didn't like my lifestyle and she was always nagging me. She said I was *limited*. That I was missing out on so much of life.

She begged me to be a child.

The problem was, I hadn't been a child since I was ten.

When rugby took off for me, I left that shite behind, my childhood dreams of playing rugby morphing into a focused, hungry, driven obsession. I had spent the past seven years in beast mode 24/7 and had the physical body shape and size to prove it.

My father was easier on me.

He mollified my mother and coaxed her to stop worrying so much—telling her that it could be worse. I could be going out getting stoned off my head after school or getting legless with the rest of my friends down the pub.

Instead of doing any of that, I trained. I spent my days studying, my afternoons on the pitch, my evenings in the gym, and my weekends rotating between all three.

Jaysus, I couldn't recall the last time I blew off the gym for a night out with the lads or ate an ice-cream cone without worrying about wasteful calories and unbalanced macronutrients.

I ate clean, I trained hard, and I followed every order, suggestion, and demand given to me by my coaches and trainers. It wasn't an easy lifestyle to uphold, but it was the one I had chosen for myself. I trusted my gut and pursued my dreams with relentless drive, taking comfort in the fact that I was almost *there*. Until I made it—and I *would* make it—I would continue to make the sacrifices and remain focused, dedicated, and undistracted from bullshit teenage drama.

Those were the exact reasons I was feeling so edgy.

A girl, a fucking *female* I'd known for no longer than two hours, had managed to do what no one else ever had: knock me off-kilter.

Shannon *like the river* was on my mind, and I didn't fucking like it.

I didn't like that she was taking up valuable time in my head. Time I didn't have to spare or to give to anything—or anyone—other than rugby.

"She was already pulled out of Ballylaggin Community School for being verbally and physically attacked. And what happens on her first day at Tommen? This!"

"You assured me this kind of thing wouldn't happen at this school and look what happened on her first day!"

"Shannon, I don't know what to do with you anymore. I really don't, baby. I thought this place would be different for you."

What the hell was going on? What happened to her?

And why the fuck was I obsessing about her like this?

I barely knew the girl. It shouldn't matter to me.

Jaysus, I needed to get a life.

Take up watching some train-wreck reality TV program or something—anything to block out today's events and those lonesome blue eyes.

Forcing myself to block *her* out, I concentrated on tending to my injuries, all the while thinking about potential strategy and tactics for the match on Friday.

When I was all patched up and had thrown my school uniform back on, I checked the time on my phone and noted that if I hurried my ass up, I would make it to my last class.

I skimmed through a couple of new text messages from Bella, asking me if I was *better* and wanted to meet up. I shot her a quick reply saying, Still out of action, and waited for her response.

It came almost immediately, followed by several more texts.

I'm getting sick of this shit, Johnny.
I don't like being ignored.
Everyone's talking about you, you know.
Saying your performance on the pitch is going to crap.
It made the papers.
They're saying you're losing your touch.
I agree.
You are being a useless dick and you have a useless dick.
I know there's nothing wrong with you.
You're just trying to get out of taking me to the awards gala at the end of the month.
Why don't you ever take me to those things?
I never ask you for ANYTHING.
If you don't start appreciating me, I know plenty of lads who will…

I expelled a heavy breath and quickly read each message.

Yeah, this was getting out of hand.

I could feel the noose tightening around my neck.

I tapped out a quick reply saying, Do whatever you want. I'm not your keeper, before turning my phone off and heading back to the school, stopping at the office.

"Johnny!" Dee, the school secretary, cooed when I stepped through the doorway. "Back already?" she asked, taking a slow appraisal of my body. "Mr. Twomey hasn't sent for you, honey."

Our school secretary was a short woman in her late twenties with peroxide-blond hair, a penchant for teenage boys, and a serious weakness for rugby players.

Her blue eyes were lined with way too much black eyeliner and thick mushy mascara that blended well with the mountain of foundation caked on her face and bloodred lips.

She wasn't an unattractive woman. She had a nice shape and a fantastic ass. But she was a case of mutton dressed as lamb.

Despite her cougar attempts and blatant inappropriateness, I was oddly fond of the woman. She had helped me out on more than one occasion down through the years, signing me out of classes, covering my absenteeism, burying misdemeanors and all types of incriminating shite that would reflect badly on me.

Back in third year, when I came home from training camp, I'd dropped an Ireland jersey with most of the team's signatures off to her.

It was a last-minute display of appreciation on my part, knowing that she'd gone to a great deal of trouble to get the Board of Education to waiver a compulsory oral junior cert exam I'd missed while away.

I had the jersey in my gear bag and just gave it to her, feeling like I needed to compensate the woman for her efforts. After that, she was my biggest champion, doing countless, often morally questionable favors for me. And I, in turn, snagged her tickets to games whenever I could.

We had a good arrangement.

"I'm here to see you, Dee," I shot back with a flirty wink. Fighting down the urge to run for the hills from the school cougar, I sauntered over to the counter that separated her office from the rest of reception and grinned. "I was hoping you could help me out with something."

"I'm always willing to help my favorite all-star," she purred. "With anything."

"Appreciate it," I replied, repressing the urge to shudder when she reached over the counter and stroked her inch-long flaming-red fingernails across my knuckles. "Do you have an envelope?"

"An envelope?" Her drawn-on brows shot up in surprise. "Oh," she muttered, looking a little forlorn.

Reaching behind the desk, she rummaged around before slapping a plain brown envelope on the counter.

Pulling out my wallet, I snagged two fifty-euro notes and stuffed them inside.

"Do you have a pen?" I asked.

With a little huff, she handed me one.

"You're a lifesaver," I mumbled as I quickly scrawled a note on the envelope before placing the pen on the counter.

"Is that all?"

"Actually, no, it's not."

Resting my elbows on the counter, I fingered the envelope between my hands and smiled down at her.

Here it goes…

"I'm looking for some information on a student."

Dee frowned. "Information on a student?"

"Yeah." I nodded, widening my smile. "Shannon Lynch."

Who had I been fooling, with distracting myself with reality TV?

I was an obsessive bastard by nature, with a one-track mind that was currently—and solely—programmed on her.

I *had* to know more. I *needed* more.

I wasn't thick enough to think this didn't matter. Or that my reaction to McGarry in the changing rooms earlier didn't matter.

It *mattered* that she was able to do this to me. It *mattered* that, hours later, I was still thinking about her, wondering about her, and inevitably worrying about her. It *mattered* that she *mattered* when no one ever *mattered* to me before.

Fuck, now I was confused about all the *matters*.

"Oh, Johnny." Dee pursed her lips, her frown deepening, as she drew me back to the present. "I'm not sure. Mr. Twomey made it clear that you are to have no contact with the Lynch girl—" Her voice broke off and she reached for her notepad. "See?" She tapped her finger on the scrawled pad. "It's written down and everything. Her mother was demanding you be suspended for that incident on the pitch today. She's calling it assault. It took a lot of persuading on Mr. Twomey's part to stop her from phoning the Gardaí—"

"Come on, Dee," I purred, smothering my outrage with what I hoped was charm. "You know me. I would never intentionally hurt a girl."

"Of course you wouldn't," she breathed, blinking up at me. "You're a good boy."

"And you're very *good* to me." Leaning closer, I covered her hand with mine and whispered, "So, all I need you to do is tell me what you know about her—or better yet, let me see her file."

"No way, Johnny." She chewed on her bottom lip. "If anyone found out, my job would be on the line—"

"You think I'd get you into trouble, Dee?" I coaxed with a small shake of my head. "It can be our little secret." God, I was a complete fucker,

playing on this poor woman's emotions.

But I wanted that file, dammit. I had a burning curiosity to find out about Shannon—more specifically what happened to her at her old school.

Mr. Twomey's words had planted the seed inside my head, and I was dying to find out.

"I'm sorry, honey, but I can't help you this time," Dee replied, lips pursed. "I need this job."

Frustrated, I shook my head and wrestled my temper under control before trying again, "Can you at least give me her locker number?"

Dee's eyes narrowed. "Why do you need that?"

"I just do," I shot back, tone a little harder now.

I was pissed off.

I wasn't used to being told no.

When I asked for something, I usually got it.

It was a shitty way to be, but that's how life went for me.

"I already told you," she retorted. "Mr. Twomey said you're not supposed to go near her—"

"It's her locker number, Dee, not her fucking home address," I snapped, irritation growing. "You'd swear I was a fucking murderer or something—the way you're all acting."

With a heavy sigh, Dee nodded dejectedly and walked over to the filing cabinet. "Alright."

"Thank you," I replied, tone heavy with sarcasm.

"But you didn't get this off me," she grumbled, rummaging through each drawer until she found the desired folder.

"Fine."

"I'm serious, Johnny. I don't need the hassle."

"Neither do I."

Flicking the folder open, she quickly scanned the first page before snapping it shut. "Locker 461. In the third-year wing."

"Great, thanks for this." I grabbed the pen and scrawled the number on the back of my hand before heading for the door. Pausing in the doorway, I turned and asked, "Can you at least tell me how she is?"

Dee sighed. "The last I heard, her mother was taking her to the A&E for a scan."

“A scan?” I frowned, anxiety gnawing at my gut. “She alright though, isn’t she? When she left? She was walking and stuff? I mean, she’ll be grand, right?”

“Yes, Johnny, I’m sure she’s fine.” She picked up the pen on the counter and placed the cap on it. “It’s just a precautionary measure.”

“Really?”

“Uh-huh.”

Uncertain, I blurted out, “Do you think I should go—to the hospital, that is?” Shrugging, I added, “Should I visit? It’s my fault she’s at the hospital. I’m responsible.”

“Definitely not!” Dee snapped, her tone taking on a hint of authority. “If you know what’s good for you, Johnny Kavanagh, you will stay well away from the girl.” She let out a loud huff before adding in a much quieter tone of voice, “Between you and me, her mother is out for your blood. You’d do well to avoid all contact with her. And if I’m being honest, the girl just doesn’t seem”—she paused, chewing on her bottom lip for a moment before finishing—“well, *stable*.”

My brows furrowed. “What do you mean, she’s not stable?”

Dee chewed on her pen, looking uncomfortable.

“Dee?” I pressed. “What do you mean by that?”

“Maybe *stable* isn’t the appropriate word,” she admitted, tone low. “But there’s something…off about her.”

“Off?”

“Troubling,” Dee clarified and then corrected herself by saying, “Troubled. She seems *troubled*.”

Well, shite. Trust me to fixate on the crazy.

“Right,” I muttered, turning for the door again. “Thanks for the heads-up.”

“Keep your distance, Johnny,” she called after me. “And stay *away* from the hospital.”

Deep in thought, I strolled out of the office with the envelope in hand.

I wandered down the left wing of the main building, stopping at a row of freshly painted blue lockers outside the third-year common area. I scanned the rows for locker number 461.

When I found the one I was looking for, I pushed the envelope through the tiny gap at the top of the metal door. I didn’t care if her mother didn’t

want the money, she could burn it for all I cared, but I had to give it to them —*to her*.

Readjusting my schoolbag on my shoulder, I slid my hand into my pocket and retrieved my car keys, decision made to blow off the rest of the day and wait in the car for Gibsie.

Besides, there was no point in going to class right now.

I couldn't concentrate on business qualifications if I tried.

My head was too clouded with words of warning and images of sad blue eyes.

Strolling down to the students' car park, I unlocked my car and dropped my shit into the back seat before collapsing inside.

Exhausted and sore, I pushed back the seat and adjusted the recliner so I could stretch my legs out. The thought of driving with the pain currently burning its way up my thighs was an unwelcome thought, but it wasn't my main concern right now.

We had a lot of boarders at Tommen, students coming from all over the country and some parts of Europe to study.

I lived half an hour from the school so I was one of the day-walkers.

Most of my friends were.

I knew Shannon was from Ballylaggin too, but I'd never laid eyes on her before that day. It wasn't a massive area, but it was big enough that our paths had never crossed—or maybe they had and I just didn't remember her.

I wasn't great with faces. I didn't look at one long enough to commit it to memory. I didn't care to. I had enough names and faces I needed to remember as it stood. Adding unnecessary names of strangers to that list seemed a pointless feat.

Until now.

Troubled. That's what Dee called her.

But weren't all teenagers a little fucked up and troubled sometimes?

I was so consumed in my own thoughts that I didn't notice the final bell ringing forty-five minutes later, or the flood of students climbing into cars around me. It was only when the passenger door of my car flew open that I jerked back to the present.

"Hey," Gibsie acknowledged, dropping into the passenger seat beside me. "I see your heart's still set on sporting the semi-homeless look in here,"

he added, kicking a pile of shit away from his feet. Reaching around, he tossed his bag into the back seat. “It fucking stinks in here, man.”

“You could always get plenty of fresh air walking,” I grumbled, rubbing the sleep from my eyes. Yeah, I was that fucking tired.

“Relax,” Gibsie shot back and then snickered when he added, “No need to get so *testy*.”

“Very funny, asshole,” I deadpanned, my hand immediately moving to my dick. “Now you really can get out and walk.”

“Here.” He paused to dump a vanilla-colored folder on my lap. “You can’t make me walk after getting you this.”

I stared down at the folder. “What’s this?”

“A present,” Gibsie replied, adjusting the visor.

“Homework?” I deadpanned. “Wow. Thanks so much.”

“It’s yer one Shannon’s file,” he corrected, rolling down the sleeves of his jumper. “No doubt your obsessive ass was looking for it.”

Well, shite.

An unsettling surge of excitement coursed through me as I stared down at the folder in my hands.

My best friend knew me too well.

“When you didn’t come back to class after training, I figured you were out here sulking over her—or pining.” He shrugged before adding, “Or whatever the fuck you’d call what you did in the locker room earlier.”

“I don’t sulk.”

He snorted.

“I don’t fucking sulk, asshole,” I bit back. “Or pine. I wasn’t doing any of that shite. I was just—”

“Losing your head?” Gibsie filled in with a wolfish grin. “Don’t worry about it. Happens to the best of us.”

“Why would I be losing my head?” I demanded and then swiftly answered, “I wasn’t losing my goddamn anything!”

“My mistake.” Gibsie held his hands up, but his tone assured me that he was far from sorry. “I must’ve read it wrong. Give me her file and I’ll put it back.”

He reached for the folder and I snatched it away. “What—no!”

Gibsie laughed but didn’t say anything else.

The knowing grin he gave me was enough of a response.

“How’d you manage to convince Dee to hand it over?” I asked, changing the subject.

“How’d you think?”

I repressed a shudder. “Jesus.”

“It’s not all bad.” Gibsie smirked. “The woman sucks like a hoover, and the thrill of getting caught always makes for fun times.”

I held a hand up. “Didn’t need to know that.”

He snorted. “You already knew that.”

“Yeah.” I sighed heavily. “Well, I didn’t need to be reminded.”

“Jesus,” he muttered, pulling at the collar of his school shirt so he could get a good look at his neck in the small rectangular mirror. “Always the neck.”

Unsatisfied with that view, he twisted the rearview mirror to face him and groaned.

Turning to look at me, Gibsie said, “See the sacrifices I make for you?”

My eyes landed on the purplish bruise forming on his neck.

“Better be something worth reading in there,” he grumbled.

Turning my attention back to the folder, I flicked it open to the first page and then tensed, eyes moving to his. “Did you read it?”

“Nope.”

“Why not?”

“Because,” he replied, digging around his pocket, “it’s not my business.” He pulled out a packet of cigarettes and a lighter. “I’m hanging for a smoke.” He shoved the door open and stepped out, stopping to lean in and announce, “Orgasms make me crave nicotine,” before closing the door and sparking up.

Shaking my head, I turned my attention to the file in my hands, riveted to every detail of information Shannon Lynch’s confidential file revealed. Pages upon pages of incidents and reports all neatly typed out on white paper, detailing every horrendous ordeal the girl had suffered in her old school—and there had been *a lot*.

Fourteen pages of incidents.

Front and back.

A few pages in, I learned that Shannon had slipped from a solid C student at the beginning of first year to scraping D’s and E’s by the end of second year. Attached to her less-than-stellar exam results were notes from

her former teachers, praising her gentle nature and diligent and conscientious work ethic.

I didn't need a note to explain the steady decline in her grades. I'd figured that out on page one.

She was the victim of bullying.

They cut her ponytail off when she was in first year. When she was *thirteen*. Their punishment for such a crime was a week's suspension. Seriously. A week off school for *cutting* a girl's fucking hair *off*.

Girls.

They were so goddamn sick and twisted.

How anyone could expect the girl to concentrate in a classroom setting as volatile as that was beyond me.

Seriously, what the hell was wrong with people? What was the matter with that school and those teachers? The fuck were her parents thinking, leaving her there for two years?

The more I read, the sicker I felt in my stomach…

Incident in P.E. resulting in a bloody nose.

Vomiting incident in the bathroom.

Incident in woodwork with a glue gun.

Issue after school with third-year girls.

Another vomiting incident in the bathroom.

Issue before school with fourth-year girls.

Refusal to take part in overnight school bonding retreat. Were they fucking kidding?

Many, many more vomiting incidents.

Referral to educational psychologist.

Older brother lodges fourth complaint about the bullying. Older brother should have found some older female friends and had them kick the shite out of these mean girls.

Graffiti on bathroom walls.

Assault in the schoolyard, older brother suspended. Older brother must have sorted it himself.

Isolation reported by several teachers.

Serious physical assault by three older students, Gardaí called. No shit, Sherlock.

Older brother suspended again for intervening.

Removal from school at the request of mother. About fucking time.

School records requested by the principal at Tommen College.

Horrified didn't being to describe my feelings when I was finished reading.

Pissed off didn't quite fit the bill, either.

Disgusted, *disturbed*, and *wholly enraged* seemed a more accurate assessment of my feelings.

Jesus, it was like reading a goddamn police report of a domestic violence victim.

No wonder Shannon's mother flipped the fuck out on me today.

If I were in her position, I would have done a lot worse.

Christ, now I was even more pissed with myself for hurting her than I was earlier.

Who the hell did this?

Seriously, what kind of creatures were they breeding in that school?

"Well?" Gibsie's voice broke through my thoughts when he climbed back into car, smelling like an ashtray. "Find out what you need?"

"Yeah," I muttered, handing the folder back to him before cranking the engine. "I did."

He looked at me expectantly. "And?"

I turned my attention to the road. "And what?"

"You look pissed."

"I'm *fine*." I needed to do something, put my foot down, hit the weight room, anything to expel the tension building inside my body.

"You sure, man?"

"Yep." Tearing out of my parking spot, I shifted into second gear, and then third, ignoring the *Caution Children Crossing* signs in my bid to get onto the main road.

Sometimes we worked out in my converted garage at home, but right now, I thought the thirty-minute drive to the gym in the city might do me some good.

I knew I had stepped over a serious line by breaching her privacy like this, but I didn't regret it.

Dammit, I *knew* she was vulnerable.

That feeling I had earlier today?

The pain I was so sure I'd seen in her eyes.

It *was* real, it was there, I recognized it, and now I could do something about it.

I could prevent anything like this from happening again.

It *wouldn't* happen again.

Not on my goddamn watch.

6
Awakened Hormones

SHANNON

I had a moderate concussion that resulted in an overnight stay at the hospital for observation, followed by the rest of the week off school. To be honest, I would have preferred to stay in the hospital the entire time or return to school immediately because the concept of spending the week at home with my father breathing down my neck was a special form of torture that no one deserved.

Miraculously, I managed to survive the week by holing myself up in my room all day, every day, and generally avoiding my father and his tumultuous mood swings like the plague.

When I returned to school the following week, I had been expecting a downpour of mocking and taunting to incur.

Shame was a problematic feeling for me, and sometimes it made it hard for me to function.

I spent the entire day in a sweaty, panic-ridden mess on high alert, waiting for something bad to happen. Something that *never* came.

Aside from a few curious stares and knowing smiles from the rugby team—as in, they knew what I looked like in my underwear—I had been left generally unscathed. I couldn't comprehend how a humiliating event like that could go unspoken about.

It didn't make sense to me.

No one brought up the incident on the pitch that day. It was as if it had never happened. Honestly, if it weren't for the lingering headache, I would have doubted it happened at all.

Days turned into weeks but the silence remained.

Nothing was ever said to me. It was never brought up again. I wasn't a target.

And I had *peace*.

Almost a month had passed since the incident on the pitch, and I found myself falling into a steady routine with Claire and Lizzie by my side.

I found myself beginning to look forward to going to school. It was the strangest turnabout of my life, considering for the majority of my life, I had loathed school, but Tommen had become almost like a safe place to be.

Instead of the usual feeling of dread when I stepped off the bus, all I felt was immense relief.

Relief to get away from my house.

Relief to be off the bully radar.

Relief to get away from my father.

Relief to be able to *breathe* for seven hours of the day.

I was used to coping alone, being alone, sitting alone, eating alone… You get my drift. I was forever alone so my latest predicament—or should I say, the latest development in my social status—was an unexpected one.

They say there's solidarity in numbers, and I was a firm believer in this.

I felt *better* when I was with my friends.

Maybe it was a teenage insecurity, or maybe it was a result of my past, but I liked that I didn't have to walk to class on my own anymore, and that I always had someone to sit with or tell me if I had something in my teeth.

Their friendship meant more to me than they would ever know, giving me a support system that I desperately needed and a buffer in times of panicked uncertainty.

At my old school, I was so stressed and anxious during my lessons that I fell behind a lot in class and had to work late into the night most nights to catch up. Without the constant threat of attack from my peers, I was keeping up in my classes with little problem, inhaling my lessons like crack.

I even managed to pass most of my pre-junior cert exams, with the exception of math and business studies. No amount of studying seemed to help with those subjects. But I had scored my first A since first year in science, so I took comfort in that.

During lunch, I had the girls to sit with—not a pity seat with my brother and his buddies, but an actual *group* of people.

I'd never had this level of normality before. I'd never felt *safe*.

But I was starting to.

And I had a feeling *he* had something to do with it.

Johnny Kavanagh.

I mean, he had to, right? I didn't have that kind of power, so that left him.

It wasn't a coincidence that the whole event had been erased from everyone's minds.

I had seen him plenty of times since that day, having passed him countless times in the hallways between classes and in the lunch hall during break, and while he never approached me, he always smiled at me in passing.

To be honest, I was surprised he smiled at me at all, considering my mother's reaction toward him outside the principal's office that day. I didn't know whether to apologize for her behavior toward him or not.

Mam had overreacted to the point of being borderline threatening toward him, but then again, Johnny's actions had resulted in me spending a night in hospital and a further week at home with my father, so I decided against apologizing. Besides, I'd left it too long.

Approaching him now, after almost four weeks had passed by, would just be weird.

Through my friends—and the hushed whispers and rumors from girls in the bathroom—I had learned all kinds of details and information about Johnny Kavanagh.

He was in fifth year—something I already knew. He was originally from Dublin—again, no surprises there. He was incredibly popular—okay, so I didn't know that but it didn't take a genius to realize that, what with him being surrounded by students all the time. He was a massive hit among the female student body—again, a blind man could figure that out. And contrary to his terrible inaccuracy with the ball and his blatant maiming of me, he was supposed to be very good at rugby.

He was the captain of the school rugby team, and with that status came popularity, girls, and some fierce pull with both the faculty and the students.

I had no clue about the ins and outs of rugby, since our family revolved around GAA, and I cared even less about the popularity ranks at school, considering I was usually dumped at the bottom, but the way the girls at school portrayed Johnny Kavanagh sounded *nothing* like the person I met that day.

According to the girls, he was aggressive, intense, and a complete snob, with a body to die for and a horrible attitude. They made him out to be a cocky, rich rugby head who was obsessed with sports, played hard on the pitch, and fucked harder off it. Evidently much older girls were his thing.

Okay, so it was quite possible that he did in fact do all these things, but it was hard to piece that information together with the person I'd met. My memories of that day were still cloudy, the events leading up to my accident still hazy, and the ones afterward a jumbled mess, but I remembered *him*.

I remembered the way he had taken care of me.

How he had stayed with me until my mother came. The way he had touched me with big dirty, *gentle* hands. How he talked to me like he *wanted* to hear what I had to say. And then listened to my rambling like it was *important* to him.

I remembered the embarrassing parts, too; the parts that kept me up late into the night with flaming cheeks and a mind full of disconcerting images and fumbling words.

The parts I didn't dare acknowledge.

I did keep the envelope though, the one I had found in my locker the week I returned to school, with the hastily scrawled *From my people to your people* on the front.

The two fifty-euro notes I had given to Mam when I got home from school, but I had tucked the envelope into my pillowcase for safekeeping.

I didn't have an explanation for why I didn't throw it out, the same way I couldn't explain why my body broke out in a cold sweat, my hands turning clammy, my heart fluttering rapidly, and my stomach twisting itself up in knots, whenever I laid eyes on him.

Well, that wasn't technically true.

There was an obvious, perfectly logical reason for my reaction toward him.

He was *beautiful*.

Every single time I spotted him in the hallways, it was as if every delayed urge, feeling, and hormone that had been lying dormant inside of my body for the last fifteen years had erupted to life.

I was achingly aware of him; my body shifting into high alert whenever our arms brushed in the crowded hallways between classes.

But it wasn’t his looks or enormous muscular build that had coaxed my stubborn hormones out of hibernation. It was the way he had *been* that day.

During small break last week, when Lizzie caught me red-handed staring at Johnny Kavanagh, she’d decided to dish out all the information she had.

According to Lizzy, Johnny Kavanagh was never tied down to any particular girl or branded as anyone’s boyfriend, though there was Bella Wilkinson to contend with. The pair had been knocking around together for a long time.

Bella was a couple of years older than him, more experienced, and from what Lizzie had told me, reported to her by the boys, sucked dick like a Dyson.

So yeah, it was a safe bet to say Johnny had been on the receiving end of a healthy number of blow jobs and god knows what else from her.

I was just thankful we had a Henry hoover at home and *not* a fancy-pants Dyson, so I didn’t gag every time I cleaned my room to that particular image.

I wasn’t surprised by any of it, though. Johnny was almost eighteen. I had two older brothers so I was quite aware what boys of that particular age demographic got up to behind closed bedroom doors.

The information was depressing but the cool dose of reality I needed to strengthen my resolve and douse my hopes.

It was terribly unfortunate to develop my first crush on a person like him, considering we’d only spoken that one time and he was involved with a suction-mouthed sixth year.

Not that he would be remotely interested in me if he wasn’t.

I liked safe. In my world, invisibility equaled safety. I was happy to be wallpaper and blend in. And Johnny Kavanagh was about as opposite of invisible as I could think of.

Before him, I’d never been interested in the opposite sex. I’d never been interested in anyone. But him?

I found myself seeking him out at school just so I could stare. It was creepy and stalkerish on my behalf but I honestly couldn’t help myself.

I comforted myself with the knowledge that I had no intentions of acting on my feelings or pursuing my first and only crush.

Either way, I was perfectly content with watching from the sidelines, settling for taking sneaky peeks and glances at him whenever I could.

I justified my stalkerish behavior by reminding myself that I was not the only girl in school to lust after the delectable Johnny Kavanagh. No, I was just one in a long list of many, *many* girls.

But he was just so interesting to observe.

He didn't act like the rest of the lads at school. He seemed *above* them in a weird way. Like he was older than his years? Or bored by the mundane way of school life?

It was hard to describe.

He seemed to drum to his own beat. He oozed confidence and had a no-fucks-given attitude that was ridiculously addictive. He forged his own path at school, and like most natural-born leaders, everyone else just followed along after him.

I guess that was the key to popularity; you needed to *not* want it, or not care that you had it.

The fact that he was beautiful with a body ripped to perfection didn't hurt his cause, either.

It made me a little jealous if I was being honest.

I didn't care about being popular. It was the fact that it was so easy for some people, while others, myself included in the latter group, suffered terribly.

He gave out this *"I'm the best. You're fucking with the best right here. You're not going to find anyone better than me. Bad luck on you"* vibe and walked around with a constant fuck-you expression on his face.

It was typical, banging-fists-on-chest, alpha male behavior—which I presumed had a lot to do with why every girl within a ten-mile radius seemed to gravitate toward him.

Thing was, whenever his eyes locked with mine, I never saw any of that fabricated machismo or his notorious glower.

It was hard to describe the look I received, because usually when our eyes locked, it was because Johnny had caught me staring at him, be it in the lunch hall or outside classrooms, and I always turned away quickly, mortified.

However, on the rare occasion that I managed to steel myself and meet his stare, I was rewarded with a curious head tilt and a small twitching

smile. I wasn't really sure what to make of any of it, or how to feel.

In a weird way, I kind of felt like one of those baby ducklings who imprint and attach themselves to the first person they see upon being born. I'd watched a movie about this when I was a kid.

Maybe that was what was happening here? Maybe I'd attached myself to Johnny because not only was he the first person I saw when I came to, but he also was the first person who'd shown me genuine kindness.

I wondered if that was an actual thing that could happen to humans after suffering moderate concussions, but then quickly dismissed the crazy notion.

Thoughts like that were *not* normal and of absolutely no benefit.

Also, I wasn't attached to him.

I simply enjoyed admiring him. From a safe distance. When he wasn't looking.

Yeah, that wasn't unhealthy at all.

"Do you want to come over after school today?" Claire asked me during big break on Wednesday.

We were sitting at the end of one of the ginormous tables in the luxurious lunch hall that I was still trying to come to terms with.

At BCS, we had a little canteen where people took turns sitting at the small round tables. Here at Tommen, it was a banquet hall with twenty-five-foot tables, hot meals on offer, and enough room to seat the entire school.

The lunch hall was bursting to the seams with other students shouting and talking so loudly that I had to lean across the table to reply. "To your house?"

Claire nodded. "We can hang out and watch a few films or something?"

"Aren't you going into town with Lizzie to see Pierce?" I asked.

At least that's what I thought they were doing after school today. That's all Lizzie had been talking about all morning.

Apparently, she was seeing some lad from fifth year named Pierce, and they'd been on and off together for months. From what I had gathered, they were currently back on.

To be fair, Lizzie had invited me to come with them after school, but I'd declined because town was the last place I ever wanted to be.

My old school was based slap-bang in the middle of town, and I tended to avoid all surrounding areas like the plague. There were too many unwelcome faces that hung around there.

"Nah, Lizzie's in a mood," Claire explained, stabbing her pot of yogurt with her spoon. "So, I'm guessing they had another fight today."

That explained Lizzie's noticeable absence at lunch. She was a hard one to figure out. She held a lot back and I never truly knew what she was thinking or feeling, unlike Claire, who was an open book.

I guess that's why I had always been closer to Claire growing up.

I loved Lizzie, of course, and considered her a good friend, but if I was to have a best friend, then it would be Claire.

"Besides, I'm not really into being the third wheel with those two," Claire added, setting her spoon into her lunch box. "So, what do you say? Mam will pick us up and drop you home whenever you want to go." She leaned back in her chair and flashed me a megawatt smile. "Or you could always sleep over?"

My stomach did a little flip. "Are you sure your mam won't mind?"

"Shannon, of course she won't mind," Claire replied, giving me a strange look. "My mam and dad both love you." Smiling, she added, "Mam is constantly on my case asking when you're coming over again."

A warm sensation flooded me.

Mrs. Biggs nursed in the intensive care unit in the hospital in Cork city, and she was one of the nicest ladies I had ever met.

Claire was a lot like her mother, with a sweet nature and a kind heart.

When we were little and Claire and Lizzie were having a birthday party or a playdate, Mrs. Biggs always made it her business to come pick me up.

I was even invited to Claire's older brother's birthday parties, and although I never attended Hughie's parties, I appreciated the invite.

They were the only invites I got growing up.

"I'd love to, but I'll have to check with my parents," I told her and then proceeded to pull out my phone and text my brother to scope out the mood at home.

"It'll be great," Claire encouraged happily. "There's a tub of Ben and Jerry's in the freezer and I got the new *Pirates of the Caribbean* movie on

DVD.” Waggling her brows, she added, “Johnny and Orlando, what girl can say no to that?”

“Not you,” I laughed. Claire was obsessed with Johnny Depp.

He was her wallpaper on her phone, and his face was plastered all over her bedroom walls.

“I love him,” she announced with a dreamy sigh. “I do. It’s real, hard-core love, and one day he’ll come to Ireland, see me, and instantly reciprocate my feelings. And then we’ll run away together and create adorable hybrid pirate babies.”

“That sounds like a plan,” I snickered. “Although, you do realize he’s not an actual pirate, don’t you?”

“Shh!” Claire chuckled. “Don’t take that away from me. Let me enjoy the visual.”

My phone vibrated in my hand then with a text from Joey.

Bad idea, Shan. He’s on the warpath.

Dejected, I shoved my phone back into my pocket and released a heavy sigh. “I can’t come over.”

“Your dad?” she asked sadly.

I nodded.

Claire looked as disappointed as I felt but she didn’t push it.

Deep down, I think she *knew*. I never verbalized it and she never pushed. That’s why I loved her.

“Another time then.” Claire offered me a huge smile that almost masked the concern in her brown eyes.

Almost.

“We’ll plan it better next time, give you some notice,” she quickly carried on, tucking her long blond hair behind her ears. “But our Johnny and Orlando session is definitely happening!”

“How’s it going, Claire-Bear?” a deep male voice asked, distracting us both.

“Oh, hey, Gerard,” Claire acknowledged in a nonchalant tone as she looked up at the ginormous blond boy standing at the end of our table. “How are you?”

“Better now I’m talking to you,” he purred as he walked over and propped his ass on the table, keeping his huge back to me and his attention locked on my friend. “You’re looking as lovely as always.”

Claire's gaze darted from his face to mine and she gave me a WTF eye bulge before quickly sobering her features and saying, "Didn't I hear you spin that same line to Megan Crean on Wednesday?"

I swallowed back a laugh as I watched my friend play the indifference card like a pro, even though she was clearly affected by this boy.

He was tall and tanned, with dirty-blond mussed-up hair, and clearly packing some serious muscle beneath his school uniform.

I didn't blame her for being affected by a boy who looked like that. Most girls would.

Just not *this* girl.

"Are you jealous?" Gerard teased, tone highly flirtatious. "You know you're my number one."

"Spare me." Claire fake gagged.

"I hear you're coming to Donegal with the team?" he asked her. "Your class got the go-ahead, didn't they?"

"Yeah, our class was picked to go," Claire replied breezily. "Mam hasn't signed the permission slip for me to go, though."

Neither had mine.

Tommen College had an away match against some rugby prep school up in Donegal next month after the Easter holidays. It was an important game for the team, a final of some league cup or another, and my class, along with one other class from sixth year, had been selected at random to attend.

Because the match was being held on the first Friday, we were due back to school after Easter break, the school bus was departing from Tommen at 10:45 p.m. on the Thursday night to beat traffic and allow for pit stops since northern Donegal was at least an eight-hour journey from Cork via bus.

According to Lizzie, Tommen's Parents Association was a bunch of tight-asses and had only allocated funding for one night's accommodation for the trip. We would be sleeping on the bus on the Thursday night, staying in a hotel on the Friday night, and then traveling back to Cork on the Saturday.

Lizzie was thoroughly disgusted with the concept of having to sleep on the bus because the school heads were being stingy and wouldn't cough up

the funds for an extra night in a hotel. Personally, I couldn't see what the problem was.

It was an all-expenses-paid trip funded by the school and an approved day off school.

Aside from the eight-hour bus ride with the majority of the passengers being testosterone-filled teenage boys, it was a win-win.

Of course, that part terrified me to my core, but I was beginning to learn how to manage my anxiety, refusing to allow my past experiences to ruin an opportunity at a much-needed *break*. I was trying really hard to just stand back, take a moment, and read situations and scenarios with clear, rational thoughts rather than the terror-induced paranoia that seemed to control me.

Regardless of my enthusiasm at the prospect of getting away from Ballylaggin for a couple of nights, I wasn't holding out much hope on going. Because it was an overnight trip, the school required permission slips to be signed by our parents.

I'd given Mam the forms that needed to be signed in order for me to attend last week. As of this morning, they still lay unsigned on top of the bread bin at home.

"Ah, your mammy will let you go," the blond god teased, ruffling Claire's hair. "Sure big brother will be there to keep an eye on ya—and me of course." He leaned closer and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "I always play better when I know you're watching."

Now I did laugh at the sheer ridiculousness of the cheesy chat-up line. I knew my stuff about sports, and I had yet to meet a guy who played better because of a girl. However, when I tried to stifle my laugh, it ended up coming out like a snort.

Slapping a hand over my mouth, I stared at Claire's horrified expression and mouthed *sorry* behind my fingers.

As if only just noticing I was present, the blond guy turned around, probably to seek out the snorting culprit. His gaze landed on my face, and immediate recognition flickered in his striking silvery-gray eyes.

"Hey! Little Shannon," he acknowledged, smiling warmly. "How's it going?"

"Uh, fine," I strangled out, as I stared up at him and wondered how the hell he knew my name. I glanced at Claire, who shrugged and gave me a

look that told me she was as confused as I was.

“I didn’t know you were friends with Shannon,” he said, turning his attention back to Claire. “That would have been useful information.”

“Uh, I didn’t know *you* were friends with Shannon,” Claire offered blankly. “And useful for what?”

“I’m not.” He shook his head. “And it doesn’t matter.”

He turned back to me and smiled again.

“I’m Gerard Gibson,” he introduced himself. “But everyone calls me Gibsie.”

“I don’t,” Claire tossed out airily.

Gibsie chuckled. “Okay, everyone except for this one calls me Gibsie.” He pointed a thumb at my friend, flashing her an indulgent smile before returning his attention to me. “She likes to be awkward.”

“No, Gerard, I like to address people by their given name,” Claire corrected, giving him the stink eye. She turned her attention to me and began to explain. “Gerard here is friends with my brother, Hugh. You remember Hughie, don’t you, Shan?”

I nodded, clearly remembering Claire’s beautiful older brother.

With light-blond hair and brown eyes, Hugh Biggs was the male equivalent of his sister, except with abs, masculine features, and the obvious boy parts. Hugh didn’t attend the same primary school as us, but he had always been friendly to me when I went to their house. He was one of the few boys aside from Joey that I didn’t feel on edge around. Hughie always left me alone and I appreciated it.

“Well, they’ve been in the same class since junior infants, and this monster right here”—she paused to give Gibsie a small shove before continuing—“has been a permanent fixture in my kitchen for most of my life. He lives across the street from us,” she added. “Unfortunately.”

“Come on, Claire-Bear,” he teased. “Is that any way to talk about the guy who gave you your first kiss?”

“That was the result of an unfortunate game of spin the bottle,” she shot back, cheeks turning pink as she glared up at him. “And I’ve told you a million times to stop calling me that.”

“It’s all a show,” Gibsie informed me with a huge grin. “She loves me really.”

“I really don’t,” Claire shot back, flustered now. “I tolerate him because he brings cookies to my house.” She turned to me and said, “Gerard’s mother owns a bakery in the city. Her cakes are insanely delicious.”

“Gibs! Come on, lad. The team’s waiting for you!” someone called out from the other side of the lunch hall, causing all three of us to swing around.

My heart flatlined for the briefest of moments before somersaulting in my chest when my eyes landed on Johnny Kavanagh standing in the archway of the lunch hall, with his hand gesturing wildly in the air and a thunderous expression etched on his face.

“Five minutes,” Gibsie called back.

“Coach wants us now,” Johnny barked in that thick Dublin accent I’d learned to listen out for. “Not in five bleeding minutes,” he added, not giving a damn who was listening to him.

It was quite clear that he didn’t care if people looked at him or not.

Ignoring him, Gibsie held two fingers up and turned his attention back to Claire.

He began to speak to her in a low hushed tone, but I didn’t catch any of it.

My entire focus was on the pair of blue eyes that were staring right back at me.

Usually, when he caught me staring, I would look away or duck my face, but this time I couldn’t.

I felt snared.

Completely and utterly ensnared in his gaze.

Johnny tilted his head to one side, regarding me with a curious expression, the earlier irritation in his eyes replaced with something I couldn’t quite decipher.

My heart hammered violently against my rib cage.

And then he shook his head and looked away, his attention moving to the watch on his left wrist, breaking the weird, trancelike stare-down.

Blowing out a shaky breath, I turned away from him, sagged forward, and let my hair fall forward to conceal my burning cheeks.

“I expect to see pom-poms and the words *I heart Gibsie* in neon letters across your tits next week at the School Boy Shield final,” was all I

managed to catch Gibsie saying before he waved us off and jogged away.

“Sorry about him,” Claire said, gaze flickering from my face to behind me. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes twinkling. She pulled at an imaginary piece of fluff on her school jumper before adding, “He’s a little strange.”

“He’s a whole lot into you,” I stated, grateful for the distraction from my thoughts.

“Gerard likes everyone,” she replied with a heavy sigh. “Well, everyone with a vagina.”

“I don’t know, Claire. He seemed to really like you,” I began to say, but she quickly cut me off.

“Well, I do know, Shan,” she said, cheeks still flushed. “He’s a player. A total fecking player. He rides anything in a skirt,” she added. “They all do.”

“They?”

“The lads on the rugby team,” she explained. “With the exception of Hugh—and possibly Patrick.”

I scrunched my nose up. “Oh.”

“Yeah, oh,” Claire replied, grimacing. “And the only reason Gerard carries on like that with me is because I’m Hughie’s little sister and he knows he can’t have me.” Sighing, she added, “It’s a harmless game of flirting to him that won’t amount to anything.”

“What about you?” I asked, tone gentle. “What’s it to you?”

Claire chewed on her bottom lip for several seconds before whispering, “Torment.”

That was all the clarification I needed to confirm my suspicions.

Claire liked Gerard—or Gibsie—or whatever his name was.

In that moment, given the recent surge of hormones battering my reproductive system, brought on by the injection of Johnny Kavanagh into my life, I could relate to my friend in the most fundamental way.

“Boys with pretty eyes and big muscles mess everything up for girls,” Claire huffed.

“Yep,” I agreed weakly. “They certainly do.”

“What are we like?” Claire chuckled half-heartedly. “Both liking the worst possible thing for us.”

“*Me*?” I shook my head and jumped into denial mode. “I don’t like anyone.”

“Yeah, right,” Claire scoffed. “Don’t even try to pretend, Little Miss Blush. I see the way you watch him.”

“Claire.” I shook my head and sighed. “You’re imagining things.”

“Oh, look,” she gasped, pointing behind me. “Johnny’s coming over here.”

“W-what?” Startled, I swung around to discover she was lying.

“Ha,” Claire snickered. “I knew it.”

“Not funny,” I mumbled, patting my burning cheeks.

“Don’t worry, Shan,” she replied, smiling knowingly. “Your secret’s safe with me.”

7
Midnight Blue

JOHNNY

Shannon Lynch had eyes the color of midnight blue that wouldn't stay the fuck out of my head. At least that's the closest comparison I could find on the countless internet searches I had performed.

Color chart searches on the internet were confusing, but not nearly as baffling as my fucked-up brain that, like a broken record, seemed to be stuck on repeat.

My brain's track of choice: Shannon *like the river*, with the gorgeous blue eyes, face of an angel, and the troubled past.

After reading her file, it took me several days to absorb the contents, and several more before I found the restraint I needed to *not* drive down to BCS and beat the ever-living shite out of her bullies.

All that first week back after Christmas break, I worried over the girl, waiting to see if tomorrow would be the day she returned to school. My anxiety levels were through the roof by the time Friday hit and she hadn't returned.

It had bothered me so much that I stopped by Mr. Twomey's office to check in. It was there that I learned I had, in fact, given the girl an unmerciful concussion and that she was at home on bed rest for the remainder of the week.

When Shannon returned to school the following Monday, I was called straight to the office, where I was greeted by Mr. Twomey, Miss Nyhan, the year-head for third years, Mr. Crowley, my year-head, and the human incubator that was Mrs. Lynch.

There, it was explained to me that while they were aware that my actions on the pitch were accidental, it would be best if I kept my distance from Shannon to avoid any future incidents.

I was also handed a plastic bag from her mother with my jersey inside, along with a mumbled apology for shoving me in the hall that day—obviously trying to cover her arse for putting her hands on a student—and another stern warning to steer clear of her daughter.

Furious over being cornered in a fucked-up and unnecessary intervention—not to mention treated like a villain for an honest mistake—I'd responded with a sharp, "No fucking problem," before taking my jersey and stalking back to class with every intention of doing just that.

I didn't need that kind of hassle in my life.

I didn't need the threat of suspension hanging over my head. It messed with my plans, and there was no girl worth putting my future in jeopardy for.

Following the rules, more for my own sake than hers, I stayed away.

I didn't speak to her, and I didn't approach when I saw her between classes or in the lunch hall during break.

I kept a wide-ass berth of that girl and the complications that seemed to follow her.

But as pissed as I was, I still kept an eye out for her in the hallways.

Call it being overly protective of a vulnerable girl or call it something else, but I kept my ears open when it came to Shannon Lynch and shut down any shite that may be an issue, making sure she had a smooth transition into Tommen.

However, after a couple of days, it quickly became clear that she didn't need anyone's help.

Shannon was liked at Tommen. Teachers liked her. Students liked her. *I* fucking liked her.

That was the problem.

Besides, she had her own little bodyguards in the form of the two blonds that always seemed to be flanking her wherever she went.

I recognized the more protective one of the two girls as the sister of Hughie Biggs, our team's fly half, and one of my closest friends. The other blond was the on-off girlfriend of Pierce O'Neill, another teammate of mine.

I couldn't remember the name of Pierce's girlfriend, only that I remembered how fucking vicious she could be with her tongue and that any lad in his right mind should keep a wide berth.

Throwing myself into my routine, I attempted to ignore and forget about Shannon, choosing to concentrate on the game and ignore all distractions around me—pussy being the most dangerous kind of distraction.

I really fucking tried.

But then one of the lads would bring her up in conversation, or she'd pass me in the hallway at school, and I was back to square one. I couldn't understand it and tried not to think too much into it. But it didn't stop her from coming up in every conversation I'd been involved in since her arrival at Tommen.

Lads were pricks, and age meant nothing to most of them.

Too fucking many of the eejits in my year were talking about her, thinking about her, and plotting about her, and it drove me batshit crazy.

Last week, for instance, I'd actually voiced my frustrations, telling a shocked table of classmates to cop the fuck on—that she was only fifteen. It didn't matter to them that she was only in third year, and it bothered me that it mattered to me when it really shouldn't. Plenty of third years scored with people from fourth, fifth, and, hell, even some sixth years.

Not me.

Never me.

Unlike the rest of the lads who had no problem fucking around with younger girls, I was fully aware of the implications that could arise. I'd had more than my fair share of lectures from coaches and former pros about the catastrophic repercussions that came from fucking with the wrong girl.

And while I wasn't particularly proud of my behavior toward girls down through the years, I drew the line at anyone younger than me.

I knew that made me a hypocrite considering I was more than willing to go with girls older than me, but I had to be safe, dammit. I had a dream and a clear vision of what I needed to do in order to achieve it. Messing around with younger girls was dangerous.

Which is why this particular girl was pissing me off so much.

The minute I laid eyes on her, something had hit me hard in the chest. Something unfamiliar and disconcerting.

Over a month had passed and I was still reeling.

We were into February and I was *still* silently obsessing over Shannon *like the river*.

I didn’t like it and I liked her even less for being the sole cause of my uncertainty. It didn’t make sense.

She was a tiny scrap of a girl—all limbs and bones. There were no curves on her, and I doubted she even wore a bra if I was being honest with myself.

See?

Too young.

Too fucking *young*.

But that didn’t stop me from searching for her in a crowd. And it didn’t stop me from looking when I found her.

The more I tried to block her out, the more I sought her out. Until I was seeking her out between every fucking class.

Sometimes, I found her watching me right back.

She always gave me this dazzled-in-the-headlights look before ducking her face.

I wasn’t sure what to make of any of it. I fully acknowledged that I was having an irrational reaction to the girl. It wasn’t *normal*.

Problem was, I couldn’t seem to get a handle on myself. I couldn’t turn my brain off.

Bella was another problem for me. She was sick of what she referred to as “being mugged off” and had texted me a couple of weeks ago to call time on our *nonhookups*.

I knew I should have felt something about that—I’d been sleeping with the girl for close to eight months—but all I felt was empty. There was no connection there and I was tired of feeling used.

It wasn’t like we met up for a chat or went to the cinema or anything like that.

She didn’t want that from me.

Not even when I offered.

Sure, there were no feelings involved, and I had never been interested in having a relationship with her, but after spending six out of eight months with my dick inside her, I wasn’t opposed to buying the girl dinner or taking her to a fucking movie.

I had offered on many occasions and she had declined every last one.

Because that wasn’t *public* enough. Because Bella only wanted me when I was on full view in the pub or at school, where she could show me

off to all her friends like I was some prized fucking bull.

Bella had informed me via text message that she had moved on to Cormac Ryan from sixth year. I had half suspected something was going on between the two for a while now because he had been acting shady as fuck around me.

Cormac had gotten the call up from the Academy during the summer. He'd been to a few sessions with the youth and competed in several bouts of trials. So far, Cormac had been unsuccessful in earning a permanent placement contract and I wasn't holding my breath for the guy.

That wasn't me being a spiteful prick.

It was me stating facts.

He was a decent winger, but he needed to pull some serious magic out of the bag if he was to make it onto the main card with the club.

If he made it, good on him.

If he didn't, I didn't give a shite.

Cormac was in the year above me so we had never been friends, per se, but having played on the same team for the last five years, I had expected a little more loyalty.

And if Bella was looking to provoke a reaction out of me by screwing my teammate, she would be sorely disappointed because I would never give her the satisfaction.

Did it hurt?

Yes.

Did I feel betrayed?

Of course.

Did that mean I wanted her back?

Hell fucking no.

Because I couldn't handle liars, and that's what she was.

I also didn't cope well with mind games, which was exactly what she was trying to do to me.

Breaking up with me, going off with my teammate, and then turning right around and flooding my inbox and telling me she wanted me back was a prime example of the games this girl liked to play with me.

What she failed to understand was that it didn't matter how many games she tried to play or how many times she promised to suck me off.

There was no going back there.

Not for me.

Maybe I was dead on the inside like Bella had suggested in the million text messages she'd sent me after I turned her offers of working things out down.

I didn't think so.

I *had* feelings. I cared about things.

Just not liars.

"I have a confession to make," Gibsie announced during training on Wednesday.

We were on our twenty-ninth out of thirty ordered laps of the pitch and he was starting to wilt.

Actually, *I* was on my twenty-ninth lap.

The rest of the team were on their fourteenth.

Gibsie was on his eighth, and the wilting began at lap four. Now, he resembled a lad falling out of a nightclub at three in the morning with a belly full of Jager bombs. He, along with the rest of them, needed to get it together, because we had the School Boy Shield to play for next week and I had no intention of running myself into the ground if the rest of the team weren't committed to the cause.

These gobshites had ten days to get their shite together.

"Are you listening?" Gibsie growled in a breathless tone, grabbing onto my shoulder in the hopes that I would pull his lazy ass around. "Because this is serious."

"I'm listening," I told him, dragging in a gulp of air and expelling it slowly. "Confess away."

"I have an insane urge to kick you in the balls—" Gibsie puffed out a ragged breath before he finished with, "And break what's left down there."

"The fuck?" Shaking his beefy hand off my shoulder for the hundredth time, I switched positions, jogging backwards so I could glare at the bastard. "*Why?*"

"Because you are a freak of nature, Kav," he panted, dragging himself along after me. "There is no goddamn way any fella in your position"—he pointed a finger at me and then sagged forward, pressing his hands to the

back of his head—“with a broken dick should be able to run for this long without dropping dead.” Groaning he added, “My cock’s in perfect working order and it’s fucking crying from exertion, Johnny! *Crying!* And my balls have hibernated back to their prepuberty position.”

“My dick’s not broken, asshole,” I growled, looking around to see if anyone heard us.

Thankfully, the rest of the team is at the other side of the pitch.

“I want a picture of it,” he wheezed. “So I can show Coach and pretend it’s mine. He’ll never make me run again.”

“Keep talking about it and you won’t need a picture to show Coach,” I bit out. “I’ll cut your cock off and you can hand it to him instead.”

Gibsie grimaced. “Still too soon to make jokes?”

I nodded stiffly and then spun around, recapturing my earlier pace, as I loomed closer to the finish line.

“Sorry, lad,” he panted, falling back into a hobbling run alongside me. “It’s just unnatural to move with that kind of speed when you’re injured.”

“Do you honestly think this is easy for me?” I bit out.

If he did, then he was fucking crazy. I had “speed” because I spent most of my childhood and all of my teenage years working on my body. While Gibsie and the lads were playing knock-and-run and spin the fucking bottle, I was on a pitch. When they were chasing girls, I was chasing gains.

Rugby was my life.

This was *all* I had.

But the laborious pace I was keeping today was so far off my usual standard that it was pathetic. I was sluggish and the only reason it wasn’t noticeable was because this was school level. If I dragged my ass like this at the Academy, where I played alongside the best players in the country, then I’d be instantly called out on it.

My body was on fire and I was moving on sheer will.

Everything hurt to the point where I had to breathe through my nose to stop myself from vomiting. I would pay for the exertion with a sleepless night of writhing in agony, half a dozen painkillers, and a scalding hot bath in Epsom salts.

But I couldn’t stop.

I fucking refused to give in.

If I gave Coach Mulcahy a single inkling that I wasn't up to par, he would call the heads at the Academy. And if he called the Academy, I was screwed.

I slowed my pace when I reached the end zone, walking it out, keeping my muscles loose and moving. If I stopped short, I was going to seize up, and I intended on doing just that in the privacy of my own car.

Swiping a bottle of water off the ground, I paced the sideline like a madman for several minutes, desperately trying to walk off the pain. I didn't dare perform a postrun stretch.

I wasn't *that* much of a masochist.

When my heart rate returned to normal, I waited for Coach to give me the nod for early dismissal, then headed back to the changing rooms, my job for the day completed.

I hadn't realized Gibsie had followed me up the path until I heard him let out an earsplitting wolf whistle. "You're looking well, Claire-Bear!"

Curious, I followed his train of vision only to find two familiar-looking blonds huddled under the awning outside the science building. One of said girls was scowling back at us with her middle finger directed toward my best friend.

"Watching me train again?" Gibsie called across the courtyard. "You know I love when you do that."

It took me a few seconds to recognize the leggy blond as Hughie Biggs's baby sister.

"What was that?" Claire called back, cupping her ear with her hand. "I can't hear you."

"Go out with me!"

"Get stuffed, Gerard!"

"You know you want to," Gibsie laughed, twiddling his fingers at her in salute. "My little brown-eyed girl."

"Don't do it, Gerard!" Claire's face turned bright red. "Don't you dare sing that—"

Gibs cut her off with a verse of Van Morrison.

"I hate you, Gerard Gibson!" Claire hissed when he was done serenading her like a demented crow.

"And I love you, too," he said, laughing, before turning his attention to me and stifling a groan. "Jesus Christ," he groaned so that only I could hear

him. “I swear to god, lad, that girl drives me crazy.”

“You’re already crazy,” I reminded him. “You don’t need anyone’s help with that.”

“*Look* at her, Johnny,” he groaned, ignoring my jab. “Look at how beautiful that girl is. Christ, it might be that sunshine hair, but I swear she *glows*.”

“Don’t even think about it,” were the words that came out of my mouth.

“I won’t—for now,” Gibs replied, eyes alight with mischief. “But I’ve a feeling that I’m going to marry her.”

His comment stopped me in my tracks. “*What?*”

It was too weird.

Even for him.

“Providing we both make it out of our youth without any accidental babies,” he added thoughtfully. “And her brother doesn’t cut my dick off first, of course.”

“Claire’s in third year,” I deadpanned. “And she’s your teammate’s little *sister*. The fuck’s wrong with you, Gibs?”

“Did I say I was going to marry her today?” Gibsie countered. “No, fucker, I did not, so clean your ears out. I meant when I’m old as fuck and I’m done sowing my wild oats.”

“Old as fuck?” I gaped at him. “Sowing your wild *oats*?”

“Yeah.” He shrugged. “You know, like thirty or something.”

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah, well, word to the wise, Gibs: bag those wild oats while you’re sowing them. And keep them far away from girls like that one.”

“Hey, don’t give me those judgy eyes,” Gibsie scoffed. “I always bag my shit. And there’s nothing wrong with liking her. *You’re* the one with the phobia to girls your own age, lad, not me.”

Aware that we were having this extremely messed-up conversation in the middle of the courtyard, I searched around to see if anyone was eavesdropping. Gibsie wasn’t the brightest crayon in the box, but I’d feel pretty fucking bereft if Hughie was to hear him talking about his baby sister like this and murder him.

At that exact moment, my gaze landed on the tiny brunette, laden down with an armful of books, skipping down the steps of the science building

and hurrying over to the blonds. A sudden swell of something filled my chest when I recognized the brunette as Shannon.

Goddammit, why did she have to look like *that*? Why did every single thing about that tiny fucking girl scream out to me?

It wasn't fair.

Actually, fuck fair; it was downright *cruel*.

It didn't make any sense for me to find her attractive. She was nothing like the girls I usually fucked around with. I liked curves. I loved tits. And I was a sucker for a big ass.

She had none of the above.

But she had legs. And hair. And a smile. And those fucking midnight blue eyes—which I didn't think was a good enough word to describe the color. They should have been called *soul blue* because they were deep as fuck and sucked a person right in…

And then she went and dropped her books.

They scattered on the ground and Shannon bent over to pick them up, causing her skirt to rise up *way* too fucking high. Two smooth, pale thighs filled my vision, sending a surge of red flags shooting up in my brain and a wave of heat flushing through my body.

"Ah, shite," I muttered under my breath, caught off guard by both the sight of her and my body's explosive reaction to the *sight of her*.

Dropping my gaze, I inhaled a few steadying breaths, desperately trying to regain control of my problematic dick.

"What's wrong?" Gibsie asked, looking around us for the source of my obvious discomfort.

"Nothing," I muttered, running an aggravated hand through my hair. "Let's go."

Gibsie, noticing my obvious *issue*, threw his head back at my reaction and howled laughing.

"Do you have a—holy shit, you *do!*" he choked out through fits of laughter. "And you're blushing!" He clapped me on the shoulder and snorted loudly. "Ah, lad, I love it."

"It's not my fault," I snarled as I thundered off in the direction of the changing rooms, walking like the rhinestone fucking cowboy. "I can't control it these days."

Plowing into the changing rooms, I stripped off my clothes and went straight for the showers with the intention of burning the pain and discomfort out of my system.

It didn't work.

My body was still in excruciating pain and I was still sporting a solid three-quarters.

Dropping my head, I stared down at the lower half of my body and debated my options.

But I couldn't do it. I couldn't touch my own damn dick.

I was too freaked out.

Vivid memories of that horrific trip to the emergency room and the god- awful warnings the doctors had given me at Christmas had officially screwed with my head.

Jesus, I was a goddamn mess.

Leaning my forehead against the tiled wall, I allowed the scalding water to wash over me while I waited what felt like an eternity for my problem to resolve itself, biting down on my knuckles to bury my groans of pain.

Well, if it wasn't clear before that I needed to keep my distance, it certainly was now. I *had* to stay away from that girl.

Christ…

"Feeling better?" Gibsie snickered when I finally walked back into the changing room with a towel around my waist.

We were still alone in here, thank god, since the rest of the team was catching up on laps.

Ignoring the quip, I turned my back to him and dropped my towel.

Before the surgery, I wouldn't have thought twice about walking around bollocks naked in front of anyone. Now, not so much. Because aside from needing to keep my problem on the down-low, I was *self-conscious*. It was yet another new and unwelcome feeling.

I had always been proud of my body. I had been blessed with natural muscle retention and physical strength, and I paid for every ab on my stomach with a grueling training regime. I worked damn hard to keep myself in peak physical condition, but the purple balls, swollen sac, and oozing scar weren't something I wanted anyone to see.

Not even myself.

Which was why I didn’t look down when I pulled on a pair of clean jocks.

In my current state of frantic panic, denial *was* a river in Egypt, and if I just kept plugging on, it would get better, because the alternative was *not* an option.

Giving in was *not* an option. More time off was *not* an option. Missing the summer campaign with the U20s was *not* an option. Losing my spot on the starting squad because of weakness was *not* a fucking option.

Play and slay were my *only* option because I refused to crash and burn at seventeen.

“Are you alright, Johnny?” Gibsie asked, breaking the built-up silence.

His tone, for once, was serious, which was why I responded with a clipped nod.

“Ready to talk about it yet?”

“Talk about what?”

“Whatever the hell it is that’s been driving you demented since we came back from Christmas break.”

“Nothing’s bothering me,” I replied, pulling my school trousers up my thighs. I buckled my belt and reached for my shirt.

“Bullshit,” he countered.

“I’m grand,” I added, quickly snapping my buttons back in place.

“You’ve been like a bear with a sore head since coming back to school after Christmas,” he grumbled. “And don’t tell me it’s because of your surgery because I know there’s more to it—”

My phone began to ring then, distracting us both.

Reaching into my bag, I pulled it out, checked the screen, and then resisted the urge to fling it at the wall.

“Fucking Bella,” I grumbled, canceling the call and tossing my phone back in my bag.

Gibsie grimaced. “What’s going on there?”

“Nothing,” I replied. “It’s done with.”

“Does Bella know that?”

“She should,” I replied flatly. “She’s the one who ended it.”

“Yeah?”

“Yep.” Pinching the bridge of my nose, I exhaled a calming breath before adding, “She’s fucking around with Cormac Ryan now.”

“And you’re okay about it?”

“Don’t give a fuck if I’m being honest, lad,” I replied flatly. “I’m more relieved than anything.”

Gibsie shook his head. “You sure? You were messing around with her for a long time.”

“I was done a long time ago, Gibs,” I admitted. “Trust me, lad, all I want her to do is leave me the hell alone.”

“Well, if that’s true, then it’s the best news I’ve heard all year,” Gibsie declared. “Because I honest to god cannot stomach that girl. She’s a dangerous fucking female. I was half-afraid you’d end up getting her pregnant and we’d be stuck with her for life.”

“No chance of that happening,” I told him as I repressed a shudder. “I always wrap my shit.”

“She’s a needle-in-a-condom type, lad,” Gibsie shot back. “And you’re a shining beacon of light for those girls—with a huge neon euro sign hanging over your head.”

“I pull out,” I shot back. “Always.”

“Every time?”

“Why are you asking me about my sexual health?” I deadpanned.

Gibsie grimaced. “Because she’s *dirty*.”

“Gibs, you don’t say shite like that about a girl,” I warned. “It’s not on.”

“I’m not saying that about just any girl.” He shrugged and added, “I’m saying it about *that* girl.”

“Well, I’m fine,” I bit out. “Had my tests last month and I’m clean as a whistle.”

“Thank god.” He sighed, looking relieved. “Because she—”

“Can we *not* talk about her anymore?” I interrupted, thoroughly sickened at the thought of her. “I’m tired of hearing about her, Gibs.”

“Okay, but let me ask you one more question,” he replied. “Just one and I’ll drop it.”

I sighed wearily and waited for him to speak, knowing that it didn’t matter whether I agreed or not.

Clearing his throat, he asked, “Are you relieved Bella ended whatever the fuck you’d call what you two were doing because you were tired of

Bella?" He studied my face for a few moments before adding, "Or because you're into the girl?"

His question caused me to pause mid-button. "The girl?"

"Yeah, the girl."

"What girl?" I asked, feigning ignorance.

"The fucking girl, Johnny," Gibsie growled, throwing his hands up. "The one you knocked out. The one I took a molesting off Dee for so I could get her file. The one you spend your days swapping gooey eyes with at school."

"Gooey eyes?" Pulling my jumper down over my stomach, I stepped into my shoes. "What the hell are *gooey eyes*?"

"Swooning eyes," Gibsie snapped, exasperated now. "Smoldering gazes. Fuck-me looks. I-want-to-eat-your pussy signals." He shook his head and reached for a can of deodorant out of his gear bag. "Whatever you want to call them."

"You're tapped, Gibs," I announced, deciding on deflection. "Seriously, man, sometimes I really worry about what's going on in that head of yours."

"There's nothing wrong with my head, Kavs. You're the one with the fucked-up eye twitch whenever that girl is about the place." He tossed the deodorant toward me and I caught it midair. "Don't think I haven't copped what's going on there."

"Don't know what you're talking about, lad." I reached under my shirt and sprayed my pits. "My eyes are in perfect working order."

"Your dick's in perfect working order, too," he shot back. He pulled his school jumper over his head and continued. "When that girl's around the place."

I took my time answering him for two reasons.

The first being I didn't want to react on gut instinct and make a show of myself.

The second being I had no goddamn clue what to say.

Remaining silent, I concentrated on tying my shoelaces instead.

"Not going to answer me?" Gibsie probed, grinning.

"There's nothing to say," I bit out, focusing way too hard on making the perfect tie knot. "I'm not talking about her."

"Why not?" he pressed.

"Because I'm bleeding not, Gibs."

“Because you like her,” Gibsie stated.

“Because she’s not up for debate,” I snapped.

“Because you *really* like her,” he corrected. “Because you *want* her.”

I shot him a dirty look and then returned to staring at my shoes.

“I wish you would just admit it, lad,” Gibsie mumbled.

“And I wish you would mind your own fucking business,” I offered sarcastically. “It’s getting old, lad. You don’t hear me giving you shite about your love life.”

The minute the words were out of my mouth, and I saw his eyes light up, I regretted them.

“Ah, so you *are* contemplating getting with her?” Gibsie demanded excitedly, eyes dancing with sheer delight. “I fucking knew it.”

“No,” I corrected. “I’m not.”

“Why not?”

“Because.”

“*Because*?” he pushed.

“Because I’m fucking not, okay?” I barked. “Now drop it.”

“You’re ridiculous,” Gibsie announced, tossing all his shit back into his gear bag. “You overthink everything, man. You talk about my head being messed up, but yours must be a fucking horrible place to be—what with all that overanalyzing you do.”

“Leave it out, Gibs.”

“I just don’t understand what the issue is,” he argued. “I’ve seen the way you look at her. You clearly like Sharon.”

“Her name isn’t *Sharon*.” I shot him a dirty look and then returned to packing up my bag. “It’s *Shannon*, and I don’t like her.”

“That was a trick question.” He grinned. “And you passed with flying colors.”

I grunted my response.

His grin widened even further when he said, “And yeah, you do.”

“No, I fucking don’t.”

“Well, I think you should ask this *Shannon* girl out,” Gibsie added, hauling his bag onto his shoulder. “What’s the worst that could happen?”

“I could get arrested,” I offered sarcastically. “She’s fifteen.”

“No, you could not get arrested,” he scoffed, rolling his eyes. “You’re seventeen, idiot, not seventy!”

“For three more months.” I pulled my jumper on and stood up. “And besides, this conversation is irrelevant.” Picking up my gear bag, I tossed it over my shoulder before adding, “I don’t ask girls out.” I walked over to the changing room door and yanked it open. “I don’t have time for that shite.”

“Hughie’s girlfriend, Katie, is in the year below him,” Gibsie offered, strolling out of the changing room. “And Pierce O’Neill is in our year and he’s been knocking around for ages with Claire’s bitchy gal pal—who is in third year, by the way.”

“Hughie doesn’t have the Academy breathing down his neck,” I replied flatly as I followed him outside. “And Pierce O’Neill can fool around with whoever the fuck he wants.”

“Relax.” Gibsie raised his hands. “All I’m saying is it wouldn’t be a big deal if you liked her.”

“Don’t go there.”

“It’s natural to be attracted to a beautiful girl—”

“Stop it.”

“No one would care if you asked her out.”

“Seriously. Give it a rest.”

“She watches you back, you know.”

“Shut up, Gibsie.”

“I’ve seen her doing it.”

“*Shut up*, Gibsie.”

“In the halls and the—”

“Shut the fuck up, Gibsie!”

“Fine,” he huffed, scowling. “I won’t talk.”

I mentally counted in my head, wondering how long Gibsie could keep his mouth shut, but only got to *seven* when he started back up with his verbal bullshit.

“How are you managing with ejaculating?”

I snapped my head toward him. “*Excuse me*?”

“Ejaculating,” Gibsie clarified, straight-faced. “You seem full of pent-up frustration. I’m just wondering if it’s cock related. You’re wanking, right? I know you were out of action for a while when they sawed at your ball sac, but you’re able to get yourself off again, aren’t you?”

“The fuck?” I gaped at him. “Are these words actually coming out of your mouth?”

He stared back at me with an expectant expression.

Sweet Jesus, he was *serious*.

And he was waiting for me to *answer* him.

When Gibsie realized that I *wasn't* going to answer him, he continued to ramble.

"Oh, lad, it was before your surgery, wasn't it?" He gave me a sympathetic look. "You haven't cum in months. No wonder you're so pissy all the time," Gibsie muttered with a worried frown. "That's why you got hard when yer one Shannon bent over and gave you some bare-ass action. Your poor dick must have thought it was Christmas." Shuddering, he added, "You poor, poor bastard."

"I'm not talking about this with you," I told him as I stalked into the main building. "There are some things in life that we *don't* share, Gibs."

"Well, sue me for being worried about my best friend," he shot back, falling back into step beside me. "Come on, Johnny, I've seen it." *It* being my mangled reproductive parts. "You can talk to me."

"I don't want to talk to you," I barked. "And *never* about this."

"Do you know how detrimental not releasing can be to your balls?" Gibsie exclaimed, deciding to torture me some more. "It's really bad, Johnny. I saw this video on the internet. It was beyond disturbing. The guy's balls just swelled to the point of explos—"

"Stop!" I strangled out. "Please, just *stop*!"

"Fine. Just answer me one question and I'll drop it." Pulling me to a stop, Gibsie placed his hands on my shoulders, looked me dead in the eyes and asked, "Are you fucking yourself?"

Glaring, I shoved his chest and hissed, "Go fuck yourself!"

"I *do*!" Gibsie hissed, eyes wide. "Three times a day. Can *you*?"

"Yeah, I'm not listening to this," I announced, desperately trying to mask my panic as images of exploding ball sacs danced across my mind.

Swinging around, I stalked back down the corridor toward the entrance. I was going the fuck home. To get away from the absolute mental case that was my best friend. And to check on my balls.

"Better out than in, lad!" Gibsie called after me. "Practice makes perfect. Let me know how it goes."

8
Explosive Diarrhea

SHANNON

Saturday was my favorite day of the week for a whole host of reasons.

First: it was the first day of the weekend and the furthest from Monday.

Second: there was no school.

Third and most importantly: it was GAA day.

Joey, Ollie, and Tadhg were always out of the house for most of the day on Saturday with training and matches. Thankfully, that meant my father was out, too, participating in activities not pertaining to alcohol consumption.

What made this particular Saturday better than most was the fact that not only was my father out of the house all day with the boys, but he was heading to his friend's stag party in Waterford tonight. It was with this knowledge, and Mam's permission, that I agreed to go over to Claire's house on Saturday afternoon to hang out with both her and Lizzie.

I had all of my chores completed by three o'clock—which consisted of cleaning the house from top to bottom, putting in half a dozen loads of laundry, and cooking the dinner. And although I had almost had a heart attack when her brother, Hughie, rolled up outside my house with his girlfriend to pick me up, I had managed to compose myself enough to climb into the back of his car and accept the lift to their house. All evening we had stuffed our faces with junk food, watched reruns of *One Tree Hill*, and gossiped about absolute nonsense.

It was the best Saturday I'd had in years.

By seven o'clock, I was bloated and strewn on Claire's bed, suffering from a sugar overload and listening to Lizzie drone on about how much she despised Pierce.

“I don’t know what I ever saw in him,” she grumbled for the hundredth time. “But whatever it was, it wasn’t worth giving him my v-card.”

“Shut the front door!” Claire squealed, jumping up from her perch on my legs to gape at Lizzie. “You had *sex* with Pierce?”

“You’re not a virgin, Lizzie?” My mouth fell open. “But you’re only sixteen.”

“Don’t look at me all judgy,” she grumbled. “Just because you’ve never seen a dick.”

“I haven’t,” Claire offered, holding her hand up. “Not even the tip.”

“Neither have I,” I fully admitted, shaking my head. “I’ve never even kissed a boy.”

“That’s just sad, Shan,” Lizzie retorted.

I flamed beet red.

“Don’t be a bitch,” Claire quipped. “Tell us about it.”

Lizzie shrugged. “What’s to tell?”

“When did it happen?” I asked.

“Thursday.”

“And you didn’t think to tell us?” Claire squeaked. “Oh my god, Liz, we were in school with you all day Friday and you never once mentioned anything!”

Lizzie shrugged but didn’t respond.

Claire and I both eyeballed each other before Claire asked, “Where did it happen?”

“In his car.”

“Ugh,” we both groaned in sympathy.

No girl wanted her first time to happen in the back seat of a car.

“Where?”

“The GAA grounds.”

“Ugh,” we chorused again.

“Yeah,” Lizzie deadpanned. “And word to the wise, girls, don’t give it up.” Settling back on a pillow, Lizzie rested her back against the headboard and picked up her magazine before adding, “It hurts, it’s disappointing, there’s blood, and the boy turns into a complete spanner afterward.”

“He broke up with you?” I gasped.

“I’ll kick his ass,” Claire hissed.

“No,” Lizzie responded. “But he’s been acting all standoffish since.”

“What a fucker,” Claire growled.

“Yep,” Lizzie agreed.

“Did it hurt really bad?” I asked, curious.

“Like a burning-hot poker being rammed in your cooch,” she replied.

Claire and I winced in sympathy.

“Are you okay?” I asked, feeling a deep surge of sympathy for my friend. Lizzie was hard as nails and rarely showed an ounce of emotion, but this was a big deal for any girl.

“I’m always okay, Shan,” was her clipped response.

“See, that is exactly why nothing is going inside my area,” Claire declared with a shudder, flopping back down and resting her head on my legs. “I think I’d die if I saw a penis coming toward me.”

“Claire.” I chuckled. “Stop.”

“She’s serious,” Lizzie informed me. “She’s afraid of the D.”

“It’s true,” Claire stated without an ounce of embarrassment. “I’ve only kissed one boy—Jamie Kelleher. We were going out for six weeks in second year, and when he tried to push my hand down the front of his jeans at the school disco, I screamed at him.”

“You didn’t,” I gasped.

“Oh, she did,” Lizzie replied. “At the top of her lungs. Caused a right scene at the disco.”

“I panicked,” Claire defended, grinning sheepishly. “I didn’t want to touch his penis.”

“What happened?”

“He called me a frigit bitch and broke up with me right there on the dance floor in front of the entire school,” she replied.

“What a creep,” I spat out.

“It’s okay,” Lizzie interjected. “Claire got her own back on him, didn’t you?”

“Not intentionally,” she objected.

“Oh, come off it.” Lizzie rolled her eyes. “You knew exactly what he would do when you went crying to him.”

“Who?” I asked. “What did you do?”

Lizzie smirked. “She went running to her shadow.”

I arched a brow. “Who?”

“Gibsie,” Lizzie filled in.

“Oh my god.” My eyes lit up. “What did he do?”

“What do you think he did?” Lizzie shot back. “He jumped in to defend her honor.”

“He didn’t!”

“He did,” Claire chirped gleefully.

“He broke Jamie’s nose,” Lizzie added.

Claire sighed happily. “It was epic.”

“You could’ve come to me,” Lizzie said. “I would’ve gladly kneed that eejit in the balls on your behalf—”

Claire’s bedroom door burst inward then, startling all three of us.

“Oh my god,” Claire shrieked, tossing a pillow at the tall blond boy who had invaded her privacy.

“I have a problem!” Gibsie announced, catching the pillow midair.

“Gerard!” Claire hissed, glaring. “Have you ever heard of knocking?”

“There’s no time,” he replied. “I need your help, babe.”

“I’m not your babe,” Claire grumbled and tossed another pillow at him. “What if I had been naked in here?”

“Then I would die a happy man,” he retorted as the second pillow smacked against his chest. “It’s the cat.”

She frowned. “Brian?”

“You named your cat *Brian*?” I chuckled.

“He’s not my cat,” Gibsie replied. “I don’t even like cats.”

I frowned. “Then whose is he?”

“My mam’s,” Gibsie replied. “He’s her pride and joy.” He turned back to Claire and said, “He’s had an episode.”

“Another one?” Scrambling off her bed, she adjusted her pajama shorts and padded toward him. “Where?”

“Uh…” Shrugging sheepishly, Gibsie gestured to the door.

“He’s in my house?” Claire squealed.

“Why is your cat in her house?” Lizzie asked the question on everyone’s mind.

“He wasn’t feeling well,” Gibsie replied. “I took him for a walk.”

“You took your cat for a walk?” Lizzie shook her head. “Boy needs institutionalizing.”

“It’s not that strange,” he huffed defensively. “I live across the street.”

“Did you put a leash on him?”

"*Obviously*." Gibsie looked at her like it was the dumbest thing he'd ever heard. "How else was I supposed to walk him over here?"

Lizzie shook her head. "Then I stand by my previous statement."

"Wow, you're a barrel of laughs, aren't ya?" Gibsie shot back sarcastically. "Pierce is a lucky lad."

Lizzie responded by flipping him off.

"Focus," Claire snapped, clicking her fingers in Gibsie's face. "Where is he now?"

"He's in your bathroom." Grimacing, he added, "He's had an accident."

"What *kind* of accident?" Claire growled.

He shrugged sheepishly. "The explosive diarrhea kind?"

"Gerard!" Claire screamed, slapping his huge bicep. "I told you not to bring him over here after the last time."

"I was worried," he groaned, rubbing his arm. "I'm sorry. But you have to help me."

"Ask Hughie to help you," she growled, planting her hands on her hips. "I'm tired of rescuing you."

"I can't," he groaned. "He's dropping Katie home and picking up the lads before we go out."

"So why are you still here?" Lizzie quipped as she flicked through a magazine.

"Hey," I admonished quietly, poking her rib. "Don't be mean."

"Ugh!" Claire growled as she stomped out of the room with Gibsie hot on her heels.

"That boy is an idiot," Lizzie muttered, not looking up from her page. "Our friend is in love with a class-A idiot."

"He's not that bad," I replied and then quickly backpedaled. "Hold on—you think Claire's in *love* with Gibsie?"

Now Lizzie looked at me.

"Isn't it obvious?" she asked. "What girl in her right mind puts up with years of flirting and tormenting if she doesn't have serious feelings for him?"

"Gerard!" Claire screamed at the top of her lungs, distracting us both. "Your cat is shitting in my bathtub!"

"I *know*." Gibsie groaned loudly. "It smells so bad, and he won't *stop*."

“I have to see this,” I snickered, scrambling off the bed. “Are you coming?”

Lizzie shook her head. “Nope. I’ve seen more than enough of their antics to last me a lifetime, thank you very much.”

Shaking my head, I hurried out of the bedroom and across the landing, reaching the bathroom doorway to see a huge, and I mean seriously huge, snow-white Persian cat balancing on the edge of the Biggs family bathtub.

Standing in the doorway, I watched their strange interaction with my hand clasped over my mouth, partially because of the smell, but mostly because it was so funny.

“Brian!” Gibsie was roaring. “What the hell is wrong with you?” He turned on the water and grabbed the showerhead. “God, that’s the worst fucking thing I’ve ever smelled in my life.”

“Yeah, I *know*, Gerard,” Claire hissed, covering her nose and mouth with her hand while using the other to pour bleach into the tub. “I can smell it too, you know.”

“He did this on purpose,” he told her, tone accusing. “Because I put him out of my room last night. He’s punishing me.”

“He’s glaring at you,” she told him.

“I know.” Gibsie shuddered. “Just pick him up and put him in the utility room.”

“He’s glaring at *me* now,” Claire squeaked, scrambling away from the cat.

“He’s trying to intimidate you, babe,” Gibsie coaxed. “Don’t look him in the eyes.”

“Christ, he’s scarier than Mr. Mulcahy,” Claire groaned, shrinking behind Gibsie’s huge frame.

“Just come up from behind him and scoop him up,” he instructed as he held the shower hose in front of them like a weapon. “Keep his paws away from you. Hold him away from your body and run.”

“*I* am not picking him up, Gerard,” Claire hissed, eyes wide. “He looks like he’s two seconds away from murdering me.”

“I’ll protect you,” he vowed valiantly.

“You’re *afraid* of him!”

“Fine, hold this,” he grumbled, passing my friend the hose. “I’ll put the fucker out.”

“Do you think we should hose him down?” Claire asked. “He’s got poo all over his fur.”

“Fuck no,” Gibsie exclaimed. “Last time I tried to clean his ass, he maimed me.”

I laughed out loud.

“It’s not fucking funny, Shannon,” Gibsie grumbled, surprising me by remembering my name. “I had to get a tetanus shot because of him.”

“I’m sorry,” I snickered, clamping a hand over my mouth. “I’m not laughing *at* you, I promise.” I chuckled. “More at the situation.” Studying the furry feline, I added, “He looks like the cat from *Inspector Gadget*.”

“Yeah, well he’s certainly evil enough,” Gibsie replied. “Some nights I wake up and he’s on my bed, standing over me with those evil little eyes.” He shook his head. “They should have never neutered him. He’s been in a homicidal mood ever since. Would have been an easier life to let the poor bastard keep his balls.”

“Go on, Gerard,” Claire coaxed, shoving Gibsie toward the tub. “You can do this. I have every faith in you.”

“Ah fuck, okay! Okay!” With his arms stretched out, Gibsie prowled toward the cat. “Here, kitty, kitty,” he coaxed, reaching over the tub to pick him out. “Good pussy… That’s right… I love pussies… I do… I won’t hurt you—ahhhhh!”

Brian snarled and whacked a paw at Gibsie, who, in turn, screamed like a girl and dove behind Claire.

“Bad fucking pussy,” he choked out, dragging Claire away from the flailing cat, who was hissing and spitting at them both. “Did he get me?” he demanded, thrusting his hand in her face. “I feel like he got me.”

“I don’t know,” Claire screeched, pushing them both into the corner of the bathroom. “But I really hate your cat,” she squeezed out, huddling under his arm.

“Let me help,” I offered, stepping into the danger zone.

Smothering my laughter, I swiped a towel off the handrail and approached with caution.

“Don’t do it, Shannon,” Gibsie warned as he and Claire clung to each other, cowering from the cat. “He’s a bastard with violent tendencies.”

“That’s not true,” I coaxed, crouching down in front of the bathtub, eyes locked on the stunning, albeit lethal cat. “You’re not a bastard, are you,

Brian?” I asked as I reached out and stroked Brian’s head.

Surprisingly, he let me stroke him without fuss.

“Meow,” he croaked out, hackles retracting.

“It’s okay,” I soothed, stroking him in a gentle pattern. “You’re okay.”

“Jesus Christ,” Gibsie breathed. “Your girl here is like the pussy whisperer.”

“Shannon,” Claire squeaked. “Please be careful. He’s vicious. He can turn on you in an instant.”

“Yeah, Shannon,” Gibsie agreed. “Be fucking careful. He only lets my mother and Kav hold him. He’s seriously dangerous.”

“Shh, guys, don’t shout,” I warned when Brian’s hackles shot back up. “You two are making him nervous,” I explained. “He can sense your anxiety and it’s making him lash out.”

I sat there for several more minutes just stroking and petting his face and ears until reaching over and scooping him up.

“Good boy,” I cooed lovingly, holding him to my chest.

Thankfully, I was rewarded with a deep purring noise.

Flicking my gaze to Gibsie, I asked, “How far is your house?”

“Directly across the street,” Gibsie replied.

“Okay.” I continued to stroke Brian. “Do you want me to carry him over to your house for you?”

He nodded gratefully.

I inclined my head toward the door and said, “Lead the way.”

Gibsie scuffled out nervously, keeping a wide berth from me.

Careful not to upset the cat in my arms, I followed him out of the Biggs’ fancy house and across the street to another impressive-looking three-story property.

“You’re a lifesaver, little Shannon,” Gibsie announced when Brian was safely tucked away in his house. “Seriously.”

“You’re welcome,” I replied, feeling shy now that my mission was complete and I was alone with a virtual stranger. “It was no big deal.”

“It was for me.” Gibsie chuckled as he locked the front door and slipped his key back into his jeans pocket. “I’m heading out tonight for birthday drinks, and you just saved my ass from showing up covered in scratches.”

“It’s your birthday?” I asked, falling in step alongside him as we crossed the quiet cul-de-sac road back to Claire’s house. “Today?”

“It is indeed.” Gibsie grinned. “The big one-seven.”

“Oh, well happy seventeenth birthday,” I replied. “I hope you have a great night.”

“Ah, I’m only heading for a few quiet ones with the lads,” he explained as he walked up the garden path. “The big celebrations will happen the end of May.”

“What’s in May?”

“My best friend’s eighteenth,” he told me. Smiling knowingly, he added, “You know him, right? Johnny Kavanagh?”

“Oh.” My face turned a bright shade of red at the mention of Johnny’s name. “Yeah, we’ve met.”

“He’ll have gotten the call up by then,” Gibsie added proudly. “It’ll be a double celebration and a session and a half that night.”

The call up?

What call up?

I wanted to ask him about it, but I held my tongue, knowing that it wouldn’t do me any good. I didn’t need to add any more Johnny-obsessed thoughts into my already Johnny-filled mind.

“He’s coming out with us tonight,” Gibsie continued to ramble on, oblivious to my blushing. “Which is a fucking miracle in itself considering he never comes out with us anymore.” He opened the front door of the Biggs’ house and gestured for me to walk in first. “Hughie’s actually picking Kav and Feely up after dropping Katie home.” Glancing at the clock hanging in the kitchen, he added, “They’ll be here in a few. You should wait around down here and say hi to him.” Winking, he added, “I bet he’d love to see you.”

Was he teasing me?

I didn’t think so. But he was definitely stirring. I just wasn’t sure if it was for my benefit or not.

Either way, I was not staying downstairs to say *hi* to anyone.

“No, that’s okay,” I mumbled, feeling every ounce of blood rush to my face. “The girls are waiting for me.”

“Suit yourself, little Shannon,” Gibsie said, chuckling.

“Happy birthday.” Offering him a weak wave, I turned to bolt up the staircase. “Have a nice night.”

“Will do,” he called after me.

I didn’t have to turn around to see he was grinning; I could hear it in his voice.

9
Birthday Bashes and Broken Glasses

JOHNNY

Pubs and bars were a temptation that I tried to stay away from as much as possible. With my training schedule, I couldn't afford to mess around like my friends did. Alcohol wasn't in my diet and I was always sluggish for days after a session.

However, tonight was Gibsie's seventeenth birthday, so after relentless phone calls and texts, I'd given in and agreed to go out to celebrate with him and some of the team at Biddies.

Biddies was our local haunt in town, and contrary to the name, it was pretty modern with minimal culchies propping up the bar. During the day, Biddies served the best food in town, and at night, it transformed into the hub for the town's younger generation.

I ate there a lot when my folks weren't home. The co-owner and head chef, Liam, was a really decent guy who had no problem with catering to my dietary needs. It was the only place in town I knew I could go to where I was guaranteed to get clean food.

As far as nights out went, I didn't drink there very often—that was more of Gibsie's thing—but when I did, we were guaranteed to get both served and shit-faced.

It was a bad idea considering we both had a club match tomorrow morning, but Gibsie had justified our recklessness by repeating the sentiment that a fella only turns seventeen once.

That was true.

Problem was, it wasn't as easy for me.

The lads could let loose on a night out and go mental if they wanted to. No one except their mothers would judge them in the morning.

If *I* messed up, on the other hand, my name would be publicly dragged through the mud, the rugby heads would be on my case, and my position at the Academy would be in jeopardy.

Which made tonight worse for several reasons.

The first being I was seventeen and had given in to Gibsie's relentless pressure by drinking myself into a semi-paralytic state right along with him. And second, Bella was here.

Both of these were very bad things with a possible disastrous ending.

Within minutes of my arrival at Biddies Bar, it became pretty clear that Cormac wasn't Bella's top priority. The minute I sat down at the table with the lads, she'd made a beeline for my lap and hadn't left since.

I spent most of the night trying to avoid making eye contact with the short skirt she was wearing and the view of that scrap of black lace between her thighs whenever she bent over the table to whisper something in one of her friend's ears.

It physically pained me.

Not because I was having some emotionally charged reaction toward her or anything like that, but because my balls ached.

It wasn't that Bella wasn't an attractive girl. To give her credit, she was probably the best-looking girl in the bar. With black hair styled in a bob, a tall curvaceous body, and a massive pair of tits, she was a serious looker.

The issue was that I was done. I was over it, whatever the hell *it* had been between us, and I had been for a long time. And I wasn't interested in stepping back into the ring for another round.

That didn't seem to make a blind bit of difference to the girl because she was like a dog with a bone.

Me being the bone.

I'd lost count of the number of times I'd gone to the bar for another round just so I could reposition myself in a seat far away from her.

It didn't work.

Her ass always found its way back to my lap, and I just ended up getting drunk faster. No amount of *no* or *not tonight* or *never again* seemed to make a difference. She wouldn't leave me alone.

I didn't want to embarrass or hurt the girl, though. I wasn't a complete prick. Which was why I was tolerating this shite.

By half one, my head was swimming, the alcohol in my veins, mixed with the strong-ass medication I was still taking, making me clumsy and uncoordinated.

On a bright note, I wasn't in pain anymore. I couldn't feel a fucking thing.

Super.

"Do you want to go somewhere else?" Bella purred, leaning close to my ear. Sliding her hand into the opening of my shirt, she trailed her fingers over my collarbone. "Somewhere a little more private?"

"No." Shaking my head, I brushed her hand aside—the one that was tiptoeing up my arm—and reached for the vodka and Red Bull I'd switched to eight pints in. My movements were clumsy, causing my drink to slosh over the rim of the glass and onto the knee of my jeans.

All fucking night she'd been trying to kiss me and pet me, and all night, I'd been turning my head and brushing off her wandering hands.

I wasn't a PDA kind of guy and she knew this.

Sitting on my lap like this wasn't something I would tolerate on a normal night when we were on good terms, and the only reason she hadn't been ejected from my lap by now was because I was drunk as fuck and didn't want to accidentally drop her on the floor and cause damage.

I didn't like this, though. Drunk or not, I didn't appreciate this touchy-feely crap.

"Come on, sexy." Unperturbed by my actions, Bella reached for the collar of my shirt again. "We could always go out to the car?" she suggested, flicking another button open.

It had to be the fourth fucking button she'd managed to undo.

"No, Bella," I grumbled, my words coming out slurred. "Stop doing that." Capturing her hand, I removed it from my shirt and put it back on her lap. "I'm not in the mood."

"I can get you in the mood," she teased, hand moving to my belt buckle.

"Stop." I snagged her hand and placed it firmly on her lap. *Again.* "I'm still recovering—and we're done."

"Oh really?" She slid her hand inside my shirt, ignoring the *we're done* part. "I can change that, too."

“No.” I brushed her other hand away from my crotch, grunting in pain when she roughly palmed my dick. “Bella, stop—” I paused to shake off the hand curling around the back of my neck. “Please just *stop*.”

Jesus Christ, if *I* kept touching *her* after she’d told me to stop, there would be war.

Double fucking standards.

“Stop?” Bella snapped, glaring at me.

“Yes.” Setting her hand back down on her thigh, I shifted out from beneath her. “I’m tired.”

“You’re always tired, Johnny!” she bit out. “And you’re never in the mood anymore.”

I wonder fucking why, I thought to myself, but made no move to answer her. I was careful with my words around girls. They could—and would—be misconstrued to her advantage.

Drunk as I was, I remembered exactly what I had been taught at the Academy, and this girl wasn’t going to get a rise out of me.

Not tonight, Satan.

Shrugging, I cast a bleary gaze around our table.

Our friends were watching. No surprises there.

My gaze landed on Gibsie and I gave him my best *you’re a fucking bastard* glare.

His returning grimace was an apologetic one.

“Don’t ignore me when I’m talking to you,” Bella demanded, voice high and pitchy, letting me know, even in my drunken state, that she was in worse condition.

“I’m not ignoring you,” I replied, trying to remain calm through the haziness.

“Yes,” she hissed, voice rising. “You are!”

“No, Bella.” I released a weary sigh. “I’m not.”

“Fine.” Cupping my face with both her hands, Bella dragged my face down to hers, pressing her mouth to mine. “Then prove it,” she growled before smashing her lips to mine.

Because of the alcohol coursing through my veins, it took me an extra few seconds to register what was happening. The feel of her tongue sliding against my lips was like a douse of water.

I jerked my head away, but she had a death grip on my hair, keeping my lips on hers.

Temper rising, I stood abruptly, knocking the table in the process, and thankfully freeing myself from her hold.

Drinks smashed to the floor, glass shattering around us, drawing the whole room's attention to our table.

"What the fuck, Johnny!" Bella screeched, glaring up at me from her seat. "What's your *problem*?"

"When I tell you no," I growled, wiping the back of my mouth as I glared down at her, "I fucking mean *no*!"

"I just wanted you to kiss me," she screamed. "Is that too much to ask?"

"I *don't* want to fucking kiss you!" I roared back, losing control of my temper. "I *don't* want your mouth on mine. I *don't* want your hands on my body. Because I *don't* fucking want *you*!"

I regretted my words immediately. But it was too late.

Bella burst into tears, and of course, I was the bastard who made her cry.

Dirty looks from half a dozen girls at the table were all directed at me and I was done for the night.

Releasing a low growl, I ran my hand through my hair and staggered out of the barmaid's way as she shoved past me with a dustpan and brush.

Stalking outside, I dragged my phone out of my jeans pocket and called for a taxi, relieved as hell when the voice on the other end said, "Five minutes."

I needed out of here and far away from my poor decisions. The poorest of those being that dangerous fucking girl I'd tangled myself up with.

In this moment, I was glad my body was broken. I was glad that I hadn't been able to have sex since Halloween.

Maybe it was fate?

Without my cock blinding my ability to make good choices in lieu of pussy, I was able to see through Bella's facade. And it wasn't pretty.

Knowing that I would rather peel my skin off than touch her again gave me some semblance of comfort.

Never again, Johnny.

Never a-fucking-again, lad.

Leaning against the wall of the pub, I allowed my thoughts to wander back to those lonesome eyes.

I wanted to see those eyes. And the girl they belonged to.

The alcohol running through my veins provided a block on my conscience, making it easier for me to obsess about Shannon Lynch without feeling like a piece of shite.

Tomorrow, when I woke up with a clear head, I would no doubt feel every ounce of the implications of my wayward thoughts, but for now, while I was temporarily void of a moral compass, I envisioned all the terrible fantasies in great colorful detail.

It was nice.

She was nice to think about. She was fucking beautiful.

Her voice. Her hair. Her smell.

The way she spoke.

Every single part of her.

I was deep in thought, contemplating how different it would have been had it been Shannon who put her mouth on me, when the sound of the taxi honking distracted me.

“Johnny, lad,” the taxi driver, whose name I never seemed to be able to remember, called out in a happy tone. “How’s it going?” To be fair, on the rare occasion our paths had crossed, I had been drunk off my tits. “Your pal not with you tonight?”

By pal, he meant Gibsie. Because Gibsie was usually the influencer behind terrible decisions like the one I made tonight.

“He’s still inside,” I explained, using every ounce of concentration to not stagger as I pushed off the wall. “Thanks for coming so fast, man.”

“Like I’d leave you here, boyo,” he chuckled. “Don’t forget your old friend Paddy when you’re up in the big smoke with the big boys.”

I couldn’t remember my old friend Paddy *now*, but I wasn’t about to tell him that.

“Johnny—wait up, lad!” Hughie Biggs called out as he stumbled out of the pub toward me. Grabbing my arm, he pulled me to a stop. “You’ll have to take us with you.”

“Who’s *us*?” I replied slowly. “If you’re talking about that crazy fucking girl, then forget it, Hughie. She’s not my responsibility, and I’d rather cut my cock off than go back inside and deal with her.”

“Who—Bella?” Hughie frowned and shook his head. “No, man. Fuck her. She’s already gone back to Cormac. He was hiding in the lounge all night. Didn’t come out until you were gone, the coward.” He dragged me over to the window and pointed inside. “You can’t leave *them* here.”

My gaze flicked from Hughie to Gibsie, who was currently facedown on the table, snoring his head off, to Patrick Feely, who was being molested by one of Bella’s friends, to Bella, who was dry-humping Cormac Ryan, and then back to Hughie.

“Why me?” I groaned.

“Because we’re your babies,” Hughie announced, leaning his weight on me.

“My babies?” I slurred. “How the fuck are you three anyone’s babies?”

“You’re our captain,” Hughie slurred. “We’re kind of your responsibility.”

“On the pitch, ya gobshite.”

“Come on, Cap, you’re the one with the empty house. You know Feely’s mother will lose her shit if he goes home in this condition, and my mam won’t let us through the front. And Gibs—” He gestured a thumb to the window. “He’s as good as your brother, lad.”

All unfortunate truths.

“You’re a bunch of bleeding eejits is what ye are,” I grumbled before relenting. “Fine.” I ran a hand through my hair and sighed. “Get them. I’m going now.”

“You absolute legend, Kavanagh,” Hughie praised as he staggered back into the pub to get the lads.

On any other occasion, I would offer to help him. Gibs was a handful after drink, but I’d sooner walk over hot coals than go back inside and face Bella.

“Sorry about this, Paddy,” I mumbled, wandering over to lean against the taxi while I waited for the three fucking stooges to come out of the bar. “I thought I’d be alone.”

“No worries, boyo,” the plump little man replied. “Any friend of Johnny Kavanagh’s is a friend of mine.”

“Yeah? Well, my friends are assholes,” I admitted with a shrug.

And partial to puking. In taxis…

“Paddy—” Scratching the back of my head I turned to look at him, my mind set on potential damage control. “Remind me to drop you off a couple of tickets to one of our home games in the summer, if you’re interested.”

“Jesus, Johnny, are you serious?” The taxi driver’s eyes lit up. “I’d be delighted, boyo. Thrilled to pieces. I watch all your matches. I even get my daughter to live stream the ones not aired on the telly. I’m always telling my wife that young Kavanagh is the best I’ve ever seen wearing the green thirteen.”

I shrugged off his words, knowing that at seventeen years old I should be rattled to hear a man more than three times my age giving me such high praise, but I had heard those exact words so many times that the compliment ran off me like water off a duck.

“Appreciate the support, man,” I replied. “You have my number on your call list. Just send me a text to remind me because I’m drunk as fuck right now and won’t remember a word of this in the morning.”

“Will do,” Paddy replied. “And not to be overstepping the line here, but you’re well rid of that girl.”

I frowned at him, mentally racking my head for a time in history when I’d been foolish enough to take her home with me. That’s the only way the taxi driver would know.

In the fogginess of my mind, I vaguely remembered a night out over Halloween break last year when Bella had thrown a huge tantrum outside the pub because I refused to take her home in the taxi to my house.

It was one of the last times I’d been with her.

“The one your pal was talking about,” he explained. “She’s bad news for a lad like you.” Tapping his temple, he added, “Trust old Paddy, lad. Girls like that one are takers.”

He had that right.

Fucking hell.

Hughie and Feely staggered out of the bar carting Gibsie, who was singing his own rendition of Aqua’s “Doctor Jones” at the top of his lungs.

I shook my head at the sight of him.

“Nobody,” I slurred as I walked over and took his weight from the lads. “And I mean *nobody*, would ever trust that you’re a doctor, Gibs.”

“Your future wife saved me from a bad fucking pussy today,” he slurred. “Buy a ring, lad.” Slinging an arm over my shoulder, he added,

“Pussy whisperer’s a keeper.”

Frowning, I looked to Hughie who stared in confusion right back at me.

“How much did you drink, lad?” I asked Gibsie as I wrestled to keep him in one place.

He had a habit of scampering off when he was drunk.

“Enough,” Gibsie slurred before bursting back into the chorus of the song, stamping his feet on the footpath for emphasis.

“Yeah, yeah, fucker,” I coaxed as I half carried him to the taxi. “You’re a doctor.”

“With no standards,” he held up a finger and declared before falling into the back seat of the car.

“Never thought you had,” I agreed, climbing in alongside him to buckle the eejit up.

“How’ya, Paddy?” Gibsie paused midsong to acknowledge the taxi driver. “To the Kavanagh manor,” he added before diving right back into song.

Fucking Gibsie.

“What’s the story with you and Bella?” Hughie asked.

We were sitting on the front porch of the house, wrapping up the night with a bottle of Jameson. Whiskey was a terrible way to end the night, but a much needed one since we’d spent the past three hours taking turns babysitting Gibsie and his upchuck reflux.

Fucker had projectile vomited all over the spare bedroom and was currently being housed in the downstairs bathtub with half a dozen towels thrown over him. Thankfully, his stomach was finally empty and he was snoring soundly.

Hughie and I were the only two still awake, with Patrick passing out on the couch in the living room the minute we got home.

“There’s no story, lad,” I said, rolling my half-empty glass between my hands.

“I presume you’ve heard the rumor?” he asked, tone cautious and slightly slurred.

I exhaled heavily. “Which one?”

“About her and Cormac?”

“Don’t need to hear any rumors to know what’s happening there, lad,” I grunted. “Saw it with my own eyes tonight.”

“No,” Hughie said slowly. “The one where she went home with Cormac on St. Stephen’s night.” Grimacing, he added, “And every weekend since.”

“No,” I deadpanned. “I didn’t know.”

“I would’ve said something, but you were just out of the hospital.” He sighed heavily. “I didn’t want her messing with your recovery.”

“Don’t worry about it, lad.” Swirling the whiskey around in my glass, I stared down at the amber liquid and admitted the truth. “I already had my suspicions long before then.”

“Yeah?” He arched a brow. “Why didn’t you say something?”

“Because I wanted a quiet life?” I offered weakly. “I’m a fucking eejit, lad.”

“Ryan’s the eejit,” Hughie corrected. “Fucking over his teammate for a girl.”

Too drunk to feign impassiveness or mask my emotions, I dropped my head and released a heavy sigh.

“I made a mistake with that girl, Hugh.” Raising my glass to my lips, I chugged back the remaining amber liquid before adding, “An eight-month-long mistake.”

“At least you got out unscathed, Cap.” Reaching between us, he grabbed the half-empty bottle of whiskey and refilled his glass. “Could have been a nine-month mistake,” he added, holding the bottle out for me. “With an eighteen-to-life price tag.”

“You can say that again,” I muttered in agreement, taking the bottle. “Can you imagine what Dennehy and O’Brien would have done to me if I rolled up to training with a baby?”

“Screw your coaches at the Academy,” Hughie countered. “Imagine what your *mother* would have done to you.”

“Shite, lad, it doesn’t bear thinking about.” Filling my glass up, I placed the bottle back down and shook my head. “Ugh.”

“Lad, can you imagine what *my* mother would say if I walked in the door with Katie and told her I got her pregnant?” Hughie slurred. “She’d cut my bollocks off there and then.”

“Stop, lad.” I shuddered violently. “Don’t even talk about it.”

We both knocked the wooden porch beams to unjinx ourselves.

Several minutes passed by in companionable silence before Hughie spoke again.

“Did you ever talk to Shannon Lynch after that day on the pitch?”

I turned my bleary gaze on him, too drunk to mask my curiosity. “My Shannon?”

Hughie laughed. “She’s *your* Shannon now?”

I shrugged, too drunk to defend or deny.

“Gotta say, lad, I was relieved when you called the team on the pitch incident and nipped it in the bud,” Hughie said with a heavy sigh. “If you hadn’t, I would have. Poor girl deserves a break.”

I frowned. “You know her?”

“She’s been friends with my sister since they were small.”

“Claire,” I filled in, racking my brain for the information I needed. “The blond one in third year.”

“Yeah, lad.” Hughie took another sip from his glass before saying, “She was over at the house today, actually.”

“What?” I looked at him. “You never said.”

He shrugged. “Why would I?”

Good point.

“Lovely girl,” he added thoughtfully. “Horrible family.”

“What do you mean?”

Hughie shook his head but didn’t reply.

That bothered me for a whole host of different reasons. I didn’t like him knowing things about her that I didn’t.

“I’m going to go check on Precious in the bath,” he announced when he finished his glass. “And then I’m putting my head down for the night.”

“Take whatever room you want,” I mumbled, deep in thought.

Hughie placed a hand on my shoulder.

“Keep looking out for her, Cap,” he said, squeezing my shoulder. “God knows someone needs to.”

And then he was gone.

10
Boy’s Gonna Shine

SHANNON

On the last Friday in February, Tommen College was playing rival school Kilbeg Prep on the school grounds for the School Boy Shield. Because it was one of the few home games of the season left, and a prestigious cup to win, all classes were invited to attend to support their team.

According to Claire, the School Boy Shield that was up for grabs today was nowhere near as important or lucrative as the league cup the team would be playing for next month in Donegal, but it was still pretty silverware and Tommen *loved* silverware.

It didn’t take me very long at Tommen to realize that what my father had said about the school being a glorified rugby prep school was true. It was plain to see that everything revolved around the sport.

Personally, I could have thought of a million places I would have preferred to be than watching oversized boys from Tommen bulldoze their way through oversized boys from Kilbeg, but life had a funny way of screwing with a person.

Wrapped up in my winter coat and a woolly hat, I sat between Lizzie and Claire—who was draped in our school’s colors—grateful to have snagged a seat in the stands.

Hundreds of other students had to stand along either side of the pitch. Not that any of them seemed to care about standing in the pouring rain. They were too busy screaming and cheering on our school’s senior rugby team.

Ten minutes into the game, I witnessed firsthand what all the fuss over Johnny Kavanagh was about.

I could literally feel the electricity crackling in the air when the ball was in his hands, and from the sounds of screaming, so did everyone else.

He seemed to be completely at home on the pitch, and when they got that ball in his hands?

Magic occurred. Beautiful things happened.

He was so tall it didn't make sense for him to be so light on his feet. He was broad and strong, thick and muscular. But he was also light and nimble. It was almost like he danced around the opposition with fancy legwork and agile body movements. He had some crazy pace, and the way he could sprint, it was *insane*.

He was unbelievable to watch.

You could see the wheels of his brain in motion as he scoped out every play, pass, and attack with expert precision.

He was an intelligent player with a keen eye for intercepting play and self-discipline that seemed to rival a saint. It didn't seem to matter how much he was knocked around or targeted by the opposition—and he was *clearly* targeted—he managed to keep his cool. The hits he took, the physical attacks on his body, and he just got back up and kept going.

I was in awe.

The way he moved on the pitch was extraordinary, and I found myself entranced by it.

No wonder everyone talks about him, I thought to myself.

He was clearly *miles ahead* of the boys he was playing alongside, and I thought he deserved to be on a more prestigious playing field. If he could play like this at seventeen, I could only imagine what a few years would do for his game.

"Yes, Hughie!" Claire cheered, distracting me from my thoughts when her brother, Tommen's number 10, kicked the ball over the sideline. The ball managed to touch off the opposition's fingers before going out of play. "Yes!" Claire hooted, thrusting a fist in the air. "Good job, guys!"

"What's happening now?" I asked, unsure why she was cheering when her brother had obviously kicked the ball wide. "Is this good for Tommen?"

It was clear that she was as much into the game as I was, considering she'd spent the last fifty minutes rotating between explaining the rules to me and screaming profanities at the top of her lungs.

Her explanations went clean over my head, my nerves too frazzled to take in anything more than the bare basics that I already knew from

watching the Six Nations every year, but I pretended that I understood for her sake.

“This isn’t football, Shan,” she said, laughing. “That’s an excellent play. It’s our line out.”

“Line out?”

“Watch,” she encouraged and then began to scream her head off when Tommen’s number 2 threw the ball and Gibsie, who was wearing number 7, was thrust into the air by his teammates and caught the ball midair.

“Yes!” Claire cheered, clapping like a demented seal. “Go on, Gerard!”

It sounded funny hearing Claire call him Gerard when everyone else around us was cheering the name Gibsie. Literally, *no one* called him Gerard except for Claire.

The ball came whizzing out the field then and into the hands of Johnny, and my heart leaped. My pulse instantly sped up at the sight of him on the move.

“Oh my god!” I screeched, heart racing erratically in my chest, when four of Kilbeg’s forwards tackled Johnny to the ground, burying him beneath a mountain of muscle and deadweight. “Are they allowed to do that?”

Limbs were flying, football boots digging into the crumpled-up heap beneath the ruck. I watched the antics unfold on the pitch.

“They’re trying to murder him,” I screamed, unable to believe what I was witnessing. “Holy shit.” Clutching both girls’ arms, I squeezed tightly. “Is that illegal?”

“Don’t ask me about it,” Lizzie replied with a shrug. Disengaging her arm from my hand, she returned to flicking through her magazine. “I could think of a million better things I could be doing with my time than sitting here pretending to cheer on a sport I couldn’t care less about.”

At least she was honest.

I had thought I would feel the same; however, *he* was playing and I was reluctantly mesmerized.

“They are clearly targeting him,” I growled, watching as the referee blew his whistle and jogged over to the now pileup of boys.

“*Of course* they’re targeting him,” Claire chimed in, squeezing my hand back. “Johnny is Tommen’s best player. Take him out and the game is freed up,” she continued to say. “They’d be fools not to try.”

I wanted to scream, *Leave him alone!* at the top of my lungs but I settled for, “That’s horrible,” instead, as an overwhelming amount of concern for him filled my chest.

“That’s rugby,” Claire agreed.

“I hate rugby,” Lizzie offered up.

“No one cares about what you hate, Little Miss Pessimist,” Claire shot back. “Go back to your horoscopes.”

Claire and Lizzie bickered back and forth for a few minutes, before Lizzie stomped off in a huff, muttering something about needing to save her brain cells, but I wasn’t really listening to either of them.

I was absorbed in the antics on the field where the team medic was fussing around Johnny, poking and prodding his face with gauze and bandages.

His black-and-white-striped jersey with the number 13 on the back was sewn to his skin; the white shorts he had on were grass stained and specked with blood. Both of his knees were caked in mud. His hair was ruffled and slick from sweat. One of his eyes was turning purple and swelling at a rapid pace, and he had a steady trail of blood flowing down his eyebrow, but it didn’t seem to faze him one bit.

Johnny’s attention wasn’t on the medic or the referee shouting commands in his ear. He was too busy looking at *me*.

My heart slammed against my rib cage as he stared unabashedly and unashamedly right at *me*—eyes burning with heat, expression palpably intense.

Breathing hard, he lifted the hem of his jersey and used the fabric to wipe the blood from his brow, dismantling the poor woman’s attempts at patching him up and revealing a stomach of hard abs.

The move was so primal, so decidedly male, that it hit me straight in the chest. My face began to flame and I felt my shoulders sag as I buckled under the weight of his intense gaze.

“*What* the hell is *that*?” Claire hissed excitedly, gripping my hand. “Johnny Kavanagh is staring at you, Shan. Like seriously, girl, that boy is *staring* at you!”

“Crap.” Unsure of what to do, but knowing that I needed to do something, I turned my face into Claire’s neck and hissed, “Hide me.”

“What?” she squeaked.

“Just tell me when he’s gone, okay?” I begged, focusing my attention on the freckle on her neck. “Pretend you’re talking to me or something.”

Less than a minute later, Claire said, “Okay, he’s gone.”

Blowing out a breath, I turned back in time to watch Johnny running back into position as the referee called for a Tommen scrum.

“What’s going on with you two?” she demanded. “I thought you said you haven’t spoken to him since that day in the office.”

“Nothing is going on with us,” I shot back, cheeks burning. “And *I haven’t.*”

Claire gave me a disbelieving look. “Well, that look he just gave you didn’t seem like nothing to me.”

“It *was* nothing,” I assured her—and myself. “Seriously, Claire, I don’t even know the guy—”

Loud booing and jeering erupted around us then, and we both turned to see Kilbeg’s number 15 had scored a try. Their number 10 converted easily, bringing the teams level.

“Oh crap,” I muttered, feeling far more anxious than I should. “How much time is left?”

“About a minute and a half, and don’t think we’re not talking about this later,” Claire told me before turning her attention back to the game and screaming, “Come on, Tommen! Woo! Kilbeg—you’re total shit!”

Kilbeg won the restart, gaining possession of the ball and gaining several yards.

Both teams looked completely exhausted with the exception of Speedy Gonzalez—a.k.a. Johnny Kavanagh—who seemed to have an unlimited tank of energy.

My palms began to sweat profusely when Kilbeg’s number 10 moved into position between the posts, falling into range for a dropkick at goal.

They were at nineteen phases and the score was tied up at twenty points apiece. At least that’s what Claire said.

“This is it,” Claire kept screeching. “This is it. This is it. Oh god. I can’t look.”

I held my breath, unable to cope with the anticipation.

Finally, Kilbeg’s number 9 positioned himself at the ruck—the word I had learned for the big pileup on the grass. With the ball in his hands, he threw a pass back to their number 10.

My heart stopped.

The supporters in the stands around me all went quiet.

Miss it.

Miss it.

Fuck it up.

Go wide.

All of my prayers were answered when the ball left his boot and was blocked down by Johnny, sending the ball flying upward in the direction of their goal line.

The clock ran down, falling into the red.

“Yes!” Claire screamed, jumping to her feet, along with every other supporter on the sidelines. “Go on, Johnny! Come on, Kavs!”

Unable to breathe, I watched as three Kilbeg backs hunted after him. They weren’t fast enough, though.

Like a bolt of lightning, Johnny chased down his interception, moving faster than any boy his size should be able to. Cheers and screams and roars of encouragement erupted from the stands when Johnny kicked the ball forward, nudging it closer to the try line as he ran at top speed after it.

“Go on!” Claire roared excitedly. “Yes! You’re almost there. Keep going. Move those sexy legs!”

The ball rolled over the line.

Milliseconds later, Johnny pounced, outstretching the Kilbeg backs who were hot on his heels. A blur of movement resulted in Johnny grounding the ball into touch.

Everyone around us went *insane*.

Tommen’s number 10 moved into position in front of the posts and quickly kicked the conversion over, securing the two points.

And that was it. It was over.

Tommen had won. And I was reeling.

“You have some explaining to do, missy,” Claire squealed as she bounced up and down in celebration. “Woo-hoo! Go, Tommen, go!”

“Explaining?” I called back. “About what?”

“About why that boy down there is looking at you like he wants to eat you up,” she replied, and then pointed a blatantly obvious finger right at Johnny—who was staring right at me again.

“I don’t know,” I choked out. “I have no idea what’s happening here.”

All of his teammates were running around like lunatics, leaping and jumping around in celebration, and Johnny looked distracted.

He was quite literally swamped by people, ranging from teachers to students to local journalists and cameramen with microphones thrust in his face.

The thing that stood out was his immaculate composure. None of this was fazing him. Not one bit. He looked the epitome of cool, calm, and collected as he answered reporters and thanked the supporters clapping his shoulders, but every few moments, his gaze flickered back to me.

I didn't understand it.

Worse, having his attention *thrilled* me.

"Why are they flocking to him?" I asked in confusion, feeling bad for the other guys on the team.

Claire rolled her eyes. "Ah, because he's *Johnny Kavanagh*."

"So?"

I didn't get it.

"Come on," she squealed, and then grabbed my hand, quite literally dragging me down through the stands and onto the pitch.

We might not have looked out of place, what with half the school out on the pitch, but I certainly felt it as I shuffled along awkwardly behind her.

"Hughie!" Claire cried out, running over to throw her arms around her big brother. "You were amazing."

"Cheers, sis," he replied, patting her back as he searched through the crowds.

Obviously finding what he was looking for in the form of a tiny redhead, Hughie quickly set his sister aside and hurried off in the direction of her.

"I want that," Claire sighed, watching her brother pick his girlfriend up and swing her around. "Obviously not with my brother," she grimaced. "But what they have." She sighed again. "I want that someday."

"Claire-Bear!" a familiar voice called out.

Claire spun around and I swear her entire face lit up when she noticed Gibsie jogging toward us.

"You did it!" she screamed and then flung herself at him.

He seemed as excited as she did and caught her.

I watched them for several minutes, swinging each other around, completely caught up in their own bubble as they talked animatedly about different points in the game. Either Claire was clueless, Gibsie was clueless, or they were both as blind as each other because I could feel, see, and taste the chemistry wafting off them.

Feeling awkward and out of place, I shoved my hands in my coat pockets and quickly turned around, slipping through a mass of Tommen supporters.

I was familiar with match day. I'd been to enough of Joey's games. This was different, though. And I felt like an intruder.

"Hey—" I heard an achingly familiar voice call out, distracting me from my thoughts. "Wait up!"

Basic human nature had me swinging around to see who was calling out and if it was directed at me. When my eyes landed on Johnny jogging toward me, my heart thundered against my rib cage, hammering violently.

Oh my god. What was he doing? Why was he coming over to me? What the hell was happening?

"How's it going?" Johnny asked, closing the space between us, voice understandably breathless from the exertion on the pitch.

"Uh, it's, ah, it's going good," I stumbled over my words, completely thrown off-kilter being this close to Johnny again. "Is it good for you?" I added lamely, and then immediately flamed in embarrassment. "You must feel good." Sighing, I repressed the urge to groan and finished with a mumbled, "I mean, how's it going *for you*…?"

"It's going good," Johnny replied with a smile that deepened the two tiny dimples in his cheeks.

It was my first time seeing those dimples and my memory soaked them in like a *sponge*.

"That's good," I breathed, struggling to focus.

Unlike the last time I was up close to him—when I was seeing stars—or in the hallways when he was a blur of movement or too far away to get a good look, I had a clear, concussion-free, unobstructed view of his face.

And boy was that view a breathtaking one.

Like, for real, he was strikingly, achingly, distractingly attractive.

He had remarkable bone structure with high cheekbones and a strong jaw, swollen lips, and a messy mop of dark-brown hair that was shaved

stylishly at the sides, with that extra bit of length on top.

His face bore the markings of a boy that had been in many a fight. Over his left eyebrow was a freshly clotting scar, his nose had clearly been broken a time or two, and his right cheekbone was purpling at a rapid pace.

"You remember who I am, right?" he asked, still smiling, although he looked a little nervous now, probably because I was staring at him like a creeper. "Shannon *like the river*."

Oh god.

"Yeah," I choked out, feeling every ounce of blood in my body rush to my cheeks as I tucked a loose strand of hair behind my ear. "I remember you." Unsure of what else to say or do, I stupidly raised a hand and waved. "Hi, Johnny."

What was wrong with me? Seriously? Did I just *wave* at him? While I was talking to him?

God…

The smile he was sporting grew into a full, perfectly straight pearly-white smile. "Hi, Shannon."

Oh crackers…

"Well, I'm good," I said, tone a little strained. "And you're good. So, it's all…good."

"That's good," he replied, lips twitching.

"Yeah, it's all good," I answered, cringing at my awkwardness.

Johnny smirked down at me. "*Good*."

Mortified, I looked up at his face and then quickly away again as I strived to never utter the word *good* again.

"I watched your match," I blurted out instead. "Congratulations."

Oh yeah, Shannon, because that's much better. You should have stuck with good, *idiot!*

"I know," Johnny replied with a small smile. "I saw you."

I opened my mouth to say something, anything to save myself, but I came up empty and shrugged helplessly instead.

"Did you get my note?" Johnny asked, thankfully saving me from trying to form a coherent sentence.

"Yeah, and I wanted to thank you for the money," I told him, voice small. "I just didn't know if I should—"

“Don’t worry about it,” he interrupted with a smile. “I didn’t expect a thank-you.”

“It’s too much, by the way,” I quickly added, tucking my hair behind my ear. “My mother got a new skirt for thirty euro.”

“I hope she got you those tights you wanted,” he countered with a knowing grin.

Oh, dear god.

That boy’s smile is something else…

“Uh, yeah.” I blushed scarlet. “Those were only a fiver.” Sliding my hands into my coat pockets, I looked down at my shoes, inhaled a shaky breath, and then faced him once again. “I can pay you back the rest of it—”

“No way.” Johnny quickly dismissed that, wiping a speck of mud off his cheek. “Keep it.”

“*Keep it*?” I stared blankly. “You don’t want sixty-five euro back?”

“I hurt you,” he replied, his intense blue eyes locked on mine. “I fucked up. You’re not paying me back anything.”

Oh, thank god because my parents would never give me the money back.

“Are you sure?” I croaked out.

Johnny nodded and said, “Yeah, ’course,” before following it up with, “How’s the head?”

I smiled up at him. “All better.”

“You sure?” he asked, smirking now. “No residual damage that might land me in trouble? I don’t need to call in the lawyers, do I?”

“W-what?” I gaped. “No, no. I’m fine. I would never sue you—”

“I’m messing with you, Shannon.” Johnny chuckled. Shaking his head, he added, “I’m really glad you’re okay.”

“Oh, okay.” I flushed. “Thanks.”

“Johnny!” a booming male voice called out, distracting us both.

I turned my head to see a burly man sauntering toward us with an impressive-looking camera strapped to his neck.

“Give us a picture for the paper, will ya, son?”

I was fairly sure I heard Johnny mutter the words *fuck off* under his breath but he turned to the photographer and gave him a polite nod. “No problem.”

“Good man yourself,” the photographer praised and pointed the camera at Johnny, only to halt and turn to me. “Move out the way, will ya, love?”

“Oh, right, sorry!” I squeaked and scrambled to back out of the line of the lens.

“We were talking,” Johnny bit out. He cast a scathing glare at the photographer and then walked right over to me.

“Smile,” he instructed quietly as he pulled me in to his side and clamped his huge muddy hand on my hip.

Stunned, I stared up at him. “Huh?”

“Smile,” Johnny repeated calmly, tucking me under his arm.

Frazzled, I turned back to face the photographer and did exactly what Johnny told me to do.

I beamed.

The photographer arched a brow and gave me a curious look, but quickly hurried to snap what felt like a million snaps. The flashes coming from his camera were blinding, and when they were joined by many more flashes from other photographers, I began to shake with anxiety.

What the hell was happening?

“Alright, that’s enough,” Johnny declared as he held a hand up and released my hip. “Thanks for coming out today. Appreciate the support.”

“Johnny, Johnny?” one of the women crowding us called out. “What’s your relationship?”

“Private,” Johnny shot back coolly.

“What’s your name, love?” the original photographer asked, as he pulled a pen out of his coat pocket.

Trembling, I just stood there, feeling like a dummy, feeling a million pairs of curious eyes on my face.

“Shannon Lynch,” Johnny stated with a clipped nod, and then, ignoring the half dozen photographers watching us, he turned his attention back to me. “Are you coming to the party after school?”

“What are they doing?” I asked uncertainly, unable to focus on what he just said, because I was too busy eyeing the photographer writing something on the back of his hand and several other reporters skulking nearby.

“Ignore them,” Johnny said with a shake of his head. “They’ll go away.”

“They’re watching you,” I whispered. “And I think they’re watching *me*?”

Releasing a frustrated growl, Johnny turned around. “I’m at *school*,” he stated in a sharp tone. “On school grounds. With a minor.”

Thankfully, that seemed to do the trick because they slowly dispersed.

“That was so strange,” I strangled out when Johnny faced me again.

He eyed me curiously. “You don’t like that sort of thing?”

“That was horrible,” I choked out. “All that attention over a silly game.”

Johnny gave me another curious look.

I stared back at him, feeling totally confused.

“So, are you coming?” Johnny asked.

When I continued to stare blankly at him, he clarified.

“To the party. Hughie’s ma is throwing on a spread for the team at their house.”

“Me?”

“Yes, you,” he replied, giving me a peculiar look.

My heart rate increased to a dangerous level as I stared up at this beautiful boy who was asking me to a party. Wait, was he asking me, or inviting me?

Oh god, I didn’t know.

Frowning, Johnny added, “You’re friends with his sister, Claire, aren’t you?”

“Oh.” I shook my head vigorously. “Oh, ah, no, I’m not. I mean, yes, I *am* friends with Claire, but I’m not going to the party.”

He arched a brow. “How come?”

“Because I’m not allowed to go anywhe—” I stopped myself short and quickly steered my words in a safer direction. “I have to help my mam in the evenings.”

“She’s pregnant,” he stated in a thoughtful tone.

“Yep,” I replied and then, because I was a glutton for making a situation uncomfortable, I added, “She’s due in August.”

“Congratulations?” Johnny offered, shifting uncomfortably.

Nice work, Shannon, I mentally hissed.

“Thanks,” I replied, squirming.

“Are you sure you don’t want to come?” he asked then. “I won’t be drinking so I can give you a spin home when you want to go—”

“Cap,” one of his teammates called out then. “Get your ass over here, lad, and lift this fucking cup.”

“I’m fucking talking here, Pierce,” Johnny snapped, turning around to glare at whoever was calling him. “Give me a bleeding minute.”

“Your friends are calling you,” I hurried to say, knowing that I needed to get away from this boy before I did something incredibly stupid like accept his invitation.

Because I wanted to. I really, *really* wanted to. And if I stayed here and kept looking at him, I knew I would.

“I better go,” I added, giving Johnny yet another dopey wave. “Have a great time.”

I didn’t wait to hear his response. Instead, I turned on my heels and hurried away with my heart hammering around in my chest.

“Are you sure you don’t want to come for an hour?” I heard Johnny call after me.

“I’m sure,” I called back over my shoulder as I hurried away. “Bye, Johnny.”

“Yeah, uh, bye, Shannon.”

The sound of boys laughing and snickering behind me filled my ears, but I didn’t dare look back. Instead, I did the sensible thing and removed myself from temptation with Claire’s words ringing in my ears.

“Boys with pretty eyes and big muscles mess everything up for girls.”

How right she was.

It was a little after eight when I finally got home from school that evening.

Three miles from Tommen, the bus had broken down.

For two hours, we were forced to remain on the bus while another bus from Cork city was sent out to transport us home. It was ridiculous. I had spent every minute of those two hours mentally kicking myself for not taking Johnny up on his offer.

What the hell was wrong with me?

I liked him. I *really* liked him.

He asked me if I was going to a party, offered to drive me home from said party, and I turned around and practically ran away from him. No, correct that to: I *did* run away from him.

In my defense, I had been completely taken aback by him.

Never once in the weeks that had passed since my accident had either of us approached the other.

He broke the imaginary rule that had been enforced between us. He threw me by talking to me and I was still very much thrown now.

All evening my mind continued to churn the encounter round and round until I was blue in the face from thinking about it and thoroughly disgusted with myself.

I should have gone to the party. If I had, I wouldn't have spent two hours on a freezing-cold bus in semi-arctic conditions. At least, if had gone to the party, being late would have been worth it. Because the look on my father's face when I walked into the house assured me that the two hours I'd spent sitting alone on a broken-down bus certainly weren't.

"Where were you?" Dad demanded, watching me like a hawk from his perch at the kitchen table when I walked through the doorway.

The familiar swell of panic built inside of me.

My father was a powerful-looking man, clocking in at six feet, with dark-blond hair and an athletic build that had stuck since his days of hurling. He too had played for Cork, but unlike my brothers, my father's merits and achievements weren't something I openly spoke about. Because I *wasn't* proud of the man staring back at me.

I wasn't sure if I even loved him anymore. Or if I ever had.

Not when he terrified me worse than any of the bullies at school ever had…

"Well?" he pressed, tone tight. He was replacing the rubber grip on what looked like Ollie's hurley, and the sight of him holding the wooden hurl caused a tremor of panic to roll down my spine. "You're late!"

I was suddenly very grateful that I had run away from Johnny Kavanagh when he invited me to the party after school. A shudder rolled through my body at the thought of what my father might do if I had accepted his invitation.

"The bus broke down," I squeezed out as I gingerly set my bag down against the wall. "We had to wait for two hours for another bus to pick us

up.”

My father gave me a hard stare.

I remained exactly where I was, not daring to breathe.

Finally, he nodded his head.

“Fucking buses,” my father muttered, turning his attention back to his task.

The air I had been holding in released from my lungs in a loud gasp.

It’s okay, Shannon, I told myself. *He’s not slurring; there’s no smell of whiskey, and no evidence of broken furniture.*

But I wasn’t foolish enough to push my luck when it came to my father and moved for the bread bin with the intention of making a cheese sandwich to go.

Getting out of this kitchen and up to my bedroom without confrontation was my goal for the next minute or so while I hurriedly pieced together a lopsided sandwich and poured myself a glass of water from the tap.

“Good night Dad,” I whispered when I had my sandwich and water ready.

“Don’t be late again,” was all he replied, not taking his eyes off the hurley in his hands. “Do ya hear me, girl?”

“I hear you,” I croaked out and then scrambled up the staircase to the sanctitude of my bedroom.

Once inside, I flicked the lock and sank down against my door, desperately trying to get my heart rate under control.

Today was Friday.

Friday was a safe day.

11
A Fist in the Face: Preferable to a Pie

JOHNNY

My head was wrecked. My body was in bits. I couldn't enjoy the win or truly celebrate with the team because I was sulking.

Sulking over something I couldn't figure out.

Refusing the countless bottles of beer thrust in my face, I sat brooding on the couch in Hughie's living room, with the Man of the Match trophy propped on the cushion beside me, my winner's medal around my neck, biding my time until I could slip away, drive home, and drown myself in an ice bath.

It was my duty to be with my teammates after a big win like this. Being the captain, I was supposed to be leading the celebrations.

Dance music was blasting from the stereo in the corner, Gigi D'Agostino's "I'll Fly with You," and I knew that stupid *duh, duh do de duh* foghorn chant would be stuck in my head all night. The house was littered with the team and people from school, all drinking, eating, and dancing around the place.

Instead of joining in on the banter, I was icing my thigh because putting the ice on my balls wouldn't be socially acceptable, and shoving around a piece of steak Hughie's ma, Sinead, had cooked me on my plate and thinking about a girl who couldn't seem to get away from me fast enough.

That showed it all right there.

Everyone else was drinking and enjoying themselves, while I refueled on protein and drove myself demented over a girl.

Was this what rejection felt like?

If so, it fucking sucked.

What possessed me to go over to Shannon, I'll never know, but everyone was screaming around me, the crowd was in my face, I needed a

reprieve, and I saw her standing there, all big eyes and lonesome, and something just shifted inside of me.

In the moment it made sense to just go over and talk to her. Because I didn't want her to be on her own. Because I could hardly concentrate during the game, knowing she was watching me. Because when she turned around to leave, my legs moved of their own accord, desperate to intercept her.

I can give you a spin home when you want to go?

What the actual fuck? I might as well have shouted, *Love me, fucking love me* at the girl.

I felt like a bleeding eejit. What was I thinking, inviting her to the party? Worse, what was I thinking, expecting her to say yes? I was a glorified stranger to her.

Jesus Christ.

I was so disappointed in myself.

For the bones of two months, I'd been doing so well, so goddamn well, in my attempts to stay away from her. I couldn't get her out of my head, but dammit, I was keeping my distance. One adrenaline-pumped victory and I blew it.

Worse than blowing it, I dragged her into a picture with me.

And she looked *terrified.*…

"You alright, lad?" Feely asked, sinking down on the couch alongside me.

Grunting my response, I dragged the cushion from behind my back and set it down on my lap, covering the purpling spreading down my right thigh.

I was still in my kit, as were most of the team. They were still donning their jerseys because they wanted to show off—and rightly so. Five-in-a-row winners of the School Boy Shield was a new record for Tommen and some of the younger lads' first taste of silverware.

I was still in my gear because I didn't have the energy to tog off after the match. If it didn't look so appealing to the scouts, I'd throw the towel in on the school team and save my body for Academy or club games.

"You know, Sinead would have a look at it for you, if you asked her," Feely interrupted my thoughts by saying. "She's a nurse, lad."

I turned to look at him. "What?"

He gestured to my leg. "It's giving you trouble again?"

Striving to rein in my irritation, I shook my head and said, “No, I’m grand. Took a kicking in the ruck, that’s all, lad.”

The look Patrick gave me was one of apprehension, but he didn’t push it.

I liked that about him.

He didn’t push shite.

If it wasn’t his business, he didn’t ask to know.

“You not drinking tonight?” I asked him, steering the topic away from my failings. “Big win for the school, lad. You should be celebrating.”

“*I* should be celebrating?” Patrick smirked. “What about Mr. MOM himself? If anyone should be kicking back, then it’s you.”

I smirked at the term *Mr. MOM*—meaning *man of the match*—and said, “I’ve Academy training on Saturdays. What’s your excuse?”

“Not in the mood,” was all he replied.

Like earlier when he didn’t push me for information, I returned the favor.

“I’m actually thinking of heading off,” he added, standing up. “I was wondering if you could give me a lift home?”

Like a starving dog presented with a juicy bone, I snapped at his offer.

Tossing my plate and ice pack on the coffee table in front me, I pulled myself to a stand and inhaled several steadying breaths through my nose before putting weight on my leg. “Ready when you are.”

Patrick smirked but didn’t say anything about my overenthusiasm. Reaching down, he scooped up my trophy from the couch and handed it to me—thank fuck, because if I had to crouch again, I wouldn’t have been able to get back up.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Gibsie called out over the music, noticing my attempt at leaving. “Sit your ass down there, Cap,” he ordered, plowing through the crowd toward me. “You’re not going anywhere yet.”

I opened my mouth to tell him to shag off, but two of the lads from the team, Luke Casey and Robbie Mac, came barreling toward me, dragging me back down on the couch before planting themselves down on either side of me.

I looked to Patrick, who shrugged in resignation.

We both knew we weren’t getting out of here anytime soon, not when Gibsie turned the music off and announced, “I have a speech to make.”

“Sorry, Cap,” Robbie Mac snickered. “But you have to hear this.”

Resisting the urge to roar from the pain searing through my lower half, I shook my head and reached for my ice pack. “For fuck’s sake, Gibs.”

With his championship medal still dangling around his neck, Gibsie dragged the coffee table over to the stereo and hopped up. With his jersey wrapped around his head like a fucking bandana, he grabbed the remote control off the unit behind him and held it to his mouth like it was his own personal microphone.

The lads on the team threw their heads back and howled with laughter as he tapped the remote and performed a sound check.

Bleeding eejit.…

With a shit-eating grin etched on his face, Gibsie tapped his “mic” and said, “How’s it going tonight?” He glanced down at the medal resting on his chest and grinned. “We could get used to this, couldn’t we, lads!”

A deafening burst of cheers and roars of agreement came from the room.

“Alright, boys. Jaysus, no need to roar at me,” he taunted. “For fuck’s sake, I’m in the same room as ya!”

His playful response drew an even louder response from the team and our friends.

“Anyways”—he chuckled—“getting down to business, I have a little song I’d like to sing for the special person in my life.”

*Ooh*s and *awww*s came from a group of girls in the doorway.

I rolled my eyes at how easily the pretty-boy flanker could charm them.

Gibsie cleared his throat for added effect, and then said, “Without this special someone’s magical fucking hands, I wouldn’t be standing here today with this gorgeous piece of silverware.” He shook his head and pressed a hand to his heart. “Thank you, baby!”

From the looks I was receiving from the lads, and the snickering coming from Robbie and Luke, I realized Gibsie’s party piece was going to be at *my* expense.

“Don’t do anything stupid!” I warned Gibsie just as he reached over and pressed a button on the stereo.

Instantly, my shoulders locked tight with tension as the familiar sound of Dire Straits’s “Walk of Life” began to play from the speakers.

Immediately, I knew what was coming.

That fucker…

"Johnny, baby," my asshole best friend called out with feigned passion in his voice, pointing his strapped-up fingers in my direction. "This one's for you," he snickered before bursting into song, crooning along to the lyrics that had become the bane of my life since I strolled onto a pitch with these culchie assholes in sixth class.

The lads around me all joined Gibsie in the loud teasing chorus. Chairs were thrown backwards as the lads all celebrated in our victory. Robbie and Luke dragged me off the couch where I was then thrust into the air and held up by my teammates. Feely, the turncoat, was inconsolable as he laughed his arse off at my expense.

Oh yeah, they could laugh all they wanted now, but I was going to bury those fuckers at training on Monday.

12
Confession Time

SHANNON

I was finishing up the last of my homework late Sunday night when a knock on my bedroom door broke through my concentration. Folding my copybook, I slid it into my math textbook and called out, “Come in.”

My bedroom door cracked open and my brother’s head popped through the crack.

“What’s up, Joe?” I asked, shoving my books back into my schoolbag.

“I’m going to the shop,” my brother announced, taking a quick glance around my room before his eyes returned to my face. “Do you want anything?”

“Where’s Aoife?”

“In my room.”

“Is she staying over?”

“Yeah.”

Aoife went to BCS and was in sixth year with Joey, so it wasn’t uncommon for them to stay at each other’s houses on a school night and head to school together. They were at the age where sleepovers were allowed. Or at least, no one ever said a word to Joey when he brought a girl home.

There was a huge case of double standards in this house—a house that had been exceptionally quiet this weekend.

My father was in rare form. He was behaving like a human. He even bought us all takeaway Chinese last night and passed me the remote control rather than just flinging it at me like he usually did.

I wasn’t naive enough to believe that my father’s decision to not break up the house this weekend was because he had decided to turn over a new

leaf. No, I had been a member of this family long enough to recognize this quiet period as the calm before the storm.

He would erupt soon. He always did.

I could only hope that I wasn't standing in the eye of the storm when it happened.

"Do you want something from the shop or not?" Joey asked, sounding impatient. "It's closing soon."

I glanced at the screen of my phone to check the time. 10:45 p.m. "Why are you going to the shop so late?" I questioned. "What do you need that's so important?"

Joey grinned. "Do you want me to answer that honestly?"

"No," I groaned, fake gagging when awareness dawned on me. "Go away."

"Night, Shan," he chuckled, closing out my door.

"Be safe!" I called after him. "I'm too young to be an auntie!"

My phone vibrated against my thigh, alerting me to an incoming call from Claire.

"Hello?" I said, pressing it to my ear.

"Hey chick-a-bee," she said happily. "What are you doing next weekend?"

Climbing off my bed, I hurried over to my door and turned the lock.

"Nothing," I replied. *Like always.* "Why?"

"Because, my dear friend, Gerard Gibson passed his theory test on Friday morning and some demented idiot at the tax office decided to give him a provisional driver's license."

"Really?" I laughed, thinking about Gibsie behind the wheel of a vehicle.

"Oh yeah," Claire sighed. "I've just spent the last hour and a half trying to shove him out of my bedroom."

"Why was he in your room?"

"To gloat," she explained. "Shaking his little green license around like he was king of the hill."

"What does Gibsie getting his driving license have to do with next weekend?"

"His parents bought him a car for his birthday last week," she explained. "He wants all of us to go for a spin with him."

My brows shot up. “Who’s all of us?”

“The usual gang,” Claire replied breezily. “Me, Gerard, Hughie, Katie, Pierce, Lizzie, Patrick, Johnny, and you of course.”

My heart leaped at the sound of Johnny’s name being mentioned. And then it rocketed even further at the prospect of spending actual time with him.

“Why me?” I managed to ask.

“Duh, because you’re our friend,” she replied.

I shook my head. “No, Claire, I’m *your* friend. Yours and Lizzie’s.”

“Well, Gerard told me to invite you along.”

“Why?” I strangled out. “He doesn’t know me.”

“You helped him with Brian.”

I shook my head. “That doesn’t make us friends.”

“Well, he knows you’re my best friend,” she explained. “Which means any invitations I receive automatically extend to you, too.”

“Well, he can’t fit all those people in one car.”

“Then maybe you can go in Johnny’s car,” Claire shot back in a teasing tone. “By the way, I saw you with him on the pitch Friday, you little flirt.”

“I was *not* flirting with him,” I practically spluttered. “He came up to me.”

“Better again.” She giggled. “He was the one doing the flirting.”

“Nobody was flirting,” I choked out. “We were just—”

“You were just what?” Claire teased.

“Talking,” I filled in with a helpless shrug.

“About what?”

“I don’t know,” I mumbled. “Just stuff, I guess?”

“And taking pictures together,” she added with a cackle. “I saw that, too.”

“Oh god.” I groaned in defeat and flopped back on my pillow. “I was caught so off guard,” I croaked out. “You should have heard me trying to talk to him,” I added, biting down on my lip. “I got tongue-tied and literally bombed my way through the entire conversation, Claire. It was completely humiliating.”

“You got tongue-tied because you like him,” she pressed.

Not bothering to deny it, I just sighed down the line.

“Oh my god,” she gasped, tone excited. “Are you finally admitting you like him?”

I nodded and then realized she couldn’t see me.

“I don’t think there’s any point in denying it,” I whispered, feeling my face burn at the thought. “I like him, Claire. I think I *really* like him.”

“Oh wow, Shan,” Claire replied gently. “This is big for you.”

She was right.

It was huge. And scary.

Absolutely terrifying.

“It’s ridiculous,” I muttered glumly. “I don’t even know him.”

“Yeah, you do,” Claire argued.

“Not well,” I replied with a sigh.

“Well,” she mused. “I’ve never met Johnny Depp in the flesh, and that hasn’t stopped me from falling madly in love with him.”

I rolled my eyes at her response. “Yeah, because that’s the same thing.”

“I have his phone number, you know,” Claire offered then. “I can give it to you and you could text him.”

My eyes widened. “Absolutely *not*.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive,” I strangled out. “There is no way on god’s green earth where I could be the type of girl who does that.” Chewing on my lip, I quickly asked, “How do you have his number?”

“Gerard is always borrowing my phone,” she explained. “ He is always calling Johnny when he uses my phone. Johnny’s practically his Siamese twin. So, I stored Johnny’s number under *Call for Sex*.” Snickering she added, “It was so funny. Gerard was so mad with me—demanding to know who I was hooking up with and why it wasn’t him listed under that name.”

“Claire, you can’t tell anyone that I like him,” I blurted out, feeling panicky that I had let the cat out of the bag. “Please. Not even Lizzie and especially not Gibsie.”

“I won’t, I promise,” she vowed. “But if you *did* text him, I think you’d be pleasantly surprised,” she added. “I know Lizzie told you a bunch of stuff about him, but honestly, most of it’s just fabricated gossip. Johnny’s not the guy all the girls at school paint him out to be.”

“Yeah,” I whispered, “I’ve already gathered that.”

He was better.

So much better.

“So, will you come with us next weekend?” she asked.

“I won’t be allowed to go.”

“Come on, Shan, you can’t just say no,” Claire whined. “Not without asking, at least?”

“I don’t need to ask, Claire,” I croaked out. “I already know the answer.”

“Then don’t ask him,” she quickly said. “Just make up an excuse or something and come over to mine. We don’t even have to go with the lads.”

I sighed heavily. “Claire—”

“We can have dinner at my house,” she hurried to say. “And you know, if Johnny just happened to stop by because of a rogue text message sent from my phone, then maybe you two could go up to my room and—”

“Stop it,” I warned her, shivering at the thought.

Claire laughed down the line. “I’m kidding.”

“You better be,” I grumbled. “Because I would die.”

“So, do you want to do that?” she asked, smothering her laughter. “Come over to mine for a takeaway and a movie? Or we could go to the cinema. Or out to eat at a restaurant. Whatever you want,” she told me. “It’s your choice and my treat.”

“I love you for offering,” I told her, biting down on my lip to stop it from wobbling. “But you know he’ll never allow it.”

Claire sighed heavily. “Shan…”

“Don’t,” I pleaded quietly. “Please don’t say anything.”

There was a long pause before she whispered, “I won’t.”

I sagged in relief. “Thank you.”

“I’m here for you,” was all Claire replied in a sad tone of voice. “Forever.”

13
Creeping and Winging

JOHNNY

Every day since starting at Tommen, I sat at the exact same table in the lunch hall for break. It was close to the door and comprised of a thirty-foot banquet table, filled with my teammates and a few of their girlfriends. I always sat at the end of the table, with my back to the wall, looking onto the rest of the room, where I had a crystal-clear view of everything going on around me. I liked it because I had space to breathe and not have girls fucking groping me and touching my back every fifteen seconds. Like always, Gibs and Feely sat opposite me, and Hughie sat to my right.

The difference today was both Hughie and Feely were in detention, and Gibsie was scowling at me.

"Could you stop staring at her for five fucking minutes and pretend to be listening to me," Gibsie hissed. "Seriously, lad." Tossing his sandwich down on the lunch table, he threw his hands up in frustration. "It's getting creepy, and you're putting me off my food."

"I'm not doing anything," I grumbled as I leaned back in my chair and rolled my water bottle between my hands absentmindedly.

Shannon was sitting at the opposite side of the lunch hall with her two friends, smiling and laughing at something Hughie's little sister was saying.

Her hair was swept back in two long braids resting on her small shoulders, and every time she wrapped one of those braids around her finger, I had to bite back a groan.

Seriously, I'd been sitting here for the past twenty-five minutes, not listening to one word Gibsie was saying, because I was too fucking busy watching a girl who clearly wanted nothing to do with me.

All weekend, Shannon had been in the back of my mind—okay, the fore point.

I'd spent days brooding over her reaction to me on the pitch Friday, and how she hurried away from me.

When she passed me in the hall this morning after first class, I had felt way too fucking excited to see her. Of course, she smiled shyly before dropping her head and hurrying past me, but she was here. She was in my space. Which meant both my attention and my thoughts were fixated solely on her.

And I fucking *hated* it.

I wanted her, I realized, and it was entirely inappropriate and horrendous bad luck on my account, but I did. I *wanted* Shannon Lynch. And worse than wanting her, I really fucking *liked* her.

She had this sweet something about her, and I liked how it felt when I was around her.

I liked the way she looked, the way she spoke, the way she carried herself. I liked a whole heap of things about her, and oddly enough, my liking her had nothing to do with what was under her clothes.

Well, that wasn't completely true.

I thought *a lot* about what I would find beneath her clothes and I liked those visuals *a lot*. But it was more than that. It was all *more* when it came to her.

But I wasn't in the position to put time into a girl, and spending time with that particular one could get me in a world of trouble.

I knew the way things worked: spend too much time with a girl and feelings arose, and where feelings arose, fucking arose.

It was a dangerous ledge to balance on. One I was *not* willing to step onto.

"No, you're not doing anything," Gibsie drawled sarcastically, shifting in his seat so he was blocking my perfect view of her. "You're only mentally undressing her in your head."

"I am not," I growled, glaring at him from across the table.

I was. I so fucking was.

Christ, was I that obvious?

"Yes, you are that obvious," Gibsie stated, clearly reading my thoughts. "And I'll tell you who else is obvious," he added, gesturing with his thumb to our right. "That evil bitch."

I didn’t need to look to know he was talking about Bella. She was perched at the opposite end of our table with a few of the lads on the team from sixth year, where she had spent most of lunch trying to get a rise out of me.

It wouldn’t work. I wasn’t fucking biting.

“Ignore her.” Unscrewing the cork on my bottle, I took a deep swig of water. “She’s not worth the hassle.”

“Lad, I know I’m repeating myself, but I honest to god don’t know how you ever touched her,” he groaned.

“Neither do I,” I admitted, as I recapped my bottle and resumed my staring at Shannon.

He leaned back in his chair and arched a brow. “You should go over and talk to her.”

“To Bella?” I scowled. “No fucking thanks.”

“Not that demon,” Gibsie countered with a grimace. “*Shannon.*”

I shook my head. “No.”

“She’s a frigit, you know,” Gibsie stated nonchalantly. “Or at least she was.” He gave me a pointed look. “You haven’t been sticking your tongue down her throat, have you?”

“No,” I hissed.

“Okay then,” he mused. “She’s still a frigit.”

I frowned at him. “How do you even know that?”

“I listen carefully,” he snickered, tapping his temple.

“What?”

“I overheard the girls talking about it in Claire’s bedroom a while back,” he admitted. “That viper Pierce is tapping was talking about what a terrible ride he is, and it came up that Shannon has never kissed a fella.” Frowning, he added, “The viper really doesn’t like me.”

“Jesus Christ,” I muttered. “You’re listening outside the girl’s bedroom now?”

When he didn’t deny it, I shook my head.

“You have a problem, Gibs. A big one.”

“It’s only a problem if you admit it,” he countered with a knowing grin. “Isn’t that how it works, Johnny?”

“Fuck off,” I growled, knowing exactly what he was getting at.

“Go on, Johnny. Just go over there and talk to her,” he encouraged. “You can do it.”

“No, Gibs,” I bit out. “Let it go.”

“Why not?” he demanded in an exasperated tone.

“Because I don’t want to,” I snapped.

“Liar.”

“You know what? For a fella who calls himself my best friend, you’re doing a shitty job,” I growled. “I told you I’m not going there with that girl. I told you she’s too fucking young for me.”

“You’re the one who can’t stop staring at her,” he barked.

“Well, tell me to stop,” I shot back. “Don’t tell me to go over there.”

“I *did* tell you to stop,” Gibsie hissed, sounding exasperated. “Like two minutes ago. I told you to stop staring at her like a creeper, and yet here you are, still fucking her with your eyes, and still looking like someone shit in your cornflakes.” He threw his hands up. “What am I supposed to do with you?”

“You’re supposed to remember that I’m the eejit who almost died this morning being dessy driver for your learner arse,” I grumbled. “So instead of encouraging me to make bad choices, why don’t you try and support me for once?”

“I’m a good driver!”

I rolled my eyes. “You are a liability.”

“And I am *nothing* but supportive to you.” He huffed dramatically. “I am your number fucking one supporter, Johnny Kavanagh.” Leaning back in his seat, he folded his arms across his chest and gave me a pointed look. “You really hurt my feelings just now.”

“I hurt your feelings?” I cocked a brow. “Who’s the bitch with a vagina now?”

“Apologize,” he ordered.

“Get the fuck out of here, ya eejit,” I said, laughing.

He glared back at me. “Say you’re sorry.”

“For *what*?”

“For hurting my feelings,” he sniffed. “Now apologize.”

“I’m sorry, Gibs,” I placated, deciding it was easier to just give the big eejit what he wanted.

“You could mean it,” he argued.

“You could learn not to push your luck,” I warned.

We had a fifteen-second stare-down until he grinned and said, “I accept your apology.”

“Good,” I muttered. “I’m delighted for ya.”

“And since you seem to need so much *support* these days—” Shoving back his chair, Gibsie stood up and winked at me. “I’ll go talk to her for you.”

“Don’t you fucking dare—” I paused to grab him, but he slipped out of my grip and sauntered away. “Gibs!”

“Relax, Kav. I’ve got this,” he told me as he made a big show of adjusting his school tie. Waggling his brows, he added, “Watch how it’s done.”

And then he walked right over to the girls’ table and sat down.

For fuck’s sake…

My feet were moving before my common sense had a chance to talk me off the ledge I was about to step onto.

14
Provisional Licenses

SHANNON

I could feel Johnny's eyes on my face from across the lunch hall on Monday. Like the stalker I was, I knew exactly where he sat for lunch each day: the last seat at the end of the glorified rugby table, on the inside row, next to the archway exit.

All through lunch, I dutifully ignored the burning sensation on my cheeks, the same burn I could feel all the way down to my toes, and concentrated on Claire and Lizzie. Because I *knew* what would happen if I looked back at him. I would give myself away, and he didn't need to know how badly he affected me.

He confused me last Friday and he was confusing me again.

Why was he watching me? Why did he invite me to that party? Why did he make my heart race so violently?

I didn't understand what was happening here, and in the storm of my turbulent emotions, I needed to hold on to some semblance of control. It wasn't easy, though, and that control was snatched from my teetering grip the moment Gibsie walked right up to our table, all blond hair and big smiles.

"Ladies," he acknowledged in that flirtatious tone I'd become used to him using as he slipped into a seat on the other side of Claire. "How are we doing today?"

"What do you want, Gerard?" Claire groaned, slipping out of his hold when he wrapped his arm around her shoulder. "We're trying to eat here."

"I have something to show you," he told her, brows waggling.

"I'm not looking at your penis," Claire hissed. "So stop trying to show it to me."

“Not *that*.” Gibsie snorted and then proceeded to pull a set of keys out of his pocket and dangle them in Claire’s face. “These.”

“Oh my god,” Claire gasped, snatching the keys out of his hands. “Your parents gave you the car early? I thought you weren’t getting the keys until the weekend.”

“They caved,” he told her, grinning. “Which means—”

“A maniac has been let loose on Irish roads?” Lizzie interjected.

“Jesus,” Gibsie muttered, frowning across the table at Lizzie. “You’re a barrel of laughs.”

Lizzie merely gave him the finger and returned to her lunch.

Shaking his head, Gibsie turned his attention back to Claire. “There’s more,” he announced, giving her his sole attention. “They’re gone to Tenerife.” He waggled his brows. “Until Monday.”

“They’ve left you to your own devices?” Claire demanded. “*You?*”

“And you know what that means, don’t you?” He winked back at her. “Sleepover time.”

“Your parents left you in charge of their house?” she repeated, looking shocked.

He grinned and swiped her apple out of her hand. “They did.”

“For an entire week?” Claire shook her head, mouth hanging open. “Alone? Unsupervised?”

His grin widened as he tossed the apple up in the air. “You sound surprised,” he added, catching the apple effortlessly.

Intrigued by their interaction, I leaned against the table and watched with interest.

“Because I *am*,” Claire spluttered, staring back at him. “Do they know you *at all*?”

“Obviously not,” he snorted. “Now go home and pack your shit.” He waggled his brows before taking a bite from Claire’s apple. “Because you’re checking into Hotel Gibson for the week,” he added midchew. “Fun times.”

“Oh really?” Claire leaned back in her chair and smirked. “And does *Hotel Gibson* come with good reviews?”

“It comes with cock, Claire-Bear,” Gibsie announced—and not quietly. “An unlimited supply of five-star cock.”

“Say it louder,” she hissed, slapping his shoulder. “I don’t think everyone heard you.”

“It comes with cock, Claire!” he taunted, accepting her challenge without an ounce of shame. “My cock.”

“Fuck your cock,” Claire growled, looking mortified.

“Of course, you can,” he nodded with a grin. “But here’s not really the place.”

“I don’t know why I’m friends with you,” Claire muttered, cheeks burning. “You’re so inappropriate.”

“You are friends with me because you love me,” he purred. “Because I’m the only one that makes your cheeks turn pink”—he paused and stroked her cheek with his finger—“in more ways than one.”

“When I was eleven, Gerard,” she shot back. “And it was one bloody kiss!”

“I’m ready for a repeat performance,” he told her. “Say the word, Claire-Bear, tell me you’re ready for us, and I’m all yours—”

“Can you stop doing that!” Lizzie barked then, glaring at Gibsie.

“Doing what?”

“Screwing around with her feelings,” she huffed. “It’s not a game!”

“Lizzie, it’s okay,” Claire began to say but Lizzie cut her off.

“It’s not okay,” she snapped. “He’s been doing this since we were four. It’s wrong!”

“I’m not screwing around with her feelings,” Gibsie replied, looking confused. “She knows I love her.”

Claire turned beet red, causing Lizzie to growl.

“Yeah, asshole,” Lizzie hissed. “You love her loads, don’t you? That’s why you’re going around shagging half the school, isn’t it?”

“What is your *problem*?” Gibsie growled, glaring now.

“You,” Lizzie snapped. “You and your shithead friends thinking you’re cock of the walk. Going around playing girls like it’s all a big game. You’re all disgusting. Every last one of you rugby heads.”

Gibsie gaped at her, looking affronted. “What did Johnny do out of the way to you?”

“Yeah,” a familiar voice asked. “What did I do?”

My heart skyrocketed in my chest at the sound of that achingly familiar Dublin accent.

It stood out from everyone around us, just like *he* stood out from everyone around us.

“You’re as bad as the rest of them,” Lizzie hissed, not missing a beat as she turned her furious glare on Johnny, who much to my detriment, was pulling out the chair next to me. “Worse. You’re their leader.”

“Well, that’s news to me,” Johnny countered calmly.

He sat down beside me then and I felt the piece of bread I was chewing on wedge itself to the roof of my mouth.

Swallowing it down, I looked up at him, wide-eyed and confused.

He smiled down at me. “Hi, Shannon.”

“Hi, Johnny,” I whispered, staring back at him, feeling like my heart was two seconds away from bursting out of my chest.

“How are you?” he asked, voice deep, blue eyes burning holes in mine.

“I’m good,” I breathed. “How are you?”

He smirked. “I’m *good*.”

Dammit, there was that word again.…

“Did you have a nice weekend?”

“Uh, it was okay.” I felt myself blush. “Did you?”

“I spent most of it training.” He smirked. “Same as always.”

I nodded, not really understanding a damn thing that was happening here. “H-how was the party?”

“I didn’t stay long.” Johnny leaned his elbow on the table, turned his body inward, and gave me his full attention. “I just went to show my face really.”

“How come?” I breathed, burning from being so close to him.

“Training commitments,” he explained, thrumming his long fingers against the table, blue eyes locked on mine. “I try to avoid parties during the season—”

“Jesus, not you, too,” Lizzie growled. “It’s bad enough Thor over there is pulling his shit with Claire without you messing with Shannon.”

Johnny turned his blue eyes on Lizzie. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me,” she countered.

“Am I not allowed to speak to her?” he questioned, arching a brow. “Do you not like to share your friends?”

“You know what you’re doing,” Lizzie shot back defiantly.

“You’re right, Gibs,” Johnny mused with a small shake of his head. Leaning back in his chair, he added, “Pierce is a bleeding saint.”

“Total respect,” Gibsie shot back, resting his arm around Claire’s chair.

“Ugh,” Lizzie sneered, giving both Johnny and Gibsie a disgusted look. “I hate you all.”

“When you say *all*, does that apply to just us”—Gibsie gestured from himself to Johnny—“or all men?”

“You most of all, you big blond eejit, with your rugby-shaped head,” Lizzie snapped. Shoving her chair back, she stood up and cast a glare at Johnny. “And you’re a close second, Captain Fantastic, for not having better control over him.”

Having said that, Lizzie swung around and stalked out of the lunch hall.

“Whoa,” Gibsie breathed when she was gone. “That girl seriously hates me.”

“She hates everyone,” Claire replied, patting his arm soothingly. “Don’t take it personal.”

“It’s true,” I decided to offer up. “She only likes, like, two people.”

“Exactly,” Claire agreed. “It truly is nothing personal. Lizzie’s just protective of us.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t have a rugby-shaped head,” Gibsie grumbled. He looked to Johnny. “Do I?”

“No, Gibs.” Johnny sighed. “Your head’s not shaped like a rugby ball.”

“Really?” He touched his head self-consciously. “Because I weighed like twelve pounds when I was born, and my mam’s always bitching to her friends about how I wrecked her with my big head.”

“It’s a perfectly normal head, Gibs,” Johnny coaxed. “Very circular.”

“Not too big?”

“You grew into it,” he assured him. “Fits you fine now.”

Unable to stop myself, I snickered at the sight of Johnny comforting Gibsie.

“You laughing at my misfortune again, little Shannon?” Gibsie shot back with a wolfish smile. “Go ahead and get it out of your system.”

I shrugged helplessly, still grinning.

He was just so unusual and entertaining.

“Now, back to business,” Gibsie continued, leaning back in his chair. “What do you want to see tonight?”

Claire frowned. “Tonight?”

“We’re going to the cinema,” he stated with a devilish grin.

“Who’s *we*?” Johnny bit out, tensing beside me.

Gibsie circled his finger around the four of us.

My mouth fell open. “Huh?”

“She-wolf can come, too,” he said to Claire. “If you promise to put a muzzle on her.”

“*Gibs*,” Johnny said in a warning tone, shaking his head.

“Come on, lad,” Gibsie countered. “You can miss a session for one night. I need a dessy driver until I’m comfortable driving alone.” Turning to look at me, he said, “What do you say, little Shannon?”

I looked to Claire, who was staring back at me with mirrored confusion, and then to Johnny, who looked like he was in some sort of physical pain, before settling on Gibsie.

Say yes, Shannon. Go with them.

You want to. You really, really want to.

But he’ll kill you. You’re a dead girl walking if he finds out.

I shook my head and croaked out, “I can’t.”

“You can’t?” Gibsie frowned. “Why not?”

“Because I–I don’t… It’s—” Shaking my head, I exhaled a ragged breath. “I’m not—”

“She can’t go, Gibs,” Johnny thankfully interjected. “Drop it.”

“But—”

“Let it go!”

The bell rang then, signaling the end of lunch, and Johnny shot to his feet.

“Come on, asshole,” he growled, glaring at Gibsie. “We have *things* to sort out.”

“I’ll swing by your place around seven?” Gibsie asked Claire. “Does that suit you?”

Claire nodded happily.

He gave her a huge smile before standing up and ruffling her curls. “See you then, Claire-Bear.”

My gaze found its way back to Johnny, who was standing at the edge of the table with a thunderous expression etched on his face.

“Bye, Johnny,” I told him in a small voice.

His features softened instantly as he looked down at me and smiled. “Bye, Shannon.”

“Well, that was the strangest thing that’s happened in a while,” Claire announced when the boys were gone.

“Yeah,” I breathed. “Very strange.”

15
Bathroom Breaks and Propositions

SHANNON

When people say something is too good to be true, it usually is.

That was *exactly* how I felt when I stepped out of the bathroom on Tuesday evening after school and collided with a hard chest. Surprised to find anyone standing outside the bathroom when the final bell had long gone, I let out a small squeak.

“How’s it going, Shannon?” the blond, vaguely familiar boy asked, grinning down at me.

The halls were relatively empty, with only a few students rambling down the corridors, leading me to believe that he had been waiting out here for me. After all, the girls’ bathroom was an unusual spot for a boy to loiter outside of, especially one togged out in a jersey, shorts, and football boots.

Panic mixed with a large dollop of wariness flared to life inside of me.

“Um, fine,” I replied, tucking and then retucking my hair behind my ear, a nervous trait. “How are you?”

“Better now I’m talking to you,” he announced, confirming my worst nightmare, as he stepped closer, the studs on his boots clanging against the floor.

“Were you waiting out here for me?” I forced myself to ask, needing the vocal confirmation. Don’t ask me why, but I needed to clarify the crazy. “In your—” I gestured to his attire, “P.E. kit?”

“I was training and forgot my mouth guard in my locker,” he explained, not one bit embarrassed by any of this. “I saw you going into the bathroom when I was heading to my locker so I figured I’d wait around to talk to you.” Shrugging like his nonsense explanation was a perfectly acceptable one, he added, “I’m Ronan, by the way. Ronan McGarry. We have French together.”

His tone was friendly, but I knew better than to be fooled.

Friendly could turn to bully in a nanosecond.

“Yeah. I know.” Taking a step back to regain my personal space, I added, “Well, it was nice of you to come say hi, but I have to go catch my bus. It leaves soon and the driver won’t wait—”

“I saw you on the pitch that day, Shannon,” he purred, voice low, eyes alight with excitement. “That’s what I wanted to talk to you about.” He took another step toward me, invading my space once more. “In your knickers? Those killer legs… I saw *all* of you.”

My heart sank. Every muscle in my body locked tight with dread.

This was it. What I had been waiting for. The inevitable taunting.

I was vaguely aware of Ronan McGarry, having sat in front of him in French class the past few weeks, but I hadn’t realized he was on the rugby team. I hadn’t noticed him on the pitch last week, but then, I hadn’t noticed anyone other than Johnny that day. I guess it made sense though, what with the muddy kit he was currently wearing and the bruised cheekbone. But I didn’t have anything to say to him, so I kept my mouth shut and waited for him to speak.

He would.

They always did.

“And I have to be honest, Shannon.” He reached up and tugged on my braid with his mud-stained hand, not hard—it was in more of a playful way—but I didn’t like the intrusion. “I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you since.”

Feign indifference, Shannon. Pretend you don’t care.

Stepping sideways to free my hair from his grasp, I brushed off his words with a small shrug and readjusted my bag on my shoulders.

He stared at me for a long time, eyes dancing with excitement, before saying, “You’re a shy little thing, aren’t you?”

“No,” I replied, voice small, and it was the truth.

I wasn’t shy. I could be as outspoken and verbose as anyone when I was with people I trusted. But I was *cautious*. I had good reason to be. And I didn’t trust him.

“Well, shy or not, you’re fucking gorgeous under those clothes,” he stated softly, dragging his bottom lip into his mouth as his eyes roamed shamelessly down my body. “I would really love your number.”

My mouth fell open. Was he serious?

I gaped up at his face, trying to gauge him.

He looked completely serious.

“I, ah, I, no…” Shaking my head, I narrowly avoided his hand once more when he tried to tug on my braid again. “I’m sorry, Ronan, but I don’t give out my number to strangers.”

The very last thing I wanted to do was give anyone aside from Claire and Lizzie my phone number. Giving out my details meant the bullies had a direct line to my psyche 24/7. And while I had made that mistake once before at my old school, a new phone number and the burning remnants of hard-earned wisdom meant that I would never do so again.

Ronan scoffed. “I’m hardly a stranger.”

“You are to me,” I replied, forcing myself to stand strong.

“Come on, Shannon, I don’t bite.” He continued to smile at me, but it was harder, his eyes a little cooler now. “Just give me your number.”

“No.” I shook my head. “I’m sorry, but I don’t know you well enough to give you my number.”

“You could always get to know me,” he purred, placing a firm hand on my shoulder.

Even though I couldn’t feel his touch through my thick winter coat, I immediately recoiled from the contact, but he didn’t move his hand.

“I have a bus to catch,” I strangled out, repeating my earlier words. My shoulders were stiffer than concrete when I added, “I need to go now or I’ll miss it.” I was clutching at straws, but I wanted away from this boy. “Seriously, the driver won’t wait for me.”

“There’ll be another bus,” he shot back. “There won’t be another me.”

Dear god, I hoped not.

“Listen,” Ronan pressed, tone taking on a flirtatious lilt. “I’m supposed to be at an after-training talk with the team down on the pitch. Coach likes to get us all together to talk strategy after our training sessions.”

He told me this like he actually thought I cared.

I didn’t. I only cared about him getting the hell away from me.

“But I don’t have to go.” His hand trailed from my shoulder to my elbow. “I could blow it off for you.” His hand moved lower, tracing the hem of my skirt. “What’d’ya say?” he asked, leaning into my ear. “Fancy going back into that bathroom and getting to know me a little better?”

“No,” I snapped, jerking away from his touch. “I’m not interested.”

“Come on, Shannon,” he snapped, tone heated now, eyes flashing with frustration. “Look around.” He clamped his hand on my shoulder again, not gently this time. “No one’s going to see us—”

Ronan didn’t have the chance to finish that statement before he was carted off—literally dragged away by the scruff of his neck by a much bigger, much older boy.

“You’re a suicidal little fucker, aren’t you?” the boy was saying in an oddly light tone as he sauntered down the hallway with his huge hand cupping the back of Ronan’s neck, forcing him to double over and waddle to keep up with the boy’s long strides. He was dressed in the same attire: a black-and-white-striped jersey, white shorts, and boots that made clickety sounds against the floor as he walked, sods of muck and grass falling away from the studs. The only contrast was a number 9 on the back of Ronan’s jersey and a number 7 on the big guy.

Immediate recognition hit me.

Number 7. Gerard “Gibsie” Gibson. Claire’s crush. The cat walker. The strange one.

Thank god!

The students still loitering in the hallway all stopped what they were doing to watch the drama, but no one stepped in. Not one person intervened on Ronan’s behalf as the giant fair-haired man-child marched him through the corridor.

“Get the fuck off me, Gibsie,” Ronan was screeching, trying and failing to break free of the monster man’s hold. “I was only messing around.”

“You know he’s going to kill you, don’t you?” Gibsie asked, tone laced with humor as he walked Ronan over to the front entrance and then ceremoniously tossed him out the double glass doors.

“Gibsie!” Ronan was screaming, red-faced, as he battled with the door handle. “Stop messing around. I was only being friendly to her.”

“That didn’t sound friendly, kid,” Gibsie taunted. “That sounded desperate—and a little rapisty.”

Right now, both boys were pulling; with Ronan furiously trying to pull the door open, and Gibsie pulling it closed with reasonable ease.

“Let me the fuck in, Gibsie!” Ronan roared, yanking on the handle like a lunatic. “I need my inhaler.”

“Nope, don’t even try that shit with me, McGarry,” Gibsie called out with a laugh, holding the door shut when Ronan tried the handle. “You knew the rules—and you don’t have asthma.”

“So, what?” Ronan demanded, looking outraged. “You’re just going to lock me out of school because Johnny said no?”

What?

“Absolutely.”

What the hell were they talking about?

“He’s *not* my captain!” Ronan snarled, pressing his forehead to the glass.

I was so confused.

“Oh, but he *is*,” Gibsie called back, still laughing, and I was sure he was finding the situation highly amusing. “And dogs that can’t behave themselves around Cap’s new buddy stay outside.”

“You’re going to pay for this, Gibs,” Ronan hissed. “I swear to god, if you don’t let me in, I’m going to tell my uncle about this.”

“Is that so?”

“You’ll be thrown off the team for this.”

“For the threat, I’m going to fuck your mother, McGarry,” Gibsie shot back. “And then I’m going to cum all over her tits, and she’s going to love every minute of it.” With another chuckle, he said, “Go and tell uncle-coachy all about what I have planned with his sister.”

“I’m going to kill you!” Ronan screamed, slamming his fists against the glass.

“Suck my balls—”

“What’s going on?” a familiar male voice boomed through the air.

Recognition immediately dawned on me.

I *knew* that accent.

Without conscious decision, my eyes searched frantically for the owner of the voice, and when I found *him*, walking stiffly out of the lunch hall, holding an ice pack to his right thigh, my heart hammered wildly against my rib cage.

Standing a good twenty or so feet away, I was at a visual disadvantage, but I was close enough to see how every inch of Johnny’s upper body *strained* against the confinement of his jersey, from his broad shoulders to his tree-trunk-sized biceps and long, lean torso.

His legs were long, his thighs thick and muscular, all of which were caked in grass and mud. I noted the small tear on the sleeve of his jersey where his bicep was bulging.

Lord, he was quite literally *bursting* out of the fabric.

He was dressed identically to the other boys, in the same jersey and shorts, but was incomparably different because of the sheer size of his body. He was almost too big. Too muscular. Too scary. Too beautiful. Too *much*.

Shaking my head to clear my wandering thoughts, I focused on the heated discussion occurring at the far end of the hall.

"What did the little bollox do now?" Johnny demanded as he closed the space between himself and Gibsie.

I mentally noted that he was walking with that same slight limp I'd observed on countless occasions. It was barely noticeable, but if you looked closely enough, like I constantly seemed to do, it was clear that he tried to keep weight off his right leg.

My gaze danced between all three of them, moving from Ronan, who wasn't yanking on the handle anymore—in fact, he'd taken a few steps away from the door—to Gibsie, who was grinning like a Cheshire cat, before landing and staying on Johnny.

Seriously, as tall as Gibsie was, Johnny *towered* over him.

There was a streak of dried mud on his cheek that he attempted to bat away with the back of his free hand.

His dark-brown hair was sticking up in forty different directions.

Probably from sweat, I mentally noted, or playing outside in the rain.

He was standing in such a way that I could see his side profile and the way his frown deepened as Gibsie spoke quietly in his ear.

I couldn't make out what they were saying and was unwilling to leave the sanctuary of my corner outside the bathroom, knowing I could always bolt inside and lock myself in a toilet cubicle and phone Joey if this turned ugly.

Seconds later, Johnny's body visibly tensed. "*What?*"

Tossing the ice pack on the floor, he balled his hands balled into fists at his sides as he turned to glare out the glass, revealing the number 13 on his back. He took a step forward, stopping just shy of the door when Gibsie clamped a hand on his shoulder.

“You’re fucking kidding me!” Johnny roared, reacting to whatever his friend was whispering in his ear.

Johnny’s head turned in Ronan’s direction before quickly snapping toward me. His eyes landed on my face, and holy crap, he looked livid. It was only a fleeting glance and he quickly turned his attention back to Ronan. This time I could clearly hear what he was saying.

“I’m going to give you a five-second head start, prickface,” he roared through the glass panel. “And then I’m going to cut your cock off and feed it to you.”

“Fuck you, Kavanagh,” Ronan shouted back, but his face was much paler than earlier. “You can’t touch me.”

“One,” Johnny barked. “Two, three, four…”

“What are you waiting for?” Gibsie called out, waving his hands in the air encouragingly. “Get going, Forrest.”

Were they really going to fight? *Over me?*

Was this really over me?

It couldn’t be. They didn’t even know me.

No way.

I didn’t like confrontation, I couldn’t cope with it, and this sure looked like it was about to snowball.

Deciding to detract myself from the situation, I turned on my heels and bolted into the bathroom, not stopping until I was safely tucked away in one of the stalls with the door locked behind me. With trembling hands, I pushed my bag off my shoulders, allowing it to clatter against the tiled floor. Dropping down on the closed toilet, I leaned forward, rested my elbows on my knees, and buried my hands in my hair, reeling.

What the hell just happened? What *was* that? What would I have done if Gerard or Gibsie or whatever his name was hadn’t come? Where would I be now?

As my earlier adrenaline deflated, tears dripped down my cheeks, but it wasn’t because I was upset. Okay, yes, I *was* upset, but my tears were those of anger.

I was pissed off actually.

Who the hell did Ronan McGarry think he was? More, who did he think *I* was?

Inviting me into the bathroom with him.

God, he looked like he actually expected me to say *yes*.

Blinking away my tears, I clenched and then unclenched my fists, knees bopping as anger and humiliation coursed through me.

I hated humans. They were such a disappointment. And to think God switched dinosaurs for man.

He must be raging.

Rubbing a hand over my face, I quickly swiped at my damp cheeks and battled to get a handle on my emotions.

I was annoyed with myself for being the kind of person who cried when angry. I wanted to be a shouter. A shouter was much better than a crier. I was disgusted with myself for freezing, too.

He had no right to put his hands on me and I did *nothing* to stop him.

Words didn't seem enough for that boy, and instead of kicking him in the junk or slapping his hand away, I'd clammed up just like I always did. I should have learned by now that being a pushover didn't do me any favors, and not fighting back wasn't an option, either.

In situations like the one that had just happened, I *had* to fight back.

I needed to *stop* letting the fear take ahold of me. I was *entitled* to stick up for myself. It wasn't rocking the boat to defend yourself. I knew this, but the problem was, every time I was faced with a confrontation or crisis, my body—and my mind—always reacted with the same broken instinct: freeze.

People talked about the fight-or-flight instinct. I had neither. Instead of fighting back or fleeing, I froze.

Every fucking time.

Dragging in a few steadying breaths, I exhaled long and slow, striving to steady my nerves and erratic heartbeat. It took three tries of shaking out my hand before I had the coordination to successfully undo the top buttons of my coat and retrieve my phone from my shirt pocket beneath my jumper. Trembling, I unlocked the screen only to release a fresh surge of panic into my bloodstream when my eyes landed on the digital clock on the top of the screen.

It was five forty-seven.

My bus left on the dot at half past five. I'd missed it. There wouldn't be another one passing through the route I needed until 9:45 p.m. tonight.

"Shit," I whisper-cried, quickly scrolling into my contacts lists to find my brother's name.

Pressing Call, I held the phone to my ear, but instead of the typical *ring-ring* sound that came with placing a call, I was greeted with the prerecorded robotic voice letting me know that I didn't have sufficient credit to place this call. "Dammit!"

Groaning, I quickly tapped in the code that allowed me to send a free call me text message to Joey. When I didn't get an immediate response, I sent another, and then I sent three more for good measure. Mam was at work and wouldn't have her phone on her, and I'd rather sleep right here in this toilet stall than call my father to come get me—not that he would even come if I asked.

Thirty minutes later and I had sent at least twenty more freebie call me messages to my brother, but to no avail. He obviously either didn't have his phone with him, or it was switched to silent. My bet was it was on silent mode since Joey rarely left the house without it. He probably forgot to take it off silent mode when he left school.

I didn't know what else to do other than just wait at the school until the next bus was due. I knew the school remained open until late for after-school programs and tutoring. It technically never closed, considering it was also a boarding school, but the main area would be open until at least 9:00 p.m.

My stomach rumbled loudly, breaking the silence.

Checking the time again, I noted that it was now 6:18 p.m.

I had those slices of bread tucked away in my lunch box. I could go and make some toast in the common area while I waited.

I would be in serious trouble when I got home, but there was no way on god's given earth that I was going to walk the fifteen miles home. The walk, I was sure I could handle. It was who I might meet on the walk that troubled me.

Standing up, I tucked my phone back into my shirt pocket, redid the buttons on my coat, reached for my bag, and let myself out the stall, stopping to wash my hands before leaving the sanctitude of the bathroom.

I pressed my ear to the door and listened for a long moment. When no sounds of violence and shouting came from the other side, I opened the door and stepped out. Like a horrific case of déjà vu, I walked out of the bathroom and straight into a hard chest of muscle.

16
Keep Your Hands Off

JOHNNY

My groin was on *fire* and my body was simmering with barely restrained anger. Taking a boot to my crotch while at the bottom of a ruck during training was not my idea of a productive practice session. It took me a solid five minutes of breathing through my nose as I lay in a heap on the pitch before I could trust the contents of my stomach to stay the fuck in there and stand up. Resisting the natural reaction to maim and kill the culprit, who just so happened to be a sheepish-looking Hughie, I blew off the last five minutes of training in favor of going in search of an ice pack.

We had the league final coming up, and my asshole teammates were going to take me out before we even got there. Letting loose last weekend was all well and good, and the Shield was a nice little victory for the team, but my sight was set on the cup and theirs needed to be, too—apparently not, though, if the sluggish training session yesterday and sloppy performance this evening was anything to go by.

I was walking out of the lunch hall with one ice pack strapped to my junk and another pressed to my thigh when Gibsie's voice boomed through the air followed by the annoying voice of Ronan McGarry.

"What did the little bollox do now?" I barked when they came into focus, standing on either side of the glass entry door.

"Don't lose your shit," Gibsie said in a low tone. "I've got it under control."

"What?" I demanded.

Gibsie released a sigh. "He was fucking with Shannon outside the jacks." He scrubbed his face with his hand. "Trying to get her to go in the bathroom with him."

My entire body tensed as a red hazy fog clouded my vision. I'd been mad as hell with Gibsie over the stunt he pulled at lunch yesterday, but right now, I was grateful for his meddling.

Tossing the ice pack on the ground, I glared out the window and snarled, "You're fucking kidding me!"

"Nope. He got a little shitty with her, too," Gibsie added, glaring out through the glass at McGarry. "Apparently McGarry has an issue with his hearing because the girl clearly told him *no*."

My legs were moving before my brain had a chance to catch up.

I warned him. I bleeding warned that little shite to leave her alone.

I was going to kill that little fucker.

"Don't," Gibsie warned as he grabbed my shoulder and pulled me back. "She's right over there, lad."

I swung around to find a wide-eyed Shannon staring back at me.

She looked *terrified*.

"For fuck's sake," I groaned, quickly turning away so I didn't see the fear in her big blue eyes.

All day, I'd been trying my best to keep my distance, but fucking McGarry had just screwed with that.

I *hated* him.

It was a strong word, but an accurate one when assessing my feelings toward the prick.

I warned him to stay away from her, and he went and did it anyway. Maybe once I used my fists instead of my words, he'd take me seriously. If he didn't, we were going to have an even bigger problem.

Turning back to Ronan, I hissed, "I'm going to give you a five-second head start, prickface, and then I'm going to cut your cock off and feed it to you."

"Fuck you, Kavanagh," McGarry spat out. "You can't touch me."

"One," I snarled, grabbing ahold of the door handle. "Two, three, four…"

"What are you waiting for?" Gibs chuckled, making shooing gestures with his hands. "Get going, Forrest."

"Five," I snarled, then yanked the door open.

McGarry shot off like a scalded dog, running at top speed. He could move as fast as his legs could carry him and he still couldn't outrun me.

Injured or not, I was a goddamn bullet.

“I’m sorry,” he roared over his shoulder as he pounded through the courtyard. “Stop—I’m sorry! I won’t go near her again.”

“Too little too late, asshole,” I shot back, closing in on him. Reaching out, I caught ahold of the back of his jersey and pulled him to an abrupt stop.

“Get off me,” he hissed, bucking against my hold.

“Come here, ya little shit,” I barked as I dragged him up the steps to the P.E. hall.

“Stop him,” Ronan screeched at Gibsie, who had trailed after us. “Gibs, come on, lad.”

“Fat chance of that happening, kid,” Gibsie called back. “Unlike your stupid ass, I’m *not* suicidal and have no intention of putting myself in the firing line.”

Stalking into the hall, I marched down the corridor and slammed my palm against the changing room door, pushing it open.

The team were all inside the room and turned to look at us.

“Oh, for Christ’s sake,” Hughie groaned, watching us enter with a resigned look on his face. “What did he do now?”

“He broke the rules,” Gibsie snickered. “Boy’s going to church.”

“And we were doing so well,” Feely sighed.

“Uh, Johnny?” Cormac Ryan muttered, scratching his stubbly jaw. “Should you be doing that to Coach’s nephew—”

“Be glad it’s not you, fuckface,” I snarled, keeping a death grip on McGarry as I dragged him toward the showers.

“Stop him!” Ronan demanded. “Lads—help me!”

No one moved.

Good. These lads had loyalty.

“Think you can put your hands on her?” I hissed when we were in the showers and away from the team. Releasing his neck, I shoved him against the wall. “Well?”

“I was only messing around with her,” he growled, pushing off the wall. “It was a joke. Christ, relax.”

“Do I look relaxed to you?” I took a step toward him. “Am I laughing, asshole?”

“Back up,” McGarry warned, raising his fists in front of him. “I mean it, Kavanagh. Back the hell up.”

“Nice words,” I growled, stalking toward him. “Pity you don’t know the meaning of them.”

He took a swing at me and managed to catch the side of my jaw.

Dangerous move.

“You cheeky little fucker.” I closed the space between us, grabbed his head, and buried my head in the bridge of his nose. An extremely satisfying crunching noise filled my ears. The steady stream of blood trickling down his face did little to sate the fury burning inside of me.

“Ahhhh, Christ!” Ronan roared, collapsing on the floor, clutching his nose. “I think you broke my nose, Johnny.”

“Your nose will heal after a break.” Grabbing his jersey, I dragged him into a shower stall, slapped my hand against the circular chrome nozzle sticking out from the wall, and watched as freezing cold water poured down on him. “But your spine won’t.” Crouching down in front of him, I held his face under the water. “And that’s exactly what I’ll crush if you so much as look at her again.”

“I was only talking to her,” he strangled out, red-faced. “Christ.”

“Well, *don’t* talk to her!” I spat out, glaring down at his stupid fucking face. “Don’t look at her, and don’t fucking touch her. She’s *not* for you.” With great effort, I forced myself to release him and stand back. “Are we clear this time?”

“Crystal,” McGarry muttered under his breath.

“You better mean it this time, kid,” I said in a warning tone. “Because if you push me on this, I’ll kill you.”

“I’m done,” he grumbled. “Fucking hell.”

I cast Ronan one final death glare before stalking back to the changing room.

Unsurprisingly, Gibsie was perched on the bench with a shit-eating grin etched on his face. “Is he alive?”

“For now,” I bit out.

Kicking off my football boots, I grabbed a pair of sweats from my bag and pulled them on over my shorts. I could shower when I got home. Right now, I needed to get the fuck out of this place before I blew a head gasket.

There were too many assholes in my close proximity, McGarry and Ryan to be precise, and I didn't trust myself.

Ironically, the lyrics of the song "Stuck in the Middle" drifted into my mind. Shaking the thought away, I concentrated on packing up my bag.

When I had everything loaded into my gear bag, I left the changing room without a word to my teammates. Thankfully, Gibsie didn't follow me.

I had my bag loaded into the back seat of my car and was rounding the driver's side when a sudden pang of uncertainty hit me in the gut.

Was she okay? *Should I go back and check on her?*

No, she was probably gone home. *I* should go home.

But what if she wasn't?

You don't have time for this, asshole, my brain hissed. *You have a PT session in an hour.*

Shaking my head, I opened my car door, only to quickly slam it shut and stalk back into the school.

You're just going to check on her, make sure she's okay, and then get the fuck out of there, I told myself as I walked through the school to the girls' bathroom. *There's nothing wrong with that.*

But there was.

There was something seriously *wrong* with this picture. I was standing outside the girls' bathroom, waiting on a girl to come out who might not be in there to begin with. I was as bad as McGarry. Disgusted with myself, I turned to leave.

I made it five feet before retracing my steps back to the bleeding bathroom.

What the fuck was wrong with me?

I was deep in thought, fighting an internal battle with my conscience, when the bathroom door flew open and a tiny wisp of a girl came rushing out and crashed straight into my chest. The minute my eyes landed on her, I knew I was in trouble.

You should have gone home while you could, eejit, my mind hissed. *There's no leaving now.*

Wasn't that the truth.

17
You’ve Got a Fast Car

SHANNON

My body smacked into a hard chest of muscle, causing my schoolbag to fall to the floor from the impact. Instinctively, my hands darted out in front of my face, self-preservation mode activated.

If I wasn’t so frightened, I would have been proud of the scream that tore from my chest.

It *was* progress.

Two large hands shot out, capturing my flailing limbs and steadying me.

“Hey—*hey*, relax.” I recognized the hint of a Dublin accent immediately. “Shh, relax. It’s just me.”

Sagging in relief, I looked up at his face, registering the familiarity.

“Oh god.” My words came out in a sharp gasp as I stared up at him, breathing hard and fast. “You almost gave me a heart attack.”

“Shite, sorry about that.” Johnny released me and took a step back, holding his hands out in front of him. “You were in the bathroom so long I thought I’d need to call in a rescue crew or something.”

He took another step backwards, then cupped the back of his neck with a hand, looking a little uncomfortable. He was still wearing the same jersey with the sleeves slightly torn at the biceps, but had switched his shorts for gray sweatpants and his footballs boots for a pair of runners.

“I just wanted to check that you were okay.” Shrugging, he dropped his hands to his sides and asked, “Are you?”

Was I?

“I think so?” My heart was beating at a hundred miles an hour, and I felt like I was two seconds away from passing out from the adrenaline

battering through my veins. Pressing a hand to my chest, I took a few deep breaths to steady my frazzled nerves before I could speak.

He was so much taller than me that I had to crane my head back so I could look at his face when I asked, “Were you waiting out here for me?”

“Uh, yeah.” Shoving his big hands into the pockets of his sweats, Johnny nodded. “I wanted to make sure you were alright. Gibsie told me what he said to you.”

“He did?”

“Yeah.” Johnny nodded grimly. “That fucker won’t be bothering you again.”

“Ronan?”

He nodded, jaw ticking. “Listen, I need you to trust me when I tell you that little scene with McGarry had more to do with me than you.” He shifted uncomfortably and ran a hand through his disheveled hair. “He likes to push boundaries—mine more than most.”

Push boundaries?

More to do with him?

“Oh.” I wasn’t sure what to say to that.

I was so confused.

“Thanks,” I added, because thanking him seemed like the right thing to do.

“No problem.”

“Did you, uh, catch him?” I asked, then immediately regretted my question. Why was I making conversation with him? That was my cue to leave. Why wasn’t I leaving?

And why wouldn’t my heart stop trying to beat its way out of my chest?

Was this going to happen every time I bumped into him? If so, I needed to get a prescription.

“Ronan,” I clarified, digging myself a deeper hole. “You were counting to five.”

“Like I said,” Johnny replied, jaw set in a tight line, “he won’t be bothering you again.”

My eyes widened. “You didn’t kill him, did you?”

He barked out a laugh. “No, Shannon, I didn’t kill him.”

“Oh, okay.” I breathed a heavy sigh. “That’s good.”

He tilted his head to one side, expression curious, voice soft. “Is it?”

“Well, I–I… Yeah,” I choked out. “I guess it’s always good to avoid a murder charge.”

“I guess that’s true,” he replied with a smirk.

“Well, I’m, ah, okay,” I said, tone a little strained. “Thanks for checking.”

He arched a dark brow. “You sure?”

“Yeah.”

“Good.”

“Good.”

He made no move to walk away, and weirdly enough, neither did I.

We both just stood there, a few feet apart, with him looking down at me, and me staring right back up at him. It was hard to explain what was happening, but it almost felt like he was rememorizing what I looked like.

At least, that’s what *I* was doing.

His dark-blue eyes were on my face, moving from my eyes to my lips and back up again. He was openly taking me in and made no attempt to be discreet about it. It was disconcerting and exciting at the same time.

My phone vibrated against my chest then, startling me, and thankfully giving me a much-needed reprieve from the strange tension enveloping us. Unbuttoning my coat, I dragged my phone out of my pocket, glanced at Joey’s name flashing on the screen, and quickly pressed ACCEPT.

“Shannon! What’s going on?” my brother demanded down the line. “Are you okay? Did something happen—” His voice broke off and he growled down the line, “If one of those posh bastards did something to you, I will lose my—”

“I’m fine,” I blurted out, interrupting him mid-rant. “I’m okay. Calm down.”

My eyes flickered to Johnny, who was still there, watching me with a considering look.

“I missed my bus,” I continued to say, turning my back on him to gain some much-needed composure. “And the next one’s not until quarter to ten tonight,” I quickly explained, keeping my voice low and hushed. “It’s already dark out and I don’t want to walk in case—” I stopped myself before finishing that sentence, then hurried on to ask, “Are you with Aoife? Can you guys come pick me up?”

Joey had his full license, but he didn't have a car. His girlfriend, who was still on her provisional license, had a fourteen-year-old Opel Corsa. It was old and sluggish, but it worked. Joey was a named driver on her insurance and her dessy driver most days, and I knew she allowed him to borrow it whenever he wanted.

"I'm really stuck, Joe," I added, voice small. "I wouldn't ask you if I wasn't desperate."

"Ah, bollox, Shan. I'm working until nine," Joey grumbled. "I got called in to cover for one of the lads, and Aoife works until half ten on Tuesdays so she has the car. Did you try Mam?"

"She's working the late shift," I mumbled. "And I'm not calling Dad."

"No! Jesus, don't call him," Joey agreed, tone hard. He sighed heavily down the line and said, "Look, hang up and give me a few minutes. I'll call around a few of the lads—see if anyone can pick you up. I'll phone you back in a few."

"No, don't do that," I was quick to interject. The thought of getting into a car with one of his friends, however tolerant they were of me, was not an appealing concept. "The school stays open late. I can wait here until my bus comes."

A gentle tap on my shoulder drew my attention away from my phone call. Spinning around, I looked up and locked eyes with Johnny.

"I can take you home," he said, blue eyes locked on mine.

"Huh?" I opened my mouth but nothing but blabbering came out.

"My car's parked outside." He inclined his head toward the entrance. "I can take you home."

"I, uh, I…" Shaking my head, I sucked in a sharp breath and tried again. "No, no, that's okay. You don't have to do that."

"I know I don't have to," he replied slowly. "I'm offering."

"Do what?" Joey barked down the line. "Shan? What's going on? Who are you talking to?"

"Oh, ah, just this guy from school," I explained, face burning with heat.

Johnny arched a brow.

I flushed bright pink.

My reaction brought a smile to Johnny's full lips.

"Guy?" my brother demanded, drawing my attention back to our phone call. "What *guy*?"

“Just a guy I know,” I squeezed out, tone pitchy. Biting down on my bottom lip, I glanced up at Johnny and said, “Honestly, it’s fine. You don’t have to drive me home.”

“Hold up—who’s driving you home, Shannon?” Joey barked down the line, distracting me once more. “Why are you talking to guys old enough to *drive* you home? You’re fifteen!”

“I know what age I am, Joey,” I shot back, nerves frazzled. “Look, relax.” Pressing my palm to my forehead, I said, “I’ll wait here until my bus comes.”

“Put him on the phone,” Joey ordered.

“What?” I gaped. “Who?”

“The lad who’s *just a guy you know with a car*,” he spat out, throwing my words back at me.

I balked. “*Why?*”

“Because I want to talk to him,” Joey replied impatiently.

I peeked up at Johnny, who was looking at me expectantly.

Dropping my gaze, I whispered, “Why do you want to talk to him?”

“Because I want to talk to the fucker offering to take my baby sister home in his car, that’s why.”

Letting out an impatient sigh, Johnny cleared his throat and held his hand out.

I stared at his hand and blinked in confusion.

“Give me your phone,” he instructed calmly.

“My phone?”

“Yes.” Johnny nodded. “Your phone.”

When I made no move to hand it over, Johnny swiped it out of my hand and pressed it to his ear.

“Hey, this is Johnny,” he said down the line, holding my shitty phone to his ear. “Yeah, I know your sister—” He paused before saying, “Kavanagh—yeah, that’s me.” Another pause followed before he nodded. “Thanks. It was a strong performance all round.”

Mortified, I reached up and tried to grab my phone, but he was too tall.

Holding a hand out between us to keep me at bay, Johnny continued to talk—to my *brother*.

“Probably,” he said into the phone. “Yeah, it’s a risky move. No, tickets don’t go on sale for the summer tour until May… Yeah, I’ll see what I can

do. Home games only, though… Cool."

What? Seriously, *what*?

Confused didn't begin to explain how I was feeling in this moment.

"I'm well aware," Johnny said in a dry tone, obviously responding to something Joey was saying. "*No*, I don't… We're, uh, yeah, we're friends…obviously… A full license…yes…" His gaze flickered to my face. "Seventeen… I know that… Yeah, I get it… I know the difference… I won't," Johnny said before pressing END on the call and holding my phone out for me.

"What just happened?" I balked, staring down at the black screen of my phone. "What did he say to you?"

Johnny shrugged, but didn't answer my question. Instead, he swooped down and grabbed my schoolbag.

"Come on." Throwing my bag over his shoulder, he pressed a hand to my back and nudged me forward. "Big brother gave me permission to take you home."

"What about your schoolbag?" I blurted out, noting he was only carrying mine.

"It's in the car," he replied, continuing to shepherd me toward the door. "Let's go."

Like a lamb to the slaughter, I went with him, knowing this was a terrible idea, but unable to stop my feet from moving. There was only a handful of students in the corridors, but I swear I felt every one of their stares as I walked toward the front door with Johnny.

Johnny yanked the glass door open and waited for me to step out before following me.

I had no idea what to do—or say for that matter. I was so far out of my comfort zone, I could barely function. I felt a little light-headed if I was being honest.

We walked side by side in silence through the courtyard and down the avenue toward the student car park. Even though today was March first, and the second month of spring in Ireland, it was dark outside, not to mention freezing cold. I wasn't a fan of being outside in the dark, and I found myself sticking close to him. Concussion-giver or not, some part of my brain told me that I was safe with this boy.

That was probably the concussed part talking.

“He didn’t hurt you, did he?” Johnny asked, breaking the silence when we entered the parking area.

“What?” I turned my face to look at him. “No, no, I’m okay.”

“You’re sure?” He was staring straight ahead, so I did the same, feeling too exposed around him. “He didn’t put his hands on you?”

“I’m sure.” Sliding my hands into my coat pockets, I kept my gaze on the line of cars up ahead. “I’m okay.”

Johnny tensed and the move caused his arm to rub against mine. “You know, you can tell me if he did.” He shoved his hand into his pocket and retrieved a set of keys. “You don’t have to be afraid.”

“He didn’t.”

“Okay, good,” he muttered, pressing a button on a sleek black car key. Lights flashed from a nearby vehicle and he steered us toward it. “This one’s mine.”

“Whoa,” I muttered when I was close enough to make out the impressive-looking car. “You have an *Audi*?”

“I do,” he agreed, yanking one of the back doors open.

“Is it yours?”

“Why else would I be driving it?”

I cringed. “I thought it might belong to your parents or something.”

“No, it’s mine,” he replied. “My folks have their own transport.”

“Oh,” I breathed, gawking in admiration.

Because of the darkness, I couldn’t depict if the car was black or navy, but god almighty, darkness or not, I could easily tell that it was fancy. And new. And fast. And *expensive*.

No wonder he didn’t want the sixty-five euros back.

“Is it an A3?” I asked, awestruck.

“Yeah,” Johnny replied, tossing my bag into the back seat where it joined another schoolbag and several more gear bags, all with different club crests.

I could spot a sports bag a mile away, having spent most of my life falling over them. I was also painfully aware of the stench of *teenage boy* that came from one of those bags. It was similar to the stench that wafted from Joey’s bedroom, a distinctive odor comprised of a combination of sweat, sex, and man.

Peeking over his shoulder, I ignored the stench of boy and marveled at the leather interior.

“Are you into cars or something?” he asked, turning his head just in time to catch me snooping over his shoulder.

“Not really.” I took a step back and shrugged, feeling a surge of heat flood my face and a whole truckload of relief to have been caught checking out his car and *not* his ass in those pants.

Because I had totally checked that out, too. It was hard not to. It was round and firm and…

“But my brother Joey is, so I know a lot of the types from listening to him,” I hurried to explain and distract myself from my dangerous thoughts. “That’s a fast car.”

“Yeah, it’s pretty decent for now.”

“For now?”

Nodding, Johnny closed the back door and flashed me a quick smile before opening the front passenger door.

“Ah, shite,” he grumbled, staring in dismay. “Sorry about this. I wasn’t planning on having anyone in here.”

My eyes took in the absolute carnage that was his front seat.

Holy hell.

It was a total mess.

“I can sit in the back if it’s easier for you?” I offered, not wanting to put him out any more than I already was.

“What—no,” Johnny muttered, scratching his jaw. “Just give me a sec.”

Diving into the car, he scooped up an armful of empty bottles, socks, plastic containers, chewing gum packets, deodorant cans, and towels, and tossed them over the back of the seat. He had to repeat this cycle three more times, dumping the rubbish from the front seat to the back, before the space was clear—pausing midway to pocket a black wallet, informing me that he had been *looking for this*.

Finally, when he was finished with the impromptu cleanup, he climbed back out, grinning sheepishly. “I think we’re good now.”

I smiled. “Thanks again for offering to drop me home.”

“It’s no problem,” he replied. “I figure I still owe you for the broken head, huh?”

“You didn’t break it,” I was quick to clear up. “You just knocked my brain around a little.”

Johnny grimaced. “I kind of did, didn’t I?”

“Well,” I mused. “It’s fifteen miles to my house. So, between the money, threatening to cut off Ronan’s penis, and the spin home, I think we can call it quits.”

“He’s not in your class, is he?” Johnny expelled a frustrated breath. “Because that can be sorted, too.”

“We only have one class together twice a week,” I explained.

The male-to-female ratio in third year was heavily unbalanced with eighty boys and only five girls. All five girls were placed into the same class, 3A. Luckily for me, Ronan McGarry was in 3D, so with the exception of a couple of mixed classes during the week, I wouldn’t have to look at him.

“He’s never spoken a word to me until this evening,” I added.

“Well, if he gives you even a whiff of shite, then let me know,” Johnny growled. “And I’ll fix it.”

“You’ll fix it?” I questioned. “You make it sound like you’re in the Mafia or something.”

Johnny barked out a laugh and held the door open, gesturing with his hand. “Come on, Shannon *like the river*. Get in my car.”

He was so unexpected, and I was so distracted by him, that I didn’t feel any hesitation. I just climbed in and fastened my seat belt, watching as he closed my door and jogged around the front of the car to his side.

It wasn’t until he was sitting in the driver’s seat beside me with the doors closed that I felt my heartbeat increase and my usual swell of anxiety churn.

“Christ, it’s freezing,” Johnny announced, rubbing his hands together before starting the engine.

He was right. It was freezing in here.

“It’s late to be catching a bus,” he added, flicking on the light overhead. “School finishes at four.”

“Yeah, I know.” I clasped my hands together, my entire body a bundle of nerves. “But the half-five bus is the only one that goes past my road.”

“That sucks.”

“It’s not so bad,” I replied, adjusting my seat belt. “I usually manage to get most of my homework done before I leave school in the evenings.”

A small shiver rolled through me then, to which Johnny automatically responded with, “Are you cold?”

Reaching for the heater, he turned it on full blast, then returned to rubbing his hands together and shivering. “Shouldn’t take long to melt,” he added, pointing to the thin layer of ice on the windscreen.

“I’m okay, but you should probably put a coat on,” I stated, eyeing his bare arms. “Or at least a jumper. It’s like two degrees out there. You’ll end up getting sick.”

“Nah, I’m used to it,” he told me. “I spend most of every winter on a pitch in the pissings of rain.”

“Playing rugby,” I filled in thoughtfully.

“Yep.” Cupping his hands close to his mouth, he blew a breath into them and continued to rub. “Do you play any sports?”

“No.” I shook my head and fingered a button on my coat. “I like watching, though.”

Tilting his head to one side, he studied my face. “Do you watch a lot of rugby?”

I could feel the weight of his stare in my cheeks.

They were on fire.

“Ah, no,” I mumbled. “I mean, I watched that one match last week, and I watch Ireland in the Six Nations championship every year, and I sometimes follow the soccer. But it’s mostly GAA—Gaelic football and hurling.” I looked over at him. “My brother Joey—the guy on the phone? He plays for Cork.”

“No shit?” Johnny’s brows shot up. “Senior level?”

“No, he’s only eighteen, so it’s the minors for now,” I replied. “But there’s talk of him being called up to the senior team next season.”

“You know, now that I think of it, the name Joey Lynch sounds familiar,” Johnny mused. He twisted in his seat to face me, expression full of interest. “He’s over in BCS, right? A hurler?”

“Yeah.” I nodded. “He was a dual player for years, like most people, but when he got called up to county level, he dropped football.”

“Nice.” Johnny blew out a breath. He sounded impressed when he leaned back against his door and said, “It’s not easy to get a call up to

county level anywhere, but especially in Cork where the competition is so fierce."

"It really isn't." I kept my body position straight ahead but turned my head to look at him. "People don't get how incredibly hard it is to play at that level and *stay* there. They assume it's easy for athletes and that they're spoiled and entitled, but they don't see the huge behind-the-scenes sacrifices that are made daily by those guys."

"You can chalk that down," he replied, nodding his head in agreement.

Propping a foot on his seat, Johnny hooked his arm around his knee, rested his other arm on the steering wheel, and gave me his undivided attention.

"Your brother's taking this opportunity with both hands?"

"I guess," I replied, thinking about my brother and his attitude toward life.

This was strange.

I usually wasn't much of a talker. Not around strangers at least. It didn't feel that way around him, though.

Not tonight, at least.

I felt oddly forthcoming and Johnny's interest in what I had to say encouraged me to keep talking. Besides, my brother was a safe topic. Everybody loved Joey, myself included, and I was fiercely proud of his achievements.

"But he's still in school—doing his leaving cert this year—and there are a lot of distractions for him. Our father wants him focused on hurling 24/7, but Joe is a sociable guy. He finds it hard to say no to his friends." I continued to ramble and Johnny continued to listen intently to what I was saying.

"Honestly, Joey has the talent and skill to play at any level," I stated truthfully, appreciating every nod Johnny made as I spoke. "It's keeping his head that's his biggest problem, and distractions are everywhere. Everybody wants a piece of you when you're in the public eye, and Joey has a hard time keeping his feet on the ground." I waved a dismissive hand in the air as I spoke. "I guess it's hard to keep your feet on the ground when you're a teenager playing in a man's world and reaping the rewards for it—" I paused, exhaling a heavy sigh before adding, "You know how it is with parties, girls, special treatment, and all that."

“Yeah,” Johnny replied, rubbing his jaw almost absentmindedly. He had this strange expression etched on his face as he looked at me, one I couldn’t quite depict. “I do know.”

“It was the same for Darren,” I added thoughtfully, thinking back to how similar my brothers’ lives were at eighteen.

Johnny’s brows knitted. “Darren?”

I flushed. “Oh, he’s my oldest brother. He played a year of senior level before giving up.”

“No shit?” Johnny’s brows shot up. “Why did he give up?”

“The pressure?” I offered weakly, unwilling to delve into my family’s issues. “I guess he lost heart in the game.”

There was a long pregnant pause after that where neither of us spoke. It was unsettling and brought with it my earlier anxieties.

“Sorry,” I mumbled, tucking my hair behind my ear. “I probably just bored you half to sleep with all that.” Fingering my braid nervously, I looked from the now ice-free windscreen to him before saying, “I’d say we’re good to go.”

Johnny made no move to leave. Instead, he surprised me by saying, “What about you?”

“What about me?” I replied, feeling a little unnerved.

“Are you a skilled camogie player?” He shot me a grin. “Since it clearly runs in your family.”

“Ah, no,” I replied, flushing bright red. “Definitely not. I was never any good at it. But I love watching. I love the physicality of the game.”

Johnny nodded, absorbing everything I was telling him with perfect politeness, only to surprise the hell out of me when he said, “I think you’d like rugby.”

My brows rose up at the odd statement.

“I think what you meant to say is I might *die* playing rugby,” I corrected, gesturing to my body. “If you haven’t noticed, I’m kind of on the small side.”

A huge smile spread across his face, dimples emerging.

“Yeah, I’ve noticed,” he said, chuckling. “I meant that I think you’d enjoy *watching* rugby. If you enjoy GAA so much, you’d love the physicality of rugby.”

“I do enjoy it,” I reminded him. “When Ireland are playing.” *Not that I have a bull’s clue of what’s going on,* I skipped adding.

“What about local teams? School rugby? Provincial sides? Ever been to any games before last week?”

He was firing off questions quicker than I could respond.

I attempted to answer him as best I could. “No, I don’t follow any team aside from the international squad, and I’ve never been to any other games.”

Johnny nodded again, taking in everything I was saying like it was important.

“I play,” he finally said.

“For Tommen. Yeah, I know,” I quipped. “I saw you, and I still have an egg on the back to my head to prove it.”

Johnny grimaced. “No,” he pressed, tone oddly serious. “I mean I *play*.”

I stared blankly back at him. “That’s…good?”

He released an impatient laugh. “You have no idea what I’m talking about, do you?”

“Nope.” I shook my head. “I honestly don’t.”

He considered this for a long moment before nodding. “I like that.”

“You like what?”

“That you don’t know what I’m talking about,” he replied without hesitation. “It’s a little insulting and a lot refreshing.”

“Uh, well, you’re welcome?” I offered, not knowing what to say to that. “So, rugby’s your thing, huh?”

Johnny smirked. “You could say that.”

I felt like I was missing something here.

“And you’re good?”

I thought he was good.

I thought he was the best out there last Friday, but I didn’t have a clue about the sport.

His smile widened, eyes crinkling slightly, as he repeated his earlier words, “You could say that.”

Okay, I was definitely missing something.

“Am I going to be embarrassed by this?” I asked, racking my brain for information that might help me.

I didn’t have any.

Sure, I knew he was the captain of the school team, and those photographers and reporters were snapping at his heels, but I figured that had to do with him being captain and the best player on the field that day.

However, I couldn’t shake the feeling that I was missing something.

“If I do an internet search on you, am I going to find out you’re some sort of rugby god?”

Johnny threw his head back and laughed. “No,” he mused. “I’m no god.”

“Then what?” I pressed.

With a rueful smile, Johnny steered the topic back to me once more by saying, “So, GAA’s your thing, huh?”

“Well, I really don’t have much of a choice in the matter,” I responded, going along with his diversion. “I have five brothers and a GAA-fanatic father so…” I let my words trail off with a small shrug.

“No sisters?”

“Nope,” I replied. “It’s just me and the boys.”

“How’s that for you?”

His question threw me and it took me several moments to form a response. “Okay, I guess.”

No one had ever asked me that before. Not even my parents.

“It makes for a busy home life,” I added, feeling the need to elaborate. “It gets kind of crazy sometimes.”

“I bet.”

Shifting his hand from the steering wheel to the leg he had planted on the floor, Johnny began to smooth his large hand over the front of his sweatpants, stopping to knead his thigh with his knuckles.

I would have been super creeped out by the move if it weren’t for the fact that he seemed to be doing this subconsciously, like he was soothing an ache.

“Are you close?” he asked, distracting me from my staring.

“Close?” I blinked rapidly. “To who—my brothers?”

He nodded.

I thought about it for a moment before responding. “I’m close to Joey—that’s the one on the phone earlier. He turned eighteen at Christmas, so

he’s the closest in age to me. Darren doesn’t live in Cork, and the three younger ones are only eleven, nine, and three, so we’re not very close.”

“He’s good to you?”

“Who—Joey?”

He nodded.

“Yeah.” I smiled. “He’s a great brother.”

“Protective?”

I shrugged. “Sometimes.”

Johnny nodded thoughtfully before saying, “So, you’re the middle child?”

“Yeah, I’m the third.”

“That’s a lot of kids.”

“What about you?” I turned the tables on him. “Any sisters or brothers?”

“Nope,” he replied with a shrug. “I’m an only child.”

Wow. “What’s that like?”

“Quiet,” he quipped before shifting the limelight back onto me once again. “You’ve lived here all your life?”

“Yep. Born and raised in Ballylaggin,” I confirmed. “You’re from Dublin, right? You moved down here when you were eleven?”

His eyes brightened. “You remember me telling you that?”

I nodded.

“Christ, you were so out of it that day, I didn’t think you’d remember any of it,” he replied thoughtfully, scratching his chin.

“Even if I hadn’t, your accent is a dead giveaway.”

“Yeah?”

Nodding, I put on my poshest south-side accent and said, “I’m from Blackrock darling.”

Johnny laughed at my attempt. “Not even close.”

“Let me guess, you enjoy dipping your toes in Sandycove before heading for a spot of lunch in D4?” I added with a snicker and another forced accent.

My cheeks burned.

God, I was so awkward.

“There’s nothing posh about me, Shannon,” Johnny countered, smile fading. “I might come from a decent area, but my parents work hard for

everything they have. They came from nothing and built themselves up."

"You're right."

He didn't sound posh at all.

My attempt at impersonating him was an epic fail.

What an idiot…

Embarrassed by my rare and poorly executed joke, I fiddled with my braid and mumbled, "I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry," he replied dismissively, smiling again. "Now, my ma, on the other hand, has a really thick north-side accent."

My eyes lit up. "Like in *Fair City*?"

Johnny scrunched his nose up. "You watch soaps?"

"I love them," I admitted with a smile. "*Fair City*'s my favorite."

"Well, if you heard my ma, you'd be in your element." He chuckled, oblivious to his weird hand-to-thigh movements. "My da was born and raised in Ballylaggin. So, he's a Cork native like yourself." Shrugging, he added, "I suppose I sound like a fucked-up mixture of both."

He wasn't. He didn't have an ounce of Cork accent in him. He was one hundred percent Dub, but I decided to skip telling him that and ask, "Why did your family move here?" instead.

"My da's mother was sick," he explained. "She wanted to come home to, ah, you know, so we moved down to take care of her." Dropping his hands in his lap, he fiddled with his thumbs. "It was supposed to be a temporary thing. I was enrolled in Royce College for the following September. We were supposed to go home after the funeral."

"But you didn't go back to Dublin?"

He shook his head. "Nah, the 'rents decided they liked the quiet way of life down here, so they put the house in Dublin on the market and made the move a permanent one."

"How was it—moving at that age?"

I had no idea why I was asking these questions. I couldn't remember ever talking to a random person for this long before.

But this was nice and Johnny was interesting. He was *different*.

I was stunned at how easy it was to actually talk to him.

"It must have been hard."

"It was a pain in the hole," Johnny muttered, clearly thinking back to the memory. "Coming into a new school halfway through the school year.

Changing clubs and finding my feet in a new squad. Taking some other fella's spot on the team and then dealing with the fallout." He shook his head and ran his hand through his hair. "I had to repeat sixth class over the move—some shit about policy or something."

"Where?"

"Scoil Eoin," he offered with a grimace. "The all-boys Catholic primary school."

My brows shot up. "Same as Hughie Biggs?"

He nodded, smiling. "Yeah, that's where I met Hughie, Gibs, and Feely."

"Those guys are your friends?"

He nodded, grinning now. "Unfortunately."

"Did you mind?" I asked then. "Having to repeat sixth class at Scoil Eoin?"

"I was raging, Shannon."

"You were?" I asked, ignoring the way my insides shivered when he said my name.

In fact, I was desperately trying to ignore the electric current of heat pulsing through my veins.

"Yeah, I was really looking forward to going to Royce with my buddies and the lads from the club," he explained. "Christ, I was fuming with my folks when they pulled me out and enrolled me at Tommen." He let out a small laugh, then said, "Six years later and I'm still pissed about it."

"Well, you seem to be doing okay for yourself here," I offered, unsure of what to say. "You have lots of friends, and you're still playing rugby and stuff."

"And stuff." Johnny chuckled, highly amused by my words. He studied my face for a long beat before asking, "Do you dance?"

"*No*, why would you ask that?"

"I don't know." Johnny shrugged. "Some girls dance instead of playing sports." His eyes trailed over me for a brief moment before returning to my face. "You look like you could be one of those—" He waved a hand around, obviously searching for a word, before finishing with, "You know, one of those tutu dancers."

My eyes widened. "You think I look like a *ballerina*?"

He nodded and a laugh tore from my lips.

“What?” He grinned sheepishly. “You’re small.” He motioned to my body with his hand before adding, “It’s not that far of a stretch of the imagination.”

“Well, I’m not a ballerina.” I laughed. “Or any other dancer, for that matter. I’m just stunted.”

Johnny cocked an amused brow. “Stunted?”

“Have you seen me?” I gestured to myself. “I’m fifteen, barely five feet, and I weigh like eighty-five pounds.”

“You’re six stone?” he breathed, eyes widening in disbelief.

Meanwhile, my eyes widened in disbelief at how fast he was able to convert pounds to stones.

Whoa.

“Jaysus, I bench twice what you weigh in the gym.” Johnny looked me over before asking, “Are you seriously only five feet?”

“If I stand really straight, I am.”

“Christ, I’m six foot three.” He shook his head. “You’re so small.”

“Exactly.” I pulled a face. “Stunted.”

“Jaysus, no wonder you folded like a lawn chair when the ball hit you,” Johnny muttered, rubbing his jaw again as his eyes traveled over me. “I could have broken you in half.”

“That’s one way to put it,” I replied, scrunching my nose up at the analogy.

“Is your mother still raging with me?”

“My mother?”

“Yeah.” He nodded. “She looked like she was two seconds away from ripping my head off that day.”

“My mother just got a fright,” I mumbled. “She saw that I was hurt and jumped to the first conclusion.”

“And the first conclusion was that I battered you?”

I shrugged uncomfortably but gave nothing away. “It happens.”

“Not from me, it doesn’t,” he pointed out, tone a little thicker now, eyes locked on mine. “Never from me.”

“Hey now, don’t be so quick to deny.” I attempted humor. “I just witnessed you threaten to cut off Ronan’s penis.”

“That little eejit doesn’t count,” was his grunted response. “I can’t fucking stand that kid, but his uncle’s the school trainer so I have no choice

than to tolerate him. He's always pushing my buttons and acting out on the pitch, pulling reckless stunts and causing unnecessary drama. It's like babysitting a fucking toddler during matches. I swear, it's a daily test to my self-restraint not to throttle the little bollox."

I smirked. "So, you're not friends then?"

Johnny scoffed at the notion. "Definitely not friends."

"Well, he's still young," I offered optimistically. "So maybe he'll mature with time."

"Like you?"

"Huh?"

"I mean you're in the same year as him," he hurried to explain. "But you don't act like you're fifteen."

"I don't?"

He shook his head. "You come across as a lot older."

"That's because I'm a ninety-year-old woman disguised as a teenager," I quipped.

"That's"—Johnny scrunched his nose up—"A disturbing concept."

"Yep," I mumbled, embarrassed at my crappy banter. "It is."

"So, what do you do?" he surprised me by asking.

"What do I do?" I'd been half expecting him to end the conversation there.

"Yeah." He nodded encouragingly. "In your free time."

I paused and thought about his question. "I don't really do anything," I finally said. "I guess I watch television and listen to music in my free time—oh, and I read a lot." Shrugging, I added, "As you can tell, I'm not very interesting."

Johnny tilted his head to one side, studying me with intense blue eyes. "What types of books?"

"Autobiographies. Fiction. Crime. Thrillers. Romance." I sighed, thinking of the pile of books in my room. "I'm not picky about genres. I just have to like the blurb. If the back of the book can suck me in, then I'm sold."

Johnny watched me while I spoke, his gaze intense and searching.

"You're a reader," he finally said.

It wasn't a question. It sounded more like he was banking that piece of information away in his mind.

“That’s really good.”

“Do you read?” I asked him.

He grimaced. “Not as much as I should.”

“So, not at all?” I teased.

“Honestly, no,” he admitted with a lopsided grin. Shifting closer, he said, “The last book I read that wasn’t school-ordered was about Chicken Licken and the sky falling down on all the little talking animals. Do you know the one?”

“Yeah,” I snickered, thinking about Johnny reading children’s fairy-tale stories. “I’ve read that one a couple of times to Sean.”

“Sean?”

“My youngest brother,” I explained. “The three-year-old.”

“You shouldn’t,” Johnny warned, suppressing a shudder. “That book scared the bejesus out of me. I haven’t read for fun since.”

My mouth fell open. “Are you being serious right now?”

“Hell fucking yes, I’m being serious,” Johnny shot back, looking comically wounded. “I was only small. It was one of those read-it-yourself books with the pictures in place for words and all that shite. They should have rated it PG because I swear to god, I genuinely believed the whole fucking sky was going to cave in on me.” He shook his head at the memory. “I slept under—rather than on—my bed for three fucking weeks until my da finally caved and moved me into one of the bedrooms downstairs.”

“Why?” I laughed loudly. “What good was moving downstairs going to do if the sky was falling?”

Johnny grinned and his dimples deepened in his cheeks.

“Ah, see…” He chuckled, tapping his head with his forefinger. “In my naive six-year-old mind, I was thinking that if the sky did in fact fall, it might break the roof, but it couldn’t possibly break the downstairs ceiling, too. I’d have a better chance of surviving on the ground level.”

“You were a clever little fella, weren’t you?”

“I was something alright,” Johnny replied, laughing along with me. “A bleeding eejit.”

“Wow,” I snickered between fits of laughter. “That’s survival at its finest.”

He gave me a wolfish grin. “Original Boy Scout right here.”

“Were you in the Boy Scouts?”

“Like fuck I was,” Johnny shot back, laughing harder now. “I was messing.” His eyes danced with amusement. “Why? Were you in the Brownies?”

“Ah, definitely not.” I shook my head, stifling a giggle. “My survival skills are terrible.”

Johnny’s voice was a little deeper when he said, “I don’t know about that.”

His expression shifted then, growing more intense.

Unable to take the heat, I turned my face away and glanced at the clock on the dashboard. It read 8:25. God, how long had we been sitting here talking?

“Tell me something,” Johnny distracted me by saying. He was still smiling, and his eyes were warm, his tone soft when he asked, “Why’d you transfer to Tommen?”

His question caught me off guard.

“I, uh—” Clasping my hands together, I cracked my knuckles and exhaled a heavy sigh. “I needed a change.”

“A change?” He arched a disbelieving brow. “Halfway through your junior cert?”

“It’s complicated and sort of private…” My voice trailed off, and I turned my face to look out my window, though all I could see was darkness outside.

I wasn’t comfortable with the direction this conversation had taken. Every time I thought about my old school, a fresh batch of terror enveloped me. My reasons for being here weren’t something I was willing to talk about with anyone.

“Hey.” I felt his fingers brush against the back of my hand, his voice closer now, soft and probing. “Where’d you go?”

I was startled by the contact. My head snapped back, my gaze flickering from his face to where his thumb was still grazing my hand, smoothing soft circles over my knuckles. It was only a harmless touch meant to capture my attention, but what surprised me most was that I didn’t immediately pull away. The awareness that I *liked* his touch was unsettling, but not nearly as unsettling as the urge I had to flip my hand over and entwine my fingers with his.

“Shite.” Yanking his hand away, Johnny shifted back to lean against the door, grimacing in what looked like discomfort at the move.

His hand automatically shot to his thigh again.

“Sorry,” he grunted and it was a noticeably pained sound. Clearing his throat, he added, “I shouldn’t have done that.”

“It’s okay,” I whispered, chewing nervously on my bottom lip. “I don’t mind.”

He exhaled a hard breath and then ran a hand through his hair with his free hand.

“No, it’s not *okay*.” His gaze drifted to my mouth and he expelled another hard breath. “It’s not fucking *okay* at all.”

“It *is* okay,” I tried to comfort him by saying. “Don’t be mad over it.”

“I’m not mad,” Johnny bit out, jaw clenched. “I’m just… Fuck!”

He so *was* mad.

My gaze flickered to his right leg, the one on the floor, and then to where his knuckles had turned white from the pressure he was using to knead his thigh.

Distracted by the sight, I blurted out, “What’s wrong with you?”

Johnny’s brows furrowed in confusion. “What do you mean?”

“You had an ice pack on your leg at school earlier,” I stated, gesturing with my hand to where he was still digging his fist into his thigh. “Are you hurt?”

His gaze followed mine to his thigh and he quickly yanked his hand away.

“Jesus,” he grunted, looking appalled. “I didn’t realize I was doing that.”

“You’ve been touching yourself since we got in the car,” I announced.

“Jesus Christ!” Johnny hissed, gaping at me in horror.

I immediately regretted my choice of words and began to backpedal. “I mean, not *touching yourself*. Obviously, you weren’t *touching yourself* touching yourself—”

“Please stop talking,” Johnny begged, holding up a hand.

I closed my mouth and nodded.

Shifting his body gingerly, he sank back down in his seat, flinching ever so slightly at the movement.

I watched in silence as he fastened his seat belt and inhaled a deep breath, expelling it slowly.

“Just to be clear,” he stated after a long pause of silence. “I really *wasn’t* feeling myself up or anything like that. I’m just…”

“Sore?” I offered, remembering his words from that day.

His gaze locked on mine, wary now.

“Yeah,” he admitted with a pained sigh.

I nodded in understanding. “You have an injury?”

Johnny looked from my face to his leg, a frustrated expression crossing his features.

“I have something, alright,” he muttered under his breath, and then released another agitated sigh before blurting out, “I fucked my adductor muscle when I was sixteen. It was brutal. Nothing helped, and it was compromising my game. I was in constant pain, Shannon. *Constant.* The physio wasn’t working and I couldn’t cope with the pain anymore, so I gave in and had the surgery at Christmas.”

He sounded angry with himself, which pushed me to ask, “And you’re mad because?”

Johnny shook his head and then ran a hand through his hair. He was quiet for so long that I didn’t think he was going to answer me, but then he mumbled, “It’s not healing.”

“Your leg?” I whispered, concern bubbling up inside of me. “Or your stitches?”

“Both?” he offered with a resigned shake of his head, then whispered, “All of it.”

This was a strange admission between two relative strangers, and I got the distinct feeling that Johnny didn’t overshare often.

He looked annoyed with himself, and I wasn’t sure if it was because he was injured or because he told me about it.

Either way, I had the biggest urge to comfort him.

“Well—” Pausing, I twisted in my seat to look at him and gathered my thoughts before saying, “It usually takes a lot longer than a few weeks to recover fully from an operation. You’re not a machine, Johnny. The healing process takes time. A teammate of Joey’s had surgery last year to have his hamstring repaired. It took five months until he was match fit.”

“It’s been *ten* weeks,” he shot back, his tone taking on a hard edge, mirroring the frustration in his eyes. “My surgeon told me that I’m on track to full recovery, and my GP cleared me to play after three weeks. It was supposed to be a minor procedure but it looks fucking horr—” Johnny stopped short and shook his head, exhaling a frustrated breath. “It *shouldn’t* be taking this long,” he reiterated, glaring down at his thigh like it was the enemy. “It’s a fucking mess.”

“You were given the all clear to play after three *weeks*?” I frowned. “That doesn’t seem like a long enough time frame for your body to heal,” I heard myself respond, tone gentle.

“Yeah, well, I was,” he huffed.

“Johnny,” I said quietly. “You should probably only be going back to training now.”

He shook his head and muttered, “You don’t get it.”

No, I definitely didn’t, but that didn’t stop me from saying, “You said your stitches haven’t healed?”

He gave me a wary look but didn’t respond.

“Can you show me?” I asked. “I’m good with stitches.”

I’ve had enough of them.

“Shannon, I had surgery on my *adductor*,” Johnny bit out, tone thick, eyes laced with confusion.

“I know,” I replied. “But I’ve seen a million sports injuries on legs and knees, so maybe I can tell you what the problem is?” Shrugging, I added, “It’s probably just taking longer to heal because you’re on your feet all the time.”

“My leg’s not the problem, Shannon.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I just presumed because I saw you limping,” I replied. “Is it your thigh?”

“No,” he deadpanned.

My cheeks switched from mildly warm to hot as a furnace in the time it took me to register that Johnny’s injury was positioned much higher than I had originally thought.

My mouth formed an *O* as vivid images of severed boy parts entered my mind.

“Yeah,” Johnny bit out derisively, looking both frustrated and uncomfortable. “*Oh*.”

“Well, I–I…” Rambling, I shook my head and tried again. “I don’t know how to help you with that.”

“Relax, I wasn’t going to let you examine it,” he tossed back defensively.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, thoroughly mortified. “I didn’t…uh, realize where it was.”

“And by the way,” he added, eyes narrowed, “It’s my groin I had surgery on—not my cock—so I’d appreciate you having the facts right before you go running your mouth about it.”

What?

“Running my mouth?” My eyes drifted from his face to his crotch, an unstoppable reaction of hearing the word *cock* come out of his mouth. “I don’t—”

“I know what girls are like for gossiping,” he bit out, jaw flexing. “Fuck, what am I doing?”

I gaped at him. “Gossiping?”

Was he serious?

“Look, just forget I told you any of that,” he huffed. “It’s getting late.”

Reaching between us, he closed a large hand over the gear stick and shifted into gear. “Where am I taking you?”

I blew out a breath. “I have no idea.”

He turned to look at me. “What?”

I squirmed in my seat. “What?”

“Your address, Shannon.” He drummed his fingers against the steering wheel impatiently. “You need to tell me where you live so I can take you home.”

“Oh.” *God.* “Sorry. Um, Elk’s Terrace in Ballylaggin.”

With a clipped nod, Johnny reversed out of his parking spot and then threw the car into forward gear before taking off down the school driveway. Flicking on the indicator, Johnny slowed to a temporary stop when we reached the entrance, leaned forward, and checked both ways before pulling onto the main road at lightning speed.

Leaning back in my seat, I raised a hand and grabbed the Jesus handle and focused on counting the cars passing us in a bid to distract myself from obsessing over the speedometer on his dashboard. I could feel the tension emanating from him, his earlier friendliness replaced with stony silence, our

conversation obviously the catalyst behind the shift in his mood. The silence enveloping us right now was thick and uncomfortable, and I was irrationally disappointed by this. I was more than disappointed.

I was reeling.

For the first time in forever, I had been *enjoying* myself. I had loosened up, bantering back and forth without the fear of, well, backlash.

And then he dragged the rug right out from beneath me. I hadn't seen it coming and I was regretting ever coming out of that bathroom stall.

When Johnny reached across the console and started switching out CDs in his swanky car stereo, I had to sit on my hands to stop myself from grabbing the wheel.

A few moments later, he settled on a song, track number five, and the car filled with a familiar guitar intro, providing a temporary distraction from my troubling thoughts.

Johnny cranked the volume and Jimmy Eat World's "The Middle" blasted through the car speakers so loudly I could feel the vibration of the bass in my bones.

I *loved* this song and considered it my anthem. Like seriously, I drowned myself in the lyrics daily. If music healed the brokenhearted, then the lyrics of this song soothed my soul. It was on a mix CD Joey's girlfriend made him for Christmas. He obviously wasn't keen on the CD Aoife had made him because I had swiped it from his bedroom last month during a random sister snoop-fest/spot-check and Joey had yet to discover it was missing. It was currently in my portable Discman where I listened to it on repeat every night before bed.

Concentrating on the lyrics of the song I already knew by heart, I attempted to get a handle on my nerves, but the punk rock beat only seemed to encourage the crazy in my designated driver because the minute we slipped onto the main road, Johnny put the pedal to the metal and floored it.

When the speedometer tipped over 120 kilometers per hour, I closed my eyes and stopped breathing. Covering my face with my hands, I peeked between my fingers, groaning when the flash of headlights of cars in the opposite lanes whizzed past us.

"What's the matter?" Reaching over, he turned down the volume on the stereo. "Shannon?" His attention flickered between the road and my face. "Are you okay?"

“You’re going too fast,” I strangled out.

“Relax, we’re going the limit,” he replied, but he slowed the car. “And I’m a good driver. You’re safe with me.”

“Okay,” I muttered, still feeling like we were going way faster than a hundred kilometers an hour. “But I’d feel better if you slowed down.”

Exhaling heavily, Johnny slowed even further. “Happy now?” he asked, tapping the dashboard.

Leaning over, I checked the speedometer.

Eighty kilometers.

“Yes,” I breathed, my coiled-up muscles relaxing ever so slightly. “Thanks.”

Sagging back in my seat, I allowed my gaze to drift over him. He was staring at the road ahead, one hand resting on the gear stick, the other elbow leaning against the door. As if he sensed me watching him, Johnny glanced sideways and caught me red-handed.

I smiled weakly.

He stared heatedly back at me, unsmiling.

My smile faded.

With a low, frustrated growl, he turned his attention back to the road. Shaking his head, he muttered something unintelligible under his breath, hand tightening around the wheel. Feeling dismissed, I clasped my hands on my lap and stared out the windscreen, not daring to cast another glance at him. We didn’t speak for the remainder of the drive, with only the songs coming from the stereo breaching the thick silence.

“Listen,” Johnny announced, breaking the silence when the lights of Ballylaggin town came into view. “What I told you back there? About my surgery?” His tone was level, polite even, as he stared straight ahead, maneuvering through the narrow streets and laneways. “I would appreciate your discretion.”

Appreciate my discretion?

He was embarrassed about having an injured groin? He should try having a useless father whose only talents were gambling his dole money and impregnating his mother, while whoring himself around to anyone stupid enough to have him.

Frustrated, I turned to him and said, “Who would I tell, Johnny?”

“Your friends,” he countered and then in a much quieter voice muttered, “My friends.”

“Well, I’m not going to tell anyone,” I bit out, annoyed and insulted. “I’m not a motormouth.”

He tightened his hand on the wheel but made no response.

Irritated by the sudden formality in his voice, not to mention the fact that he had spent the past fifteen minutes ignoring me, I glared at the side of his face and growled, “Why would I bother telling anyone anyway?”

“Because,” he bit out, keeping his attention to the road. “I know what most girls are like.”

Most girls? If he considered me to be like *most* girls, then why spend all that time talking to me? Why ask me all those questions and make me feel comfortable enough to answer him if he considered me to be just like *most* girls? Why bother with me at all?

“You’re being ridiculous,” I muttered.

“I’m being *careful*,” Johnny corrected calmly. “I shouldn’t have said anything to you. It was incredibly fucking reckless on my part, and now I’m asking you to do me a favor and keep it to yourself. I’ve a lot on the line here, Shannon, and word getting out about this could really mess things up for me. More than you will ever know.”

I folded my arms across my chest. “Fine.”

“Fine?” he repeated warily.

“Yeah,” I deadpanned, staring straight ahead. “Fine.”

“Great.” He blew out a heavy sigh and said, “Thanks,” following it up several seconds later with, “I appreciate it.”

Silence followed; thick, heavy, and unbearable.

I was conflicted by the turn of events.

Was he playing me? Had this been a big game to him? Messing around with my emotions by being kind and roping me into a false sense of security with all that getting-to-know-each-other talk back at the school? Dangling the prospect of a friendship in my face with all that niceness and small talk and then snatching it all away?

It wouldn’t be the first time this happened.

I should have seen this coming, and I was disappointed in myself for letting my guard down so easily around him.

Dammit!

“Are you okay?” he asked, breaking the silence.

I didn’t respond because I couldn’t. I was concentrating too hard on *not* crying.

“Shannon, I didn’t—” Johnny started to say but stopped short. He rubbed his jaw and then dropped his hand back on the wheel. “I don’t—” He stalled again, this time shaking his head. “Forget it.”

I didn’t probe or push him to finish whatever he had been trying to say. I didn’t want to hear it.

Retracting from the current source of my confusion and frustration—which was my designated driver—I focused all my efforts on ignoring him and keeping my emotions at bay.

If I could jump out of the car right now, I would, but he was a fast driver and I didn’t fancy my chances of surviving the postjump impact.

“What are you thinking?” Johnny finally said, making a left turn onto my estate.

It was a deep hilly ascent to my house with several hundred attached houses running side by side on either side of the road, mine at the very top.

Many of the houses were boarded up, others were dilapidated with untended gardens—my own included—but right now, I was too annoyed to care what he thought.

I swung my gaze to glare at him. “You want to know what I’m *thinking*?”

Johnny glanced sideways, eyes full of heat and barely contained frustration, and gave me a clipped nod before turning his attention back to the road.

“Fine,” I snapped, blinking back the familiar sting of tears as I proceeded to tell him exactly what I was *thinking*. “I think you’re paranoid about people finding out you’re injured because you *know* you shouldn’t be playing.”

The words were out of my mouth before I had a chance to check myself. But instead of apologizing or trying to take them back, I surged forward, shocking myself with the emotion in my tone.

“I think you’re in denial about your healing process and I *know* you’re hurt. You limp at school. Did you know that? *All* the time. Others mightn’t notice it, but I do. I see it and you do it *all* the time! So, I think you’re playing a dangerous game with your body, Johnny. And I think if your

doctors knew how much pain you are *actually* in, there's no way they would have signed off and released you to play."

I had no idea where this was coming from, but the words were bursting to come out of my mouth so I let them spill.

"I think this was a terrible mistake. I should have never accepted a lift from you. I think you overreacted tonight. I think you handled yourself terribly. And I think it would be best if you and I didn't talk anymore."

I blew out a huge breath, chest heaving from the sheer height of vocal exertion. My face was burning with heat, but I was proud of myself for getting that off my chest. It was uncharacteristic of me to have an outburst of this magnitude with anyone outside of my family, but I was glad. I guess it spoke volumes that I felt heated and weirdly comfortable enough around this boy to lose my shit, but I was too worked up to delve into the workings of that particular conundrum. For now, I would remain stewing in my apprehension and disappointment.

"Listen, I appreciate your concern," he finally bit out, pausing for a moment before adding, "At least I think that's what that was. But it's not necessary. I've got it handled—"

"You clearly don't," I shot back, interrupting him.

"You have no fucking clue of what you're talking about!" he snapped back. "I get that you mean well, but I know my own shit. I know my own *body*."

"Of course, I don't," I muttered, turning my face away to look out the passenger window. "Like *most* girls."

"You *don't*," he continued to argue. "You don't know me, Shannon."

All out of steam, I exhaled a deflating breath.

"You're right, Johnny," I whispered in agreement. "I don't know you."

"Stop doing that!" he snapped, running an impatient hand through his hair. "Christ."

"Doing what?"

"Twisting my words," he shot back angrily. "Not giving me a chance to explain. It's a dick girl move and I can't—fuck!" he roared, slamming on the brakes to avoid a rogue bicycle that was strewn in the middle of the road. "For Christ's sake. What the hell is wrong with people? Does the road look like a goddamn place to park a bike?"

“You can let me out here,” I stated flatly, unclicking my seat belt. “I can walk the rest of the way.”

I had the car door open and was out of my seat before he had a chance to respond.

Slamming my door shut, I opened the back door and reached into the piles of rubbish and dirty clothes for my bag.

“Shannon, wait, don’t go—”

“Bye, Johnny,” I whispered before closing the door and crossing onto the footpath.

I didn’t turn back when he rolled his window down and called my name three times.

And I didn’t turn around when he pulled up at the footpath, choosing to slip through the alleyway instead, with my head down and the sting of bitter regret weighing heavily on my shoulders.

18
Overreactions and Fading Dreams

JOHNNY

I was furious the entire drive home, hardly able to concentrate on the road with my temper. By the time I pulled into the driveway at home, my entire body was thrumming with frustration.

She walked away from me.

I called her and she walked the fuck away.

I wasn't used to being dismissed or ignored, and that wasn't me being a cocky shit. It was the truth. Touching her was a mistake. Doing it again was one I couldn't afford to make. She was fifteen years old.

The fuck was wrong with me?

It was bad enough when all we'd had were a couple of conversations, but now that I'd spent the bones of two hours in a car with her, I was reeling. When she asked her questions, they were deeper than the usual shite I was asked. That confused me. I couldn't read her. I couldn't figure out what she was thinking.

She lived in one of the council estates in town, the big one that was plagued by drug raids and hounded by the Gardaí, and that was a troubling thought. How the fuck did someone like *her* come from somewhere like *that*?

When I pulled into my usual spot at the back of my house, my mood was dark and my temper was out of control. Killing the engine, I sat there for several minutes, staring out my windscreen, striving to get a handle on the god-awful feeling of despair churning inside of me. Dropping my head in my hands, I grabbed clumps of my hair and just tugged.

I had learned a valuable lesson tonight though, and that was to never ask a girl what she was thinking if you weren't prepared to take a huge fucking knock to the ego.

“I think you’re in denial about your healing process and I know *you’re hurt… I think you’re playing a dangerous game with your body… And I think if your doctors knew how much pain you are actually in, there’s no way they would have signed off and released you to play.”*

Her words were haunting me. Probably because she made a valid point. I fucking hated that she was right about my body. I was stubborn like that, which was why I got so defensive when she called me out on my bullshit.

Still, though, Shannon didn’t know me. She had no clue of the pressure I was under. No one understood. And certainly not *her*.

And I absolutely did not walk with a fucking *limp*!

Jesus Christ!

Annoyed with myself for giving the girl any more airtime in my thoughts, I quickly pushed her away and concentrated very hard on thinking about nothing at all.

When I had calmed down enough, I climbed out of my car and slammed the door shut, only to immediately regret it when yodeling noises erupted. The automatic sensor lights in the yard were on, making it easy to see the two golden retrievers bounding down the lawn toward me, followed by a much slower, much older black Labrador.

“Sorry, girls,” I called out, temper dissipating at the sight of them. “Didn’t mean to wake you.”

Shoving my keys in my pocket, I scratched Bonnie and Cupcake, my mother’s dogs, on their heads before making a beeline for the older Lab.

Sookie was almost fifteen, and the hair around her eyes, nose, and chin had turned white. She was stiff and hobbled more these days, but she was still a puppy to me and would forever be the best birthday present a three-year-old boy ever received. She waddled into my arms and then dropped down on my foot, wagging her tail so hard her back was shaking.

“Hey, gorgeous.” Taking a knee, I wrapped my arms around my dog. “How’s my best girl?”

She rewarded me with slobbering kisses to my face and an arthritic-plagued attempt to give me the paw. Cradling her face in my hands, I scratched her ears and pressed my nose to hers. “I missed you… Yes, I did.”

God, I loved this dog. She was my baby. I didn’t care what the lads said or how badly they slagged me off over her name. Sookie was my girl, loyal to a fault, and I loved the shite out of her. It was a good thing she couldn’t

talk, because the old girl knew more about my shit than anyone else on this planet. Those big brown doe eyes always got to me, and the little white beard around her mouth always pulled at my heartstrings.

I didn't understand how people could hurt any animals, but especially dogs. They were too good for us. Humans didn't deserve the love and loyalty dogs gave them.

I was a dog lover. I trusted them. There was something about the way a dog looked at you; they didn't care if you were a famous rugby player or a homeless person on the streets. They only cared about how you treated them, and once they chose you as their human, you had a faithful friend for the rest of their lives. I didn't think humans were capable of such compassion and commitment.

Bonnie and Cupcake, put out with the lack of attention they were getting, pined loudly and jumped and scratched at my back.

If it wasn't so cold out here, and I wasn't so bleeding sore, I would run a few laps of the lawn with them to wear them out, but it was taking everything I had in me to stay upright, so I decided against it. I took the time to give all three a belly rub, stopping to give one extra ear rub to Sookie before standing up and heading inside.

The suitcase just inside the back door alerted me to that fact that my mother was home. If I hadn't seen the case, I would've figured it out by the unmistakable aroma of beef stew wafting through the air. With my stomach grumbling in agreement, I sailed through the utility room, following the delicious smell into the kitchen.

I found my mother standing at the stove. She had her back to me and she was dressed in one of those pantsuits she wore for work. Her blond hair was pulled back from her face with a fancy-looking clip, and she looked like *home*.

At the sight of her, I felt a weight shift off my shoulders.

My mother worked for some fashion consultancy firm based in London. She was constantly traveling for work, and I'd missed her these past three weeks she'd been away.

Hadn't realized how much until now.

"Hey, Ma," I mumbled, making my presence known. "How's it going?"

"Johnny!" Swinging around with a wooden spoon clutched in her hand, Mam beamed at me. "You're home." Dropping the spoon on the counter,

she wiped her hands on her apron and then made a beeline for me. “Come here and let me squeeze you.”

I moved in for a quick hug that turned into a full thirty-second hug.

“Ma,” I chuckled, freeing myself from her death grip. “I’m still here. Relax.”

“I missed you so much.” Reluctantly, she released me and took a step back, eyes trailing over me with that weird maternal look she always gave me. “Jaysus, you’ve grown another foot.”

I cocked a brow. “In three weeks?”

Mam returned my sarcasm with a scowl. “Don’t be smart.”

“I’m always smart.” I pressed a kiss to her cheek and then sidestepped her, my sights set on that pot of stew. “I’m starving.”

“Have you been eating?”

“Of course.”

“Properly?”

“Always.”

“How’s school?”

“It’s school.”

She didn’t ask about rugby. It was always questions about things like school, my friends, my homework, my day, and god love me, my *feelings.*

But never rugby.

It wasn’t that Mam didn’t care about my passion. She just always made it a point to let me know that she cared about the rest of *me* first and most.

“And Gerard?” My mother always used Gibsie’s first name. “How’s he doing?”

“He’s the same as always,” I replied, heaping stew into a bowl before moving to the island. “Is Da back from Dublin yet?”

My father was a barrister, a fairly prolific one at that, and spent a huge portion of his time rotating between Cork and his HQ in Dublin. It all depended on the client he was defending and the seriousness of the case. But it basically went like this: the bigger the crime, the bigger the commute.

My parents’ work commitments and schedules meant that I spent a lot of time on my own when they were traveling, and that was exactly how I liked it. Up until I was about fourteen, they would have our neighbor, Maura Reilly, come stay with me, but that was mostly just to drive me to school and training. I was mature enough to stay on my own and fairly self-

sufficient. Maura still stopped by when my mother was away on business, but that was more to clean up and cook a batch of meals. After so many years living this way, not to mention endless freedom, I didn't think I would cope with having them around me 24/7.

"He won't be back from Dublin until the middle of March at the earliest," Mam replied, coming to join me at the island. "I flew into Dublin this morning and had lunch with him before driving down," she explained before taking the stool opposite mine.

"Why'd you do that?" I asked between mouthfuls of stew. "You could've stayed above with him for a few days."

"Why'd you think?" Mam rested her elbows on the counter and smiled. "Because I wanted to see my baby."

I rolled my eyes. "I'm not a baby, Ma."

"You're *my* baby," she countered. "And you always will be. I don't care if you grow to seven feet tall. You'll still be my little Johnny."

Jaysus. What could you do with a woman like that?

Shaking my head, I gave up on my spoon and lifted the bowl to my mouth, draining the last drop of soup at the bottom before slapping the bowl down and sighing in contentment. No one cooked like my mother. Not the chefs at the Academy or the takeout restaurants in town. The woman had birthed me and she had a direct line to my stomach.

"I see your manners haven't improved," Mam quipped, giving me a disapproving frown.

"Can't help myself, Ma," I shot back with a wink. "I'm a growing boy."

Moving for seconds, I filled my bowl and just stood over the stove to eat. There was no point in sitting down when I had plans on cleaning out the pot.

"How did your checkup go last week?" she asked. "Is Dr. Murphy happy with how you're healing?"

Wouldn't know, because I didn't go…

I grunted a blasé response, too busy inhaling my food.

"What about the doctors at the Academy?" she pushed. "I know they weren't keen on you returning so soon."

Again, I grunted my response because getting into this with my mother was a discussion I could do without tonight.

If I lied, she'd see through me. If I told her the truth, she'd panic.

Either way this discussion went, my mother would insist on seeing my injury—a.k.a. my cock and balls. And either way this discussion went, I would lose my shit and tell her no.

Then she would overreact and get on the phone to my father and cry about how I wouldn't show her my "private parts" and how he needed to come home to deal with me because I was probably dying from gangrene of the penis or some other horrific and overdramatic illness.

Distraction and avoidance was key to a tear-free Mam and a trauma-free me.

"Delighted you're home, Ma, but I'm going to head up to my room and start on my homework," I decided on saying instead. "Fifth year is kicking my ass. I'm actually thinking about getting some grinds for Irish." I added that last bit in for extra affect. I didn't need grinds for anything. I hadn't scored less than a B on any test or exam since third year.

In fact, I could be the one giving the fucking grinds. I sure as hell spent enough time helping the lads in my business and accounting classes.

But my distraction worked, steering my mother's concerns away from my ailments and onto my education.

"Oh, pet, that's okay," she quickly announced, tone comforting. "I'm proud of you for being brave enough to admit when you're having a problem. I'll make a few calls in the morning to see what's available."

"Yeah, that might be a good idea," I agreed with a solemn nod. Stretching my arms over my head, I forced a yawn.

"You look shattered, love," my mother assessed, her brown eyes laced with empathy. "Why don't you get an early night and I'll write you a note for your homework?"

"Thanks, Ma, I'm wrecked."

I walked over and pressed a kiss to her cheek, and then hightailed it out of the kitchen before she had a chance to remember her earlier question.

"Oh, and before I forget," she called out, stopping me in my tracks. "I booked your car into the garage for service. The closest date I could get was Monday fortnight, so I'll give you a lift to school and we can pick your car up afterward."

"Ah, shite," I grumbled, turning in the doorway to face her.

"What?"

“I’ve sessions booked with the PT in the Academy every evening for the next month.” Exhaling a frustrated breath, I rubbed my forehead. “I need my car, Ma.” I looked at her with a hopeful expression before adding, “Unless you want to drop me off and pick me up at the clinic—or loan me the SUV?”

“Missing one session won’t kill you,” Mam replied in a level tone.

No, it probably wouldn’t—if I hadn’t missed tonight’s session over Shannon.

“Besides,” Mam continued. “I fly back out to London the day after that, and I wanted to spend as much time with you as I can before I go.”

Yeah, I knew she’d say that. The woman was all about spending time with me.

Dammit.

“The league final’s coming up,” I argued, even though I knew it was pointless. “It’s important for the school. I need to be match fit.”

“And you’re not match fit now?”

“Of course, I am.”

“Then what’s with the limp?”

My mouth fell open. “What?”

“Your leg,” she replied. “You’re not putting your weight on it.”

Shannon’s earlier words filled my mind and I balked. “I’m not fucking limping!”

Ma glared at me. “Watch your language, Jonathan!”

“Well, I don’t have a bleeding limp, Ma,” I shot back defensively.

“Why are you getting so touchy about it?” she countered evenly. “Is it your testicles, love? Because you can tell me if something’s wrong with them.”

I opened my mouth to respond, but quickly closed it. There was no point in arguing with this woman. I wasn’t going to win, and if I kept pushing, she’d do that sneaky fucking thing mothers did when they made you reveal things without asking.

Jesus Christ.

“Good night, Ma,” I bit out and turned to leave.

“One more thing?” Mam called after me.

Inhaling a calming breath, I turned back to her. “*Yes*?”

“Who’s this?” she asked, lips twitching as she tapped her finger on the newspaper lying open on the counter.

I frowned. “Who’s who?”

With a huge smile on her face, she picked up the newspaper and held it up to show me. “This,” Ma asked, full-on grinning now, as she tapped her nail on a huge-ass full-color picture of me with Shannon at the School Boy Shield game last week.

“Local or national?”

“National.”

Fuck.

My.

Life.

“Give me that,” I snapped, stalking over to get a better look.

Snatching the paper out of my mother’s hands, I stared down at the girl who’d been driving me crazy for the best part of two months.

Jesus, she looked gorgeous, all wide-eyed and smiling as I held her to my side. Her brown hair was loose and blowing in the breeze. The top of her head grazed my armpit, that’s how tiny she was.

And then my heart skipped in my chest when I read the caption.

> *Johnny Kavanagh, 17, pictured with school friend Shannon Lynch as they celebrated Tommen College’s win over Kilbeg in the final of the School Boy Shield last Friday. Kavanagh captained his school to their fifth win in a row of the Shield, clocking up another piece of silverware in his impressive career and putting to bed any rumors of existing injuries. The pretty schoolgirl was fresh-faced and beaming for the cameras as she congratulated Kavanagh on another win. When asked for a comment on the status of their relationship, Kavanagh politely declined—although they say a picture speaks a thousand words…*

“She’s a stunner of a girl, Johnny,” Mam mused, distracting me. “You look absolutely adorable together.”

“It’s not like that, Ma,” I muttered, knowing full well what she was hinting at. “She’s just a friend.”

“I’ve never seen you in the papers with friends that look like this one before,” Mam quipped. “It’s a gorgeous picture, love. The editor must have thought so, too, because they gave you a whole page.”

“I captained our school to the final last week,” I bit out, unable to look at her because my entire focus was on the picture. “We won. It’s a big deal. That’s why they gave me a full page.”

“I’m delighted for you, love,” Mam chimed happily. “Now, what’s her name?”

“Shannon.”

“*And*?”

“And that’s her name,” I deadpanned.

“Am I going to get anything else?”

“What else do you want?” I snapped. “I’ve already told you that she’s just a friend.”

“*She’s a friend*,” Mam snickered, tone laced with sarcasm. “Sure she is—and I’m the Virgin Mary.”

“Don’t talk about your virginity to me,” I groaned.

“Why?” Mam replied. “Would you rather I talk about yours?”

No.

No.

Sweet Jesus, no!

“I’m going to bed.” I tucked the paper under my arm before trudging out of the room—and not bastard limping.

“Give me my paper,” Mam called after me, laughing. “I want to frame that picture.”

“No, you’re bleeding not,” I shot back with a huff.

When I reached my bedroom, I flipped the lock on the door and dropped the paper on my bed before heading straight to my en suite bathroom.

Kicking off my clothes, I flicked on the shower and stepped inside.

Carefully lowering myself to the floor, I hooked my arms around my knees and bent my head. I didn’t have the energy to stand.

Mam was right.

I *wasn’t* match fit.

Sitting beneath the flow of scalding water, I closed my eyes as a shudder rolled through me. Using one hand, I pushed my hair back from my

face and exhaled a bitter sigh as every fear and concern about my future traveled to the fore point of my mind.

My life was going to hell. My body was falling apart. My dreams were slipping out the window. I had a whole heap of problems to worry about.

And still, I couldn't get *her* out of my head.

Midnight fucking blue eyes and painfully accurate words.

And now it was worse because not only was she in my thoughts 24/7, but I had a bleeding picture of her to torment myself with. And I *would* torment myself with that picture.

I planned on it.

19
Late-Night Reality Checks

SHANNON

“Good day?” were the words I was greeted with when I stepped through the front door after my disastrous car ride with Johnny.

Now, if anyone else in the whole wide world had asked me that question, I would have had a response, but this was my father we were talking about. He was standing in the small hallway, with a rolled-up newspaper clutched in his hand, asking me about my day, and that was a terrifying concept.

“Are you fucking deaf?” he demanded as he glared down at me, the white around his brown eyes completely bloodshot. “I asked you a question, girl.”

The stench of whiskey from his breath impaled my senses, and my anxiety skyrocketed as I mentally tried to figure this out.

He was paid his social welfare benefits on Thursdays. That was the bad day. Not Tuesdays.

Then I thought about what day it was and mentally slapped myself for being unprepared. Today was March 1. And it was the first Tuesday of the month.

Children’s allowance day.

The day the Irish government made their monthly cash payment to parents for every child they had. Which meant hundreds of euros wasted in the bookies and the pubs. Which meant weeks of struggling and scraping by would be incurred by our family because of my father’s inability to control himself.

My heart sank.

Muttering a quick response, I retrieved my house key from the lock, slipped it into my coat, and sidestepped his huge frame with the intention of

swiping a packet of biscuits from the kitchen cupboard and then hightailing it to the sanctuary of my room. With my wits about me and my brain on full alert, I managed to make it to the kitchen, but like a bad smell, both figuratively and literally, my father trailed after me.

Dad leaned against the doorframe, clenching the newspaper in his hand and blocking my exit. “How was school?”

I kept my back to him, busying myself with browsing through soup packets and tins of beans when I answered, “Okay.”

“Okay?” he sneered. “We’re paying four thousand euros a year for *okay*?”

There it was. There *he* was.

“It was good, Dad,” I quickly injected. “I had a productive day.”

“*Productive day*?” he mimicked, tone derisive and cruel. “Don’t get fucking smart with me, *girl*.”

“I wasn’t.”

“And you’re late,” he barked, his words a drunken slur. “Why the fuck are you late *again*?”

“I missed my bus,” I squeezed out, panicked.

“Fucking buses,” he snarled. “Fucking private school. You’re a pain in the hole, girl!”

There was nothing to say to that, so I kept quiet.

The way he always called me *girl*, like it was some sort of insult to be female, didn’t even irk me tonight. I was in full self-preservation mode, knowing what I had to do to get out of this room unscathed: take his shit, keep my mouth shut, and pray he left me alone.

“Do you know where your mother is, girl?” he snarled.

Again, I didn’t respond. It wasn’t a real question. He was pumping me with information before the onslaught.

“Breaking her back over you!” Dad roared. “Working herself to the bone because you’re a spoiled little cunt who thinks she’s better than everyone.”

“I don’t think I’m better than anyone,” I mumbled, and then immediately regretted throwing verbal petrol on his already burning temper.

“Look at you,” Dad sneered, waving a hand at me. “In your fancy fucking private school uniform. Coming home late. Thinking you are God’s fucking gift. Were you whoring yourself around?” he demanded, taking a

few staggering steps toward me. “Is that why you’re late again? Got yourself a little *boyfriend*?”

I immediately recoiled but didn’t dare open my mouth to defend myself. He wouldn’t believe me either way. Nine times out of ten, it made it worse.

And ten times out of ten, answering him back resulted in a stinging cheek.

“That’s it, isn’t it? You’ve been messing around with one of those posh rugby pricks with *Daddy’s money* at your precious *Tommen*,” he sneered. “Spreading your legs like the dirty little tramp you are!”

“I don’t have a boyfriend, Dad,” I strangled out.

Swinging his arm back, he whacked me across the face with the rolled-up paper. “Don’t fucking lie to me, girl!”

“I’m not lying,” I sobbed, clutching my burning cheek.

Being slapped across the face with a rolled-up newspaper might not sound like a painful thing, but when the man yielding the weapon weighed three times what I did, it *hurt*.

“Explain this, then,” my father demanded. Tearing open the newspaper, he roughly flicked through the pages until stopping on the sports section. “Explain *him*!”

Blinking away tears, I looked down at the page Dad was pointing at and immediately felt my blood run cold. There I was, in full Technicolor, smiling for the stupid photographer, with Johnny’s arm wrapped around my waist, all smiles and blushed cheeks.

I couldn’t think about the picture or question why it was printed in the biggest newspaper in Ireland because I was *terrified.*

I was so frightened that I could taste it.

You’re going to die, Shannon. This is the night he’s going to kill you…

“He’s the captain of the rugby team,” I hurried to say, trying to think up a lie to get myself out of the beating I knew full well I was about to receive. “They won some big match,” I rambled, desperately clutching at straws. “Mr. Twomey, the principal, had us all stand in for a picture with him… I don’t even know him, Dad, I swear!”

I knew I should have expected my father’s next move—he’d perfected it to a fine art down through the years—but when he clutched my throat and slammed me against the fridge, I was still caught off guard.

Squeezing tightly, he hissed, “You are lying to me—”

“I’m…not,” I strangled out, clawing at his hands. “Dad…please…I can’t…breathe—”

The sound of the front door opening and then quickly closing filled the air. Dad released my throat and I physically sagged in relief. Gasping for air, I scrambled away from him.

Seconds later, Joey appeared in the doorway, looking like a gift sent from God with a grease-stained face and oil-covered overalls. Joey patted Dad’s shoulder and then pushed him aside with ease before strolling into the kitchen, swinging a set of keys around his fingers. “How’s it going, family?”

He looked relaxed and sounded cheerful, but the tightness around his eyes assured me that he was anything but. Acting like he didn’t have a care in the world was Joey’s coping mechanism.

Mine was turning mute.

“Joey,” Dad acknowledged, looking slightly more alert now at the presence of the more dominant alpha in the family.

Our father may be big and bitter, but Joey was *bigger* and faster.

“Boys up in bed?” Joey asked, grabbing a can of Coke from the fridge.

Dad nodded but didn’t take his eyes off me.

“Where’s Mam?” Joey asked, obviously trying to ease the tension. Cracking open the cap, he took a deep swig, then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Still at work?”

“Your mother’s at work and this one here is late home again,” our father barked. He pointed a finger at me and slurred, “Missed her fucking bus apparently.”

“I know,” Joey replied breezily, before turning his attention to me. “How’s it going, Shan?”

“Hey, Joe,” I croaked out, clenching, then unclenching my fists to stop my hands from moving to my throat as I desperately tried to get my heartbeat under control. “Nothing. Just hungry. I was getting a snack.”

Joey walked over to where I was standing, feet frozen to the floor, and playfully nudged my cheek with his knuckles. It was a tender display of affection and a silent show of solidarity.

“Did Aoife stay long when she drove you home?”

My eyes widened in confusion.

The look my brother gave me said, *Go with it*.

Realization dawned on me. My brother was giving me an out.

“Uh, no,” I choked out, eyes locked on Joey. “She just dropped me off and went straight home.”

Joey winked his approval and then reached around me, shoving his hand into the back of the cupboard—the one I couldn’t reach without the help of a chair. “Here.” Pulling out a packet of chocolate biscuits, he handed them to me. “No doubt these are what you’re looking for?”

“It’s not a halfway house,” Dad slurred.

“This is my food, old man,” Joey shot back coolly, turning to face our father. “Bought with *my* money. From *my* job.”

“This is my house!”

“A house given to you by the government,” Joey countered coolly. “Because of *us*.”

“Don’t get smart with me, boy,” Dad shot back, but his tone lacked its usual punch.

Drunk as he was, our father was quite aware that the shit he pulled with me wouldn’t float with my brother.

They’d had several belting matches down through the years, but the fight that burned brightest in my memory was the one that had occurred this past November. The fight had been about the usual: infidelity. Dad had been caught with another woman, no surprises there, and had decided to up and leave us for the other woman—again, no surprises there.

Mam had just found out she was pregnant the day he left and had taken to the bed. Joey and I had spent almost two weeks taking care of the younger boys and cleaning up the mess our parents had made.

When our father finally rolled through the door, ten days later, stinking of whiskey and throwing shit at Mam, my brother had lost it. He and Dad ended up brawling in the living room, smashing through furniture and ornaments as they went for each other.

That wasn’t why it stood out, though.

It stood out because the fight had ended with my father curled up on the living room floor in the fetal position while my brother delivered blow after merciless blow to his face. It was absolute carnage, and while Dad had managed to break Joey’s nose, it was my brother who’d come out on top. Dad was in a bad way after the beating he’d taken, and in a screwed-up

way, it had worked to his advantage because Mam had felt sorry for him and taken him back.

However depressing that day was for us, as the children of toxic parents, it also signified a shift in power. That day's events showed our father that he was not the top dog anymore. There was a new dog in town—one who'd taken one too many beatings from him and was prepared to shut his shit down at any moment.

"Shannon," Joey said, tone level, eyes locked on our father. "It's getting late. Why don't you head on up to bed?"

Joey didn't need to tell me twice.

Taking the offered escape like a drowning victim would take a life jacket, I made a beeline for the stairs, halting in my tracks when Dad blocked the doorway.

"I'm not done talking to her," he slurred.

"Well, she's done talking to you," Joey deadpanned, coming to stand behind me. "So get out of her way, old man. *Now*."

There was a solid thirty-second stare-down between them before Dad finally stepped aside.

Bolting out of the kitchen, I ran up the staircase at top speed, not stopping until I was safely holed up in my bedroom with the door closed and the lock turned.

Barely taking time to catch a breath, I tossed the biscuits on my bedside locker, stripped out of my uniform as fast as humanly possible, and threw on my pajamas before diving onto my bed. Scrambling under the covers, I reached for the portable Discman under my pillow and pulled the covers up to my chin. I had one earplug in when the screaming started. Seconds later, the sound of furniture crashing filled my ears.

My stomach churned and I quickly rammed the other earplug in before firing up the old discolored Discman. Fumbling with the buttons, I pressed PLAY and turned the volume up to maximum level, praying the batteries had enough juice left in them to block out the hell that was my home. Clicking onto the loudest, hardest metal track on the CD, I lay back on my pillow and remained perfectly still, body rigid and coiled tight with tension.

Four songs in and my heartbeat returned to normal rhythm. Three more songs and the ability to form coherent thoughts returned.

It wasn't always like this.

Weeknights were mostly okay, with the exception of Thursdays, when Dad got his social welfare money at the post office. The weekends could be sketchy, but I was fantastic at avoiding confrontation with my father. If he was drinking on a weekday, I always made it my business to be home from school, dinner eaten, and locked in my bedroom by six o'clock. If he was drinking at the weekends, I didn't come out of my room at all.

However, the events of today had thrown me and I had made a fatal mistake. *Johnny* had thrown me. I let down my guard.

I *forgot*.

The album played to the end and I flicked it back on, repeating it on a loop. It was only when I heard the sound of the bedroom door next to mine slamming over the music in my ears that I unlocked my coiled muscles.

He was okay.

Exhaling a shuddering breath, I lowered the volume and listened carefully.

Silence.

Pulling out my earbuds, I threw the covers off and climbed out of bed. Tiptoeing over to my bedroom door, I turned the lock and crept into the empty landing. Feeling my way over to Joey's door in the dark, I grabbed the door handle and slipped inside.

"Joe?" I whispered when my eyes landed on him. He was sitting on the edge of his bed in his boxer shorts, holding a wad of toilet paper to his mouth. "You okay?"

"I'm grand, Shan," he bit out, tone sharp, as he dabbed the tissue against his bottom lip. "You should go to bed."

"You're bleeding," I strangled out, eyes locked on the stream of bloodstained tissue.

"It's just a busted lip," he shot back, sounding a little irritated. "Just go back to your room."

I didn't.

I couldn't.

I must have hovered at his door for a long time because when Joey looked up at me, his expression was resigned. Sighing heavily, he ran a hand through his hair and then patted the mattress beside him. "Come on."

Bolting over to him, I collapsed on the bed and wrapped my arms around my brother's neck, clinging to him like he was the only thing

holding my world together.

Sometimes I thought that might be true.

“It’s okay, Shan,” he whispered, comforting me.

“I’m sorry,” I choked out, tightening my hold on his neck. Tears spilled over my cheeks. “I’m so sorry, Joe.”

“It’s not your fault, Shan.”

“But I made him mad—”

“*Not* your fault,” my brother repeated, tone stern.

“I don’t want to be here anymore, Joe.”

“Me neither.”

“I’m sick of feeling scared all the time.”

“I know.” He patted my back and then stood. “One of these days, everything will be better. I promise.”

Walking over to his wardrobe, he pulled open the doors and dragged out the familiar sleeping bag and spare pillows. I didn’t have to ask what he was doing, not when I already knew and it made my heart squeeze tight.

When Joey was finished setting up the makeshift bed on the floor, he dropped onto it. Folding his arms behind his head, he released a heavy sigh. “Turn off the light, will ya, Shan?”

Complying, I leaned over the bed and flicked off his lamp before climbing into his empty bed.

“Thanks, Joey,” I sniffled, wiping my nose with the back of my hand as I settled under the covers.

“No problem.”

Turning onto my side, I looked down at him lying on his bedroom floor.

His curtains were closed, but the streetlamps on the footpath outside the house cloaked the room in a dull hue of faded color, illuminating the shadows on my brother’s face.

“Hey, Joe?”

“Yeah?”

“Can you do me a favor?”

He tipped his chin up, letting me know he was listening.

“Please don’t do to me what Darren did to us.” Folding my hands under my cheek, I whispered, “Don’t leave me.”

“I won’t,” my brother vowed, tone laced with grit and sincerity. “I won’t *ever* leave you here with him.”

I breathed out a shaky breath. “Mam is never going to leave him—”

“Mam can do whatever the fuck she wants,” Joey interrupted, tone hardening. “She made her bed when she took him back last time. She can keep popping out his offspring and put up with his bullshit for the rest of her goddamn life for all I care. But you and me? We stick together.” He turned his face to me and said, “When I get out of this shithole, and I will get out, I’m taking you with me.”

Chewing on my lip, I asked, “What about the boys?”

Joey exhaled heavily but didn’t respond.

Nanny Murphy, our maternal great-grandmother, picked our younger brothers up from school every day and dropped them home, fed and watered and dressed for bed around 8:00 p.m. Nanny had done the same for Darren, Joey, and me up until we moved on to secondary school.

It was a strange arrangement considering she and my parents barely spoke, and one I had asked Nanny about. I wanted to know why at the age of eighty-one she continued to help my parents when they clearly didn’t appreciate her.

She had raised my mother and her sister, Alice, when their parents passed away when they were children, but you’d swear Nanny was a stranger the way our mother treated her.

Nanny told me that she didn’t do it for them. She did it for us. Because she loved us. And we were not to suffer for our parents’ poor decisions. She had toilet-trained every one of us when our mother was working all the hours God gave her and our father wasn’t interested.

Nanny Murphy had stepped in when our mother and father stepped out. Nanny made it clear that she would love and nurture every child born out of their fucked-up union because we were her great-grandbabies.

Tadhg, Ollie, and Sean were relatively protected from the tornado that was our father because we were lucky enough to have a great-grandmother who loved us.

The problem was, Nanny was pushing on in life, and she couldn’t do this forever. She couldn’t keep wading in and saving the day. Her health was fading, old age was setting in, and money was as tight for her as it was for us. Nanny didn’t have the money to feed us on top of our three younger

brothers, and every time we ran to her with another problem, another wrinkle appeared on her face and another doctor's appointment accrued.

It was for those and many more reasons why Joey and I had scaled back on our visits.

"They're our brothers," I whispered, dragging myself from my thoughts.

"I'm not their father," Joey croaked out. "And who knows, maybe Mam will come to her senses before they completely fuck them up like they did us and Darren. Either way, there's nothing I can do about it. I can't take care of them, Shannon. I can't afford it and I don't have the time. I'm getting us out of here. That's the best I can do."

"You promise?"

He nodded. "As soon as I'm finished with school and settled in college next year, I'll get a flat. It might take me some time to put together the cash and get on my feet, but I'll get out of here, Shannon. I'll get *you* out of here. I can fucking promise you that."

"I believe you," I told him.

And I did.

He'd been telling me this plan since Darren walked out the door five years ago and left us to deal with our father's whiskey wrath alone.

I believed that my brother meant every word he was saying, every promise he was making.

Problem was, I could see the unimaginable sacrifices that would have to be made by my brother in order to make this work for us, and knew deep down in my heart that the probability of it actually going to fruition was slim.

Either way, the child inside of me clung to the promise for all it was worth.

And promises like that to girls like me were worth *everything*.

"Anyway, enough of the parental bullshit talk," Joey said, looking up at my face. "Tell me how you know Johnny Kavanagh."

"*What*?" I gaped down at him, startled by the sudden change in conversation.

It wasn't uncommon for us to change the subject after a night like this and talk about ridiculous things. To others, it might seem strange that we

were able to switch from serious, meaningful conversation to simple chitchat, but it was the norm for us.

We'd been dealing with our father's bullshit our entire lives.

Changing subjects came naturally to us. It was a coping mechanism we had perfected down through the years: deflection and distraction. But asking me about Johnny? That *threw* me.

"Kavanagh," Joey confirmed, eyes sharp and searching. "How do you know the guy?"

"He goes to Tommen," I explained, grateful for the semidarkness so my brother couldn't see how red my face had turned. "He's, uh, in fifth year, I think?" *I know.* "And I've seen him a few times at school. He's the one who knocked me out on my first day."

Joey's head snapped toward me. "It was *Kavanagh* who knocked you out?"

"It was an accident." I quickly reeled off the familiar words I'd spoken time and again in the past month or so. "He made a bad pass, or kicked the ball wrong, or something like that. Anyway, he apologized like a million times, so it's all good…" I finished with a big sigh, unwilling to provide any further information on the matter. "All over and done with."

"Well, shit," Joey mused, scratching his chest. "You'd think a guy in his position wouldn't be making Mickey Mouse mistakes like that."

"A guy in his position?" I remarked. "I'm pretty sure he's not the only person in the world to kick a ball arseways."

"No…" Joey shrugged. "Still though, I didn't think they made those kind of schoolboy errors in the Academy."

"Academy?" I exhaled a huff. "It's called Tommen College, Joe. Not *the Academy*."

"I'm not talking about your school, Shan," Joey said. "I'm talking about the Academy—you know, *the Institute of Further Progression*. The Academy's only a nickname."

"What the hell is the Institute of Further Progression? And how do you know him?"

"Exactly what it sounds like: an institute for *further progression*," he shot back sarcastically. "And everyone knows who Johnny Kavanagh is."

I didn't. I was baffled.

"Then why nickname it the Academy?"

“Because *the Academy* sounds better than *the Institute*.” Joey barked out a soft laugh. “You really have no clue who he is, do you?”

When I didn’t respond, Joey laughed again.

“That’s priceless,” he mused, clearly entertained. “You were driving around in his car tonight, and you didn’t even know.”

“Know what?” I snapped, feeling flustered and annoyed by my lack of comprehension.

Johnny’s earlier words floated into my head.

“I play… No, I mean I play…”

Dammit, I knew I had been making a fool of myself.

“What?” I demanded. “Is he a hotshot rugby player or something?”

Joey snorted loudly. “I can’t believe you don’t know.”

“Tell me!”

“You should have snapped a pic,” he added thoughtfully. “Oh, wait—you did. What’s the story with you being in the papers with him? The old man practically rammed it in my face.”

“I have no idea, Joe.” I shook my head and exhaled heavily. “They won some cup last Friday and I got pulled into a picture with him.” I shrugged helplessly. “I had no idea it would end up in the papers.”

“It ended up in the papers because he’s *Johnny Kavanagh*,” my brother stated, enunciating his name like it should mean something to me. “Come on, Shan.”

When I came up empty, Joey heaved an impatient sigh.

“He’s a big fucking deal on the rugby circuit. Jesus, you only have to turn on a computer or crack open the papers to read all about him,” he continued to say. “He was recruited into the rugby academy when he was like fourteen or some insanely young age like that.”

“That’s the institute place?” I shifted, leaning over to the edge of the bed to take his measure. “Is that a big deal or something?”

“It’s a big fucking deal, Shan,” Joey confirmed. “You have to be handpicked by top Irish rugby scouts to get trials. Money and pull have no factor. Selection is based purely on talent and potential. They teach them everything they need to know about a professional career in rugby and have the best coaches, physios, nutritionists, and trainers in the country watching over them. They run these insane conditioning programs and camps for their players, and it’s the best place to meet potential scouts. It’s like this

school of excellence for upcoming professional rugby players—except it's not a school. It's a state-of-the-art sports facility in the city. Actually, it's more like a puppy farm where they produce thoroughbred high-caliber rugby players instead of dogs."

"Ew." I scrunched my nose up. "Disgusting analogy, Joe."

"That's what it's like." Joey chuckled. "Only the most promising teenagers in the country get a chance to work with the Academy, and even at that, it's brutal. You have to be made of something fucking special to make it through the trials and get a season with them, never mind getting selected a second time. Personally, I can respect the hell out of anyone with that kind of self-discipline. He has to have some huge fucking work ethic to perform at that level in his sport."

"So, he's good?"

"He's better than good, Shan," my brother corrected. "I've seen a few of Kavanagh's games with the U18 squad that were aired on the telly over the summer campaign, and I'm telling you now, he's like a loaded gun on the pitch. Give him a sliver of opportunity and he'll expose the defense and hit the fucking target every time. Shit, the guy's only seventeen and this is his second season with the Irish under-eighteen youth team—and he'll move right on up to the under-twenties once he turns eighteen. After that, it'll be the senior team."

So, Johnny wasn't joking around when he said he *played*.

"I didn't know any of this," I mumbled, feeling like an idiot.

Why didn't anyone mention this? All the girls said at school was that he was amazing at rugby and was captain of the school team. I never even heard of this Academy thingy.

"You're blushing," Joey stated, sounding amused.

It was a completely accurate assessment, one I furtively denied. "I am not."

He snorted. "Yeah, you fucking are."

"It's too dark to see that, so how do you even know that I'm blushing?"

Joey laughed softly. "So, you admit it?"

"I do not." I bit back a curse. "And I am not."

He scoffed. "Don't give me that shit."

"What shit?"

"You let him drop you home."

I gaped. “Yeah. So?”

“You don’t even get in the car with Podge, and he’s been my best friend since nappies,” Joey challenged. “I’ve never seen or heard about you being friends with fellas.”

“That’s because I don’t have any friends,” I growled. “Or at least I didn’t.”

“So, you’re friends with him?”

“No, I’m not friends with him,” I ground out. “I missed my bus. He overheard me talking to you on the phone and offered to give me a spin home. You *know* this.”

“Yeah, well, word to the wise,” he replied breezily. “Don’t get your hopes up with him.”

“My hopes?”

“Yeah,” Joey yawned lazily. “It won’t end well.”

“What are you—w-why would I get my hopes up?” I shot back, flustered. “And hopes for *what*?”

“Whatever shit teenage girls get their hopes up on,” Joey countered, yawning again. “At the risk of sounding like an overprotective brother, he’s too old and *way* too fucking experienced for you.”

“I’m not getting my hopes up on anyone,” I denied heatedly before quickly adding, “Why are you even telling me all of this?”

“I’m not thick, Shan,” Joey replied. “I’m well aware of the way young ones get all hung up and go all fangirly on fellas in his position.” He shifted around on his makeshift bed, stretching out. “All I’m saying is, don’t read into him taking a picture with you or giving you a lift home tonight. He more than likely does that with a lot of girls.”

“I wasn’t!” I snapped. “I didn’t even know about his *position* until you just told me.” I followed up with, “And I’m well aware that him offering me a lift was an attempt to make amends for the concussion.”

“You’re sure?”

“Of course.”

“Are you sure *you* know that’s all?”

I balked with indignance. “*Yes*, Joey.”

“Well, good.” He sighed. “Because from what I’ve read in the papers, he’ll be out of here after the leaving cert, so pining after him would be a bad idea. Clubs are already crying out for him—even in the Southern

Hemisphere. It's only a matter of time before he's contracted out to the highest bidder."

"So?" My tone was defensive. "Why would I care? I don't even like rugby!"

"Calm your tits, Shannon," Joey huffed. "I was only trying to give you some brotherly advice."

"Well, it's not necessary," I grumbled, face burning. "And for your information, he's actually not that great," I decided to throw out there in a disdainful tone.

My earlier altercation with Johnny was still fresh in my mind, and I had an insane urge to take him down a peg or two—even if it was just to my brother.

"He's really moody and he drives like maniac—and his car is a disgrace, it's so filthy."

"What does he drive?"

"An Audi A3." I grimaced before reluctantly admitting, "It's so sweet."

"Of course, he does. They practically toss out top-of-the-range cars to their players." Joey blew out a breath and sounded a little fangirly when he said, "Lucky bastard."

Silence fell around us then, as I quietly staggered through my thoughts.

Reeling, I tried to digest the information Joey had given me. I tried to connect it to the Johnny I had met, but I *couldn't.* He didn't seem like a superstar rugby player to me.

Okay, sure, physically he looked every inch the description of one, but he wasn't… He didn't…

I shook my head, thoughts awry with confusion.

Now that I knew *exactly* how invested he was in rugby, I could understand his irrational reaction tonight. He didn't want anyone to know about his injuries because he was scared.

He hadn't admitted it, but now that I knew what was at stake for him, it made complete sense. If my future career I'd invested so much time and energy into was up in the air over an injury, I would do whatever it took to get back on track.

But lying about his recovery? That seemed like a risky move to me.

A dangerous move.

He'd said it himself; he wasn't healing right.

So why risk his body like that?

“What happens to a boy when he tears his adductor muscle?”

The question was out of my mouth before I had a chance to think it through.

“What—like in the groin?”

“Yeah.” I nodded. “What happens?”

“Depends on the severity of the tear,” Joey replied without hesitation. “But he’d be sore as fuck for a while. If it was bad, he’d probably need physio and rehab.”

“What if it was *really* bad?” I chewed on my fingernail and asked, “What if it was bad enough that he had to have surgery down there?”

“Shannon, stop!” Joey visibly shuddered and cupped his junk. “I don’t want to think about it.”

“Would it be really bad?” I kept pushing. “For a boy, that is? Would it hurt?”

“Put it this way,” Joey bit out, still shuddering. “I’d rather break both legs than suffer that kind of trauma to my package.”

“Would it hurt to walk and stuff?” I asked. “What about playing sports?”

“Shannon, it would hurt to take a piss,” Joey deadpanned. “Never mind running around on a pitch.”

Oh, Jesus.

No wonder Johnny was sore.

“Why?” he asked then.

“Oh, I was just wondering because Lizzie said her boyfriend, Pierce, had surgery to repair his adductor muscle back in December.” Shrugging, I continued to lie through my teeth. I didn’t know Lizzie’s boyfriend’s last name, let alone the condition of his adductor muscles. “Lizzie said he’s back playing rug—uh, soccer again, but that he’s still in a lot of pain. She asked me if I knew anything about it since you play hurling. I told her I’d ask you.”

“Well, you can tell her that I said the poor bastard deserves an unlimited supply of morphine,” Joey muttered. “And a bed. And an endless supply of ice packs for his balls.”

“His balls?” I swallowed deeply, eyes widening. “Why would he need an ice pack for those?”

“Because when the surgeons cut you open for that kind of procedure, they make an incision right below your s—ugh! I can’t.” Shaking his head, Joey snapped, “I can’t even think about it without going out in sympathy with the poor bastard.”

“But what if—”

“No!”

“But I just—”

“Good night, Shannon!” Flopping onto his side with his back to me, Joey grumbled, “Thanks for my future nightmares.”

Flopping onto my back, I cradled the top of my head with my hands and released a slow, steadying breath, hoping to calm my tremulous thoughts and make my mind go blank.

When the sound of Joey’s deep-sleep snores filled my ears, several hours later, I was still wide awake.

I was tired.

I was chasing sleep, urging it to come, but try as I might, I couldn’t make my brain shut off. Staring up at the ceiling, I mentally flicked through my own personal catalog of heartache. It was a sick form of self-harm because thinking about it did me absolutely no good, but still, I relived every argument, cruel comment, and painful memory I’d endured, ranging from taunts on the schoolyard at the age of four to the comments made by my father tonight.

It was the ultimate form of masochism, and a ritual I always performed after a bad day.

Closing my eyes didn’t help matters, either. Every time I allowed my eyes to flutter shut, the mental images of Johnny Kavanagh danced across my lids. I wasn’t sure if I preferred it when he was just the stranger who’d knocked me out and smiled in the hallways, or the moody, overreactive asshole who’d blown hot and cold tonight.

I definitely knew that I regretted learning what I had about him.

Discovering Johnny was an up-and-coming rugby star with a future bright sports career was depressing for several reasons, but one particular one stuck out in my head.

I had a superstar brother of my own, a can-do-no-wrong-in-anyone’s-eyes pretty boy who was praised for his performance on the pitch and rewarded with free rein of it. Joey, as good as he was to me, was also a total

manwhore who had left a trail of broken hearts from Ballylaggin to Cork city. He'd been seeing his girlfriend, Aoife, exclusively for about eight months, and he seemed completely devoted to her, but the jury was still out on whether he was fully reformed from his old ways or not.

Experience told me that boys were dogs.

And fathers. Fathers were bastards and men couldn't be trusted.

Not all men, I begrudgingly admitted, but most were.

Especially the athletic ones.

Being the sister of one, I had insight into the minds of these teenage athletes and knew that it was safest to be related to them, platonic friends, or just avoid them like the plague. They had big egos, larger-than-life attitudes, and highly charged sex drives. Loyal to their families, their team, and not a lot else.

Trust my stubborn teenage hormones to go wild at the sight of one.

Acknowledging it as the safest option, I decided I would move forward from tonight's events by blocking out everything I had learned about Johnny Kavanagh and by avoiding him.

I was young but I wasn't stupid, and I knew that harboring any sort of feelings, harmless crush or not, for a boy like Johnny Kavanagh would do me no favors in the long run. Because in all honesty, since the day he knocked me out, I'd been harboring *a lot* of conflicting emotions toward him. But the horrible way Johnny handled his discomfort tonight, along with the talk from Joey, was the cool hard dose of reality that I needed to kick myself back into touch.

I needed to forget about him.

And I would.

I hoped.

20
Mother Knows Best—Only in the Movies

SHANNON

When I woke up for school on Wednesday morning, my mother was waiting for me. In my rush to get out of the house—and away from my father—I almost didn't see her. It was only when I stopped in the hall to retrieve my coat that I noticed her sitting at the kitchen table, clasping a mug of coffee between her hands.

"Mam?" I frowned at the sight of her.

She looked exhausted, with dark circles under her eyes, complexion pale and gaunt. She was wrapped up in her old frayed polka-dot dressing gown—the last Christmas present Darren had given her before he left.

Abandoning my coat on the baluster, I wandered into the kitchen. "What are you doing up?"

"Shannon," she acknowledged, forcing a weak smile. "Come and sit with me for a bit."

I did because it was so unusual to see her at this time of morning, and I knew something was wrong.

I checked my watch, making sure that I hadn't accidently slept in or something. Five forty-five. Nope, I was early and something was definitely wrong.

Scraping a chair back, I lowered myself into the seat opposite her and asked, "What's going on, Mam?"

"Can't I get up to see you off to school?"

No. Not really.

Not at all.

My silent response must have spoken volumes because Mam set her mug down and reached for my hand.

“Shannon.” She finally got on with it and said, “I know you feel like we don’t… That sometimes your father isn’t very… I just want you to know that I love all my children equally, but you’re my special one.”

That was a lie. I wasn’t her special anything.

Darren was her favorite, and after he left, Mam was never the same.

In truth, between shifts at work and taking care of the younger kids, she barely noticed me.

I loved my mother, I truly did, but that didn’t mean I didn’t resent her weakness, which I did.

A lot.

Uncomfortable, I slid my hand out from beneath hers and asked, “Did you sign my permission slip for the school trip to Donegal?”

I knew she hadn’t. It was still on top of the bread bin—unsigned.

“I’m not comfortable with you being so far from home, Shannon,” she explained, worrying on her bottom lip. “Donegal is a long way away.”

Exactly.

“I want to go, Mam,” I whispered. “Claire and Lizzie are going, and I *really* want to go. I need to have the permission slip handed in before Friday. Otherwise they won’t let me go.”

Okay, so that was a lie, I had until after the holidays to hand in the form, but putting the pressure on her was the only chance I had of getting her to sign those forms.

“What if something happens to you up there?” Mam offered. “What if someone goes at you?”

“There’s more chance of that happening in this house,” I muttered under my breath.

Mam flinched. “Shannon—”

“Did *he* tell you what happened last night?” I bit out, knowing that this was what she wanted to talk to me about—what she wanted to make sure I *didn’t* talk about.

Straightening my shoulders, I stared across the table at my mother. “Did *he* tell you what *he* did to Joey?”

“*He* has a name,” Mam said in a tight voice.

“Did *he* tell you?” was all I replied.

“Yes, your father told me what happened,” she finally replied.

“And that’s it?” I leaned back in my chair and studied her face. “That’s all you have to say about it?”

“Shannon, it’s complicated.” Mam sighed heavily and dropped her head. “We’re all under a lot of pressure right now, what with the baby coming in the summer and your father being out of work. Money’s tight, Shannon, and it affects your father. He has a lot on his mind—”

“He split Joey’s lip, Mam!” I swallowed down the lump in my throat. “Over a packet of biscuits. And if he’s worried about money, then maybe he should stop gambling and drinking the children’s allowance money!”

My mother flinched at my words, but I was glad I had spoken them. They needed to be said. I just wished she’d start *listening*.

“Your father told me you were late home from school,” she continued to say. “He was very upset about a picture of you in the paper—”

“It was a school picture!”

“With a boy?”

“Oh my god,” I cried. “Not you too.”

“No.” She shook her head. “Of course not. I understand these things, but your father was very upset over it. You know how he gets—”

“So, it’s *my* fault he beat my brother and tried to strangle me?” I choked back the sob of outrage threatening to burst out of me. “For getting home late, or having a school picture taken, or for moving to Tommen? Which one, Mam? Or is everything I do wrong? Am I to blame for everything that goes wrong in this family?”

“No, of course it’s not your fault, Shannon.” She quickly tried to retract. “You’re not to blame, and your father loves you very much. But you know he has fears of you ending up like me. And he and Joey have a complicated relationship,” she said, trying to talk her way out of her responsibilities with lies. “Joey knows better than to rile him up like that—”

I cut her off with a shake of my head.

“*Stop* defending him,” I hissed, keeping my voice low as to not wake the man who had been successfully ruining my life every day since March 13, 1989—the day I entered this world and toxic fucking family. “Just stop, Mam! Nothing you ever say helps. It just keeps happening over and over again. So just stop apologizing and trying to explain his behavior away. We’re tired of hearing it.”

“I’m doing the best I can, Shannon,” my mother whispered.

“For who, Mam?”

Her eyes flashed with anger when she looked at me and spat out, “For my *family*.”

“For him,” I muttered under my breath.

My mother flinched, but I didn’t take my words back.

They were the truth.

“You can’t speak to me like this,” she snapped. “You have no idea how hard it is coming home every night to World War Three.”

I didn’t respond.

I had nothing to say.

If she truly believed that I didn’t know what it felt like to live in a war zone, then she was delusional as well as a neglectful mother.

“I’m tired of this, Shannon,” she said. “I’m exhausted from living like this. And I’m tired of being judged by my own children.”

“Well, join the club, Mam,” I bit out. “We’re all tired of living like this.”

“Don’t cheek me,” she warned. “I won’t put up with it, Shannon. I’m telling you now I will tell—”

“My father?” I filled in for her, tone high and pitchy. “That’s what you were going to say, wasn’t it, Mam? You’re going to tell *him* on me?”

“You need to show me some respect, Shannon,” she growled. “I’m working myself to the bone to put you through school, and I sure as hell don’t appreciate you talking to me like I’m the shit on your shoe!”

“Well, I don’t appreciate being called a whore every time I walk through the front door,” I choked out, my emotions spilling over.

Guilt for upsetting my mother was churning inside of me, mixing with a lifetime’s worth of resentment, fear, and anger.

“Because that’s what he calls me, Mam,” I strangled out hoarsely. “According to *my father*, I’m nothing but a dirty whore.”

“He was worried about you,” she replied. “He didn’t know how you got home last night.”

“He was worried about me so he called me a *whore*?” I shook my head, appalled. “Because that makes sense.”

“Because you were in that picture—”

“Have you seen the picture?”

“No.”

“Well, if you had, you’d see that I didn’t do anything wrong!” Batting away a traitorous tear, I sniffled and said, “I’ve never even been with a boy, Mam, and you know that. But he gets to call me a whore and you do nothing.”

“I did,” she defended. “I spoke to your father about it, and he’s promised not to do it again.”

“Forget it.” Shoving back my chair, I quickly stood up and moved for the door, unwilling to listen to her explain away my father’s actions. “Just *forget it*, Mam.”

I’d heard enough of those explanations over the years.

“I need to go,” I added hoarsely. “I don’t want to miss my bus again and cause any more problems.”

“Stop,” she warned, following after me. “I haven’t finished.”

“Yeah, well, I have,” I choked out, shrugging off the hand she placed on my shoulder. It was a gentle touch but it hurt worse than any slap he could deliver.

Ignoring my mother’s protests, I stalked out of the kitchen.

“How did you get home last night?”

Stopping at the front door, I swung around to face her. “*What*?”

“Your father thinks Aoife dropped you home from school last night,” she said, eyes laced with concern. “But I know that’s not true. She works on Tuesday nights. So, *how* did you get home?”

“What does it matter?”

“It matters because it’s fifteen miles to Tommen from our house, Shannon Lynch, and I want to know how you made that journey!” she demanded. “Are you having trouble again? Did you miss your bus on purpose to avoid more bullies?”

“No, Mam, I’m not having trouble at school,” I choked out.

“It wouldn’t be the first time you avoided the bus, Shannon,” she countered, blue eyes locked on mine. “If you’re in trouble, you can tell me. I can help you.”

“I love Tommen, Mam. I’m *happy* there!” The words that came out of my mouth surprised me because they were true.

Shockingly, I realized that I did, in fact, love my new school.

“Then how did you get home?” she repeated for the third time. “Tell me!”

“Johnny Kavanagh dropped me home,” I bit out, fighting back the urge to scream. “Okay? Are you happy now? He’s the boy I was with in the newspaper. I had my picture taken with him last week, and then I went and got in his car and he dropped me home last night, so I suppose you can run upstairs and tell Dad that he was right all along and I’m a fucking whore.”

Mam’s face turned deathly white. “I’m calling the school.”

“What?” My eyes widened. “Why?”

“That boy is not supposed to go anywhere near you,” she spat out.

“Why not?”

“Because he *hurt* you, Shannon!”

“It was an *accident*.”

“I’m phoning Mr. Twomey.”

Mam turned to walk back into the kitchen to get her phone, and I found myself chasing after her. “Don’t… Mam, *don’t*!”

“Give me my phone, Shannon,” my mother ordered when I wrestled it out of her hands. “Right this minute.”

“You don’t even know why!” I cried, clutching her mobile to my chest.

“I don’t care,” Mam barked and yanked the phone out of my hands. “He knows the rules. They were explained to him very clearly. He is not supposed to talk to you. He was warned, Shannon. In no uncertain terms. He should have been suspended for what he did to you. By the time I’m finished with him, he will be.”

“Johnny is *not* the problem here,” I strangled out. My heart was hammering in my chest; the thought of getting Johnny into trouble again was making me feel light-headed. “He apologized for what happened. He replaced my uniform. He stuck up for me at school when a boy was giving me trouble. He has been nothing but *good* to me, Mam.”

My mother was not a big woman, but at five foot eight and four and a half months pregnant, she made me feel very small in this moment. When her fingers tapped against the keypad of the phone, I reached my breaking point.

“I missed my bus!” I screamed, panicking when she began to dial. “I was scared of being late. I was scared of coming home late to *him*. I took the spin because I was desperate! Because I knew what he’d do if I waited for the next bus.”

“Shannon,” Mam whispered, pausing mid-dial. “You don’t have to feel scared to come home.”

“Don’t I?” I brushed my hair off my face and pointed to the scar on my temple.

The one that my father put there when he almost maimed me with a whiskey bottle when I was eleven. There were many more where that one came from, but she already knew that.

“You are so concerned with fighting the bullies at school, Mam,” I sobbed, tears streaming down my cheeks, “when the biggest bully of them all lives under this roof.”

My mother flinched like I had physically slapped her. I hadn’t. What she was feeling right now was a cold hard dose of reality smacking her in the face.

“You need to leave Johnny *alone*!” I screamed at the top of my lungs, voice shrill and furious. “He has done *nothing* wrong here! Absolutely nothing.”

I didn’t care anymore.

If I woke my father, then I woke him. If he kicked the shit out me, then I would heal.

I was beyond containing myself, and all of my concern was directed at the boy who had done nothing to deserve being dragged into the middle of my madness.

“I mean it, Mam,” I warned, voice warbling. “Call the school making trouble for Johnny, and I’ll tell them *everything* you don’t want them to know!”

Mam clutched her chest and shook her head. “Shannon.”

“Everything,” I bit out.

This time when I turned around, I didn’t turn back.

“Shannon, wait,” were the last words I heard before I closed the door on my problems.

Tilting my head up to the storm-ridden sky, I closed my eyes and absorbed the feel of raindrops pelting down on my skin. I stood right there in the middle of the torrential March downpour and prayed for divine intervention, or at the very least a little reprieve from the hell that was the family I’d been born into.

I never wanted to go back into that house.

Knowing that I had no choice and would have to go back was a special form of hell. For once in my life, I wanted a safe place to run *to* instead of *from*.

I felt like I was slowly dying in that house.

In my *home*. Where I was supposed to lay my head. Where I was supposed to feel *safe*.

The door opened behind me and every muscle in my body coiled tight with dreaded anticipation.

He was up and I was done for.

"Shannon." My mother's voice filled my ears, managing to dissipate some of the fear threatening to choke me. "You forgot to take your coat."

Stiff as a poker, I turned to find Mam standing in the doorway with my coat in her hands.

"You need your coat," she explained in a thick tone, gesturing a hand to the sky. "They're forecasting another storm."

"Don't you ever get tired of it, Mam?" I asked, voice breaking. Blinking back my tears, I choked out, "Don't you ever get sick to death of pretending?"

Her expression caved. "Shannon…"

She took a step toward me and I took three more back.

I couldn't keep doing this. I couldn't keep *living* like this. I laid my heart out to my mother. And she was worried about a *coat*.

"Fuck my coat," I strangled out as I broke into a run toward the bus stop, desperate to put some much-needed distance between me and my family. "Fuck my life!"

21
Closure

SHANNON

When I arrived at school, the anger hadn't dissipated one inch. I was so furious I could practically taste it, and in a messed-up way, I welcomed the emotion. It was better than the usual desperation and fear that rattled through me. The anger made me brave and it gave me the Dutch courage I needed to do what had to be done. Regardless of how much my brain told me this was a bad idea, I knew I had to do it.

I would straighten a few things up with Johnny Kavanagh, and then I would walk away with my heart intact and a clear conscience because I could not, in good faith, ignore what my mother had said.

Fueled by the adrenaline still coursing through my veins from my earlier argument with my mother and the disaster that was last night, I inhaled a steadying breath and marched down the corridor toward the fifth-year locker area.

When I spotted Johnny leaning against the lockers at the end of the fifth-year hallway and talking to a couple of older-looking boys, I blew out a ragged breath. Invisibility was both a beautiful thing and a necessary survival tool sought out by people such as myself. Associating with a future Irish rugby star was like throwing a six-feet, three-inch spanner in the works. Calling on every ounce of bravery inside of my body, I walked right up to him, relying on the adrenaline pumping through my veins to push my feet toward him.

His head snapped up as I approached, his sharp gaze honing in on me, blue eyes heated and wary, but I didn't stop.

I *couldn't.*

"I need to talk to you," I announced when I reached him, shaking from head to toe as the weight of what felt like a thousand pairs of eyes landed

on my body.

I expected two things to happen in this moment: either Johnny would send me packing or he would agree to go somewhere quiet to speak with me.

When Johnny tipped his chin up and uttered the word, “Leave,” I realized I had been right about scenario number one.

My adrenaline and bravery abandoned me in a rush and my shoulders sagged.

Nodding, I turned to leave, feeling thoroughly deflated, only to have a warm hand wrap around my wrist and pull me back to his side.

“Not you,” Johnny whispered in my ear, settling me in front of him. “Them.” His blue-eyed gaze darted to the two older boys watching us with curious expressions, and in a tone that left no room for discussion, he said, “Go.”

I watched in semi-awed amazement as the two lads he’d been talking to, along with the seven or so students loitering in the corridor, simply turned around and left.

“Whoa,” I breathed when we were alone in the hallway. “You really do have some serious pull at school.” I turned around to face him and once again had to crane my head back to see his face. “That was kind of epic.”

Johnny rewarded me with a boyish smirk that quickly morphed into a frown as he looked at my face.

“What happened?” he demanded, glaring down at me. “Who the fuck made you cry?”

“What?” I breathed, shaking my head. “I’m not crying.”

“Your eyes are red and swollen,” he deadpanned. “You’ve been *crying*.” His eyes moved to my cheek. “The fuck happened to your face?”

“What?”

“Your face,” he bit out. “Your cheek is red.”

“I’m fine,” I choked out, taking a safe step back from his overly observant eyes.

It was only then that I noticed he was still holding my wrist.

Johnny obviously noticed it, too, because he quickly dropped my hand and took a step back himself, then ran a hand through his mussed-up hair. “What happened to your face?”

My father beat me with a newspaper…

“Uh, don’t worry about that,” I muttered, wiping my cheeks with the back of my hand to erase any residual evidence of tears.

“Give me a name,” Johnny growled, dropping his hands to his hips. “And I’ll take care of it.”

“What—no! I’m grand,” I quickly replied. “I have allergies.”

“Me too. To assholes and bullshit,” Johnny snarled. “Now, tell me who made you cry and I’ll fix it.”

For a split second, I debated naming my father just to see if Johnny would follow through on his word and *take care* of him.

He looked like he could.

He was certainly big enough.

Shaking my head to clear my ridiculous thoughts, I looked up at him and said, “I need to tell you something.”

“Yeah, you do,” he shot back. “A name.”

“What? No, just stop for a sec.” Shaking my head, I held a hand up. “I have something important to say and you’re distracting me.”

Johnny opened his mouth to respond, but quickly snapped it shut. With a vein ticking in his neck, he nodded stiffly and said, “I’m listening.”

Here we go…

“Apparently you’re not supposed to talk to me,” I started off by saying, keeping my tone low and hushed. “At least that’s what my mother says—that you were warned to stay away from me? Anyway, I’m sorry about that,” I hurried to say. “My mother? You being treated like that? I had no idea about any of it.”

“I think your mother’s choice of words was *steer clear,*” Johnny quipped, shoving his hands into his pockets. “And don’t worry about it, Shannon.” Frowning, he added, “I’m a big boy. I’m well able to take care of myself.”

“But you did anyway?” I questioned, stunning myself with how upfront I could be with this boy who, for all intents and purposes, was a stranger to me. “I mean, you didn’t steer clear?”

He nodded slowly, eyes wary and uncertain.

I blew out a breath. “Well, I wanted to let you know that she won’t be causing any trouble for you. I’ve set her straight about you.”

“That’s what you wanted to talk about?” Johnny eyed me with caution. “Your ma?”

I nodded. “That and I’ll be making it clear to Mr. Twomey that there is no issue between us.” I exhaled a heavy breath and forced out the next words. “I also wanted to apologize for the way I left things last night.”

Johnny’s shoulders stiffened for a brief moment and then I heard his heavy exhale of breath. “You were right,” he finally replied. “I overreacted and handled it badly.”

“Maybe so,” I offered, my voice little more than a whisper. “But I didn’t know what playing rugby meant to you then.”

“And now you do?” he asked, voice low, tone gruff. “Now you think you get it?”

“No, not really.” I chewed on my lip before adding, “But I understand fear, which makes it easier for me to understand why you would feel the need to play through the pain.”

The stiffness in his shoulders returned, and he was quiet for so long that I gave up on waiting for a response.

“Well, that’s all I needed to say,” I whispered. “Bye, Johnny.”

And then I turned around and walked away.

Like I promised myself, I didn’t seek Johnny Kavanagh out after that. I cleared the air and I walked away.

All day, I steered clear of the hallways I knew he traveled through between classes—the one’s I’d mapped out in the previous weeks—and I avoided the lunch hall at big break.

He sat with a huge crowd of rugby players right by the entrance so it wasn’t a matter of being able to ignore him in there.

It was unnecessary avoidance on my part because on the few occasions our paths had crossed during the day, Johnny had dutifully ignored me—no smiles, no eye contact—and I, in turn, had pretended like I didn’t care.

I shouldn’t. I knew that.

I still did, though…

Like the masochist I was, I gave in to curiosity about him and did my research during computer class that afternoon. Internet searches, not to mention word of mouth from my friends, only solidified what Joey told me.

Johnny Kavanagh was a big deal.

Throwing myself into my schoolwork, I attempted to block out all thoughts of him, but it was a hard thing to do—what with him being the topic on the tips of most people's tongues around school.

I couldn't seem to escape him.

When I confessed to Claire during lunch that Johnny had dropped me home, her pupils dilated so much I'd thought she was about to have a stroke.

It was a confession I instantly regretted, considering she didn't let the matter drop. If she wasn't asking me questions about what we talked about, none of which I divulged, she was pointing him out in the halls or doodling *S.L. hearts J.K.* in our homework journals.

Fortunately for me, I was gifted at diversion and denial, and after a few hours of not taking the bait, she gave up on getting any more information out of me. I was glad because I didn't want anyone knowing how much of a mess I was on the inside. She knew I liked him and that was bad enough.

The only bright side to the whole ordeal was the fact that Ronan McGarry hadn't so much as glanced in my direction all day. During French, instead of sitting behind me, he sat at the other side of the classroom and dutifully ignored me like I didn't exist.

It suited me perfectly.

I didn't want attention from anyone, much less him. I didn't miss the fresh bruising under his left eye or the busted lip he was sporting, though.

A busted lip I knew in my heart had been provided by Johnny.

Leaving my coat at home felt like a stupid idea on the walk to the bus stop after school, especially since every stitch of clothing I had on was soaked right through.

Nope. I shook my head. *On second thought, I'd rather drown.*

It was better than taking my mother's pathetic peace offering, which had come in the form of my coat.

Other days it was chocolate or a cup of tea or a new pair of hair ties, or some other form of bribery given with the intention of shutting me up.

I knew full well that the text message I'd received from her at small break saying, I won't make trouble for the boy, had been sent with the hopes of receiving a reciprocating text message from me saying the same.

I didn't reply for two reasons.

One, I didn't have credit. Two, she didn't deserve to be put at ease.

Why should she, when I spent my entire life in state of constant unease?

I'd thrown her by threatening to tell the principal.

She wasn't the only one thrown by my erratic reaction. I had felt like a caged animal, cornered. I had never struck back like that before.

I'd never felt so strongly about something.

My small act of defiance was a futile one because I would be the one who would most likely end up getting sick, but honestly, had I taken my coat this morning, it would have been the same as turning a blind eye to what had happened.

And I refused to do that.

When I walked through the front door, I dutifully ignored my father, who was banging around in the kitchen, and headed straight for my bedroom, knowing that I would rather starve to death than set foot in that kitchen and face him.

Whether he was sober this evening or not, I loathed him with every fiber of my being.

Back in the house of pain, I closed my bedroom door and then quickly stripped out of my wet clothes before throwing on my pajamas. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed an envelope on my bed with the Tommen College crest etched on the front.

Reaching over, I snatched the envelope and ripped it open.

My eyes widened as I stared down at the permission slip.

My mother had signed it.

With the permission slip gripped tightly in my hand, I flopped back on my bed and released a ragged breath.

I was going to Donegal.

22
Borrowed Time

JOHNNY

Every Saturday from the age of six, I spent my day on a field with a rugby ball in my hands and vivid dreams flashing in front of my eyes.

As I grew up, those Saturdays evolved from throwing a ball around with my father, to playing with the minis, to drills and matches with my club, to training at the National Rugby Institute of Further Progression—a.k.a. the Academy—when I turned fourteen.

The routine changed, the pitches varied, but the dream stayed the same. The goal was *always* the same. Play for my country. And be the best.

This Saturday was different.

Because I was in trouble. Because I messed up at Academy training.

I showed my weakness and they were on to me.

I was slow and distracted, screwing up left, right, and center all morning until Coach hauled my ass off the pitch and into the office. He demanded to know what was wrong with me.

My problem was simple.

I couldn't move right. My body was falling apart. And my head was stuck on a girl.

Lying through my teeth, I managed to talk my way out of the danger zone and avoid more scans and tests, but still ended up being dismissed from training early and told to come back next week with a clear head.

Un-fucking-likely.

Depressed and demoralized, I drove around for hours, trying to get a handle on my head.

My body I could do nothing about, but my head?

I needed to get my head in the game.

Problem was, I left it with Shannon Lynch.

All my great plans of forgetting about her flew clean out the window the minute she marched her tiny arse up to me at school last Wednesday and demanded to *talk*. I was so fucking bowled over, I could do nothing but stand there, gaping like an eejit at the pint-sized girl pulling on every single one of my strings.

If that wasn't bad enough, she went and blew my goddamn mind to pieces by apologizing to me.

I wasn't expecting it and I didn't deserve it.

I wasn't thick.

I knew I handled it badly with her. I knew I overreacted.

If she'd given me half a minute to work through my thoughts, I would have put her straight. But she didn't. Instead, she walked away from me—again—and hadn't looked in my direction at school since.

A part of me thought it might be for the best. If she kept avoiding me, like I knew I needed to avoid her, then maybe I could make it through this weird phase and forget about her. But then I was hit with the stinging pang of bitter regret in my chest when she brushed past me in the hallway without a second glance, her coconut-scented shampoo hitting my senses like a wrecking ball, and I knew that wasn't going to work for me.

There was nothing forgettable about the girl, and I found myself gravitating toward her, wanting to find her looking at me, and then growing frustrated when she didn't. Knowing that I would listen to whatever she had to say, whenever she wanted to say it, regardless of time or inconvenience, was a frightening concept.

All week, I found myself moping around the place, not listening to a single word any of my teachers spurted. I couldn't concentrate on a damn thing, and it was all *her* fault. Furious at myself for being so stupid and letting a virtual stranger screw me up like this, I forced her to the back of my mind, blasted my car stereo to the maximum, and tried to drown her out.

When I arrived home after training, Gibsie was sitting on the back porch waiting for me and I immediately regretted texting him that four-page rant about mind-fucking girls last night.

"We are going on the lash," he announced the minute I stepped out of the car.

"No." Shaking off his hand when I reached the back door, I pushed it open and stepped aside for him to pass. "We're not."

“Yes,” he argued, sauntering into my house. “We fucking are.”

Holding the back door open, I let out a whistle and waited for my girl to come running. Waddling out of the garage, Sookie hurried toward me.

“Good girl,” I cooed, encouraging her to hurry her arse up before the other two dogs noticed.

Reaching down, I helped her up the step before quickly closing the door again.

“I’m really not up for it tonight,” I explained, walking through the kitchen to the hallway with Sookie at my legs. “You go ahead, though. I’ll hang here.”

“You’re not spending another Saturday night alone in the manor,” Gibsie argued, following after me. “You’re coming out with me.”

Gibsie referred to my house as the manor—had done so since our fucked friendship had been formed in sixth class of primary school and I brought the eejit home to play PlayStation. He knew it annoyed the shite out of me, so he kept it going.

It was a large eight-bedroom property in the countryside, with lawns and gardens spanning out the course of several acres, all of which were enclosed with fencing so the family dogs could roam freely without restraints.

The previous owners used to operate an equine center from the property, so it was filled with unused housing stalls and sheds, and the only access to the property was through the electronically gated entrance at the front.

Mam often talked about buying a horse for the stables, but thankfully my father talked her down from that particular ledge. She was hopeless when it came to animals. Problem was, she traveled a lot so it wasn’t practical or fair.

Three dogs were where my father drew the line.

My folks had converted one of the garages into a home gym for workouts. They supported my lifestyle and encouraged my dreams, even if they didn’t always agree with my methods of pursuing them. We also had a separate outbuilding built several years ago that contained a jacuzzi and sauna. It was a lifesaver after matches.

Our closest neighbors lived a mile and a half down the road so it was fairly secluded, and the house was south facing so it constantly captured the

sun. Even though I missed the noise and bustle of Dublin and spent a solid two years trying to get used to the quiet, I couldn't deny that where I lived now was fucking beautiful.

Not a manor, just a nice place to live in.

"Come on, Johnny," Gibsie pleaded. "You've been in a horrible mood for weeks."

"I wonder why," I grumbled. "Listen, lad, I know you mean well"—I paused to grit my teeth when a nerve pain shot up my leg—"but I'm not going out tonight."

"Because of Bella?" Gibsie asked, leaning against the banister. "Or because of Shannon?"

"Because of me," I snapped, bristling. "Because I am dead on my feet."

Forcing myself not to limp, I made it to the staircase, inhaled a steadying breath, and pushed my legs to comply and not let me down.

Like they did earlier.

"You're limping, Johnny," Gibsie acknowledged in a quiet tone as he followed me down to my room.

"Keep your fucking voice down," I hissed, pushing my bedroom door open. "My ma's in her office."

"Well, you are," he countered in an oddly serious tone. "Are you okay?"

"Took a spill at training—" I paused to lift Sookie onto my bed. "Nothing a night's sleep won't fix."

"You sure that's all it is?" Gibsie asked, sinking down on one of the beanbags by the TV, "his" beanbag. "If you don't want your mother knowing, I can drive you to the hospital to get it checked out—"

"I'm *fine*." Walking over to the beanbag next to his, I sank down beside him, only to hiss when a sharp pain rocketed up my pelvis. "Absolutely fucking fine."

Gibsie shook his head and reached for the remote control, thankfully keeping his thoughts to himself for once. Flicking on the television, he began to channel surf. "What do you want to watch?"

"You can go out," I told him, stretching my legs out in front of me. "I'm not holding you back."

"Nah." Standing up, he walked over to the PS2 and switched it on before settling back down beside me. "I was only trying to get you out of

the house.”

“Appreciate it,” I muttered, taking the controller he held out for me. “But not tonight.”

“You’re going to make that team, Johnny,” he mumbled as he set up a game of *FIFA 05*. “You know that, right?”

Exhaling a steadying breath, I forced the panic threatening to engulf me back down and concentrated on the screen in front of me.

“You will,” he added quietly.

“I hope so,” I bit out, focusing way too hard on the controller in my hand. “I really fucking do, Gibs.”

Otherwise, I was going to lose my mind.

“Do you want to get drunk?” he offered then. “Here—with your da’s whiskey and no clingers following you around and tormenting you?”

I thought about it for a minute and exhaled a heavy sigh.

“Yeah, lad,” I replied with a nod. “I really fucking do.”

23
Exes and Hell Nos

JOHNNY

I saw her again today.

We passed each other no fewer than five times in the hallway, and every single time she put her head down and walked past me without so much as a backwards glance.

This wasn't a new thing, of course. Shannon had been brushing me off like I was invisible for over a week now.

Nine days to be precise.

Being ignored didn't sit well with me. It was unfamiliar territory for me, and I was quickly learning that I didn't like it one bit. Especially when the person ignoring me was the very same one who was tormenting my every waking thought—my dreams, too.

That's right; I was actually fucking dreaming about the girl now. How messed up was that?

Last night, for instance, I dreamt that Shannon was watching me play. Except instead of being on the school pitch, we were at the Aviva Stadium in Dublin. And instead of wearing Tommen's black and white, I was wearing green and white.

Shannon had on a matching Irish jersey, with my name and number on the back, and she was cheering for me in the stands.

I was thrown the ball but when I caught it, Shannon began to cry. For real, her face was contorted in pain and she was pointing at me. That's when it got really disturbing because when I looked down, my legs were gone.

In their place were two stumps.

Then I began to shrink away, shriveling up like the creepy guy in the Harry Potter books. Shannon's distraught face was the last thing I saw before I jerked awake.

It was fucking horrendous.

I woke up in a bog of sweat and spent a solid five minutes patting my legs to assure my panicked mind that they were still there. I couldn't shake the feeling that the dream was a warning sign. Of what, I had no idea, but I had this god-awful feeling of dread in the pit of my stomach that wouldn't go away.

That feeling had stuck with me all day. I couldn't seem to shake it off.

I couldn't shake *her* off.

None of this made any sense to me, and I had no goddamn clue why she was the person I wanted to go to.

Not Gibs. Not my ma. Not my coaches.

I was freaking the fuck out inside, worrying myself half to death over the summer campaign, and it was a girl I barely knew, with soul-deep eyes, that I wanted to confide in. Because something told me I could. Because somewhere deep down inside of me, I felt like she *knew* me.

Like she could save me?

Jesus, I was losing my bleeding mind…

After a disastrous last class on Friday—where I had retained not one iota of what the teacher had been prattling on about—I was heading out of the main building toward the P.E. hall to catch up with Coach when I heard a familiar voice call out my name. For a split second, I debated pretending I hadn't heard her and walking out the door, but then she grabbed my hand and tugged me backwards, and manners won out.

Inhaling a steadying breath, I mentally reminded myself to *be nice* before turning around to face her.

"Bella," I acknowledged with a curt nod.

She looked just as good as she always did, with her black hair styled into a bob and a full face of makeup. She was tall and curved and filled her school uniform in all the right places.

Fortunately, I was completely unaffected.

"Hey, Johnny," Bella replied with a massive smile. Despite her five-eleven height, she still had to crane her head up to look at me. "How are you?"

The words *like you give a shite* were on the tip of my tongue, but I toned down my impatience and went with, "What's up?" instead.

“Oh, you know, the usual,” she replied, tucking her dark hair behind her ears.

Actually, I *didn’t* know.

I didn’t know anything about her and she knew even less about me.

We didn’t talk.

We fucked.

And that had been her decision more than it had been mine.

“I was coming out of the office and saw you walking outside,” Bella continued to say, trailing her thumb over my wrist. “So I thought I’d come say hi.”

Freeing my hand from hers, I shoved my hands into my pockets and rocked back on my heels. “Hi.”

“I feel like we haven’t talked in so long,” she added.

I glared at her. “We talked a few weeks ago.”

When you were trying to force yourself on me. And let’s not forget about the million fucking messages and voicemails you’ve left me.

“We did?”

I narrowed my eyes. “Yeah, Bella, we did.”

“Oh god,” she giggled, acting all coy. “I was completely wasted that night,” she added. “I hardly remember a thing.” She took a step closer. “I definitely don’t remember seeing you that night.”

I stepped back. “Well, you did.”

I wasn’t buying this convenient lack-of-memory bullshit. She’d played that card too many times with me.

“Anyway, that’s not what I meant.” She tucked her hair behind her ear and smiled up at me. “I was talking about the last time we *met* up. It has to have been before Christmas, right?”

More like Halloween, I thought to myself, but I was eager to get away so I didn’t object to her dates. Instead I nodded and said, “Yeah, that sounds about right,” while wishing I knew the appropriate etiquette to use when dealing with vindictive girls I’d been foolish enough to stick my dick inside.

“So,” she said in a breathy tone. “How have you been?”

“You already asked me that,” I replied evenly, trying to mask my impatience at the pointless chitchat. “I’m *fine*.”

“Oh yeah, well I’m fine, too,” Bella replied, exhaling a loud sigh. “I mean, I guess I’m a little bored.”

Yeah, well I was bored, too. With this conversation.

“You know how it is,” she said for the second time, and for the second time I stared blankly back at her.

Nope. I had no clue what the fuck she was talking about.

“Oh my god!” she blurted out then, clutching my hand once more. “I totally forgot to ask; how’s your leg?”

Bella didn’t know the ins and outs of my surgery, only that I’d had a procedure done at Christmas.

When I told her that I would be out of action for a while, her biggest concern had been how soon I would be back on the pitch, whether or not I’d still get to play for Ireland in the summer, and when did I want to fuck again.

Besides all that, I didn’t trust her in that way. Having sex with her was one thing but confiding in her was quite another.

“Better,” I replied in a flat tone before reclaiming my hand.

“That’s fantastic news, babe,” she replied, smiling widely. “I’ve been really worried about you.”

No, she bleeding well hadn’t been. If at any point Bella had been truly worried about me, she would have asked me something other than Are you ready to meet up? or Hurry up, I’m horny in the bazillion texts she’d sent me. She wouldn’t have fucked me over the way she had with one of my teammates.

“I bet,” I drawled, hearing the sarcasm in my own voice.

Now, I got that at no point during the time Bella and I had been messing around had we ever been anything remotely serious, but I still felt betrayed by the Cormac thing. In my eyes, it was shady as fuck on both their parts, and I would never go off with one of her friends. I had enough respect for her to show her that decency.

Obviously, Bella didn’t have the same level of respect for me.

I glanced over her shoulder toward the door and then at my watch before asking, “Did you need anything else? I have to talk to Coach about a game.”

“Oh yeah,” she sighed. “You have the playoff match coming up, don’t you?”

I nodded stiffly.

Unfortunately, because we had lost a couple of matches earlier in the season, and Royce College from Dublin had won their game last week, it brought them level in points with us and put us in joint second place in the league behind Levitt. It was an unexpected turn of events and a pain in the arse because Royce should have lost their last game, which would have made life easier for us, considering the final had already been organized between Levitt and Tommen.

Their win had thrown a spanner in the works for Tommen because Royce was an awkward fucking bunch and was refusing to allow the playoff to be held in Cork. We'd traveled for the last three league games so it was our turn to play at home, but they weren't having it. Already, they had pulled out of two other proposed dates for the playoff—one in Cork and one in Dublin.

They were contesting everything from the time of kickoff to the day of the week the match should be held, to the color of the away jerseys. Switching days, pulling matches forward, and changing venues were all within Royce's right, but it was a scummy thing to do and few schools ever behaved that way.

The coach at Royce was being difficult, arguing on where the match should be held, and cribbing and grousing over the fairness of Tommen's team having an international player on the squad. Tommen was my school and Coach was well within his rights to play me. But I would have been Royce's international player had my folks stayed in Dublin, and that was the real issue here.

Because of this, Coach wanted to talk to me pronto. He wanted to go through my upcoming schedule because he needed to agree to a date. We were breaking from school next Friday for Easter holidays so this needed to happen sooner rather than later.

I had the summer campaign to focus on and scouts to impress, so April and May wouldn't work for me. Royce's coach knew this, too, which was why we were at a standstill.

I might find the school league boring and unchallenging, but I fucking hated sore losers. With that in mind, I had plans of burying Royce College at the earliest convenience.

"When are you guys playing them?" Bella asked.

“As soon as possible.”

“You’re going to be playing against your old teammates and friends, aren’t you?” she asked. “You were supposed to go to Royce, weren’t you?”

“I’m here now, aren’t I?” I drawled.

“Are you worried about playing your old friends?”

Yes.

“No.”

“So you’re ready for it?”

I stared blankly at her. “I’m always ready.”

“I know you are,” she purred, tone flirtatious.

Ugh.

Shaking my head, I turned to leave but she spoke again.

“I also wanted to talk to you about something else,” she added, taking a step closer.

“Oh?” I stepped back. “What’s that?”

“Us, Johnny,” she purred, batting her big blue eyes up at me.

“There is no us, Bella,” I replied, frowning. “There never was.”

“Then what the fuck were we doing for the past year, Johnny?” she spat out, the innocent schoolgirl mask slipping.

That was cool. I knew what was underneath anyway. She didn’t need to put on a performance in front of me.

I was well aware of her true colors.

“I don’t know, Bella,” I replied in a flat tone. “But whatever it was, it’s in the past.”

“Are you fucking with me?” she demanded, planting her hands on her hips. “I’m trying to sort things out here.”

Was *she* fucking with *me*?

“You ended it,” I deadpanned. “You are *fucking* my teammate, Bella. You told me so yourself.” With great detail in a text message. “You got with him at Biddies. Right in front of me. You sit with him at lunch. As far as I’m concerned, there is nothing to sort out between us.”

“It’s not serious.”

“I don’t care.”

“I thought we were taking a break.”

“We are,” I confirmed. “A permanent one.”

“I don’t have to be with him,” she offered, batting her long eyelashes at me. “We could sort us out?”

“No, thanks,” I replied in a flat tone.

“Come on, Johnny,” she moaned. “We had a good time together.”

“Yeah, we did,” I agreed. “Half of which you spent running around behind my back with my fucking winger!”

Her mouth fell open. “What are you talking about?”

“Cormac.”

“I’m with him *now*,” she huffed. “Not *then*.”

“Don’t bother lying,” I told her. “I already know you were riding him when you were with me.”

“That’s a lie,” she countered. “Who told you that?”

“Everyone knows, Bella,” I replied, then released a weary sigh. “I’ve known for a while.”

I just chose to block it out…

“And you were hardly discreet,” I decided to throw out there because, quite frankly, I wanted to.

“Well, I wasn’t your girlfriend, Johnny. We weren’t exclusive,” she said, defending her actions. “And *you* completely dropped off the map. You never wanted to go out or meet up.”

“Because I was recovering from *surgery*!” I bit out.

“For months?” she demanded, tone accusing. “Yeah *right*, Johnny.”

“I was,” I barked.

I still am.

“And before that?” she demanded. “What about the other six long weeks *before* your surgery when you refused to meet up with me? When you *ignored* me? What’s your excuse for that?”

“I wasn’t ignoring you.”

“Yes, you were!”

“No, I fucking wasn’t. I just couldn’t get—” Snapping my mouth shut, I shook my head and forced myself to hold my tongue.

Do not fight with girls, I reminded myself. *You’ll never win. They’ll twist your words.*

“You weren’t giving me what I wanted,” she continued to torment me by saying. “You weren’t giving me enough attention! All those award

ceremonies and balls in Dublin last year and never *once* did you invite me to go," she hissed. "You never wanted me there."

"Because you were never my girlfriend," I countered, throwing her earlier words back at her.

"Because you never *asked* me to be your girlfriend, Johnny," she spat out.

"No, Bella, because you never wanted *me*," I shot back. "You only wanted the shiny part of my life. The fame. You were never interested in the real part. The real me."

"That's not true!" she argued.

"Why don't you just tell it straight, Bella?" I hissed, losing control of my temper. "You fucked off with Ryan because you thought I wasn't going to be match fit. You saw I was out on injury, you thought I wouldn't make it back in time for the summer campaign, so you went after the next best thing just to be safe."

She blushed.

I *knew* it!

"Ask me now," she urged, closing the space between us. "Ask me to do all those things and I will."

"I *don't* want to ask you," I bit out, unhooking her arms from around my neck.

"Johnny, come on." She sighed. "Don't be like this."

"Go on back to Cormac," I deadpanned, thoroughly disgusted. "And pray he makes it up the ranks in the Academy so he can take you to all those fancy awards parties you want to attend. He's your only shot at getting there now, Bella, because we're done."

"I was hurt, Johnny," she strangled out. "I got with Cormac because I wanted to hurt you back."

"Hurt me back?" I balked. "For what exactly? Getting injured? Being stuck on my back for weeks while you rode my friend behind my back? Messing up your chances of fancy fucking dinner parties?" I shook my head and sneered at her, regretting touching her with every fiber of my being. "Jesus, I'm an awful, inconsiderate bastard."

"For ignoring me," she hissed, cheeks turning pink. "For using me."

"*Me* using *you*?" I balked. "Yeah, because that's what was happening."

"That's how you made me feel, Johnny!"

“Then I’m sorry!” I snapped back, striving for patience in the eye of this girl-induced, mind-fucking shitstorm.

“You have to have feelings to be sorry, Johnny,” she retorted. “And you are heartless!”

Keep the head. Take it on the chin. And then get the hell away from her.

Inhaling a calming breath, I exhaled slowly before saying, “Bella, I am sorry if at any point I made you feel ignored or used. That was not my intention. I sincerely apologize for my lack of heart and feelings and wish you nothing but the best for all your future endeavors with my teammate. Now, if you don’t mind, I am tired of going around in circles with you and have actual shit to do.”

I moved for the door, but she grabbed my hand again, pulling me back.

“Wait—are you with someone else?” she demanded, squeezing my hand. “Is that what your problem is?” Her eyes widened. “Oh my god,” she exclaimed. “You *are*, aren’t you?”

Jesus. What the hell had I been thinking messing around with this girl?

“No, Bella, I’m *not* with anyone else.” Yanking my hand free, I shook my head and released a frustrated sigh. “But I’m not with you, either. And I won’t *ever* be with you again.”

“I’ve heard rumors, Johnny!” Bella pressed, ignoring my words. “About you and the new girl in third year. I heard you beat up Ronan McGarry because of her. And I saw that picture of you with her in the paper.”

“That’s none of your business,” I bit out through clenched teeth as I struggled to rein in my temper.

“Come on, Johnny,” she challenged. “You never had me in any pictures with you for the media and I’m the longest girl you’ve ever been with. What’s the story with her?”

“None of your bleeding business,” I spat, fresh out of patience. “Christ.”

“Why were you fighting with McGarry over her?” she demanded. “Why did Cormac tell me you warned all the team off her?”

“I’m not doing this with you,” I warned, shaking my head. “Not anymore.”

“Stop dodging the question, Johnny,” she hissed. “If you’re with another girl, then I have the right to know.”

“I already gave you a fucking answer,” I snapped, done with this bullshit. “You’re the one who can’t seem to *listen*.”

“You’re lying! I can see it in your eyes!” she screamed, loud enough to wake the dead. “It’s written all over your face, Johnny. Something’s going on with that girl.”

“You need to get a handle on yourself,” I said, tone laced with disgust. “This is pathetic.”

“Fine,” Bella sneered, looking wholly enraged. “If you won’t tell me, I’ll ask her.” Smiling darkly, she added, “Shannon—that’s her name, right?”

Yeah, fuck that.

“You’ll stay the hell away from her,” I whisper-hissed, aware that we were within hearing range of the office.

While Dee wouldn’t cause any trouble for me, I didn’t fancy my chances if Mr. Twomey came out and saw I was having problems with *another* girl.

“Whatever shite that’s going on between us has *nothing* to do with Shannon.”

“What’s the matter?” she taunted, pushing every one of my buttons. “Afraid I’ll find out something you don’t want me to?”

“I mean it, Bella,” I snarled, feeling a surge of anger rise up inside of me. “I’m not fucking around here. Keep your distance from her.”

“Well,” she mused, eyes narrowed. “Look who’s showing emotion now.”

She was absolutely right. I was showing emotion. Because I *cared*. I cared a great deal more about a girl I barely knew than I ever did Bella.

It was warped, and confusing, and completely fucked up, but I did.

Instead of admitting this terrifying new development, I said, “Leave. Her. Alone.”

And then I did what I should have done the first time I laid eyes on her. I walked away from Bella Wilkinson.

“I’m going to make you so sorry for walking away from me,” she called after me.

“Believe me, I’m already sorry,” I called back. “Sorry I ever went there in the first place.”

Furious, I stormed away from the girl who seemed to be hell-bent on making my life a living hell.

Loaded with bitter regrets and burning anger, I rounded the corner of the main building feeling like I was two seconds away from breaking something. Unfortunately for me, that something turned out to be a girl.

Not just any girl.

Shannon.

24
I’m Taking You Home

SHANNON

I always knew when there was a storm brewing at home. I could always sense it. It was like a sixth sense of some kind, warning me and alerting my body to danger and pain.

All day during school on Friday, I had the most gut-wrenching feeling of dread in the pit of my stomach. It couldn’t be dislodged by deep breathing or calming exercises and was so severe, so potent and transparent that I was actually afraid to go home. Wednesday night’s antics hadn’t helped matters.

It was a night that consisted of my parents screaming at each other so loudly that the Gardaí came to the door, having received an anonymous call about a disturbance of the peace.

My peace.

Because I made the call. Because I was afraid he would hurt her.

Furious with my mother or not, I couldn’t bear the thought of *him* knocking her around downstairs while I hid in my bedroom like the coward I was.

Joey was once again staying with Aoife, and I wasn’t nearly big enough or brave enough to save Mam myself.

Thankfully, my father hadn’t laid a finger on her, and once he had convinced the Gards that his wife was having a pregnancy-related tantrum, he left for the night. Of course, he returned yesterday morning with a bunch of flowers and a promise to never do whatever the hell he had done this time again.

It worked.

She hugged him and kissed him, and I was fairly sure that if she wasn’t already pregnant, she would have been after spending the morning locked

in their bedroom with him.

I hated her. Sometimes more than I hated him.

Yesterday was one of those times.

When I returned to school Friday morning, it was with a sore neck and a serious lack of hope.

Oh yeah, because even though Dad and Mam were all loved up again, I was still his favorite target. Apparently, he still wasn't over that picture of me with Johnny. Something I was reminded of late last night when I foolishly made a food run to the kitchen and got tangled up in his whiskey tantrum. He added fresh bruises to old bruises, and I had spent a good portion of the night contemplating the worst possible thoughts.

By the time the last class of the day finished, my body was so tightly coiled with tension that I could hardly make my feet walk a straight line from the science building to the main building, which I needed to get to. I knew I had to go back home and the thought was crippling me.

I didn't want the weekend to come and now it was here, staring me in the face.

It was a terrifying prospect.

The horrible, niggling pain in my stomach all day was now bordering on unbearable. My mind was in such overload, running through list after list of potential problems I might face when I walked through the front door, that I wasn't paying attention to the rain belting down on me or the students whizzing past.

I wasn't paying attention to anything.

Because I *knew*. I just knew deep down in my heart and soul that danger was coming. I didn't know where, or when, or how it might unfold.

But I *knew* it was coming.

However, the danger I was predicting arrived prematurely when I rounded the corner of the main building and collided with a solid male chest.

I was so unprepared for the contact, so deeply caught up in my own thoughts, that I didn't have time to steady myself or break my fall. I folded like a deck of cards, no match for the person I had smashed into, and collapsed on my arse on the cold, wet ground.

"Oh, shit. I'm so sorry," a deep, familiar voice said from above me.

I didn't need to look up to know who I had bumped into, though.

I would recognize his voice anywhere.

“Shannon, are you okay?” Johnny asked as he dropped his schoolbag on the ground and reached down to help me up.

“I’m okay,” I mumbled, batting his hand away.

I didn’t need him touching me.

I was already too affected by him.

Keeping my eyes trained on the concrete, I twisted onto my hands and knees and pulled myself up.

“I’m so sorry,” he continued to say.

“It’s okay,” I whispered, brushing my skirt down. “I’m okay.”

“Are you?”

I nodded but kept my gaze down. I couldn’t look at him. I didn’t want him to see me.

Not like this.

“Shannon?”

“I need to go,” I croaked out, and then stepped around him, moving for the main building.

With my head down, I hurried into the main building and straight to the third-year locker area.

Breathe.

Stop panicking.

Just breathe.

When I reached the locker area, which was thankfully empty, I let my schoolbag fall from my shoulders and pressed my forehead against the cool, hard metal, inhaling sharp, audible breaths.

Trembling, I leaned my forearms against the locker and just held my head, desperately trying to get a handle on this ridiculous terror threatening to possess me and to stop my body from going into vomit mode.

My legs were shaking so badly I knew I wouldn’t make it to the bathroom in time, so my only hope was to calm myself down before I threw up. Too late, I thought to myself just as my legs buckled beneath me.

I dropped to the floor on my hands and knees, as my stomach emptied itself right there in the middle of school. I didn’t have much in my stomach to begin with, I never usually had, but the water and half bar of chocolate I had at lunch made a reappearance in glorious fashion.

The sound of footsteps pounding down the corridor filled my ears and I groaned to myself, knowing that I would never in a million years live this one down.

Moments later, I felt a hand on my back as someone knelt down beside me and pulled my hair back from my face.

“It’s okay.” Johnny’s voice filled my ears as he rubbed soothing circles over my spine with his big hand. “Shh, you’re okay.”

Oh god, no.

Why did he do that? Why did he follow me?

He wasn’t supposed to talk to me.

That was the plan.

I dry heaved for a solid two minutes longer before my stomach finally settled, and all the while he knelt beside me, holding my hair out of my vomit and rubbing my back.

“Are you okay?” Johnny asked when I was breathing again and not gawking.

I nodded weakly and then felt his hand still on my back. I coiled tight on instinct.

“What’s this?” I heard him ask moments before his fingertips grazed my neck, right above the collar of my school shirt. “Your neck is bruised.”

Panic seized my heart as I felt him shift more of my hair aside and touch my neck again.

“Shannon?” Johnny repeated. “How’d you get this?”

“It’s old,” I croaked out, still gasping for air.

“Doesn’t look old,” he replied, touching my neck.

“Well, it is,” I strangled out, shaking off his touch.

Thankfully, he complied and shifted away from me.

Weak and mortified, I remained exactly where I was on my hands and knees, just staring at the floor as a wave of utter humiliation washed through me.

“Shannon?” he said in a soft tone, hand on my back once more. “Are you okay?”

Nodding weakly, I pulled back to a kneeling position, hands on my lap, gaze cast downward.

“Wait here, okay?” Johnny ordered as he pulled himself up to a standing position. “I’ll go get the caretaker.”

“No, no,” I strangled out, mortified. “I’ll clean it.”

“No, you won’t,” he argued. “It’s okay. Just wait here for me and I’ll be right back.”

The moment I heard his footsteps retreating, I scrambled to my feet, grabbed my schoolbag, and bolted into the nearest bathroom on this wing of the school.

Hurrying inside, I went straight to the sink, unzipped the front pocket of my schoolbag, and retrieved the travel-sized toothbrush and paste I religiously carried around with me.

I was an anxious person and my anxiety made me sick. It happened in the most inappropriate and inconvenient places, usually at school, like today, so I was always prepared.

Trembling from head to toe, and with tears burning my eyes, I quickly brushed my teeth, gagging when the brush poked the back of my throat. When I was finished cleaning my mouth, I rinsed off the toothbrush and tucked it back inside the small ziplock bag with the paste before packing it back into my schoolbag.

You’re okay, I mentally coaxed myself as I washed my hands and splashed water on my face. *Everything is going to be okay.*

I knew I wasn’t, though. No matter how much I tried to lie to myself, nothing was okay about my life.

Sniffling, I strapped my schoolbag to my back, pushed open one of the toilet cubicle doors, and grabbed a bottle of disinfectant tucked away behind the cistern.

Walking back to the sink, I pulled a couple dozen paper towels out of the dispenser and headed back to the crime scene. But it was gone. Erased by the caretaker wandering back down the hall with a mop and bucket trailing after him.

“I told you to wait for me.” A familiar voice came from close by.

Swinging around, I found Johnny leaning against the lockers.

“I had to brush my teeth,” I blurted out, sniffling.

He arched a brow. “At school?”

“It happens a lot,” I strangled out.

He frowned, watching me with those intense blue eyes. “Are you feeling better now?”

I nodded, mortified. “I’m okay.”

“Good.” Pushing off the lockers, Johnny walked over to where I was standing and took the disinfectant and paper towels out of my hands.

Reeling, I watched as he opened the girls’ bathroom door and tossed the disinfectant and paper towels back inside.

“I’m taking you home now,” he said as he slid my schoolbag off my shoulders and slung it over his left shoulder.

My eyes widened. “No, no, you don’t have—”

“I’m *taking* you home,” he repeated, blue eyes locked on mine. “Let’s go.”

“Why?” I croaked out.

Johnny frowned. “Why what?”

“Why are you helping me?”

He stared at me for the longest moment before exhaling a heavy sigh. “Because I want to.”

“You do?”

He nodded. “Do you have a coat?”

“A coat?” I croaked out, feeling helpless as I stared up at this beautiful boy.

“Yeah, it’s hammering down with rain outside.”

“I, uh—” I pressed my hand to my forehead, striving to gather my thoughts. “It’s on the coat hook,” I finally managed to say. “In the science building.”

With wide eyes, I watched as Johnny unzipped the black coat he was wearing and draped it over my shoulders.

“Come on,” he said in a coaxing tone as he wrapped an arm around my shoulders, tucked me into his side, and led me out of school. “I’ll take care of you.”

25
Trouble

JOHNNY

I unintentionally hurt Shannon Lynch.

Again.

I knocked her on her ass at school.

Again.

And then she went and almost gave me a bleeding heart attack. Honest to god, I'd never felt fear like I did when I saw her collapse on the floor next to her locker.

I knew it was a stupid idea to follow her back into school, but I needed to check on her. To be honest, I was afraid of Bella intercepting her.

Finding her on the floor like that was beyond terrifying.

My heart literally seized in my chest when I saw her and only kick-started back up when I got to her and realized that she was okay. She was mortified, but she was okay.

I didn't care about puke. Everyone puked. Even girls.

Apparently, *this girl* did it a lot.

I remembered exactly what was written in the file.

She threw up *a lot*.

That worried me. More than it should.

What worried me further was why this happened. Shannon was clearly an anxiety puker. It was as good as written in her school file. For Christ's sake, she brought a toothbrush to school with her.

I was burning with my own form of anxiety from the need to know what had upset her. I didn't want to push my luck though, or make the situation worse, so I kept my mouth shut.

Putting her in my car probably wasn't my best idea, given the fact that she didn't seem to want to speak to me ever again, but I wasn't leaving her

here to take a shitty bus.

She didn't speak a single word to me the entire drive to her house—with the exception of apologizing a million fucking times for something she obviously couldn't control.

I didn't know what to do or say to put her at ease. I kept telling her it was okay, but she wasn't hearing me. It was like she was stuck in her own head, worrying herself to death over something I couldn't see.

I felt helpless. I wanted to help her, but it was an impossible thing to do when I couldn't see who she was up against.

"I'm sorry," Shannon told me when I pulled up outside her house, after I spent a solid five minutes trying to coax her into telling me which one hers was. "I really am so—"

"You have nothing to apologize for," I told her before cutting the engine and turning to look at her.

Jesus Christ, what was wrong? Had someone given her shit at school?

She looked *terrified*.

"Johnny, I, uh…" Her words trailed off as she flicked her gaze toward the small terraced house at the end of the street and then back to me. "Please don't tell," she finally said, voice small, eyes wide and full of unshed tears.

I frowned, feeling my heart race. "Tell what, Shannon?"

She tucked her hair behind her ears and exhaled a shaky breath. "What I did at school."

My hands twitched on the wheel as I fought the urge to pull her onto my lap and hug her.

"I'm not going to tell anyone anything," I said in as gentle a tone as I could muster.

"You promise?" she croaked out.

I nodded. "I promise."

Shannon exhaled another ragged breath. "I'm sorry… It just… It happens when I get scared."

My blood ran cold.

"What are you scared of, Shannon?" I surprised myself by how calm I sounded when I was two seconds away from losing my shit right here in this car. "Did something happen?"

"Happen?" she whispered, biting on her bottom lip.

“At school?” I nodded slowly. “Was someone giving you hassle?”

She closed her eyes and bit down even harder on her lip, so hard that I reached over and pulled it free from her teeth.

“Don’t,” I coaxed.

Her eyes popped open. “Huh?”

“You’ll hurt yourself,” I told her, retracting my hand even though it was the last thing I wanted to do.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

“You don’t need to be sorry,” I replied in a thick tone.

Shannon dropped her gaze to stare at her clasped hands, and after an achingly long pause of silence, she nodded to herself.

“I better go inside now,” she finally said, voice small. “Thanks for the spin.”

I watched as she unbuckled her seat belt and opened the door, and panic flared to life inside of my stomach, which made no sense because I didn’t know what the fuck I was worrying about.

“You’d tell me, right?” I called after her when she was out of my car. “If something was happening to you?” I leaned over the passenger seat to look at her, knowing I was making a hash of this, but needing to say it anyway. “You’d tell me if someone was giving you trouble at school?”

Shannon stood with her hand gripping my car door for the longest moment, big blue eyes locked on mine.

Finally, she nodded.

I felt my body sag in relief.

“Bye, Johnny,” she whispered and then she closed the door.

“Bye, Shannon,” I muttered to myself as I turned the key in the engine.

I needed to get out of here before I did something really stupid, like put her back in my car and take her home with me. Because a fucked-up glitch in my brain told me to do just that.

Leaving her felt all wrong.

Drive away, Johnny. Turn the car around and leave.

She’s fine. She’s perfectly fine.

Concentrate on the game, Kav.

You have training. You do not need to be losing your head over a girl.

Shaking my head, I switched the car into gear and forced myself to get a bleeding grip of myself and just drive.

It didn’t work.

Because I couldn’t *go*.

Throwing the car into neutral, I shoved open my car door and climbed out. “Wait!”

Shannon spun around and stared at me with wide eyes. “Huh?”

What are you doing, Kav? What the fuck are you doing?

“Come with me.” The words were out of my mouth before I had a chance to stop myself or take them back.

“Come where with you?” Shannon whispered, gaze flicking from me to the house down the street.

I don’t know, Shannon. I don’t fucking know.

I have no bleeding clue what’s happening to me. I just know that my gut is telling me not to leave you right now.

“Anywhere?” I offered, and then cleared my throat before adding, “We could go for a drive? Or get something to eat?”

Jesus, what was wrong with me?

I saw something flash across her eyes then, something that looked an awful lot like relief.

“You want me to?” Shannon asked in a small voice. “Come with you?”

I nodded uncertainly. “Yeah, Shannon.” My voice was thick. “I want you to come with me.”

26
The Boy’s a Hero

SHANNON

I was back in his car.

I had no idea where we were going, or why Johnny had asked me to come with him in the first place after driving me all the way home, but in this moment, I didn’t care. I didn’t care that he hurt my feelings last week. And I didn’t care that I could get into trouble for being with him.

When he opened that passenger door of his car and offered me a temporary escape from the hell that was my home, *I took it*.

I more than took it. I practically dove into that seat.

Forty-five minutes later, I found myself sitting across from him at this bar in town called Biddies, with a half-eaten bowl of soup in front of me, a bottle of Coke, and a racing heart.

The moment we stepped through the door of the bustling pub, everyone inside had turned around and honed in on Johnny. It was incredibly intimidating just watching him try to deal with the attention thrown at him.

I was overwhelmed, so I couldn’t imagine what it must be like for Johnny. He was only seventeen.

Just like that day on the pitch with the reporters, Johnny was nothing but professional, accepting handshakes and claps on the shoulder while we waited at the bar for one of the waitresses.

I was so distracted by the attention he received, and the hand he kept on my lower back as he spoke, that I just nodded when he leaned into my ear and asked me if I was hungry.

It took a further five minutes of talking to random people before we finally sat down at the only empty table in the bar.

I felt absolutely mortified that he had bought me food, and I would have protested and offered to pay, but I didn’t have any money. I didn’t

have anything to offer this boy.

Nothing at all.

“How are you feeling now?” Johnny asked, stirring me from my thoughts.

My head snapped up from where I had been staring at my hands, and I found him watching me from across the small round table.

That familiar burn ignited inside of my tummy as I forced myself to meet his gaze. I had his coat wrapped tightly around me, but that didn’t stop me from shivering.

“I’m, uh, I’m feeling a lot better now,” I replied, blushing from the weight of his stare. “Thanks.”

“Good.” Johnny leaned back in his chair, eyes still locked on me, and tapped a beer mat on the table absentmindedly. “I’m glad.”

“Thanks for dinner,” I added, feeling shy and awkward and a million other emotions. “I really appreciate it.”

For some reason my words drew a huge smile from Johnny.

“You consider a bowl of soup to be dinner?” he asked, grinning so wide his dimples appeared.

“Well, it was a huge bowl,” I offered with a shrug “So, yeah, I would consider it dinner.”

“It’s soup, Shannon.” Johnny chuckled. “It’s practically water.”

“Why?” I eyed the empty plate and bowl in front of him. “Are you *still* hungry?”

He couldn’t be.

I’d just watched him inhale a gigantic bowl of soup, before following it up with a mountain of veg and chicken. It was physically impossible to be hungry after consuming that volume of food.

Johnny snorted. “This was a snack.”

“A snack?” I rested my elbows on the table and asked, “You’re planning on having another dinner when you get home?”

“I’ll probably eat at least four more times before I go to bed,” he told me.

My mouth fell open. “But it’s five o’clock.”

“I know.” He shook his head, smiling ruefully. “You should see what I put away on a daily basis. It would probably shock you.”

“Well, you’re not fat for a guy who eats so much,” I blurted out and immediately regretted my words.

Johnny laughed softly. “No, I’m not.”

I turned the color of crimson.

“I’m so sorry,” I choked out. “I didn’t mean to call you—”

“Don’t apologize,” he told me, still smiling. “I train. Hard. I need the fuel to pump my body.”

“Because of the rugby?” I asked, tucking my rain-damp hair behind my ears.

Johnny nodded. “I need to consume four thousand five hundred calories daily when I’m in training.”

My jaw dropped again. “How is that humanly possible?”

Johnny smirked. “I make it work.”

“How?” I asked, thoroughly intrigued now.

“By spacing out my meals,” he explained. “Eat the right stuff at the right time.” He shrugged before adding, “I usually eat every two or three hours. My nutritionist says that’s the best fit for my body.”

“So, you’re on a feeding schedule?” Snickering, I added, “Like a baby.”

Johnny flashed me an indulgent smile and took a deep swig of his diluted orange.

Ignoring the loud group of girls at a nearby table, I concentrated on the boy in front of me. “So, you can’t have anything nice?”

“Define *nice*?”

“Coke. Chocolate. Ice cream. Crisps,” I reeled off a short list of my favorite treats. “Sour gummies. Coco Pops. Pizza. Cheeseburgers. Chips. Chinese food. Doughnuts—”

“I’m in the middle of a season,” Johnny interrupted, giving me an affronted look. “The only things that go into my body are organic, unprocessed, and loaded with protein.”

I gaped at him. “Not even a rich tea biscuit?”

Johnny shook his head.

“Why—oh my god! Is it because you would get into trouble with those rugby academy people?” My eyes widened at the injustice. “My brother Joey told me about how they groom young boys like puppies.” Horrified, I

asked, “Do they give you a list of banned foods and then punish you if you eat them?”

“*No*,” Johnny drawled slowly, frowning now. “The fuck kind of place do you think the Academy is?”

“If you’re not allowed to eat treats, then a terrible place,” I answered solemnly.

“Eating clean is *my* choice,” he explained, watching me with a bemused expression. “I’m not forced to do anything. My life is on *my* terms. And not stuffing my face with processed sugar-loaded shite is called being *healthy* and exercising self-control.”

“But all the time?” I questioned. “Like 24/7?”

“I have an all-nothing attitude,” he replied. “I’m either all in with something or I’m not wasting my time. There’s no point doing something half-arsed.”

“Well, I’m sad for you,” I announced. “You don’t know what you’re missing.”

Slipping my hand into my skirt pocket, I dragged out the half-eaten chocolate bar—my favorite brand—and took a quick peek to check the waitress wasn’t watching me bring food on the premises before dangling it in front of his face.

“The smell is the best part,” I told him. “And you get endorphins from these, too.”

His lips twitched. “I train six hours a day, Shannon. I don’t need to supplement endorphins with a chocolate bar.”

Ripping off the wrapping, I held it in front of his nose for a few moments.

“Sniff it,” I encouraged, feeling oddly at ease with him. “Go on.”

“Get out of it.” Johnny laughed, gently batting my hand away.

“Your loss,” I said with a shrug, then bit off a square of chocolate, moaning when the delicious chocolaty goodness hit my tongue.

“Your gain,” he scoffed, as he swirled a clunk of ice around in his glass.

“Wow,” I snorted, slipping the chocolate back into my pocket. “If I was a bigger girl, you could have seriously hurt my feelings.”

“What?” Panic flashed across his face. “Fuck, no! It was a joke.” He leaned forward in his seat. “I didn’t mean… I wasn’t calling you fat…

You’re the tiniest thing I’ve ever… Shite, you’re so small I could—”

“Relax,” I snickered. “I’m not offended.”

Johnny stared at me for a long beat and then released a heavy breath.

“Jesus Christ, I almost had a heart attack there.” Rubbing his chest, he smiled impishly. “I know how mental most girls can get over their weight.”

“Well, I’m not like most girls,” I replied with a grimace and gestured to myself. “As you can see.”

“No,” Johnny confirmed quietly, eyes following my hand movements. “No, you’re not.”

There was a long uncomfortable pause where we both stared at each other. The silence was disconcerting, but not nearly as unnerving as the intensity in his blue eyes.

They were too sharp. Too all-seeing. Too *much*.

“Do you want another Coke?” Johnny asked, breaking the tension.

“Uh…” I glanced at my watch and then back to him. “I don’t know.”

Johnny frowned. “You don’t know?”

Yes.

No.

Go home before your father finds out you’re in a pub and kills you.

No, stay here with him.

God…

I shrugged helplessly.

“Well, are you thirsty?” he asked. “Do you think you would like another drink?”

“I…” I glanced around nervously, only to find dozens of pairs of eyes trained on our table.

My heartbeat skyrocketed.

I did not like this. Not one bit.

“Shannon?” Johnny said, capturing my attention once more. He was looking at me expectantly, wallet in hand. “Will I get you another drink?”

“Uh…” Scooting closer, I leaned over the table and gestured for Johnny to come closer.

Frowning, he did.

“Johnny,” I whispered in his ear. “I feel like we’re being watched.”

Pulling back, I looked around again and noticed the table of teenage girls had somehow pushed closer to ours. My eyes flicked to his and I

nodded vigorously. “People are definitely watching us, Johnny.”

Johnny looked incredibly irritated when he exhaled heavily and ran a hand through his hair. “I’m sorry about this.”

“Is it because of the rugby?”

He gave me a resigned-looking nod. “I’m sorry. Just ignore them.”

“How?” I croaked out, feeling very exposed in this moment.

Johnny stared at me for a long moment, unspeaking, before pushing back his chair and standing up.

“Come on,” he announced, holding his hand out for me. “I’ll get you another drink and we’ll sit in the lounge.”

“The lounge?”

“It’s quieter.” He looked around and muttered, “Maybe we’ll get some peace and fucking quiet,” under his breath.

He didn’t like this, either.

He might act like it didn’t bother him. But this wasn’t something he was comfortable with.

It was with this realization that I found myself taking his outstretched hand.

Overwhelmed, I followed Johnny to the bar, where he ordered us more drinks before walking through a door at the side of the bar, and into a dimly lit room. This room had more of a youthful feel to it, with pool tables and dartboards on the walls, and a jukebox playing in the corner.

I noticed several teenagers sporting a range of different school uniforms from the local district lounging around. Like when we walked into the main bar, everyone turned to look at him, but after a few head nods and “How’s it going, Kav,” they turned back to their company.

Johnny led me over to a table in the far corner of the lounge, but this time instead of taking one of the barstools on the other side of the table, he set our drinks down and sat down on the leather bench beside me.

From here, we had a perfect view of the rest of the room, with the perk of being slightly tucked out of the way.

You should go home, Shannon, my common sense commanded. *You should not be here.*

“Better?” Johnny asked, settling down beside me.

I nodded and reached for my Coke, eyes locked on the goings-on around me.

I could see several boys at the far side of the lounge wearing BCS uniforms, and that made me want to crawl under the table and hide. I was so nervous that I had to use both hands to stop the bottle from shaking.

Seeing Ciara Maloney, my greatest tormentor from my old school and the giver of my eyelid scar, sitting among them made my entire body coil up with dread. Like she could sense me watching her, Ciara turned her face in my direction.

Great. Just bloody great.

The moment she recognized me, that familiar glint of malicious intent flashed in her eyes for about two seconds before her gaze moved to Johnny, who was sitting beside me. Her mouth visibly fell open and she began to nudge the girl sitting beside her, Hannah Daly—her best friend and another one of my bullies.

We were being watched again. But now it had more to do with me being hated than him being the local celebrity. Panicked, I dropped my gaze to the glass bottle clasped between my hands.

Breathe, Shannon. Just breathe…

"You're a lying, little whore," Ciara snarled as she pinned me to the wall behind the school and glared down at me. "You were looking at him."

Knowing it was safer to say nothing, I kept my mouth shut and mentally prepared myself for the beating I knew I would receive.

"Answer me, bitch!" she snarled, slamming my shoulders into the concrete, causing the air to expel from my lungs in a loud pained groan.

Several of the girls standing around us laughed and sneered when a whimper tore from my throat.

I was already aching in more ways than any of these girls could comprehend—my father's latest whiskey tantrum the cause of my pain—and they were enjoying my obvious discomfort.

It wasn't anything new to me.

I was used to being laughed at. I was used to being the punching bag.

And I hated myself for accepting it.

When Ciara shoved me into the wall again, I forced myself to swallow down the sob that was threatening to erupt from my throat, forcing the words, "I didn't look at your boyfriend," out instead. "He looked at me."

That was the truth.

Her boyfriend had a horrible habit of staring at me.

My explanation earned me a slap across the face and a fistful of my hair to be yanked so roughly that I staggered forward, feeling weak and powerless.

"I'm going to fucking destroy you," she hissed in my ear before tearing her nails down the side of my cheek.

Go for it, *I thought to myself.*

But you can't destroy what's already broken…

"Relax," Johnny whispered in my ear, distracting me from my memories. "You're safe with me."

His words threw me and I turned my face to look at him.

God, he was just so beautiful, it was painful. Everything about Johnny Kavanagh was pure perfection. He was big and strong, and his face?

Oh god, his face was the best face I had ever laid eyes on.

"Why wouldn't I be safe?" It was a defensive question asked out of desperation because this boy was throwing me like no one had before.

I couldn't figure any of this out, and my poor heart was working in overdrive to keep up with the feelings bombarding my body because of his close proximity. Fear, uncertainty, lust, and panic were all kicking my ass.

"I'm just letting you know that you are," he replied, blue eyes locked on mine. "Okay?"

Exhaling a ragged breath, I nodded and shifted closer to him. If I could, I would climb on his lap and bury my face in his chest in this moment, but he was a virtual stranger to me and that would be socially frowned upon, so I settled for sidling up to him.

I knew he probably thought I was crazy, but I was two seconds away from having a full-blown panic attack and his presence was grounding me.

Johnny looked at me with curious eyes before turning his attention to the table of sixth years from BCS. I saw it then, a spark of recognition that lit up Johnny's eyes before his face took on a hardened expression.

"Can we go now?" I whispered, heart beating rapidly as I resisted the urge to burrow into his side. "Please?"

"We'll go when we're ready to go," he said in a voice so low and soft that it was barely audible. "Put your head up, Shannon *like the river*." Moments later, he draped his arm over my shoulder and pulled me in to his side. "No one's going to hurt you."

Relieved, I moved closer, too close for strangers to sit, but I didn't care.

He was big and strong and I got the distinct feeling that he was telling me the truth.

I *believed* him when he told me I was safe with him.

“Those girls?” he asked, tilting his face down to look at me as he spoke. “What’s the story?”

“There’s no story,” I croaked out, clutching my bottle with a death grip.

“Why do I find that hard to believe?”

I shrugged and ducked my chin, letting my hair fall forward, wishing I had Harry Potter’s invisibility cloak draped around my body so I could escape this situation without more pain.

I couldn’t take anymore.

“Look at me.”

I didn’t.

“Look at me,” he repeated, tone calm and coaxing.

I couldn’t.

I felt him shift beside me and then his fingers were on my chin, tipping my face up to his. “You’re safe,” he whispered, cupping my cheek in his hand, eyes boring holes straight through my soul. “I promise.”

That word.

God.

That one word broke me.

It was all too much.

My life.

Those girls.

My father.

And in the middle of it all, I could only see *him*.

This boy.

27
Keep the Head

JOHNNY

What possessed me to bring Shannon to Biddies, I would never fully understand, but she was here now, and looking more upset than when I'd found her throwing her guts up at school an hour ago.

I was upset, too, trying to mask my fury but close to killing someone. Genuinely. Truly.

Abso-fucking-lutely.

Shannon was petrified of these girls. Her body was shaking.

Shaking.

Which was why she was currently tucked into my side with my arm wrapped tightly around her frail shoulders.

I knew I was stepping over serious lines here, but I refused to let her run from these fuckers. I knew I shouldn't be touching her, but how the hell could I not? How could I just leave her sitting there, looking so frightened and unsure?

I *couldn't.*

To be honest, it was a good thing she was touching me because I was about two seconds away from blowing a head gasket and getting my ass thrown in the barracks.

This wasn't me.

I wasn't a reactor.

I thought shit through.

Not when it comes to this girl…

The blond in the BCS uniform across the lounge caught my eye again and smiled. I met her smile with a cold hard glare and reveled in a sick sort of pleasure when her smile slipped away and fear filled her eyes.

Be fucking frightened, I thought to myself. *You have no idea of who you're messing with.*

I could ruin these people.

I wanted to.

Every cell in my brain was projecting nothing but rage and vengeance, demanding I take back what they took from Shannon.

Take their pride like they took hers. Scare them like they scared her. Inflict pain on them like they tortured her.

I could taste my anger. It was fucking potent.

Dammit, I needed to get a handle on myself, but every time I tried, I just kept thinking about her file.

Were these bitches the ones that cut off her ponytail?

I had a bad feeling about the blond.

Another issue I was having that was going to make me lose my fucking mind was the way these pricks were eyeing her up.

Longingly.

They needed to avert their bleeding eyes from this girl because I couldn't handle it.

They didn't need to be looking in her direction. Ever.

I had my arm around her, for Christ's sake.

Take a bleeding hint.

No wonder the blond was pissed, I thought to myself. The dark-haired git was clearly going out with her, and yet he was staring at Shannon like she was dinner.

My dinner, prick, I wanted to roar.

"I'm ready to go now," Shannon said, dragging me from my thoughts and my stare-down with the dark-haired prick gawking at her from across the lounge.

She set her empty bottle on the table and looked up at me with those big blue eyes. "If that's okay?"

Settle down, heart. Settle the fuck down.

I forced a smile. "Yeah, Shannon, that's okay."

For obvious reasons, I kept my arm around her as we walked past the table of assholes from her old school. I didn't miss the way her fingers knotted in my jumper, or how her whole body stiffened when one of the girls made some backhanded comment about whores chasing rich dick.

Keeping my head, I walked her out of the lounge and then pulled her to a stop at the bar. “Can you do me a favor?”

Shannon looked up at me with wide eyes, nodding. “Yeah. Of course.”

I pulled my wallet and keys out of my pocket and handed them to her. “Can you settle up with the barmaid and go wait in the car for me?”

Her face paled. “Why?”

“I need to talk to one of my friends,” I lied, smiling down at her. “I’ll be right out.”

She eyed me warily for a long moment before blowing out a breath. “Sure,” she finally said, sounding relieved. “I can do that.”

“Thanks,” I replied.

I waited until Shannon had moved to the bar before spinning on my heels and stalking back into the lounge, not stopping until I was standing in front of the table of assholes.

“Now,” I sneered, glaring down at their faces. “Who wants to call my girlfriend a whore to *my face*?”

I threw in the word *girlfriend* for maximum effect to align with the maximum damage I was about to cause.

Several heads turned my way and I did not give one iota of a fuck. Someone was going to pay for her pain.

“Well?” I demanded, glaring at the blond. “You?” I asked before flicking my gaze to the redhead sitting beside her. “Or is it you?”

“Listen, I don’t know what she said to you,” the blond began to say, but I cut her off with a shake of my head.

“Is this your fella?” I asked, inclining my head to the dark-haired prick who was ogling Shannon less than five minutes ago, yet had turned conveniently quiet now. “Is he?”

The blond’s face reddened and she nodded.

“That’s good to know,” I mused, and then I reached over the table, fisted his school jumper, and slammed my fist into his face.

“What the fuck are you doing?” the lad snarled, doubling over.

“I’m playing by the rules, asshole,” I spat out as I dragged him out over the table and hit him again.

Both girls started screaming and flailing around.

One of his friends made to move toward me.

“I fucking dare ya,” I snarled, as I continued to smack the shit out of his buddy.

He took a safe step back and held his hands up.

I rolled my eyes.

Fucking coward.

I’d lost count of the number of brawls Gibs had jumped into on my behalf down through the years, and vice versa.

This prick needed to get better friends.

“Stop!” the blond cried when I continued to slam my fist into her boyfriend’s face. “You’re hurting him!”

“Oh, you realize that, do you?” I spat out. “So you *are* capable of knowing right from wrong?”

“What’s your problem?” she cried. “We didn’t do anything to you!”

“You sure as shit did something to her,” I snarled. “And when you fuck with her, you fuck with me.”

The blond paled and I released her boyfriend.

He sank down on the floor, cupping his face and groaning like a pussy.

She moved straight to him.

“Did you like that?” I asked, glaring at the prick whose face I had just rearranged. “Was that *nice*?”

“Jesus, lad,” the lad groaned, holding his nose to stem the blood. “I didn’t do anything to you.”

“No,” I seethed. “And my girl”—I pointed to the lounge door—“didn’t do anything to your girl but that didn’t stop her from terrorizing her.” I glared at the blond. “From cutting her hair and beating the shit out her!”

The blond’s face turned scarlet.

I *knew* it.

“For Christ’s sake, Ciara,” the dark-haired guy groaned as he shook off the blond’s hand. “What did you do to her now?”

“Nothing,” Ciara argued. “I haven’t even seen her since Christmas, babe.”

“Do you like being terrorized?” I asked him, taking a step closer. “How does it feel to have no power?”

“I get it, lad,” the lad groaned, waving a hand in front of me. “Loud and clear.”

“Make sure your girlfriend gets it,” I hissed, glowering down at him. “Because if she doesn’t—” I paused to point at both the blond and the redhead before continuing. “If she or any of her *whore* friends even look at my girlfriend again, I’m coming for you.”

I stood there for a long-ass minute, giving every one of those BCS scum a glare and waiting for a response.

When I didn’t get one, like I knew I wouldn’t, I turned around and walked away, only to halt at the door.

Call it childish, but I couldn’t stop myself from stalking back to their table and tossing it on its side.

Feeling ridiculously satisfied when their drinks all spilled and smashed to the floor, I spun on my heels and stalked out.

“Johnny!” Liam, the owner, barked as he rounded the main bar. “What the fuck are you playing at, kid?”

For fuck’s sake.

Inhaling a calming breath, I turned to face him. “I’m sorry for making trouble in your bar. It won’t happen again.”

“Trouble?” He arched a brow. “I saw you on the cameras. You could’ve killed that kid.”

Agitated, I ran a hand through my hair. “Those pricks were giving my girlfriend a hard time,” I bit out. “Now I’m sorry that I resolved the issue in your bar, and I’ll pay for any broken glasses or damage I caused, but this will be my last time putting money behind your bar.”

Liam balked. “Jesus Christ, relax, Johnny. I’m not barring you.”

“I don’t associate with scum, Liam,” I told him in a tight tone. Pointing to the lounge door, I added, “And those fuckers are about the scummiest you can get. So you go ahead and keep on serving them, and I’ll go ahead and find a new watering hole for my team.”

“Johnny, lad, hold up—”

“No, I don’t think so,” I hissed, brushing his arm off as I stalked for the door. “I have a reputation to uphold, and I can’t do that in a place that serves scumbags.”

“This will be their last time here,” Liam called after me. “I’ll have your usual ready for you tomorrow?”

I stopped at the door and turned back. “I’ll be back when the clientele doesn’t consist of vicious fucking bullies.”

And then I turned around and stalked out.

Shannon was sitting in the passenger seat of my car when I climbed inside. “I’m sorry about that,” I told her as I closed the door and pulled on my seat belt. “I got caught up talking.”

“No, no,” Shannon hurried to say in that small voice of hers. “It’s absolutely fine. You don’t have to apologize to me.”

Yeah, I did. I left her out here in a freezing-cold car for half an hour.

It wasn’t good enough. Not for her.

“You good?” I asked, turning to look at her.

“Yes, and thanks so much for paying,” she said and I watched as her cheeks turned a bright shade of pink. “I really appreciate it.”

Was she serious? Was she really thanking me for that?

Christ, this girl was unlike any of the others.

“That’s no problem, Shannon,” I replied, eyeing her with burning curiosity. “It was just a couple of bottles of Coke and a bowl of soup.”

“Well, it means a lot to me, so thank you,” she whispered, tucking that fucking beautiful hair of hers behind her ear.

Her eyes burned holes in me so deep that I had to look away before completely losing myself in the girl.

It was too much. *She* was too fucking much.

“Uh, here’s your stuff,” she said, gently placing my keys and wallet on my left thigh.

My good thigh, I realized.

Shit, this girl was too much.

“You can count it here if you want,” Shannon added. “Your wallet, I mean.” She tucked another strand of hair behind her ear. “I won’t be insulted.”

The fuck?

I stared at her. “*What*?”

Shannon blushed. “Well, I just… I thought you might—”

“I *trust* you,” I told her. “I’m not counting anything. It never even crossed my mind, okay?”

“Are you sure?” she whispered, killing me with those big eyes.

I nodded and resisted the urge to lean across and kiss the shite out of those swollen lips. “I am absolutely sure.”

The smile that lit up her face then was so striking that it made my heart race recklessly. I just stared at her for the longest moment, wondering how the hell I got here, and how the hell I was going to get out.

"I better take you home," I finally said as I shoved my key in the ignition and cranked the engine.

"Of course," Shannon replied, still smiling at me.

I had to look away. I couldn't risk another glance at her. Not tonight.

Get your ass away from this girl before you do something stupid like lose your heart as well as your head, my brain hissed as I tore out of the car park, nerves shot to hell.

Too late, asshole, my heart taunted.

"Or," I heard myself say, giving in to the urgent need I had inside of me to keep this girl right here with me.

Shannon looked at me with bright eyes. "Or?"

Don't do it, Johnny. Don't put yourself in temptation's way.

"We could go see a film?" I offered, knowing I was screwed the minute the words came out of my mouth.

"A f-film?" Shannon squeezed out.

Oh, Jesus.

I nodded uncertainly. "If you want?"

"At the cinema?" she asked, cheeks flushing.

I shrugged. "Or my house."

You stupid fucker.

"I'm… I don't… I'm not exactly…" She paused to tuck her hair behind her ears before saying, "Allowed to go."

"You're not allowed to go where?" I asked, feeling a huge pang of disappointment settle in my stomach.

"Um, anywhere?" she offered with a helpless shrug. "My parents are kind of protective."

Understandable. If I was in their shoes, I would be protective of her, too, given what Shannon had been through at her old school. Hell, I was protective now.

"But I want to," she added, smiling shyly at me. "I'd love to, actually —if you want to, that is?"

Well, shit. Balls.

What the hell was I supposed to do now?

My mother was at home so that was out.

Forcing myself to concentrate on the road in front of me and not the girl sitting beside me, I flicked on my indicator and pulled onto the slip road for the city.

“Cinema, it is,” I replied in as breezy a tone as I could muster while on the inside I was burning the hell up.

Extended Scene
Booster Seats and Beating Hearts

SHANNON

My poor heart hammered like a drum the entire drive to the cinema. The thunderous beating grew to epic proportions a little while later when a group of rowdy boys from our school knocked up against us while we were queueing for tickets in the already jam-packed foyer. The move resulted in Johnny placing his hand on my lower back to *steady* me, while warning said boys to back the hell up.

I tried not to think too much about Johnny's actions, or the fact that he kept his hand on my back until we reached the counter. I mean, he was just being kind. After all, this boy seemed to be the pinnacle of good manners. It didn't mean anything. It couldn't. Not to him, at least. Still, I had a feeling that the memory of his hand on my back would be scored on my soul for eternity.

His touch was different because it wasn't unwelcome.

The opposite.

"Then give us two tickets to something that's not sold out," Johnny snapped, dragging my attention back to the conversation he was having with the girl behind the counter that I was having a hard time seeing over.

Pushing up on my tippy-toes, I craned my neck to see the girl on the other side of the counter. She was definitely familiar. I'd seen her around Tommen on several occasions, but she was one of the older girls. One of the sixth years.

"All we have left is *Boogeyman*."

"Fine. We'll take it."

"So, you want two tickets to see *Boogeyman*, and the *couple's* combo," the girl stated, gaze flicking from him to me, expression incredulous. "With *her*."

Heat flooded my cheeks and I had to force myself not to shy away.

I wasn't unaccustomed to cruel jibes at the hands of other females.

I just didn't want *this* particular boy to witness it.

"Yeah." Looking entirely unimpressed, Johnny withdrew a fifty euro note from his wallet and tossed it down on the counter. "With her."

"We only have a couples double seat left."

"That's fine."

"Together."

"Yeah, I know what it means."

"In the back row."

"Again, that's *fine*."

"And what am I supposed to tell my friend?"

"You can tell your friend whatever the bleeding hell you want."

"Does she need a booster seat?"

"Keep pushing, Kelly," came Johnny's hot response. "I fucking dare ya."

After a five-second stare-down, the girl relented, huffing and puffing dramatically as she fulfilled the order, causing Johnny to roll his eyes.

Panicked confusion gnawed at my gut.

"Don't mind her," he said in a low tone, offering me a reassuring smile. "She's a friend of a past mistake of mine."

"I, uh…" I began to say, only to stagger sideways when I was jolted by a rogue elbow to the back.

"Watch your fucking arms," Johnny warned the lads behind us. "Jesus bleeding Christ. Here." Catching ahold of my hand, he positioned me between him and the counter. "I'll protect you, Shannon *like the river*."

He held my hand.

Johnny Kavanagh actually put my hand in his.

I didn't know what to make of it. I begged my poor fickle heart to not read too much into his actions. To not get my hopes up.

Hope was dangerous to a person like me.

I couldn't afford it.

Because this was close. This was *way* too close.

"It's uh…it's really busy in here tonight." Exhaling a shaky breath, I tried to steady my nerves and not reveal just how deeply he affected me. "There's a lot of people from school here, Johnny."

“Hmm,” he agreed, chest brushing the back of my head, as he grabbed our drinks and popcorn from the sullen-looking sixth year. Keeping an arm hooked around me, he guided me toward the screen our film was showing on. “Stay close.”

Repressing a full-body shiver, I blinked rapidly and nodded. “Okay.”

Feeling clumsy and uncoordinated, I let Johnny guide me to the back row of the packed-out room, feeling my body heat up with every step I took as I shuffled awkwardly past several couples already in their seats toward the last vacant double seat at the end.

This impromptu cinema trip was unexpected and welcome and terrifying all at once, and I wasn’t sure if I should hold my breath or suck in gulps of air.

Entirely unnerved by this boy’s close proximity, I slumped into the seat at the end of the back row and then held my breath when Johnny slowly sank down beside me.

So, *this* was a couple’s double seat. Without an armrest to separate our bodies.

Oh god.

“Sorry about this,” Johnny muttered by way of explanation when he angled his big body sideways, causing his long legs to spill over into my space. “I’m, ah…” Shrugging sheepishly, he shook his head and grinned. “I’m a fair bit oversized.”

No, he was perfect. God hadn’t made a single mistake with this particular boy.

“It’s okay,” I hurried to say, folding my legs under myself to give him more space to stretch out. “I usually sit like this,” I added, my voice a small whisper as I gestured to my kneeling position. “My own personal booster seat.”

“That’s hardly comfortable, Shannon.”

“It’s okay.”

His blue eyes locked on mine, and he shook his head. “Give me your legs.”

“My wh-what?” I spluttered, breathing erratic.

“Your legs,” he coaxed, patting his lap. “Seems only fair since I’m taking up all the legroom.”

“You want me to put my legs on you?”

“I want you to be comfortable.”

“But what about your sore—”

“I’m fine,” he replied, giving me an expectant look.

“Uh, okay?” Blowing out a shaky breath, I gingerly shifted my legs onto his lap. “Is that good for you?”

“Yeah, Shan.” Offering me a small smile, he reached for his bottle of water and took a swig. “You’re good for me.”

“Huh?”

“It,” he correctly gruffly, and then roughly cleared his throat. “*It’s* good for me.”

“Oh my god,” I hissed, distracted, when a familiar face strolled into the cinema, trailing after a blond bombshell. “That’s my brother.”

“Your *brother*?” Johnny’s voice took on a higher octave. “Ah shite.”

“I don’t get it.” Nodding weakly, I pointed toward the opposite side of the room to where Joey was taking up his seat in the middle row with his girlfriend, oblivious to my presence. “He always works on Friday nights.”

“Is that going to be a problem?”

Johnny’s question threw me a little and I quickly flicked my attention back to him. “A problem?”

“You said your folks are protective.” Shrugging, he waved a hand between us. “And you’re here with me…”

“Oh, no, no, of course not,” I was quick to reply. “Joe’s great. He’s the best. Honestly. He would never say anything to our…” My voice trailed off when several other familiar faces filled my peripheral vision. “Hey, Johnny, I think your friends are here.”

I was fairly sure I heard Johnny mutter the words *dear god, no* under his breath moments before several of his teammates came barreling toward us, disrupting everyone in their seats as they pushed through the crowds and settled in the seats in front of ours.

“Well, if it isn’t I’m Too Busy to Go to the Cinema,” one of them scoffed, tossing a piece of popcorn at Johnny’s head. “You lying bastard. You weren’t too busy. You had other plans.”

“Yeah,” another one snorted. “Other plans to get his dick—”

“Finish that sentence and I’ll wring your bleeding neck, Pierce,” Johnny growled, tossing a handful of popcorn right back at them. “Now, turn around and fuck right off.”

“Ah, don’t be cranky, Cap,” another one chuckled. “You could’ve told us you had a *date* with your little girlfriend.”

“We would’ve understood.”

“Jesus, we wouldn’t have blamed ya.”

My face burned with heat, and I had to clasp my hands together to stop them from trembling at the thought.

Date. Girlfriend.

He didn’t deny it, Shannon. He’s not denying it.

“Would ye mind yer own bleeding business,” Johnny snapped. “Jaysus, I can’t take a piss in this town without making headlines.”

Oh god.

“We can leave if you want to,” I gingerly leaned in close to whisper. *If you’re embarrassed to be seen with me.* “I won’t mind.”

“What? No!” Turning to face me, Johnny shook his head. “No, Shannon, we’re not going anywhere.” Clearing his throat, he added, “I want to be here with you. It’s these other spanners I’m having a problem with.”

I want to be here with you.

Whoa.

It was at that exact second the lights dimmed out, cloaking us in darkness for a brief moment before the screen lit up.

“Okay,” I breathed, exhaling slowly. “If you’re sure.”

Johnny kicked the back of his friend’s chair before turning his attention back to me. “I’m sure.”

JOHNNY

Fucked. That was the only word in my vocabulary to define the way I was feeling right now. If I was to add another word to the sentiment, then it would be *royally*.

Yeah, I was *royally* fucked.

At one point, I made the near-fatal mistake of holding her hand. Why? Only God knew the answer to that particular conundrum.

Apparently, I had issues. A lot of them. Issues that seemed to begin with the first name Shannon and end with the last name Lynch.

Jesus.

She was too close for comfort, sitting in the back row of the cinema with her face buried in the crook of my arm. Keeping my distance wasn't exactly an option when she was all skittish and frightened.

Yeah, it was safe to say that I screwed up with the choice of film. My pint-sized companion was *not* a fan of horror.

At one point, I half expected Shannon to climb onto my lap. She certainly looked like she wanted to. If she did, I wouldn't stop her. In fact, it was taking everything in me to keep my hands to myself and *not* pull her onto my lap.

I didn't care if it would hurt me. I didn't care, period. Because I was vulnerable around this girl.

Shannon Lynch *utterly* disarmed me.

"Are you okay?" I whispered during a particularly gory scene, while Shannon did a fantastic job of burrowing a hole in my shirt with her nails. "Shan?"

"All good," she strangled out, fingers knotted in my clothes. "I'm totally fine."

She wasn't. Far from it. But I was too selfish to push because I didn't want to leave.

No, I didn't want *her* to leave.

Jesus, there was something very wrong with me.

Robbie, Pierce, Feely, and a few others had taken up residence in the row in front of us, which, under any other circumstance, would have pissed me the hell off, but I was too distracted by this girl to care. Without meaning to or even trying, Shannon soaked up every sliver of my attention. It wasn't a healthy feeling, but it *was* an addictive one.

Usually, I couldn't wait to be done with the cinema, or any other mundane excursion that didn't revolve around rugby, but not tonight.

Not with this girl.

We made it halfway through the movie when she withdrew her phone from her skirt pocket and glanced at the screen. The heavy sigh that escaped her reverberated through me, and when she whispered in my ear that she had to go home, I swear it affected me way more than it should have. Honest to God, my disappointment was so strong, I could taste it.

As we deftly exited the cinema without her brother noticing, I quickly came to the conclusion that Shannon *like the river* had some serious skills in avoiding unwanted confrontation.

“Thank you so much,” she declared a little while later when I parked outside her house. “I had the best time.”

The best time? She spent most of the film cowering into her hands.

“Me too,” I heard myself say, and oddly enough, it was the truth. “We should do it again sometime.”

Fuck. My. Life.

“I mean…”

“It’s okay,” Shannon was quick to say, tone soothing, as she unfastened her seat belt and reached for the door. “I understand what you meant.”

I seriously doubted it. I was having a hard time understanding my own thoughts lately.

“You’ll, uh, you’ll be okay, yeah?” I called after her, feeling a dull ache in my chest as I watched her leave my car. *Leave me.* “You’ll be safe?”

“Safe?” she whispered, blinking rapidly.

“Safe,” I confirmed, unwilling to break eye contact or take back my words.

I watched her watch me for the longest time, and I swear the pressure in my chest intensified to the point of pain.

“I’ll be safe,” Shannon finally replied, chewing on her swollen lip. “I promise.”

“Yeah.” I heaved out a shaky breath and nodded. “Okay then.”

“Bye, Johnny.”

“Bye, Shannon.”

28
Substitute Parents

SHANNON

I spent all of Saturday babysitting my youngest brother, Sean, which was the norm whenever Mam was working and Nanny decided to take a trip to Beara to visit Aunty Alice and her family.

The difference this weekend was that our father was gone, and our mother was missing.

I knew a storm had been brewing. My gut was *always* right.

After Johnny dropped me home last night, there was a blazing row that resulted in my father beating the living shit out of me, mostly over that stupid newspaper clipping that he still wouldn't let drop. Mam dragged him off me, earning herself a slap in the face for her troubles. She ordered him to leave and never come back.

Dad proceeded to fill the family car with everything he owned, called both me and Mam a pack of whores, and sped off steaming drunk.

Mam had hurried out of the house an hour later with an overnight bag, climbed into a taxi, and hadn't been seen since.

It wasn't uncommon for our mother to storm off after an argument. However, it was rare for her to not come back.

I knew she would come back. It was just a matter of when.

I also knew my father would be back. It gave me no comfort watching him leave last night. That wasn't the first time he had been told to go. And it wasn't the first time he had beaten me to a pulp. Sooner or later, he would be back, promising heaven and delivering hell.

Nothing would change. It never did.

Tadhg, Ollie, and Sean might believe he was gone for good, but Joey and I knew better.

Without our parents' presence, it was down to Joey and me to fend for our younger siblings.

When there was no sign of either of our parents this morning, Joey sacrificed his own training session with the Cork team so he could take Tadhg and Ollie to a football blitz they were both playing in. I was left with Sean, who had spent the best part of the day screaming for Mam.

It was a disaster.

Countless phone calls to our mother had gone unanswered, so I had given up trying to get ahold of her.

Setting to work on the bottomless list of jobs allocated to me on a weekly basis, I cleaned the house from top to bottom, washing down skirting boards and changing all the bedsheets as I went. By eight o'clock Saturday evening, I had gone through four loads of laundry, cooked both lunch and dinner for my brothers, bathed and dressed Sean for bed, and cleaned the house to within an inch of my life.

It hadn't lasted, of course. As soon as the boys stomped through the front door, the chaos and mess had resumed.

Balancing a bowl of Coco Pops in one hand and a cup of milk in the other, I used my hip to push the sitting room door open and stepped inside.

"Here you go, Sean."

Setting the bowl and sippy cup down on the coffee table in front of my baby brother, I ruffled his curly blond locks, then stood up and stretched my back.

"Eat it all up before bed," I added, groaning in relief when I felt the muscles in my back click back into place.

I was in so much pain it was hard to walk a straight line.

"I want Mammy," Sean replied, pouting at his cereal. "Mammy's gone."

"Mammy's at work, Sean," I repeated the same sentence I'd told him fifty times today. Striving for patience, I added, "She'll be home soon," and then hurried out of the room before he had a chance to ask when.

I didn't have an answer for him and I hated lying to him.

The truth was, I didn't know when Mam would be back.

Shoulders slumped, I padded back into the kitchen and moved for the kettle.

I needed tea. Lots of tea.

29
Shifting Jackets

JOHNNY

My training day at the Academy on Saturday went down like a lead balloon. I was weak and it showed on the pitch.

I was called into Coach's office midway through the morning, where I received something I would consider to be similar to the Spanish fucking Inquisition from Coach Dennehy. Afterward, I was sent straight to the team doctor for yet another examination, followed by a checkup with Janice, the physio.

Like my coach had predicted, I failed both the fitness and medical tests doled out to me.

Sore and demoralized, I was given a stern talking-to about the dangers of the nondisclosure of pain before being sent home with another goddamn prescription and a formal letter stating that I was temporarily excused from all Academy training and duties until my next fitness test in three weeks' time.

If I failed my next round of tests, I would be back under the knife and out of action for a further four to six weeks. That meant it would be early to mid-May before I would see a pitch again. That meant I would lose my shot.

There was no way I'd be match fit in two to four weeks to make the squad at the U20 level.

So yeah, it was safe to say that I was royally screwed.

My only consolation was that I could still participate in light training with my school and club. There wasn't a fucking thing they could do to stop that, but it wasn't much to cling to in the way of hope. Not when it was a guarantee that both my coaches at Ballylaggin RFC and Tommen would receive the same letter.

There was little chance of getting any match time now with the club.

There was no way Coach Mulcahy would bench me—he couldn't afford to—but that was just schoolboy shite.

Furious at being written out of the upcoming youth games, I was simmering with tension by the time I made it home this afternoon to a—thankfully—empty house.

Mam was gone to Dublin to spend the weekend with my father, so I didn't have to face the parental third degree for a few days.

I wanted to cry. I wouldn't, but I fucking wanted to.

I should have worked through the pain.

I should've never taken that fucking surgery. If I hadn't, I'd still be in with a chance of making the starting team for the U20's European campaign in June.

U20 was a big jump from U18 and I was on goddamn track to make the jump.

Not now.

If I couldn't get my shit together, nobody would want me. Not with a broken body.

I spent the rest of the afternoon in my home gym, working my body to the bone, desperate to erase the god-awful feeling of despair that was threatening to take ahold of me.

This latest setback was the cherry on top of the year from hell.

To be honest, I was regretting coming back to school after Christmas break. I should have stayed in my goddamn bed and had my mother write me three months' worth of sick notes or some shite. Everything had gone to hell for me since then.

My body. My brain. My train of thought.

I was all over the place.

In the middle of my personal breakdown, my mind continued to focus on the one person I needed to *not* think about.

Shannon like the river, with those midnight blue eyes…

"You've got a problem, Kavanagh, and I'm staging an intervention." Gibsie's voice perforated my thoughts, causing me to momentarily lose focus and almost poleaxe myself with the 280-pound barbell.

"Christ," I strangled out, locking my muscles in place just in time to save myself from certain choking. "Don't sneak up on me like that, ya

bleeding eejit.” I looked up from my perch to find my best friend standing in the doorway of my garage. “I could’ve killed myself.”

“Yeah, you could have.” Unfolding his arms, Gibsie walked over to where I was and grabbed the bar. Setting it down, he reached for a towel on the stand and dropped it on my chest before saying, “Don’t do this alone again.” He pointed to the stacked barbell, expression disapproving. “It’s highly irresponsible.”

Sagging, I dropped my head back down on the bench and dragged in a few ragged breaths before attempting to speak. “You’re giving me a lecture on responsibility?” Exhaling a breathless laugh, I grabbed the towel off my chest and patted myself down. “Jaysus, the hypocrite in you is ripe today, lad.”

“Don’t try and throw me off my mission with your shit banter,” he shot back. “I’ve got plans for you.”

“Don’t know what you’re going on about, Gibs.” Pulling myself into a sitting position, I took another few steadying breaths before climbing to my feet. “But whatever it is, I’m not in the form.”

“Be that as it may,” Gibsie countered happily. “We’re still going out.” He followed me over to the fridge in the corner of my home gym and swiped a can of Coke. “So, go take a shit, a shower, and a shave because the lads are meeting us in Biddies at half eight.”

Uncorking the lid of a bottle of water, I drained the contents before replying. “No,” I breathed, drenched in sweat and feeling like shite. “We’re not.”

Liam had phoned me no less than three times yesterday to try to smooth me over, so that wasn’t the reason I didn’t want to go out.

My issue was that I was close to my breaking point. I was one conversation away from losing my goddamn mind.

“We fucking are,” Gibsie countered. “I got your text about your coach sending you home today, and I have to be honest with you, lad, I’m relieved they’re starting to see through your bullshit ‘I’m fine, it doesn’t hurt’ charade.”

“Wow.” I arched a brow. “Thanks a lot, *friend*.”

“Don’t give me that shit,” Gibsie shot back. “You know I want you to get on that team in June more than anyone, but *not* at the risk of permanent damage.” He shook his head. “It’s too high a price to pay.”

“You don’t get it,” I mumbled, regretting the venting text I’d sent to him earlier.

“No, in all honestly, I probably don’t get it,” Gibsie replied. “I’ve never been invested in anything like you are with rugby, but I see what you’re doing to yourself. I see *that*, Johnny.”

“Yeah, well,” I grumbled. “Unless I can pull off a miracle and get my shit together, it’s all in the can.”

“Which is exactly why you’re coming out with me,” he argued. “You need to kick back and take your mind off rugby.” Grinning, he pointed to himself and said, “And what better man to help you do that?”

“I don’t know, Gibs.” Tossing the empty bottle in the nearby bin, I ran a hand through my hair and sighed. “I’m fairly wrecked.”

That was the truth.

Exhaustion was the norm for me and especially lately. I was sore as shit and this wasn’t helping my bad mood.

“I’m probably just going to pass out in front of the telly for the night.”

“You’re a fucking robot is what you are,” Gibsie retorted. “Well, not tonight.”

Clamping a hand on my shoulder, he nudged me toward the open garage door.

“You have no early morning sessions tomorrow or any of that Academy bullshit to stop you from enjoying a night out with your buddies.”

I allowed him to walk me outside for one singular reason: I was too tired to dig my heels in.

“Tonight, we are going on the piss and”—he squeezed my shoulder for emphasis and steered me in the direction of my house—“you are going to be *human*. Tomorrow you can go right on back to your robotic, dull-as-dishwater self.”

“I’m too sore,” I grumbled.

“*Of course* you’re sore,” he shot back. “You’re not giving your body time to repair itself, you never bloody rest, and you haven’t had pussy in months.” Winking, he added, “It’s time to take your balls off ice and put your shifting jacket on.”

“My shifting jacket?” A smile cracked through my bad mood. “What are we, thirteen again and heading to the underage disco?”

“I’m wearing *my* shifting T-shirt,” he replied proudly, flexing his biceps for emphasis. “It has a one-hundred-percent success rate.”

I cocked a brow. “Probably because the tag on the back of it says it’s for ages twelve to thirteen.”

“Here now.” Gibsie grinned widely. “Don’t be jealous of my spectacular form.”

“Your spectacular bullshit more like.”

Shaking off his hand when we reached the back door, I pushed it open and stepped aside for him to pass, and then headed for my favorite part of my house: the fridge.

“That’s the plan,” Gibsie stated. Traipsing through my kitchen like it was his own—and it might as well have been for the amount of time he spent here—he strolled over to the cupboards and grabbed a slice pan and a knife from the drawer before pulling a stool out from the center island and sinking down. “And you are not giving me any bullshit excuse tonight.”

“Who’s going?”

“Hughie and Katie are meeting us below—” He paused and then said, “And Pierce and Feely might show their faces.”

“Are any of the girls from school going?”

“*Katie*,” Gibsie shot back in a *duh* tone of voice.

“Aside from Katie,” I snapped.

Katie was a given. Hughie rarely left the girl’s side.

“No.” Gibsie frowned at me. “Why would they be?”

I leveled him with a WTF expression. “Because they *always* fucking show up.”

“Does it matter if they show up?”

“I’m not in the mood to be dealing with them.”

“You mean you’re not in the mood to be dealing with the crazy one,” Gibsie corrected with a grimace.

“No, I’m not,” I replied, rummaging in the fridge. “I’m not dealing with her this weekend.” With my arms laden down with sandwich supplies, I walked over to the island and tossed them down on the black marble countertop. “I need a break, Gibs.”

Gibsie shook his head and reached for the bread.

“What happened?” Snatching up the knife and the packet of cooked ham, he asked, “Is she contacting you again?”

“When *isn’t* she contacting me?” I bit out as I slowly chopped a tomato. “It’s a constant stream of texts and phone calls.”

All the damn time.

I stopped reading Bella’s messages weeks ago, but it still drove me batshit whenever my phone lit up because nine times out of ten, it was her on the other line.

“You must be fucking amazing in bed,” Gibsie mused. “If she’s hunting you down like this.”

“Not the point, Gibs,” I growled. “No means no, lad.”

“You can change your number,” he offered.

“What’s the point?” I grumbled. “She’ll just find a way to get my new one.”

“I know I’m always saying it, but I really have to say it one more time, lad.” Slathering two slices of bread with butter, Gibsie layered on cheese, dumped half a dozen slices of meat on top, and then proceeded to fold his sandwich in half and stuff it in his mouth before continuing. “I do not know how you ever put your dick inside that girl.”

“I lost my bleeding mind,” I bit out, focusing way too hard on spreading the butter evenly on my slice. “That’s how.”

“You can say that again,” Gibsie shot back, making himself another sandwich. “You were blinded by big tits,” he added between huge mouthfuls of ham and cheese. “And posh pussy.”

“Yeah.” Tossing the knife down on the counter, I layered my bread evenly with slices of tomato and then added some fresh chicken pieces before folding it over. “Well, I’m not blinded anymore.” Picking up my sandwich, I took a huge bite, chewing and swallowing before adding, “I’m seeing everything clearly now.”

“You need to get yourself a girlfriend, lad,” Gibsie declared. “It’s the only way you’re going to shake Bella off.”

“I don’t want to get a girlfriend,” I bit out. “I am too fucking busy for a girlfriend, Gibsie. You know this.”

“Even little Shannon?” he tossed out with a grin.

My heart leaped in my chest at the sound of her name.

Christ…

“What did I tell you about her?” I snapped, tossing the remainder of my sandwich on my plate, appetite gone. “What in the bleeding hell have I been

saying to you for the last two months?”

“It’s not what you’re saying,” he replied with a snicker. “It’s how you’re acting.”

“I am *not* going there,” I growled. “I’ve said it a hundred fucking times.”

“And you can say it a hundred more,” Gibsie shot back with a laugh. “And I still won’t believe you.”

Jesus Christ.

“You like the girl,” he continued to taunt. “Maybe you even looooooooovv—”

“If I agree to go to Biddies, will you stop talking about it?” I asked, desperate to stop him before he went into full-fledged Gibsie mode and drove me insane. “Will you let this drop?”

My best friend nodded eagerly. “Absolutely.”

“Fine.” I sighed in defeat and moved for the door. “I’ll grab a shower.”

“Good man,” Gibsie called after me. “I’ll phone for a taxi for us.”

I swung back to face him. “I can drive us—”

“No, you can’t,” Gibsie interrupted, holding his phone to his ear. “We’re going on the lash. *Both* of us.”

Shoulders sagging, I turned and made my way to my room.

Fucking Gibsie.

30
We’ll Manage

SHANNON

“How’s the face, Shan?” Joey asked when I walked into kitchen a little after midnight.

He and Aoife were sitting at the table with coffee mugs in front of them and wore matching looks of concern.

“Jesus,” he muttered, flinching at the sight of me.

“I’m okay, Joe.” I forced a smile to comfort him. “It looks worse than it feels.”

That was a lie.

My face was killing me. Every inch of my body was in agony. I was black and blue from head to toe.

Thankfully, the only visible evidence of last night was a small shiner on my cheekbone.

It was the rest of my body that had taken the brunt of his fury.

My only saving grace was it was cold out and I could hide my bruises with baggy sweatpants and long-sleeved shirts.

My lie didn’t seem to comfort my brother, though. He just stared back at me, looking broken and defeated.

“I’m so fucking sorry, Shan,” my brother choked out, dropping his head in his hands. “I should have been here.”

Joey had gone to the cinema with Aoife last night and I was glad. Had he been here, I knew in my heart that someone would have left this house in a body bag.

“It’s not your fault,” I told him sharply. “None of what happened last night was your fault. You’re entitled to have a life, Joey.”

“Did you manage to get Sean to go to sleep?” Aoife asked, smiling sadly at me as she thankfully changed the subject.

“Finally.” I sighed heavily. “Tadhg and Ollie are out for the count. But Sean…god, he’s in an awful way over Mam.” I tucked my frazzled hair behind my ears and leaned against the kitchen counter. “He was sobbing his heart out for hours. He ended up crying himself to sleep.”

“Fucking cunts,” Joey muttered beneath his breath.

“Joey,” Aoife coaxed. “Don’t say that.”

“Say what, babe?” he countered hotly. “The truth? Because that’s what they are. A pack of fucking cunts.”

“She’s still your mother,” Aoife replied sadly.

“And she’s worse than him,” my brother shot back. “Leaving those kids here on their own.” He ran a hand through his blond hair and growled. “She could pick up the phone and talk to the boys, but no, like always, she runs and buries her head in the sand.”

Unlike Aoife, I didn’t flinch at my brother’s words. They might be hard to hear, but they held nothing but the truth.

Joey’s girlfriend was absolutely stunning, with an envious figure, long blond hair, and a beautiful face, but tonight she looked *shook*.

Aoife was in love with my brother, so I guessed that explained the horrified look on her face and the way she constantly stroked her fingers over the back of his hand.

“Let’s see what we’re dealing with,” Joey said with a sigh.

Reaching into his jeans pocket, he pulled out his wallet, tossed it on the table, and then went back for the loose change rattling around in his jeans.

“I don’t get paid again until next Thursday,” he muttered more to himself than us as he tipped the contents of his wallet onto the table and began to count. “Which leaves us with exactly—” He paused to stack a few coins. “Eighty-seven euro and thirty cents for the next six days.”

“That’s good, right?” Aoife offered with forced optimism.

Joey nodded cautiously. “It should work.”

“You know I’d help if I could,” I croaked out, feeling like deadweight around my brother’s neck. “But he won’t let me get a job—”

“Stop,” Joey commanded. “Don’t even think about taking on blame for this, Shan.”

But I did. I felt incredibly guilty. There was something about me that caused all this pain.

If I wasn’t in this house, I was fairly sure my family wouldn’t have half the problems they did.

Mam took a beating from my father because of me. Because he hated *me*.

I was the problem.

Joey exhaled heavily. “Check the fridge for me.”

Reluctantly, I did as I was told. Yanking the fridge open, I held the door out for Joey to see for himself.

“Fucking cunts,” he growled once more, taking in the sight of the almost bare shelves inside the fridge.

“The cupboards are the same,” I decided to fill in before he asked me to open those, too. “Mam usually does the shopping on a Saturday.”

“Usually,” Joey tossed out bitterly.

“She wouldn’t leave like this, Joe,” I whispered. “She’d never leave us without the shopping.”

“Well, she did,” he snapped. “And it’s grand, Shan. We’ll manage.”

“Okay,” I croaked out.

Running a hand through his hair, Joey dropped his elbows on the table and muttered a few incoherent curse words to himself before saying, “I’ll give Mark a buzz in the morning. He has a conservatory job lined up in the city next week. I’ll ask if he needs a laborer.”

“No way, Joey. You cannot miss school,” Aoife admonished. “It’s the leaving cert.”

“No, babe,” Joey replied wearily. “I can’t let the kids go hungry, and god only knows when that bitch will come back.”

“I can help you with—”

“I am *not* taking your money, Aoife,” Joey cut her off by saying. “So please don’t offer.”

“Joey, I *want* to help you.”

“And I love you for that, but I’m not taking handouts from my girlfriend.”

“Do you know where she is?” Aoife asked then, directing the question at me.

She was clearly desperate to comfort him and didn’t know how.

I wanted to tell her she couldn’t, we were too damaged, but I held my tongue and addressed her question instead. “I presume she’s gone to find

him.”

It was a depressing thought, but more than likely the truth.

“Guys,” Aoife said in a nervous tone. “Don’t bite my head off for this, but should you think about calling the authorities?”

Joey gaped at her like she had grown three heads.

Panic flared up inside of my chest.

Aoife, noticing our reactions, turned bright red.

“He can’t keep doing this to you,” she quickly explained. “And you’re both here alone looking after three small children… It’s not right or fair on any of you.”

“No, it’s not right or fair on us,” Joey snapped. “But Shannon and I have been down that road before, and there’s no fucking way we’re going back there.”

“Joey!” I hissed, shaking my head.

“Look at us, Shan,” he groaned. “She can already see how fucked up we are.”

I knew that, but I continued to shake my head.

Ignoring my silent protests, Joey went into a full-on rant, revealing our biggest fear, the one that kept us silent for most of our lives. “When we were small. Before the boys were born—when it was just Darren, Shannon, and myself—the three of us were put into care for six months.”

Aoife’s eyes widened and I smothered a groan. “You never told me that.”

“It’s not something I go around talking about, babe,” he replied gruffly. “Besides, I was only six at the time.” He inclined his head toward me and said, “Shan was only three. Mam placed us in voluntary care—said she was too sick to care for us at the time. Dropped us off and walked the fuck away. Shannon and I got lucky. We were placed together with a nice family.” Exhaling heavily, he added, “Darren was eleven at the time and wasn’t so lucky.”

Tears filled my eyes because I knew what Joey was going to say next.

“Joe, please don’t,” I begged.

“He was sent to a care home where *things* happened to him,” Joey choked out. “Things that aren’t supposed to *happen* to children.”

Aoife clasped her hand over her mouth. “Are you saying…?”

Joey nodded stiffly.

Tears filled her eyes. “Oh, baby.”

“Don’t,” he whispered, shaking his head. “It didn’t happen to me.”

“I know,” Aoife choked out, reaching for his hand. “I just… It’s awful.”

“Anyway, when Mam’s *health* improved, she went to court and managed to get us back,” Joey quickly hurried on. “It all came out in court about what happened in that care home, and because she’d voluntarily given us up because of ‘health problems’, she was somehow awarded custody again.” Joey stared down at their joined hands for a long moment before continuing. “Darren was never the same again, and neither was our father.”

Sighing wearily, he added, “He actually wasn’t too bad a guy before that. But after it all came out about Darren, the old man lost his fucking mind. He couldn’t get over it and turned to the drink. Got this ridiculous fucking notion into his head that what happened to Darren had somehow turned him.”

Joey shook his head and released a frustrated breath. “Had he paid an ounce of fucking attention to us growing up, he would have known better.”

“I don’t know what to say,” Aoife whispered, gaze flickering from me to Joey.

“It’s not right what happens in this house but it’s better than what’s out there in some of those homes,” Joey stated. “There’s no fucking way I’m letting my sister and brothers go into care, babe. No goddamn way. At least when they’re here, they’re all in one place, and I can keep them somewhat safe.”

“Do you guys have someone you can call?” Aoife asked, eyes laced with concern. “A relative or a family friend?”

“Nanny is eighty-one,” I whispered, wiping my tears away. “She’s too old and fragile to—”

“Myself and Shannon have each other,” Joey interrupted, gesturing a finger between us. “That’s it.”

“Not anymore,” Aoife told my brother. “You have me.” Reaching across the table, she covered his hand with hers and smiled weakly. “All of you.”

Joey’s shoulders visibly sagged as he snatched her hand up and pressed his lips to her knuckles.

“Christ, I love you,” he told her, voice low and gruff.

I turned away because it was too hard to watch.

I loved Aoife Molloy. I truly loved the girl as a sister.

But I also resented her.

Because I knew exactly how appealing unconditional love, affection, and security was to someone like Joey.

It was the same for me.

And because I knew in my heart and soul exactly how this would pan out.

From her, Joey was receiving a form of love he'd been denied his whole life. And if that girl jumped, he would jump right along with her.

I wouldn't blame him. Given the chance, I would jump, too.

But knowing that his time in this house was coming to an end made it hard for me to breathe.

I could feel it coming down the tracks like a freight train.

Our father would be back. He always came back. And I honestly couldn't see my brother sticking around once he did.

He'd taken eighteen years of beatings and abuse. I wasn't sure he could take much more.

"Okay!" Aoife clapped her hands together and stood up. Sniffling, she wiped the tears from her cheeks away and forced a bright smile. "I am *starving* and I know you both must be, too. So, I am going to make a food run to the chipper and it will be my treat."

Joey shook his head. "Aoife, I told you—"

"*My* treat, babe," she interrupted, giving my brother a hard look. "Now, are you coming with me?"

"Yeah, I'll come," Joey muttered, climbing to his feet. "You're not driving around the town in the middle of the night by yourself."

"Will you be okay on your own, Shan?" Aoife asked, smiling sadly.

I nodded. "I'll be okay."

"What would you like to eat?"

"Nothing thanks," I replied, forcing down a yawn. "I'm going to head up to bed."

"Don't tell me you're as stubborn as your brother and won't take a bloody bag of chips?" Aoife frowned. "You're too skinny, girl," she added, concern laced in her eyes again. "We need to put some meat on those bones."

I smiled at her flustered expression. “I’m honestly too tired to eat.”

“If you’re sure?” She didn’t sound convinced.

“I am.”

“We won’t be long, Shan,” Joey called over his shoulder as he led Aoife out of the kitchen.

“Take your time,” I called back. “The boys are fine and I’ll be in bed.”

I waited until I heard the key turn in the lock before tiptoeing up to bed.

Slipping inside my bedroom, I didn’t bother switching on the light. I wasn’t lying when I was said I was tired.

Crawling up my bed, I shuffled under my duvet and snuggled up, knowing that with my parents gone, I would sleep better tonight than I had in months.

That’s how messed up my life was.

31
Bitchy Girls and Burger Breath

JOHNNY

The minute I stepped foot inside Biddies, I knew I had made a terrible mistake.

Scratch that: the minute I let Gibsie open that bottle of my da's whiskey, I knew I had made a terrible mistake.

After my shower, I tried to persuade him to have a few drinks at home with me instead of going out, but whiskey made me compliant. It turned me into an agreeable bleeding eejit. Which was exactly how Gibsie had managed to coax me out of my bad mood, into what he called my "shifting jacket," and into the passenger seat of his car.

I should've known better when he wasn't drinking with me.

Fucker.

Drip-feeding me Jameson was the reason I was currently standing in the doorway of Biddies Bar, three drinks past tipsy, and wishing I was anywhere but this goddamn pub.

Not only were half the girls from sixth year inside. But so was Bella.

The minute Bella noticed us, she caught ahold of a nervous-looking Cormac and welded her face to his.

Whatever semblance of enthusiasm I had churned up for tonight being a bit of craic had flown out the window at the sight of her. Not so much because she was scoring with Cormac in front of me, though that didn't help, but because I was still peppering with anger over the way she carried on at school yesterday.

All I wanted her to do was *go away*. Just go away and leave me alone.

In all honesty, I didn't think that was too much to ask for.

"Ignore them," Gibsie muttered in my ear.

“Kinda hard, all things considered,” I shot back, gesturing to where my former whatever-the-hell-she-was mauled the face off my winger less than ten feet from me.

I instantly felt my brain kick to life and start the sobering-up process because I knew exactly how dangerous this girl was, and dammit, I needed to be in my full senses to defend myself.

“Understandable,” Gibs said in agreement. “At least you know the show’s for your benefit.”

“I *don’t* want it to be for my benefit. I want her to *fuck* off,” I growled, repressing a shudder at the sight. “Please tell me that I never carried on like that with her.”

“Well, I don’t know how you carried on behind closed car doors,” Gibs replied. “But you never let yourself down like that in public.”

“Thank Christ,” I muttered.

“Come on, Johnny.” Clamping a hand on my shoulder, Gibsie steered me toward the table we usually sat at. “Sit down. I’ll get a round of pints in.”

“Vodka, Gibs,” I corrected, knowing I was going to need something a hell of a lot stronger than the beer that was on tap to get through tonight. “A double vodka and Red Bull—and a shitload of shots.”

Fuck getting sober. I was going all out. Gibsie could take care of me for once.

“I’m on it, buddy.” Gibsie chuckled before disappearing into the crowd.

Ignoring the table of girls from school who had conveniently positioned themselves at the table next to ours, a table that included Bella and Cormac, I slumped down beside Hughie and his girlfriend, Katie Wilmot.

“Hughie,” I muttered by way of acknowledgment.

I eyed the bottle of 7up with a straw sticking out the rim that Hughie’s girlfriend was clutching and my lips twitched.

“Alright, Cap?” Hughie acknowledged with a loose smile. “How was training?”

I grunted my response, too sore and uncomfortable to make an effort and lie.

It was shite. Everything was shite.

My world was going to shite. And tonight's spectacle was the cherry to top it all off.

"Feely coming out tonight?"

Hughie shook his head. "Nah, lad. Something came up."

"No surprises there," I replied knowingly.

"You're telling me," Hughie replied with a weary sigh.

Patrick was a quiet fish, and even though we'd been friends for the bones of seven years, I didn't know a great deal about him aside from the fact that he was evasive, quiet, and had a tendency to back out of plans at the last minute.

After catching up with Hughie, I inclined my head to the pretty little redhead tucked into his side. "Katie."

"Hi, Johnny," Katie said with a shy smile as she huddled under Hughie's arm.

No fucking wonder you're huddling, I thought to myself.

I'd huddle, too, if I was a shy, sixteen-year-old girl being subjected to the horrendous mouthfucking at the other table.

Katie was too young to be in a bar—we all were—but kudos to my friend for having the decency to not fill her up with booze. Not that I thought for one minute that he would. For some unknown reason, Hughie was obsessed with the tiny redhead under his arm. Had been since she walked through the doors of Tommen as a fresh-faced first year.

We had been in second year when Hughie threw his cards in with Katie Wilmot. At the time, I—along with every other one of our friends and teammates—had thought Hughie was a lunatic and had voiced my thoughts aloud regularly. But now that I had age and experience on my side, I had to admit that his situation seemed a hell of a lot more appealing than mine.

Devotion had to feel better than being used did.

"You're looking well tonight, Katie," I told her, because it was the truth and she was insecure.

I knew this tidbit of information because her boyfriend often confided in me about their relationship. I probably knew far more about their relationship than Katie would be comfortable with, but I'd take those details to the grave.

Katie smiled shyly and snuggled closer into Hughie's side. "Thanks."

Hughie shot me a grateful look. He didn’t need to thank me for shit. His girlfriend *was* beautiful.

Gibsie rounded the table a few moments later, distracting me with a tray laden down with glasses.

“Bottoms up, Cap,” he announced, slapping the tray down in front of me.

“Cheers.” Not bothering to ask what was on offer tonight, knowing I’d drink petrol with the mood I was in, I grabbed two shot glasses off the tray and tossed them back.

And then, for good measure, I threw back another four shots before settling on my vodka and Red Bull.

I needed it because watching the floor show occurring at the table next to ours wasn’t fun. From where I was sitting, I had a perfect view of Bella straddling Cormac. He had his hands under her skirt, and her legs were wrapped around his waist. They might as well be naked and shagging, they were being that bleeding obvious.

Propping himself on the stool in front of me, Gibs thankfully blocked my view.

“I’m prettier to look at,” he announced with a wink and then proceeded to toss back shots like it was going out of fashion.

I could always depend on this fucker. Hail, rain, or snow, Gibsie had my back.

That was a comforting notion.

“Ryan’s a clown,” Hughie stated aloud, reading my thoughts. “She’s doing this on purpose to get a rise out of you, and he’s letting her use him to do it.”

“You had a lucky escape, Johnny,” Katie agreed with a sympathetic smile.

I shrugged and reached for another shot.

“She can do whatever she wants.” Pressing the glass to my lips, I tossed the drink back and swallowed quickly. “They both can.”

I meant it. I didn’t want her back. I would *never* go back there. But that didn’t mean that this was easy to watch. Because it wasn’t.

It was an intentional attack and it stung.

Mostly because Cormac was going along with it.

“Yeah, but rubbing it in your face like this is disgusting,” Katie replied, frowning at the pair. “If the shoe was on the other foot, and you did *that* with one of Bella’s friends right in front of her, she would lose it.”

“True,” both Gibs and Hughie agreed in unison.

For the next couple of hours, I ignored Bella and Cormac, focusing my attention on my friends and the live band playing in the corner of the bar. I tried to relax and let loose by joining in on the conversation, while necking back drink after drink, but it wasn’t coming easy to me.

I was too stressed.

When I wasn’t actively trying to avoid Bella and Cormac, my mind wandered back to the niggling concern that I tried so hard not to dwell on.

My health.

Problem was, the alcohol flushing through my veins was making it impossible for me to block out my fears.

What if I couldn’t get my shit together? What if my body didn’t heal? What the fuck was I supposed to do with my life?

Every theoretical egg I had ever possessed was firmly nestled in the basket labeled *Career in rugby.*

Right now, that basket was toppling and I was powerless to stop it.

In other words, I was completely helpless and utterly screwed.

“Okay, folks, this next song is from Reckless Kelly,” the lead singer announced over the microphone, distracting me from my drunken thoughts. He strummed on his guitar and then added, “‘Wicked Twisted Road.’”

Leaning forward, I placed my elbows on the table and strained to hear the lyrics over the noise of the crowd. One verse in and I was hooked.

Drunk as I was, I knew I needed to remember it. I *needed* to hear it again. The words were shooting straight through me. I felt them hard and deep, relating something fierce to every line of every verse.

Unsurprisingly—but still completely messed up—it was Shannon’s face that flittered through my mind as the lyrics forced their way into my sluggish brain.

Shannon with the lonesome eyes.

A lifetime of striving to be the best. The fear of not being good enough. And the constant, sinking feeling of dread in the pit of my stomach.

Dragging my phone out of my jeans pocket, I tapped out a quick text, hoping I was typing the name of the song properly before exiting my

messages, leaving the text in my drafts.

With my phone in my hands, I pondered what I would do if I had Shannon's phone number.

It was good that I didn't have it. Never in my life had I been partial to drunk dialing, but right now I had a burning urge to dial her absent number.

Would she pick up the phone? If she did, what would I say? Would she talk to me?

Fuck, I wanted to hear her voice on the other side of that line.

This girl is different, my stupid fucking brain chanted. *This one is for keeps.*

I wanted to be back in my room, with my phone pressed to my ear, listening to her stumble over her words as she told me every one of her thoughts. I wanted to be back here with her, watching her blush and smile and peek up at me through those long thick lashes. I wanted to be sitting in that dark cinema with her, not paying an ounce of attention to the film showing, while I stole secret glances at her and burned in heat when I found her eyes on me.

I just wanted *her*.

You could love this girl your whole life, the crazy thought persisted inside my brain over and over, *if you just let yourself.*

A sharp elbow to my ribs had my head snapping up.

"The fuck?" I turned my glare on Hughie, annoyed to be distracted from my happy place. "What was that in aid of?"

"We have company," he muttered, inclining his head.

"Oh god, here we go," Katie mumbled under her breath.

Bleary-eyed, I followed his move, my gaze landing on Cormac Ryan just as he rounded our table, face flushed and lipstick smeared across his mouth.

Hot on his heels was a smug-looking Bella.

"Alright, lads?" Cormac acknowledged, shoving his hands into his pockets. "How's it going?"

Leaning back in my seat, I gave them both an impassive look.

Hughie gave Cormac a stiff nod but made no move to enter into small talk with him.

Katie didn't even look at him.

Gibsie *was* looking at him, a murderous expression replacing his usual lopsided grin.

"Johnny." Cormac's wary gaze landed on me. "Can I have a word, lad?"

I took my time looking him up and down before settling on, "If that's what you want to talk to me about"—I gestured to Bella, who was standing behind him with a smirk on her face—"then there's no need. Your actions spoke clearly for you tonight."

"Listen, Johnny, I don't want any trouble," Cormac replied, running a frustrated hand through his black hair. "All I wanted to do was clear the air and make sure there's no hard feelings between us." Shrugging, he added, "We have to play together and I don't want any bad blood."

"The window of time to talk to me about this was months ago," I replied in a flat tone. "And considering we were playing together when you decided to fuck me over, I find that hard to believe."

"It wasn't like that, lad," Cormac countered, flustered. "I thought you two were off at the time."

"I honestly don't care," I told him. "As far as I'm concerned, she's your problem now."

"Johnny, come on—"

"Now off you go," I interrupted, waving him off. "And good luck with that—" I shot Bella a scathing look. "Because you're going to need it."

"*That*?" Bella spat out. "Who the hell do you think you're talking about, Johnny Kavanagh?"

"I'm talking about you," I shot back with a sneer. "And I'm wondering what the hell possessed me to ever put my dick inside something so fucking poisonous."

A chorus of snickering erupted around the table next to us.

Gibsie laughed loudly.

So did Hughie and Katie.

I would have felt bad for the comment, but the alcohol flushing through my veins was like truth potion.

"Yeah, well, you were total shit," Bella screamed at me. "And I will *never* touch you again."

"Praise fucking Jesus," I shot back sarcastically. "That's the best news I've heard all year."

“Hey, don’t be like that!” Cormac warned, taking a protective stance in front of her. “Bella’s my girlfriend now, and I won’t have you talking to her like that.”

I arched a brow. “Your girlfriend?”

“That’s right,” Bella hissed, smirking. “I’m his girlfriend.”

“Ah, Christ.” I rubbed a hand over my face and groaned. “I almost feel sorry for you, Ryan, because you clearly have *no* idea of who you’re dealing with.”

“I know exactly who you are, Kavanagh,” he snarled. “I know *all* about you.”

“Not me, asshole,” I growled. “Her!”

Cormac glared at me, face turning bright red. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means keep an eye on your teammates, lad,” I shot back. “Because that one’s not girlfriend material.”

His eyes narrowed. “Come outside and say that to my face.”

“I’m saying it right here,” I deadpanned. “To your face.”

“With a table in front of you and your friends at your side,” he taunted. “Big man you are. Come outside and talk shit about her to my face.”

“Nope,” Gibsie replied for me, reaching for another shot glass. “Not happening. So you can keep on walking, turncoat, because he’s not biting.”

“Shag off, Gibs.” Cormac glared down at him. “I wasn’t talking to you.”

“Maybe not,” Gibs replied, tossing his drink back. “But I’m sure as hell talking to you.” Shoving his stool back, he jerked to his feet and squared up to Cormac. “Now turn your ass around and take your little girlfriend back to the hole you both crawled out from.”

“Or what?” Cormac growled, pressing his forehead against Gibsie’s.

Bad fucking move on Ryan’s part.

“There’s no contract hanging over my head like there is his, asshole,” Gibsie seethed, pushing back with his forehead. “I have no fucking problem stepping in on Kav’s behalf and kicking the ever-loving shit out of your turncoat ass.”

At six feet, both lads were evenly matched in height, but Gibsie outweighed Cormac by a good thirty pounds because on the pitch, Cormac was a skilled runner and Gibs was a highly charged battering ram.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” Hughie groaned, voicing my thoughts aloud. “He had to push it.”

“Yep,” Katie agreed glumly. “He sure did.”

Gibsie had an easygoing nature, but give him a few drinks and a reason to fight and he went all in.

“I’ve got no problem with you, Gibsie,” Cormac barked. “My issue’s with Kavanagh.”

“Well, that’s too bad, because I have a huge fucking problem with you,” Gibsie snarled. “Who the fuck do you think you are, coming over here with her, trying to cause drama?”

“I was *trying* to clear the air,” Cormac bit out, jaw clenched.

“No, you were *trying* to get a rise out of him,” Gibsie corrected, snarling. “You were *trying* to fuck up his season.” He shoved Cormac in the chest and claimed the space when he staggered backwards. “Because you’re a jealous little prick and the Academy doesn’t want you.”

“Push me one more time and I’ll break your legs,” Cormac snarled, shoving Gibsie right back.

Unfazed by the threat, Gibsie continued on his rampage. “You and that bitch were *trying* to get one over on him because *he* doesn’t *want* her, and *you* can’t do it where it counts.” Pressing his forehead to Cormac’s, he hissed, “On the *pitch*.”

“We don’t want any trouble in here tonight, boys,” the barmaid called out over the crowd. “Pack it in!”

“Trouble?” Gibsie laughed humorlessly, and then he swung his fist, catching Cormac straight in the jaw. “I’m going to rip this fucker’s head off,” he roared, barreling into him.

Several high-pitched screams erupted from the girls around us as both lads landed on a nearby table, sending chairs flying and glasses crashing to the floor.

I was out of my seat and closing in on my friend in seconds.

“Gibs!” I roared, dragging him off of Cormac, who was getting a few punches of his own in.

“Walk away, lad,” I commanded in a low tone as I clamped a hand on his shoulder and pulled him back to me. “This isn’t your fight.”

“Like hell it’s not,” he snarled, lunging forward so hard that I had to double my efforts to keep him at bay. “You’re my best friend and this prick

has been disrespecting you for months."

"Let him," I replied calmly, catching Hughie's eye and gesturing for him to get his arse over here pronto. "I don't care, and *neither* do you."

"Oh, I care," Gibsie snarled, eyes locked on Cormac.

"Get this mental case away from me or I'll kill him," Cormac seethed, wiping a trail of blood from his mouth. "You're a fucking lunatic, Gerard Gibson."

"You'll do nothing," I snarled, glaring at Cormac as I took a protective stance in front of Gibsie.

Bella, who had been screaming her head off to the side, decided this was the perfect time to slip around me and get in Gibsie's face.

"You prick," she screamed, slapping him across the face. "Don't you dare touch him."

"Get out of his face," I warned her, shoving my best friend behind me. "Now."

"Or what?" she hissed, slapping me across the face. "You'll set your guard dog on me, too?"

"Did you enjoy that?" I seethed, not even flinching. "Because that's the only way you'll put your hands on me again."

She reared back and slapped me again.

I laughed into her face. "Go on. Go right ahead. Hit me all fucking night. It won't change a thing."

"Stop," Cormac commanded, pushing her behind his back. "Don't hit him."

"He deserves it," she screamed.

"Because I don't want you?" I tossed back and laughed. "Oh yeah, because that's how life works."

"Don't make me call the Gardaí on ye!" the older woman behind the bar screeched. "Pack of little gobshites."

"No need for that, Mags," Hughie announced, scrambling to intercept Gibsie's swinging fist with his hand.

"Get him out of here," I ordered, dragging Gibsie back once more.

"Your place?" Hughie asked.

"Anywhere." I ran a hand through my hair in exasperation. "Just keep him safe."

Hughie nodded and turned his attention to Gibsie.

“Let’s go, Rocky Balboa,” he said brightly. “Before you get us all thrown in the barrack for the night.”

“He asked for it,” Gibsie slurred. “Piece of shit.”

“I know, lad,” Hughie coaxed. “Come on.” Wrapping his body around Gibsie’s, he forcefully walked him backwards out of the bar.

“You coming, Johnny?” Katie asked, glancing nervously between Cormac and me.

“I’ll be grand,” I told her and turned my attention on Cormac.

“Are you sure?” Katie persisted. “You should come with us—”

“Go ahead, Katie,” I ordered, swinging around to catch her eye. “I’ll make my own way home.”

“If you’re sure.”

“I am.”

I waited until Katie had followed Hughie and Gibsie out of the bar before turning my attention back to Cormac.

“You want to talk to me?” I snarled, gesturing toward the door. “Then let’s go.”

Not waiting for a response, I pushed my way through the crowded bar toward the exit, receiving several claps on the shoulders and “Great match, Johnny” and “Looking forward to seeing you in green in June” spiels as I tried my best to walk a straight line.

Doubtful, I thought to myself. *Very fucking doubtful.*

When I reached the pub door and stepped outside into the street, I was relieved to not find the lads outside waiting for me.

A few minutes later the door swung open and Cormac walked out.

“Not her,” I barked, pointing a finger at Bella, who filed outside after him. “She stays the fuck away from me.”

“It’s a free country,” Bella countered, glaring daggers at me. “I can go wherever the hell I want.”

“Either she goes or I go,” I growled, addressing Cormac. “Your choice.”

Bella opened her mouth to say something else, something spiteful, no doubt, but Cormac spoke first. “Go back inside,” he told her. “I won’t be long.”

“But I—”

“I need to talk to him,” Cormac pressed. “Go inside.”

With what looked like great reluctance, Bella went back inside, leaving me alone on the street with Cormac.

“Right,” he growled, rolling out his shoulders. “Let’s do this, Kavanagh.”

I arched a brow, amused at the fighting stance Ryan had taken. If he thought I was going to throw my career away for a punch-up over Bella, he was seriously mistaken.

Shannon—absolutely, but Bella? Not a chance.

“Put your fists away, ya bleeding eejit,” I barked. “I’m not going to touch you.”

He watched me for several moments, eyes full of mistrust, clearly waiting for me to pounce.

It was almost comical. *Almost.*

“Believe it or not, Johnny,” he finally broke the tension by saying, “I was genuinely trying to clear the air between us.”

“When we’re both full of drink?”

“Fair enough,” he conceded. “But I didn’t mean for that to happen.”

“You didn’t mean for what to happen exactly?” I asked, leaning my shoulder against the wall of the pub for balance. “You didn’t mean to fuck me over, or you didn’t mean to hit *my* best friend and *your* teammate?”

The night air had hit me like a fucking wrecking ball, and I knew full well that without the wall for support, I would be swaying like the tower of Pisa.

“Gibs hit me first,” Cormac snapped and then threw his hands up. “He was in my face.”

“Because you were in mine,” I replied calmly. “Because you were told to leave and you wouldn’t, and because I’m his captain and that means something to him.”

Cormac grimaced at my words.

Good. Fucker needed to feel them.

“And I didn’t mean to fuck you over,” he added, cheeks reddening. “I thought you two were off. I really fucking like the girl, Johnny—I always have.”

“Then all you had to do was pick up the phone,” I countered, words slurring despite my best efforts. “And hear it from the horse’s mouth.”

“I should have,” he finally admitted.

“You know what the messed-up thing is,” I mused, voicing my thoughts aloud. “It’s that if you told me you liked her, I would have stepped back.” Folding my arms across my chest, I glared at him. “I would have respected the shite out of you for being a man about it, and I would have walked away. Bella and I were never serious. I didn’t have a relationship with her. But I had one with you. And you *betrayed* me.”

“Cap—”

“No, shut up and let me say this.” Exhaling heavily, I said, “It’s not that she went behind my back with my teammate. It’s that my *teammate* went behind my back with her.”

Cormac groaned loudly. “Johnny, lad, I didn’t mean for it to—”

I held a hand up, warding him off with his bullshit.

“Don’t feed me that I-didn’t-mean-for-it-to-happen line. I’ve had sex, Cormac, many times, and we both know that when you put your dick inside a girl, you *always* fucking mean it. It doesn’t just slip in unannounced to ya.”

“You’re right,” he admitted after a long pause. “Shit, lad, you’re right.”

“I know I am,” I replied, tone clipped.

“And you’re really done?” He watched me with a wary expression. “You don’t want her back?”

I shook my head and expelled a frustrated breath. “I don’t know how many ways I can say it, Ryan. I don’t want a bleeding thing to do with that girl. So, you go right ahead and do whatever the hell you want with her. Just keep her the fuck away from me, keep your PDAs out of my face, and we’ll be golden.”

“Are you saying that to save face?” he pushed.

“I would think you know by now that I’m a straight talker,” I growled. “When I tell you I’m done, I mean it.”

“So, that’s it?”

“Yep.” I nodded. “That’s it.”

“Why aren’t you more pissed at me?” he asked, giving me a mistrusting look.

“Because I feel sorry for you,” I told him and surprisingly it was the truth.

I *was* feeling sorry for Cormac. I was also disappointed in him.

I was a lot of things but pissed wasn't one of them. Not right now, at least.

He was a pawn in one of Bella's games, and even though I was drunk, I could see that as clear as day.

"Listen to me," I began, striving not to slur my words as I tried to give him some hard-learned home truths. "I've been in this game a long fucking time and I know what's happening here. Bella's using you to get to me, and you're letting her make an eejit out of you."

Only God himself knew why I was giving him advice after he stabbed me in the back, but I continued.

"She can't have me anymore and you're the next best thing," I slurred. "It's money for that one, Ryan. Money and status." Shaking my head, I added, "Fighting with your teammate over a fucking girl is the beginning of the end. Go down that path and it's over for you before it has even started."

Even in my drunken state, I knew I was making a hypocritical fucking statement.

I justified my reasons with the knowledge that Shannon was worth it.

Bella was *not*.

Cormac glowered at me. "You think you're better than me."

Was he serious?

Was that *all* he took from my effort of helping him?

"I *am* better than you," I snapped, frustrated that he wasn't listening to me. "If you want to be on my level, then step it up on the pitch. Work harder. Train harder. Be fucking better. And open your goddamn eyes to danger. Because that so-called girlfriend of yours will bleed you dry, lad."

"She *is* my girlfriend," he snarled. "So don't talk about her like that."

God, give me strength…

"Fine." I threw my hands up. "Keep your girlfriend away from mine and we'll be rosy."

"You don't have a girlfriend," he replied slowly, expression laced with confusion.

"Me," I corrected, flustered at the word spill. "Keep her away from *me* and we won't have a problem."

"So, what happens now?" Cormac asked, face contorted in a pained grimace. "Are we going to have a problem playing together after this?"

"No."

“No.” His brows shot up. “Why not?”

“Because I’m not thick enough to let a girl like *that* fuck with my head,” I bit out. “You’re a decent winger and the team needs you. I’d be a selfish bastard if I allowed my personal issues to impact the squad.”

“And Bella?” Cormac asked after a long pause. “Are you going to cause problems with her?”

“Because you’re with her? No,” I told him. “If she fucks with Shannon? Absolutely.”

“Shannon?”

“Yes, *Shannon*,” I bit out, tone harsh now.

Cormac stared blankly. “Who’s Shannon?”

“*Shannon* is the reason you’re going to end up with a broken jaw.”

“The hell?”

“Bella was threatening to go after her,” I snarled. “If that happens, I will fuck you up.”

He blanched. “Why me?”

“Can’t hit a girl, which means I’ll be coming for the next best thing,” I explained. “So, bear in mind that every *single* time your Bella decides to make a threat, spread a nasty rumor, or fuck with my Shannon, I’ll return the favor on your face. Every single goddamn time.”

Cormac visibly paled, and the visual, although slightly hazy, was extremely satisfying.

“Good,” I grunted, pulling my phone out of my pocket to call a taxi. “Glad we understand each other.”

Shaking my head, I blinked a couple of times to clear my vision as I pulled up my phonebook and dialed the number labeled *Fat Paddy*.

Fucking Gibsie.

I should have known better than to leave my phone alone with him when I went for a shower. The last time he got ahold of my phone, he renamed my mother *Sugar Tits* and Bella *Devil Pussy*. It was all shits and giggles until *Sugar Tits* texted me in the middle of the night, demanding I come downstairs and unlock the front door because she was standing outside and wanted to come inside. Not knowing who the hell was texting me, I had replied with more profanities than I cared to think about before threatening to call the Gardaí—on my own bleeding mother.

Talk about a clusterfuck of a misunderstanding.

“Do you want to shake it out?” Cormac asked, distracting me from my mission to get my drunk ass home as he extended his hand toward me.

“Get that fucking thing away from me.” I scowled at his hand as I put my phone to my ear. “I know where it’s been.”

His expression darkened, but he had the good sense not to push his luck for the night. With a stiff nod, Cormac turned around and walked back inside the bar.

When Fat Paddy’s number rang off, I tried five more times before giving up.

Taxis around here turned their phones off on Saturday nights when it got busy, and from the sheer volume of people about the streets tonight, I knew I’d be waiting a long fucking time to get home.

Frustrated, I turned my attention back to my phone and scrolled through my contacts, looking for Hughie’s name.

“That little bollox,” I cursed when I realized that Gibsie had once again changed the name of every single contact on my list.

Sugar Tits and *Devil Pussy* were once against present in my contacts, along with new ones like *Big Daddy G*, *Fanny Flaps*, *Call if Arrested*, *Do* Not *Call if Arrested*, and my personal favorite: *Judas Iscari-cunt*.

Clicking into that particular contact, I recognized the number as being Cormac’s.

He could stay like that.

Devil Pussy too.

I spent a ridiculous amount of time trying to find Hughie’s number because I couldn’t figure out who was bleeding who in my phone.

After accidentally dialing the contact *Casual Sex* and hearing Coach Mulcahy’s voice on the other line, I quickly hung up.

Canceling another incoming call from *King Clit*, because who in their right mind would answer a number listed as that, I switched off my phone and shoved it back in my pocket.

Morose, I made my way across the road to the chip shop and ordered half a dozen cheeseburgers and two bags of chips. No need to watch my diet now. Not when my body was hell-bent on giving up on me.

Slumping on a wall outside the chipper, I devoured everything and chugged it down with a bottle of water. The grease tasted foreign to me, and I knew I would pay for it tomorrow, but for now I didn’t care.

“Johnny Kavanagh?” A vaguely familiar voice called my name. “Is that you?”

I snapped my gaze up to see a tall lad about my age looking expectantly at me. He had his arm slung over the shoulder of an attractive blond.

Fan or friend?

Friend or fan?

I tried to place the face and couldn’t, so decided on *fan*.

“No pictures tonight, kids,” I bit out, tone slurred. “Johnny’s on a time-out.”

The guy laughed but made no move to shove a camera in my face, which was just as well considering my current condition.

Instead he shocked the hell out of me by saying, “I spoke to you on the phone the other week. You know my sister, Shannon. You dropped her home from school.”

My head snapped up, and I found myself concentrating a whole heap more on the lad in front of me.

“You’re the hurler…” I paused and racked my brain for his name. “Joey!” I blurted out, proud of myself for managing to retrieve that piece of information in my state. “Joey *the hurler* and Shannon *like the river*.”

“Like the river?” the girl chuckled. “God, how much have you had to drink?”

“A *river* load by the looks of it,” Joey stated wryly, eyeing me with curiosity. “Do you think you should head home, man?” he added. “You look fairly well oiled.”

“Would if I could,” I admitted with a grumble. “No taxi.”

“Sure we can give you a lift, can’t we, babe?” the girl announced, pointing down the street. “We’re only parked down the road.”

I opened my mouth to protest but, “That’d be great, thanks,” came out instead.

“Yeah, sure, no problem,” Joey agreed, looking a bit surprised. He shifted uncomfortably for a minute, then inclined his head. “Let’s go.”

I managed to stand up, but it took a lot of work to stay upright.

Slamming my shoulder against the wall, I managed to keep my balance as I followed after them.

Thankfully, the girl who I presumed was Joey's girlfriend wasn't messing when she said they were only parked down the road.

Another few stumbling feet and we reached the red Opal Corsa.

At least that's what I thought it was. It was hard to tell because my head was spinning and the car was a bucket of rust.

Fuck it, though, I was in no state to question their methods of traveling. I was beyond grateful for the lift.

"I'm Aoife Molloy, by the way," the girl announced, giving me a bright smile before making her way around to the passenger side of the car. "Joey *the hurler's* girlfriend." She snickered at that last bit before climbing into the front seat.

"Nice to meet you," I replied, keeping my weight against the wall while Joey opened the driver's side door and then rolled the seat forward.

"Three door," he said by way of explanation. "You're going to have to climb into the back."

"It's fine, lad." I pulled away from the wall and braced my weight against the car before wedging myself through the tiny space.

My efforts were about as effective as sailing a paper boat because Joey had to shove on my back to get me inside.

"Christ," I muttered when I was finally in.

Sinking down in the middle of the seat, I had to twist my body sideways, my legs facing the side window, so Joey could push back his seat.

"You good, Kavanagh?" he called out when he climbed inside and pushed his seat back another five inches.

"All good," I croaked out, body mashed between the back of his seat and mine. "Thanks again for the lift."

"No bother," Joey replied. He leaned over and pressed a kiss to his girlfriend's lips before fastening his seat belt. "Where are we heading?"

Straight to your house because I wanna fuck your sister, I thought to myself. I smirked at the fabulous notion, and then hunted the crazy thought away with a shake of my head.

Probably love her, too, I mused to myself, *a fucking lot*, before pushing that madness out as well.

Cop yourself on, asshole!

"About four miles the other side of Tommen College," I slurred. I tried to find my seat belt, but my fumbling hands wouldn't cooperate. "Head out

the main road for the city.” Giving up on finding my belt, I dropped my head back against the rest and sighed. “I’ll call the turnoffs when we get to them.”

“No bother.”

He started the engine and had just pulled onto the road when I felt the car brake suddenly.

“What the fuck?” Joey barked seconds before two hands slammed down on the hood of his car. “Get off my car, asshole!”

“You’re stealing my center,” Gibsie roared in the window as he leaned over the hood of the car. “Give him back.” His eyes darted from Joey to me, recognition sparking. “Hey, Cap.” He grinned, head lolling to one side. “How’s it going? I’ve been looking everywhere for you.”

“And this clown is?” Joey asked, tone derisive, attention locked on Gibsie who was having a one-way conversation with me through the windscreen of his car.

“He’s my flanker,” I grumbled before turning my attention back to the man-child hugging the bonnet. “Gibs! What the fuck are you doing, lad!” I barked, glaring out the windscreen. “You’re supposed to be gone home with Hughie.”

“The Gards pulled him over for tax and insurance,” he called back through the windscreen like that answered my question.

I gaped. “So? Hughie’s above board.”

“He *looked* at me, Johnny—shone his big fucking torch right in my eyes,” he called back. “I panicked and jumped out of the car.” Shrugging, he added, “I’ve been running around town ever since.” He narrowed his eyes. “I tried to call you but you kept cutting me off!”

I glared at him. “You’re *King Clit*?”

“Oh, yeah,” Gibsie snickered. “I forgot about that.”

“What’s Hughie down as?”

“*Ginger Pubes*,” he replied like it was the most obvious thing ever.

It wasn’t.

“He’s blond,” I growled.

“His girlfriend isn’t.”

“Jesus Christ,” I groaned, rubbing my forehead.

“What do you want me to do with him?” Joey asked.

I shrugged and contemplated telling him to drive over the annoying fucker, but then I knew I would be terribly lonely without him. And in all fairness, he had taken a few slaps defending my honor tonight.

“I should probably bring him back to my place,” I begrudgingly admitted. “Or a secured hospital.”

Joey muttered something incoherent under his breath and climbed out. It sounded something like, *You two fuckers better not puke in this car.*

I was making no promises. My buddy was a projector.

Pulling on the seat, Joey dragged it forward and instructed an intoxicated Gibsie to climb in.

He did. But instead of climbing or crawling inside, the bastard lunged into the back seat.

“Fuck!” I roared, doubling over in pain when his elbow landed in my crotch.

There goes your last shot right there…

“Shit, man, did I get your dick?” Gibsie slurred as he tried and failed to climb over me. “I’ll get ice for your balls when we get home.”

“Get. Off. Me,” I strangled out, fairly sure I was turning purple from the pain, as he climbed over the seat, digging and kneeing me with his elbows and knees.

Finally, he managed to drag his ass over to the other side of the seat.

“Christ,” he mused, settling down alongside me. “That’s the tightest hole I’ve been inside in months.”

Joey climbed back in and started the engine before quickly tearing off down the street.

“I hope there’s not any more of you,” he said. “The car’s weighing down at the back.”

“Sorry,” I began to say but was cut off by Gibsie.

“It’s his fault—the fat bastard,” he announced. Turning to face me, he added, “Hey, is your dick okay, man? I’m really sorry about that. I hope I didn’t squash your balls.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Go fuck yourself, *Gerard*.”

“I was being sincere, *Jonathan*,” he shot back, wounded. “For that, you can get your own bloody ice tonight… Hold up!” Grabbing the front of my shirt, he dragged me toward him and sniffed my mouth.

“You traitor!” he choked out, looking comically horrified. “You went to the chipper!”

“Yeah, I did,” I replied, shoving away from him. “And it was fucking delicious, and I have no regrets.”

“What did you have?”

“A few cheeseburgers and a curry chips.”

“How did it taste?”

“Better than sex.”

“We’re supposed to be on a diet!” Gibsie hissed in an appalled tone before quickly asking, “Did you get me something?”

“Yeah, I got you a burger.”

“Thanks, Johnny.”

“And then I got hungry so I ate it.”

“You’re a *monster*.”

“You two are so weird,” Aoife laughed. “Aren’t they funny, Joey?”

“They’re something, alright,” Shannon’s brother replied.

“Hey.” Suddenly realizing he was in the company of strangers, Gibsie leaned through the middle of their seats and asked, “Who the fuck are you guys?”

“Johnny’s friends with my boyfriend’s sister,” Aoife explained.

“Sister?” The word seemed to confuse Gibsie, who stared blankly at me for several moments.

Throwing a prayer up to the heavens that he could control himself, I nodded and said, “Shannon.”

Gibsie sank back beside me and frowned. “Shannon?”

“Yes, *Shannon*.” I glared at him.

Gibsie’s eyes widened then, awareness suddenly dawning on him. “Oh, *Shannon*!” he exclaimed. “Ah, yeah, little Shannon from third year.” Grinning, he nudged me in the ribs. “Johnny here has a fierce soft spot for your sister.”

“Is that right?” Joey replied tightly.

Oh fuck.

“Yeah, he’s always looking out for her at school,” Gibsie added with a wink. “Making sure she’s not getting into any hassle.”

I bit back a groan and resisted the urge to wrap my hands around his neck and choke the life out of him.

To be fair, it could have been worse. Gibsie was capable of saying so much worse.

“That’s lovely,” Aoife chimed in, and I noticed the way she placed a hand on her boyfriend’s knee. “Isn’t it kind of him, Joe?”

“Why?” Joey demanded, tone hard and suspicious. “What’s in it for you?”

I sighed heavily and tried to come up with something believable.

“Because I fucked her—”

“You what?” Joey roared, slamming on the brakes.

The sudden jolt of the car stopping caused Gibsie and me to lunge forward.

Turning around, Joey glared at me. “You better be messing around right now, Kavanagh, because I swear to Christ I will—”

“Over!” I hurried to explain, dragging myself back onto the seat. “I fucked her *over* on her first day. Embarrassed her on the pitch when I knocked her out.”

But I want to fuck her…

I want in your sister so bad you wouldn’t believe it…

The things I imagine doing to her would shock you…

I waited for the homicidal look in his eyes to fade before continuing.

“I figured I owed the girl, so I just kept an eye out on things—made sure she was settling in okay. It’s not easy starting a new school.” Shrugging, I added, “Didn’t want her getting any unnecessary shite.”

I was a sitting duck waiting for her brother to make the next move. If Joey hit me, I wouldn’t hit back. I wouldn’t retaliate.

That was the scary thing about this situation.

Sitting in his car, drunk off my ass, knowing that I was more than capable of beating the shite out of him, but knowing I wouldn’t.

Because of *her*. Because he was important to *her*. Because if I hit him, I would hurt *her.*

And hurting her was *bad*. Hurting her made me want to hurt something harder.

That notion was more messed up and complicated than my drunk ass could comprehend.

Joey didn’t reply, but he did turn his attention to the road and start driving again.

I breathed a sigh of relief.

Turning to Gibsie, I mouthed the words *Keep your mouth shut*.

He responded with a theatrical finger-to-mouth zipper motion.

When we reached the turnoff to my house, half an hour later, I mumbled a few short directions.

Joey responded with a clipped nod and turned right, leaving the main road for the rickety secondary road that led to the entrance of the property.

I was feeling more clearheaded now. I guess the near brush with death at the hands of Shannon's brother had shaken some sense into me and sobered my ass up. I wished the same could be said for Gibsie, who was passed out beside me, snoring like a grizzly bear.

When Joey pulled up outside the gates of the property, I said, "We can get out here, man."

"That's where you live?" Shannon's brother asked, speaking for the first time since the almost disaster that was our miscommunication. His attention was riveted to the huge cast iron gates with the ugly-ass eagles on either pillar.

"How far is it up that driveway to your house?" he asked.

"About a quarter of a mile."

"You'll never manage getting him to walk that far," he muttered. "I'll drive you up to the door."

"310587," I rolled out the code, which just so happened to be my date of birth. "Just key that into the pad over there and they'll open for you."

Joey keyed the code into the pad and waited for the gates to open inward.

"Again, I appreciate this," I felt the need to mention. "I know it's out of your way."

"Just returning the favor," he replied, driving up the narrow laneway toward the house.

"This place is amazing," Aoife said with a dreamy sigh. "Look at all the trees and—oh my god! Look at the size of that house," she squeaked when the house came into view, lit up like a fucking Christmas tree.

Mam was paranoid as fuck about potential robbers thinking the house was empty so she had automatic sensors and timed lighting installed everywhere.

In the yard. In the house. On the lawn.

It was ridiculous but drunk me was grateful for the illumination.

Joey killed the engine and climbed out, adjusting his seat as far forward as it would go.

I was much steadier on my feet when I was getting out than I had been climbing in.

“Thanks again,” I said before reaching into the back and hauling Sleeping Beauty himself out of the car. “I owe you one.”

Wrapping an arm around still half-asleep Gibsie’s waist, I dragged him to the front door and wrestled to get my keys out. Failing to get them out of my jeans pocket, I dropped him on his ass and battled with my jeans for a long moment before finally retrieving my keys.

“Stop, will ya, I’m sensitive,” Gibsie groaned before curling up, snoring resumed.

“Here,” Joey announced when I managed to stab the timber frame with the key, missing the keyhole by a good three inches. “Let me give you a hand.”

Grateful for the intervention, I handed over my keys and turned my attention to my friend. “Get up,” I growled, nudging him with my foot. “We’re home.”

Fucker didn’t budge.

“Gibsie!” I barked.

Nothing but snores. *Goddammit.*

Releasing a frustrated sigh, I reached down and grabbed his shoulders and tried to haul him off the ground.

Joey, who had the door open, came and helped me heave him up.

I was in no position to decline his help, so with each of us taking a side, we hauled his deadweight ass into the house.

“Drop him down in here,” I instructed, gesturing to the living room.

“You sure?” Joey asked, flicking on the light. “That couch is white, man.”

“It’s leather,” I muttered, too tired and sore to worry about my mother’s three-piece suite. Shuffling over to the couch, we tossed Gibsie down. “If he pukes, he’ll be hosing it down by himself in the morning.”

“Fair enough,” Joey replied with a shrug before turning around and heading for the door.

I trailed after him, not really knowing what to say. This night had gone from depressing to infuriating to downright confusing in a matter of hours.

"Listen," Joey said when he stepped outside onto the gravel. "About Shannon."

Here we go, I thought to myself. I'd been waiting for this since I climbed into his piece-of-shit car. *Behave yourself, Kav, keep your mouth shut.*

"What about Shannon?" I asked, leaning against the doorframe.

"She's fragile," he came right out and said. "Vulnerable."

"Yeah." My voice was gruff, so I cleared my throat and tried again. "I, uh, already guessed that."

Joey nodded and shoved his hands in his pockets.

I kept my mouth shut, waiting for him to continue.

"What I'm trying to say here is that I appreciate you looking out for my sister," he finally said. "She's had a hard few years and Tommen seems like a good fit for her. So, I guess I'm hoping that you continue keeping an eye out for her at school—you know, making sure no one is giving her any hassle."

My brows shot up. "Ah, yeah, sure. That's no problem."

He nodded again, his words coming out faster now. "She seems to be settling in at Tommen, and she keeps telling me the kids are nice to her, but I'm at BCS so I've no way to tell if she's okay or not, and she never tells anyone what's going on in that head of hers until it's too late."

I frowned. "Too late?"

"Bitchy girl shit," he explained. "My sister has had a target on her back since she was in nappies."

"That's pretty messed up," I muttered, already knowing all of this, but having the good sense to not tell her brother that.

"Kids are cruel," he agreed.

"They sure are," I muttered.

He stared at me for a long time before saying, "Are you going to tell me about it?"

Oh, Jesus.

What?

The fuck did he want me to tell him?

I racked my brain and came up with nothing PG so I kept my mouth shut.

“Ciara Maloney’s boyfriend,” Joey filled in, giving me an odd look. “Some fella from Tommen beat the shit out of him in town yesterday.”

“Oh?” I arched a brow and folded my arms across my chest. “Is that so?”

Joey smirked. “Yeah, it is.”

“Well, I hope he fucked him up,” I slurred, feeling my body thrum with anger at the memory of those nasty fucking girls. “Heard his girlfriend’s a bitch.”

“I heard he was in a bad way,” Joey replied. “Broken nose. A few stitches.”

“How awful,” I drawled.

Joey stared at me for another long pause before shaking his head. “Anyway, I just wanted you to know that I appreciate that my sister has someone looking out for her. When I can’t.”

He turned to leave, only to spin back around.

“Friend.” His word held a bite to it. “My sister needs a *friend*, Kavanagh,” he clarified. “She doesn’t need to be getting her hopes up on a guy who’ll be gone come the summer.”

I heard his warning loud and clear. My fucked-up brain might not heed the warning, but I definitely heard it.

Without another word, Joey turned around and walked away, leaving me standing in the doorway, staring after him with only two things on my mind.

The first: finding an ice pack for my balls.

The second: fantasizing about all the terribly inappropriate things I longed to do with his sister.

32
Days Off and Demon Brothers

SHANNON

“I think you need to buy that girl a ring, Joe,” I announced as I read and then reread the note Aoife had left on my brother’s bedside locker on Sunday morning. “She’s a keeper.”

“Yeah,” Joey muttered, scratching his jaw. “She must really love me.”

“Uh, you *think*?” I rolled my eyes. “She adores you.”

“But I don’t get why she would do this for me.”

“Me either,” I teased. “Especially when you look so much like Shrek.”

“Cheeky fucker,” he chuckled, play-shoving me. “Give me a look at that note again.”

I held it out for him—the same note he had already read at least a dozen times—and then padded over to the kitchen table with my mug of tea. Taking a seat, I watched my brother read the note again, brows scrunched in confusion.

“Why did she do this, Shan?” Shaking his head, he walked from cupboard door to cupboard door, opening and closing them. “She must’ve gotten up at the crack of dawn to do this.” He opened the fridge, revealing a heaving stack of groceries slotted inside. “It must’ve cost her a fortune.”

Joey was right. Aoife had to have gotten up early to do this, considering it was only eleven o’clock. He was also right about it costing her a fortune.

I had found the shopping receipt in the bin for €143.67.

“Says here, she’ll be back around one o’clock with the boys,” he added, rereading the note he’d been brooding over since he woke up. “They’re going to the playground first and then the pitch for a kickabout after that.”

“Did you see this?” I asked as I thumbed through seven neatly stacked envelopes, labeled by day of the week. Shaking one of the little brown envelopes in my hand, I smiled when I heard the sound of coins clanging. “Your girlfriend allotted your money into daily budget packets.”

Joey gaped at me. “*What*?”

“Yep,” I giggled, placing Tuesday’s envelope back down on the pile.

“No fucking way,” he muttered as he stalked over to where I was and picked up a handful of the tiny rectangular envelopes.

“And she put little hearts on them for you,” I snickered. “It’s so cute.”

“Is it normal to be mad at a person because they love you?” my brother asked, eyeing the envelopes with confusion. He turned his green eyes on me and asked, “Is this normal?”

“Why are you asking me?” I shrugged uncomfortably. “I have no experience with this sort of thing.”

“Oh, would you look at this,” he said with a sigh, pointing to the twenty-euro note lodged beneath Aoife’s car keys and the sticky note alongside it saying: *Joey and Shannon’s breakfast fund*. In capital letters beneath that were the words: Feed your sister, babe. She’s too skinny.

“My girlfriend left me pocket money.” Joey’s tone was laced with sarcasm. “Jesus Christ, Shan.”

“Don’t be mad at her,” I told him. “She’s trying to help us.”

“I know.” He pinched the bridge of his nose and exhaled heavily. “And I’m not mad. I just *don’t* know how to handle it.”

“Maybe just by saying thank you?” I offered. “And I love you, too? Or flowers? Those are good, too.”

Joey smirked. “You’re full of ideas, aren’t you?”

I smiled back at him and then sighed, forcing myself to address the elephant in the room—or the lack of. “Do you think Mam will be home soon?”

The light in my brother’s eyes dimmed out.

“I really don’t give a fuck what she does, Shan,” he replied tightly. “So long as that prick stays away from this house.”

He will come back, Joey. You know this. Stop lying to yourself.

“Yeah.” I chewed on my nail, contemplating his reply for a moment before saying, “What are we going to do if Mam doesn’t come back, Joe?”

That was where my worries rested. With my mother. Because she had never left us overnight like this before.

“We’ll manage, Shan,” Joey replied, Adam’s apple bobbing. “Like we always do.”

“And school?” I whispered.

“Nanny will be home from Beara tonight,” Joey stated in a no-nonsense tone of voice. “She’ll sort the boys the same as she always does with school and all that stuff.” He scrubbed a hand over his face before adding, “All we have to do is keep the house, pay the bills, pack them a lunch in the mornings, and be here at night when Nanny drops them off.”

“I was supposed to go on the school trip after Easter, but if she’s not home I’ll cancel—”

“No,” he barked. “You won’t.”

“Joey.” I sighed. “If Mam isn’t back by then, you can’t take care of the boys on your own.”

“I won’t be,” he countered. “I’ve already told you Nanny will help—Aoife too. There’s no way you’re missing that trip. You need out of this shithole, Shan. More than any of us.”

“Are you sure?” I squeezed out.

He nodded.

Inhaling a steadying breath, I said, “I know I don’t say this often, but I want you to know that I love you and I’m so bloody grateful that you’re my big brother.”

Joey pulled a face. “Are you going soft on me, baby sister?”

“No.” I blushed. “I just want you to know that you’re important to us. And we appreciate everything you do for us.”

Don’t leave us. Please don’t ever leave me.

“Well, right back atcha, kid,” he replied, looking a little awkward.

“You’ll make a great dad someday.” I decided to tease and make him even more uncomfortable.

Joey snorted. “Yeah, that’s never fucking happening.”

I winked. “Never say never, Joe.”

“Believe me, I’ve had more than enough of playing daddy to another man’s kids to last me a lifetime,” he shot back. “Now, go upstairs and throw some clothes on and we’ll hit up the deli for a chicken fillet roll.”

“The fridge is full now,” I informed him.

“Yeah.” He grinned. “But my girlfriend left me a direct order and I’m not nearly thick enough to ignore that.”

I hadn’t eaten anything since yesterday and my stomach growled in anticipation.

“Hash browns,” I practically purred as I thought about what I was going to have. “And some jellies and a can of Coke.”

Springing off the chair, I hurried for the staircase with food on my mind.

“Hold on, Shan. I almost forgot—” Breaking off midsentence, Joey padded into kitchen, returning a few moments later with a small gift-wrapped parcel in his hands.

Joey handed me the gift and then ruffled my hair. “Happy sweet sixteenth, Shan.”

“Thanks, Joey.” I beamed, clutching what I already knew was a CD beneath the pink wrapping paper.

“I’d get you more if I could,” he told me with an embarrassed shrug. “And I forgot to get a card—”

“Stop,” I told him as I sank down on the step of the stairs and ripped at the paper only to squeal with excitement. “McFly’s album!” Eyes wide with excitement, I stared down at the CD in my hand and smiled. “I really wanted this.”

“I know.” He snorted. “You’re such a girl.” Slipping his hand into his jeans pocket, he tossed another box on my lap. “This one’s from Aoife,” he explained.

Thrilled at the prospect of getting two presents, I tore at the polka-dot wrapping paper and gasped when I saw what was inside.

“Whoa,” I breathed, gaping at the designer bottle of perfume in my hands. “This must have cost her a fortune.”

“She must love you, too,” Joey teased.

I rolled my eyes. “Uh-huh.”

“Hurry up and get changed,” he ordered, moving for the front door. “I’ll be in the car.”

Bolting into my room with my presents in tow, I placed them carefully on my dresser before tearing off my pajamas. Pulling on a jumper and tracksuit pants, I ripped open the box that contained my new bottle of perfume, squirted myself all over, and then raced after Joey.

Shoving my feet into my runners in the hall, I grabbed my coat off the banister and hurried outside to the car. The minute I climbed into the passenger seat, the smell of alcohol assaulted my senses.

"Jesus, Joey," I coughed as I rolled down the window. "It smells like a brewery in here."

"I know," Joey replied as he started the engine and pulled away from the curb. "You can blame your friends from Tommen for that."

"My friends?" I shook my head and stared at his side profile. "What are you talking about?"

"Johnny Kavanagh," Joey stated. "We ended up dropping him home from the pub last night."

"Oh." Wait. *What?* "You dropped Johnny home?" I hated the way my voice was all loud and pitchy. "When…? How…? *Why*?"

"Last night when we were picking up our takeaway," Joey explained as he pulled out of the estate and onto the main road. "He was thrown down against a wall outside the chipper in town. He was in a bad way."

"He was?" *Oh god.* Concern filled my chest. "What was wrong with him?"

"He was drunk off his tits," Joey grumbled. "His friend was worse."

"His friend?" I asked, careful to mask the emotion in my voice. "His… girlfriend?"

"Nah, some big blond fucker," Joey corrected and I mentally sagged in relief. "I think his name was Gussie or Gillie or something like that."

"Gibsie," I confirmed quietly, thinking about how those two were joined at the hip at school.

"That's the one." Joey nodded, then released a low chuckle. "Bloody eejit threw himself on top of the car, demanding I give him back his center." Laughing, he added, "He looked serious, too. Like he genuinely thought I was kidnapping Kavanagh."

My brows furrowed. "Why did Gibsie call Johnny his *center*?"

"Johnny's position is outside center in rugby," he explained. "He's number thirteen."

Oh, yeah, I knew that.

I remembered his jersey.

"So, you dropped them both home?" I asked, feeling warm. "To Johnny's house?"

“Yep,” my brother confirmed. “Had to help Kavanagh carry that Gibsie fella into the house. He was legless, Shan. A right bloody mess. We left him in the living room.”

“You were inside Johnny’s *house*?”

My brain was reeling, trying to digest everything my brother was telling me.

He was with Johnny last night. He was at his house. He was *inside* his house.

I wanted to ask him if he asked about me, but I managed to keep that question from spilling from my lips.

“Yeah, Shan, and Jesus Christ, by the looks of their property, his family must be minted.” Joey blew out a breath. “Never seen anything so fancy in my life—”

The sound of a phone ringing cut through the air, distracting us both.

We both patted our pockets.

“Not mine,” Joey stated.

“Mine either,” I muttered, looking on the dashboard and then on the floor at my feet.

The ringing cut out and then restarted a few seconds later, vibrating loudly.

“Check the back seat,” Joey instructed as he pulled over on the side of the road and threw on his hazard lights.

Unclipping my belt, I crawled between the seats and dropped into the back seat, my eyes searching the seats for the noise.

“Anything?” Joey asked, pulling back into traffic.

“No.”

Dropping down between the seats I peeked under the driver’s seat.

“Oh, wait, it’s here!” I exclaimed, eyes locking on the sleek-looking phone lighting up and vibrating against the floor. “I see it.”

The ringing cut out again and I snaked a hand out, retrieving the phone. Shuffling back onto the seat, I quickly fastened my seat belt, eyes glued to the phone.

“Is this Aoife’s?” I gazed down at the expensive looking device. “Did she get a new phone for Christmas?”

“No,” Joey replied. “Her folks got her hair straighteners for Christmas.”

The phone began to ring again, screen lighting up with the name *King Clit* flashing across it.

"Ew, Joe," I groaned. "That's disgusting."

"What?"

"Whoever's calling this number is listed as *King Clit*."

My brother threw his head back and laughed.

"That's not funny," I admonished, watching the screen go blank again as the call ended. "That's pretty disturbing."

"It's yer man—the Gibsie fella. I heard Johnny ranting at him over changing his contacts around last night." Joey chuckled. "He's *King Clit*."

The phone lit up again, vibrating in my hands and ringing loudly.

"Well, answer it," my brother instructed, tone impatient. "He's probably looking for it."

"I don't want to." Shoving my hand between the seats, I tried to thrust the phone at my brother. "You answer it."

"How the fuck am I supposed to answer it?" Joey hissed, batting my hand away. "I'm driving, Shannon. Just answer the phone."

"No," I refused, shaking my head. "They'll think we stole it."

"No, they won't think we stole it," Joey shot back tetchily. The ringing stopped and Joey let out a growl. "When it rings again, *answer* the fucking thing!"

Like clockwork, the phone rang five seconds later.

Trembling, I pressed the ACCEPT button and put the phone to my ear. "Uh, hello?"

"Well, shit, I wasn't expecting anyone to pick up," the voice at the other end replied. "You have my buddy's phone."

"Yeah, I know." Closing my eyes, I pressed the heel of my hand to my forehead and exhaled heavily. "He left it in my brother's car last night."

"Last night's a bit hazy," Gibsie drawled down the line. "So, you might need to refresh my memory by letting me know who your brother is?"

"Joey Lynch?" I squeezed out, trying not to hyperventilate in front of my brother. "He and his girlfriend, Aoife, dropped you guys home from town last night. The phone was under his seat." Squirming uncomfortably, I threw in a quick disclaimer by saying, "I just found it like two minutes ago."

“Nope,” Gibsie replied after a long pause. “I have no recollection of that happening.”

“Well, it clearly did,” I shot back, flustered. “Considering *your* friend’s phone is in *my* brother’s car.”

“Little Shannon?” Gibsie sounded amused. “Is that you?”

“Uh, yeah.” I flamed red. “It’s me.”

“Is your brother with you now?” he asked.

“Yeah, but he’s driving, so he won’t use the phone.”

“Does he remember where he dropped us last night?”

“Hold on, I’ll ask—” Pausing, I covered the handset and looked to Joey. “They want to know if you remember where the house is.”

Joey nodded and I returned to the call.

“Yeah, he remembers.”

“Can you put me on loudspeaker?”

“I’ll try.” Clicking a few buttons, I held the phone up to Joey’s ear. “Okay, you’re on loudspeaker now.”

“Hey, man, how’s it going?” Gibsie’s voice came out much louder now, though he was noticeably hoarse.

“Better than you by the sound of it,” my brother quipped. “What do you need?”

“Could you drop Kav’s phone over?” he asked. “I’m sorry to put you out, man, but he’s losing his shit here. He’s weird as fuck when it comes to his personal information.”

“What’s in it for me?” Joey shot back, not missing a beat.

“Joey,” I whisper-hissed.

He shot a cheeky smirk back at me.

“Shit, man, I don’t know,” Gibsie mumbled. “A rasher sandwich and a pot of tea? I don’t have much in the lines of barter.”

Horrified, I shook my head and mouthed *no*, but Joey said, “Yeah, grand. We’ll be over in thirty.”

“Joey!” I cried.

“Thanks a million,” Gibsie replied, sounding relieved. “You’re as sound as a pound.”

“No bother,” Joey replied, taking the phone out of my hand. “And I like my rashers crispy,” he added before cutting the call and dropping the phone down on the seat beside him. “Detour.”

“What are you doing?” I spluttered, wide-eyed. “We are *not* going over there!”

“What’s the problem?” he quizzed. “I thought you were friends.”

“I know him from school, Joey,” I choked out. “That doesn’t mean I’m his *friend*!”

“Relax, we’re only dropping over the guy’s phone.”

“And you’re having breakfast!”

“Well, I’m hardly driving that far out of my way for nothing.” Joey laughed. “Besides, I’m hungry.”

“Yeah, for a chicken fillet roll,” I reminded him.

“I’ve changed my mind.”

“What about Aoife?” I demanded. “And the boys?”

“Aoife and the kids won’t be back until one,” he replied. “She said so herself.”

“Joey, we can’t go over there,” I pleaded. “*Please*.”

“Shannon Lynch,” Joey said in a teasing tone. “Are you blushing?”

“No,” I grumbled.

“You know it’s okay by me if you like him, don’t you?” Joey chuckled. “I’m not that kind of brother. All I want you to do is be careful. I’ve told you what he’s about. He’ll be gone in the summer so it’s up to you if you want to get hung up on something temporary.”

“I don’t,” I lied, mortified. “So *drop it*.”

“Fair enough,” Joey mused. “Then you should have no problem stopping over for some grub.”

“*You* can do what you like.” Sulking, I folded my arms across my chest and huffed. “*I* am not getting out of this car.”

Half an hour of tense silence later, we pulled up outside a gigantic pair of black-painted iron gates, and Joey rolled down his window, stretched his arm out, and keyed something into the pad.

A few moments later the gates swung inward.

My mouth fell open. “You have the *password* to his gate?”

My brother laughed in response.

A few moments later, the huge gates swung inward and we continued up a long winding laneway that was lined on either side with huge trees. A house came into view a few minutes later and I sucked in a sharp breath.

Oh god. This was where he lived?

Of course it was.

“Wow,” I whispered to myself, taking in the sight of the huge Victorian-style mansion with a bazillion windows and the biggest front door I’d ever seen.

“I know,” Joey agreed with an impressed sigh.

Pressing my cheek to the window, I stared out at the sprawling lawns and gardens as the sound of gravel crunching beneath the tires filled my ears.

The house was stone gray in color, but it was draped in so much ivy that it looked almost majestic.

“It looks like six of our house side by side,” I whispered, gazing up at the property. “There’s, like, twelve windows on the top level alone.”

Joey pulled up outside the front door and killed the engine before climbing out.

“You should see it from the inside,” he said as he reached over and grabbed the phone. “Fucking incredible.”

My gaze followed Joey as he strolled over to the front door, knocked once, and then sauntered inside.

Holy crap.

My brother just *walked* into Johnny Kavanagh’s house.

33
King Clit Is a Liability

JOHNNY

I was in the process of flipping my mattress off my bed when Gibsie strolled into my room, whistling to himself.

"I've located your phone, Kav," he announced proudly.

"Thank Christ." I sagged forward in relief and dropped my mattress back down on the base. "Where was it?"

"In Joey's car."

My brows shot up. "Joey *the hurler*?"

Gibsie nodded. "Apparently."

"You dope," I grumbled. "This is all your fault."

"I know," he chirped happily. "But he's dropping it over for you."

"Yeah?" I sighed in relief. "Fair play."

Grabbing my duvet off the floor, I threw it back on the bed and then carefully lifted Sookie back up.

"Good girl," I coaxed, feeling terrible for disturbing her in the first place.

"That is seriously unhygienic, Johnny," Gibsie stated with a frown. "Letting her sleep on your bed like that?" He shuddered. "Fucking rank, lad."

"You're one to talk about unhygienic," I growled, swinging around to face him. "She's cleaner than you." I shot him a dirty look before adding, "At least Sook doesn't puke all over herself in her sleep and roll it into my ma's couch."

"You *promised* you wouldn't bring it up again," he choked out, looking wounded. "Promise breaker."

"Gibs," I bit out, striving for patience. "I'm tired. I was up all night taking care of your drunk ass. I spent half the night turning you on your side

so you didn’t choke yourself, and winding you like a bleeding baby, and the other half I spent mopping up your vomit. You wrecked the living room. You plastered the downstairs bathroom in puke. You almost smothered me to death with your Guinness farts when I brought you up here. Give me a few hours to get over it first before asking me not to bring it up.”

“Well, at least I hosed off all the chunks,” Gibsie replied sheepishly. “And the living room, hall, and bathroom are back to their former glory.”

“Good,” I barked. “So, you should. It’s your fucking puke.”

“You made me sleep on the floor, Johnny!” he huffed. “That was mean.”

“Because you can’t be trusted with nice things.”

“Not even a bed?”

“Yes, Gerard, not even a bed.”

“Yeah, well, I’m your best friend and you put me on the *floor*,” he shot back with a huff. “The dog gets the foot of your bed and I get the fucking floor.”

I arched a brow. “Are you saying that you *want* to sleep at the foot of my bed?”

Gibsie stared back at me for several seconds before snickering. “Yeah, okay, I have no idea where I was going with that.”

“Neither do I, lad,” I muttered with a shake of my head. “Neither do I.”

“By the way,” Gibsie said with an impish grin. “I told yer man Joey that I’d make him a fry for his troubles.”

“Fine. Just keep it tidy. My ma will be back in the morning,” I replied, too weary to contemplate the terrible idea it was to have Joey Lynch in my house when he was clearly skeptical of my intentions toward his sister.

And rightly so…

Gibsie looked at me expectantly.

“Don’t look at me like that,” I told him. “You know where the kitchen is. I’m not fucking cooking for you.”

“I’m not used to gas.” Gibsie shrugged helplessly. “We have electric at home.”

“Your mother is a baker,” I snapped. “How do you not know how to work a bleeding stove?”

“And yours is a flashy fashion designer,” he shot back. “But I don’t see you prancing around the place in fur coats and Prada handbags.”

“You’re a baby, do you know that?” I growled. “You’re like an oversized infant I’ve been given custody of to care for.”

Stomping past him, I trudged downstairs to the kitchen.

“Get the pan out—and whatever it is you’re planning on making,” I ordered. “And I’m not cooking it for you,” I grumbled as I stamped over to the stove and switched on the gas. “You’re more than capable of doing it for yourself.”

“Let’s hope so,” Gibsie said, chuckling and shuffling toward me with his arms full of pork product and a tray of eggs.

“Think you can manage without burning the house down?” I quipped as I stepped away from the stove.

“Pretty sure,” Gibsie replied as he set to work, leaning precariously close to the naked flame.

I eyed him warily, unconvinced. “Don’t burn yourself.”

“Okay, Dad,” he mocked before asking, “Do you have scones?” Turning to face me, he added, “I’d love one of your mam’s scones with my tea.”

I shook my head and held my tongue, deciding to just let the crazy float over my head. “There might be a batch in the freezer. You’ll have to heat them up in the oven first.”

“I *know* that,” he scoffed.

“Do you?” I muttered under my breath.

He was a liability. A big dopey loyal-as-they-came liability.

“Did I ever tell you about the time your girl saved me from Brian?” Gibsie asked while he cracked an egg over the pan, distracting me from my thoughts.

“Brian?” I questioned, thinking about Mrs. Gibson’s evil bastard of a cat. “Shannon saved you from Brian?”

“She sure did,” he mused. Grabbing a spatula off the rack, he swung it around in his hand as he spoke. “I love how you don’t even deny she’s yours anymore, lad.”

“Fuck off,” I grumbled. Curiosity got the better of me then, and I perched my ass on a stool at the island and looked at him. “Tell me.”

Gibsie chuckled at my response.

“It was the day of my birthday last month,” he explained, tossing half a dozen sausages into the sizzling grease. “I’d taken Brian for a walk over to

Hughie's. You know how he gets when he's left alone too long."

"Yeah." I nodded, not batting an eyelid at this information. There had been at least nine occasions over the last eighteen months when he had arrived at my house with the Inspector Gadget look-alike cat.

"He lost it, lad," he said. "Went batshit crazy. Broke off his lead and made for the bathroom. Took a dump in the tub."

"Like his owner," I quipped.

"My *mother* has never taken a shit in anyone's bathtub," Gibsie snarled.

"Not your ma," I retorted. "You."

Gibsie frowned and tilted his head to the side, clearly racking his brain for the memory.

I decided to help him out. "Away game against that school in Tipperary back in third year?"

Recognition dawned on his features.

"Oh, yeah," he snickered. "That wasn't a bath. That was a shower stall in their school changing rooms and those bastards deserved it. And in my defense, I was only fourteen."

"In Brian's defense, he's only a cat," I shot back.

"That fucker knows exactly what he's doing," Gibsie grumbled. "Anyway, he destroyed the gaff, Johnny, and went for us when we tried to pick him up. Shannon just walked right in and scooped the furry little fucker up and walked him home. And do you know what he did to her? He *purred*. He was in his bloody element, lad. Delighted with life being curled up to her."

Lucky Brian.

"Why am I only hearing about this now?" I asked, trying to keep my tone neutral.

"Sorry," Gibsie snickered. "I wasn't aware I had to run it by you every time I talk to the girl."

"You don't," I muttered. "I just—"

The sound of banging on the front door filled my ears moments before a door closing filled the air.

"Kavanagh?" a deep voice called out.

"Come on up!" Gibsie called out, replying for me. Turning to face me, he winked and said, "Best behavior, lad. Big brother's here."

Brilliant. Fucking perfect.

“Jesus Christ,” Joey Lynch stated when he stepped into the kitchen a few moments later with my phone in his hand and sporting a beauty of a shiner under his right eye that I had been too drunk to notice last night.

In the clear light of day, I found myself sizing up this guy. He was tall, but I had a good three inches on him, like I had on most lads our age. He was obviously in good shape, too, but it was that typical hurler physique with lean, cut muscle, built for agility and speed, rather than packing any serious muscle.

“You should have a tour guide at the front door,” Joey added, looking around my kitchen before settling his gaze on me. “This house is like a museum.”

“That it is,” Gibsie snickered. “It’s a manor.”

Pushing off the stool, I closed the space between us and greeted him.

“Thanks for this,” I said, taking my phone from him. “Appreciate you driving all the way over with it.”

“Yeah, well, *King Clit* was very persuasive,” he shot back with a smirk. Turning his gaze on Gibsie, he arched an expectant brow. “How’s my food coming along, chef?”

“Faster than a whore at a brothel, good sir,” Gibsie called back over his shoulder. “Egg?”

“Lad,” Joey mused, sauntering over to where Gibsie was ducking and dodging splatters of grease. “Are you old enough to use the cooker without your mammy?”

Christ, this fella had some pair of stones sauntering into my house and demanding food. Oddly enough, I liked it. Joey Lynch seemed like a straight shooter. I respected that in a person.

“I doubt it,” Gibsie replied with a laugh. “It’s my first time.”

Gibsie fiddled with the knobs on the stove and a huge flame flew upward, singeing his eyebrow.

“Jesus Christ!” Gibsie roared, slapping his face. “I’m on fire.”

“Give me that thing before you hurt yourself,” Joey ordered, snatching the spatula out of Gibsie’s hand, and stepping in to flip over the rashers and eggs.

Adjusting the hob to medium heat, Joey snagged the tea towel off my best friend’s shoulder and began to mop up the grease splatters.

“Fucking private-school boys,” he muttered under his breath. “Used to having everything done for ye.”

“Shit, Kav,” Gibsie snickered, taking a step back from the stove. “I was wrong. This fucker right here is the daddy.”

“Do me a favor, Kav,” Joey called over his shoulder. “Go and check on my sister, will ya?”

My heart leaped in my chest. “Shannon?”

Joey nodded and reached for a plate off the countertop. Shoveling several pieces of bacon onto the plate, he added, “She’s out in the car.”

“Why would you *leave* her in the car?” I demanded, tone tight. “It’s freezing outside.”

“Because she wouldn’t come in for me,” Joey shot back in what sounded like a *duh* tone. “You can try and get her to come inside yourself if you want, but she’s not budging.”

He didn’t need to ask me twice. Or give me permission once, for that matter. I was already on my feet and moving for the front door.

34
Mauled by Dogs and Feelings

SHANNON

Feeling shocked, I sat in the back seat of Aoife's car and stared up at the Kavanagh house, debating my options.

Should I go inside? Should I wait out here? Should I curl up in a ball and pretend I wasn't here?

Was his mother inside? Was his father there?

I was mortified over what happened Friday, and while I had been okay when we were together at the pub and the cinema, I'd spent the last two nights lying awake and drowning in humiliation over throwing up in front of Johnny.

I was thrown off-kilter by this boy, and being in his personal space was something I didn't know how to handle.

I wasn't sure I could handle my feelings for him.

My thought process was interrupted when two pairs of enormous yellow paws slapped against the window.

Startled, I swung my gaze to find two identical-looking dogs with bright-pink collars staring back at me, whining loudly, with their mouths open and tongues lolling to one side. Without thinking twice about it, I slid Joey's seat forward and climbed out of the car. The second my feet hit the gravel, I was assaulted with kisses and yodels as both dogs tried to climb my body.

"Hi, guys!" I reached down and rubbed them both.

My affection only seemed to rile them up because one of the dogs jumped at me, her paws slapping hard against my chest.

"Whoa." Losing my balance, I collapsed on my arse with a loud *oof*.

The minute I was grounded, they both dove for me, slobbering all over my face and neck. Laughing, I tried to duck my face, but it was useless

because these dogs were persistent with their loving.

What I failed to notice in the car was that both dogs had clearly rolled in cow dung lately because not only were their coats matted with mud, but they reeked *so* bad.

After a fruitless battle to stand up, I ended up on the flat of my back on the rain-soaked gravel as they sniffed and pawed at me and basically licked every inch of exposed skin.

“You’re a friendly pair,” I snickered, giving up on any attempt to escape. I could feel the damp seeping into my clothes, but I made no move to get up.

I couldn’t if I wanted to.

“Hi,” I laughed, grinning up at the one who had decided my stomach was the perfect home for her butt.

She had her paws pressed firmly on my shoulders as she licked at my face.

“You’re a lovely girl, aren’t you?” I cooed, as I ducked and dodged a tongue to the mouth. It was pretty pointless, considering the other one was standing by my head, fighting for attention.

“Careful,” I warned the one by my head. “My face is tender.”

“Bonnie! Cupcake! Get off her,” a familiar voice ordered from nearby, but neither dog listened. Instead, they seemed to up their efforts of loving me into a canine coma.

A few moments later, a pair of hands hooked under my armpits.

Startled by the sudden contact, my limbs locked tight of their own accord as I was lifted clean off the ground.

Johnny set me down on my feet and then quickly pushed me behind him as the dogs lunged toward us.

“No!” he ordered. Keeping an arm around me, he held out the other in warning. “Bonnie,” he growled. “You’re a bad girl.” His eyes darted to the other dog who was creeping closer. “Cupcake, don’t even think about pulling that shite.”

Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a tennis ball and waved it in front of the dogs, capturing their attention instantly.

“Yeah, you see that, don’t you?” Johnny coaxed and then flung it across the yard. It landed somewhere out of sight and the two dogs bolted after it.

I took the opportunity of his momentary distraction to pull my hair tie out and drape my hair over my left shoulder, concealing the side of my face from his view.

“Sorry about them,” Johnny said once the dogs were out of sight. Turning to face me, he gave me a quick once-over and grimaced. “Jaysus, they destroyed you.”

I was so stunned by the sight of him, so completely unsure of what to do or say, that it took me a few moments to clear my head and register that he was speaking—*to me*. “Huh?”

“Your clothes,” he explained, gesturing up and down.

I looked down at myself and bit back a groan.

Yep, he was right. I was destroyed in a combination of mud, rain, clumps of hair, and dog slobber.

“Oh, ah, yep.” Mortified, I attempted to wipe my hands on my navy tracksuit pants, but the drool stuck to my fingers. “Yes, I am,” I offered, forcing a small laugh when all I wanted to do was dive into the back of Aoife’s car and vanish.

“Sorry about them,” Johnny apologized, looking a little embarrassed. “Those two are feral.”

Shaking my head, I exhaled a heavy sigh and said, “No, it’s okay. I didn’t mind. Bonnie and Cupcake are very cute.”

“Bonnie and Cupcake are very *untrained*,” Johnny corrected with a grimace. Shoving his hands into the pockets of the gray sweatpants he was wearing, he added, “They’re my mam’s dogs. She treats them like they’re human, so they believe they are.”

“Are your parents at home?” I asked, feeling incredibly nervous at the thought of my brother being in close confines with either one of his parents.

Joey shot from the hip and was partial to saying whatever was on his mind. It was quite possible that he would talk about the concussion incident.

“No, they’re above in Dublin,” Johnny told me. “My da’s working up there at the moment.”

My eyes widened. “You’re home alone?”

He smirked. “I’m not four.”

“I know that,” I replied, blushing.

“My folks travel for work,” he explained, taking mercy on me. “I’m usually alone.”

For whatever reason, those words bothered me.

“*I’m usually alone.*”

That was a sorrowful statement.

Frowning, Johnny reached over and cupped—yes, literally cupped—my chin in his hand.

“What the fuck is that?” he demanded, voice deathly quiet, as his blue eyes blazed with fire.

“What?” I squeezed out, panic-stricken.

Tipping my chin up, he brushed my hair off my shoulder and released a low growl.

“*That*,” he growled, trailing his thumb over my cheekbone. “And *that*,” he added, skimming the curve of my eye.

The contact was so gentle that it caused me to jump from nerves rather than pain.

He dropped his hand from my face but remained exactly where he was standing, so close that I could see the vein ticking in his neck as he clenched and unclenched his jaw.

“Shannon, what happened to your *face*?”

“Oh, that?” Laughing nervously, I tucked my hair behind my ear.

I immediately regretted the action when I felt the snot-like drool squelch between my fingers and hair. It wasn’t bad enough to look like a homeless person; I had to go and add drool-soaked hair to the equation.

“Yeah, *that*,” Johnny bit out, glaring at my cheek. “Who did that to you?”

“Nobody. I fell over my brother’s Lego tower last night and almost poleaxed myself on the kitchen table.” The line I had rehearsed to perfection for school tomorrow spilled from my mouth with the expert precision needed to sound believable.

I had been telling lies for so long about where the cuts and bruises on my body came from that the lie poured effortlessly from my lips.

“You expect me to believe that?” Johnny stunned me by saying.

I frowned up at him.

That was a *good* line. It was a *believable* line.

Why wasn’t he *taking* it?

“Yes,” I strangled out, flustered by his directness. “Because that’s what happened.”

He arched a brow. “You’re honestly trying to tell me that you gave *yourself* a black eye?”

I shrugged noncommittedly. “It happens.”

“Not *usually*,” he bit out. “You must have been running full speed to smash yourself up like that,” he added, eyes locked on mine in disbelief. “Were you running?” he asked. “From something?” He stepped closer. “Or someone?”

Self-preservation roared to life inside of me, my three little brothers’ faces the driving force behind my next words. “What exactly are you trying to say?”

“I’m not trying to say anything here, Shannon,” he countered hotly. “I’m asking you to tell me the truth.”

“I *am* telling you the truth,” I snapped, voice breaking. “Stop pushing me.” Tears prickled my eyes and I quickly batted them away. “God!”

I felt terrible for lying to him especially, but I couldn’t exactly turn around and say, *Oh yeah, when my dad’s full of drink, he likes to beat the shit out of me and throw me around like a rag doll*.

It was at that exact moment that the skies decided to open above us, delivering an onslaught of pelting March rain and soaking us both.

Thankful for the downpour, I spun around and hurried back to the car.

“Don’t do that,” Johnny called after me. “Don’t go back in the bleeding car.”

I shook my head and yanked the door open.

“I’m sorry, okay?” Johnny reached around me and closed the car door again. “I won’t push you.” Spinning me around to face him, he said, “I won’t say another word about it.”

He reached out to touch my face but quickly diverted his movements, cupping the back of his neck instead.

“Okay?”

Nodding, I released a ragged breath. “Okay.”

Johnny exhaled heavily, expression full of relief. “Now, will you come inside with me?”

“I should probably just wait in the car,” I mumbled, hardly able to look him in the eyes. “I don’t want to be intruding—unlike my idiot brother who

apparently has no qualms about walking into strangers' houses and eating their food."

"Firstly, I'm not a stranger to you, and you're not intruding on me," Johnny corrected gruffly as rain pelted down on us both. "Secondly, I'm *inviting* you into my house," he added, running a hand through his now-soaked hair. "You're getting soaked." His gaze traveled over me once more before he inclined his head toward the house. "I *want* you to come inside."

"Are you sure?" I croaked out.

He nodded slowly. "Absolutely."

"Um, okay," I whispered uncertainly. "If you're sure that you're sure?"

"I'm sure that I'm sure," Johnny quipped. "Come on."

Johnny spun around and hurried over to the front door, only to turn around and jog back to where I was rooted to the ground.

He placed his hands on my shoulders and walked me into the house.

"See?" he coaxed when we were both inside with the huge door closed behind us. "That wasn't so bad, was it?"

I shook my head.

Johnny shook himself down like a dog would, causing raindrops to splatter everywhere.

"You laughing at me, Shannon *like the river*?" he teased, noticing my smile.

I shook my head again.

He smiled one of the big double-dimpled smiles that caused my heart to stutter before gesturing for me to follow him down the long entrance hall and into a spacious foyer with a huge archway on either side of the room, leading god knows where.

Careful to keep my lips mashed together—and not let my mouth fall open like I wanted to—I took in the enormous staircase that took center stage, with its intricate wooden balusters with little lion heads carved on top.

My gaze trailed upward to the top of the staircase where both sides of the landing were clearly visible through the wooden banister rails that eventually joined the wall on either side.

"It's an old house," Johnny said by way of explanation. "Like a hundred and fifty years or something." He looked uncomfortable as he spoke. "My mother didn't want to change the original design too much

when we bought it. We renovated most of the rooms and put in a new kitchen, but Mam wanted to keep some of the original parts." Shrugging, he added, "She says the place has character or some shite like that."

"She's right," I breathed, doing a full 360 turn so I could take in the ridiculously tall ceilings and crystal chandeliers. "I think you could fit my entire house in this hall."

"Johnny!" Gibsie's voice thundered from the archway on the left. "Grub's up."

"Are you hungry?" Johnny asked as he led me down the long hallway to the door at the end. "Knowing Gibsie, he's after frying the contents of the fridge."

I shook my head, my arms moving to wrap around my body almost protectively as I trailed after him. "I'm okay."

The moment Johnny pushed the door of the kitchen open, we were bathed in sunlight and the delicious aroma of rashers cooking.

"Hey, it's little Shannon," Gibsie chirped, turning from his position at an impressive-looking stove range to smile and wave a spatula at me. "Did Johnny manage to coax you inside, or was it the smell of my fucking amazing cooking that drew you in?"

"It's raining," I mumbled, biting back a shiver as the dampness from my clothes began to seep into my skin.

"You cooked one egg, Gibs, under my supervision," Joey, who was sitting on a stool at the center island, piped up. "You're no Darina Allen."

"Thank fuck for that, Lynchy." With the frying pan in his hand, Gibsie walked over to where my brother was sitting and slapped an egg onto his plate. "I like my man parts."

Reaching across the counter, Joey retrieved the tea-cozy-covered teapot and poured two cups of tea before swinging the pot in our direction. "Shan, Kavs, tea?"

Gibs?

Lynchy?

Kavs?

This was typical Joey—sparking up a friendship as easily as he could snap his fingers.

A sudden jolt of jealousy burned inside of me, the unfairness of how easy life was for my brother making me feel hard done by. That tinge of

jealousy was quickly doused out by the huge tsunami of guilt that enveloped me.

Joey didn't have anything easy. He made the best of every situation. He was just trying to survive like the rest of us.

"Can I get you a towel or something?" Johnny offered in a low tone, gaze trailing over me. Frowning, he added, "You're soaked."

"Holy shit," Joey barked then, startling me. "What in the name of Jesus happened to you?"

Setting the teapot down, he stood up and stalked toward me. Leaning closer, Joey took a whiff of me and then quickly backed away. "Jesus Christ, Shannon," he gagged. "What did you roll in—dog shit?"

Wow, tactful, big brother, thanks a lot…

"No!" I balked and then tried to sniff myself inconspicuously. "I don't smell."

"You *don't* smell?" Joey shot back mockingly. "You're so ripe my eyes are watering."

God, Joey!

"My dogs mauled her," Johnny quickly interjected, running another hand through his hair. Droplets of water continued to drip from his broad shoulders to the tiles on the floor as he spoke. "They knocked her down outside and rolled all over her."

"Huh," my brother bit out. "Funny how my sister always seems to get mauled and knocked around when you're near her, Kavanagh."

Johnny's jaw ticked, but he didn't respond.

Turning his attention to me, Joey said, "You need to get out of those wet clothes, Shan, before you get pneumonia."

I opened my mouth to respond, but my brother continued without giving me a chance.

"Do you have something she can throw on?" Joey asked, looking to Johnny. "Or some bleach to mask that god-awful smell?"

Johnny nodded slowly. "Yeah, I can find something—"

"Or we can just leave?" I offered, glaring at my brother, praying he would take the hint. "We should go *home*, Joey."

"You're not getting into my girlfriend's car smelling like that," Joey shot back.

"Don't be a dickhead," I growled. "Take me home."

“You guys can’t go home yet. We haven’t had tea and chats,” Gibsie piped up. “And I have scones baking in the oven.”

“You baked *scones*?” I asked, momentarily distracted. “*You*?”

“Yes, *me*,” Gibsie shot back, looking slightly wounded. “I’ll have you know that I’m a wonderful baker.”

“Sorry,” I quickly replied, not wanting to offend him. “You just don’t strike me as a *baker*.”

“Relax, I’m totally fucking with you,” he laughed. “I have no idea what I’m doing.” He pointed to the stove and said, “For all I know, those scones could be killers.”

“Killer scones?” I scrunched my nose up at the concept. “Then I hope you won’t mind if I pass.”

Gibsie chuckled. “I like you.” He looked over my head and said, “I like her,” before returning his attention to me. “But not the smell.” He pegged his nose with his fingers and added, “Your brother’s right. You need to change.”

“That’s okay, I’m going home—” I began to say, but once again, I was interrupted, this time by Gibsie.

“Johnny, she can take a shower here, can’t she?”

My eyes bulged. “*What*?”

“Uh, yeah, I guess,” Johnny, who was still standing behind me, replied slowly. “If she wants?”

Joey, who had returned to his perch at the island, nodded his head.

“Good idea, Gibs,” he agreed between forkfuls of egg and sausage. “Wash that wet dog smell off ya before we have to drive home in small confines.”

“I don’t smell,” I muttered.

“You stink,” both Gibsie and Joey said in unison.

“Fuck off the pair of you and leave her alone,” Johnny piped up, sounding aggravated. “She doesn’t smell bad at all.”

“You don’t smell it because you’re immune,” Gibsie retorted. Turning to Joey, he said, “He lets the mutt sleep on his bed every night.”

“Call my dog a mutt again and you’ll be wearing that frying pan,” Johnny warned.

“My sincerest apologies, lad.” Gibsie threw his hands up in retreat. “I never meant to insult your precious pooch.”

Ignoring the snickering and banter, I swung around and stared up at Johnny. “I’m so sorry about this.”

His attention flickered from the boys to me and stayed there. “It’s okay, Shannon.” His voice was impassive, but his eyes were burning with something I was afraid to decipher because I had the distinct feeling that in this moment, my eyes mirrored his. “You can wash up in my bathroom.”

“No, honestly, it’s okay.” My face was burning with embarrassment. “I don’t have to shower in your house.”

“Ah, yeah you fucking do,” Joey called out. “I meant it when I said you’re not getting into Aoife’s car like that. I could run a drag off ya with the state you’re in.”

“For fuck’s sake,” Johnny snapped.

Yanking the kitchen door open, he caught ahold of my hand and practically dragged me down the hallway.

“Come on,” he ordered. “I’ll look after you.”

“Uh, okay,” I strangled out, because in all honesty what hope did I have of saying no when a gigantic rugby player was dragging me through his house?

“For the record,” Johnny called over his shoulder as he tugged me up the staircase, turning right when we reached the upstairs landing. “I don’t think you smell that bad.”

“Um, thank you?” I strangled out, unsure of the appropriate response to a boy telling you that you don’t smell *that* bad, and too out of breath to come up with anything better.

He was moving fast, my hand still wrapped in his, and I had to run to keep up with his long strides. He didn’t stop moving until we were at the end of the landing and standing outside a closed door.

I noted that we had passed at least half a dozen other doors on this section of the landing, but I was too light-headed from trying to keep up with him to really take stock of my surroundings.

Releasing my hand, Johnny pushed the door inward and stepped inside, gesturing for me to follow him.

I did—and it was like stepping into a bedroom version of the Hall of Fame.

The room was huge, the walls were blue, and the enormous four-poster bed took center stage. There was an entertainment center opposite the bed

that resembled a miniature cinema, but none of those details were what stuck out in my mind. The rows upon rows of trophies and medals adorning the walls were what had my immediate attention. Framed jerseys littered the walls, along with several peculiar-looking caps and posters of the Irish rugby team.

There was a huge oak desk settled in the space at the far wall between two windows. On top of the desk were an expensive-looking laptop and heaps of schoolbooks and exam papers. Above it hung a huge corkboard, mounted to the wall. Stuck to the board were countless photographs—of different celebrity athletes. *All* of whom Johnny was standing beside in the pictures.

"So," Johnny said with a shrug. "This is my room."

He walked over to his bed and kicked several items of clothes under it.

"It's a nice room," I replied, chewing on my lip as I glanced around.

In typical teenage boy fashion, it was a complete mess with the mandatory posters of seminaked girls with humongous breasts adorning the walls. Clothes were strewn everywhere, and PlayStation controllers and games littered the floor by the TV beside a couple of leather beanbags.

"You can shower in here," Johnny said then. Shaking his head, he burst into action, moving for a door in the left corner of his room near his bed.

"If you're sure?" I squeezed out, feeling incredibly intimidated to be standing in his personal space and potentially removing all my clothes.

We were virtual strangers. It seemed wrong to be in his space.

Seemed wrong, but felt so right…

"Yeah, it's no problem," he quickly replied, opening the door for me. He poked his head inside for a brief moment before popping back out. "There's fresh towels on the rack. Use whatever you like."

Holy crap. This was crazy. It was too surreal.

I left my house this morning to buy some hash browns and a can of Coke, and now I was standing in Johnny Kavanagh's bedroom, about to take a shower in his en suite bathroom.

How was this even happening?

"Do you want me to throw your clothes in the dryer while you're in the shower?" he asked, startling me back to the present.

"My clothes?" My hands moved to my middle and I quickly shook my head. "Uh, no, that's okay."

He nodded stiffly and I watched him kick several more items of clothes under his bed. “I’d give you something of my mother’s but she locks her clothes room when she travels.”

“Her clothes room?”

“Yeah, she, uh, my ma works with clothes.” Johnny shifted uncomfortably. “It’s more of a giant fucking wardrobe of a room if you ask me, but she calls it her office.” He smirked then, clearly thinking about something funny. “Gibs broke in there one time and wrecked some important piece for a new line she was working on, so she keeps it locked when she’s in London now.”

“Your mam designs clothes?”

“Yeah.”

My eyes widened. “Like a fashion designer?”

Johnny nodded.

“In London?”

Another nod.

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

Whoa…

“What’s your father?” I muttered. “A doctor?”

“No, he’s a barrister,” he replied without batting an eyelid.

Jesus. His mother was a fashion designer and his father was a bloody high-class lawyer.

Well, at least that explains the mansion I’m standing inside.

Johnny’s gaze darted to his bedside locker, and he hurried over and yanked open the top drawer before sweeping the contents on top into the drawer.

“I’ll go find you something of mine you can change into,” he mumbled, cheeks turning slightly pink as he shoved the drawer closed and kicked a bunch of papers that had toppled off his locker under the bed. “I’ll leave some clothes on the bed just in case you want to… Just pick whatever you want.”

I hesitated, taking one step forward and three steps back before taking a deep breath and walking over to the bathroom door. Johnny stepped aside for me to pass, but he was so big that I still managed to brush against him.

“Thanks, Johnny,” I whispered before hurrying into his bathroom with a raging case of hormones and a hammering heart.

“You’re welcome, Shannon,” I heard him say just before I clicked the door shut.

Oh Jesus. What the hell was happening?

35
Answers

JOHNNY

"I've a question, *Joey the hurler*," I snarled when I stalked back into the kitchen, having deposited his naked sister in my shower.

"Go for it, *Mr. Rugby*," Joey shot back, unfazed.

I swung my gaze to Gibsie and gestured to the door. "I need a minute, Gibs."

My best friend must have seen the fury in my eyes because for once in his life, he didn't make a smart comment or crack a joke. He just stood up and walked out of the kitchen, closing the door behind him.

"Now," I said when we were alone, eyes locked on Joey. "Who the fuck is putting their hands on your sister?"

Joey's brows shot up.

"Yeah, you heard me," I growled. "I found her on her hands and knees at school on Friday, throwing her guts up." I ran a hand through my hair, furious and beyond agitated. "Something's happening to her and I want to know what it is."

"Why?"

"Because I want to fix it."

"Why?"

"Because no one should be putting their goddamn *anything* on her," I barked.

"What did she tell you?" he asked calmly.

"That she fell over Legos," I bit out.

Fell over Legos, my ass. Fell into a fist was more like it.

Joey studied me with sharp green eyes for the longest moment before nodding. "If Shannon says that's what happened, then that's what happened."

“No…no! Don’t give me that shit,” I hissed, frustrated. “This isn’t the first time I’ve seen her with marks.” I distinctly remembered a red mark on her face a couple of weeks ago and that mark on the back of her neck on Friday. “What’s happening to her?”

Joey leaned back on his stool, eyeing me with a superior fucking expression I *hated*. He knew something I didn’t, and it was driving me insane.

Yeah, I wasn’t sure I liked Joey the hurler that much anymore.

“Who is hurting your sister?” I repeated. He needed to give me something before I jumped to conclusions and kicked his ass. “Is it those pricks from your school?”

Did they get her for what I did at the bar on Friday?

“Was it them?” I demanded. “Those girls?”

Joey remained silent.

“Is she hurting herself?” I asked.

He continued to stare at me.

“Are *you* hurting her?”

He arched a brow.

“Lad, you better start talking, because brother or no brother, I will kick your fucking ass.”

“You’ll need to talk to Shannon,” he finally said. “I can’t give you the answers you want.”

“Yes, you can,” I snapped. “Just open your mouth and *speak*.”

“No.” He shook his head. “I can’t and I won’t. If she trusts you enough, she’ll tell you. If she doesn’t, she doesn’t. Either way, it’s not my call.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?” I demanded, furious. “Not your call?”

“Exactly what it sounds like,” Joey countered. “It means it’s *not my call*. But I can assure you that I have never put my hands on my sister,” he added, giving me a hard glare. “Or any other woman, for that matter.”

“I want to know what’s going on here, Lynch,” I snapped, striving for every piece of control I could muster. “If she’s being bullied or some shit like that, then I can help. I can fix this if you tell me.”

His brows rose. “*You* can fix this?”

“For her?” I nodded determinedly. “Absolutely.”

“You like her.” He arched another brow at me and tilted his head to one side. “Maybe even more than like her.”

I didn’t bother denying it. Not to him. This wasn’t Gibsie, or one of the lads at school trying to get a rise out of me. This was her *brother.*

I knew better than to spew bullshit in this moment.

“I want to know what’s happening,” was all I replied. “I *need* to.”

“Listen, I’d love to tell you,” Joey finally said with a heavy sigh. “I’d have no goddamn problem laying it all out there for you. I have nothing to hide. But *she*”—he pointed to the door behind me—“won’t want me to do that. She would die if she thought anyone knew her business. After all the shit that went down on her at BCS, she wants that clean slate at Tommen. I want that for her, too.”

“So she *is* being bullied?” My heart fucking sank. “Someone at Tommen?” If someone at my school did that to her face, then I was going to burn the fucking school down. “Or from her old school?”

I had a hard time believing those creeps from the bar would be stupid enough to pull another stunt with her. Call me full of myself, but I scared the shit out of them on Friday.

Joey stared hard at me for the longest moment before shaking his head.

“Listen, Kavanagh,” he finally said. “If you want to know what goes on inside of that head of hers, then be worth it.”

“Be *worth* it?” I frowned at his words. “Be worth *what*?”

“You’re a smart guy,” he shot back. “You’ll figure it out.”

I shook my head. “I don’t—”

My words were cut off by the sound of Joey’s phone as it rang loudly.

Calm as a breeze, he held a finger up and dragged his phone out of his pocket, glanced at the screen, then muttered a string of curses before pressing it to his ear.

“What the fuck do you want?” he snapped.

Jerking off the stool, Joey walked over to the stove and turned his back to me while he spoke in a hushed tone. “No, you were told… There’s no back… I don’t give two shits how sorry you are… No… She’s *where*?”

I watched as Joey’s entire frame stiffened. I strained to hear the person on the other line, but it was impossible.

“When did that happen…? And the baby…? Okay… No… What the fuck do you want me to say…? Why would I be sad…? It’s a goddamn

relief is what it is… Fine… Yeah, I'll be there… I just said I'd be there, didn't I?"

Joey glanced behind him and caught me staring.

I arched a brow, not particularly giving a shit that he knew I was eavesdropping. That's what I *was* doing. I wasn't about to deny it.

"I'll be there," Joey said in a low tone. "I'm on my way." With that, he ended the call and shoved his phone in his pocket.

"I need to take off," he said in that calm, cool, and collected tone of his.

"Take off?" I gaped at him. "*Where*?"

"I have somewhere I need to be," was all he replied and then moved for the door.

"Hold the fuck up," I ordered, stepping in his way. "Your sister is in the shower."

"Yeah." He rubbed his jaw and said, "I'm going to need you to hold on to her for me."

"Hold on to her?" I shook my head, struggling to comprehend what the fuck was happening. "You just want me to *hold on to* your sister?"

"That's what I said, wasn't it?" Joey shot back tightly.

"You're not *saying* anything," I snarled. "That's the problem. You're not telling me shit!"

"I did tell you," he snapped. "I told you to ask *Shannon*."

"So, you're what, just going to leave her here?" I demanded. "For how long?"

"I don't know," Joey shot back.

"You don't know?"

"Yeah, I don't fucking know," he spat out. "Is that a problem?"

"It's not a problem that she's here," I growled. "It's a problem that you're leaving her here and I have no goddamn idea of what to tell her."

"Fine," Joey snapped, glaring at me with blazing green eyes. "Tell my sister our *father* just called. Our *mother* had a miscarriage on Friday night, and he's on the way home from the hospital with her now."

"Shite," I muttered.

"You have no fucking idea," Joey bit out as he shoved past me and stormed down the hallway.

"Do you want me to bring her straight home?" I asked, having no goddamn clue how to deal with this. I followed after him, feeling at a

complete loss. “Or take her to the hospital—”

“I want you to hold fucking on to her,” Joey roared. Stopping at the front door, he spun around and glared up at me. “Can you do that, Johnny Kavanagh? Can you look after my sister for me?”

“*Yes*,” I bit out, not liking his tone but knowing he must be feeling some kind of grief. “I can.”

“Good,” he snapped. “I’ll call when I can to sort out picking her up. Just keep her until I call you, okay?”

Sort out picking her up?

The fuck did he think his sister was? A bleeding package?

Knowing the guy must be going through hell right now, I simply nodded and tapped my number into the phone he held out for me and handed it back to him.

“Gussie!” Joey barked, sliding his phone back into his pocket. “I’m leaving now if you want a spin into town for your car.”

Gibsie popped his head out from the living room door.

“Everything okay?” he asked, looking between us in confusion.

“Go on,” I told Gibsie, gesturing for him to follow Joey who was stalking down the driveway to his car.

“You sure?”

I nodded stiffly.

Thankfully, Gibsie had the good sense to not ask questions. Instead, he gave me a quick salute and hurried after Shannon’s brother.

Exhaling a ragged breath, I walked over to the door and closed it quietly.

What the fuck was I going to do?

36
Bad News

SHANNON

It took me a ridiculous amount of time to get the temperature right in Johnny's shower, because apparently, he liked to incinerate his skin when showering. When I finally got the temperature down to a bearable heat and felt the power jets wash over my body, I had a hard time getting out.

Seriously, his shower was *amazing*.

It was a combo—a bath with an overhead shower—and I had to stand in an oval-shaped tub with a curtain drawn across, but I swear it only added to the most luxuriating wash of my life. Using his shampoo and soap felt weirdly inappropriate, like it wasn't something I should be doing, but I was filthy and definitely smelly, so I lathered my body with samples from every available, fancy-looking bottle on the rack.

When I was finally clean and smelling like boy's bodywash—rather than wet dog—I climbed out, wrapped myself in a fresh towel, and bundled my dirty clothes in a ball. The smell wafting from my clothes was so gross that I immediately dropped the bundle and had to breathe through my mouth for several moments to stop myself from gagging.

Joey and Gibsie were right. I really did stink. There was no way I could put anything I owned back on without projectile vomiting.

Pressing my ear against the door, I listened carefully to make sure his bedroom was empty before unlocking the door and stepping out.

Seeing that the room was empty, I exhaled a sigh of relief and tiptoed over to his bed to where a massive pile of clothes was strewn in a heap on the edge of the mattress.

Tucking my damp hair over one shoulder, I began to sort through the pile of clothes he had laid out for me.

Sifting through half a dozen T-shirts, I grabbed the smallest one—that happened to be size XL. It was blue in color, soft to the touch, and it smelled like Johnny. I quickly shrugged it on. The hem fell to my midthigh, the short sleeves reaching my elbows, letting me know that I was practically a hobbit in comparison to him.

Shivering from the cold, I moved on to rummage through the bottoms, my anxiety rising with every ginormous pair of sweatpants I picked up. I held one pair against my body and released a frustrated sob when they reached my chest.

My eyes landed on the pair of white boxer shorts strewn in the middle of the pile and I blew out a breath.

Did he mean to leave those there? Were they meant for me? Was that *weird*? Holy hell, were they *Calvin Klein's*?

On closer inspection, I confirmed that they were, indeed, designer boxer shorts.

My knickers came in a pack of seven for a fiver.

In this moment, I was acutely aware of our social differences.

His mother was a fashion designer, for god's sake.

Mine was a cleaner.

His father was a barrister.

Mine spent plenty of time in court, too—on the other side of the law.

His house reeked of money and luxury.

Mine reeked of whiskey and pain.

I looked to the sweatpants in my hands and then back to the elastic-waisted boxers on the bed. If anything belonging to Johnny was going to even remotely fit me, it would be those.

Trying not to think about it too much, I reached for the boxers and quickly stepped into them and pulled them up. I presumed they were the snug-fitting boxers, but on *me* they were loose and baggy. However, they *were* staying up on my hips.

What are you doing? What the hell *are you doing?*

Johnny's penis has touched these things. And now your vagina has.

You're practically having sex with him!

Uncertainty took over then and I quickly yanked them off before snatching the sweatpants back up and stepping into them. Like I predicted,

his sweatpants were enormous on me, coming up to my chest, and the moment I let go of the waistband, they fell to my ankles.

Yanking them back up, I clutched the waistband and shuffled awkwardly into the bathroom, trying not to trip over the legs in the process. Retrieving my hair tie from where I'd left it on the shower rack, I tied a loose knot at the side of the pants and secured them up. For about two seconds, until they dropped to the floor again.

Morose, I yanked the boxer shorts back on, ignored the voice in my head telling me that this was wrong, retrieved my hair tie from the traitor sweatpants, and tied a firm knot in the boxers.

Unsure of what to do next, I returned to his room and began to fold the discarded clothes. I had no bloody idea why I was doing this, but I had a feeling he wouldn't and I didn't want him to be left with wrinkled clothes because he dragged them all out of his wardrobe for my benefit.

I was folding the last T-shirt on Johnny's bed when I noticed something sticking out from under his bed.

Something that looked just like *me.*

Bending down, I retrieved the newspaper with shaky hands and just stared at the picture of us.

He kept it. In his room. Under his bed.

My heart leaped against my chest.

It doesn't mean anything. It's a nice picture. That's all.

Don't read into this.

I was completely absorbed in my thoughts when a low groaning noise came from somewhere close by. Dropping the newspaper on the floor, I remained completely still and listened carefully.

A few seconds later, the groaning noise came again.

From the *bed!*

Freaked out, I grabbed a random folded T-shirt in my hands with a death grip and lowered my face to where his duvet was balled up at the foot of the bed.

I was certain that's where the groaning came from.

"Hello?" I whispered, eyes locked on the duvet.

It *moved* in response, the quilt moving back and forth rapidly.

"Oh my god," I screamed, staggering backwards.

Dropping Johnny's T-shirt on the floor, I pressed a hand to my chest and watched the bed like it was a scene straight out of *Poltergeist*.

"Is someone in there?" I asked when my voice returned.

I had to be imagining this. It hadn't really moved. I was just hyperalert.

I was losing my bloody mind.

"Hello?"

The duvet moved again.

"Oh my god!"

The duvet started to rise up.

Oh, screw that!

This time when I screamed, it was at the top of my lungs as I lunged away from the bed. Knocking up against the chest of drawers behind me, I lost my balance and sprawled face-first on the floor, grazing my chin on the hardwood floor in the process.

Undeterred by my faceplant, I scrambled to my feet, only to collapse in a tangled heap when my feet got stuck in his giant pants that I'd forgotten to pick up. Kicking my foot free, and still screaming my head off, I dragged myself off the floor and bolted for the bedroom door.

It swung inward at the same time I was pulling at the handle, and I was greeted with a bewildered-looking Johnny.

"What's wrong?" he demanded, eyes flashing with concern. "Shannon, what the fuck happened?"

"There's something in your room!" I screamed, lunging at him. "Oh my god," I half sobbed, half screamed as I crawled up his huge frame and wrapped my arms and legs around him. "You have to save me!"

"What do you mean there's *something in my room*?" Johnny demanded as his arms came around my waist. "Shannon?"

He tried to pry me off him, but I held on tighter, clenching my thighs and arms as tight as I could.

Exhaling heavily, he rubbed my back with one hand and asked in a much softer tone, "What happened?"

"There's something *in your bed*."

Clenching my eyes shut, I clung to his body for all I was worth.

"Under the covers," I strangled out as a huge shudder rolled through me. "I'm not messing. I saw it move—*twice*!" I buried my face in his neck and choked out, "I think you have a ghost in your *bed*!"

“Shannon, I don’t have a ghost in my bed,” Johnny replied, sounding amused now.

“*Yes*, you do,” I snapped, shuddering again. “I saw it—and don’t laugh at me.”

“I’m not laughing at you,” he told me—while he laughed. “Come on, I’ll prove to you there’s no ghost in here.”

He moved to walk into the room and my hands shot out, gripping the doorframe to stop him.

“Take me home,” I begged, wide-eyed and horrified. “Please. Don’t bring me in there. I am *terrified*, Johnny!”

He brought me back in anyway, marching into the room with me locked around him like a baby monkey.

“Look at your ghost, Shannon,” he said, chuckling when we reached the bed.

“I can’t.” I closed my eyes and shook my head, burying my face back in the crook of his neck. “I don’t want to see.” He smelled so good. Whatever cologne he was wearing was wafting up my nose, so at least I could die smelling something wonderful.

A bark filled my ears then, stalling me midmeltdown.

“Hey, baby,” Johnny cooed. “You scared the shite out of my friend here.”

Baby?

Slowly, I lifted my head and turned to face the bed. A black Labrador poked out from beneath Johnny’s duvet.

A tsunami of relief crashed through me followed swiftly by a generous dollop of reality.

The dog nudged out from under the covers, tail wagging so hard it slapped against the mattress.

“Shannon, this is Sookie,” Johnny said. “Your ghost.”

“Oh.” Unlocking my arms and legs, I slid down his body, every inch of my skin flaming with embarrassment. “Oh, that makes more sense.”

Feeling light-headed, I sank down on the edge of his bed, pressed my hand to my chest, and exhaled a tremulous breath.

“Your dog,” I panted, breathing hard. “Sleeps in your bed.”

It wasn’t a question. I was just trying to piece everything together.

“I said hi and she wagged her tail. I thought she was a—”

“Ghost?” Johnny offered, smirking.

I shook my head.

“Don’t make jokes,” I whispered, still shivering as the adrenaline inside of me slowly dissipated. “Not yet.”

Sookie touched her wet nose to my bare thigh and nuzzled gently, distracting me.

“Look at you,” I whispered, giving her my attention.

It was clear from the white hair on her face that she was an old dog.

“You’re so sweet.” Reaching over, I placed my hand on her head and stroked lightly.

“Now this one *is* sweet,” Johnny stated. “She’s mine—and much better behaved than the other two.”

“Well, Sookie, you almost gave me a heart attack with your impressive hiding skills,” I added, feeling my heart slowly return to its natural rhythm. “But you’re still very sweet.”

“Are you okay?” Johnny asked, tone serious now.

I felt the mattress shift beside me, but I didn’t look up from his dog.

“I should’ve warned you that she was in here,” he added. “I’m just so used to her that I totally forgot. She can pass out for hours up here.”

“It’s okay,” I whispered, keeping my attention on Sookie.

“*It’s* okay or *you’re* okay?”

I chewed on my lip and thought about it for a moment before saying, “It’s okay and I will be okay.”

Dropping my head in my hands, I let out a low groan. “God, I’m so embarrassed. Did you guys hear me screaming all the way down in the kitchen?”

“Actually, it was just me,” he replied. “I was on the way up to talk to you when I heard you scream.”

My heartbeat quickened.

“Talk to me?”

“Yeah, your brother had to take off while you were in the shower.”

“Joey’s *gone*?” I croaked out, feeling a sudden surge of panic race through me. “Is something wrong?”

Johnny nodded and clasped his hands together, elbows resting on his huge thighs.

“What is it?” I squeezed out. “Tell me, Johnny!”

“It’s, ah, it’s your ma, Shannon,” he finally said, tone gruff.

“What about my mam?” I whispered. “Oh my god, is she dead?”

“No, no, fuck no,” Johnny hurried to say. Turning to face me, he exhaled a pained sigh, took my trembling hand in his big, warm one, and said, “She had a miscarriage.”

She had a miscarriage.

Your mother has lost the baby, Shannon.

Feel something! Feel something, dammit!

I was dead on the inside. I had to be. That, or I was downright evil.

There was no other explanation for it.

Feeling relief over the loss of a pregnancy was the most disgusting, horrible, unforgivable crime on the face of the planet. And that’s the first thing I felt when those words came out of Johnny’s mouth.

An overwhelming swell of sheer relief washed over my body for the briefest of moments as my brain registered the gratitude encompassing my heart at the knowledge that another child wouldn’t be born into this hell.

It was bad enough that we had been born into this life.

“I’m so fucking sorry, Shannon,” Johnny said, squeezing my hand. “I hate that I had to tell you that.”

“Is she okay?” I croaked out when words found me.

Johnny nodded. “Your brother said she’s okay and that she had the miscarriage on Friday—although you probably knew that she was in the—”

“Yeah,” I quickly lied to cover up the carnage, feeling tears prickle my eyes as disgust and self-hatred took over. “We knew there was a problem.”

Was that what happened? Was that where she went? Was she all alone in the hospital all weekend and none of us knew?

We were bitching about her being a bad mother and she was lying in a hospital bed, losing her baby.

Oh god.

“Of course.” Johnny nodded and exhaled another heavy sigh. “Joey told me to tell you that your dad is picking her up from the hospital and that they’ll both be home soon.”

My body froze. The weighted pain and fearful anticipation settled down on my shoulders like an old friend’s hand. That’s how familiar I was with the feeling of fear.

My heart could not have sunk any further if I tied weights to it and dropped it into the ocean.

He was back.

Why was he back? Why couldn't he just go away forever?

"Your brother wants you to stay here for a while. He said he would call when he can come get you—" Johnny paused before adding, "But I can take you home whenever you want, okay?"

"Joey shouldn't have put you in that position," I croaked out, wrestling to keep my emotions at bay. "I'm so sorry about this." I stood up to leave. "I can go now."

"Shannon." Johnny's hand snaked out and wrapped around my wrist. "I don't want you to go," he said gruffly, tugging me back down beside him. "I want you here." He rested a hand on the bed right behind my back and leaned close. "I want you to stay with me."

I shook my head, unable to form a single word.

I had a horrible taste in my mouth. It matched the one in the pit of my stomach.

Impending doom, I acknowledged.

That's what I was tasting and feeling right now.

My father was back.

Once I left this house and returned to mine, the vicious never-ending circle would continue.

Suddenly, I never wanted to leave this room.

Do not cry, Shannon Lynch, I warned myself. *Do not shed another tear!*

I dropped my head and blinked like crazy, desperately trying to fight back the tears threatening to spill down my cheeks in big fat drops.

It didn't work.

One tear slid down my cheek, followed in quick succession by another and then another.

"I'm going to hug you," Johnny whispered in my ear. "Tell me if that's not okay."

Sniffling, I turned inward and buried my face in his side, answering his question with actions.

Johnny's arms came around me, pulling me close, and I clutched his shirt in my hand, fisting the fabric tightly as sobs racked my body.

“I’m here for you,” he told me, voice gruff and thick as his hand moved in slow circles over my back. “If you need someone to talk to”—he pulled me closer—“I’m right here.”

I couldn’t stop crying and I wasn’t sure if it was the fear of facing my father pushing me over the edge, or my mother’s miscarriage, or the emotions building up inside of me because of this boy whose arms I was currently in. Unable to get a handle on myself, and desperately seeking the comfort and safety that oozed from him in waves, I did something incredibly reckless.

I crawled onto his lap. Johnny’s entire frame tensed, and his hands fell away from my body, but I didn’t stop. I *couldn’t*. With my knees on either side of his thighs, I wrapped my arms around him and buried my face in his neck.

“What do you want me to do, Shannon?” Johnny strangled out. “Tell me what to do here.”

“Hold me,” I sobbed, burying my face in his neck. “Don’t let go.”

“Okay.” One of his large hands cupped the back of my head and the other moved to my back as he held me to his chest, slowly rocking me on his lap. “I won’t,” he whispered, folding me up in his arms.

Trembling, I clung to his body and prayed for him to be my strength in this moment because I couldn’t *do this* anymore.

I couldn’t live like this.

I was so alone.

All my life.

I was so scared.

37
It’s Your Birthday

SHANNON

I spent a solid twenty minutes wrapped up in Johnny’s arms as I desperately tried to get a handle on my emotions. Finally, when I didn’t feel like I had another tear left inside of my body to shed, I pulled back to look at him.

His blue eyes burned with sympathy as he watched me carefully.

“Hi,” I sniffled, feeling embarrassed.

“Hi,” Johnny said gruffly as he smoothed my damp hair back off my face and over my shoulder.

“Thanks,” I croaked out, resisting the urge to press my cheek into his hand.

“For what?” he asked thickly, tucking loose strands of hair behind my ears.

“Holding me and not letting go,” I offered weakly.

He smiled sadly. “Anytime.”

“Do you want me to go now?” I asked, feeling uncertain. “Now that I’ve drenched your shirt and neck?”

Johnny shook his head and repeated those same words from earlier. “I want you to stay with me.”

“You do?” I sniffled, tightening my hold on his neck.

He nodded slowly. “Yeah, I do.”

“Okay,” I whispered, heart racing violently.

“Do you want to talk about it?” he asked, blue eyes burning holes in mine.

I quickly shook my head, knowing that I wanted to block it all out and concentrate on the one good thing in my life.

Him.

Johnny eyed me warily. “You’re sure?”

“I want to forget about it,” I confessed. “I don’t even want to think about it. Not at all…at least until I have to go home and face it.”

“If that’s what you want, then that’s what we’ll do,” Johnny replied huskily.

I sagged in relief.

This boy.

God.

“Are you hungry?” he offered, releasing my hips and removing the comforting feeling of his hands on my skin.

My stomach growled at his offer as I reluctantly climbed off his lap.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” Johnny said with a small chuckle.

Shaking his head, he stood up and helped Sookie off the bed before turning to smile down at me. “Come on, Shannon *like the river*.” He inclined his head toward the door. “Let me feed you.”

On shaky legs, I trailed after Johnny and Sookie, wandering down the long hallway to the ginormous staircase.

I had to fight the smile threatening to break free when Johnny stopped at the top of the staircase to scoop up Sookie and then proceeded to carry the huge, eighty-pound-minimum Labrador down the stairs like she was a baby cradled in his arms.

Smiling, I followed after them.

“Arthritis,” he explained in an embarrassed tone when he caught me staring. “Old age.” He set her down carefully when he reached the ground floor and watched her waddle off down the hall before adding, “But she’s young at heart.”

The minute my bare feet touched the cold tiles, I yelped and jumped back onto the carpeted step.

“God,” I squeaked, shivering. “The floor’s so cold.”

“Hang on,” Johnny said and then bounded back up the staircase only to return a few minutes later holding a pair of socks.

He handed me the socks and I sat down on the steps to slip them on.

“Thanks,” I whispered, pulling the huge black socks on my feet.

Lo and behold, they were Nike brand socks.

And not the fake ones, either.

“No problem,” Johnny replied, watching me. Scratching his jaw, he added, “I don’t know why I didn’t think of socks.”

“It’s okay,” I assured him, pulling them up to my calves before standing up. “I, uh…” I shrugged helplessly and gestured at my bare legs, covered only at the thighs by his boxer shorts. “I couldn’t keep your pants up.”

His lips twitched in amusement. “No?”

I shook my head, cheeks burning. “I’m too small.”

“That’s okay,” he replied gruffly. “I like it.”

“You like it?”

“I mean I—” He shook his head and exhaled a sigh. “I mean I don’t mind.”

“Will your parents mind?” I tucked my hair behind my ear nervously. “I mean, they won’t think…”

“No,” Johnny replied but he sounded distracted.

“Are you sure?”

His gaze roamed over me, making my skin flood with heat. “No, it’s, uh, good.”

My brows shot up. “Good?”

He blushed, causing me to blush a much deeper shade of red.

Oh god…

“It’s just us,” he added with a cough. “Ma won’t be back until the morning.”

“Oh, okay.”

“So, what are you in the mood for?” Johnny asked, thankfully veering the subject back to food.

“I’m not fussy,” I mumbled, following him down a long hallway to the door at the end.

I hovered in the doorway, admiring the beautiful, modernly designed kitchen in front of me. It looked nothing like the rest of the house that was traditional and majestic.

“Thank god,” Johnny replied, drawing my attention to where he was standing at a huge black marble island, checking his phone. “Because my kitchen skills are pretty fucking basic, and Gibsie cleared out the fridge earlier.”

“I can cook?” I offered shyly.

“What? No.” He quickly dismissed my offer, giving me a rueful smile. “You’re my guest. You’re not cooking for me.”

“I don’t mind,” I replied.

“Well, I do,” he told me as he tossed his phone on the counter and gave me his full attention. “Toasted sandwich good for you?”

I smiled brightly. “Sounds great.”

“Good choice,” he said with a chuckle. “Because it was sandwiches or cereal.”

“We can just have cereal,” I offered. “I don’t mind.”

Johnny winked and said, “We’ll go hard and have both.”

I didn’t protest. I was more than happy to hoof down whatever was put in front of me.

“Do you drink tea?”

“Only by the bucketful,” I replied with a smile. “Barry’s Tea with two sugars and a small drop of milk.”

He chuckled. “So you’re a tea girl, not a coffee one.”

I gagged. “Ugh. I hate coffee.”

Johnny grinned and pointed to the large marble island in the middle of the kitchen.

“Sit down,” he instructed as he moved to the cupboards and began to dig around. “I’ll throw the sandwiches in the toaster and we can have the cereal while we’re waiting.”

“Thanks for this,” I said quietly.

“For what?” he asked as he prepared the sandwiches in record time.

“Cooking for me,” I replied, watching Johnny’s back as he worked.

He was wearing a gray T-shirt, and the fabric of his shirt stretched gloriously over the span of his broad back.

“I’d hardly call a ham and cheese toastie cooking for you,” Johnny shot back with a wolfish grin.

“Well, no one ever cooks for me, so I appreciate it,” I told him, still hovering in the doorway. “I do most of the cooking at home.”

“Yeah?” He sounded surprised. “Why’s that?”

“Because I’m the only girl,” I mumbled. “And most of the housework falls on my shoulders.”

“So?” Johnny replied, still with his back to me. “Having a vagina doesn’t automatically tie you to a cooker—or a fucking hoover.” He shook his head. “Christ, if I even thought about pulling that sexist shite on my ma, she’d cut my balls off.”

“That’s a healthy way to approach life,” I told him, thrilled by his words.

“That’s the *only* way to approach life,” he corrected. “We’re in the twenty-first century,” he added. “Not the eighteen hundreds.”

He placed the sandwiches in the toaster and swung around to face me.

“You can sit down, Shannon,” he said gently. “It’s okay.”

“Uh, okay?” Padding over to the island, I moved for one of the stools only to flame in embarrassment when I couldn’t hoist myself up.

I tried again and failed miserably.

“Is there a spring to lower this?”

I knew I was small, but this was just ridiculous. The leather seat of the stool was grazing my rib cage.

“Huh?” Johnny called over his shoulder as he rummaged around in the fridge with a box of cereal tucked under his arm.

“The stool,” I replied, red-faced. “I can’t reach.”

He cast a quick glance over his shoulder and smirked when he noticed my predicament.

“There was,” he explained, walking over to me. He placed a box of Cheerios and a pint of milk on the island. “But Gibsie has a habit of breaking everything he touches.”

Without a hint of warning, Johnny grabbed my hips and lifted me onto the stool.

“He likes to pretend he’s a rocket taking off,” he added, unaware of how affected I was by his touch.

Strolling over to another cupboard, he retrieved two bowls and then pulled open a drawer and grabbed two spoons.

“Fucker broke all six stools within a week of my ma buying them.” He set the spoons and bowls down on the island and smirked at me. “They’re all stuck on full height.”

I arched a brow. “Are you mocking me?”

Johnny grinned. “I would never.” Pushing a bowl and spoon toward me, he added, “Cheerios work for a starter? I have Rice Krispies if you prefer.”

“Cheerios work.”

Johnny settled down on the stool next to mine and reached for the box of cereal. His arm brushed against mine as he poured cereal into both of our

bowls, and I shivered again.

"Are you cold?" he asked, turning to look at me.

I shook my head. "I'm okay."

"You sure?" he asked, pouring milk into both of our bowls.

I nodded. "Are you sure your parents won't mind that I'm here?"

He frowned. "Why would they mind?"

"I don't know," I hurried to say.

"It's okay," he reassured me. "They won't mind."

"Yeah, okay." Unable to take the heat of his stare, I dropped my gaze to my bowl. "I suppose they're used to you having girls over."

"What's that supposed to mean?" he asked, tone a little sharp.

"Nothing." Flushing, I snatched up my spoon and shoveled a spoonful of Cheerios into my mouth.

"Shannon?" Johnny asked, eyes still trained on my face.

I shrugged helplessly.

"I don't bring girls here."

"You don't?"

"No," he confirmed. "I don't."

"What about Bella?" The words were out of my mouth before I had a chance to take them back.

"What *about* Bella?" he asked with a frown.

"Don't you have, like, a thing with her?"

Johnny's frown deepened. "That's in the past."

"I'm sorry." I scooped up a spoonful of cereal, chewed, and then swallowed before adding, "You two were going out for a long time so I just presumed she would have been at your house."

Johnny turned and gave me a blank expression. "Were we?"

I frowned. "Were you not?"

He shrugged and turned his attention back to his bowl. "No."

"Oh, okay," I mumbled, thoroughly confused.

"We weren't together like that, Shannon," Johnny explained before shoveling a huge spoonful of cereal into his mouth.

"Then how was it?" I asked. "You and her?"

I knew I should stop rooting for information, but I couldn't help myself. I *had* to know.

Johnny shoveled another spoonful of cereal into his mouth, chewed on it for a moment, and then swallowed before turning to look at me. “Honestly?”

I nodded.

“It was physical,” he admitted, looking uncomfortable. “It was just sex, Shannon.”

“Just sex,” I repeated, my words barely more than a whisper.

“Yeah,” he replied. “And before you say it, I know how that sounds. But it’s the truth, and it was the same for her. So, don’t go thinking I’m the bad guy and that she wanted anything more from me, because she absolutely didn’t.”

“And you know that for sure?”

“Yeah, I do,” he shot back, a little defensively now. “She wasn’t interested in me as a person. She was happy with what I could do on a pitch and under her skirt. It was purely physical. And when I couldn’t give her what she wanted, she moved on to my teammate.”

“That’s pretty terrible,” I whispered, cheeks burning.

“Yeah, well, sometimes things aren’t all rose-tinted,” he grumbled. “Sometimes fucking is just fucking.”

“You can stop talking about it now,” I whispered, pushing my bowl away.

“You’re right,” he groaned, dropping his spoon back into his bowl. “You don’t need to be listening to this. You’re only fifteen, for Christ’s sake.” He shook his head. “The fuck am I thinking talking about this kind of shite with you?”

“I’m sixteen,” I informed him. “And I’m not a child.”

Johnny’s head snapped toward me, expression wary. “You’re fifteen.”

“No, I’m not,” I corrected. “I’m sixteen.”

Johnny frowned. “Since when?”

“Since today,” I replied.

Johnny gaped at me. “It’s your *birthday*?”

I shrugged.

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I don’t know.” I shrugged again. “Slipped my mind?”

“Shannon, come on.”

“Because it isn’t a big deal,” I hurried to dismiss. “It’s just another day.”

A bad day. A terrible day.

Brightened only because I’m with you…

“No, Shannon,” Johnny argued, looking like he was at a complete loss. “It is a big deal.”

“Johnny, today’s my birthday,” I reeled off, embarrassed. “There you go.”

“I wish I’d known earlier,” he grumbled. “I would have bought you a present.”

“I don’t need a present,” I strangled out, heart fluttering. “Don’t be silly.”

Johnny shook his head and muttered, “Yeah, well, if you told me, I could have given you something better than a bowl of bleeding Cheerios.”

“And a toasted sandwich,” I offered weakly.

Johnny sighed heavily. “And a toasted sandwich.”

“Shouldn’t they be ready by now?” I asked.

“Shite!”

Shoving his stool back, Johnny hurried over to the sandwich maker and pulled them out. “Not quite cremated,” he announced with a frown. “But they’re well on the way.”

“It’s fine,” I assured him as I jumped down from the stool. “I like them crispy.”

Lifting both of our bowls, I moved to the sink to clean up.

“Don’t even think about it,” Johnny warned as he plated our sandwiches.

“Think about what?” I asked, confused.

“You’re not cleaning a bleeding thing on your birthday,” he stated, holding a plate in each hand.

“I don’t mind—”

“And your *face*.” He shook his head. “And your ma. Christ, it’s your birthday—”

“You said we could forget it,” I strangled out, feeling my voice tremble, as panic set in.

I did not want to think about it. I knew what was coming when I left this house. And I wanted to forget.

For a couple more hours, I wanted to pretend that hell wasn't waiting for me on the other side of his front door.

Johnny looked like he wanted to fight with me but he shook his head and exhaled a low growl. "You're right. I'm sorry," he finally said. "Drop the bowls in the sink and come with me. I'll sort it out later."

It went against my nature to leave a mess behind me, but I complied with Johnny's instructions and followed him back down the hallway and into a large sitting room with a roaring fire already burning in the fireplace. Without thinking about it, I moved straight for it, groaning in relief when the heat wafted against my bare legs and hands.

Johnny set the plates down on the glass table in front of the fire and then dragged the couch over from the wall, setting it right in front of the fireplace.

"You don't have to do that for my benefit," I hurried to say.

"It's freezing out," he explained. "And this house is so big it takes forever to heat." Waving a hand in front of the couch, he said, "Make yourself at home. I'll be back in a sec."

Without another word, Johnny walked out, leaving me alone in his enormous living room. Too stunned to do anything but stare, I remained by the fire, warming my back and wrangling my emotions into touch.

When Johnny returned a few minutes later, he was carrying two mugs of tea.

"Two sugars and a small drop of milk," he announced with a wink, setting the mugs down next to our plates.

"Thank you," I whispered, overwhelmed by his kindness.

Johnny sat down on one end of the couch and arched a brow at me. After a couple of minutes of internal debate, I gingerly followed him, taking the other end of the couch, leaving a space between us. Grabbing the remote, Johnny flicked on the television that was mounted to the wall above the fireplace.

It was *huge*. At least eighty inches.

"Any preferences?" he asked me, scrolling through the channel guide on the screen.

I shook my head. "Whatever you want."

"Birthday girl's choice."

I blushed. "Surprise me."

Johnny glanced at the television and then grinned sheepishly. “Ireland are playing in the Six Nations Championship in a bit.” Shrugging, he added, “I was planning on watching it.”

“Then put it on,” I encouraged him.

His brows shot up. “You don’t mind?”

“It’s your television,” I replied. “Why would I mind?”

“If you get bored, just tell me and we can put on something else,” he muttered as he flicked on the match, attention immediately glued to the screen.

When the Irish senior team marched onto the pitch for the national anthem, Johnny’s entire face lit up. His eyes danced with excitement as he tapped his hand against the couch. He looked very young. And adorable.

I waited for Johnny to pick up his sandwich before reaching for mine and taking a small bite. The taste of ham and melted cheese dripped on my tongue and I moaned before hurrying to devour it.

“I’m going to be there one day,” Johnny stated, tilting his head in the direction of the telly. “One of these days that’s going to be me, Shannon.”

“I know,” I replied, believing every word. Biting down on my lip, I turned to face him and said, “Don’t forget about me when you’re a rich and famous rugby player.”

“You never know,” he said with a smirk. “I might take you with me so you can cheer me on in the stands.”

Please do. Please take me away with you.

“You’re very sure of yourself,” I said instead.

“You can wear my number and shout, ‘Johnny, Johnny,’ from the stands.” He chuckled before settling back down to watch the game.

Don’t tempt me…

Sitting on the couch in his parents’ living room with a roaring fire crackling and the rain pelting down outside the huge bay window, I felt my body slowly relaxing as I tried to follow the match. I wasn’t forcing conversation to break uncomfortable silences because there weren’t any.

In this moment, being here with him was as easy as breathing. It was an odd reaction to being in such close proximity to Johnny, but there it was. I was *enjoying* being with him. He didn’t push me to talk and I liked that. He just sat beside me, with a huge cushion between us and Sookie at our feet as he barked orders at the television set.

When Johnny stretched his legs out on top of the coffee table, I waited for a good ten minutes before attempting to do the same, only to fail epically when my toes barely touched the corner before clattering to the floor. Chuckling softly, Johnny reached forward and dragged the table closer to the couch. Embarrassed, I kept my feet firmly on the floor.

Less than a minute later, Johnny reached over, lifted my legs, and placed them on the table. I turned to look at him, but his attention was back on the screen. Every once in a while, Johnny would pause the match to put some coal or blocks in the fire before settling back down on the couch. After the third time he did it, I pulled the cushion out of his way when he sat back down and held it to my chest. By the end of the match, our shoulders were touching.

I didn’t move away.

He was big and solid and warm and I liked the feel of him beside me.

A little while later, when my eyes began to droop, he lifted his arm, and I didn’t even flinch when it came down around my shoulder. Instead, I nestled my cheek against his side and closed my eyes, allowing myself to drift off to sleep without an ounce of fear in my heart because it couldn’t exist inside of me, not when this boy had his arm around me.

38
She’s So Lovely

JOHNNY

It was her birthday.

Today was Shannon’s sixteenth birthday. And she was spending it with me. I was *glad*.

How crazy was that?

This girl who before Christmas was a total stranger, and since Christmas, I couldn’t imagine going through a day not thinking about.

I didn’t want to give her back. Something inside of me told me that if I did, she would return with another bruise. At least if I kept her with me, she would be safe.

There was something very fucked up about her life. Something that made me want to snatch her away and take her with me, wherever that may be.

I wasn’t stupid. I knew someone had put those marks on her face. And her thighs. And her arms. And I was fairly fucking sure that if I stripped the girl bare, I would find plenty more.

I didn’t know what was happening, or who was bullying her, but I would figure it out. Straight out asking her was out of the question, though. She was so goddamned guarded that it was almost impossible to penetrate the walls she built up around herself.

I thought I might be doing a good job, but if I pushed too hard too fast, she would retreat back in her shell. I wanted to smash that fucking shell and the bastards responsible for making her hide there in the first place.

She was lovely. Fucking lovely. She didn’t need to be hiding any of her shine behind those bleeding shutters.

Shannon shivered then and the movement distracted me. It was gone ten at night and she hadn’t opened her eyes once since falling asleep earlier

this afternoon.

“Shh,” I whispered when she whimpered in her sleep.

I didn’t even try to stop myself from stroking her hair. I was beyond help when it came to her. I was beyond fucking stopping. Everything inside of me was shifting, honing in on this tiny girl.

Nuzzling her cheek against my thigh, Shannon nestled closer, curling up in the smallest ball I’d ever seen a person her age contort their body into.

Like the obsessive freak I was, I allowed my gaze to land on her bruised cheekbone for the millionth time tonight. I knew I shouldn’t look at it. It made my body thrum with rage. And still, I couldn’t stop myself. I stared at the mark on her face until I was sufficiently filled with enough anger to take down an entire village, and then I turned my attention to the bruises on her thighs.

My phone vibrated in my pocket then, and the sensation pulled me from my murderous thoughts. Pulling my phone out, I stared at the screen, not recognizing the number flashing in front of my eyes.

Careful not to wake Shannon, I slid out from beneath her and waited for her to settle back down. Pulling off my hoodie, I draped it over her bare legs and then slipped out of the room to take the call.

“Yeah?” I said when I was standing in the hallway.

“How’s she doing?” Joey Lynch’s voice came down the line.

“She’s asleep,” I replied, keeping my tone low because if she woke up and asked to go home, I honestly didn’t know what I would do. I couldn’t refuse her, but I certainly didn’t want to. “She’s been out all day.”

“Good,” he replied with a sigh. “She needed it.”

“What’s going on, Lynch?” Moving for the front door, I yanked it open and stepped into the cold night air. “The fuck’s happening to your sister?”

“I already told you,” he snapped. “Ask her.”

“I’m asking *you*,” I snarled.

“I’ll be at yours in five minutes,” was all Joey replied before cutting the call and leaving me as clueless as ever.

Furious and at a complete loss, I paced the hallway, knowing that I needed to get a handle on myself, but not finding the restraint to do so.

Exactly five minutes later, a small knock came from the other side of my front door. Like the raging lunatic I was, I was standing there waiting

for him. Yanking the door open, I opened my mouth, ready to lose my shit on Joey Lynch, when Shannon's voice came from behind me.

"Joe?" she said in a sleepy voice as she hovered in the living room doorway.

I moved to go to her, to tell her to go to my room and stay there, but her brother intercepted her before I could.

"It's time to go, Shan," Joey announced.

"It is?" Her eyes widened in panic for the briefest moment before switching to resignation. "Okay."

"Yeah." He exhaled a heavy breath. "Mam needs a hand with the kids."

"She can stay," I hurried to say. I looked to Shannon and added, "You can *stay*."

"No, we need to go," Joey stated as he wrapped a protective arm around Shannon's shoulder and walked her out of my house. "Thanks for your help, Kavanagh."

Agitated, I followed after them both.

"Thanks, Johnny," Shannon whispered, looking back at me with sad eyes as her brother led her outside. "For everything."

"Shannon, you don't have to—"

"Come on, Shan," Joey interrupted me by saying. "We need to get home."

"Is Mam okay?" Shannon asked when her brother walked her around to the passenger side and pulled open the door.

"She'll be fine," Joey told her. "But we need to go home."

I had no fucking clue why my legs moved me toward the passenger side of the car, but that's what happened. Feeling helpless, I watched as her brother bundled her into the passenger seat before rounding the car to the driver's side.

"Bye, Johnny," Shannon whispered as Joey started the engine.

She moved to close the car door, but my hand snaked out, stopping her from closing it. She looked up at me with those big blue eyes.

Stay. Stay with me, Shannon. I can keep you safe…

"Bye, Shannon," I told her instead, and with a reluctance that bordered on regret, I closed the door.

The tires of her brother's car skidded as he tore out of my driveway.

Standing in the pouring rain, I watched him take her away from me.

39
Bad News and Worse News

SHANNON

“Are you feeling it, too?” Joey bit out, hands gripping the wheel with such force it turned his knuckles white as we drove away from Johnny Kavanagh’s house.

“Feeling what?” I strangled out.

Joey looked me dead in the eye and made me feel a little less alone in my disgrace when he said, “Relief?”

I nodded, hating myself for even thinking it, but I felt it. And so did he.

“Is she okay?” I croaked out, when words found me again.

Joey nodded stiffly. “Supposed to be.”

“Is that what happened?” I whispered, feeling tears prickle my eyes as disgust and self-hatred took over. “Was she in the hospital all weekend and we didn’t know?”

Again, my brother nodded stiffly.

“Oh, Joey,” I sobbed. “She was alone.”

“She had *him*,” Joey bit out, jaw clenched. “He was with her, and *he* is home now.”

“What are we going to do?” I asked, needing him to have the answers I didn’t. “Joe?”

“I don’t know,” he finally choked out, voice cracking. “I don’t know what to do anymore, Shannon.”

“It’s okay,” I forced myself to say. “You don’t have to know. You’re only eighteen.”

“I can’t be there, Shan,” he finally said, face awash with guilt. “I can’t live like this anymore.”

“I know,” I breathed, feeling faint hearing those words come out of his mouth.

I'd heard those words before. From Darren.

"I think we should consider what Aoife said," Joey added, voice thick with emotion.

"What about what Aoife said?" I choked out, horrified.

"Calling this in."

"You must be joking," I deadpanned.

Joey looked at me with guilty eyes but he didn't respond.

"I am *not* going into care," I spat out, feeling betrayed. "You're fine. You'll get to live your own life and walk away. I will be put in a home!"

"Shannon, she was talking to me last night about my future, and she made a lot of sense—"

"Your future," I deadpanned.

Joey groaned loudly. "Not just me, Shannon. All of us—"

"I can't believe you would even *think* it after what happened to Darren!" I screamed, losing all grasp on my emotions. "How could you think about doing that to us, Joey?"

My father terrorized me. He battered me. I lived in constant fear. But he *never* touched me like that.

He never *raped* me.

Which is *exactly* what happened to Darren repeatedly for months and months, over and over until they almost killed him.

I read the reports years after it happened. I knew all about the surgeries he had to have to repair the damage those bastards caused him.

And now Joey was contemplating risking that?

Go back. Turn the car around and go back to him. Go back to Johnny. Tell him. Tell him and let him help you. He told you he would.

No, you idiot, he can't help you. No one can. Your own brother's giving up on you!

"If you want to go, then go!" I screamed as hot tears poured down my cheeks. "Go off and leave us. Go be with Aoife and have a wonderful life together. I'll protect the boys."

"You can't even protect yourself!" Joey roared. "I'm doing that, Shannon. *Me.* I'm the one trying to soften the fucking blows and they just keep coming.

"Then maybe you and Dad will both get lucky and he'll finish me off the next time," I hissed as a huge sob racked through me. "It'll save you the

worry, and him the energy."

"Don't fucking say that, Shannon!" Joey bellowed, slamming his hand on the steering wheel.

"Why not?" I strangled out between gasps. "It's the truth."

"Shannon, breathe," Joey commanded in a softer tone as he reached over and rubbed my back. "Take a breath."

I couldn't. I could not fucking breathe. Leaning forward, I desperately tried to drag air into my lungs.

"Good girl," Joey coaxed as he steered with one hand and rubbed my back with the other. "Nice and slow."

By the time we made it back to the house, I had managed to calm myself down to the point where I could actually drag air into my lungs. For several minutes, we just sat outside the house, staring at our father's car parked in the driveway.

I did not want to go into that house. And neither did Joey. We were both completely screwed.

No, you're *screwed. He'll be fine.…*

"Shannon?" Joey's voice broke through my thoughts.

I didn't look at him. I didn't respond, either.

"Are you listening to me?" he asked.

I nodded weakly, keeping my eyes trained on the car.

"The next time he puts his hands on you, I want you to fight back."

I stiffened.

"Are you listening to me?"

I nodded.

"If he touches you again, Shannon, then I want you to grab the sharpest knife you can, and I want you to plunge it into his heart."

Sniffling, I turned to look at him. "You're not coming back, are you?"

Joey just stared at me, eyes filled with tears. "I can't," he whispered as a tear rolled down his cheek. "If I go back inside that house, I'll kill them both."

I watched his face, registered the truth he was telling me, and then I unfastened my seat belt and opened the door.

"Goodbye, Joey," I whispered numbly, and then I climbed out and walked inside.

40
Lines and Bulldozers

JOHNNY

I was in a horrible mood on Monday morning that was partially propelled by the god-awful pain I was in, but mostly attributed to the fact that I hadn't closed an eye last night. All night, I had tossed and turned over Shannon. All bleeding night, I laid awake with only my regrets to keep me company—and that bleeding picture from the paper.

I should have stopped her. I shouldn't have let him take her.

Why, I had no bleeding clue, but there was a voice inside my head screaming at me to protect her. I *wanted* to. I just didn't know what I needed to protect her from.

Or who.

I was completely fucking clueless, armed and ready to go to war for a girl I didn't know, against an enemy no one would tell me about. Jesus, I was so fucked in the head from her. It was getting out of hand.

She was disrupting my perfectly content way of life, and I didn't fucking know how to cope with it. The girl fucked with my head and made me weak and swayable. It wasn't right, and she had no business coming into my life at this pivotal point.

She was like a tornado I never saw coming. The one problem I didn't foresee when making my plans. The one person who could fracture all my hard work.

And the most nerve-racking thing about it all was that I *liked* it. I *liked* the fact that she was turning my life on its axis and encouraging never-seen-before notions and feelings inside of me, and then I *hated* that I *liked* it. I was thoroughly addicted to every single thing about the girl and it had nothing to do with the physical—and the physical was pretty fucking perfect.

Most importantly, she didn't look at me like I was a meal ticket. She looked right through all the bullshit. Seeing *me*. Seeing *only* me.

And that made me want to move some shit around and place her slap-bang in the middle of my world.

I knew I needed to get a fucking handle on myself. Except I couldn't. Because she was addictive. And I was obsessed.

I'd lost count of the number of lads I'd played rugby with down through the seasons that had dropped out or lost form over a girl. I couldn't afford to let that happen to me. There was too much at stake.

Everything was at stake.

Before Shannon, I never had any problem concentrating. Before her, I had never been uncertain about a thing. I knew exactly who I was, where I had come from, and where I was going.

And now?

Now I was a mess.

I didn't need this. I didn't need this fucking stress.

I had fitness exams in less than three weeks' time that I needed to focus on. Exams that if I didn't pass would put my whole future in jeopardy. That's what I needed to be focusing on.

My career.

Not a girl.

By the time I made it to school, I was distracted, off-balance, and freaking the fuck out. There was something very wrong with me and I needed an immediate intervention.

"I need a favor," were the first words that came out of my mouth when I found Gibsie outside the woodwork room before first class. "Seriously!" Exhaling a harsh breath, I shoved him down the hallway toward the fifth-year common area. "You need to help me."

"Okay, but I have class in two minutes," Gibsie complained, shuffling along in front of me.

"So have I, Gibs," I snapped, steering him into the thankfully empty common room. "Double accounting with Moggy Dan. But this is far more urgent than me balancing spreadsheets and you designing a fucking coffee table for your ma."

"Alright, lad, relax," he coaxed. Shaking out of my hold, he walked over to one of tables and pulled out a chair. Dropping his bag on the floor,

he sat down and faced me. “I’m all ears.”

Slamming the door closed behind us, I grabbed a leather armchair and shoved it against the door before dropping into the chair.

“You were right, Gibs,” I groaned. “I’m so *screwed*.”

“I am?” His brows shot up in surprise. “About what?” Before I had a chance to respond, his eyes widened in comical awareness. “About you fucking yourself?” Or at least, it would have been comical if it wasn’t so fucking depressing. “Holy shit, Johnny. You haven’t or you can’t?”

“I tried, I failed, I haven’t tried since, so now I’m fairly sure I can’t,” I decided to throw out there.

There was no goddamn point in trying to evade the question. He wasn’t going to let it go, and I had bigger issues right now than my temperamental testosterone.

“How long has it been?”

“Before Christmas,” I quickly replied before saying, “but that’s not the problem here.”

“Jesus, Kav, I’d say that’s a very big problem, lad.” Gibsie let out a low whistle. “Have you tried lube?”

“What—no! Stop talking about my dick,” I barked, then ran a frustrated hand through my hair. “It’s *her*, man. You were right. I am completely fucked in the head, and I need you to stop me from doing something stupid with that girl.”

“Which girl?”

“Which girl do you think, asshole?” I snarled. “*Shannon*.”

“Oh, *that* girl.” Gibsie chuckled. “The resurrectionator.”

“Stop laughing. It’s not funny. I need your help,” I snapped, flustered. “And ‘resurrectionator’ is not a word.”

“Yes, it is,” Gibsie challenged. “Jesus was *resurrected*. It was a *resurrection* performed by God, the ‘resurrectionator.’ Similar to Shannon, the ‘resurrectionator’ of your bollocks that day outside the P.E hall.” Snickering, he added in a deep voice, “She shall appear and he shall arise.”

“Which made God a resurrectionist and/or a resurrector,” I growled. “Nowhere in the English language was he called a bleeding *resurrectionator*.”

“I’m talking about the bible, not the dictionary.”

“You’re talking out of your hole,” I countered.

“The terminator is called the fucking terminator, asshole,” Gibsie shot back. “Not the bloody terminist.”

“*Terminist*,” I mused. “Another word that’s *not* a word.”

“Well, ‘resurrectionator’ *is* a word.”

“No, it bleeding well isn’t.” I shook my head, aggravated. “It’s not phonetically or grammatically correct.”

“Grammatically correct?” Gibsie balked at me. “Look at you, Mr. Higher-Level English, thinking you know everything with your *Great Gatsby* and Shakespeare. Well, not this time.” He tapped his temple. “This time, I’m the smart one.”

“It’s called basic comprehension, Mr. Foundation-Level English, and I’m telling you now that you are wrong.”

He scratched his head.

“Concentrate, Gibs,” I ordered. “I need your help here, man.”

“I can’t,” he grumbled, brows set in a deep frown. “I know I’m right, Johnny. I go to mass every Sunday, you know.”

“Good for you,” I mocked. “Maybe you should pray to Jesus for some common sense—” My words fell off my tongue when he stalked over to me and dragged my seat out of the way. “Dammit, Gibs!” I barked. “Where the hell are you going?”

“To the library,” he shot back, yanking the door open. “You’re wrong. I’m googling it. And then I’m printing it off and posting it all over the fucking school,” he added as he sauntered out of the room. “Watch me *resurrect* the truth.”

“Fine,” I muttered wearily. “Go for it.”

Less than ten minutes later, Gibsie returned with a sheepish expression.

“It’s not a word,” he announced, stalking back through the doorway.

“I know,” I deadpanned. “Now that you have that worked out of your system, do you think you can you help me?”

“I just don’t get it.” Gibsie groaned, plopping into the armchair across from mine. “How is it not a word?”

“Gibsie, please!”

“I just want the word, Johnny.”

“Fine, it’s your word,” I agreed, exasperated. “You can have it. Fucking call the Oxford Dictionary and trademark the bleeding word for all I care. Just *help* me.”

“Yeah, well, I might just do that,” Gibsie huffed, running a hand through his blond hair. “Right, tell me about your problem.”

I exhaled a heavy sigh. “I like her.”

“Okaaay,” he drawled. “Tell me what the problem is.”

“That’s my problem,” I bit out. “I like her, Gibs. I think I really like her, man. Like really as in a *lot*. A lot more than fucking like. Christ!”

He shrugged a shoulder. “Still not seeing the problem here, lad.”

“I. Don’t. Want. To. Like. Her.” I spelled it out for him, fresh out of patience now.

“Because she’s fifteen and you’re seventeen?”

“She’s sixteen,” I admitted with a groan. “Her birthday was yesterday.”

“Then you know the age thing is horseshit, don’t you?” Gibsie countered. “You’re clutching at straws, lad. The age thing is a big fat excuse because yer one Shannon has you rattled and you’re panicking because you’ve never felt rattled a day in your life.”

“I *am* rattled,” I admitted without hesitation. “Completely fucking rattled.”

“This is brilliant.” Gibsie chuckled gleefully, thoroughly enjoying my rare breakdown.

“It’s not a laughing matter,” I snapped.

“Are you kidding me?” He snorted. “It’s the funniest thing I’ve heard in ages.”

Noticing my murderous expression, he stopped laughing and gestured for me to continue.

Jerking forward, I ignored the pain in my groin and rested my elbows on my thighs. “I drove her home the other week, lad. She missed her bus over that stunt McGarry pulled outside the bathrooms, and I couldn’t leave her there—”

“And you’re only telling me now?” he accused.

I shrugged helplessly. “I know I should have walked away, but I didn’t. I put her in my car and we talked—for *hours*. And not just about rugby, Gibs. About all random, pointless bullshit that should have bored me to tears. It *didn’t*. It was just like that day when I knocked her out and I spent an hour outside Twomey’s office talking to her, except *better* because she was in her full senses. She is so goddamn easy to talk to, Gibs. Like you

wouldn’t believe.” I released a heavy sigh and said, “I didn’t want to let her go, lad.”

Gibsie rubbed his jaw. “Shit.”

“Exactly.” Leaning forward, I loosely clasped my hands together and stared at my best friend. “In all the years you’ve known me, Gibs, when has that *ever* happened to me?”

“It’s definitely a first for you,” he agreed, expression thoughtful.

“It gets worse,” I grumbled.

“Worse?” He frowned. “How?”

“I told her about my surgery.”

Gibsie’s brows shot up. “Are you serious?”

“As a heart attack.” I blew out a frustrated breath. “I told her *everything*, and then I lost my shit on her.”

“Why?”

“I *panicked*, Gibs,” I shot back defensively. “It slipped out and I totally fucking panicked. You know what would happen if word got back to the U20 coaches that I’m not fully fit.”

Not that it matters much now, I thought bitterly. *If I don’t get my shit together, my dreams are down the drain.*

“And you think she’d talk?” he asked.

“Honestly, no, man. I don’t think she’s the kind of girl who talks about anybody,” I told him. “But I’m *always* so careful, and I lost my head and it freaked me out. I was more annoyed with myself than anything and overreacted.” Dropping my head in shame, I added, “I’m pretty sure I made her cry.”

“So, you screwed yourself?”

“You would think,” I mumbled. “But then she walked up to me at school the following morning and apologized *to me*.”

“Why?”

“Fuck if I know, lad.”

“Did you set her straight?”

“Couldn’t. She walked off before I had a chance,” I muttered. “And then I did it again on Friday.”

“Did what?”

“Put her in my car,” I admitted.

“Well, shit.”

“And then I went one further.”

“How?” Gibsie eyed me warily. “What did you do, Johnny?”

“I dropped her home.” Expelling another frustrated breath, I sagged back in my seat and groaned. “But then I snatched her back.”

“What the fuck?”

“I know,” I barked. “I *know*.”

“How do you snatch a girl, Johnny?”

I shrugged helplessly. “Fuck knows, but I did it.”

“Why?”

“Because I couldn’t let her go,” I admitted truthfully, keeping out the part about Shannon being sick. “I couldn’t let her leave me, lad.”

“Did you ride her?”

“What did I just tell you about my dick?”

“Okay, did you *try* and ride her?”

“What? No!” I barked. “I took her to Biddies, asshole.”

“Is that supposed to mean something to me?” Gibsie shot back. “This is me you’re talking to, lad. I’m well fucking aware of what goes on at the place.” Snickering, he added, “I’m usually in the middle of it.”

“No, I didn’t bleeding ride her. And don’t say ‘ride.’”

“Why not?”

“Not about her.” Leaning back, I pinched the bridge of my nose and sighed. “Just…not about her, okay?”

“Alright, did you make sweet *love* to her?” he taunted. “In the car park? Or the toilets? Or that sweet spot in the back of the lounge?”

“You are a gobshite,” I growled. “A complete and utter gobshite.”

“Oh, my Jesus!” Gibsie cringed and slapped a hand across his mouth. “Oh no.” He groaned. “It wouldn’t work, would it?”

“My dick works, Gibs!” I snapped. “I get hard, asshole. It just hurts when I—”

“When you what?” he asked, eyes wide.

“I can’t finish,” I muttered.

“You can’t come?” he choked out. “Like at all?”

“I mean, I suppose I could if I tried.” I sighed dejectedly. “But the last time I tried, it was so painful that I puked my guts up and almost passed out.”

“Jesus. When was the last time you tried?”

“Saint Stephen’s night.”

“Holy shit,” Gibsie gasped. “Johnny, that was months ago. You need to come, lad.”

“Don’t you fucking think I know that?” I bit out. “It’s not like I’m enjoying this, Gibs.”

“That’s unnatural.”

“Yeah, Gibs, it’s my dick. I’m well aware how abnormal it is.”

“No wonder you’re limping,” he muttered. “Your balls are so full of spunk they’re weighing you down.”

“Not fucking funny, Gibs.”

“Oh, Jesus. What if they sewed you back together wrong?” he hissed, eyes bulging. “Fuck, lad, what if they snipped a sperm cord when they were messing around near your ball sac?”

“A *sperm cord*?” I gaped at him. “The fuck kind of drugs are you taking?”

“I read up on that procedure, you know,” he stated, looking horrified. “So many things can go wrong—”

“No.” I shook my head, burying my terror. “They can’t.”

“Yeah, lad,” he choked out. “They really fucking can. They cut you so close to your—”

“Can you stop!” I barked, shuddering now. “Jesus Christ, I can’t hear this.”

“I’m sorry.” Smothering a grimace, he waved a hand at me and said, “Finish telling me about what happened with Shannon.”

“I didn’t touch her.” Shifting uncomfortably, I muttered, “But I wanted to.” I dropped my head in my hands and groaned. “After Biddies, I knew I needed to drop her home, but I couldn’t, Gibs. I fucking *couldn’t*. So I took her to the bleeding cinema instead. I just…needed more time with her, you know? Like, it wasn’t enough. I needed more…”

“More?” He cocked a brow. “More of what, Johnny?”

“More of her,” I replied glumly. “It’s all more when it comes to her.” I shook my head and sighed heavily. “Jesus, I want her so fucking bad I can’t think straight, Gibs.”

“Balls,” Gibsie mused.

“And I beat the living shit out of some prick from her old school at the bar,” I admitted.

“You fucking idiot,” Gibsie snapped. “Did anyone see?”

“Liam,” I muttered, tugging on my hair. “I lost it, lad. They said something about her, and I lost complete and utter control of my senses.”

“You’re lucky it didn’t get back to Dennehy,” he pointed out.

“Yeah, Gibs,” I grumbled. “I’m well aware of how close I came to screwing myself.”

Don’t need anyone else to tell me…

“And yesterday?” he asked. “At your house? What was that about?”

I shook my head and sank back in my chair. “Her ma had a miscarriage.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah.”

“Is she okay?”

“I don’t know.” I shrugged helplessly. “He took her away from me.”

“Who took her?”

“Joey *the hurler*.”

“Well, he is her brother, lad,” Gibsie offered. “He was obviously going to come back for her.”

“I don’t give a shite,” I snapped, thinking about her bruised face. “I didn’t want her to leave, Gibs, and he just took her away from me. And I *let* him!”

“You do know that you’re not allowed to *keep* humans as pets, don’t you?” he asked in a wry tone. “You know that’s just dogs and cats, right?”

“Fuck. Right. Off,” I growled.

“Relax,” he muttered. “I was messing with you.”

“Well, it’s not fucking funny, Gibs,” I shot back. “None of this is *fun*. It took everything in me to let her go with her brother last night. Fucking *everything*.”

“Well, lad,” Gibsie finally said, blowing out a breath. “On a bright note, at least you can finally admit that you like her.”

“But I *don’t* want to bleeding like her,” I bit out. “That’s the whole point. I don’t have *time* for liking her. I can’t have her taking up my headspace, Gibs. You know what’s at stake for me. I need to stay on track, and that girl makes my mind stray so far off the beaten track it’s ridiculous.”

I’m already in trouble.

“Well, obviously, you don’t have any control of that,” Gibsie responded in an oddly serious tone. “Can’t help who you like, Johnny. That’s life.”

“Not my life,” I argued weakly. “That’s not how I work.”

“That’s how we all work,” he corrected.

“Thing is, Shannon’s not just some random girl, Gibs,” I strangled out. “She’s different. She’s not a hookup, or a fuck and chuck, or a clinger looking for a leg up. I can’t fuck her out of my system. She doesn’t even know who I am, lad. She had no fucking clue. And it was genuine. She wasn’t putting it on. I’ve met enough of those clingers to last me a lifetime and I could tell she was clueless.” I shook my head and sagged against the leather. “And aside from all that, she’s *fragile*.”

“Fragile?”

“Fragile,” I confirmed, unwilling to give any more information.

“Is it because of whatever you read in that file?”

I glared at him, tensing.

“Relax,” he coaxed, holding his hands up. “I never read it. I just handed it back to Dee.”

I exhaled heavily and nodded. “Just believe me when I tell you that girl is a line I cannot cross.”

“Then don’t,” Gibsie replied after a long pause. “If she’s messing you up this bad when you hardly know her, then you’re better off walking away now, lad.”

“That’s the thing, lad… I don’t know if I can,” I admitted hoarsely. “You know what I’m like when I get something into my head. I lose the run of myself and go all in.”

“I sure do,” Gibsie chuckled. “You bulldoze. Everything and everyone that gets in your way.”

“Well, stop me!”

“Stop yourself,” Gibsie snorted. “Flex that famous self-control.” Grinning he added, “You’ve had plenty of it lately.”

“You don’t get it, Gibs. Last night almost *killed* me. I swear, I spent the entire night wide awake, staring at my keys and forcing myself to stay in my bed and not drive over there and bring her home with me,” I admitted glumly. “I don’t have an ounce of self-restraint when it comes to her—which is *why* I need your help.”

“So, what are you asking me to do here, Johnny?” he asked, smirking. “Are you saying you want me to cockblock you?”

“I’m *saying* that if you see me bulldozing over any lines, pull me back,” I bit out. “I don’t trust myself around her.”

“You do realize that the lines that exist between the two of you are the ones you’ve drawn in your head?”

“I can’t go there with her, Gibs, and I *won’t*.”

“You’re serious?”

I nodded. “She’s too fucking dangerous to me.”

“Because?”

“I just told you!” I snapped.

“No.” He shook his head slowly. “You basically just went around in circles there, lad.” Shrugging, he added, “I haven’t heard a decent argument against her yet.”

I didn’t answer him for three reasons. The first, he wouldn’t understand. Second, he wouldn’t believe me. Third, I wasn’t sure *I* believed me.

“So, you’re happy to just step back and watch McGarry or some other clown at school make a move?” Gibsie asked then. “You’re completely fine with that?”

The way my body automatically coiled tight with tension was enough of an answer.

“She’s a gorgeous girl, Johnny, with a lot of interest directed her way,” Gibsie stated calmly. “Can’t have it both ways, lad.” He shrugged. “You either want her or you don’t. You either go for it, or step back.”

“No,” I snarled, tensing. It was all I could say. Just plain *no.*

“And you’re sure you don’t want to try the whole girlfriend thing out with her?” he asked.

“It wouldn’t work,” I groaned. “Aside from the fact that I’m too old for her, and she probably doesn’t feel the same, I’m too busy and too unavailable to commit to anything even remotely resembling a relationship.”

“Says who?”

“You know what my life is like, Gibs.” I exhaled another heavy sigh. “You know why I’m unattached. It’s too much pressure and I can’t afford to lose focus. I don’t have a spare hour in the day, and once the summer

comes, I'll be out of here." I shrugged helplessly. "How's that fair on any girl?"

"True," Gibsie mused. "But she's clearly not just any girl."

"*Exactly*," I gritted out. "She's too…more…too…better…important—" Breaking off, I rubbed a hand over my face. "It would never work," I finally said, tone weary. "I would end up leaving, they would write a ton of shit in the papers and online like they always do while I'm gone, she would get paranoid, I would get pissed, she would end up getting hurt, and we would both end up completely fucking miserable."

"Whoa," Gibsie breathed. "You've thought about this a lot, haven't you?"

Every minute of the day since I first laid eyes on her.

I nodded glumly.

"Then be her friend," he offered.

I snapped my head up. "Her *friend*?"

"Yes, asshole, her *friend*," Gibsie drawled sarcastically. "You are aware of the concept of friendship? Believe it or not, you're actually fairly good at it. And if anything *more* is off the cards, and you can't stay away from her, then the friendship card is your best bet."

"But she's a girl, Gibs."

He rolled his eyes. "Yeah, Johnny, I know."

"I don't have any girls who are friends."

"Well then, she can be your first."

I pondered the thought.

Could I be Shannon's friend? Could I *just* be her friend?

"Friends," I repeated, lifting my gaze to his. "I guess I could give it a shot?"

"Now you're talking," Gibsie encouraged with a pleased smile.

I could be her friend. I would be a good friend to her. I could make life easier for her. I *wanted* to do that for her.

"But what if she doesn't want to be my friend?" I asked, feeling that unfamiliar swell of uncertainty that seemed to accompany any thoughts I had of that girl.

"Keep that pathetic shit talk up, and *I* won't want to be your friend, you big vagina," Gibsie snorted. "'What if she doesn't want to be my friend?'" he mocked and then snorted, "Go home and find your balls—remember

who the fuck you are—and while you're at it, have a pull on your dick, too. Even if you pass out from the pain, having an orgasm has to be worth it."

"So, you'll help me?" I asked, choosing to ignore his last jibe.

"Have an orgasm?" Gibsie shot back with a shake of his head. "I love you, lad. But not enough to get you off."

"Fuck off," I grumbled.

"Relax," he said, laughing. "I'm joking."

"Yeah, my life's a big fucking joke to you, isn't it?" I snapped.

"Don't be so *touchy*," he snickered.

"Gibs," I warned. "I'm not fucking around here. I need you to help me with this."

He let out a heavy sigh. "If it's what you really want?"

No.

"It has to be," I croaked out.

"Fine, lad, I'll help you," Gibsie replied with a sigh. "Even though it'll never work, you're doomed to fail, and I'll more than likely end up giving the best man speech at your wedding at some ridiculously young age because you'll have bulldozed the shit out of things, for now, I will absolutely help you bury your head in the sand."

"That's not funny, Gibs," I snapped, bristling.

"I know," he replied—while he laughed his arse off. "It's hilarious."

"Not even a little bit," I groaned.

41
Block It Out

SHANNON

I spent the following week home from school, taking care of my brothers and my mother, who, as I suspected, wasn't speaking to me. She wasn't speaking to any of us.

Except him.

He was back.

Just like I knew he would be.

The miscarriage had been the perfect opportunity for my father to weasel his way back into my mother's fragile emotions.

When he came back that night, Joey left. He drove away and didn't come home for three days.

Those three days, I had lived in terror, fearing he would never come home. He finally did. But I knew it wouldn't be forever. One of these days, Joey was going to walk out that front door just like Darren had and never come back.

Mam returned to work on the following Saturday. Like a robot, she dressed in her cleaning scrubs, walked downstairs, made herself a cup of coffee, smoked seven cigarettes, and then left for work. I knew Mam shouldn't be working in her condition—she clearly wasn't in the right frame of mind—but when I tried to tell her, all she did was give me a watery smile, kiss my cheek, and walk right out the door.

I spent the entire day worrying myself sick about my mother and listening to my father tell me how it was all my fault she lost the baby.

I was the whore. *I* made him lose his temper. *I* was to blame for him putting his hands on me. And *I* was the reason he shoved Mam when she tried to drag him off me that night.

I was the reason he *slapped* her around. It was all on me.

Because I was such a slut.

That's right, I was a sixteen-year-old girl who had never even kissed a boy, but to my father, I was a tramp.

When he broke his promise of sobriety to my mother last night, I wasn't even surprised. When he used my neck as a squeeze toy, I didn't even flinch.

I was just so tired. A part of me prayed he would just get it over with.

Even though Joey had come thundering down the staircase and dragged Dad off me, the damage had been done.

He added fresh bruises to old bruises, and I had spent a good portion of the night contemplating the worst possible thoughts.

There was no reprieve from this. I had no way out. Not in that house. Not in a care home.

I was trapped.

When I stepped off the bus and walked through the doors of Tommen this morning, the relief that had flooded my body was so potent that I could taste it. Returning after a week in hell felt like the greatest reward for surviving.

Seeing Claire and Lizzie again, and knowing they loved me, being *told* they loved me, helped piece something back together inside of my body. When they presented me with a belated birthday cupcake and gifts at lunch, I almost cried. When I gave them the PG version of what happened to Mam, they knew me well enough to drop it.

I didn't want talk about it, think about it, or be reminded of it. *Ever again.* Claire and Lizzie knew that and respected my wishes.

Going through the motions, I went to all my classes and erased my family from my mind for the next seven hours.

It was *wonderful*.

42
Catching Shoes and Feelings

SHANNON

My last class on Monday was double P.E., and because of the torrential downpour of rain outside, Mr. Mulcahy had taken pity on us and set up a game of soccer in the indoor basketball hall. Mr. Mulcahy was the school's rugby coach and it was pretty evident in the way he lounged on a folding chair on the sideline, eyes focused on the clipboard in his hand, that he wasn't concerned with our physical education. Also, I had managed to sneak a peek at said clipboard when I tried and failed to get out of playing, and it was covered in doodles and rugby-related plays.

I had ended up being drafted onto the team with Claire, thank god, and a couple of the other girls, while Lizzie had managed to talk her way out of participating and got to go to the library instead. I wished I was as persuasive as her. Instead, I was sporting a yellow bib and attempting to run around and not get squashed to death by the boys.

With Lizzie living it up in the library, that left only four girls on the court to play with the eighteen other boys from 3A. I was by far the worst. Shelly and Helen, the other two girls in my class, weren't much better, but I had a feeling that had more to do with their general disinterest in the game rather than lack of ability. Claire was amazing at sports, the best girl on the court, and the lads treated her with the respect she deserved by passing the ball off to her whenever she managed to get free. So far, she had scored twice.

To be fair, my teammates had tried that with me earlier on in the game, but after tripping myself up and costing our side a goal, they avoided me. I thought that might be for the best.

"Are you having fun?" Claire asked, jogging toward me when one of the boys on our team scored again.

She was wearing the same black jersey, white shorts, and yellow bib that I was, but unlike me, her training clothes actually fit her body. Her long blond curly ponytail swished from side to side as she moved. Her cheeks were red, her eyes alight with excitement. She was disgustingly stunning.

"Isn't this the best way to end the day?"

"Uh, yeah, sure!" I feigned a smile and gave her two enthusiastic thumbs up.

"You hate this, don't you?" She laughed and rested her elbow on my shoulder. The fact that she could do that with ease only drove home how small I was. "Don't worry. There's only another ten minutes left."

"Soccer isn't really my—" I paused to duck, narrowly avoiding a ball to the face. "It's not my thing," I began to say, but Claire was already chasing after the ball, screaming at our teammates that she was "open."

Moments later, a stampede of teenagers came barreling up the court toward me, hunting down the rogue soccer ball. So, I did what any sane five foot zero person in my position would do; I ran over to the wall and flattened my back against it. Narrowly avoiding another trampling, I decided that I had quite enough of P.E. for one day. I'd had a horrible, niggling pain in my stomach all day, and running around wasn't helping matters.

My body was in pieces.

I was in so much pain that I could hardly stand it.

To be honest, I had a feeling the stomachache I was suffering was anxiety induced and father related.

We were finishing up school on Friday for two whole weeks, and every time I allowed myself to think about all those days stuck in my house with my father, the pain grew worse. Most people were looking forward to getting away for the holidays. Meanwhile, I was a trembling mess.

Exhausted, I pulled my bib off and searched the hall for Mr. Mulcahy to ask him if I could be dismissed early and sit in the changing room. My heart jackknifed in my chest when I found him standing in the entrance to the hall, talking to none other than Johnny Kavanagh.

Oh god. How long had he been standing there?

Certainly long enough to see my pathetic attempt at evading death.

All day, I felt him watching me. Everywhere I went, I swear I could feel eyes on me. I knew he wanted to speak to me, which was why I had

spent the day ducking and dodging him.

He would have questions about last week. He would want to know. And he wouldn't believe my lies.

That was terrifying.

Because he was too clever for a girl in my position to hang around with.

When I was with him, I forgot about lying and hiding. I forgot about *everything*.

Mr. Mulcahy was tapping the clipboard in his hand, deep in conversation with Johnny—whose attention was flickering between whatever was on that clipboard and, well, *me*.

I was exactly opposite him, with the court between us, but I swear I could feel the heat of his stare right down to my toes. Every time he switched his attention from the clipboard to me, I was hit with a gaze so heated and full of intensity that I couldn't figure out what I was seeing.

Was it anger? Was it frustration? Was it something else?

I couldn't tell.

I didn't have to think about it too much, because a few seconds later, Mr. Mulcahy blew his whistle and instructed our class to leave the court and get packed up. Coach and Johnny remained in the entrance, deep in discussion as our class trudged past them to the changing rooms.

Feeling like it was the safest option, I made a beeline for Claire, hooking my arm with hers and asking her a bazillion pointless questions about the game we'd just played—well, the game she'd just played. I kept my eyes on her face, listening intently to her responses, when we passed them. It wasn't until I was safely tucked away in the girls' changing room that I released the tremulous breath I'd been holding in.

"Ouch… Shannon, what the hell is wrong with you?" Claire demanded the second the changing room door slammed shut behind us.

"Huh?"

"My arm?" Claire squeezed out. "Are you intentionally trying to cut off my circulation?"

My gaze shot to her arm, more specifically to where my fingers were digging into her skin. "Oh my god!" Releasing her, I slapped a hand over my mouth. "I am so sorry."

“What’s the matter?” She took a step closer, concern splashed across her features. “You look really freaked out.”

“Nothing,” I quickly replied. “I’m fine. It’s just…” I shook my head and blew out a ragged breath. “I wasn’t expecting *him* to be out there.”

“Johnny?”

I nodded slowly.

Her eyes widened then. “Oh my god!” Pointing a finger at my face, she whisper-shouted, “You lied to me! Something happened the other week, didn’t it?”

“No.” I shook my head, cheeks flaming. “Nothing happened.”

“He was staring at you back there—like completely eyeballing you,” she hissed, looking a little giddy. “Did something happen? Please tell me something happened…”

“I promise you that *nothing* happened between us,” I strangled out, regretting ever mentioning it. “And he wasn’t eyeballing me.”

“But you wanted him to?”

I opened my mouth to deny it, but Claire interrupted me.

“Ha! Don’t even lie. I can see right through you.” She snickered. “Even your ears are blushing.”

“Claire, please, you can’t tell anyone!” I blurted out, mortified.

“I already promised you that I wouldn’t.”

I sagged in relief. “Thank you.”

“But you should know that he was looking at you, Shan. Like seriously *looking* at you.” Claire clapped her hands together, squealing loudly. “Oh god, this makes me so happy.”

“No, he wasn’t… And I don’t… I can’t… I just…” Choking on my words, I inhaled a calming breath and tried again. “We had a fight that night in his car.”

“A fight?” Claire’s brows shot up. “About what?”

“It doesn’t matter,” I mumbled, flushing. “And I…”

“You what?”

“He dropped me home again on the Friday before my birthday.”

Her entire face lit up. “Oh my god!”

“And then I threw up in front of him,” I glumly admitted. “Possibly on him.”

He was very close to the danger zone.

While he held back my hair.

Claire cringed in sympathy. “In his car?”

“No,” I replied weakly. “In school. At my locker.”

She smiled sadly. “And he dropped you home afterward?”

“And then I…”

“You what, Shan?”

“I went to the pub with him.”

“The pub?” she screeched. “What pub?”

I thought about it for a moment before I remembered the name. “Biddies, I think?”

“Oh my god,” she gasped. “That’s his pub.”

“What?” My eyes widened. “His family owns it?”

It wouldn’t surprise me.

“No, no,” Claire hurried to say. “They don’t own it, but it’s like his pub. His spot. His…his…HQ.”

“What does that even mean?”

“That’s where they all go,” Claire said. “All the boys from the team. Biddies is their hangout.”

“Oh,” I breathed, flustered. “Okay.”

“So,” she mused. “What did you do at the pub?”

“He bought me dinner,” I confessed.

“Wait—why did he take you to Biddies if you were sick?”

I shrugged. “He drove me home, but when we got to my house, he asked me to go for a drive with him.” Frowning, I added, “And he took me to the cinema after Biddies.”

“*Shut the front door,*” she squeaked.

“And on my birthday, I ended up going to his house.”

“What?” Claire actually screamed. “His house?”

“It was Joey’s fault. But I was there…and I had a shower…and then he cooked for me…and I fell asleep on his—” I quickly snapped my mouth shut when the door flew open and Shelley and Helen came bursting into the room.

Claire raised her brows at me but didn’t say anything else. One look at her face, though, and it was clear that this conversation was far from over for her.

I took that as my opportunity to scoop up my uniform off the bench and slip into one of the shower stalls to get changed. I wasn't a prude or anything like that, but I was seriously lacking in comparison to these girls. Saving myself some unnecessary humiliation, I always changed in one of the stalls with a curtain drawn around my A cups.

When I had my uniform back on, and my frazzled nerves under control, I returned to the girls just in time to hear Shelly and Helen's latest drama.

Shelly was a tall brunette with the kind of curves I could only hope to grow into one day. Helen was the shorter, slightly less curvy, red-haired version of Shelly. They were massive gossipers and spent their days welded to each other's sides, whispering and snickering, but I'd met far worse than them. I actually sort of liked them both in a "they're completely harmless if you don't tell them your business" kind of way.

"God, he's such a ride!" Shelly continued to squeal.

She was standing in her bra and knickers, completely at ease with her body, and making animated hand gestures to her BFF.

"I swear to god, Hells, I would climb that boy like a drainpipe." She flicked her long ponytail over her shoulder and feign-swooned. "He'd be amazing at it, too."

"Don't lie, Shell," Helen shot back with a snicker. "If he looked at you long enough, you'd pass out from shock."

"I might," Shelly agreed with a laugh. "But then he could revive me." Waggling her finely shaped brows, she added, "With his tongue."

"Who are we talking about, girls?" Claire interjected with a friendly smile. She was sitting on the bench, buttoning her school shirt back up. "Anyone interesting?"

"Who do you think?" Shelly teased with a huge smile. "Mr. Sex on Legs himself."

"Did you see him watching us?" Helen added excitedly, biting down on her bottom lip. "He was. I saw him. He was totally watching us when we were on the court."

"I wish." Shelly sigh-swooned. "God, why can't the lads in our year look like him?"

"I know," Helen agreed dreamily. "That boy is one hundred percent homegrown Cork sexiness."

"He's not homegrown," I heard myself interject. "He's from Dublin."

“No…” Helen challenged with a confused expression etched on her face. “He’s from Ballylaggin.”

“If it’s Johnny Kavanagh you guys are talking about, then Shannon’s right,” Claire interjected. “Honestly, girls, if you went and spoke to the boy, you’d know straight away that he’s a Dub.”

“He is *not* a Dub,” Shelly piped up, looking mildly horrified. “He’s from Cork.”

“Sorry to disappoint you, but Johnny is a big blue Dub,” Claire countered, grinning. “God, girls, the minute he opens his mouth, it’s so obvious.”

“Well, his father is from Cork, so he’s half-Corkonian,” Shelly grumbled. “And he *lives* in Cork.”

“And he was born and raised in Dublin—which makes him a *Dub*,” Claire snickered. “Ask him what colors he’ll be wearing on All-Ireland Final day,” she added. “I can promise you it won’t be red.”

Shelly clearly took the Cork and Dublin sporting rivalry to heart because she looked terribly distraught at the news.

“You don’t know that,” she challenged. “He moved down here when he was little. He probably supports Cork and Munster now.”

“Actually, I *do* know that,” Claire countered, grinning. “Back in September, Hughie had all the lads from the team over to watch the hurling final, and guess who was the only one wearing blue in a sea of red jerseys?”

“Well, I don’t care.” Helen sighed. “The accent only makes him sexier.”

“Exactly.” Shelly sniffed. “I’d still climb him like a drainpipe.”

“Then you better get a hurry on that climbing, Shell.” Laughing, Claire continued to rub salt in Shelly’s rebel wounds by adding, “Because he’ll be out of here after he leaves school. Once he’s through with the Academy and Irish head coaches offer him a contract, mark my words when I tell you that he won’t stay in Cork. He’ll go straight back to Dublin and they’ll welcome him with open arms. Because he’s their ‘homegrown,’ not ours.”

“How do you even know all this?” Helen asked, staring at Claire like she had grown two heads.

“Because I spend my time surrounded by boys who play rugby with him,” Claire replied. “I heard Hughie and Gerard talking about how Johnny will only stay in Ireland for a couple of years. The boys reckon he will more

than likely play abroad for a few years while their team's current center phases out and Johnny gets senior-level game experience. My brother's bet is France. The clubs over there have some serious cash to throw away. Then they'll bring him home as a world-class player with the world of experience under his belt and youth still on his side."

"God," I muttered, feeling a little queasy from this conversation. "You make him sound like a piece of meat."

"Because that's what he is in their world, Shan," Claire replied, turning her attention to me. "A big fat juicy piece of premium steak."

"I can't begin to imagine what it feels like to be under so much pressure," I whispered, my thoughts immediately rushing back to that night in his car. No wonder he reacted so badly.

I'd seen the attention people gave him when we were out. Johnny's entire life was being played out in front of the country. Everybody talked about him. *All* the time. I think if I were him, I would crawl under my bed and hide.

A huge swell of sympathy filled my chest, all directed at him.

"Poor guy," I mumbled, thinking about how desperate he must be feeling to have to hide his injury.

"*Poor guy*?" Helen scoffed and made a *pffft* noise. "There's nothing *poor* about Johnny Kavanagh, Shannon. The beautiful, beautiful ride of a boy is going straight to the pros. He's already being featured on popular rugby blogs and magazines. Does that sound like someone poor to you?"

"You should see the crowds and media at his local games," Helen added with a dreamlike sigh. "It's insane."

I know. I saw.

Maybe he was off to the pros or maybe he wasn't. I didn't think that it was any of our business to be talking about him like this. This was his life that was being openly discussed, and I wasn't comfortable.

"You're awfully quiet there, Shannon," Shelly stated as her eyes assessed me with keen interest. "Don't even pretend that he isn't the most beautiful boy you've ever laid eyes on."

He was, by far, the most beautiful boy I'd ever seen in the flesh. However, I got the distinct feeling that without the allure of fame and money that was attached to him, these girls wouldn't be so obsessed.

Then again, maybe they would be.

Meanwhile, I couldn't care less about what shaped ball he kicked around a field. Rugby was a sport. It was a game. It wasn't *all* he was. It was just one part of him. The only part that mattered to these girls, apparently.

It was disgusting, and I refused to join in on a conversation that reminded me heavily of the conversations I'd overhead girls have about Joey.

"I guess." I shrugged noncommittally. "He's a very good player."

Both girls laughed.

"She's totally blushing," Shelly teased. "Look, don't even bother, Shan."

I frowned. "Bother with what?"

"Liking him," she replied. "Johnny doesn't even look sideways at the girls in his own year, let alone girls in lowly third year."

"Actually, that's not true," Claire tossed back cattily. "He gave her a spin home from school." She cast me a mischievous grin. "Twice."

Blushing, I made a mental note to never tell Claire a goddamn thing again.

Both girls swung their gazes toward me.

"You lucky bitch," Shelly breathed, wide-eyed.

"You were in his *car*?" Helen demanded.

I shrugged, feeling very exposed in this moment, but didn't reply.

"And she was in the papers with him," Claire added. "Hughie showed me. All the lads were talking about it because Johnny never stands in pictures with girls."

"He's *never* in the papers with girls," Helen accused. "When did this happen?"

"Before she went out to dinner with him at Biddies," Claire offered with a huge grin. "And the cinema. Oh, and after she spent her birthday at his *house*."

"Oh my fucking god!" Both girls gasped at the same time.

"Did you score with him?" Helen asked. Actually, it was more of a demand. "Oh my god, did you ride *Johnny*?"

Claire looked at me with an expectant expression.

"No! God, of course I didn't," I choked out, spluttering on my words. "Why would you even ask that?"

“Ah, because he’s *Johnny Kavanagh*.” Shelly rolled her eyes sarcastically. “And you were in his house. Any girl in her right mind would want to ride him.”

“Not Lizzie,” Claire waved a hand in the air. “She despises rugby players.”

“That’s because Lizzie is fighting with Pierce. She’ll love rugby players again next week when he smooths her over again,” Shelly retorted, then quickly turned her attention back to me. “Oh my god!” Planting her hands on her hips, she squealed, “Did you see his bedroom? What’s it like? Does he have a huge bed? I bet it’s huge. Is he driving you home from school again? Is that why he’s *here*? Oh my god, are you two a *couple*?”

“Oh god, Bella is going to be maaaaad,” Helen interjected. “She’ll hit the roof when she finds out you’re after her fella.”

“Johnny’s not Bella’s *fella*.” Claire snorted. “She, on the other hand, is everyone’s girl.”

“Actually,” Shelly chimed in, holding a finger up. “I heard some of the sixth-year girls in the bathroom the other day talking about Bella being with Cormac Ryan now.” Arching a brow, she added, “Apparently, she’s been shagging him for ages.”

“While she was with Johnny?” Helen gasped.

“Mm-hmm,” Shelly said. “Stupid girl, huh?”

“Well, Cormac’s a good-looking guy,” Helen replied with a frown. “But he’s no Johnny Kavanagh.”

“I know, right?” Shelly agreed.

Claire took a dramatic half bow. “And there you have it,” she said. “Everyone’s girl.”

“Still, though.” Helen chewed on her nail, gaze flicking to mine. “Bella won’t be happy about you.”

“She doesn’t own him,” Claire scoffed. “They were never an actual couple, and even if they were, Bella can’t talk. Everyone knows that she’s been riding half the school behind his back for months.”

“Yeah, but he’s her horse in the race,” Helen reasoned. “Operation Binding Thirteen, anyone?”

“Ugh, those girls are dopes,” Claire grumbled. “I thought that stupid competition phased out last year.”

“It did,” Shelly said in a sulky tone. “Bella won.”

“Operation Bind *what*?” I croaked out.

“Binding Thirteen,” Helen repeated, staring at me like I was clueless.

In this instance, I was.

“What does that even mean?”

“The fifth- and sixth-year girls had this stupid competition going last year to see who could get with Johnny,” Claire grumbled. “They called it Operation Binding Thirteen because they’re completely sad and unoriginal.” She pulled a face before adding, “Apparently, Bella won.”

“I don’t get it,” I admitted, mortified.

“Johnny’s jersey number is thirteen,” Claire explained, looking thoroughly disgusted. “And *binding* is a rugby reference for engaging in a scrum—although I’m pretty sure those girls meant engaging with Johnny in a whole different position.”

“What—why would they do that to him?”

“Because he’s impossibly picky,” Shelly groaned. “And rarely looks at any of the girls around here. He’s a complete snob when it comes to who he’s with.”

“I suppose he can afford to be with the kind of women he’s surrounded by on those tours,” Helen injected.

“True,” Shelly said glumly. “Did you see those girls on their last tour?”

“The model?” Helen asked and gave a resigned nod. “She was like twenty-seven.”

“They were all over the internet.” Shelly sighed.

“Bella won’t be happy with competition,” Helen offered with a grimace. “Shan, you should stay away from him, because she’ll scratch your eyes right out.”

“She’s a bitch,” Shelly agreed. “It doesn’t matter if they’re taking a break right now or not. She’ll go batshit on you.”

“They’re not taking an anything because they were never in a relationship,” Claire grumbled. “They were glorified fuck buddies, guys. It was hardly the romance of the century.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Helen countered. “You know what she’s like, Claire. In Bella’s eyes, she and Johnny are on a break, and she will lose her shit if anyone gets in her way.”

“I wasn’t with him,” I choked out, the fear of having my eyes scratched out by a sixth year making my stomach churn violently. It wouldn’t be the

first time, and I still had a faint scar on my right eyelid to prove it. “I swear.”

“Shannon, relax,” Claire interjected, coming to stand beside me. “No one is going to touch you.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that,” Helen piped up, looking worried. “Bella can be a right bitch when she wants to be.”

“Oh yeah?” Claire shot back, placing a hand on my shoulder. “Well, so can I.”

“Wh-what?” I whispered, feeling like my stomach was about to fall out of my butt. “But I wasn’t… I’m not… I didn’t do anything—”

The sound of the school bell beeping filled my ears, interrupting me, and instead of trying to explain my way out of this messed-up conversation, I grabbed my gear bag and bolted for the door.

“Shannon—wait!” Claire called after me. “Just wait for me!”

I didn’t wait.

Instead, I ran at top speed out of the P.E. hall, pushing past the lads coming out of the boys’ changing room and stumbling down the steps in my attempt to get as far away from potential confrontation as possible.

I couldn’t take this. Not today. I couldn’t take another argument. Not with my parents, or Bella Wilkinson, or anyone else. I just couldn’t do it.

It was too *much*.

I made it to the laneway leading out of the school, feet still pounding against the concrete, when the heel of my shoe got wedged in a crack in the middle of the road and almost caused me to fall headfirst onto the wet asphalt. Thankfully, I managed to right myself in time to save myself from another concussion.

Aware that several students were openly watching my mini meltdown, I slowed to a brisk walk. Hobbling over to the footpath, I waited for a large crowd of boys to pass before falling in step several feet behind them.

Jesus.

Were Helen and Shelly right? Was Bella going to come after me? Because Johnny gave me a spin home?

Oh god, my heart, my poor, frazzled heart was battering my rib cage.

My stomach was rolling. I felt like I was going to be sick.

No, rephrase that to *I* was *going to be sick*.

Climbing over the low fence that separated the path from a wooded area, I ran into the bushes, dropped my bag on the wet grass, ducked behind the nearest tree, and vomited violently. There was very little in my stomach, but the apple I'd eaten earlier came up in glorious fashion. Shuddering in revulsion, I remained in a crouched position, inhaling several calming breaths, while I attempted to calm myself down. My entire body was trembling violently, and I wasn't sure if it was from the rain pelting down on me or the sheer terror in my heart.

I suspected both.

Several minutes later, when I was sure I could move again, I stood up gingerly and wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. Pressing a hand to my stomach, I exhaled a ragged breath and looked around. Thankfully, I had managed to position myself out of sight from the lane.

This time.

I reached into my schoolbag for my water bottle only to realize that, in my haste, I had grabbed the wrong bag. My schoolbag was back in the P.E. hall.

"Crap," I croaked out.

Shoulders sagging, I slung my gear bag onto my back and made my way back to the road. I didn't bother running this time. I was all out of energy.

I was all out of *everything*.

If Bella wanted to hurt me, then no amount of running away would change that. She would find a way. They always did.

The worrisome thing was I didn't know what she looked like. I didn't know who to watch out for.

Everyone, my brain insisted. *Trust nobody.*

With the rain pouring down on me, seeping through my clothes, I walked slowly back to the P.E. hall with my head down and my flight mode deactivated. There was a steady stream of fast-flowing water running down the road, and the grassy dike to the left of the path was underwater so I was careful to avoid them when I crossed over toward the P.E. building.

Unlike earlier when I had been running and not taking any notice of the weather, I was achingly aware of my surroundings now—and the shitty Irish weather.

God, if it didn’t stop raining soon, the town would be put under flood alert.

It wasn’t an uncommon thing for Cork in the winter and sometimes early spring. Hell, it could even flood in the summer in Cork.

Without the protection of the coat I had left in my locker, my clothes were soaked right through. My feet were wet, my socks drenched from scurrying around trying to find a spot in the woods to vomit. The sensation of my wet uniform clinging to my equally wet skin made me feel both icky and *cold*.

Everyone was gone when I eventually returned to the hall, the earlier noise and bustle from my classmates noticeably absent.

Grateful for the temporary shelter from the monsoon outside, I went straight for the girls’ changing rooms and breathed a sigh of relief when I spotted my schoolbag on the bench where I had left it. I was still getting used to my things not being touched in this school.

I walked over to my bag and picked it up, only to notice a torn-out page from a copybook flutter to the floor.

I ignored it.

Soaked to the skin, I grabbed my emergency pouch, trudged into the bathroom, and quickly brushed my teeth, gagging when the brush poked the back of my throat. When I was finished cleaning my mouth, I rinsed off the toothbrush and tucked it back inside the small ziplock bag with the paste and walked back to my get my bag.

Checking my watch, I noted that it was four twenty-five.

Aside from my shorts and jersey and a clean pair of underwear, something I always carried, I didn’t have a spare change of clothes at school, so I would have to suffer on until I got home.

My bus wasn’t for another hour but I knew I would much rather wait at the bus stop for it to arrive than risk bumping into Bella inside the school. Even though I didn’t know what Bella looked like, I wasn’t prepared to put myself through that level of worry. Not even for my coat that was still in my locker.

The rain was worth my peace of mind.

Tucking my emergency pouch back into the front pocket of my schoolbag, I hoisted it onto my back and settled the straps of my bag on my shoulders before reaching for the note.

Shan,

I should've kept my fat gob shut. I really didn't mean to upset you. I thought we were all joking around and I got caught up in the banter. Sometimes, I forget about all the horrible things those girls did to you. It's hard because you seem so happy here…and different? Different in a good way.

And don't take any notice of Shelly and Helen. They are complete drama whores. Bella won't lay a finger on you. I promise.

Anyway, I'm really sorry and please text me when you get home.

Love, Claire. x.x.x

I read the note three more times before stuffing it into the pocket of my skirt. Then I tucked my gear bag under the bench next to Claire's before leaving the changing room.

I wasn't mad at Claire. Their banter was perfectly normal. It was my reaction to the banter that I was mad about. My *constant* overreaction to everything.

I needed to work on myself. I needed to *stop* being scared all the time.

It was hard, though, when I spent most of my waking hours in a constant state of paranoia and anxiety.

Joey told me that I had to fight back. He said it again last night when he was rubbing my back as I tried to breathe through a panic attack. He told me that if Da ever put his hands on me again, I should grab a weapon.

I was afraid to, though. I was terrified of unleashing something I might not be able to rein back in.

It was because of my lack of action that my brother ended up taking a beating last night. I knew Joey didn't blame me for his broken nose, but the text message I'd received from him earlier, letting me know that he was staying with Aoife for the night, made the prospect of going home a terrifying one. He was bailing out and I didn't blame him.

If I had a safe place to fall, I would hurl myself toward it.

That's what Aoife was to my brother. Joey had Aoife and I had no one.

Deep in thought, I was at the bottom of the steps outside the P.E. building when the sound of my name being called rocketed through the air.

"Shannon."

Turning around, I watched as Johnny jogged down the steep steps of the building, pulling up the hood of his navy jacket as he went.

Don't overreact and run, I silently commanded as my feet twitched beneath me. *Just say hi.*

Realizing that I was physically nodding along to my mental affirmations, I cleared my throat and offered a weak, "Hi, Johnny."

"Hi, Shannon," he puffed, coming to a stop in front of me. "How's it going?"

"Okay," I squeezed out as I tried to keep my features impassive. It was an impossible feat when every ounce of blood in my body was rushing to my face, encouraged by my thunderous heartbeat. "You, uh, were in the hall?"

"Yeah." Johnny nodded. "I had a few things I needed to go through with Coach." A small smile pulled at his lips. "You weren't messing when you said you didn't play any sports, huh?"

I flamed in embarrassment.

"Ah, no, I wasn't."

"How's your mam?" he asked, blue eyes sharp and probing.

"Oh, she's, uh—" I paused to tuck a drenched tendril of hair behind my ear. "She's a lot better now."

"That's good," he said, and it sounded like he genuinely meant it. "You were at home helping her last week? That's why you didn't come to school?"

"Um, yeah, she needed some help after the, uh, the—" I shook my head before adding, "Mam's okay now. She's back to work and everything."

Johnny's brows shot up. "So soon?"

You're one to talk, Mr. Adductor…

I shrugged. "That's what she wanted."

"What about you?" Johnny asked then.

I frowned. "What about me?"

His blue eyes burned holes in mine when he said, "Are *you* okay?"

"I'm okay," I croaked out, feeling incredibly nervous to be so close to him again.

“You know,” he mused. “I’m starting to really dislike that word.”

“Well, I am,” I choked out. “Okay, that is.”

“That’s good,” he said. “And your family—”

“I really don’t want to talk about it,” I said in a small voice. *Ever again*. “We’re moving on from it, so I’d prefer not to be reminded,” I added. “If that’s okay?”

“Shite, yeah,” he muttered. “I won’t say another word about it.”

I sagged in relief.

“I’m also really sorry,” I croaked out. “For the way we imposed on you at your house that day.”

“*What*?” Johnny frowned at me. “You didn’t impose on me.”

“I really did,” I admitted, embarrassed. “And so did Joey.”

“Shannon, I don’t feel that way,” he told me, tone gruff. “I don’t—so don’t think like that. Okay?”

“Okay.” I nodded. “Well, I should probably get going now.” Smiling weakly, I offered him a small wave and said, “Bye, Johnny,” before turning on my heels and *walking* away.

See, *progress*!

I wasn’t running.

“Wait,” Johnny called out, his voice coming from close behind me. “Are you walking home?”

Irrationally affected by his close proximity, I gripped the shoulder straps of my bag and nodded but didn’t stop walking.

“In this weather?” he asked, falling into step beside me.

“No, I’m just walking to the bus stop,” I explained quietly, keeping my eyes trained on the footpath ahead of me, careful to avoid the overflow of rainwater that seemed to be bubbling out of every drain.

It wasn’t an easy feat, what with my heart trying to burst its way out of my chest. That was another thing I needed to work on: controlling my body’s reaction around this boy.

He was walking beside me, and every time he took a step, his arm brushed against mine. It was clearly accidental, I doubted he even noticed it, and he was so big I was sure he couldn’t help it, but that didn’t mean my body didn’t react to the feel of him.

At least I was burning up now.

It helped with the damp.

“What time’s your bus at again?” Johnny asked, voice deep and gravelly.

Shivering, I swiped a raindrop off my lip with my tongue before replying, “I get the half-five bus every day.”

“That’s over an hour from now.”

I didn’t respond. I just kept walking.

“Are you planning on standing around in the rain for an hour?” he asked, stepping in front of me and halting me in my tracks.

We were both like drenched rats from the downpour, and I had to avert my eyes to stop myself from admiring the way his wet hair clung to his forehead.

He had gorgeous hair. He had a gorgeous smell, too. One I couldn’t stop myself from inhaling as he stood far too close to me for comfort. Lynx deodorant, freshly cut grass, and boy all rolled into one.

Who was I kidding; he had a gorgeous everything.

When I dragged my thoughts back to the present and shrugged, Johnny let out an impatient growl, his piercing blue eyes burning holes through me.

“Come on,” he said gruffly. “I’ll take you home.”

Oh no. Sweet baby Jesus, no.

“No.” I quickly shook my head. “You’re grand.”

He arched a brow, getting all up in my personal space with his gigantic frame. “Why not?”

“Because you dropped me home,” I replied, taking a safe step back.

“So?” he countered, taking another step toward me.

“So, that’s enough.” I tucked my chin into my chest and tried to step around him. “Thanks anyway.”

Again, Johnny blocked my path, caging me in with his huge frame.

And just like before, I had to crane my neck up to look at him.

“You’d rather stand in the rain for an hour than take a spin from me?” he asked, eyes wild and heated. “Why?”

Because your on-again, off-again girlfriend may or may not want to cause grievous bodily harm to me. Because the first time I got in a car with you, it ended badly. Because the second time I got in a car with you, I almost told you secrets.

And mostly because the way you make me feel scares me.

When I didn’t respond, because I honestly couldn’t, Johnny let out another growl but this one sounded like he was frustrated. “Are you mad at me?”

“Mad at you?” I shook my head, eyes wide. “No, no, of course I’m not.”

“Then why are you being like this?”

“Being like what?”

“Avoiding me,” he said quietly.

“I’m not,” I lied. “I just… I just…”

“You just what, Shannon?”

I shrugged, at a complete loss for words.

He shook his head, dropped his bag on the ground, and then reached forward, swiping my schoolbag off my shoulders—both shoulders, and with minimal effort.

Shocked, I watched as he tossed my bag on the ground alongside his before lowering the zipper on his designer-looking jacket and shrugging it off.

“Wh-what are you doing?” I strangled out, teeth chattering from the cold.

“What do you think I’m doing?” he countered as he reached behind me and placed the hood of his jacket on my head and wrapped it around my shoulders. “You’re getting soaked out here.”

“But you won’t have a jacket,” I blurted out.

“But you will,” he shot back. “Now, are you going to put your arms in the sleeves, or am I going to have to do it for you?”

When I failed to assist him—quite frankly I was too stunned to do anything other than gape at him—Johnny grabbed both ends of the jacket and zipped it up to my chin, leaving my hands trapped at my sides, the empty sleeves swaying beside me.

He pulled the hood forward, covering my hair from the rain, and then reached down and grabbed both of our bags.

“Now,” he said, nodding his approval as he tossed a bag over either shoulder. “Let’s go. I’m taking you home. Ma’s probably waiting down by the gates.”

“Your *mother*?” I squeezed out.

“Yes,” he replied. “My car’s in the garage for service.”

“But I don’t know your mother,” I blurted out. I tried to flail my arms out for emphasis, but the zipped jacket gave me little room to do so.

“You know *me*,” was his response.

I opened my mouth to say something, *anything*, but Johnny strode off down the footpath—with *my* schoolbag.

“Move your legs, Shannon,” he called out over his shoulder, not looking back at me. “Before we both get struck down with pneumonia.”

I was so gobsmacked by his actions that I did exactly what Johnny told me to.

I moved my legs.

Hurrying after him, I weaved around the rain puddles and cracks in the pavement. It was hard enough to keep up with him in my two-inch heels, and damn near impossible to keep my balance with my arms trapped to my sides.

“Crap,” I squeaked when I miscalculated a jump and landed in the freezing puddle.

It wasn’t a regular puddle, either. No, this was an Irish puddle, consisting of a good five inches of muddy, sludgy, ice-cold rainwater. Immediately, the water began to fill my shoes, making it unbearable to walk.

Hopping on one foot, I wrestled an arm out beneath the jacket and pulled off my shoe. Tipping it upside down, I watched in dismay as a slosh of water spilled out. My poor sock was drenched through. My calves were specked with leaves and brown slush.

I groaned in dismay as I slipped my foot back into my shoe, then proceeded to empty the other shoe.

“What are you doing?” Johnny called out from up ahead of me.

“There’s water in my shoe,” I called back, while muttering a string of curse words all directed at the Irish weather. “I can’t walk in them like this. Just give me a sec—whoa…”

My shoe slipped from my grasp and I lunged for it. Bad idea considering I was balancing on one foot and my arms were trapped.

Feeling like a noodle, I managed to snag my shoe midair, only to lose it again when I couldn’t find my footing. My shoe flew out of my hand and I flailed backwards, trying and failing to keep myself upright.

Knowing it was a lost cause, I gave up the battle and braced my body for the impact I was sure to feel. I fell backwards, my ass grazing the concrete for the briefest moment, before I was heaved back up.

With one hand fisted in the front of the jacket I was wearing, Johnny quite literally held me hovering off the ground like my body was something obscenely miniscule and weightless. It wasn't. I weighed six stone three pounds, but you wouldn't have guessed it by the way he dangled me from one arm.

"Nice catch," I finally breathed, looking up at his face with a mixture of shock and admiration as he held my entire body up with one hand.

His lips twitched. "Thanks."

"Well, you're definitely better at catching than throwing."

Smirking, Johnny dragged me to my feet before pulling the zipper of the jacket open and freeing my hands.

"Better?" he asked, his hands settling on the slight curves of my waist.

Not really because I could feel the heat of his hands on my body, and even though a full layer of clothes separated his touch from my flesh, I still felt it all the way down to my toes.

This was so not good.

Red-faced and blushing, I latched onto his forearms, balancing on my one sheathed foot, and blurted out the only thing I could think of in this moment, "I don't want to get beaten up."

His hands tightened on my waist as he stared down at my face. "Who would beat you up?"

"Your girlfriend."

"I don't have a girlfriend," he replied slowly, wariness and confusion etched on his face. "You know this."

"Bella."

"Did she say something to you?" Johnny demanded, tone hard, expression angry.

I shook my head.

He cocked a brow. "No?"

"No," I confirmed quietly.

"You're sure she hasn't said anything to you?" he probed.

"I'm sure," I replied. "But I don't want to give her a reason to."

Johnny stared hard at me and repeated his earlier statement with a few tweaks. “She was never my girlfriend, Shannon.”

“Yeah, well, a couple of the girls in my class were saying that you had a—”

“You were talking about me?” he interrupted, a hard edge to his tone. “With them?”

“No.” I shook my head. “They were talking about you. *To me*.”

Johnny arched an indignant brow. “Is there a difference?”

“Yes.” I nodded. “A big one.” I swallowed deeply and shook my head. “Listen, Johnny, I don’t need… I can’t get into any more…” Exhaling a ragged breath, I forced myself to look at him. “I don’t want to get hurt because you spoke to me.” My words came out fast and breathy. “I don’t need that kind of trouble in my life. I’m not a fighter. I need to keep my head down and get through school with no drama.”

There was a long pause of silence where neither of us spoke.

“You think I’d let anyone hurt you?” Johnny finally asked, his eyes dark and intense and focused solely on my face. “You think I’d let anything bad happen to you, Shannon *like the river*?”

I stared up at him, unsure of what to say and uncertain of my feelings.

When I didn’t respond, Johnny released a low growl and shook his head, causing droplets of rain to spray my face.

“Because I won’t,” he answered his own question by saying. “Nothing bad is going to happen to you,” he added, blue eyes dark and locked on mine. “Because I’m not going to let anyone hurt you, okay?”

I nodded uncertainly. “Okay?”

He watched me carefully, eyes heated and locked on mine. “Do you believe me?”

“I want to,” I breathed as my fingers dug into the hard plains of his shoulders—my body’s helpless reaction to his words.

God, I want to…

“Good,” he replied gruffly, stepping closer, hands tightening on my waistline. “I want that, too.”

A strange heaviness settled over us as the never-ending cycle of rain continued to pelt down. Like a pressured sensation. Like the air had grown thin around us.

He was staring down at me, looking both annoyed and excited.

It was a confusing look.

I didn't know what to make of it.

A huge black Range Rover SUV pulled up alongside us then, breaking the weird tension and saving me from blurting out something dangerous. The tinted window rolled down and a woman's head popped out.

"Johnny?" the woman inside the Range Rover called out. She was blond and beautiful and looked mildly horrified as she stared at us. "What are you doing to that poor girl?"

"That's my ma," Johnny muttered, glancing briefly at his mother before returning his attention to me. "Come on."

"Wait!" I croaked out, gripping his arms before he could go, still balancing on one foot. "What about my shoe?"

Johnny glanced down at my feet and then behind me. Releasing a heavy sigh, he hooked an arm around my waist, pulled me to his side, hoisted me clean off the ground, and walked us over to the SUV. He yanked the back door open with one hand and deposited me in the back seat with the other before jogging back to the footpath to retrieve our discarded bags.

"I'm soaking wet," I warned, feeling embarrassed at the thought of ruining the expensive upholstery of the car. "Seriously, Johnny," I added with a shiver when he returned to the door with our bags. "I'm soaked right through my clothes."

His lips twitched for the briefest moment, and then he shook his head as if waving off an unwelcome thought that had come to him.

"Ma, this is my, ah… This is Shannon," he acknowledged, looking clearly uncomfortable. He cast a nervous glance at me and then turned back to his mother, clearing his throat twice before adding, "She's my, uh… She's new." He shoved me further into the back seat of his mother's SUV and then tossed both bags in alongside me. "I told her we'd drop her home."

"Hello, Shannon," his mother said, turning in her seat to flash me a megawatt smile.

"Shannon, this is my ma," he announced gruffly. "I'll, ah, go and find your shoe."

He closed the car door then, locking me inside with his mother, and jogged away. Mortified, I slumped into the back seat of his mother's Range Rover.

Well, this wasn't awkward. This wasn't awkward at all.

Trying not to hyperventilate with burning discomfort was surprisingly difficult considering I was sure full-blown hypothermia was setting in.

“N-nice to m-meet you, Mrs. Kavanagh,” I chattered, knees bopping restlessly as I rubbed my hands up and down my arms.

I was so unbelievably out of my comfort zone that I had no clue what to do.

Knowing that I was dripping water all over this kind lady’s leather interior wasn’t helping matters, either. “Th-thank you f-for the s-spin.”

“It’s Edel, love,” she replied, sounding distracted as she watched out the window. “What in the name of Jesus is that young fella of mine doing now?”

Muttering several profanities to herself, Mrs. Kavanagh pressed a button on the door and her window rolled down.

“Johnny!” she called out. “What are you doing running around in the rain, ya bleeding eejit? Get in!”

“He’s looking for a shoe,” I pointed out, cheeks flaming. “My shoe—I dropped it.” *More like flung it.* “He’s trying to find it for me.”

Mrs. Kavanagh turned around to grin at me, but her smile faltered, her expression morphing into a concerned frown.

“Oh god,” she gasped. “Look at you shaking. You must be perished.”

I *was* perished. I was beyond perished. My body was jolting violently as the dampness of my clothes continued to assault my skin.

Johnny’s mother turned the heater on full blast, and I groaned in relief as a wave of heat hit my face. She slipped the chunky knit cardigan she was wearing off her shoulders and draped it over my legs.

“Now, pet,” she said in a soothing tone. “We’ll get you warmed up in no time.”

“Th-thank you s-so much,” I replied as I slowly withered inside. Her small act of kindness was overwhelming to me. “I don’t want to d-dirty your c-cardigan.”

“That’s what washing machines are for,” she replied, smile returning.

Whoa, Johnny’s mother was beautiful. And extremely well dressed. Seriously, her clothes were like *wow*. Everything matched, from her earrings to her belt.

Fashion designer, remember, my brain hissed. *Of course she’s going to look good.*

With blond hair and brown eyes, Mrs. Kavanagh didn't look much like her son, but he had definitely inherited her bone structure and full lips.

Johnny was right about her Dublin accent though; it was thick and much more distinct than his.

"Looks like you have a fan," Mrs. Kavanagh added, pointing to where Johnny was jogging up and down the footpath, scouring the ground and dikes for my missing shoe.

Crap, I hoped it hadn't floated away in the drain water. Dad would hit the roof if I came home with another expense.

"He's done a terrible job of keeping you quiet." Mrs. Kavanagh added with a smile. "I saw you in the papers with him the other week. Beautiful picture, love. You two look absolutely stunning together."

Did she think…?

"What? Oh no… No!" I blushed an ugly shade of beet red. "It's not like *that*."

"Oh no?" She smirked. "I thought maybe Johnny had gotten himself a little girlfriend while I was away."

"Um, no." I squirmed in discomfort. "We're just—"

"Friends?" Mrs. Kavanagh quipped, a small smile tugging at the corner of her lips. "So I've heard."

Were we friends?

I wasn't sure.

Maybe he was still trying to make amends.

I nodded and said, "Yeah, we're just friends."

"Ah, that's a shame," she replied after a long pause. "For a moment there, I thought you had managed to do the impossible."

"The impossible?"

"Distract him from rugby."

"Oh." I clasped my hands together, unsure of how to respond to that. "Well, I haven't," was all I came up with, followed with, "We're just friends."

When Mrs. Kavanagh spoke again, her brow was knit in concern. "I love my son with all my heart, but sometimes, I wish he would remember to be seventeen and let go a little. Have fun. Fall in love. Break the rules. Be a teenager instead of a—"

"Machine?" I offered quietly.

“Yes,” his mother agreed, nodding eagerly. “His food intake, the training, the traveling, the sponsors, all of it…it’s scary.” She sighed again, brows creasing. “I just want him to let loose every once in a while. I know how that sounds coming from a mother, but he’s so *controlled*. Every part of his life is completely structured and planned. It’s overwhelming for me as his mother to watch it. I can’t imagine how it feels to be seventeen years old and live that way, day in, day out. But it’s all rugby, rugby, and more rugby with Johnny. He eats, sleeps, and breathes the damn sport.”

I opened my mouth to say something—anything—but Mrs. Kavanagh continued.

“He wakes up and trains. He goes to school and trains. He comes home and trains. And then he goes to bed and repeats the whole cycle all over again the next day.”

“It sounds exhausting,” I agreed, feeling a little uncomfortable at the sudden and in-depth insight I was being given into his life.

“It’s certainly exhausting watching him.” With a small sigh, she touched her forehead and said, “I just wish he could find an outlet for the frustration or anger or whatever it is that’s built up inside of him. I’m afraid that one of these days, he’ll explode.”

I had no idea what to say in response. My brain was struggling to register all of the new information about Johnny.

“And I’ve just realized that I’m rambling,” Mrs. Kavanagh said, chuckling softly. “Sorry. My husband is always rising me about it.”

“That’s okay,” I replied as a small shiver ran through my body. “I don’t mind.”

And I didn’t. I felt oddly at ease listening to her speak.

Johnny’s mother was nice and friendly and the complete opposite of the type of parent I would be going home to.

“So, tell me how you and Johnny know each other,” she asked. “Are you in the same class? How did you make friends with each other?”

“Uh, no, I’m in third year,” I replied, shifting in my seat.

“Really?” Mrs. Kavanagh’s eyes widened. “I thought you were much older.”

I beamed at the compliment—at least I was taking it as a compliment. It wasn’t often someone mistook me for being older than what I was.

“I’m sixteen. I should be in fourth year,” I explained, delighted with myself for coming across as older. “But I was held back in primary school.”

“So was Johnny,” Mrs. Kavanagh told me with warm smile.

“In sixth class,” I replied with a small nod. “He wasn’t happy.”

“No.” She laughed. “He certainly wasn’t.” Smiling, she added, “You must know each other well if he gave you the ‘my parents ruined my life when they moved me to the sticks’ story.”

“Not that well,” I found myself explaining. “Honestly, Johnny offering to drop me home is probably just another one of his ways of trying to make up for knocking me up on the pitch.”

“Excuse me?” Mrs. Kavanagh spluttered, eyes bulging.

“It was an accident,” I quickly interjected. “He didn’t mean for it to happen. If anyone’s at fault, then I am. I shouldn’t have gone there. I distracted him. But he took good care of me afterward.” I blew out a breath before adding, “He was very kind.”

“And when did this *accident* happen?”

“Back in January,” I explained, my hand automatically moving to cup the back of my head. “The doctors at the hospital said everything’s okay, and the bump’s long gone now, but Johnny’s been trying to make it up to me since it happened.”

“Has he now?”

“I think he still feels responsible for it happening,” I said with a shrug. “We both know he didn’t mean for it happen. Neither of us did. It was a complete accident. But it’s all sorted now.”

“And so he should feel responsible!” Mrs. Kavanagh’s face turned a deathly shade of white when she hissed, “I am going to castrate that little shit—”

“Oh my god, no!” I squealed.

Thinking back over my words, I suddenly realized how badly that must have sounded to Mrs. Kavanagh and, desperate to wipe the look of terror off her face, I quickly clarified. “*Out*. Johnny knocked me *out*. Not up.”

Oh, dear god, let me die.

“Out,” I emphasized for the dozenth time. “The bump was on my *head*.”

“How did he hurt you?” his mother asked, looking troubled and yet massively relieved.

I sighed heavily. “With his balls.”

“With his balls?” she repeated, looking horrified. “Johnny knocked you out with his *balls*?”

“Ball,” I stressed, squirming in my seat. “Just the one ball—” I stopped speaking, knowing I was making a hash of things.

“Balls? Bumps? Knocking you up?” Mrs. Kavanagh expelled a heavy breath. “Shannon, love, please explain this to me before I have a stroke.”

“I’m not pregnant or anything!” I blurted out, feeling the need to make that clear. “I have never been pregnant,” I added for clarification. “Not by your son or anyone else.”

“That’s good to know,” his mother replied, tone slightly less pitchy. “Now, tell me what happened.”

“Oh god…” I pressed my hands to my burning cheeks and inhaled a steadying breath before trying again. “I transferred to Tommen after Christmas break. It was my first day and I was late for a class so I cut across the pitch where they were having rugby practice. Johnny kicked the ball and it smacked me in the back of the head. I fell down the bank of the pitch and cracked my head off the ground. I must have hit a rock or something when I landed because I passed out. It’s all still pretty fuzzy, but Johnny helped me to the office and waited with me until my mother got to the school. Mam took me to the hospital to get checked over.” I blew out a shaky breath and added, “That’s it.”

Mrs. Kavanagh watched me for a long, uncomfortable moment, obviously taking my measure. I guessed that she realized I was telling her the truth because her voice was laced with concern when she finally asked, “And you were alright?”

“Yeah.” I nodded, relieved to have cleared the disastrous miscommunication up. “It was just a moderate concussion.”

“Oh, Jesus,” she gasped. “Shannon, love, I am so sorry.”

Reaching across the console, she snatched a designer-looking handbag off the floor and clicked it open.

“Your hospital bills,” she began to say, tone distracted as she rummaged in her bag. “Do you know how much they are. Dammit, I’ve left my purse on the kitchen counter. I’ll need your mother’s phone number.” She continued to rummage in her gorgeous designer bag. “Why didn’t the school contact me?”

“What?” I gaped and shook my head. “No, no, Mrs. Kavanagh. It’s fine. There was no bill. I have a medical card.”

She watched me for several long beats before finally pulling her hand out of her handbag.

I was glad she did because I had a firm grip on the door handle and was two seconds away from bolting out of this vehicle—shoe or no shoe.

“Well, I’m very sorry that happened to you, Shannon,” she finally said, setting her handbag back down on the passenger-side floor. “But I would still like to talk to your parents to apologize. Maybe I can do that when I drop you home—”

“There’s no need,” I blurted out, feeling my chest constrict with panic as the blood in my veins turned to ice. “My mother works all the time so she won’t be home, and my father isn’t… He won’t… Please don’t call… He isn’t—” My words choked on my tongue and I exhaled a ragged breath and strangled out the words, “It’s not necessary.”

Mrs. Kavanagh nibbled on her bottom lip uncertainly as she studied my face.

Her brown eyes were full of unspoken concern, her expression matching. “Shannon, love, I don’t—”

It was at this exact moment the front passenger door swung open, startling us both, and causing Mrs. Kavanagh to—thankfully—stop talking.

“Fuck, it’s freezing out there!” Johnny announced as he jumped inside and shook himself down, causing water to spray everywhere. “I’d say it’s time to batten down the hatches and get the rubber dinghies out, girls. The weather’s gone to shite.”

“Says the genius running around in a storm for the last half a bleeding hour,” his mother quipped. “We’re on the orange alert for flooding, you know. Fourth one in a month.”

“You know I’m no quitter, Ma,” Johnny shot back, holding up my shoe in triumph.

Twisting in his seat to face me, he arched a brow and said, “Tip for next time we do this?” His tone was serious but his eyes danced with mischief as water dripped from his rain-flattened hair onto his forehead. “Keep your shoes on your feet.”

Winking, he tossed my shoe onto my lap before turning back around and reaching for his safety belt.

“Sorry,” I mumbled, red-faced.

Picking the slimy shoe off my lap, I reluctantly slipped my foot inside, shuddering at the squelching sensation.

“Thanks for saving my shoe.”

“Yeah, well, thank me by learning how to *walk* in them,” Johnny shot back in a teasing tone.

I blushed beet red. “Um, yeah, okay.”

“Christ, that’s some amount of rain for March.”

“Watch your language,” Mrs. Kavanagh scolded as she started the engine and pulled off. “And what’s this I hear about you knocking Shannon out?”

Johnny swung around and stared at me, the expression on his face saying, *Really*?

I sank back in my seat.

“Well?”

“For fuck’s sake, Ma!”

“What have I told you about your language?” Mrs. Kavanagh snapped. “Cool your jets, Johnny.”

“Christ.” Johnny sagged against the headrest and groaned. “I already got it in the neck from Twomey, Lane, Coach, and Shannon’s ma. Please not you as well.”

“Well?” Mrs. Kavanagh asked, casting a quick glance at her son before refocusing on the road. “Did you not think I should have been told?”

“I’m sorry,” I squeezed out, clasping my hands together anxiously. “Your mam thought I was your…that we were…that you got me…with your pregnant balls… Ugh—” Clearing my throat, I whispered, “I’m sorry.”

Johnny turned back to face me and smirked. “My pregnant balls?”

“No, *my* pregnant and *your* balls,” I spluttered and then cringed at my words. “Never mind.”

Ignoring my rambling, Johnny turned to his mother and said, “It was an *accident*. She was on the pitch during training. I didn’t even see her until the ball cracked her in the head.”

“Yes, I know that now. Shannon explained,” Mrs. Kavanagh replied. “I hope you apologized to her, Johnny.”

“Of course, I fucking apologized to her,” Johnny huffed, shoulders rigid.

From my perch in the center of the back seat, I watched as he smoothed his hand over his thigh—his injured thigh.

Shaking his head, Johnny exhaled a frustrated breath and muttered, “I’ve been apologizing ever since.”

“Still, I would have liked to have been told about this when it happened.”

“Well, now you know,” he bit out. “It was an accident. I didn’t mean for it to happen, and I don’t go around clocking girls over the head for shits and giggles.”

“Don’t get so defensive, Johnny,” she replied, tone softening. “No one’s accusing you of doing it on purpose, love.”

“Yeah fucking right,” he muttered. “Just drop it, Ma.”

He sounded agitated—no, it was more than that. He sounded like he was in *pain.* Which he more than likely was.

My memories of our conversation in his car floated into my mind in glorious colored detail.

It’s not healing fast enough.

It’s a fucking mess.

My leg’s not the problem.

Just forget I told you any of that.

Concern sparked to life inside of me, and I wondered if his mother knew how much pain he was in.

I doubted it.

Based on my limited interaction with the woman, she didn’t strike me as the type of person who would knowingly allow her son to put himself in harm’s way.

“You’re going the wrong way,” Johnny stated when Mrs. Kavanagh took a left turn at the intersection instead of heading straight onto the motorway. “Shannon lives in Ballylaggin town—the far side.”

“Oh, I know, love,” Mrs. Kavanagh chirped. “I just thought it might be a nice idea to have Shannon around for tea.”

“Tea?” I croaked out.

Johnny sighed heavily. “*Ma*.”

“Do you drink tea, Shannon, love?” Mrs. Kavanagh asked.

“Um…yes?”

“Ma,” Johnny hissed in a low tone. “What are you *doing*?”

“The girls are at the groomers in town and need to be collected at seven,” Mrs. Kavanagh explained. “It’s almost five now. It doesn’t make sense to drive all the way into Ballylaggin with Shannon, only to drive all the way back again for the dogs.”

“Then pick them up *now*,” he hissed, tensing.

“I can’t,” Mrs. Kavanagh replied breezily. “I’ve left my purse at home.”

“Ma, *no*,” Johnny said in a warning tone as he slowly shook his head. “She wants to go home.”

“Shannon doesn’t mind if we pop home for an hour before dropping her home,” Mrs. Kavanagh replied.

“You didn’t even *ask* her,” Johnny bit out.

“Shannon?” Mrs. Kavanagh called back to me. “Do you mind, love?”

Say no, Shannon.

Tell her that you do mind.

If he finds out, he’ll kill you.

You know this is wrong.

This boy is not safe for you…

“I don’t mind,” I strangled out, torn by the fear inside of my heart and the burning curiosity in my body. “It’s okay by me.”

“See now?” his mother quipped, patting Johnny’s cheek. “Shannon doesn’t mind, love.”

Johnny turned back and gave me an apologetic look. I didn’t know what to say or do so I just shrugged and smiled weakly back at him. He stared at me for a long beat before exhaling a sharp breath and turning back to face the windscreen.

Oh god.

Oh lord.

Oh sweet merciful baby Jesus…

Breathe, Shannon, just breathe…

I remained quiet, watching Johnny and his mother interact and speaking only when I was asked a direct question. It was awkward, uncomfortable, and I was achingly aware of his presence the entire time, my body on high alert. For what, I had no clue. But every time I was in close proximity with him, I found it hard to breathe.

After a few minutes of traveling up a narrow secondary road, we pulled up outside the familiar black iron gates. Mrs. Kavanagh rolled down her window, stretched her arm out, and keyed the code into the pad. And just like when I came here with Joey a little over a week ago, the huge gates swung inward.

Concentrating on my breathing, I tried not to focus on how beautiful his home was and how inferior I felt to be, once again, about to enter it.

"Now," Mrs. Kavanagh announced, parking outside their eight-foot-tall door. "Bring your *friend* inside, love, and get her something warm and dry to change into."

She cut the engine and unbuckled her seat belt.

"I must make a quick call to work and then I'll make you both something to eat."

"Ma—" Johnny began to say, but Mrs. Kavanagh climbed out of the car and hurried over to unlock the front door.

Stunned, I could do nothing but watch as Mrs. Kavanagh disappeared into the house, leaving us alone in her Range Rover.

"I am so fucking sorry about this," Johnny announced, distracting me from my inner turmoil. He twisted around in his seat to face me. "I have no bleeding clue what she was thinking."

"It's okay," I replied, clasping my hands together tightly. "Your mam is really nice."

"She's something alright," Johnny muttered under his breath as he stared over his shoulder toward the house. "What about your ma?"

My brows shot up. "What about her?"

"Do you need to be at home?" he asked, cringing a little in obvious discomfort. "Helping her out or anything?"

"She's at work," I replied quietly.

"Shit, yeah, you said that already," he muttered, running a hand through his drenched hair. "Are you okay?"

I nodded.

"And you already said that, too," he muttered with a shake of his head. "Shite, you told me not to talk about it."

"I know," I whispered.

"It's done," he promised. "I won't bring it up again."

I smiled weakly. "Thank you."

He looked at me for a long moment, as if he was trying to figure something out in his head, before exhaling a heavy sigh. “Right. We better go in.”

“I don’t have to,” I quickly offered, feeling awkward and unsure. “I can wait out here if you prefer.”

“What—no!” He climbed out and opened my door. “I don’t want that.”

“Are you sure?” I whispered, feeling my heart race unsteadily in my chest.

Johnny nodded, but he looked as uncertain as I felt. “I want you to come in, Shannon.”

“You do?”

“I do.”

Inhaling a deep, steadying breath, I climbed out of the car and stared up at his face, feeling very small and very lost. I needed him to take the lead here. This was unfamiliar territory for me. I didn’t know how to approach this.

“Come on,” Johnny finally said, thankfully taking control of the strange situation we had found ourselves in, as he took ahold of my elbow and led us out of the rain.

When we stepped into the house, Johnny released my elbow and closed the door behind us.

Meanwhile, I stood in the enormous entrance hall and tried my best not to stare at the antique hall table lining the wall or the expensive-looking coat rack just inside the door, and I definitely tried not to gape at the huge grandfather clock, ticking loudly, or the countless paintings lining the immaculate ivory walls.

When Johnny kicked off his shoes, I automatically copied him, not wanting to traipse mud on the perfectly polished black-and-white-patterned tiles.

I’d stood in this very hall a little over a week ago, but I had been too nervous to take in my surroundings. I was still nervous. Maybe even more nervous.

But it was different today.

There was no Joey or Gibsie to distract me. It was just Johnny and me. And his mother.

Oh god…

43
Meddling Mothers

JOHNNY

There was something very wrong with me.

Running around for twenty minutes in the pouring rain for a *shoe* was a good indication that this girl was making me lose my mind.

The minute I saw Shannon darting around the P.E. hall, a monstrous swell of protectiveness surged up inside of my body at the sight of her trying to protect herself from being trampled on, and I knew that my problem was bigger than I had realized. I'd had the craziest urge to stalk onto the court and tell her classmates to back the fuck off from her.

All last week, I had been behaving like deranged stalker, watching out for her in the halls, and growing increasingly agitated when she didn't show. I put out feelers in the hopes of squashing any shite that might be going down without my knowledge, making it clear that anyone who fucked with her fucked with me.

Thank Christ she came back to school today, because I had plans on driving over there this evening if she hadn't. Every minute of every day since the day her brother took her away from me had been plagued with concern.

I didn't know why I was behaving this way. I only knew that something inside of me *demanded* I protect her. I had no goddamn clue what that something was or why I was feeling it, but it was so strong I could practically taste it.

I had no idea how to handle her mother's miscarriage. No goddamn clue of how to comfort her without coming on too strong. I seemed to have a habit of doing that when it came to this girl. I knew I needed to step the fuck back. But I *couldn't.*

My reaction to her only intensified when I watched her walking away in the rain, all small and uncertain, and I jumped right in and bulldozed. She clearly didn't want me to drop her home and I insisted anyway. I did more than insist; I physically put her into the back of my mother's Range Rover, too aggravated and flustered by my feelings to take a step back and listen.

Yeah, that was a stupid move.

I shouldn't have put my hands on her. Helpful or not, it wasn't the right way to go with this girl.

The worst part was knowing that if my mother hadn't shown up when she had, there was a very big chance I would've kissed her.

I *wanted* to.

Badly.

And that was beyond terrifying.

Worse again was the fact my meddling mother had fucked me over and brought Shannon to the house. Left her purse at home, my arse. The woman had a credit card in her back pocket at all times. She did this on purpose.

I knew it. Mam knew it.

The only one that didn't know it—*thank god*—was Shannon.

Now she was here, standing in my house, looking up at me with those big lonesome eyes, waiting for me to do something, and I was completely fucking thrown off-kilter.

"Do you want to come up to my room?" I asked, because, quite frankly, what the fuck else was I supposed to do with her?

Take her into the kitchen and let Mam fire fifty questions at her?

Hell no.

If she was here, then she was here with me.

She was mine and I didn't want to share.

"Uh, okay?" she replied nervously, though it sounded more like a question. "If you want me to?"

Jesus, she needed to stop asking me what I wanted her to do. If she kept it up, I might be stupid enough to tell her the truth. And then we were both screwed.

Deciding it was safer to not answer that, I simply gestured to the staircase and began to walk, only making it to the third step when I realized she wasn't following me.

When I turned back, I found Shannon standing exactly where I left her, watching me with a nervous expression. She had her arms wrapped protectively around herself, with her long brown hair drenched from the rain and sticking in wet clumps to her face, and in my whole life, I'd never seen anything so beautiful.

Jesus.

How was I supposed to handle this? How was I supposed to handle *her*?

"Johnny!" I heard Mam call from down the hall. "Did you get Shannon something to change into? The poor girl's like a drowned rat from the rain."

"I'm okay, Johnny," Shannon hurried to tell me. "Honestly, I am."

I eyed her with unease.

She was shivering like crazy, and there was a small puddle forming around her from the water dripping from her clothes.

Christ…

"Come on, it's okay," I coaxed, retracing my steps. "I'll look after you."

And then I took her hand in mine and led her up the staircase, knowing this was a terrible fucking idea, but resigned to doing it anyway.

I was so completely fucked.

44
So, This Is My Room—Again

SHANNON

Johnny Kavanagh was holding my hand. He was holding my hand and taking me upstairs.

Again.

To his bedroom.

Again.

Where he slept. On his bed. Probably with very little clothes on.

Oh god…

Unlike the last time I took this trip with Johnny, he walked at my pace, giving me a chance to take in the absolute wonder that was his home. I mean it was hard to put into words how stunning it was.

Unlike the huge modern kitchen he'd taken me into last week, this wing of the house was traditional and almost…regal? The entire upstairs landing was made up of stained hardwood flooring and gorgeous patterned wallpaper that was so clean and shiny that it looked like silk. For all I knew about fabric and designs, it could have been.

This entire house and the boy holding my hand reeked of money. Lots and lots of money.

It was *terrifying*.

The floor creaked a little beneath our feet as we walked down the right wing of the house, passing no fewer than five other doors, until we reached the door I knew was his. Johnny pushed the door inward and walked us into his room, still holding my hand, still making my heart leap around violently.

Depressingly, he released my hand a few moments later, and the lack of contact made me feel oddly bereft.

"So, this is my room," he said with a smirk, waving a hand around the still-messy room. "Again."

“And it’s still a nice room,” I offered with a shy smile.

He grinned. “I’m not the best housekeeper.”

I can tell.

Feeling achingly uncomfortable just standing in the middle of his room, I walked over to the pile of DVDs next to his television, hoping I knew one of the titles so I could spark up some conversation instead of just standing here like a dummy. My face burned with heat when I read the title on the DVD box on top of the pile—*Pussy Pleasure XXX*.

“Fuck,” Johnny muttered when he noticed where I was looking. He hurried over and tossed the porno behind the TV. “That’s, ah…” Breaking off, he exhaled a heavy sigh and scrubbed his face with his hand. “Sorry about that. I don’t bring girls up here.” He frowned for a moment before adding, “Except you.”

Squirming uncomfortably, I replied, “Don’t worry about it.”

“So,” he mused.

“So,” I whispered.

“This is pretty fucking strange,” Johnny muttered.

“Yep,” I agreed as a small smile crept across my face.

Johnny noticed my smile and grinned back at me. “Bet you didn’t plan on spending your evening stuck here, huh?”

“I really don’t mind,” I told him, and surprisingly, I meant it.

Being here delayed going home to another night of drama. And being here with Johnny was a good kind of terrifying. I *wanted* to be here with him. I wanted *him*, period.

“So,” Johnny said again, shifting restlessly as he smoothed a hand down his thigh. “What do you want to do?”

“I don’t mind,” I replied. “I’ll do whatever you want to do.”

“Fuck.” Johnny clenched his eyes shut and groaned.

“Oh god, are you okay?” I hurried to ask, well aware he was in pain.

“All good,” he assured me in a tight tone.

“Are you sure?” I asked, uncertain again.

His blue eyes were wild and full of uncertainty when he said, “I’m kind of out of my comfort zone here, Shannon.”

“Do you want me to go?”

He shook his head.

“Are you sure?”

He nodded slowly. “I want you to stay.”

“Okay,” I breathed.

Inhaling a steadying breath, I wrapped my arms around my middle and walked over to his enormous desk where mountains of schoolbooks lay unopen.

“You’re a good student?” I asked, casting a glance over my shoulder.

“I’m decent,” Johnny replied, trailing after me.

“No copy of *Chicken Licken*?”

Johnny laughed loudly. “No.” Coming to stand behind me, he chuckled, “Definitely no *Chicken Licken*.”

With my face on fire, I kept my attention on his desk, skimming my finger over the test papers and books as my gaze wandered to the corkboard above the desk.

“Whoa, you’ve met a *lot* of famous people,” I whispered, my gaze flicking from photo to photo of Johnny with a range of different celebrities and athletes. “Which one of these guys is your hero?”

I presumed one was.

He was a teenage boy. They all had heroes.

Johnny reached around me and pulled one of the photos off the board. The tack holding it dropped onto his desk.

“See this one?” he asked as he stood behind me with his arm stretched around my body so I could see.

Breathe, Shannon, just breathe…

Forcing myself to concentrate on his question, and not the way my body was reacting to his close proximity, I stared down at the picture in his hands.

“I see,” I whispered, gazing down at the one photograph that didn’t seem to have a celebrity in it.

I immediately recognized the stunning blond lying on the picnic blanket on the grass as a younger version of Mrs. Kavanagh. She had huge sunglasses covering her eyes and a big white floppy hat perched on her head as she beamed up at a man.

The man in question—a beautiful man who looked just like an older version of Johnny—was standing over her, and on his shoulders sat a small dark-haired boy of no more than five or six.

The little boy was dressed in a light-blue-and-white-striped jersey and white shorts. His hair was cocking up in forty different directions, and he was holding a rugby ball proudly above his head and grinning this huge double-dimpled, toothless smile.

"This is my favorite picture," Johnny said, stirring me from my thoughts. He tapped the photo. "And he's my hero."

"Your dad?" I whispered, eyes glued to the photo. "That's you with your mam and dad?"

"Yeah," Johnny replied. "In all our glory."

"And it's your favorite photo because it's of you and your parents?"

Johnny shrugged and the movement caused his hard chest to brush against my back. "That's partly why it's my favorite."

I shivered involuntarily.

"What's the other part?" I whispered.

"Because it's real."

"Real?"

"Innocent. Good. Pure. Before the limelight," he explained. "When all that mattered to me was a ball and my folks."

"Oh," I breathed, staring down at what looked like the happiest little boy in the world. "Well, you were a gorgeous child."

"Was?" Johnny quipped. "As in, I'm not anymore?"

"Uh, no… I mean yes, of course… I didn't… Um, you have all your teeth now," I spluttered, feeling flustered and foolish for voicing my thoughts aloud.

Johnny chuckled at my response. "I'm only messing with you, Shannon."

Embarrassed, I set the picture down on the desk and stepped around him, needing to put some space between us. I couldn't think when I was this close to him.

"You play *GTA*?" I asked then, eyeing the PlayStation box on the floor with excitement.

"Yeah." Johnny eyed me curiously, "Do *you*?"

I nodded. "I'm awesome."

He cocked a brow. "Is that so?"

"Uh-huh." I was terrible at most things in life, but I kicked ass at *GTA*. "Joey has *Vice City* and *San Andreas* and I've cleared both games."

His brows shot up.

“In a week.”

His mouth fell open. “*No*.”

“Oh *yeah*.” I nodded, smiling proudly. “I’m the best.”

Johnny tilted his head to one side, giving me a curious smile. “Do you want to play a game?”

I smirked. “If you want.”

He grinned. “You think you’re that good?”

“I know I am,” I replied, and for once in my life, I had the confidence to say that. It didn’t say much about me as a person when all I excelled at in life was kicking ass on *GTA*, but it was better than nothing.

“Well, little girl, you better put your money where your mouth is,” Johnny shot back with a smirk. “Because *I’m* the best.”

I snorted. “It’s on, little boy.”

Johnny shook his head, clearly amused with my smack talk, and then hurried over to set up the game.

“No memory cards,” he called over his shoulder. “Start from scratch, and the person who completes the most missions before dying is the winner—and girls first.”

“That’ll be me,” I replied, accepting the controller he held out to me.

“Because you’re a girl?”

“Because I’m the best.”

“Do you, uh—” Johnny scratched his head and gestured to his bed. “Want to do this here?”

“On your bed?” I squeaked.

He shrugged, looking as uncertain as I felt. “Or the beanbags, if you prefer?”

“Uh, yeah, okay,” I replied. I walked over to the leather beanbags lying side by side, only to hesitate and swing back to look at him. “If you want me to—”

“Sit your ass down, little Lynch, so I can beat you,” Johnny interrupted me, tone laced with amusement.

I sank onto one of the bags and gave him my best you’re-going-down expression.

“You *should* get comfy,” I noted when he sprawled onto the beanbag next to mine. “You’re going to be watching for a while.” Clicking into the

game, I thumbed on my controller, attention riveted to his massive television screen, and muttered, “A long while.”

“No cheats!” Johnny barked an hour later. “That’s fucking cheating.”

“No, it’s not.” I laughed as I keyed in another cheat code to load my guy up on life. “You never said anything about cheat codes.”

“Yeah, I fucking did,” Johnny huffed from beside me.

“‘No memory cards. Start from scratch, and the person who completes the most missions before dying is the winner,’” I mimicked his voice. “You never said anything about cheat codes.”

“You’re dangerous,” Johnny grumbled. “And sneaky.”

“I’m the best,” I cackled as I cleared another mission. “I did try to warn you.”

“Yeah, well, I didn’t expect you to be the Bill fucking Gates of *Grand Theft Auto*, did I?”

I laughed loudly, feeling completely at ease with him in this moment.

“Because I’m a girl?”

“Because I thought you were sweet,” Johnny shot back, and I didn’t have to look to know he was pouting. He’d been pouting for almost an hour.

I snickered to myself.

“Now I know better,” Johnny huffed. “You’re a little demon.”

Biting down on my lip to stop myself from laughing at his tantrum, I concentrated even harder on evading the cops hunting me down.

“How are you doing this?” Johnny demanded then, clearly outraged. Springing forward, he waved his hand at the screen. “You have five fucking stars. *Five*. And you’re still not dead.”

Pausing the game, I turned and gave him my full attention.

“Are you a sore loser, Mr. I’m a Big Rugby Star?”

Johnny’s face turned a hilarious shade of red.

“Don’t you like it when a *girl* beats you?” I continued to tease, using the same smack-talk taunts that drove Joey berserk when we played together. “Can’t you take your beating like a *man*?”

“You are so lucky you’re a girl right now,” Johnny told me, lips twitching.

“Why?” I snickered. “Do you prefer losing to *boys*?”

“Give me that fucking controller,” Johnny growled and then pounced on me. “The power’s going to your head.”

“No!” I scream-laughed, twisting onto my side to protect the controller. “I’m not finished… Ahhhh!”

“Give it to me,” Johnny said, laughing as he tried to slip his hand under my arm.

“Never,” I declared through fits of laughter. “It’s mine… Stop, please… Ahhhh, I’m ticklish—”

“Now, Shannon, love, I’m so sorry about that. My work call took longer than expected.” Mrs. Kavanagh announced as she pottered into Johnny’s room without knocking, causing me to spring out of the beanbag and Johnny to groan in despair.

“Go on into the bathroom and change out of those wet clothes,” Mrs. Kavanagh instructed as she placed some towels on the foot of his bed. “I’ll put your uniform in the dryer and it will be ready before you go.”

“No, no,” I hurried to say, wielding the PlayStation controller in front of me like it could somehow ward off her kindness. “I’m fine as I am… Thank you.”

“Nonsense, love,” Mrs. Kavanagh said with a dismissive wave. “You can’t be sitting around in wet clothes. You’ll catch your death.”

“Ma,” Johnny said with a pained sigh. He climbed to his feet and exhaled a frustrated breath. “Leave her alone, will ya?”

“Don’t be so rude, Johnny,” Mrs. Kavanagh warned. “Show the poor girl to the bathroom and bring me down her clothes to dry.”

“I really am fine,” I choked out, eyeing Johnny pleadingly. “I’m drying off.”

I wasn’t. I was damp and cold, but I had been having so much fun that I completely forgot about my drenched uniform. I had quite literally forgotten about my problems, my wet clothes, my parents, my *everything*, for the past hour.

The moment my brain registered the damp seeping into my bones, I inwardly shivered.

Dammit.

“She just told you she’s fine, Ma,” Johnny groaned, staring at his mother in horror. “Leave it alone. *Please*.”

Ignoring her son's protests, she turned to face me, smiling. "A nice hot shower will warm you up, love."

"W-what?" I croaked out. "I can't shower in your house." *Again.*

Why were people always telling me to shower in this boy's house?

God!

"Of course, you can," she replied with the warmest smile I'd ever seen.

"Ma, can you just go?" Johnny bit out. "*Now*? We were in the middle of something here."

She gave him a hard stare. "In the middle of *what*?"

I waved the controller at her. "I beat him at PlayStation."

"No," Johnny corrected. "She didn't beat me at anything…" He paused to glare at me. "You haven't won yet." And then he turned back to his mother and added, "She just pushed the bar out."

"To space," I mumbled under my breath.

"I heard that," he shot back, smirking.

Mrs. Kavanagh looked between us and then beamed. "He's a terrible loser, isn't he?"

"I am fucking not!"

"I know." I giggled.

"His father's the same," Mrs. Kavanagh added. "You should see him if he loses in court. No speaking for hours."

"Ma," Johnny snapped. "Can you just leave us be? *Please*?"

"I will," she replied. "Once that poor girl has a warm shower and some dry clothes on her."

"She doesn't want a—"

"Do you know what, Shannon, love?" she added, once again ignoring her son. "I might have something in my office to fit you." She eyed me up and down and tapped her lip before saying, "You're a UK size six?"

Startled, I just stood there while Mrs. Kavanagh circled me, brows set in concentration.

"Ma!" Johnny bit out. "Back off."

"No, no," Mrs. Kavanagh mused, ignoring her son.

Frowning, she stepped closer and pulled at the hem of my skirt and pursed her lips.

"You're a small four." Her eyes trailed over me. "With the most amazing bone structure. Shannon, love, it's a pity you're not taller. You'd

make the most beautiful mod—”

“Jesus Christ, Ma,” Johnny barked, running an exasperated hand through his hair. “She’s not a bleeding doll.”

His mother’s eyes widened in excitement when she said, “Would you like to come see if we can find something for you to wear in my—”

“No, she fucking wouldn’t,” Johnny interrupted as he intercepted his mother and walked her to the door. “She’s not a project, Ma, or a bleeding clothes hanger.”

“Fine,” Mrs. Kavanagh huffed.

“Thank you,” Johnny growled.

Turning to her son, she whispered, “Door open, Jonathan,” and gave him a hard look before walking out of his room, humming softly to herself.

Johnny watched her walk down the hall and out of sight before flinging the door shut and twisting the lock. Exhaling heavily, he turned to look at me.

“Again, I am so fucking sorry about her.” Johnny shrugged helplessly. “I don’t know what’s wrong with that woman today.”

“It’s okay,” I hurried to soothe him. “She’s, uh, she’s very friendly.”

“Yeah,” he muttered. “Just be glad she didn’t drag you into that clothes room.” Shuddering he added, “You’d never get out of there.”

“Really?”

“Oh *yeah*,” he muttered.

“Oh.”

“Sorry again about the whole sizing-you-up thing,” he said, looking mortified. “She wanted a girl. They were told they were having a daughter, actually.” Grinning sheepishly, he added, “She got me instead.”

“A six-foot-three rugby-playing son,” I mused, smiling back at him. “I can see why you might have thrown her.”

“Yeah.” He chuckled and then pinched his nose in an act of embarrassment. “She and my da wanted a bunch of kids, but it didn’t work out that way for them.” He scrunched his nose up then, obviously thinking about something personal. “Took them a bunch of attempts at IVF or some shite like that.” He shrugged and gestured to himself. “This is what their money got them.”

“You,” I offered with a smile.

He grinned wolfishly. “Lucky them, huh?”

Yes. *Lucky them.*

“She’s away for work most of the time,” he continued to say. “She actually flies back out to London in the morning for a few weeks. But when she’s home, she likes to be *involved* in my life.”

“It’s nice,” I told him. “You’re lucky to have a mother like her.”

“Yeah,” he shot back sarcastically. “Sure I am.”

He was.

Johnny didn’t realize it, but in the space of an hour or two, his mother had taken more of an interest in me than my own mother had in months.

Maybe even years.

“Listen, you better just take a shower and give me your clothes,” Johnny said with a sigh. “Otherwise, she’s just going to come back and keep nagging on about pneumonia and all that shite.”

Was he serious?

Was I actually supposed to take a shower in his house again?

“I am serious,” Johnny muttered, reading my thoughts. “And I am sorry.”

“Oh.” Blushing, I knotted my hands in front of myself and shrugged uncertainly. “Um, okay?”

He stared at me for the longest moment before shaking his head. “Come here.”

“Come where?”

“Here,” he instructed, gesturing for me to follow him into his en suite bathroom.

Like a baby foal, I hurried after him, all shaky-legged and clumsy. Hovering in the doorway of his luxurious bathroom, I watched as he reached over the tub and turned on the shower.

“You, uh, said you had a problem with it last time,” he mumbled with a shrug.

“Did I?”

“Uh, yeah,” he replied, shifting uncomfortably. “You were mumbling in your sleep about my shower scalding you.”

I turned beet red.

“Oh god, I’m sorry,” I choked out, feeling nervous again.

“Stop,” he warned with a smile. “It was cute.”

“Cute?” I squeezed out, practically hyperventilating.

“Uh, yeah, I’ll put some clothes out for you again.” Johnny’s cheeks turned a flushed shade of pink as he stepped around me and hurried back into his room. “Same as last time.”

“Where will I put my clothes?”

“Just throw them out to me when you’re naked…ah, when you’re ready,” he muttered gruffly. “I’ll put them in the dryer,” he added before closing the door and leaving me alone in his bathroom.

Trembling, I sank down on the closed toilet lid and exhaled a ragged breath.

Oh god.

45
I’m a Virgin

JOHNNY

I was in so much fucking trouble.

For once, my problems had nothing to do with my adductor and everything to do with the girl naked in my bathroom.

“What the hell was that about?” I hissed when I found my mother in the kitchen.

“Hello, love,” my mother replied, as she continued to chop carrots, clearly oblivious to my outrage.

“*Hello*?” I balked. “That’s all you’ve got to say?”

Setting her knife down on the chopping board, she turned to face me.

“That girl is fragile, Johnny.” Mam nibbled on her lip, brows furrowed in concern. “There is something about her that makes me want to wrap my arms around her and cuddle the sadness out of her eyes.”

Yeah, I knew the feeling. I knew that feeling very fucking well.

“So, you *force* her to come over here?” I hissed. “Tell me how that was a good idea?”

“Oh god,” Mam strangled. “I haven’t upset her, have I?”

“No, she’s okay,” I bit out. “But *I’m* not.”

I was so far from *okay* that the word was a blip on my radar.

“What’s wrong, baby?”

“What’s *wrong*?” I practically spat out. “Ma, you just snookered me! What were you thinking bringing her here?”

“You were enjoying yourself up there,” Mam said with a smile. “She was beating you at PlayStation, huh?”

Yeah, she was. Shannon was kicking my ass at *GTA* and ruining other parts of my anatomy.

I had no clue how I ended up getting my ass handed to me by that pint-sized girl, but that's what happened. Watching her completely dominate my PlayStation was so fucking hot. Seriously, her skills with a controller, and her ability to kick my ass like she did, only made her infinitely sexier.

She was fucking perfect.

I was so caught up in her that I could have sat there all night, just *being* with her.

And then my ma had to go wreck it and make everything all awkward and strained again.

Jesus, she was naked in my room.

Naked.

I couldn't handle that. Not when all I wanted to do was be naked right with her. I was only seventeen. This was a temptation I doubted a man twice my age could resist.

I shook my head and expelled a frustrated breath. "*Why*, Ma…? Why in god's name would you do this to me? And this—" I held up Shannon's jumper and shook it around. "Why would you make her *shower* here?"

"Did she have a shower?"

"She's currently *in* my shower."

"Oh, that's good."

Good? "What are you trying to do to me, Ma?" I demanded. "Why would you do this?"

"She was wet!" Mam defended. "And so are you," she added with a concerned look. "Go and change your clothes before you catch pneumonia."

"I will," I growled, "when you tell me why you screwed me over."

"I didn't screw you over, Johnny," Mam replied. "Don't be overdramatic."

"You knew I had a PT session I had to go to this evening."

Since I'd been banned from the pitch, Jason, my personal trainer, wanted my ass in the pool every evening for the rest of the week.

And now?

Now I was trying to figure how to get myself out of a situation that only had one appealing result.

Shannon naked on my bed. With me naked on top of her. Preferably *in* her. If my fucked-up dick held out.

Stop it, asshole. Stop those thoughts!

"You knew I needed you to take me because I don't have my bleeding car," I hissed, frustrated. "And now? Now, I have a naked girl in my room, Ma. A *naked* fucking girl and I'm holding her bleeding clothes."

Stalking toward her, I dumped Shannon's wet uniform on the counter and glared at her.

"What kind of mother *does* that to their son?"

"Well, you're down here with me," Mam replied calmly, patting my cheek. "So, I raised you well."

"Ma," I growled.

"I thought you could do with a rest," she huffed. "You look so tired, sweetheart."

Give me strength…

"And you were having so much fun," she added with a rueful smile. "I haven't seen you relax like that in years."

True. But not the point.

"And my car?" I demanded. "What am I supposed to do without my car?"

"Your father's picking it up on his way home this evening," she replied, having a bleeding answer for everything. "There's been some hiccup with the case, so he'll be home tonight and he'll take me to the airport in the morning." She checked her watch and sighed happily. "He should be home any minute. He left Dublin over three hours ago."

Normally when my mother pushed my buttons, my father would smooth things over, but not this time.

No, because as delighted as I was to hear my dad would be home for the night, Mam had gone way too far this time. She had meddled in something I didn't want anyone meddling in. She meddled with *Shannon*.

"Why did you do this?" I repeated.

"Because I think you two are doing a line together on the sly," Mam said with smirk. "You look so cute together."

"Doing a line?" I gaped at my mother. "What are you talking about? You know I don't take drugs! I'm tested all the fucking time."

"No, love," Mam chuckled. "Doing a line together as in secretly seeing each other." Shrugging, she added, "I was trying to let you know that I was

okay with you having a girlfriend, and I was trying to make Shannon feel welcome."

God.

This woman.

"Well, I can assure you that I am not doing lines of anything—cocaine or girls," I snapped. "We are just *friends*."

"She's a lovely girl, Johnny," Mam offered. "Seems very fond of you." She turned to look at me when she said, "You could do a lot worse than a nice girl like her."

"Yeah, well, I don't see her like that."

Lie.

Lie.

Barefaced lie.

"She's just a friend."

More lies.

"That's it, Ma."

"Do you honestly think you can sell me that shite, Johnny Kavanagh?" Mam shot back, lips twitching. "I'm your mother. I brought you into this world, and I know every single time you tell me a lie."

"I am *not* lying," I lied.

"You're lying to me right now."

"I am fucking not."

"It's okay if you do, love," Mam said in a reassuring tone.

"We're friends," I bit out. "That's it."

"But you like her?" Mam asked after a long pause of silence.

I turned to look at her. "*What*?"

"Shannon," Mam filled in, tone gentle and coaxing. "You like her."

I shook my head and exhaled heavily, making no move to respond. This conversation was beyond disturbing.

"Just tread carefully and exercise patience. She's younger than you, and as I'm sure you're more than aware, you need to move at her pace."

"Ma, please." I leaned my head back and sighed. "Just give it a rest."

"All I'm trying to say is be careful," Mam replied. "Do not break her, Johnny." She cupped my cheek and smiled sadly. "Not when she already seems fractured."

"Don't worry," I muttered. "I've no intention of going there with her."

“Going there with her?” Mam questioned. “Where’s there?”

“A relationship,” I bit out. “Feelings and shite.”

“Oh, *there*.” Mam was quiet for a long moment before saying, “Are you sure you’re not already *there*, love?”

Christ, I hoped not. For both our sakes.

“She’s fifteen years old,” I decided to throw out there, unwilling to let go of my annoyance at her meddling. “You get that, don’t you?”

Mam’s eyes widened. “I thought she was sixteen?”

“No, Ma, she’s fifteen,” I hissed.

“No, Johnny,” Mam replied, brows furrowed. “I’m pretty sure she’s sixteen.”

My mouth fell open.

Shit. She was right.

Dammit.

“That’s *worse* again,” I barked, flustered. “There is a naked *sixteen*-year-old girl in your *seventeen*-year-old son’s bedroom right now—one you put there, I might add!”

“Johnny, love, you need to relax—”

“And how do you propose I do that?” I demanded. “When you put a *naked* teenage girl in my *bedroom*?”

“Oh, love,” Mam muttered, worrying her lip. “I think it’s time we had a chat.”

“A chat?” I gaped at her. “We are chatting. We are having a very important fucking *chat*, Ma. About the lack of *boundaries* in this family. About you needing to respect *my* boundaries!”

“About you and Shannon.”

“What about Shannon and me?”

“About your feelings.”

I gaped at her. “My feelings?”

“And your intentions, love,” Mam replied.

“My *intentions*?”

The fuck?

“I know it’s early stages and what I’m about to talk to you about is a long way off for you both, but it’s important that you know about it.”

I eyed her warily. “About what?”

“About sex, love.”

My mouth fell open. “Why are you not hearing me? Why isn’t anyone *hearing* me anymore?”

“I know your father spoke to you a few years ago about the birds and the bees.” She placed a hand on my shoulder and steered me over to the island, obviously not fucking *hearing again*. “But considering this latest development, I think it might be a good idea for us to talk about it. Just so we’re all clear on how important it is to take things slowly.”

“Latest development?” I sank onto a stool and gaped at her. “I’m not having any bleeding developments. We don’t need to talk about anything.”

“Even still—” Shrugging, Mam sat down on the stool beside me and patted my thigh. “It would do no harm to refresh your memory.”

“I sincerely fucking hope you’re joking, Ma,” I strangled out.

“Maybe we should call Shannon down, so I can talk to you both about this—”

“Don’t you bleeding dare,” I snapped. “You leave her alone.”

You’ve traumatized her enough!

“Okay then,” she replied. “I’ll talk to you about this.”

“Please, don’t—”

“Sex is a beautiful thing, love,” Mam said in that motherly tone that currently made me want to stab pencils in my ears. “When it’s between two people who love and are committed to each other.”

I held up a hand. “We are just *friends*.”

“Uh-huh,” Mam quipped with a disbelieving smile. “That’s what they all say.”

“That’s the bleeding truth,” I snapped. “That’s all we are.”

Jesus, even your mother can see through you…

“It’s completely natural to want to experience pleasure with a partner,” Mam continued to say, ignoring my pleas. “When you’re both *old* enough to fully understand the act of love.”

“Jesus Christ,” I groaned. “Please stop.”

“But, I know how these things can go. Not everyone waits, no matter how *important* it is to *wait*…” She paused to glare knowingly at me. “When it happens—which I hope is a long, *long* time from now—then it is necessary to use a condom,” she pressed. “Do you know how to roll one on properly, love? Did your father explain how it works? You need to make sure the shaft of your private part is—”

“I can’t hear this,” I groaned in despair. “Seriously, Ma.”

“Sex in real life is nothing like what happens in those blue movies Gerard gives you,” Mam continued. “It’s important to know that a woman has needs. In real life, girls don’t all scream and carry on like porn stars. And you need to respect a girl’s body at all times—”

“Please.” I pressed my fists into my eye sockets so hard I was seeing stars. “Just stop.”

“I’m trying to help you, love, so you know what to expect.”

“I know what to expect, Ma,” I groaned while I contemplated bathing in bleach. “I’m not a bleeding kid.”

My mother’s head snapped toward me, eyes wide. “So you’re not a…”

“No, Ma.” I dropped my head in my hands and fought back the urge to fucking cry. “I’m not a virgin.”

“Oh, dear…okay. That’s okay, love. That’s perfectly fine,” she rambled, tone forced. “I just presumed that since you’ve never brought a girl home before now, or talked about girlfriends, that you weren’t pursuing any love partners—”

“Keep talking and I’m going to jump out a window,” I warned her. “I’m not messing around. I will go upstairs and hurl myself off the fucking roof.”

“I know it’s uncomfortable, but you can talk about these kinds of things with me, son,” Mam urged. “I was a teenager once upon a time, too, you know,” she added, reaching over to pat my shoulder. “I understand all the urges your body is going through, and a female perspective can be helpful.”

“How is any of this *helpful*?” I choked out, horrified. “I thought you *loved* me.”

Mam laughed softly. “Of course, I love you.”

“Then *why* are you doing this to me?” I cried. “Why are you meddling in my life?”

“Because I’m not blind, Jonathan,” Mam replied, full-naming me to let me know how serious she was about this. “I see the way you look at Shannon and the way she looks at you.”

“We are just friends,” I bit out.

“You’re in love.”

My jaw fell open. “We are bleeding *not*.”

The look my mother gave me was one of disbelief. “Are you taking things at her pace?”

“I’m serious, Ma,” I snapped. “We’re just friends. I haven’t touched her.”

Mam visibly sagged in relief.

“So, you didn’t do, uh, let’s call it *the deed*, with Shannon—”

“Jesus Christ, no, Ma!” I barked, interrupting her before she caused permanent trauma to my brain.

“Oh, that’s good,” my mother breathed. “You’re a good boy.”

A good boy? Was I a bleeding dog?

And there was *nothing* good about what I wanted to do to Shannon Lynch.

“Thanks for automatically assuming that I’m a bastard, though, Ma,” I snarked. “I really appreciate the lack of faith my own mother has in my moral compass.”

“Well, you drop the bomb that you’re not a virgin on me the same day you bring your girlfriend home,” Mam huffed. “The first girl I have ever seen you with, may I add. What am I supposed to think? I was trying to prepare you for the future.”

“First, for the last bleeding time, Shannon is not my girlfriend,” I snapped, flustered. “Second, I haven’t been a virgin since first year. And third, I can roll a condom on in the dark with one hand tied behind my bleeding back, so I don’t need the sex talk, or tips, or any of that shite.”

Mam gasped in horror and I mentally kicked the shite out of myself.

“I’m lying,” I coddled her. “I am a virgin.”

“First year,” she sobbed. “*First year*!”

“No, no, no,” I hurried to assure her. “I’m a virgin, Ma. I am.”

“No,” she wept, shaking her head. “You’re not.”

What the fuck was I supposed to do now?

Christ, where was my dad when I needed him?

“You were only fourteen in first year,” she continued to wail.

“Thirteen,” I muttered under my breath as I held her to my chest and patted her back.

“Holy Mary, Mother of God.” She sobbed harder, clearly hearing me.

Shit.

Balls.

“I am a virgin,” I continued to say over and over while my mother cried into my school jumper. “I’m saving myself for marriage, Ma.”

“It’s the rugby,” she sobbed, fisting my jumper. “I blame the bleeding rugby for this.”

“For what?”

“For you losing your innocence!” Mam hissed. She looked up at me and then burst into another bout of tears. “Those boys you play with, they’re too old for you and obviously led you astray.”

No, Ma, my dick led me astray when puberty kicked in…

“And she’s in your bedroom,” Mam wailed, dropping her head against my chest again. “Oh dear god.”

“Because *you* brought her here, Ma, not me,” I replied as I continued to rub her back. “Let’s say, for argument’s sake, that I was with Shannon. *Which I’m not,*” I quickly clarified. “But if I was and you were worried about me getting up to no good, then why in the hell would you bring her over here?”

“Because I was still under the impression that you were a virgin when I brought her over here, wasn’t I?” Mam huffed, slapping my chest. “I *thought* you were having your first crush. I *thought* I was catching you in time.”

Fair point.

“Ma, I’m almost eighteen,” I tried to comfort her by saying. “You were married to Da by the time you were eighteen.”

“That’s different,” she sobbed.

“How?”

“Because you’re my baby,” Mam sniffled. “Oh god, my baby is sexually active.”

“No, I’m not,” I coaxed, hugging her. “I promise, I am not having sex.” *Right now.* “I’m not, Ma.”

“Are you at least being safe?” she choked out, looking up at me with big tear-filled brown eyes.

“I’m playing bleeding PlayStation with the girl,” I strangled out. “Shouldn’t that tell you how safe I’m being?”

“That’s true.” Mam nodded and sniffled.

I sighed. “*Thank you*.”

“So, I don’t have to worry, do I?” she added. “Being safe?” She sniffled. “Using—oh, dear god, *condoms*—”

“No, Ma, you don’t have to worry because I am not having sex,” I said, sticking to the story, and pulled her back to my chest. “So just relax.”

How the hell did I get myself into this situation? What was my life coming to?

In the space of one day, I had upset no less than three females. The one that created me by telling her that I was no longer an innocent. The one that used me by telling her via text message to fuck off. And the one that blew my fucking mind.

Jesus Christ, my dick had a lot to answer to.

To be fair, I didn’t think I actually upset Shannon today, but it was still early, and I was running on some serious shitty luck, so my chances of making it out of this glorified *playdate* without fucking up was slim.

“Ma,” I said after a solid ten minutes of her sniffling on my chest. “I’m going to have to go back up to Shannon now.”

“Okay, love,” she sniffled. “You won’t do anything—”

“No, Ma,” I coaxed, freeing myself from her hold and standing up. “I won’t lay a finger on her because we are just *friends*, and I am a virgin.”

“I know you’re not,” she croaked out. “But I’m trusting you to do the right thing.”

“You can trust me, because *nothing* is happening between us,” I repeated for the millionth time. “But I need to take a shower because I’m fucking soaked, so I’m going to use *your* bathroom, okay?” I moved for the door only to turn back and say, “Call me when it’s time to pick up your demented dogs.”

“About that,” Mam sniffled.

“You lied, didn’t you?” I gave her an accusing glare. “You don’t have to pick Bonnie and Cupcake up at all tonight, do you?”

Of course, she lied.

One look at her sheepish expression and it was plain to see.

“You *meddler*,” I accused.

“You *sexer*,” Mam shot back in a tone as equally accusing.

For fuck’s sake. I wasn’t going to win here.

Holding my hands up in defeat, I hurried out of the kitchen before she drowned me in a fresh batch of tears.

46
The Consequences of Kissing Boys in Bedrooms

SHANNON

Just like the last time I showered in Johnny's glorious bathroom, I took a crazy amount of time. I couldn't help myself.

I blamed the jets. And his bodywash. And the smell of him.

God, I was losing my mind.

When I finally climbed out of the tub, I wrapped myself up in one of the huge fluffy white towels hanging on his rack and sighed when the luxurious fabric grazed my skin. Johnny would never understand how lucky he was to grow up in a home like this, with parents like his and towels this soft.

For a long time, I just stood there in the middle of his bathroom, listening to absolutely nothing.

No screaming voices. No stomping footsteps. No rattling door handles. No feelings of impending doom.

Just *peace*.

When the cold finally got the better of me, I dried myself off and slipped my bra back on. Wearing a bra was a waste of time, considering I didn't have much to conceal and what I did have were perky and stayed up on their own.

They certainly didn't match up to the breasts those models on his bedroom wall displayed proudly…

However, ten seconds into wearing my bra, I was quickly yanking it back off with a shudder. It was *soaked* right through, along with my underwear.

I spent an inordinate amount of time folding my underwear into the tiniest ball I could before wrapping my bra around them. Embarrassed that I

didn’t have my schoolbag to tuck them inside, I stood like a fool in the middle of his bathroom, panicking.

Logic told me I was being silly, but the thought of Johnny seeing my underwear made me feel a little faint. Giving up, I decided to tuck them in my balled-up school tights before wrapping myself in a towel and heading back to his room.

This time, when I stepped out of the bathroom, I was prepared for Sookie and found her snoozing on the bed.

I was not, however, prepared for the sight of Johnny’s naked ass.

He was standing in front of his chest of drawers with his back to me, a towel on the floor at his feet, and was in the process of pulling a pair of boxers up his thighs.

God, he even had muscles on his ass. How was that even *possible*?

And then Johnny glanced over his shoulder and caught me red-handed.

“Like what you see?” he teased, arching his brow.

“Oh god,” I squeaked and then tore my gaze away from his round, tight ass. “I’m so sorry.” Spinning around, I bit down on my lip and forced back a moan. “I didn’t expect anyone to be in here.”

“It’s fine, Shannon,” he said, laughing. “Don’t worry about it.”

Let me die.

Dear God, open the ground and let me fall through it.

“I, uh…” Shaking my head, I tightened my grip on my towel. “It’s… uh…”

“I had a shower in my parents’ en suite,” Johnny explained. “I was just coming to grab some clothes.”

“Oh.” I blew out a ragged breath and shifted from foot to foot. “Okay, yeah, that makes sense.”

“It’s okay, Shannon,” Johnny said in a gentle tone. “Everything’s fine.”

“I know that,” I blurted out, panicked.

He chuckled softly. “Then why are you still facing the wall?”

Dammit.

Inhaling a steadying breath, I swung around and faced him.

My gaze automatically swept over him and my heart rate spiked. For once, Johnny’s face wasn’t the reason for my rapid pulse. Nope, that was down to the rest of him. The almost naked rest of him.

He was wearing a pair of tight white boxer shorts and that was it.

No shirt. No pants. No jumper. No socks.

Just a pair of Calvin Kleins that hung low on his V-indented hips—identical to the pair of his that I had worn last week. The pair I had been sleeping in for nights.

God, I was pathetic.

Everything I had imagined from the moment I laid eyes on him was right in front of me. And with this unobstructed view came the realization that both my imagination and my visual memory sucked.

I already knew he had a nice body. I remembered his chest from that day. Or at least I *thought* I had.

Apparently not, because Holy Mary, Mother of God, up close, he was something else.

His chest was bare and his pectorals were toned, his stomach ripped. I mean, he was seriously *ripped*. Not like the six-pack my brother sported or any of the lads I'd seen swapping jerseys after Joey's matches. His entire body was a solid mass of hard-core, chiseled *muscle*.

I held my breath as I allowed my eyes to wander over him, absorbing the sight of rippled abs, sun-kissed golden skin, the dark trail of hair under his navel, and that amazing way he smelled. Like soap and grass and *Johnny*.

It wasn't fair to give this much beauty to one person. They could have spread it out across the entire school and he'd still be perfect.

"What happened here?" Johnny asked then, distracting me from my ogling as he stalked over to where I was standing and stroked his thumb across my cheek.

Confused and frazzled, I let out a shaky breath and looked up at him. "Huh?"

"You have a red mark," Johnny mumbled, frowning down at me. "I didn't notice it earlier."

My brows rose up. "I do?"

He nodded, blue eyes locked on mine. "Yes, Shannon, you do."

Slipping around him, I padded into the bathroom to check in the mirror. Sure enough, my right cheek was red and blotchy while the rest of me was milk-bottle pale.

That would be my father's backhand, I thought to myself.

"Well?" Johnny asked, leaning in the doorway.

I leaned forward, stretching over the sink to get a better look in the mirror.

Johnny walked over to where I was standing. And then he proceeded to hover behind me, his bare chest rubbing against my back, as he stared at my reflection in the mirror, face set in a deep frown.

I didn't think he realized he was doing it—brushing his body against mine.

His focus had moved from my cheek to my neck. His expression was dark, face turning a dark shade of purple.

"What the fuck is *this*?" he hissed.

I followed his gaze to the faint purplish fingerprints lining my neck.

Awareness dawned on me.

My dad.

Last night.

Oh god.

"I don't know," I replied, feigning confusion, deciding it was safer to stick to the original story.

If I backpedaled now, Johnny would smell a rat.

"You don't know?" he asked quietly, eyes locked on mine in the mirror.

Shaking my head, I let my shoulders fall. "No idea."

"Is someone hurting you, Shannon?" he asked in a deathly quiet voice.

"No one is hurting me, Johnny," I whispered, eyes glued to his in the mirror.

My heart was racing so hard I feared it might burst. There was a terrible concoction of fear, uncertainty, and lust all rolled into one complicated ball of emotions in the pit of my stomach.

Reaching up with one hand, Johnny cupped my chin and used his free hand to gently sweep my hair off my neck.

He didn't ask permission if he could touch me. He just did it.

Then his fingers were tracing the fingerprints left by my father, his featherlight touch making my entire body tremble.

"Someone touched you," Johnny whispered in my ear, placing his fingers on the marks. "I want to know who."

The air escaped my lungs in an audible gasp. Unable to stop myself, I sagged against his chest, eyes glued to our reflection in the mirror as he

stared right back at me, blue eyes scorching holes in my soul, waiting for an explanation I could never give him.

"Tell me who put their hands on you," he coaxed as he stood behind me, my face in his hand and his fingers on my throat. "And I'll make it better."

Think, Shannon, think…

"Well?"

Hurry the hell up…

"Shannon?"

"I got smashed up in P.E.," was all I came up with.

Johnny didn't respond. He just continued to stare at my neck with a dark expression.

Panicking, I hurried to add to my lies. "It was my fault. I got in the way of the boys during soccer, and four of them ended up crashing into me."

Slipping around Johnny, I walked back into his bedroom, putting some space between us.

"I ended up on the bottom of a pileup. Happened just before you came in." Shaking my head, I forced a small laugh. "It was total carnage."

Johnny hovered in the bathroom doorway, expression tight, eyes sharp and intelligent.

"So, the hand of one of the lads in your class just so happened to land on your neck?" he asked, tone laced with disbelief. "His fingers just so happened to squeeze your throat?"

This one's nobody's fool, I thought to myself. *Lie better, Shannon.*

"It didn't feel like that at the time." I gave him a weak shrug and sat down on the edge of his bed. "But I guess that's what happened."

"You guess?" he repeated, folding his arms across his chest.

The movement caused his huge biceps to bulge. He was seriously *huge*. It was incredibly intimidating. But I knew he wouldn't hurt me.

It was one of the few things in my life that I was absolutely certain of. This boy would never put his hands on me in anger.

Inhaling a steadying breath, I added, "Maybe he caught me when he was trying to stand up."

"Maybe," Johnny mused, nodding in agreement.

I sagged in relief.

"Or maybe it was those Legos again."

My heart sank.

“Was it?” Johnny demanded. “Did you fall over the same Legos getting those fingerprints on your throat that you did when you busted up your face on your birthday?”

“Johnny—”

“And how about the bruise on the back of your neck the time before that? Or the red mark on your face the time before that again? Or the bruises on your thighs? And your arms? And the rest of you?” He glared at me. “Was that those pesky Legos, too?”

“Do you think my uniform’s ready yet?” I changed the subject by asking. “I should probably get home.”

Yeah, I needed to get out of here.

And fast.

“No. No! Don’t *do* that,” Johnny called me right out on my diversion. “Don’t try and brush me off,” he growled. “I want to know what happened to you, Shannon.”

“I want to go home.” Sniffling, I quickly wiped my face with the back of my hand. “Now, please.”

He ran a hand through his damp hair and sighed. “Christ, Shannon, don’t cry!”

He unfolded his arms and moved toward me but I shook my head and held a hand up to warn him off. Johnny stopped short and ran a hand through his hair.

“I can help you,” he pleaded. “Let me *help* you.”

“Then help me by getting my clothes,” I sniffled. “That’s the only help I need from you.”

Exhaling a pained groan, Johnny closed the space between us and crouched in front of me.

“I want to help you.” He placed his hands on my outer thighs and looked up at me, blue eyes wide and sincere. He squeezed my thighs gently. “All you have to do is tell me what’s happening, okay?” Reaching up, he tucked a wet strand of hair behind my ear. “Just tell me who’s hurting you and I’ll make it go away.”

You can’t help me.

No one can.

I took that beating for talking to you. For taking a fucking picture with you.

You are the last person who can help me.

"I'm okay, Johnny," I croaked out, feeling the tears pooling my eyes. "You don't need to help me."

"You're lying to me," he growled, looking furious. "You're fucking lying to me, and I can't stand it."

"Please take me *home*," I strangled out, jerking away from him. "Just take me home and you won't have to stand me."

Johnny groaned. "Shannon, come on. Don't twist my words. You know that's not what I meant—"

"I want to go home, Johnny," I choked out. "If you don't want to take me, then I'll call Joey to come pick me up."

"Okay." Johnny sighed in resignation. "Fine." Releasing me, he stood up and held his hands up. "I'll get your clothes and take you home."

Exhaling a shaky breath, I nodded. "Thank you."

He watched me for a long moment before shaking his head in resignation. "I'll be right back, okay?"

Nodding, I watched him walk out of room, waiting until he was gone before slumping down on his bed.

"God," I cried, furiously batting the traitorous tears away. "Get it together, Shannon."

Don't even think about telling him anything.

His father's a barrister. You know what those guys are like. They'll get involved and you'll all be split up and put into care.

Like Darren…

Johnny's dog shifted closer to me, distracting me from my meltdown, and plopped her head on my thigh.

"Hi," I sobbed, dropping my hand on her head.

Sookie nuzzled my hand with her snout and licked my fingers. Her affection only made me feel worse.

I didn't deserve it. I had just lied to her human.

"I wish I had a dog," I whispered to her, focusing all of my attention on her, desperate to block out my thoughts. "One just like you," I told her as I pulled my feet up on the bed and twisted my body to face her. "If I ever get

a dog, it'll be one that that looks just like you—'cause you're so pretty. Yes, you are."

She rewarded my attention by crawling onto my lap—or at least she tried to. She was a full-grown Labrador and I probably weighed less than her.

"What do you want?" I whispered, scratching her neck with both hands. "Huh?" Tickling her ears, I pressed a kiss to her nose. "You want me to give you love?"

Her tail wagged like crazy and she smothered me with wet dog kisses all over my face. It was a welcome distraction and I choked out a laugh at her enthusiasm.

"What a good girl," I cooed, falling into a playful game of wrestling with her. "That's right. You're the best girl. You are."

Encouraged by my response, Sookie clambered onto me, pushing her whole weight down on my chest and causing me to flop back on the pillows.

"What?" I giggled through my tears as I ruffled her ears. "You like me?"

She groaned deep in her throat, her approval obvious as she stretched out on top of me and nuzzled my face with her wet nose.

"Thank you," I praised when she slapped her paw on my shoulder. "You're such a mannerly girl, giving me the paw."

"Your uniform's still damp, but I brought it up anyway…"

Startled by Johnny's voice, I tried to sit up, but I couldn't because Sookie was still in full-force play mode.

"Sookie, down," Johnny ordered in a tight tone of voice, eyes glued to mine.

Obedient, Sookie immediately climbed off me and clumsily jumped off the bed, her paws slip-sliding on the wooden floor.

"Out," Johnny commanded as he held his door open, still watching me.

Sookie padded out of the room and he quickly shut the door, his expression thunderous.

God…

"I'm sorry," I croaked out, pulling myself up on my elbows. "I was just, uh, playing with your dog."

“Don’t be sorry,” Johnny replied in a tight voice as he walked over to the bed, dropped my uniform down, and then sank down on the edge.

Keeping his back to me, Johnny leaned forward, his muscles flexing beneath his golden skin, rested his elbows on his thighs, and inhaled what sounded like several calming breaths. And then he did something I knew I would lose countless years of sleep over. He turned back around to face me, grabbed both sides of my towel, and pushed them together.

To cover me, I realized. Because I had obviously been flashing him. Because let’s face it, that was exactly the kind of luck I had.

“I’m so sorry,” I choked out, mortified.

“It’s okay,” he told me in a gravelly tone of voice.

“Did I—did you see my…?”

He nodded.

Oh god!

“I am so sorry.”

“Stop saying sorry,” he replied, voice strained. “There’s nothing to be sorry for.”

“I’m sorry you had to see *that*,” I strangled out.

Johnny shook his head and turned his back to me again.

“Don’t apologize to me for seeing you,” he groaned, dropping his head in his hands. “*Fuck*!”

My heart was racing so hard in my chest in this moment that I found myself breathing faster, exhaling in short, puffy breaths.

What was I supposed to do?

Run? Leave? Hide? Throw myself at him?

I didn’t know. I had no idea what to do. I only knew that my body was rooted to his mattress, my eyes glued to his muscular back.

“I’m going to take you home now,” Johnny finally stated quietly, head still in his hands.

“Yeah, okay,” I whispered as the sound of my pulse hammered in my ears.

“That’s what I’m going to do,” he added, though I wasn’t sure if he was talking to me or himself. “I’ll take you home,” he repeated but made no move to stand up.

Several seconds passed where he remained completely motionless.

Unable to bear the tension building inside of his bedroom, I reached out and touched his shoulder blade. “Johnny?”

A small tremor rolled through his huge frame. And then he turned around to face me.

“I can’t be alone with you like this,” he whispered, eyes locked on mine. “I…” He exhaled a ragged breath. “Not here…not when you look like *that*.”

His eyes were heated and full of uncertainty and roaming wildly over my body. His chest was rising and falling at a rapid pace, mirroring my own.

I looked into his eyes, feeling my heart squeeze so tight it was hard to breathe. In one stare, I felt like I had collided with him. It was instant and shocking.

My feelings exploded inside of me, absorbing the boy and all he was like a sponge that was desperate for water.

I was desperate for him.

All of him. Every piece and part.

Raging hormones, encouraged by my frazzled emotions, overrode my common sense right then, causing me to do something completely out of character.

Releasing an unsteady breath, I reached up, grabbed Johnny’s neck, and pulled his face down to mine.

And then I kissed him.

I had no clue what to do next, my bravery deserting me in my moment of need, as I knelt on his bed and held his face in my hands.

Johnny’s eyes were wide open and locked on mine, clearly stunned, as I pressed my lips to his.

But he *wasn’t* kissing me back.

In fact, I was fairly sure he wasn’t breathing.

My actions had turned him to stone in my hands.

My eyes were wide and bulging in my head as I broke the kiss and stared in horror right back at him.

“I’m so sorry,” I blurted out, mortified.

“It’s okay,” he told me, breathing hard.

“No.” I shook my head furiously. “No, it’s not okay.”

“Shannon, it’s okay—”

“Oh my god! What did I do?”

“Shannon,” Johnny coaxed, tone firmer now. “Stop. It’s okay—”

“It’s not okay,” I strangled out as I scrambled off the bed and backed up, hitting his chest of drawers in the process. “I just—oh god!”

Staggering backwards, I shook my head and held a hand out to warn him off when he took a step toward me. “I’m really sorry.”

“Shannon, it’s *okay*,” Johnny said as he held his hands up. “Just stop moving around for a second and talk to me, will ya?”

I didn’t stop moving. And I didn’t stop to talk. Because I couldn’t. I was in full-force panic mode, and for once, my flight instinct had kicked in.

“I need to go,” I announced, mortified.

“No, you don’t,” he replied calmly. “We can talk about this.”

“No!” Shaking my head, I slipped around Johnny and snatched my clothes off the bed. “I need to leave,” I added before bolting into the bathroom and locking myself inside.

“Shannon, come on,” Johnny called out, knocking on the door. “Open the door.”

Speechless, I staggered over to the toilet, pushed the lid down, and collapsed on top.

“Oh god,” I breathed, as I dropped my head in my hands.

What the hell did I just do?

Not only did I flash Johnny Kavanagh, but I went one further and kissed him.

My first kiss.

The first time I ever put my lips on a boy. And he didn’t reciprocate.

Oh my god…

What the hell was I thinking? Why was I feeling like my heart was shattering into a million pieces? And most importantly, how was I going to get out of this bathroom?

Because there was no way I could face Johnny now. In fact, I was fairly sure I could never face him again.

47
Crying Girls and Burning Hearts

JOHNNY

Someone put their hands on her.

Those kinds of marks didn't happen in a bleeding ruck, never mind during a soccer game in P.E.

It was ridiculous, and *she* was ridiculous for feeding me that line. What did she think I was, some thick eejit who couldn't tell the difference between an accidental bruise and foul play?

I played rugby. I'd spent my whole life knocking up injuries and knocking lads out. I knew the goddamn difference between accidental damage and intentional harm.

Someone squeezed her throat, and they did it so hard they left fucking fingerprints on her.

If she was being bullied at Tommen, then I was going to find out. If it was McGarry, then I was going to end up in a cell. If it was those fuckers from BCS, then they might as well lock me in a straitjacket.

I was about ten seconds away from going CSI on the situation, but then her big blue eyes filled up with tears and I was thrown another curveball.

I had no clue how to handle girl tears. And girl tears coming from that particular girl affected me something fierce.

And there was my hat trick…

Going against every instinct in my body, because my judgment was clouded with the urge I had to comfort her, I'd given in to her pleas to get her clothes and take her home. But then I saw her—I fucking saw *all* of *her*—sprawled out on my bed, with my dog on top of her, and her towel hanging open, and my brain switched off, body taking over. And then she blew my carefully constructed world apart by putting her mouth on mine.

Shannon kissed me and I froze.

I completely fucking choked up, attacked by every abnormal, foreign emotion and sensation a person could think of.

I didn't expect it. I didn't expect *her*.

It all hit me like a head-on collision in that exact moment and I clammed up, feeling more exposed and vulnerable in that moment than I had in my whole life. Contrary to how good my body assured me having her lips on mine was, or how much harder my heart had to work when she was around, my head knew better.

It was not good. It was not fucking good at all. It took every ounce of self-control I had inside of my body to hold myself back. Especially when everything inside of me demanded I do the opposite.

I knew, though. I *knew* if I gave in to the burning need inside of me and kissed her back, then that would be it.

I would be completely fucked.

And so would Shannon.

Because my being here was temporary and that girl reeked of permanence. The best I could offer was friendship, even if that was the last thing I wanted.

"Shannon?" Resting my forehead against the doorframe, I continued to knock. "Will you please come out?" She locked herself in my bathroom thirty minutes ago and hadn't come out since. "*Please*?"

Silence.

Exhaling heavily, I knocked again. "Just open the door and we can talk about it."

Nothing.

"Please, Shannon," I growled, resisting the urge to bang my head against the frame. "Just come out. You don't even have to talk to me if you don't want to. I'll take you home and I won't say a word if you—"

I let my words trail off when I heard the sound of the lock clicking.

Moments later, my bathroom door opened inward and there she was, fully dressed in her damp uniform, with puffy eyes and blotchy cheeks.

Fuck. I made her cry. *Again.*

"I'm ready to go home now," she told me in a small voice, not meeting my eyes. "If that's okay?"

"Yeah, of course it's okay," I replied thickly.

“Thank you.” With her head down, Shannon stepped around me and walked over to my bedroom door.

She looked so vulnerable and uncertain that all I wanted to do was wrap her up in my arms.

My heart was on fire.

Get it together, Kavanagh.

Don’t do anything stupid.

Don’t kiss her.

You know you won’t be able to stop.

With great effort, I didn’t go to her and walked over to my wardrobe instead. “Just give me a sec, okay?” I told her.

She nodded and dropped her gaze to her clasped hands.

Sighing, I opened my wardrobe and quickly threw on a T-shirt, sweatpants, and a hoodie.

Grabbing a pair of socks from my chest of drawers, I sank down on my bed and pulled them on before toeing on a pair of runners.

All the while, Shannon stood silently by my door with her wet hair falling forward, concealing her face.

She seemed so lonely in this moment that it physically pained me to look at her. Because I knew I was responsible. And my heart was demanding I make it right.

I wanted to. I just didn’t know how without hurting both of us.

“Here,” I said, grabbing a jacket off the foot of my bed. “Put that on.”

Her nervous eyes darted to the jacket I was holding out for her and she immediately began to shake her head. “No, no, no,” she croaked out. “I’m o __”

“You’re okay. Yeah, I know,” I replied as I stood up and closed the space between us. “But it’s still lashing down with rain outside, and I’m not okay with you getting sick. Put it on.”

“Are you sure?” she asked, reaching out hesitantly.

Christ, this girl was killing me…

“Positive.” Handing her my jacket, I moved for the door, careful not to brush against her, knowing my poor dick couldn’t take the pressure.

I waited for her to slide the jacket on and then I walked out of my room, knowing she was with me, even though she trailed behind.

This felt so shitty—like the opposite of the right thing to do, which made zero sense because I was thinking with my brain right now, and not my dick.

“I need to get Ma’s keys,” I told her when we were standing in the downstairs foyer. “Gimme a sec, okay?”

“Um, yeah, okay,” Shannon replied as she slid her hands into my jacket that was swamping her. “I’ll wait here?”

Was she asking me?

It sounded like she was.

I didn’t know for sure because she wouldn’t look at me. I couldn’t gauge how she was feeling because the windows to her emotions, her eyes, were trained on her feet.

It fucking sucked, but I knew I needed to give her space right now.

Problem was, the closer to the front door we got, the more depressed I felt.

My dick was devastated. My chest was burning. My brain was doubtful.

I was completely fucked.

48
You’re Okay

SHANNON

There were no words to explain the turbulence of emotions whishing through my body. Striving for control, I concentrated on breathing in slow, deep patterns.

I didn’t know what to do. Apologizing didn’t seem to cut it. Besides, I’d already done that.

I contemplated telling him that I had temporarily lost control of my senses back there, but I thought he might already know that.

Thoroughly mortified by my actions, I stared out the windscreen into the darkening sky and ignored the boy sitting in the driver’s seat beside me.

“Are we going to talk about it?” Johnny finally asked after several minutes of strained silence.

I shook my head, cheeks flaming with shame, and continued to stare out the window at nothing.

“Are you going to talk to *me*?” he asked then, voice low and gruff.

Again, I shook my head, too embarrassed to look at him.

“So, what?” he demanded. “You’re just going to ignore me altogether?”

I shrugged helplessly. I knew what was coming if we spoke. He was going to give me *the talk*. And right now, with my emotions frayed and my stomach churning from anxiety, I honestly didn’t think I could hear that talk.

I couldn’t take *his* rejection.

“Shannon,” Johnny growled, clearly frustrated.

Flicking on the indicator, he pulled onto the side of the road and killed the engine.

Oh no. Oh please, god, no.

“Shannon.” Turning in his seat, he pushed the armrest that separated us up and twisted his body to face me. “We need to talk about what happened back there.”

“I’m sorry,” I got there first and said. With my heart hammering in my chest, I turned in my seat and faced him. “I am so sorry.”

“I don’t want you to be sorry,” he replied, blue eyes burning into mine. “What happened in my room?” Shaking his head, he released a pained growl. “I didn’t expect it… I didn’t expect *you*.” His breath fanned my face as he spoke, causing my body to shiver involuntarily. “I don’t regret it,” he added. “And I don’t regret you doing that—”

“But?” I filled in, keeping my eyes trained on my hands folded on my lap, knowing full well there was a *but* coming.

“But I’m leaving in a couple of months, Shannon,” Johnny finally said. “Once the summer comes, I’ll be out of here and I won’t be back until school starts.”

“I know,” I whispered, clasping my hands tightly together.

Joey told me all about it.

He was leaving to be a big star.

“That’s the way it is for me,” Johnny added gruffly. “And it’s only going to get worse—longer stints away. More traveling. Permanent moves. That’s what’s coming down the line for me. Down the *very close* line. It wouldn’t be fair of me not to disclose that now.” He sighed wearily and ran a hand through his thoroughly disheveled hair. “You need to know that I’m not going to be here for much longer.”

“I know,” I whispered, feeling the burning ache in my chest. “And I know I shouldn’t have kissed you,” I choked out, voice torn. “Okay? I know that. It was wrong. I understand. I just…I just…”

“You just what, Shannon?” he coaxed.

“I thought you liked me,” I strangled out.

“Jesus Christ,” Johnny groaned, dropping his head in his hands. “*Of course,* I like you.” He tugged on his hair and sighed. “I think it’s pretty fucking clear that I’m mad about you.” Exhaling a pained groan, he added, “But I’ll be eighteen in May, Shannon.”

“I’m sixteen,” I whispered.

“I know, Shannon, fuck I know,” he groaned, voice torn. “But I’m trying to do the right thing here.”

My heart fluttered uncertainly. I didn't know what to think or how to feel. He was rejecting me and telling me he liked me at the same time, and it was too much for my heart to take.

"For who?" I croaked out.

"For the both of us," Johnny strangled out. "My career is taking off and I need to stay focused. And you deserve someone who can put you first." He ran a hand through his hair again, looking both stressed and tired. "I *can't* do that." He looked me right in the eyes and said, "I want to—I *really* fucking want to. But I'm not in the position to do that for you." Exhaling heavily, he added, "I can't give you a relationship, Shannon, and it would be selfish of me to ask you for something I can't follow through on."

There it was. The rejection I'd been waiting for.

"I didn't ask you for a relationship, Johnny," I choked out, thoroughly humiliated. "I've never asked you for anything. So, don't worry about giving me the let-me-down-gently talk because it's unnecessary."

Johnny released a frustrated growl. "I'm *not* trying to let you down, Shannon, I'm trying to figure this out with you—"

"Listen, Johnny, I'm really tired," I whispered, turning back to face the window. "I just want to go home now."

"Come on, Shannon," he groaned, tone agitated now. "You can't avoid this."

I had every intention of avoiding him for the rest of my life. I planned on starting that avoiding as soon as I got out of this car.

"Shannon, talk to me."

I remained silent.

"Shannon, come on," Johnny pleaded. "Don't be like this."

I didn't think there was any other way I could be, given the circumstances.

I kissed him. He rejected me.

I put myself out there for him. He turned me down.

It was my fault. One hundred percent. I accepted responsibility for my recklessness. But that didn't mean I was strong enough to listen to the painful verbal repercussions of my actions.

"Just fucking talk to me," Johnny demanded, unwilling to let this go.

"What's to say?" I croaked out, turning back to look at him, giving in to his relentless probing. "You *don't* want me. I *heard* you. I *got* the

message.”

“You clearly didn’t if that’s what you took from it,” he shot back, looking furious.

When I didn’t respond, Johnny literally *growled*.

“Fine, if you don’t want to hash this out, then I won’t say another word,” he announced, throwing his hands up in the air. “Is that what you want, Shannon?”

“That’s what I want, Johnny,” I whispered.

“Suit yourself,” he bit out, starting the engine again. “I give up.”

With his words of rejection belting in my ears, and my emotions in turmoil, I clenched my eyes shut and prayed for time to speed up. I had the worst pain in my stomach to match the throbbing ache in my chest that seemed to blossom and burn with every mile he knocked up on the clock.

When Johnny pulled onto my street, I lied just like I had every other time he dropped me home, and told him that my house was the one at the other end of the street, knowing full well that if my father saw me climbing out of his car, I’d be as good as dead. However, I did not anticipate that he might turn off the engine again, which is exactly what he did.

“Are you okay?” he asked, turning in his seat to face me.

“Yeah,” I croaked out.

He nodded slowly. “Shannon, listen—”

“You don’t have to say anything else,” I quickly stopped him by saying. “It won’t happen again.”

He frowned. “No, that’s not what I was—”

“I’m sorry,” I blurted out and then grabbed the handle and pushed the door open. “I really am very sorry.” Unbuckling my belt, I slipped out of the SUV and slammed the door closed before he could say another word.

I couldn’t handle *more*. Not tonight.

Mortified, I hovered outside my neighbor’s garden wall until it was clear that Johnny was waiting for me to go inside before he left, and then I did the only thing I could: I ducked my head and ran down the footpath to my *actual* house, not daring to look back at him. Slipping inside, I closed the door behind me and exhaled a ragged breath before quickly searching the downstairs.

The house was empty.

Ollie, Tadhg, and Sean went to Nanny Murphy's on weekdays, with the exception of Fridays, when Nanny dropped them straight home after school because she went to Beara on the weekends to visit her granddaughter and wouldn't be home until at least eight o'clock.

Joey and Mam both worked on Mondays, and my father kept a stool warm at the bookies most evenings.

Nothing changed.

Miscarriage or no miscarriage, my screwed-up family went on as normal…

Thankful to have avoided another pointless confrontation, I kicked off my shoes and hurried up the staircase to get out of my damp clothes.

We had a secondhand tumble dryer in the utility room that I wasn't supposed to use because of how hard it was on the electricity, but I was going to use it this evening. I had no choice.

Back in the house of pain, I closed my bedroom door and then quickly stripped out of my wet clothes before throwing on my pajamas.

I was halfway down the staircase with my uniform balled up in my hands when there was a knock on the front door. Pausing midstep, I squinted my eyes and tried to make out who the tall shadow outside the frosted glass could be.

Another knock came, louder this time, so I hurried down the remaining steps and wrenched the door open, only to find Johnny standing outside in the rain, looking like some sort of semidrowned angel.

Instantly, my heart jackknifed in my chest and then began to thud so hard it was almost painful.

Seriously, God?

Why?

"Hi," I whispered, clutching the door with a death grip. The step into our house was a least a foot high, but I still found myself staring up at him.

"Hi," Johnny replied, blue eyes locked on mine. "You live at ninety-five."

I nodded, mortified.

"I thought your house was number eighty-one?" He frowned. "That's where I've been dropping you off."

I shrugged helplessly, feeling at a loss.

“Well, you left your bag in the car.” Shifting my bag off his right shoulder, he held it out to me.

“I’m sorry,” I mumbled, feeling my cheeks flush once again. “Your jacket’s up in my bedroom. I’ll go and get it.” I turned to run up the staircase, but he stopped me with a hand to my wrist.

“Don’t worry about it,” he explained, quickly retracting his hand. “I’ll get it off you at school or something.”

“Okay.”

Shoving his hands into his pockets, Johnny rocked back on his heels, considering me for a brief moment before blowing out a breath. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” I whispered, not feeling one bit *okay.*

“Shannon, I don’t want you to think that I don’t want you—”

“Please, don’t say anything,” I begged, beyond mortified at this stage. “Please.”

“Things are complicated for me right now—”

“Johnny, please just forget it ever happened.”

He stared hard at me for an achingly long moment before nodding stiffly. “If that’s what you want.”

I sagged slightly. “It is.”

His gaze flicked to my neck then, and his expression instantly darkened.

“I need to go inside now,” I stated, fearful of him starting back up where he had left off.

“Right,” he said with a small shake of his head. “Of course, yeah, and I’d better get going.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll guess I’ll see you tomorrow,” Johnny said, and then he turned around and walked away from me.

Feeling bereft, I chewed on my lip as I watched him walk away. “Bye, Johnny.”

“Bye, Shannon,” he called back, casting a quick smile over his shoulder.

Oh god.

With my heart knocking around restlessly in my chest, I closed the door and trudged back up the staircase. I needed to lie down for a minute so

I could process my thoughts.

Slipping back inside my tiny room, I walked straight to my single bed with the intention of face-planting on the mattress, only to stop short when my eyes landed on Johnny's jacket strewn on my bed.

Like the creeper I was, I sank down on the foot of my bed, reached for his jacket, and held it to my chest. His smell was everywhere. On his jacket. On me. Holding the drenched fabric, I inhaled deeply, taking in the familiar scent of his deodorant and then mentally chastised myself for being such a freak.

What was I doing? Why was I allowing myself to feel these emotions?

They were dangerous.

I had to *stop*.

He doesn't want you. No one does.

Feeling sick to my stomach with regret and anxiety, I pulled back the covers, climbed into my bed, and then curled into the smallest ball I could.

Everything hurt.

My body. My brain. My heart.

Breathing slowly, I attempted to rid my mind of every bad thought plaguing me. Every embarrassing and soul-destroying memory of how ridiculously stupid I had behaved.

It didn't last long.

Fifteen minutes into my silent mourning, the sound of the front door slamming filled my ears. No less the three minutes later, my bedroom door flew inward.

"Where's the dinner?"

Remaining perfectly still, I clutched the duvet as my body coiled tight with anxiety. "I forgot."

"Well get out of that fucking bed and come downstairs," Dad snarled from my doorway. "You've jobs to do around this house, girl, and that includes putting on the dinner. 'Tis about time you earned your keep."

"I feel sick," I croaked out.

It wasn't a lie. My stomach was cramping up.

"You'll feel a lot fucking sicker if you don't get your useless hole out of that bed," my father warned. "Sick. Your mother's fucking sick and she's working to pay your bastard school fees, you ungrateful little cunt."

I knew he hadn’t been drinking today, but my father sober was still terrifying to me.

“You have five minutes to get down those stairs, girl,” he added. “Don’t make me come back up to ya.”

He slammed my bedroom door closed, and while I listened to him thumping back down the stairs, I debated my options.

Stay where I was and take a beating, or do as he asked and risk one anyway?

There was no choice. There never was.

Not for me anyway.

Throwing back the covers, I climbed out of bed and walked back down to hell.

“Are you still talking to me?” were the first words that came out of Claire’s mouth when I answered her phone call later that night.

I was just finishing mopping the kitchen floor before bed, having cooked the dinner and washed all the dishes. Balancing my phone between my ear and shoulder, I poured the water from the mop bucket down the kitchen sink and quickly tucked the mop and bucket away in the utility room.

“Considering I just answered your call, I’d say it’s pretty obvious that I’m still talking to you,” I replied in a hushed tone.

It was gone eleven at night, but my father was still in the living room watching some match on the television, and I knew better than to disturb him.

“I’m so sorry,” Claire groaned down the line. “I didn’t mean to embarrass you today, I swear. I was just sick of listening to those two droning on about Johnny and wanted to put them in their place.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Grabbing Johnny’s jacket out of the tumble dryer, I flicked off the kitchen light and padded out. “I’m not mad,” I added, my voice barely more than a whisper.

“Can you talk right now?” she questioned.

“Yeah,” I whispered, creeping toward the staircase. “Just give me two secs.”

“Okay,” she replied.

Holding my phone to my chest, I tiptoed up the staircase, avoiding every creak with expert precision.

“Okay, I’m back,” I told her in a more audible tone once I was safely inside my bedroom with the door locked.

“You’re sure you’re not mad at me?”

I shook my head and flopped down on my bed. “I’m really not.”

“Oh, *thank god*.” Claire sighed loudly. “I’ve been a wreck all evening worrying about it. I won’t be in class tomorrow and I was afraid you wouldn’t pick up when I called.”

My heart sank. “You’re not coming to school tomorrow?”

“I have that hockey blitz with the school,” she explained. “But Lizzie will be there.”

At least there’s that.

“Well, I’m not mad.”

“You’re sure?”

“I have good news,” I said, deciding on changing the topic. Otherwise we would end up going back and forth all night. “I forgot to tell you last week, but I think you’ll like it.”

“Spill your beans, Lynch.”

“Mam signed the forms. I turned them in the other week.” Exhaling heavily, I said, “I’m allowed to go to Donegal with you after Easter.”

I had to hold the phone away from my ear for a few moments while Claire squealed her excitement out of her system.

“This is the best news *ever*,” she gushed. “You have no idea how happy you’ve just made me. I thought I was going to be trapped in a foreign county for two days with Lizzie and Pierce,” she continued to say. “And you know how screwed up their relationship is.”

“A foreign county,” I snickered, then grunted when a sharp pain ricocheted through my side.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, it’s just my stomach,” I replied, stroking the curve of my belly. “It’s been bothering me all day.” Worrying my lip, I added, “I hope I’m not coming down with something.”

“Then you better take some acetaminophen and get the hell over it,” Claire retorted chirpily. “Because we’re going to Donegal, baby! Woo!”

“After Easter,” I reminded her.

“So?” she shot back. “It’s still the best news ever.”

I laughed at her enthusiasm because, in all honesty, how could I not? It was infectious.

“So, have you figured out how you’re going to manage forty-eight hours in close quarters with *Gerard*?” I asked with a teasing lilt to my tone, thankful for the distraction from my life.

Claire groaned loudly. “He drives me crazy, Shan.”

“He likes you,” I told her. “And before you shut me down and tell me he likes everyone, I mean he *really* likes you, Claire. It’s obvious when you guys are together that he’s into you.”

It really was.

At school, they watched each other’s moves *constantly*. He was always coming over to her, cracking jokes and making pointless conversation. They behaved like an old married couple when they were together, with witty banter and quick retorts, and I couldn’t figure out why they weren’t a couple already.

It seemed so inevitable.

“Having him carry on like that toward me is not a compliment,” Claire grumbled when I called her out on it. Huffing, she added, “Any girl who walks past that boy turns his head.”

“Yeah, but you haven’t just turned his head, Claire,” I told her. “I think you’ve turned his heart.”

“You can’t turn something that isn’t there, Shan,” she replied, tone sad.

“I don’t believe that,” I countered.

“That’s because you don’t know him like I do,” was all she replied.

“Well, I think you and Gibsie together make sense,” I pressed. “A lot more than Lizzie and Pierce.”

“That wouldn’t be hard,” Claire chuckled. “Mr. Mulcahy and me make more sense than those two.”

“True,” I mused.

“So, here’s what we’ll do,” she said then. “You can keep me focused and away from Gerard when we’re in Donegal, and I’ll do the same for you with Johnny.”

I exhaled a shaky breath. “About that…”

“Go on,” she urged.

Clenching my eyes shut, I blurted, “He dropped me home again.”

“*What*?” Claire shrieked.

I blew out a breath. “I know.”

“Oh my god, Shan, what’s this about?”

“I really don’t know.” I groaned, scrubbing my face with my hand. “I’m so confused.”

“Confused?”

Deciding to give her full disclosure, I whispered, “He didn’t just drop me home, Claire. I went over to his house again.”

“Shut the front door,” she gasped.

Nodding, I groaned into my hand. “And I kissed him.”

“*Shut the front door!*” she repeated, louder now, and in a much more excited tone. “Where did this happen?”

“In his bedroom,” I confessed, and then reluctantly added, “On his bed.”

“Oh. My. God,” she squealed. “Oh my bloody god, Shan!”

“He didn’t kiss me back,” I admitted, grimacing.

“That bloody idiot,” she growled, tone switching instantly.

“I’m the idiot, Claire,” I hurried to say, feeling just as mortified now as I was in his car on the drive of shame home. “What the hell was I thinking?”

“Was he mean to you?” she demanded. “Because I’ll kick his big rugby-loving ass if he was mean to you—”

“He wasn’t mean to me, Claire,” I croaked out. “He was…lovely.”

“No, Shannon, you’re the lovely one. He’s a *dick*,” Claire corrected angrily. “Because only a complete dick takes *my best friend* to his house, brings her up to his bedroom, and then, when she puts herself out there for the first time in her life, he goes and *rejects* her.”

“I kissed him, Claire,” I whispered. “Not the other way around.”

“And he clearly didn’t deserve your kiss,” Claire snipped. “You’re too good for the big eejit.”

“I thought you liked Johnny?”

“I used to,” she agreed angrily. “I *used* to think he was a good guy. I *used* to think he was better than that reputation of his,” she growled. “Not anymore.”

“It’s my fault, Claire.”

“No, Shan,” she growled. “He led you on, and you deserve so much better than having some rugby-head asshole do that.”

“He really didn’t,” I admitted. “It was all me.”

“I don’t care,” she snipped. “He’s an eejit.”

“What do I do now?” I asked, feeling unsure.

“What do you mean?”

“I have his jacket.” I confessed. “I need to return it to him.”

“Why do you have his jacket?”

“He gave it to me—” I paused before adding, “Actually this is the second one he’s given me. He gave me his coat after school, too, but that one was soaked from the rain so he gave me another one.”

“There you go,” she snapped. “Leading you on!”

“I don’t think that’s what he was doing,” I argued weakly. “He was just being nice, Claire.” Exhaling heavily, I added, “He’s just a really good guy.”

“Fine,” she sighed, relenting on her anger a little. “Just give his coat back to him at school tomorrow and be done with the big ape.”

“Okay,” I replied, sad at the thought.

“He’s a fool, you know,” she added. “You’re gorgeous, and kind, and sweet, and loyal, and a million other brilliant things he’ll never find in whores like that Bella Wilkinson.”

“Thank you,” I replied, appreciating her attempt to console me. It wasn’t true, of course, but her words did help. “But you’re not allowed to hate him because of this.”

“Really?” she whined. “*Really*?”

“He didn’t do anything wrong, Claire,” I pushed. “Seriously. He couldn’t have been nicer to me.”

“Then why didn’t he kiss you back?” she demanded.

“Because he doesn’t want me,” I bit out. “Obviously.”

“Then he’s insane,” she grumbled. “If I had a penis or liked girls, I would want you.”

“Thanks,” I half sobbed, half laughed. “If I had a penis or liked girls, I’d want you, too.”

“So, we’re really not going to hate him?”

“No,” I replied. “We’re really not.”

“Ugh,” Claire groaned. “Fine.”

“You’re a great friend, Claire,” I told her. “I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“Am I a great enough friend that I get the details?”

“What kind of details?” I asked nervously. “What do you want to know?”

“All the details,” she replied.

Ugh.

“It’s so embarrassing,” I whispered. “Humiliating, actually.”

“Okay, I’m sorry,” she quickly replied. “You don’t have to talk about it.”

“He’s beautiful,” I whispered after a pause.

“Yeah, yeah,” she grumbled. “Everybody already knows that.”

“No, Claire,” I urged. “I mean he’s *really* beautiful.” Closing my eyes, I whispered, “Under the clothes.”

“Oh my god!” she screamed in my ear. “How do you know what’s under his clothes?”

“Because he took a shower and he was only half-dressed when I came out—”

“Came out of where?”

“His shower.”

“Hold up!” Claire squeaked, “Did you take a *shower* with Johnny Kavanagh?”

“What? No!” I shook my head. “I took a shower in his *shower*.”

“Okay, you need to take this back to the beginning because I’m losing the run of my filthy imagination here.”

“We were both soaked from the rain,” I explained with a weary sigh. “His mam took my clothes down to dry them. I used the shower in his en suite. He took a *separate* shower. And then we both just sort of ended up in his room.”

“With no clothes on?”

“He had boxers on,” I replied, resisting the urge to tell her about what I saw before he had his jocks on. “That’s it.”

“And you?” she pressed.

“Just a towel.” I bit down on my lip, feeling my face flame with heat. “I think I flashed him my, uh, you know… and I don’t really know how it happened, but we both ended up on his bed,” I hurried to say, keeping my

voice low. “And then he was right there, like his face was so close to mine…” Exhaling a ragged breath, I added, “And I just lost my mind and kissed him.”

“God,” Claire gasped. “It’s like a watching a train wreck, except instead of watching it, I’m listening to it.”

“I know,” I groaned. “And then I panicked and locked myself in his bathroom.” I cringed at the memory. “And he was so kind to me, Claire. I mean, he could have flipped out and thrown me out, but he just kept talking to me from the other side of the door, trying to coax me out—”

“Ugh, I can’t,” she moaned. “It hurts my heart too much.”

“He promised he wouldn’t talk about it if I came out.” I continued to talk despite her protests, needing to get this off my chest. “Of course, he lied. When we were back in his car, he gave me the talk—”

“Not *the talk*,” she breathed. “Please tell me he didn’t give you *the talk*.”

“He did,” I strangled out. “And then he kept telling me that I didn’t need to be sorry and I think he meant it, but I’m just so embarrassed by it all. I swear, I will never put myself out there like that for anyone ever again.”

“Damn,” Claire sighed. “I wish I didn’t have that stupid blitz tomorrow. I don’t want you being alone at school while you’re feeling like this.”

“Me too,” I agreed glumly. “At least Lizzie will be there.”

“Maybe don’t mention this to Liz,” Claire interjected. “She’ll cut his dick right off.”

“No one can know about this, Claire,” I whispered. “*No one*.”

“Agreed.”

I clutched my stomach when another stabbing pain ricocheted through me, causing me to grunt once more in pain.

“Hey, maybe you should take tomorrow off,” she offered, sounding concerned. “You don’t sound too good.”

“I’ll be okay,” I whispered.

And I would be.

I hoped.

49
I Fucked Up

JOHNNY

“Morning,” Gibsie acknowledged, sinking into the passenger seat of my car on Tuesday morning. “How’d training go yesterday?”

“I fucked up!” I blurted out.

“You fucked up?” Gibsie arched a brow as he buckled himself in. “In training?”

“No.” I shook my head. “I didn’t go.”

“Why not?”

“Because I *fucked* up!”

“How?”

“Fuck.” Groaning, I shifted into gear and pulled away from his house. “So fucking bad.” Tightening my hands on the wheel, I released a pained growl. “So fucking, *fucking* bad, Gibs.”

“Are you going to say anything other than the word *fuck*?” he drawled as he pulled a blank CD out of his schoolbag and slid it into my CD case. “By the way, I burned this for you last night,” he added with a smirk. “I think you’ll enjoy it.”

“Thanks,” I grumbled, too distracted to concentrate on anything other than my raging thoughts.

“Now,” Gibsie said, pulling out a box of cigarettes. He placed one between his lips and sparked up. “Are you going to tell me how you fucked up?”

“Roll the window down,” I grumbled. “You know I can’t stand the smell of those things.”

“I presume this meltdown has something to do with little Shannon?” he offered as he rolled the window down and exhaled a cloud of smoke out of it.

I nodded again, feeling panicky.

All night, I had been waiting to get this shit off my chest. I could hardly breathe with the pressure in my body—that, and my regrets, and the smell of her on my sheets.

I couldn't even enjoy having dinner with my da, something that because of conflicting schedules, we hadn't been able to do since New Year's Day. All through dinner last night, I was too lost inside my own head.

I was too caught up in *her*.

"I thought you liked me."

Well, fuck me, my heart just about cracked when she said those words.

"What did you do, Johnny?" Gibsie pushed, dragging me from my thoughts.

"I did it again," I admitted.

He eyed me warily. "You drove her home again?"

Nodding, I released a strangled groan. "Except this time, I went one further and *forced* her into taking a spin home after school."

"*Johnny—*"

"I literally picked her up and put her in the fucking car, Gibs." Expelling another frustrated breath, I sagged back in my seat and groaned. "With my *ma*."

He laughed. "You are an idiot."

"I know," I groaned. "And then Ma did what she does best."

"She meddled," Gibsie filled in knowingly.

"Brought her over to the house."

Gibsie's brows shot up. "Your house?"

"Oh yeah," I hissed, still feeling bitter. "Then she went and gave me *the talk*."

Gibsie shuddered. "Oh, Jesus."

"I know, lad." I shook my head, forcing myself to concentrate on the road. "It was brutal."

"Where was Shannon when this *talk* was going on?"

"That's the worst part," I replied with a grimace, as I indicated the school ahead. "Ma decided it would be a *wonderful* idea to make Shannon take a bleeding shower." I cast him an evil glare. "*Another one*."

"Are you shitting me?" Gibsie snickered.

“I shit you not,” I bit out, turning up the familiar laneway to Tommen. “Ma also thought it was a fabulous fucking idea to take Shannon’s wet clothes and put them in the dryer.”

“Stop. I can’t. This is too priceless.” He threw his head back and howled laughing. “Mammy Kavanagh’s a better wingman than I am!”

“Focus, Gibs!” I barked as I pulled into the car park. “It was bad. Really fucking bad.”

“How bad?” he asked.

I drove into my usual parking spot and killed the engine.

“How bad, Johnny?” Gibsie coaxed.

Exhaling a pained growl, I turned in my seat to face him. “She kissed me.”

Gibsie eyes lit up. “Yeah?”

I nodded. “On my bed. In a towel. Looking like a fucking wet dream. She just fucking put her mouth on me, Gibs.”

“In a towel?”

“Ma had her clothes, remember?” I strangled out. “She was wrapped in a towel and nothing else.”

Gibsie grinned. “Nothing else?”

“*Nothing* else,” I repeated, enunciating the word *nothing*.

“Did you see—”

“Yes,” I snapped and then groaned loudly. “Fuck.”

“And?”

“*Perfect*.”

“Fuck.”

“Yep.”

“Well, shit, lad,” Gibsie mused, expression thoughtful as he scratched his jaw. “I would never have guessed she’d make the first move.” Turning to look at me, he asked, “What did you do?”

“Froze,” I admitted with a pained exhale. “I completely fucking froze up, lad. And then she panicked and locked herself in the bathroom. It was a bleeding disaster. Took me ages to coax her out, and even then, she wouldn’t speak more than three words to me on the drive back to her place.”

“That”—Gibsie shook his head—“is a disaster.”

“Of the highest order,” I agreed glumly. “I tried to talk it out with her, but she wasn’t having it, lad. She didn’t want to hear a word I had to say.”

“What did you try and tell her?”

“The truth?” I offered wearily. “That I’m leaving in a couple of months and can’t commit to her.”

“You’re a little stupid for a genius, aren’t ya?” Gibsie mused.

I turned to glare at him. “Excuse me?”

“You drive her home multiple times, you take her out to the pub, to the cinema, you bring her home to your house—twice—and then she kisses you, and you *reject* her,” he shot back. “What did you expect her to do? Sit there and listen to it?”

“I did *not* fucking reject her,” I spat out. “I would never reject *her*!”

“Oh, okay,” Gibsie snickered. “*Sure*, you didn’t.”

“And you’re the one who told me to be her friend,” I accused.

“Well, I was wrong,” he chimed. “You can’t do it. It’ll never work. Give up now.”

“Yes, it will,” I hissed. “It has to.”

“Why does it have to work?” he asked.

“Because I need her—” I shook my head and expelled another frustrated breath. “Because I want to keep her in my life.”

“You want to keep her, period,” Gibsie countered. “Because you are ass over tit in love with that girl.”

“Stop it,” I warned.

“Fine.” He threw his hands up. “I’ll say no more about it.”

We sat in silence for a long time while Gibsie smoked another cigarette before I finally broke it by saying, “Do you know that she’s insanely good at PlayStation? Like fucking gamer good?”

Gibsie looked at me with surprise. “No shit?”

I nodded. “She kicked my ass, lad. I’ve never seen anyone clear missions as fast as she did.”

He exhaled another cloud of smoke and tossed his cigarette out the window. “Did she have a cheat sheet with her?”

“She didn’t need one,” I muttered as I pressed a button and rolled up the windows. “She had every bleeding code memorized.”

“Oh god,” Gibsie groaned. “That is so fucking sexy.”

I pointed to the passenger door. “Get out of my car.”

“I’m not thinking about her like that.” He laughed as he swung the door open and climbed out.

Yeah, he fucking was.

50
Period Leaks and Hero Boys

SHANNON

When I woke up on Tuesday morning, it took me a ridiculous amount of time to drag myself out of bed. I was in so much pain that all I wanted to do was bury my head under the duvet and stay there.

Knowing that staying home from school meant spending all day in the same house as my father was a big enough incentive to go to school. But the thought of having to face Johnny again meant it was a close call.

I didn't feel right. My mind was reeling and my body was in agony.

By the time I climbed off the bus at Tommen, my body felt like it was trying to hack itself apart from the inside out and it was starting with my stomach.

I had Johnny's jacket washed, dried, and wrapped up in a plastic carrier bag in the front pocket of my schoolbag, ready to return to him, like Claire and I discussed. I intended to give it back to him and bolt. Better still, if I saw Gibsie, I could give it to him and be done with it.

All morning, I watched out for him in the hallways, but we never crossed paths.

A million and one ridiculous thoughts and worries filled my mind.

Was he hurt?

I already knew he was hurt.

But was it worse?

Was it his adductor? Was he in the hospital? Was he sick?

God, I was pathetic.

I would have dwelled even more on his absence if it wasn't for the god-awful pain in my stomach demanding all of my attention. My stomach was cramping, with every one of my abdominal muscles agonizingly contracting like an attack of blades cutting me from the inside out.

This wasn’t anxiety-induced. No, this was definitely something else.

The pain was so bad I could hardly focus on my schoolwork, and I didn’t have the girls to distract me from it because Claire was at that away game with the girl’s hockey team, and Lizzie hadn’t shown up for school today. Knowing my luck, Lizzie was out sick with a vomiting bug and I was brewing the same.

Going through the motions, I went to all my classes, sat by myself, tried to blend in with the wallpaper, and prayed not to pass out. By the time big break rolled around, I’d had quite enough of school for one day and was prepared to do some morally questionable things for a couple of acetaminophen and a glass of water.

However, my day took a predominant turn for the worst when a girl from sixth year pulled me aside in the hallway and uttered the words every teenage girl on the face of the planet dreaded hearing at school. “Excuse me, hun, but I think you’re leaking.”

Because I was *me*, it took my brain several seconds to comprehend what she was saying, and several more before I gathered her meaning. The minute I did, I wanted the ground to open up and swallow me whole.

Scratch that; I wanted to burst into flames and disintegrate into thin air because having a sixth-year girl point out the fact that you were *leaking* in the middle of a school hallway had that effect on a girl.

Mortified, I dashed into the girls’ bathroom to investigate. Thankfully, the bathroom was empty when I barreled inside. Ditching my schoolbag on the floor, I stood with my back to the mirror and craned my head around.

“Oh, god, no!” I sob-gasped when my gaze landed on the bloodstain on the back of my gray school skirt.

It wasn’t a small patch, either.

Of course it wasn’t.

This was me we were talking about, and I never did embarrassment and shame by halves.

So, this was it. Today was the day Mother Nature decided to pay me a visit. Nine days after my sixteenth birthday.

Better late than never.

In the middle of school.

Oh dear Jesus.

Well, at least the excruciating stomach cramps made sense now.

In my defense, how the hell was I supposed to know? Never in my life had I encountered such gut-wrenching pelvic stabbing. Because this was my first proper period.

Grabbing my schoolbag and a handful of paper towels, I bolted into one of the stalls and locked the door behind me. Shimmying out of my skirt, I yanked off my tights and knickers, crying when blood smeared my legs.

Oh god.

Don't panic, Shannon. Don't freak out.

Inhaling a steadying breath, I quickly set to work cleaning myself up with only one thought in my mind.

Running away.

As soon as I was reasonably respectable looking, I was going straight home to bury my head under my blankets and die of shame in peace.

Pulling out my phone, I sent a freebie call me to Joey because, like usual, I didn't have any damn credit, and also like usual, I needed him to come save me.

He didn't respond.

Digging inside of my bag, I hunted for the tampon I knew I wouldn't find because why the hell would I find one?

It was like Mother Nature had decided to grace me with three years' worth of period pains and shame in this very moment.

God.

Grunting out a harsh breath, I clutched my stomach and held still, hoping I would find some relief.

I didn't.

I also rooted for the money I didn't have so I could buy sanitary towels I couldn't afford in the machine in the bathroom.

Two euro.

All I needed was a pathetic two-euro coin and I didn't even have that.

Thankfully, I did find a spare pair of underwear so I made a makeshift sanitary pad out of paper towels while tears streamed down my cheeks.

I was well aware that I didn't need to be crying over this. It was perfectly normal. But I was upset, embarrassed, and unprepared.

For once in my life, I wished things could go smoothly for me.

I was so tired of my life railroading me. I needed a reprieve.

I cleaned my skirt as best I could before slipping it back on. Then I yanked my jumper off and tied it around my waist to conceal the stain of shame. My legs were bare, my arms sleeveless, and I looked entirely out of place for March weather.

Sniffling, I rummaged around in my bag aimlessly, my fingers hovering over the plastic bag that contained Johnny's jacket. Pulling the jacket out of the plastic bag, I quickly stuffed my tights and underwear inside the bag and buried them at the bottom of my schoolbag.

Letting myself out of the stall, I shuffled over to the sink, dropped my schoolbag and the jacket on the floor, and scrubbed my hands raw with a profligate amount of soap, unable to stop the stupid tears dripping down my cheeks.

"Are you okay?" a female voice asked, startling me.

Sniffling, I turned to see a girl in a matching uniform step out of the toilet cubicle at the end of the bathroom—the one with the out-of-order sign. A thick cloud of smoke wafted around her, undetected by the unassembled smoke alarm on the ceiling. I had been so caught up in my personal breakdown that I didn't realize there was anyone else in here.

"I'm sorry," I mumbled. "I didn't know anyone else was in here."

"It's still pelting down outside," she announced, shaking a cigarette box in front of her. "I didn't fancy standing outside in the rain for a smoke."

My uniform was the only thing I had in common with the girl standing in front of me.

She was much older than me—and much more beautiful. Her black hair was cut in one of those classy bob-style haircuts that all the celebrities were currently sporting, and her face was flawless. She was tall and had a killer hourglass figure with huge boobs bulging against the fabric of her navy jumper.

She walked over to where I was standing and leaned against the sink next to mine.

"Why were you crying?"

"Oh, I'm okay," I quickly deflected. "It was nothing."

"It didn't sound like nothing," she mused, light blue eyes locked on mine. "You were bawling like a baby in there."

I shrugged, feeling my face flame with embarrassment.

"Bad day?"

More like bad life…

I exhaled heavily. “You could say that.”

“I’ve had a few of those,” she replied.

I doubted it. She looked too perfect to have seen a bad day in her life.

She tilted her head to one side, studying my face. “You’re the new girl.”

I nodded.

“From the public school?”

My heart sank. Fear prickled across my skin. But I managed to nod and remain impassive.

“What’s your name again?”

“Um, it’s Shannon,” I replied, voice small. “Shannon Lynch.”

“Shannon.” Recognition flashed in her eyes, and I wasn’t sure I liked it.

Feeling uncomfortable, I stepped around her and moved for the heater and gave my hands a three-second dry-off before reaching for my stuff.

“I’m Bella,” she announced, pushing off the sink. “And that”—she snatched the jacket out of my hands—“does not belong to you.”

My heart dropped into my ass.

“How did you get this?” she asked. Her tone was still light but her expression was thunderous. “Did Johnny give it to you?”

“Oh, no, I’m sorry,” I replied lamely, adjusting my schoolbag onto my shoulders. “I must have grabbed it off the coatrack by mistake.”

“Don’t lie,” she warned. “How did you get his jacket?”

“He gave it to me,” I whispered as a slight tremor racked through my body.

She arched a finely tweezed brow. “Johnny just *gave* you his jacket?”

I nodded and swallowed deeply.

“When?” she demanded.

“Yesterday.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Why?”

“It was raining.”

“So? It’s Ireland.” She placed a hand on her hip and glared down at me. “It’s always raining.”

I shifted uncomfortably. “He was just being nice.”

“Johnny isn’t *nice* and especially not to random strangers,” she spat out.

Shrugging, I moved to slip past her but she held out a hand, blocking my path.

I shrunk away.

“Wait,” she commanded, gaze flickering from the jacket in her hand to my face. “I’m not done talking to you.”

If she hits you, then hit her back, Shannon, I mentally chanted my brother’s advice in my head over and over. *You are nobody’s punching bag. Don’t let anyone push you around.*

“A little bird told me that you’ve been spinning around in his car with him.”

It didn’t sound like a question, so I didn’t answer. I had enough altercations with girls just like Bella under my belt to know that whatever I said could and *would* be used against me. It was safer to remain silent.

“Do you know who I am?” she finally asked.

I nodded.

“Do you know who he is?”

I nodded.

“Now, do you know what you are?”

I shrugged.

“A nobody,” Bella said softly. “You are nothing, little girl. Not to him. Not to me.” She stepped closer and I had to force myself not to flinch. “So whatever game you’re playing, you need to back the fuck up because—” She paused to brush a hair off my shoulder, smiling sweetly down at me. “Whatever little drama you were having in that bathroom cubicle will pale in comparison to the hell I will rain down on you if you even think about going after him.”

“I don’t want him,” I choked out, feeling close to fainting.

And he doesn’t want me.

Bella threw her head back and laughed.

“*Everyone* wants him,” she finally replied, still laughing humorlessly. “And here’s a heads-up: you are *nothing* special. Johnny’s only being nice to you because you were a stupid little bitch who got herself tangled up in one of their training sessions and caused him a ton of hassle.”

My heart sank.

“You thought I didn’t know about your little display on the pitch that day?” She arched a brow. “I know *everything* that happens around here.”

“It was an accident,” I whispered, feeling my eyes well up with tears.

“As if,” she sneered. “You were looking for his attention and you got it.”

“No,” I mumbled. “I wasn’t.”

“Oh, please,” she hissed. “Ever since you showed up here, you’ve caused him nothing but problems. Fighting with Ronan McGarry?” She arched a brow. “I bet you loved that, didn’t you?”

I shook my head, mortified.

“I hope you know that he’s being nice to you because he has no choice,” she added, glaring at me. “Because your *mommy* tried to have him suspended and he needs to keep his nose squeaky clean for the Academy.”

My mouth fell open.

“You thought I didn’t know that, either?” She laughed softly. “I know all about you. All your little secrets. All the skeletons in your closet.”

“I don’t… I haven’t… It’s not—”

“Save it,” Bella snapped. “Your poor-little-me victim act won’t work on me. I’m letting you know that what those girls in that shitty school you came from did to you will feel like a walk in the park in comparison to what I do if you don’t *back off*.” She gave me a hard look before adding, “This is me being friendly, Shannon. I won’t be so nice if I have to tell you again.”

“You won’t have to,” I strangled out.

Not giving her a chance to respond, I slipped around her and bolted out of the bathroom. I needed to get the hell out of here and fast.

Because it was lunchtime and raining outside, the corridors were filled with other students taking shelter from the weather.

With my heart hammering rapidly in my chest, I maneuvered through the crowd with my head down and my mind set on the exit. I only made it to five feet from the bathroom door when I crashed into a wall of hard muscle. The impact caused me to bounce backwards and land in a heap on the floor.

“Whoa, shit,” a familiar voice grunted. “Sorry about that.”

Two large hands wrapped around my arms and pulled me up.

“I didn’t see you there, little Shannon,” Gibsie chuckled as he set me on my feet. “Are you okay?”

I had done enough stalking to know that wherever Gerard Gibson was, Johnny Kavanagh was never far behind, and vice versa. That was a

worrying concept considering the war that had been just declared on me.

I nodded once and tried to sidestep him. Problem was, Gibsie intercepted my move and blocked my path.

“Hey,” he coaxed, tone suddenly serious. “Are you okay? Did I hurt you or something?”

“I’m f-fine,” I sniffled, desperately trying to keep my sobs at bay.

It didn’t work. The minute he crouched down and made eye contact with me, a huge sob racked my body.

“Shit,” he muttered, looking around nervously. “I did hurt you.”

“N-no, you d-didn’t. I just n-need to g-go h-home,” I spluttered, crying like a baby right in front of him. “Right n-now.”

It was all too much for me.

The blood. The threats. The panic.

It was too much and I was freaking out.

“Should I hug you?”

I shook my head.

“Should I take you home?”

I shrugged helplessly.

“Right now?”

I sniffled in response.

“Yeah, uh, okay,” Gibsie replied, tone laced with confusion. “I’ll take you home now.”

“Shannon?”

The sound of my name being called out, followed a few moments later by Johnny coming to stand beside Gibsie, only confirmed my theory about the pair traveling in a pack.

“What’s wrong?” Johnny demanded, eyeing me with concern. He turned to Gibsie. “What did you do to her?”

“Nothing, lad,” Gibsie quickly replied, holding his hands up. “I swear.”

“She’s fucking crying, Gibs,” Johnny snarled, squaring up to his friend. “You obviously did something.”

Panic roared to life inside of me, urged on by the sight of Bella standing outside the bathroom door, observing our interaction with a dark expression. I knew that look well. It came with a promise of pain.

“Shannon,” Johnny growled, turning his gaze back to me. “What happened?”

“Please don’t talk to me,” I choked out before sidestepping around him.

Johnny’s reflexes were much quicker than mine because his hand shot out, fingers wrapping around the curve of my elbow. “Shannon?”

“Don’t touch me!” I hissed, panicked, and yanked my arm free.

Johnny reeled back like I struck him. “What’s your *problem*?”

“Johnny, lad,” Gibsie interjected, trailing after us. “Maybe you should listen to her—”

“Gibsie, maybe you should fuck off and leave us alone,” Johnny shot back heatedly. “This is private.”

“Suit yourself, Bulldozer,” Gibsie chimed before sauntering off.

“Shannon, what’s wrong?” Johnny repeated, his entire focus on my face. “Is it because of what happened last night? Because you don’t need to —”

“No,” I strangled out, begging the Lord to take mercy on me and not have Johnny bring up last night in the middle of the school. “It’s not about last night.”

“Then what’s wrong?” he demanded. “Talk to me!”

“I just need you to leave me alone,” I choked out, moving to step around him again.

“I will—” Johnny caught ahold of my arm once more when I tried to duck around him, and pulled me back before finishing, “Once you tell me what the hell is going on.”

My gaze flickered to where Bella was glaring daggers at me. I flinched at the sight of her menacing expression and Johnny noticed. He craned his head around and his whole body visibly tensed.

“Jesus Christ,” he growled, running a hand through his hair in what looked like obvious frustration. “What did she do?”

I shook my head. “Nothing.”

“Shannon, tell me what she said to you.” He turned his hard gaze on me. “I *know* she said something to you.”

When I didn’t answer him, Johnny shook his head.

“Fine,” he snarled, turning his back to me. “I’ll find out for myself.”

“Wait—” Catching ahold of the back the navy hoodie he was wearing over his uniform, I dragged him back to me, “Please don’t say anything.”

“*Don’t say anything*?” Johnny gaped down at me. “Shannon, if she’s giving you shite, then I most definitely *am* going to say something.” He

turned back to glare at Bella. “A lot of fucking somethings.”

“She didn’t!” I lied, desperate to defuse the situation and stop this from exploding. “I swear.”

“Don’t even think about lying to me again,” Johnny shot back, looking furious. “You’re crying and there’s a girl over there with a vendetta against me shooting fucking daggers at us.” Narrowing his eyes, he bit out, “I’m doing the math here, Shannon, and two plus two equals a bad bitch.”

“No, you’re wrong, I just—” My words broke off and I grunted as a sharp pain ricocheted through my belly.

“Shite.” His hand shot out and clasped my elbow, steadying me. “Are you *okay*?”

“Yeah,” I strangled out, breathing through my nose, as I clutched my side. “I’m fine.”

“Jesus Christ,” Johnny exclaimed, gaping down at me with a horrified expression. “Did she *hit* you?”

“What? No!” I spluttered, panicked.

His gaze darkened. “Is it her? Has she been giving you shit?” He reached up and touched my neck. “Was *that* her?”

I shook my head.

“Don’t lie to me, Shannon,” he growled. “I fucking hate liars.”

“I’m not lying to you!”

“Then tell me what’s going on,” he demanded, running a hand through his hair. Exhaling a frustrated growl, he added, “Please tell me before I lose my shit and crack up.”

Oh god.

Mortified, I waved for Johnny to come closer, and when he did, I leaned up on my tiptoes and whispered into his ear, “I’m after getting my period.”

I closed my eyes when I said this, mentally kicking myself for telling him this.

“It’s my first one,” I quickly rambled on, watching his side profile carefully as I indulged him with my worst nightmare. “And I’m in some serious pain.”

Rocking back down on my heels, I exhaled shakily and peeked up at his face, expecting him to turn and run for the hills.

Johnny certainly looked horrified, and his entire frame had frozen, but he *didn't* run, and the hand he had on my elbow didn't move, either. It *tightened*.

Rooted to the spot, I stared up at him in terror while he mirrored me.

"You coming, Kav?" one of his friends called out.

Johnny waved a hand, gesturing that he was busy.

"Johnny?"

"Fuck off, Feely," he growled. "I'm talking here."

"Alright, lad, but we're heading down town for lun—"

"I said I'm fucking talking here!" Johnny snarled. "Piss off."

"I probably shouldn't have told you that," I quickly finished, stepping back, putting some space between us, cheeks burning an unflattering shade of scarlet. "Go on with your friend. I'm fine."

"That's what's wrong?" he asked, ignoring my words, blue eyes searching mine. "That's why you're crying?"

"Yeah," I whispered.

"You're in pain?"

I bit down on my lip and forced another small nod.

He blew out a breath. "I have some ibuprofen in my gear bag for my adductor." He looked at me with a hopeful expression. "Would those help?"

"God, yes," I sighed, feeling a wave of gratitude wash over me at the thought of pain relief.

"My bag's in the changing room in the P.E. hall," he stated, gesturing toward the entrance. "Come with me."

I glanced uncertainly to where Bella was still watching me and debated my next move before deciding to go with Johnny. I needed the medicine and he was throwing me a life jacket by offering me a temporary escape.

Shame or pain, Shannon, shame or pain?

Shame, I decided, and fell into step with him.

"Slut!" Bella called out, loudly enough to garner everyone's attention.

I groaned internally.

"That's right," she hissed when my step faltered. "I'm talking about you, slut!"

"Don't," I begged when I felt him stiffen beside me. "Johnny, please don't do anythi—"

Johnny didn’t give me a chance to finish before he swung around and stormed over to where Bella was standing. “You’re one to fucking talk!”

Frozen to the spot, I watched their heated interaction, knowing this was my perfect opportunity to bolt, but unable to make my legs run. I was exhausted from running away, and somewhere deep inside the back of my mind, I wondered if this boy was the one to anchor me.

It certainly seemed that way when I heard him roaring profanities right back at a screeching Bella.

A large crowd was gathering around to watch, and it didn’t seem to faze Johnny one bit.

“Leave her the fuck alone,” he was barking. “She’s not your business.”

“*You’re* my business,” Bella screamed back at him.

Johnny threw his hands in the air. “You’re *delusional*.”

“I take it you were lying to me when you said nothing was going on?” she snarled.

“Take it whatever way you want, Bella. I couldn’t give a flying fuck what you think,” he shot back loudly. “Just leave her out of your bullshit scheming.”

He was defending me.

Not my brother. Not Claire. Not Lizzie. Not a teacher.

No, this boy who made my heart jackknife in my chest at regular intervals and my common sense flatline, was standing in the middle of the school hallway, defending my honor.

He had rejected me last night, and today he was taking on my bullies.

My mind was spinning, I felt so confused.

“*Her*, Johnny?” Bella hissed, casting a scathing look at me. “Seriously?”

“Stay *away* from her,” he warned in a menacing tone. “Push back on this and you won’t like the results.”

“Are you threatening me?” she hissed. “What do you think your coaches at the Academy will say about that?”

“Why don’t you call them and find out?” he spat out before turning on his heels and stalking back to where I was.

His expression was so thunderous that I felt myself shrink away.

“Come on,” Johnny ordered when he reached me. He placed a hand on my lower back and urged me to walk. “We’re leaving.”

Unsure, I let him guide me away from the staring crowd.

“Where are we going?” I whispered, hurrying to keep his pace.

“Away from here,” he bit out, jaw clenching.

“Why?”

“Because if *I* stay here and she says something to you, I’ll lose my shit. If *you* stay here and she says something to you, I’ll lose my shit,” he explained in a tight tone. “Therefore, *I* need to go”—he paused to pull the glass door open and usher me outside—“and *you* need to come with me,” he finished, leading me into the rain.

“I, uh, yeah, okay,” I whispered as I hurried along beside him.

My emotions were whishing through me as he led me out through the courtyard.

“You lied to me, Shannon,” Johnny stated quietly as he steered us toward the P.E. hall. “She said something to you.”

“I didn’t want to cause any trouble,” I admitted.

“That wasn’t your call to make,” he replied. “Did you lie about her hitting you, too? About why you’re in pain?”

“No,” I croaked out. “That part was true.”

Regrettably.

“And your neck?”

“That wasn’t her,” was all I replied.

Johnny was quiet for a long moment.

“Don’t ever lie to me again,” he finally said in a quiet tone as he cast me a sideways glance. “I can’t take it.”

“I won’t,” I told him, hating the lie as it fell from my lips.

We reached the P.E. hall and hurried inside, both glad to get out of the rain.

I shuffled behind him, this area of the school more his forte than it was mine. I kept my eyes trained on his back, walking after him. I hesitated when he sauntered into the boys’ changing room, but then he held the door open for me and gestured me inside with an expectant look.

Like a skittish foal, I hurried inside only to jump in surprise when the heavy door slammed closed behind us.

The overpowering smell of teenage boy was the first thing that hit me. The stench of sweat, deodorant, and bodily fluids was so strong I had to force back the urge to gag. It wasn’t a smell I was unfamiliar with—Joey,

anyone?—but this particular stench was eye-watering, intensified by the fact that forty or so from the opposite sex used this room at any given time.

Feeling completely out of place, and with my nostrils thoroughly violated, I watched Johnny stroll over to a bench on the right-hand side of the room. He sank down on the bench, dragged a bag out from beneath his legs, and quickly unzipped it.

“Come here,” he ordered as he rummaged around inside of his bag, pulling out socks, cans of deodorant, and empty bottles of Lucozade Sport. “Come here, Shannon,” he repeated calmly.

So, I did. I walked over to where he was.

Johnny elbowed a random schoolbag off the bench and gestured to the space he had made. “Sit down.”

I eyed the bench warily.

Shaking his head, Johnny reached up and snagged my hand.

“Sit down,” he coaxed, pulling me down on the bench beside him.

Our shoulders brushed, and I skittered an inch or two away before wrapping my arms around my stomach.

He was big and strong and intimidatingly beautiful.

I felt very small around him. Very young. Very uncertain.

Very rejected.

I was intimidated, but not because he was scary. He wasn’t, or at least I didn’t find him scary. I’m sure he terrified the guys he played, but that’s not what was happening here.

Not for me.

No, I was intimidated because he looked like that and I was infinitely inferior. Whatever spark of hope I had in my heart quenched out. He would never look at me when he could have the likes of Bella at his disposal.

They matched. He was suited with her.

Someone who looked like a Page 3 model. Someone who looked like a woman worthy of *that*.

I was a teenage girl with a bad case of lust.

“Fucking finally,” Johnny muttered, dragging out a rectangular box of ibuprofen from the side pocket of his bag. He popped two small tablets out from the foil encasement, then held them out to me.

Clumsily, I tried and failed to take the tablets from his fingers. Flushed, I tried again and again, failing miserably until I managed to knock them out

of his hands altogether.

“Relax,” he encouraged me, stooping down to scoop up the pills. I watched him wipe them on the front of his hoodie and then he blew my mind with three words, “Open your mouth.”

I gaped. “I can do it.”

“You obviously can’t,” he shot back, smirking. “Open your mouth.”

I sat there stumped for several long beats before finally opening my mouth.

He dropped the two small pills on my tongue and winked.

Reaching into his bag, he thrust a capped bottle of water into my hands and said, “Drink.”

I did. Like a well-trained dog, I did exactly what he told me to.

Annoyed with myself for being so compliant, and then annoyed even further for being pissed with a boy who was clearly taking time out of his lunch break to help me, I swallowed the tablets and sighed.

I waited for Johnny to stand up and tell me he needed to go back to his friends, but he didn’t. He just sat there with me while the pain relief took effect. He didn’t mock me or run. He didn’t react in the way most boys would. He took control of the situation.

I knew right there that he was exceptionally special and that it had nothing to do with his sporting capabilities. He was exceptional on the inside, too.

“Do you need to go back for lunch?” I croaked out. “I’ll be okay in a bit—”

“I’m happy to stay,” Johnny quickly cut me off by saying. He rubbed his neck with his hand and said, “I like the peace and quiet.”

So, we sat.

We sat and said *nothing*. Not one single word.

I was feeling a multitude of emotions right now, ranging from shame to mortification to fear, but with every minute that passed, I slowly calmed down.

Several long minutes of unspoken silence had passed between us when Johnny finally broke it by clearing his throat. “How’s it now?”

“Not as bad,” I whispered, relieved with the speed with which the medication was working. “I don’t feel like I’m being stabbed by a thousand blunt knives anymore.”

He frowned in horror and I shook my head, annoyed at myself for once again disclosing too much information to him.

“I don’t know shite all about what’s going on with your, uh, your body,” he added, cheeks turning pink. “But I hope it fucks off soon.”

His words, so crass and boyish, yet sincere and caring, caused a small laugh to crack through my nervousness.

“I don’t think it works that way,” I replied, forcing myself to look him in the eye. “But thanks for helping me.”

“Have to say, it’s a first for me.” He frowned at the thought before muttering, “Thank fucking god.”

“Oh god, I’m sorry.” I jumped up to leave, but he caught ahold of my hand, pulling me back down on the bench.

“I don’t want you to be sorry,” he said gruffly. “There’s nothing to be sorry for. I just meant that I don’t have any sisters so this shite is foreign to me.”

“I bet,” I mumbled, embarrassed.

Did he think of me as a sister? It certainly sounded like he did. He certainly reacted to my kiss like he did. Had I been sister-zoned?

“Stop overthinking,” Johnny instructed in a coaxing tone, distracting me from my internal battle. “Everything’s fine.”

I turned to look at him. “What makes you think I’m overthinking?”

He shrugged, smiling this amazing boyish grin at me. “Am I wrong?”

No. No, of course he wasn’t.

Overthinking was my specialty.

Dammit.

“I can’t help it,” I admitted, feeling my face heat up. “It’s in my nature. I’m a born worrier.”

“Well,” he sighed. “One thing you don’t need to worry about is Bella.”

The minute I heard her name, I automatically began to *worry*. Worry and overthink.

What would she say next? What would she do? Was I going to get a hiding from her the next time she caught me in the bathrooms? Should I run now?

“Stop,” Johnny ordered, intercepting my panic. “You *don’t* need to worry about her.” He leaned back against the wall and hooked his hands

together on his lap. “If she even thinks about coming at you again, I’ll know about it and I’ll sort it.”

“She has your jacket,” I blurted out. “I washed it and brought it to school to give it back to you, but she, uh, took it off me.”

“I have plenty more jackets,” he replied. “I’m just sorry she gave you shite over me. That shouldn’t have happened to you. I’d tell you that she’s psychotic, but you’ve probably already figured that out on your own.”

“She’s mad about you, Johnny,” I told him, voice small.

And so am I…

“She’s mad about my lifestyle,” he corrected with a heavy sigh. “She doesn’t even know me, Shannon.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m a prize to her. A shiny trophy,” he muttered under his breath. “That’s all I am to most people.”

“Not to me,” I told him.

Johnny looked at me.

I forced myself not to turn away.

“No?” I could see frustration and hope flashing around in his blue eyes.

“No,” I confirmed quietly.

“Well, that’s good to know,” he replied, blue eyes locked on mine, tone gruff.

“I’m really sorry for what I did last night,” I whispered, forcing myself to address the elephant in the room.

“Shannon.” Johnny leaned forward, rested his elbows on his thighs, and sighed heavily. “There’s nothing to be sorry for.”

“There is,” I mumbled. “I shouldn’t have done that.” Shaking my head, I resisted the urge to bolt, choosing instead to be a grown-up about the situation. Tricky thing to do, given my age and rampant emotions around this boy, but I did it. “It won’t happen again.”

“I *don’t* want you to be sorry, Shannon,” he replied gruffly.

I exhaled shakily. “You don’t?”

He shook his head slowly. “No.”

And just like that, the air changed around us.

“I should probably go,” I whispered, quickly breaking the tension.

I stood up before I did something stupid, like kiss him.

Oh wait, I already did that.

Ugh…

"There's a bus going my route at two o'clock with my name on it."

And then maybe I won't have to deal with my dad.

Johnny frowned. "You're not going back to class?"

I shook my head. "No, I need to go home and, uh, sort myself out."

"Yeah, uh, right," he muttered. "Of course." He checked his watch and said, "It's quarter to two now," before turning his gaze back on me. "I'll drive you."

I opened my mouth to say no, but Johnny got there first.

"I want to take you home," he told me. "I need to make sure you're okay."

"Why?"

"I just do." Standing up, Johnny reached for my bag and tossed it over his shoulder before turning to look at me. "Let me take you home, Shannon."

Don't do it, Shannon. Don't put yourself through it again.

And don't you dare get your hopes up.

I blew out a ragged breath. "Yeah, okay."

51
Losing the Run of Myself

JOHNNY

Shannon was in my car again.

So much for not bulldozing. They might as well slap a CAT sticker on my forehead and switch on my hazards, I seemed to do so much of it around this girl.

And I was nervous—so much that my stupid fucking heart could have been a strong contender for Olympic gold in boxing, it was thumping around so hard in my chest.

Fucking Bella. She needed to get a bleeding life and stop interfering in mine. She needed to step the hell back and let go. Messing around with Shannon was something I would not tolerate. I hoped she got that message loud and clear today because I was not fucking around. Not when it came to the girl sitting beside me.

"Are you warm enough?" Blasting the heater in her face probably wasn't my brightest idea, but I didn't know what to do. I had zero experience with the fucked-up workings of the female body. I only knew about the fun parts.

Already, I had forced my hoodie over her head and shoved tablets down her throat in my pathetic attempt to help. I wanted to make her better. I wanted to make it right. In whatever way she needed me to do it. I just didn't know how.

Whatever she needed from me, I was more than willing to provide.

That was a sobering thought.

Jesus Christ, I'd opened myself up to danger with this girl.

"I'm okay," Shannon replied as she settled into the passenger seat of my car.

She pulled her long brown hair out from the collar of my hoodie and draped it over her shoulder.

“Thanks again,” she added shyly. “I promise I’ll give this one back to you.”

“No problem.” Clenching my jaw, I forced myself to keep my eyes on the road and not on the way her skirt was hidden beneath the hem of my hoodie and how *high* said hoodie rode up her bare thighs when she was sitting. “Keep it.”

“Sorry?”

“The hoodie.” Clearing my throat, I tightened my hand on the wheel to keep myself from doing something reckless. “Hang on to it.”

“Why?”

I could *feel* her blue eyes on me—I knew that sounded thick, but I could—and the sensation caused my arms to break out in goose bumps.

I shrugged. “Because it looks good on you.”

Johnny, you bleeding eejit!

“Are you feeling better?” I hurried to ask—and distract her. “Did the ibuprofen help?”

I glanced over at her and bit back a groan. She was so fucking beautiful it was painful, with those big blue eyes staring back at me all innocent and full of uncertainty. I didn’t need the temptation that came with being this close to her. Problem was, every time she ran, I found myself chasing right after her, desperate to just *be with her*.

“I’m okay, Johnny,” she replied in a small voice. “You’ve helped me.” She smiled shyly. “Again.”

I snapped my gaze back on the road and fought to get my body under control. “It’s no problem.” I had no idea what this girl was doing to me, but I was burning the hell up. “Anytime.”

“I like your music,” Shannon said then, giving me a welcome distraction from my wayward thoughts. “You have good taste.”

“Go on,” I encouraged when her fingers fluttered toward the stereo. Reaching over, I snatched my iPod, which was attached to my stereo, off the dashboard and handed it to her. “Find something you like.”

“Are you sure?” she asked, voice small and uncertain.

I nodded and smiled, trying to reassure her.

It must have worked because she whispered, “I love them all,” as she began to flick through track after track. “You have amazing taste.”

“Thanks.” I shifted uncomfortably, feeling a weird tingling sensation in the pit of my stomach. “I like good music.”

Spending countless hours working out alone gave me the opportunity to broaden my taste.

“Me too,” she agreed. “And your music is epic.”

It wasn’t that I wasn’t used to being on the receiving end of compliments. It was just that they usually revolved around rugby. Shannon clearly wasn’t impressed or fazed by my role. It was both a relief and a worry.

I didn’t know how to handle that. She was confusing the shite out of me.

“I wouldn’t have pegged you for a Beatles fan,” Shannon mused, stopping on an old number. “‘Here Comes the Sun’?” she questioned, brow arched. “You like this one?”

“It’s my favorite one of theirs,” I told her, palms sweating under her scrutiny.

“Me too,” she said softly. “My great-granda Murphy used to sing this to me when I was little.”

I glanced over at her. “Yeah?”

Shannon nodded in confirmation. “Yeah, whenever I got scared or nervous, he would always sit me on his lap and sing those lyrics in my ear.” She sighed contently. “And it always worked.”

For some unknown reason, I made a mental note of that piece of information and stored it away for future reference.

Shannon was silent then, clearly immersed in the song.

Meanwhile, I held the steering wheel with a death grip, desperately trying to concentrate on the road ahead and not the girl sitting beside me, fucking up my well-laid plans.

“Do you have an iPod?” I asked when I pulled up outside her house—her actual house this time.

I was stalling, not wanting her to get out of my car. The pang of disappointment I felt when we reached our destination was the same one that consumed me every time she left, and that was incredibly disconcerting.

“I could put some of my music on it for you,” I offered. “If you’d like?”

“Me?” Shannon blushed bright pink and shook her head. “Uh, no, I could never afford one of those.” She unfastened her seat belt. “I use an old CD Discman of Joey’s to listen to music.”

I nodded nonchalantly, while mentally kicking the shite out of myself for being so dense.

“You like the classics?” I blurted out, feeling all panicky when she reached for the door handle.

“Yes,” she replied, turning back to face me, eyes bright with excitement. “Do you?”

“I like a lot of stuff,” I told her.

You, most of all.

“Shake it off, baby?”

My brows shot up. “Excuse me?”

“‘Shake It Off, Baby.’” Shannon stared back at me, all innocent and cute. “Do you like it?”

It took me a few seconds to realize she wasn’t calling *me* baby and that she was referring to a song.

“You mean ‘Twist and Shout,’” I corrected gruffly. “Yeah, that’s a good one.”

“Do you like Reckless Kelly?” she asked then.

I shook my head. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard of them.”

“They have this new song out called ‘Wicked Twisted Road,’” she explained. “Are you sure you haven’t heard it?”

My heart stopped in my chest.

That song from the pub. The one that fucked with my head.

Jesus…

“You should,” Shannon continued to say. “Listen to it, I mean.” Her cheeks turned pink when she said, “It reminds me of you.”

Rattled. I was thoroughly fucking rattled by this girl.

Partly because I had related to the words of that song, but mostly because *she* related the words of the song to *me*.

Her red lips and rosy cheeks were fucking beautiful and I had to take a moment before I could form a coherent sentence and not sound like a fucking eejit.

“I’ll do that,” was all I came up with.

“Well, thanks for saving me,” she whispered. Her eyes darted from my eyes to my mouth several times before she leaned over and pressed her lips to my cheek. “Again.”

It was the smallest, briefest, least sexy peck, but it had come from her lips and that changed everything. Just like last night had changed everything. It deepened everything I had been desperately trying to deny. The signs I had been hiding from. They shot up like neon posters on the sides of buildings.

I was so fucking thrown off-kilter by this girl.

Stunned, I could do nothing but stare at her and mutter the words, “You’re welcome.”

With glowing red cheeks, Shannon pushed the car door open and moved to climb out.

“Wait!” I regrettably called out, snaking a hand out and catching her wrist.

Shannon looked at me with wide eyes.

Let her go, asshole. Let the girl go.

You can’t do right by her.

“Here—” Reaching into the glove compartment, I pulled out a leather case and quickly flicked through a bunch of mix CDs, stopping when I found the one I wanted, “Listen to track nine.” I practically shoved the CD into her hand and shrugged. “Reminds me of you.”

“Oh, okay,” she replied, holding the CD carefully. “I will.”

“Good.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Bye, Johnny,” she whispered before quickly closing the door and hurrying away.

“Bye, Shannon,” I replied gruffly, watching her every move as she walked away from me.

Trouble. I was in so much fucking trouble.

I drove the whole way home on autopilot with my brain reeling, my hormones raging, and life throwing a tiny brown-haired plot twist in my path. I was so consumed in my thoughts that it wasn't until I parked up in my usual spot out back that I noticed her schoolbag was still in my car.

Groaning, I slapped my head on the wheel and prayed for an intervention.

I needed one. Because this girl was going to ruin me.

Half an hour later, I was standing outside Shannon's front door with sweaty palms and a racing heart.

What the hell was I doing here?

This was madness.

Put the schoolbag down and walk the fuck away, the sensible part of me instructed.

But of course, I didn't listen.

No, because I had to knock instead.

The sound of footsteps pattering on the staircase came from the other side of the door followed by a key twisting in the lock, and then she was there, standing in front of me, obliterating any notion of walking away.

"Hi, Johnny," Shannon said in a breathy voice, staring up at me all wide-eyed and lethal. "You're back."

Yeah, I was back. Like a bad fucking smell that seemed to follow her around.

"Uh, yeah, I'm back." Shaking my head, I pulled her bag off my shoulder and held it out for her. "You forgot this in my car again."

"I'm so sorry." She blushed the most adorable shade of pink. "Were you knocking for long?" She reached for her bag and then heaved it into the house. "I was in the shower."

Yeah, I could tell.

Her long hair was loose, flowing down her body in damp curls, she was wearing a white vest and the tiniest pair of pajama shorts I'd ever seen in my life, and all my brain could register was bare skin—way too much bare skin.

"Don't be sorry," I said gruffly, trying to focus on my words and not my wayward thoughts. "And no, I just got here."

"Well, thanks for bringing it to me," Shannon said, dragging my attention back to her face. "I didn't even notice. I would have been in a

major panic in the morning."

"Again, it's no bother," I replied and then proceeded to stare at her like a fucking tool.

Well, this wasn't awkward at all.

Move your feet, Johnny.

Leave the girl alone.

"Do you have training this evening?" she asked.

Yes.

"No."

"Do you want to come inside?" she offered nervously.

My brows shot up. "Inside?"

She bit down on her bottom lip and shrugged. She looked unsure. Like she shouldn't be inviting me into her house.

"Do you *want* me to come inside?" I asked with a frown.

She nodded shyly and opened the door inward. "If you want to?"

Don't do it, lad, my brain warned. *Don't put yourself in temptation's way.*

Against my better judgment, I stepped inside.

Shoving my hands in my pockets, I watched as Shannon quickly locked the door again.

I focused my attention on her and not my dilapidated surroundings. The place was tidy, but the walls badly needed replastering and a fresh lick of paint.

"There won't be anyone home until evening time," she announced as she led me through the short hallway and into the kitchen.

That was not good information. Not good at all.

"Would you like a can of Coke?" Pulling open the fridge, she retrieved two cans and smiled. "Joey's addicted and he always buys the real brand stuff."

She held a can out to me and I shook my head.

"I can't drink that," I replied, and then felt like a tool when her smile fell.

"Oh."

"I want to," I quickly assured her. "But I'm in training."

"Oh, yeah," she mumbled, placing one of the cans back in the fridge. "I forgot about the rugby thing."

I bit back a smile. “Yeah, the rugby thing.”

She stared up at me then, looking as unsure as I felt.

“Do you want to come up to my room?”

My brows shot up, matching the sudden spike in my heart rate. “Your room?”

Blushing, she tucked her hair behind her ear and hurried to say, “It’s just that I don’t normally stay down here… I mean I do, but I don’t… because…I…” Her voice trailed off and she sighed heavily. “Never mind, it was a stupid—”

“Okay.”

Her eyes widened. “Okay?”

I nodded. “Lead the way.”

I waited until Shannon had turned around before slapping the heel of my hand against my forehead. I was so fucking stupid. This was worse than coming inside. This was wrong.

I knew it was.

And still, I followed her up a narrow staircase, avoiding rogue Legos and stepping over children’s toys on the ascent.

The bedroom Shannon led me into at the front of the house was a glorified box room. She stepped around me, which wasn’t easy in small quarters, and turned the lock on her door before walking the four steps it took to reach her bed. Meanwhile, I stood like a tool in her tiny bedroom, not knowing what the hell I was supposed to do now.

The single bed pushed against the far side of the room took up the entire width of the wall. There was a bedside locker next to it, a chest of drawers shoved against the opposite wall, and not a lot else.

“It’s a small house for a family of eight,” Shannon acknowledged quietly, noticing my staring. She set her Coke down on her bedside locker and shrugged. “I’m the only girl so I get the box room.”

“It’s a nice room,” I replied as I walked over to her bed and sat down.

I was already in the danger zone. I might as well be comfortable.

“Don’t lie,” she said with a sad smile. “It’s a dump.”

“*No*,” I corrected. “It’s nice.”

I glanced around her tiny purple-painted bedroom, looking for a television set and came up empty. She didn’t have one. Didn’t have a stereo system, either.

But she had books. A lot of them.

"You weren't messing when you said you liked to read," I mused, eyeing several piles of neatly stacked books on her bedroom floor under the windowsill. Turning back to face her, I grinned. "Are you a little swot, Shannon Lynch?"

"Believe me, I wish I could call myself a swot," she replied with a grimace. "I love to read but I'm not academically smart."

I frowned at her in disbelief. "Bullshit."

"No, I'm really not," she replied, shaking her head. "I have to work so hard to keep up in my classes, and most of those are ordinary-level subjects."

"What subjects give you the most trouble?" I asked, relaxing into the conversation.

This, I could handle.

Learning more about her fed the beast—and distracted the other beast.

"Business," Shannon replied, scrunching her nose up at the thought. "And maths—I'm *terrible* with numbers."

"Those are my best subjects," I mused, scratching my jaw. "I'm taking business and accounting for the leaving cert next year."

"What else are you taking?" she asked, sounding genuinely interested.

"Irish, English, maths, accounting, business…" I shifted until my back was resting against the wall before continuing. "History and French."

"Why French?"

Because there's a high chance I'll be moving there once I'm done with school.

"I need a language for university," I said instead. "French was a good fit for me."

"Higher-level?" Shannon asked, looking impressed.

I nodded.

"Really?" Her eyes widened. "Which ones?"

"All of them."

"Why am I not surprised?" Shannon quipped as she tucked her legs beneath her and sat facing me. "And you called *me* a swot."

"School has never been an issue for me," I admitted with a frown.

"Lucky you," she whispered. "I barely scraped through the pretests."

“I can give you a hand,” I heard myself offer without thinking it through.

“What—like now?” she squeaked.

“Or later.” I shrugged, feigning nonchalance. “Whenever you want.”

“Is that something you do?” Shannon asked, watching me with those big uncertain eyes of hers. “Do you tutor other students?”

I’d tutor you.

“You have your junior cert coming up in June, right?” I asked instead.

Shannon nodded.

“I’ve been through it already,” I explained, desperately trying to keep my tone impassive and light. “If you need someone to go through the coursework with you, then just let me know.”

“You would do that for me?” she asked, voice soft.

I would do pretty much anything for you.

“Yeah,” I replied, unable to keep the gruffness out of my tone. “I would.”

“But you’re so busy.”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“Why are you always trying to help me, Johnny?” she whispered, blue eyes burning holes inside of me.

There was the million-dollar question. And I had no fucking clue how to answer it.

“Because I want to,” I finally said, deciding on the truth. “I want to help you, Shannon.”

“You do?” she breathed.

“I do.” Tearing my gaze off her before I did something stupid, I shifted around to get comfortable on her tiny-ass bed and said, “Now, go get your books and you can show me where you’re finding it difficult.”

“Yeah, okay,” Shannon replied as she scrambled off the bed and hurried to the door. “Are you sure?” she stopped in the doorway to ask me.

No.

“I’m always sure, Shannon.”

Smiling, she nodded and then hurried back down stairs to get her bag.

“Fuck.” Pulling my phone out of my pocket, I typed out a quick SOS message to Gibsie, only to delete it before sending it.

Exhaling a frustrated breath, I typed out another text, this one to Jason, letting him know I wouldn't make this afternoon's hydropool session and then quickly shut my phone off before he could call to give me a litany of abuse.

I already knew I was doing wrong.

I'd missed yesterday's session and two more a couple of weeks back.

Because of her. Because when she jumped, I flew clean off the ledge after her.

Didn't need my trainer to tell me something I already knew. He'd tell me I needed to get my head back in the game. He'd scream at me and tell me to focus on my future—on the upcoming fitness test I needed to pass more than I needed to breathe.

Problem was, I couldn't focus. Because my head was gone. Shot to shite. Lost inside the girl whose bedroom I was sitting in.

I was sliding my phone back into the pocket of my school trousers when Shannon returned with her bag.

"I think business wouldn't be so hard if I could get a handle on the maths side of it," she said in a slightly breathless tone as she hauled her bag over to the bed.

Dropping it on the floor, she ran back to her door and quickly locked it before resuming her position on the bed, cross-legged and facing me.

"I had trouble concentrating at my old school," she added, while rummaging in her bag. "I managed to keep up with my language classes, but I let maths slide."

I knew this. I'd read all about it in her file.

"That's understandable," I told her, nodding.

Shannon looked at me with a wary expression. "Why is that understandable?"

Shit.

Fuck.

"Because you have to take a crazy number of subjects for the junior cert," I bluffed. Shrugging, I added, "Can't be good at all of them."

"I bet you were," she replied, turning her attention back to her bag, disaster averted. She pulled her maths book out and dropped it on the bed between us. "Let me guess, you took all higher-level subjects for your junior cert, too?"

“Give me that book,” I grumbled, feeling embarrassed.

“All A’s?” she teased.

“Nope,” I shot back, flicking through the pages of her textbook. “I got a C in ordinary-level science,” I told her and then I sighed before admitting, “The rest were higher-level A’s.”

“Really?”

I nodded, feeling hot and uncomfortable.

“You’re smart?”

I just shrugged.

“Well, I got my only A in science,” she mused. “It’s my only higher-level subject.”

“Well, I take my hat off to you,” I muttered. “Because I fucking loathe science.”

“Stop,” she chuckled. “Science isn’t that bad.”

I arched a brow. “Oh, like maths isn’t?”

She grimaced. “Okay, fair point.”

“Come on,” I said with a smirk, refocusing my attention on the book in my hands. “Get your copybook out and I’ll school you.”

“You’ll school me?” She giggled and, Christ, it was a lovely sound.

Shannon didn’t do enough laughing.

I racked my brain thinking of other things I could do to get a repeat of that sound. I had a whole heap of ideas—terrible, awful ideas.

Concentrate, Kavanagh…

So I did.

For the next hour or so, I went through her work with her, watching carefully as she attempted each problem. She wasn’t kidding when she said she found maths hard.

Shannon was seriously struggling with the subject.

Seeing her struggle made me want to jump in and bulldoze, which was exactly what I seemed to be doing as I lay strewn out on my side, with my long legs hanging off the side of her bed, breaking down every sum, equation, fraction, and percentage that came our way.

One of her biggest issues was that she had no idea how to use her calculator efficiently.

Quickly on, I discovered that she had no clue about sin, cos, and tan. She was bluffing and pretending that she knew what she was doing when

she clearly didn’t.

When she finally caved in and tossed the calculator on my lap and admitted that she didn’t have the foggiest clue of what she was doing, I ended up spending another forty-five minutes going through basic methods with her.

When she eventually starting solving the problems without me hovering over her copybook with an eraser, it felt like I’d scored a bleeding try, I was so proud of her.

It was ridiculous how much genuine satisfaction I got when those big blue eyes lit up when she clicked onto a problem.

It was right around the time I was beginning to think Gibsie had a point, and that I could do this friend thing, when I faced a problem of my own.

I foolishly allowed my eyes to wander off the copybook Shannon was furiously scribbling on, where they then proceeded to trail over her body.

She was still sitting cross-legged and facing me, but she was leaning forward, working hard on a sum, which caused the string top she was wearing to droop, giving me a glorious view of her braless tits.

Sweet Jesus Christ.

I loved tits.

And tits that belonged to this girl were even more appealing. They were small and perky with rosy-tipped, pebbled nipples.

She was just so fucking *beautiful*.

I was instantly hard.

“Are you okay?” Shannon asked, placing her small hand on my forearm.

“Huh?” I snapped my gaze to her face, totally fucking busted.

“Are you okay?” she repeated, blue eyes locked on mine, expression innocent.

I was about the furthest a person could get from okay. But for her sake, I forced a small nod and said, “Yeah, I’m just getting a bit hungry.”

What the actual fuck, Johnny?

“Can I get you something?” she quickly asked. “What would you like to eat?”

You.

I would like to eat you, Shannon.

“We should probably think about wrapping this up,” I stated gruffly. “It’s getting late.”

I made a big deal of checking my watch only to frown when I realized it actually *was* getting late.

“Shite,” I muttered. “It’s half six.”

We’d been up in her room for four hours? Where the hell did the time go?

I never missed a meal.

I wasn’t even sore. I couldn’t remember the last time I spent four hours sitting down. It didn’t happen.

Jesus, this girl was making me lose track of everything.

“Um, yeah, sure—of course,” Shannon mumbled, falling over her words in that adorable way she did when she was flustered.

Don’t worry, baby, I thought to myself. *I’m flustered too.*

“I really appreciate you helping me,” she added, closing her books up and shoving them back in her schoolbag. “You helped me big time.” She blew out a breath before adding, “Again.”

“We can do this again,” I offered. “If you want?”

Her face lit up and she shifted closer to me. “Really?”

I nodded slowly and resisted the urge to reach over and touch her.

“You wouldn’t mind?” Shannon asked, all wide-eyed, as she tentatively shifted closer until her knees were touching my left thigh.

“No, Shannon.” Failing miserably, I reached over and tucked a rogue strand of hair behind her ear. “I wouldn’t mind.”

Stop this, Johnny.

Stop this now!

I tried.

I truly, honest to god, tried to make my body get off her bed, but she was there, she was right fucking there, and I couldn’t find an ounce of resolve inside of me. I just sat there, knowing what was coming, knowing it was the worst possible thing I could allow to happen, and still wanting it more than my next breath.

“Maybe in the library next time,” I finally found the words to say. “Or school.”

Her small heart-shaped face nodded up and down. “Okay.”

“Because I shouldn’t be here,” I added weakly. “In your room.”

“I know,” she replied, voice small and uncertain.

“It’s, uh…” I swallowed deeply. “I should probably go home now.”

“Johnny?” she whispered.

“Yeah?”

“Hi,” she breathed, edging closer.

“Hi,” I croaked out, fisting her duvet so tightly I was fairly sure I was going to rip the fabric.

“Johnny?” Shannon whispered again.

“Yeah?”

“I’m going to hug you now.” She hitched her leg over mine. “Is that okay?”

Don’t do it. You’ll never get over this girl.

“Yeah.” I exhaled a ragged breath, feeling my heart smash against my rib cage, as she hovered above me. “That’s okay.”

“Thanks for today,” she whispered in my ear as she straddled me.

“You’re welcome,” I replied gruffly, clinging to my self-restraint for all I was worth.

Don’t put your hands on her.

Too fucking late.

My hands moved of their own accord, shooting out to clamp her hips. The sensation of having her on top of me was too much.

It was all too fucking much.

“I should go,” I groaned as I dragged her on my lap, unable to stop myself from thrusting upward.

Fuck the pain in my groin.

I was on fire for this girl.

Shannon wrapped her arms around my shoulders and gingerly rocked her hips on top of me in the best, most fucked-up hug I’d ever received.

“I don’t want you to go,” she moaned. She actually fucking moaned in my ear.

Groaning, I sat forward and pulled her roughly against me, hugging on her and rocking on her, and losing my mind in her.

You’re playing with fire.

This girl is going to ruin you.

Fuck.

“I should go,” I continued to tell her as I buried my face in her gorgeous neck and prayed for divine intervention to stop me before I took something from her that I couldn’t give back.

Before she took something from me that I could never get back.

Because I had never felt this much for anyone. And it was with that knowledge that I knew I could never be selfish with her.

“Shannon, I really need to go home now,” I told her, tone thick and gravelly. “Really.”

“Oh…of course. I’m so sorry,” she whispered as she scrambled off my lap. “If that’s what you want?” she added, retreating to the far corner of her bed.

No.

No, that wasn’t what I wanted at all. But it was the right thing to do.

Dammit to hell!

With self-control I didn’t know I possessed, I climbed off her bed and stood up. Keeping my back to Shannon, I walked over to her window and pretended to stare out, while I discreetly rearranged the huge fucking problem in my pants.

I knew I was probably freaking Shannon out by just standing here like this, but I couldn’t walk until I had calmed down. I was hurt and horny. It was a terrible combination.

Inhaling several calming breaths, I clenched my eyes shut and strived for control, and thought of every unsexy thing imaginable, ranging from my dead grandmother, God bless her soul, to Gibsie in drag.

By the time Shannon spoke again, I had managed to settle myself.

“Johnny?” she said in a small voice from her perch on the bed. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry,” I replied, tone thick and husky, confident that I wouldn’t traumatize her when I turned around. “It’s all good. I’m uh, just… I’m going to go home now.”

“Okay.” She nodded shyly and climbed off the bed. “I’ll walk you out.”

I kept a wide berth of her body as I trailed after her, knowing that if I didn’t, there was a good chance I would take her back in that bedroom and mess up beyond repair. Like every time I walked away from this girl, the closer I got to leaving, the more depressed I felt.

“So, I guess I’ll see you tomorrow?” Shannon said when I stepped outside.

“Yeah.” Shoving my hand into my pocket, I pulled out my car keys. “You definitely will.”

“Thanks again for today.”

“Thanks for showing me your room,” I replied, cringing internally at the stupid fucking comment.

“Oh, no problem. You can see it anytime,” Shannon replied, smiling.

I smirked at her verbal blunder.

“Oh god.” She slapped a hand over her mouth, eyes bulging. “I didn’t __”

“Relax.” I chuckled. “I know what you meant.”

I stepped forward then, because I was a masochistic bastard with a penchant for torturing myself, and pressed a kiss to her cheek. “Bye, Shannon.”

“Bye, Johnny,” she whispered, shivering on the doorstep.

I turned around and walked straight to my car, not daring to look back at her.

Masochistic or not, if I turned back and looked at those midnight blue eyes again, I was going to drown in them.

52
Rude Awakening

SHANNON

“What are you doing up?” Dad barked when I walked into the living room later that night to get my phone, which I had foolishly forgotten on the couch when I was doing an emergency cleanup after Johnny left.

“I left my phone down here,” I quickly explained. I’d been so distracted by Johnny that I had to get all my chores done in record time.

“Then get it and go,” Dad ordered. “United are playing.”

It wasn’t like me to leave stuff lying around the place, but my head was in the clouds. Cloud Johnny, to be precise.

I knew I had played a dangerous game of Russian roulette by taking him up to my bedroom this afternoon. If my father had come home, he would have killed me.

The problem was, if the opportunity presented itself, I knew I would do it again.

Having him in my space like that, even just for a little while, was wonderful. It was *personal*. And I felt *safe*. Like nothing could touch me when he was close.

In a messed-up way, I think I did it on purpose? Like I half hoped my father *would* come home just so he could see the huge boy who I knew wouldn’t let him hurt me.

That was a crazy thought. *I* was being crazy.

Thinking about Johnny sitting on my bed, offering to tutor me, made my heart thump against my rib cage.

He was so smart. Like for real, he was incredibly intelligent and patient and a million other amazing things.

After he left, I spent the rest of the evening in emotional overload, thinking about how reckless I had behaved. I had no idea what I was

thinking when I climbed onto his lap like that, but I didn't care because Johnny hugged me *back*.

He held me to his body and hugged me so tight that I was still trembling from the contact. And then he kissed me goodbye.

Granted, it was on the cheek, but still. His lips had touched my body without coercion.

I didn't even care about Bella right now. Not tonight at least.

It was hard to dwell on the negative when something so incredibly positive had just happened to me.

I understood that he didn't see me in the way I saw him, and I got that this would never amount to anything more than friends, but I didn't care because he seemed to be sticking around. He seemed determined to help me.

I wasn't sure what was happening, but whatever it was, I didn't want it to stop. I was happy to be his friend. I just wanted to keep him in my life. In whatever way I could.

I wanted him to stay…

"Are you deaf?" my father's slurred voice penetrated my thoughts, bringing me back down to reality with a depressing bang.

"Huh?"

"I said get out of the fucking way," Dad barked, tossing the remote at me. "I can't see the match with ya!"

The remote smacked off my hip and landed on the floor, resulting in the batteries flying out and rolling under the couch.

"Sorry," I hurried out of his way of the television and quickly scrambled to retrieve the batteries and put them back in the remote for him.

"Why are you being like that?" Dad asked then, eyeing me with bleary mistrust.

Exhaling slowly, I set the remote down on the coffee table and picked up my phone before turning to look at him. "Being like what, Dad?"

"Acting strange," he accused, glaring at me. "Smirking to yourself."

I shrugged my response, unsure how to answer that.

"What's going on?" he growled, watching me like a hawk, his brown eyes hard and unyielding.

"Nothing's going on," I replied quietly.

He pushed his recliner down and stood up. The move evoked a tsunami of terror to flood my body and I scuttled backwards.

“Give me that,” he instructed, holding a hand out to me.

My brows shot up. “My phone?”

“Yes, your phone,” he sneered. “Give it to me.”

Trembling, I walked over to him and placed it in his palm.

Immediately, he began to scroll through my messages and call list. I didn’t understand why, considering he was swaying so much I doubted he could read in his state. But I didn’t dare move, knowing that if I walked out, this could turn messy.

“Where’s his number?” he demanded, gripping my phone in his huge hand.

“Whose number, Dad?” I croaked out.

“The lad sniffing around ya,” he snarled. “The hotshot from the papers.”

My heart sank. “What?”

His gaze flicked from my phone to me. “Fran, next door, said she saw a lad from your school driving around here,” he slurred. “Said she saw him drop you home from school today.” He turned his attention back to my phone. “Where is his number? Where are his texts? Who the fuck are you knocking around with? Is it him? That rugby asshole? The Kavanagh prick?”

Dammit, Fran!

“Nobody, Dad,” I lied through my teeth. “I was sick in school today, and Claire and her brother, Hughie, drove me home.”

“*Hughie Biggs*?” Dad hissed, swaying on his feet again. “That jumped-up gobshite? That’s why you’re walking about with a shit-eating grin on your face?”

“What? No!” I shook my head and backed away. “I’m not with Hughie. I’m not with anyone.”

“I don’t believe you,” he growled.

“I’m not lying,” I choked out. “I don’t have a boyfriend.”

“You don’t have to have a boyfriend to whore yourself,” he hissed. “Ask your mother about that.”

“I’m not seeing anyone,” I strangled out, panicked. “I swear to god, I’m not!”

Reaching out, he clamped a beefy hand on my shoulder and pressed down hard. “If you’re lying to me—”

“I’m not, Dad,” I cried out, buckling under the force of his touch. “Please—”

My words broke off when my father’s fist connected with my cheek, hitting me so hard that my head snapped back from the force.

Fight back, Shannon.

Grab something. Anything.

Do something.

Pain scorched through my face, tears filled my eyes, and still, I did *nothing*. I didn’t fight back. I didn’t try to run.

I just *stood there*.

“Come here,” he snarled. Keeping his hand on my shoulder, fingers digging into my bones, Dad marched me into the kitchen, not stopping until we were at the sink.

“Turn it on,” he instructed.

Without hesitation, I reached over and turned on the tap.

“Fill that up,” he ordered, toppling a pint glass off the draining board and into the basin of the sink.

Thankfully, it didn’t break and I hurried to fill the glass, resisting the urge to tuck and roll to break free from his grip.

“See this?” he hissed as he dropped my phone into the water. “See it, girl?”

Motionless, I nodded, watching my phone sink to the bottom of the pint glass.

“If I find out you’re lying to me, it won’t be your phone I’ll be drowning,” he growled, digging his fingers so hard into my shoulder that my back bowed without my brain’s permission. “Do ya hear me?”

“I hear you,” I whimpered, shaking from head to toe.

“Don’t you go running to your brother with stories, either,” he hissed in my ear. Shoving me away, he added, “Or I’ll fuck you both on the streets.”

I wish you would, I just about stopped myself from saying.

Because what would happen to Tadhg, Ollie, and Sean if we were gone? Tadhg was next in line to me, therefore he would take the brunt of my father’s wrath.

That concept was abhorrent to me.

Reaching up, I rubbed my cheek and forced myself to not cry.

He gave me one final look before shaking his head. “Go on. Get out of my sight.”

Without another word, I hurried out of room with tears stinging my eyes.

I hate you! I silent screamed as I made the familiar run to my room. *I fucking hate you!*

Racing up to my room, I made a conscious decision to tiptoe past Joey’s room, forcing myself not to make a sound, and then quickly locked myself inside my bedroom. Flicking off my bedroom light, I scrambled into my bed, threw the covers over my head, and grabbed my Discman.

Less than two minutes later, there was a soft knock on my bedroom door.

“Shan?” Joey’s voice came from the other side of the frame. “Everything alright?”

I debated not answering him, but decided against it, knowing that he would automatically jump to the right conclusion and all hell would break loose. He’d only just come back from Aoife’s tonight. I didn’t want him to go again.

So instead, I called back, “I’m fine, Joe. Just tired.”

There was a long pause before he spoke again. “You sure?”

“Yeah,” I croaked out, pressing my fingers to my bottom lip so it didn’t wobble and my voice didn’t tremble.

“You don’t sound fine,” my brother replied.

Dammit.

Clearing my throat, I added, “I’m having female issues.”

“Female issues?” he called back, sounding confused.

“I’m on my period.”

“For fuck’s sake, I really didn’t need to know that, Shan,” Joey groaned, and I imagined him shuddering on the other side of the door.

A few moments later, the sound of his bedroom door clicking shut filled my ears.

Releasing a ragged breath, I batted away the hot tears burning my cheeks.

One of these days, I was going to get out of this house. And when I did, I was *never* going to come back.

It was with that thought, that tiny slither of hope, and Johnny's mix CD playing in my ears, that I drifted off to a fitful sleep.

53
Sticky Gifts

JOHNNY

From the age of six, I had been focused solely on rugby. I believed in myself and my abilities. There was something inside of me that sparked to life, an almost dancing sensation fluttering over my skin, when I had the ball in my hands. I knew I was going to the Academy, and when I got there I wasn't one bit surprised.

I was *that* sure of my future. I refused to accept any other route in life.

A career in professional rugby was my goal, my purpose, my fucking fate, and I was grabbing it with both hands.

I wasn't impulsive. I was *steady*. Goal-oriented. Driven. Determined.

I was probably a lot of other negative traits, too, but I only focused on my strengths.

The only weaknesses I was interested in learning about were those that affected my game. Once they were discovered, I worked like a madman to correct myself.

I was a fairly decisive person.

I didn't fuck about with second-guessing my decisions or any of that shite. I made a decision and I stuck to it.

Like when I was six and decided I would make a career out of my passion.

Sorted.

Or when I decided a degree in business was the perfect fallback for me.

Simple.

I made a choice and I stuck to it.

I had to be really fucking careful with my choices because once I made a decision, once I set my mind on something—or worse, my heart—it was

in my nature to follow it through with an obsessive hunger. No going back, no second-guessing, and no changing my mind.

My personality more than likely had a lot to do with my hesitance.

I didn't connect with people for the sheer sake of it—and never girls.

I was well aware that I possessed an obsessive personality. It was the reason I was in my position so early on in my career.

Knowing this only made my current predicament more depressing.

In a matter of months, I'd lost my head to a fucking girl.

And my heart?

Fuck me, the piece of stone worked after all and had thrown me a curveball by attaching itself to a scrawny little third year with brown pigtails and blue eyes that fucking scorched my soul.

I needed to be really fucking careful with my next move, because once I decided that she was the girl for me, that would be that. Once I committed myself, once my heart laid claim *on her*, I might as well slap a label on my forehead stating, *I'm yours. Please be gentle with me because I'm here to stay.*

The scariest part of it all was knowing that I was holding myself back by the skin of my teeth, with the plunge looking more appealing every time I laid eyes on her.

"What are you doing?" Gibsie asked when he sauntered into my bedroom without knocking late Tuesday night, thankfully giving me a distraction from my thoughts.

"What does it look like I'm doing?" Dropping my pen on my desk, I turned in my swivel chair and stared at him. "Homework."

It wasn't uncommon for Gibsie to arrive at my house at any time of the day or night. I was just glad that he didn't have the fucking cat with him this time.

It was more than a possibility with him.

"Lad, you're such a swot." Gibsie tossed his schoolbag next to my desk and then threw himself down on my bed, folding his arms behind his head. "Did you get a text off Coach?"

"I did indeed," I replied, finishing off a trigonometry problem I had been in the middle of solving when he barged in. "Let's hope he manages to rope someone other than Mrs. Moore to help chaperone this time."

Gibsie shuddered. "That woman is batshit."

“Yes, she is,” I agreed.

Coach had sent a group text about an hour ago, letting us know that Royce had finally agreed to play us.

This Friday. In Dublin. On their school grounds. On the condition that I didn’t play.

I smirked to myself, happy that I had such an effect on these coaches.

“Dublin scumbags,” Gibsie grumbled. “Making life awkward for everyone.”

“Hello, asshole?” I balked. “I’m a Dublin scumbag!”

“Not you,” he replied, looking sheepish.

“Whatever, ya culchie, muck-savage from the mountains,” I grumbled as I scribbled down the answer to question B.

“You know that’s not socially acceptable,” Gibsie shot back. “Calling me a culchie.”

“So’s calling me a Jackeen,” I countered. “Yet you do it daily.”

“You *are* a Jackeen,” he argued.

I rolled my eyes. “And you *are* a smelly fucking culchie from the back ass of nowhere.”

“Fuck you, city boy.”

“Fuck you right back, country boy.”

“Capital Dick.”

“Rebel Wankstain.”

Gibsie snickered. “How are we friends?”

“Been asking myself that for years, lad,” I replied, gaze locked on my work. “It’s one of life’s greatest unsolved mysteries.”

“I have homework,” he announced then.

“I know,” I replied, not missing a beat. “I love the way you not so subtly dropped your bag at my desk.”

“I can’t do it,” he groaned.

“No,” I corrected calmly. “You can do it.” Pulling out my calculator, I worked on the formula I needed and scribbled down my results. “You’re just too fucking lazy.”

“It’s hard,” he whined.

“Life is hard, Gibs,” I stated. “Get your books out. I’m not doing it for you again.”

“But you’re so much better at it than me,” he groaned.

“Says the fella who just called me a swot five minutes ago,” I shot back.

“You know that’s a compliment,” he argued. “Come on, Johnny…”

“Fine, but I’m tired and I need to hit the pool before school in the morning, so I’m only doing one subject,” I snapped, finishing up my own work. “Pick your poison.”

“English,” he told me with a nod. “I’ve an essay due in for tomorrow.”

Exhaling a heavy sigh, I unzipped his bag and pulled out his English book.

“You know you’re going to have to read the books before the exams next year?” I added. “All the homework in the world won’t help you if you walk in there without studying.”

Gibsie grinned. “I promise I’ll get caught up over the Easter holidays, Dad.”

“Don’t give me that *Dad* shite,” I grumbled as I quickly ready through his assignment task. “You need to start putting your head down, Gibs,” I added before getting stuck in. “We’re breaking up from school on Friday, lad. You need to use those two weeks off to get caught up.”

“I will,” he grumbled.

“You better,” I warned.

Gibsie let me work in silence for about twenty minutes, which was an all-time record for him, before breaking my concentration by asking, “Did you sort Bella out for that stunt she pulled at school?”

“Damn fucking straight, I did,” I growled, instantly angry at the memory. “I sent her a text earlier to drive the message home.”

“Was Shannon okay?” he asked. “What was said?”

“Nothing good,” I muttered, finishing off a paragraph. “She wouldn’t tell me, lad, but you and I both know how poisonous it had to be if it came from Bella’s mouth.”

“Ugh,” he groaned. “I don’t know how you ever touched her.”

“Neither do I,” I admitted with a shudder.

“By the way?” Gibsie mused, distracting me once more. “You bulldozed again.”

I turned to glare at him. “I did not.”

“Yeah, lad, you did,” he chuckled. “I tried to stop you, after your *‘Save me, Gibsie, please save me from myself’* spiel the other week, and you went

right ahead and bulldozed in like a freight train."

"Well, what the hell was I supposed to do?" I bit out, tossing my pen away. "Just stand back and do nothing while Bella called her a *slut* in front of half the bleeding school because of me?"

"Bella called *Shannon* a slut?" Gibsie scoffed, fluffing a pillow. "She's one to talk."

"I know," I grumbled. "That's what I said."

"So, you disappeared out of school with Shannon and didn't come back after lunch," he added, arching a brow. "Did you put her in your car again?"

"Maybe," I bit out.

"Did you do anything *besides* drop her home?"

"Like what?"

"I don't know." He shrugged. "Invite yourself in for tea or some typical Johnny stunt like that?"

I dropped my head.

"Bulldozing." Gibsie laughed.

"Shut up," I muttered, pushing away from my desk. I was done for the night. Whatever concentration I had was long gone now.

"That's an A-minus right there," I told him, gesturing to his neatly written five-page essay. "Be fucking thankful."

"I am thankful," he assured me with a beaming smile before saying, "and I think you need to revisit the friend notion. I told you this morning, and I'm telling you again that it will never work."

"Nope." I shook my head. "You're wrong. I *can* do the friend thing."

"You clearly can't," Gibsie snickered. "Lover boy."

"I helped her today," I bit out, tensing. "That's what *friends* do for *friends*."

"By the way, Robbie Mac asked me if I could get her number off Claire for him during lunch," Gibsie stated in an impassive tone. Pulling himself up to rest on his elbows, he looked at me and added, "Said he'd love to take little Shannon to the cinema at the weekend."

"I hope you set that fucker straight!" I hissed. "Gibs, you better not have given that eejit her number."

He flopped back down on the bed and laughed. "I'm messing with you. Robbie's not suicidal. All the lads heard you loud and clear that day, Cap."

I glared at him. "That's not funny."

“It’s hilarious,” he snickered. “You’re a lost cause to that girl.” Grinning, he added, “Better get your cock and balls in working order, lad. No girl wants a broken dick.”

“I’m not—” Pausing, I pinched the bridge of my nose and called on every ounce of patience inside of me before continuing. “I am not going there with her, and my cock and balls are my own damn business.”

“I’m only looking out for you,” Gibsie replied. “Oh, I almost forgot—” He shoved a hand into his jeans pocket and retrieved a travel-sized bottle. “Here,” he said, tossing the bottle across the room at me. “From my balls to yours.”

I caught it midair and read the description on the bottle.

“Lube?” I barked. “Jesus, Gibs.”

“Hey, don’t knock it until you try it,” he scoffed. “I went to a huge fucking effort combing a dozen different chemists to get that for you.” Waggling his brows, he added, “The pharmacist told me it’s ‘sensitive touch.’”

I stared at him. “It’s half-empty.”

He shrugged. “I had to test it before I could recommend it to you.”

I immediately dropped the bottle on my bedroom floor.

“You are fucking disgusting,” I groaned, wiping my hands on my thighs. “Christ.”

“Don’t be a prude.” Gibsie chuckled. “It’s perfectly normal.”

“Lube *is* normal,” I agreed. “You, on the other hand, are not.”

“I don’t see what the problem is,” he huffed. “I bought you a present. There’s nothing weird about that. You should be thanking me for taking an interest in your life.”

“Lad, you just bought my dick a present,” I deadpanned. “It doesn’t get much weirder than that.”

“Whatever, lad.” He shrugged, unaffected. “I don’t care what anyone thinks.”

“Yeah, Gibs,” I replied. “I think we’ve established that.”

“But do you know who *will* care?” he mused, grinning. “Your Shannon.”

“She’s not *my* Shannon,” I barked.

“And she never will be if you don’t sort your fucking problem out!” he countered.

Jesus Christ…

"Nothing's changed," I said in as patient a tone as I could muster. "I can't, won't, and will *never* go there."

Lies.

Lies.

Lies.

My best friend stared at me for a long moment before asking, "Are you sure about that, Johnny?"

Not even a little bit.

"Absolutely."

"Suit yourself," Gibsie shot back.

"Thank you."

"But just so you know?" he added. "She's always been *your* Shannon."

54
Concealer

SHANNON

“Don’t ask,” I warned when I found Claire standing outside the girls’ bathroom on Wednesday morning with a horrified expression on her face. Snaking my arm through hers, I tugged her into the bathroom. “Just help me hide it.”

“Shannon, I–I…” Claire shook her head and stared at me. “Shan—”

“Please,” I snapped, dropping my bag on the bathroom floor and catching her hands. “*Help me*.”

Tears filled her eyes.

“Don’t do that,” I begged, squeezing her hands. “Just help.”

She continued to stare at me for the longest moment with an almost trancelike expression before finally snapping out of it.

“Okay,” she sniffled and then offered me a bright smile. “I have just the trick.”

I exhaled a huge sigh of relief. “Thank you.”

Twenty minutes later, I stared at my reflection in the mirror and hardly recognized myself.

“I had to go full smoky-eyed glamour-puss on your face to match the shade of foundation I used to cover your…” Her voice cracked and she cleared her throat several times before adding, “Well, what do you think?”

“Whoa,” I breathed, touching my red-painted lips. “My lips are huge.”

“Yes, they are,” Claire agreed. “Women pay thousands of euros for lips like yours, and you don’t even appreciate them.”

“And my eyes.” I shook my head and gaped at myself, fluttering my eyelashes admiringly. “Whoa, those are—”

“Gorgeous?” Claire offered, coming to stand beside me. “Because you are sickeningly gorgeous.”

“It’s the makeup,” I assured her, embarrassed.

“It’s the girl,” Claire corrected as she slung an arm around my shoulder.

I flinched from the contact, still tender from my father’s outburst, and Claire’s face fell.

“Shannon, I can’t keep—”

The bathroom door creaked open and Lizzie stepped into the bathroom, causing Claire to snap her mouth closed and me to sag in relief.

“Come on, girls,” Lizzie said, waving a hand at us. “We’re late for class.”

Never in my life had I been more grateful to see her than I was in this moment.

“I’m going to kill that bitch,” Lizzie hissed later that day during lunch. Word had spread around school about the incident with Bella yesterday and my friend was peppering with anger.

“Seriously,” Lizzie added, glaring at the table at the opposite side of the lunch hall, which seated at least fifty students—one of whom being Bella Wilkinson.

“If she looks over here one more time, I am going to go over there and rip those shiny new extensions out of her hair.”

“They’re pretty bad,” Claire agreed with a grimace.

“Bad?” Lizzie snapped. “It looks like she attached black seaweed to her hair.” Muttering something else under her breath, she added, “She’s a troll.”

“Just ignore her,” I pleaded, choosing to keep my eyes trained on my sandwich and not the table I was receiving death glares from.

It was safer to keep my head down.

All day, everywhere I went, curious eyes followed me. I didn’t know how to handle this sort of attention. I needed to *not* rock the boat. And spending time with Johnny was as good as capsizing the ship.

I had bumped into him no less than three times between classes today, and each time he’d given me that beautiful double-dimpled smile, asked me how my day was going, and then told me he’d catch me later.

I could feel his eyes on me right now from across the room. And it terrified me.

For the first time in my academic life, I had been given a beautiful cloak of invisibility at Tommen. Johnny Kavanagh threatened to take that from me, and I wasn't nearly brave enough to let him.

All the goodness of last night had been sucked away by my father's threats and my fear of Bella's wrath. Now, I was afraid again.

Of Bella. Of my father. Of the other girls at this school. Of my feelings. Of Johnny.

Of my own damn shadow.

"And she had the nerve to call you a slut," Lizzie continued to rant, with me and Claire looking on helplessly. "She's the one straddling Cormac Ryan over there."

"It doesn't matter," I quickly told her, praying for her to just let it go.

"It *does* matter, Shannon," Lizzie snapped. "No one gets to do this to you. Not here. Not again!"

"Liz," Claire said in a low warning tone. "Leave it alone, okay?"

"We're getting our holidays Friday," I whispered, more to myself than the girls as I desperately tried to calm myself down. "Two weeks of no Bella."

"Exactly," Claire offered gently. "Everyone will have forgotten about it by the time we come back."

"I can't believe you," Lizzie snapped, glaring at Claire. "How are you okay with that bitch talking crap about our best friend?"

"I'm not okay with it," Claire replied evenly. "I just know that making a scene is the last thing anyone needs."

"Do you know what everyone is saying?" Lizzie demanded, and then continued before either of us had a chance to respond. "They are all saying Shannon is having sex with Johnny Kavanagh."

"Great," I groaned and dropped my head in my hands.

Claire placed a soothing hand on my shoulder. "Well, it's not true."

"I know that," Lizzie huffed. "But Bella's been going around saying that Shannon's the reason her and Johnny are finished," Lizzie hissed. "Because of that bitch and her lies, everyone in school is talking about *our friend* and saying that she must have a golden vagina to turn that big eejit's head—"

"Don't!" Claire hissed. "Don't repeat it."

"I'm going home," I blurted out, pushing back my chair, ready to bolt.

“No,” Claire replied calmly, pushing me back down in my seat. “You’re not.”

“Like hell you’re going home,” Lizzie growled. “You haven’t done anything wrong.”

Wrong or not, I wasn’t staying here.

Shaking off Claire’s hand, I shoved my chair back and stood up.

“I’m sorry,” I choked out, glancing at my friends. “But I can’t do this again.”

“We’ll come with you,” Claire called after me. “Shan, just don’t run—”

“No, it’s okay,” I mumbled. “You guys stay. I’m just…I’m going to go now.” Swinging around, I pushed past the tables and chairs blocking my way and bolted for the exit.

However, I did not anticipate the hand that snaked out from the rugby table at the doorway and grabbed my wrist, pulling me to an abrupt stop.

“What’s wrong?” Johnny was sitting on his chair, with his hand wrapped around my wrist, looking up at me with a concerned expression. “Shannon?”

Shaking my head, I pulled on my hand but Johnny didn’t let go. Instead he pulled me closer to him, making this so much worse.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

“I, uh, need to go home,” I squeezed out, glancing around nervously and finding several pairs of eyes trained on my face. Turning back to Johnny, I whispered, “I need to go now.”

“Home?” Johnny frowned. “Why?”

“Take a look around, Mr. Fucking Hotshot,” Lizzie hissed, coming to stand beside me. “Or better still, open your ears.”

“My eyes are open,” Johnny replied as he released my hand and turned his attention to Lizzie. “And my ears are right here.”

“Lizzie,” I croaked out, shaking my head. “Just drop it.”

“*No*, if she has something to say to me, then she can say it,” Johnny drawled. “Go right ahead.”

“Fine,” Lizzie growled, taking ahold of my hand Johnny had released. “*Your* evil whore of a girlfriend is spreading lies about *my* friend, and I’m holding you entirely responsible for neither straightening the facts nor putting her in her place.”

“What’s she talking about?” Gibsie, who was sitting across the table from Johnny, asked.

“No idea,” Johnny bit out.

“I’m talking about my friend’s reputation being tarnished because you were stupid enough to stick your dick inside that girl,” Lizzie snarled.

“What girl?” Hughie Biggs turned his head from where he was nuzzling his girlfriend’s neck to ask. “Who’d you stick your dick in, Cap?”

“Fuck off, Hughie,” Johnny snapped, eyes flicking to me.

I blushed scarlet and dropped my gaze from his.

“Oh, Jesus,” another boy who hung around with them said. Patrick Feely, I think I remembered Claire calling him once. “What did you do now, Gibs?”

“It wasn’t me, Feely.” Gibsie snickered.

“Yeah,” Patrick muttered. “For once.”

“Can you all stop distracting me?” Lizzie barked. “I’m trying to sort something out here.”

“Baby,” a shaved-headed boy called from a few seats up the huge table. “What are you doing?”

“Mind your own damn business,” Lizzie shot back.

“Baby—”

“We’re in a fight right now, Pierce O’Neill, so don’t even look at me.”

Releasing what sounded like a pained groan, Pierce shoved his chair back and rounded the table toward us.

“Saint,” Gibsie fake-coughed, clapping his arm as he passed by.

“I’m sorry,” Pierce announced, hands up in the air as he approached his girlfriend with caution. “It’s all my fault.”

“What are you sorry for?” she asked him.

“Everything?” Pierce replied, though it sounded more like a question. “Whatever you want me to be sorry for?”

“Was there a point to your big talk just there?” Johnny asked, drawing everyone’s attention back to him.

“Yes,” Lizzie bit out, glaring daggers at him.

“Then *get* to it,” he countered coolly.

“Fine,” Lizzie hissed. “I was talking about Bella telling everyone that the reason you ended things is because you’re riding Shannon. I was *talking*

about everyone saying my friend must be a fantastic fuck to turn your stupid rugby-ball head."

"His head's not shaped like a rugby ball," Gibsie scoffed. "You said that about my head, too."

"Not now, Gerard," Claire admonished as she slumped onto the chair beside him.

"She's lying," Johnny snapped, bristling with tension.

"*Obviously*," Lizzie sneered, shaking off Pierce's hand as he tried to place it on her shoulder. "So now I want to know what you are you going to do about it."

"Nothing," I croaked out. "He's going to do nothing about this because there's nothing to do!"

"It's your fault, Johnny." Lizzie continued to talk over me. "This is on you. She's your crazy ex. So, *fix* it."

Johnny remained completely motionless for about fifteen seconds, eyes locked on Lizzie, not saying a single word, before bursting into action.

He shoved his chair back and stood up, eyes locked on me. "Come on."

"W-what?" I choked out, gaping up at him.

"Come with me," he ordered, holding out his hand for me. "We're sorting this now."

I looked from Lizzie, who had her hands folded across her chest and a satisfied expression on her face, to Gibsie, who looked ecstatic, to Claire, who was cringing, to the other boys, who just looked plain confused, before finally settling on Johnny.

He looked furious.

And *expectant*.

"*No*," I strangled out, shaking my head. "No way. I'm not going over there."

"*She's* going to apologize to you publicly," he told me. "She's going to set everyone straight, publicly!" He glanced around the room before adding, "And I'm going to straighten out every other piece of shit that went along with her lies, *publicly*!"

"No." My eyes widened in horror. "It's okay. I don't want an apology."

He exhaled a frustrated breath. "It's not *okay*, Shannon—"

"I am not going over there," I repeated, trembling at the thought. "I don't want to."

“Fine,” Johnny growled, stepping around me. He kicked a chair out of his way, causing Pierce and Lizzie to part out of his way like the Red Sea before rounding the table. “I’ll sort it myself.”

“No—” Hurrying after him, I caught the sleeve of his jumper and dug my heels in. “Please don’t.”

Johnny dragged me along for about five feet before finally halting. “Then what do you want me to do?” he demanded, swinging around to face me.

“Nothing!” I spluttered, still clutching his sleeve. “Absolutely nothing.”

“I can’t do nothing.” He ran his free hand through his hair, clearly agitated. “They’re *talking* about you.”

“It doesn’t matter.” I shook my head, ignoring the stares I knew I was receiving, and tugged on his sleeve. “I don’t care.”

Johnny stared hard at me for a long moment before shaking his head. “Yeah, well I do,” he finally said. “I fucking care!”

“Why don’t we all fuck off out of here for the rest of the day?” Gibsie interjected as he practically fell out of his chair in his attempt to intercept Johnny. “Take a breather from the drama,” he added as he clamped his hands down on Johnny’s shoulders. “And have a little craic.”

Johnny glared at him. “What are you *talking* about?”

“Good plan, lad,” Hughie offered as he slid over the table and moved to stand next to Gibsie.

“I’m up for that,” Claire piped up.

Gibsie flashed her a grateful look. “Your mam’s gone back to London, isn’t she?” he asked, tearing his gaze off Claire to look at his friend, hands still clamped on his shoulders. “You’ve an empty house?”

Johnny nodded slowly, gaze flickering between Gibsie, Hughie, and the table behind them. “She left yesterday morning.”

“Then we’ll head over to yours and hang out for an hour.” Gibsie stated calmly before turning his gray eyes on me. “What do you think, little Shannon?” He gave me a meaningful look. “Fancy getting out of here before Kav turns the lunch hall into a scene from *The Game of Thrones*?”

I shuddered at the thought, having read all of those books.

“Actually, Thor’s making sense for once,” Lizzie said, putting in her two cents. She turned to me and said, “Go with it.”

Go with it? Go with what?

"Uh…okay?"

"Perfect!" Gibsie performed a little drumroll on Johnny's chest before slinging an arm over his shoulder and steering him toward the exit. "Let's go," he called over his shoulder before disappearing through the archway. "Now."

I had no idea what was happening, but I fell into step with the others as we trailed after Johnny and Gibsie.

"They're probably going somewhere so she can suck his cock," a horribly familiar voice called out loudly enough to once again garner everyone's attention. "You know about those ones from Elk's Terrace. They're up for *anything*."

"Oh, hell fucking no," Johnny snarled as he broke free of Gibsie and stormed past all of us. "This is getting sorted *now*," he roared as he rounded the table and stalked toward Bella.

"For fuck's sake," Hughie groaned.

"You just can't fucking help yourself, can you?" Johnny roared, pointing a finger in Bella's face.

"I didn't do anything," Bella laughed. "Except state the truth."

"The truth?" Johnny hissed, clearly livid. "You wouldn't know the truth if it smacked you across the face."

I had no idea what part of my body my sudden bravery erupted from, but it came hard and fast and propelled my legs toward him.

"Johnny, don't," I strangled out as I chased after him.

For once in my life, I was glad to be tiny. It allowed me to slide into the tiny space between Johnny and the table he was leaning over.

"Johnny," I breathed, pressing hard on his chest. "Walk away."

He didn't look at me.

"Johnny," I repeated, reaching up and touching his face.

He snapped his furious gaze on me.

"Walk away," I commanded, staring up at him with my heart in my mouth. "*Please*."

A vein ticked in Johnny's temple as he stared down at me, looking more enraged than I'd ever seen him. I didn't dare breathe while I watched him make his choice. Finally, he released a furious growl and nodded stiffly. I exhaled a ragged breath.

Thank god…

"Keep her name out of your fucking mouth," he snarled, chest heaving, as he allowed me to push him backwards away from the table.

"She's a dirty council-house slut," Bella chimed evilly. "There's no lie in that."

"You better watch your fucking mouth," Johnny snarled, slipping past me.

My heart sank.

I tried and I failed.

"Why? What are you going to do if I don't, Johnny?" Bella hissed, jumping out of her chair and slapping his chest. "Hit me?"

"No…" Johnny paused to drag Cormac Ryan out of his chair, "I'm going to hit him."

And then he smashed his fist into Cormac Ryan's face.

Unlike yesterday, I did not wait to see the outcome. Instead, I turned on my heels and bolted out of the lunch hall. Because I knew this could go one of two ways. Either way it went, I would lose.

I'd witnessed incidents just like this one, where Joey would jump in to defend my honor. It made no difference to girls like that one.

I always lost.

55
Calm Your Tits

JOHNNY

"What the fuck are you doing?" I snarled when Gibsie and Hughie dragged me out of the lunch hall before I had a chance to get a second punch in on Cormac.

"Stopping you from doing something really stupid," Gibsie explained calmly as he steered me out of the main building. "*Again*, Bulldozer."

"What were you thinking?" Hughie demanded when we reached the courtyard and were out of view of the office. "You know how much trouble you'd be in with the Academy if they knew you were fighting at school!

"Fuck the Academy," I snarled, shaking their hands off. "I was trying to *defend* her."

"Well, all you ended up doing was *embarrassing* the girl," Hughie barked. "Congratulations, Cap. Like she doesn't have enough shit to deal with. You just single-handedly made her the target of every one of your little fangirls."

Furious, I ran a hand through my hair to stop myself from swinging a punch at one of my buddies. "You heard what she said back there," I hissed, feeling my body vibrate with rage. "What did you expect me to do?"

"She didn't want you to defend her, lad," Gibsie added. "She told you that."

"Well, she was wrong," I spat out.

"Well, now she's gone," Gibsie told me. "So calm your tits."

She was gone?

That gave me pause for thought.

Swinging around, I spotted Claire, the viper, and Kate all standing alongside us, but no Shannon.

“Yeah, she’s definitely gone,” Feely added as he strolled over to us with his hands shoved in his pockets.

“You with the new girl, Cap?” Pierce asked, joining the never-ending circle of fucking nuisance. “You kept that one on the quiet.”

“What? No,” I muttered, exhaling a weary sigh as the anger dissipated from my body. “I don’t know what I am anymore. I don’t know what the fuck is happening to me.”

“Well,” Lizzie piped up. “You just earned some major brownie points in my eyes.” She patted my arm. “And trust me, I don’t give those out often.”

“She doesn’t,” Pierce offered with a knowing grimace.

“Are we still heading to your gaff?” Feely asked. “Seems pointless going back in now.”

I shook my head, needing a damn minute to work through my thoughts.

What the hell just happened? How did I allow myself to lose control like that?

And where the fuck did she go? Was she okay?

I was going to kill someone. I could feel the anger growing back up inside of me at the thought of Shannon’s resigned expression.

Yeah, she looked bleeding *resigned*.

She should have been furious. Instead she just *took* it.

That might have been the way it worked for her at BCS, but that was *not* how it was going to go down at Tommen. She was no one’s fucking target, and I was going to make damn sure of that.

“Johnny?”

The sound of my name being called stirred me from my thoughts.

“What?” I snapped my eyes up and looked around at my friends, feeling at a complete loss.

“Are we going?” Hughie asked, giving me a strange look.

“Going where?” I snapped, bristling, not liking this kind of attention one bleeding bit.

I felt like I was standing here naked with my fucked-up feelings on full display, giving all seven of them a glimpse into something I didn’t understand myself.

“I should find her,” I said to myself more than anyone else. Panicking, I swung around then, doing a full 360. “I should check on her.”

“No,” Hughie said calmly. “You should go home and cool off. She obviously doesn’t want to come with us, lad. That’s why she’s gone.”

I turned my glare on him. “The fuck would you know about what she wants?”

Hughie’s brows shot up in surprise.

“Give me your house keys, Cap,” Gibsie commanded then, stepping in front of me.

Without questioning him, I pulled my keys out of my pocket and handed them to him.

“We’ll catch you up,” Gibsie told our friends as he tossed my keys to Hughie and then slung an arm over my shoulder, leading me back toward the P.E. hall.

I went with him because my schoolbag was in the hall and I had no clue of what else to do.

“Are you okay?” Gibsie asked when we walked into the empty changing room.

“No!” I roared. “I am so far from okay, I don’t know what the fucking word means anymore.”

“I know now isn’t the time to say it, but I’m going to say it anyway,” Gibsie said. “*I told you so*. I fucking told you back in fourth year when she started sniffing around that she was bad news.”

“I don’t need reminding,” I spat out as I stalked over to the bench and grabbed my stuff. “I know I fucked up.”

“You did,” he agreed, not bothering to lie as he grabbed his own bag. “You saw a pair of nice tits, an easy life, and you let your then-working dick do the thinking for ya.” Shrugging, he tossed his bag over his shoulder and said, “This is the result. Another clinger who won’t let the fuck go.”

“Well, my dick’s not doing the thinking anymore,” I bit out.

“Thank god. And for what it’s worth, I would have lost my shit, too,” he told me. “If some bitch talked about Claire like that, I would have blown ten head gaskets.”

“It’s my fault that happened to her,” I growled. “Bella’s on Shannon’s case because of me.”

“No,” Gibsie corrected and then shook his head. “Okay, yes, she’s on her case because of you, but that’s not your fault, lad.”

“She won’t leave me alone, Gibs.” Exhaling a ragged breath, I ran a hand through my hair and growled. “She won’t *stop*.”

“Could you talk to your dad about getting, I don’t know, like a restraining order or something?”

“For what, Gibs?” I shot back, flustered. “Being annoying at school?”

“And following you around the pubs,” he interjected.

I shook my head. “No, the only restraining that should have been done was me restraining my dick.”

Gibsie laughed as we walked out of the changing room. “Restraining your dick.”

“It’s not funny,” I barked. “I haven’t had sex with her since Halloween. It’s March now, Gibs. Fucking March. You’d think she’d let it go by now.”

“You should have stopped things back then.” He opened the door to the hall and we both stepped out into the rare afternoon sunshine. “You let it slide into January, Johnny.”

“Yeah, well, I had a lot on my mind,” I huffed, descending the steps. “And she finished it, so I have no bleeding clue why she won’t just go away.”

“You know why she won’t go away, lad,” Gibsie replied, nudging my shoulder as we strolled into the car park.

I sighed heavily. Yeah, I knew.

Fucking rugby.

“Can you promise me something?” he said as he pulled out his car keys and unlocked his shiny new Ford Focus.

“Yeah, lad,” I sighed, slinging my bags into the boot of the car.

“Promise that you will never go back there, no matter how fucking tempting it is.”

I balked at him. “Gibs, I wouldn’t go back there if she was the last girl on the bleeding planet.”

He laughed at my response and climbed into the driver’s seat.

“I’m serious,” I told him, sinking into the passenger seat. “I wouldn’t touch that girl again if she was the only cure for my unejaculating dick—” I paused to fasten my seat belt. “I would rather walk around for the rest of my life with blue balls and a shriveled cock than put my hands on her again. That’s how much she repulses me.”

“Well, good for you.” Gibsie cranked the engine. “Because that girl wants to tie your ass down so bad it’s scary.”

“There will be no tying me down to anyone,” I shot back. “And especially not her.”

He arched a brow. “You sure about that?”

“Just shut up and put your seat belt on,” I instructed, looking around for anything he could hurt. “And check your mirrors.”

“Yes, Dad,” Gibsie muttered, complying with my commands.

“Okay, you can go now…nice and slow,” I told him when I was confident that he could pull out of his parking spot without causing grievous bodily harm, which he was quite capable of doing. “*Slow*, Gibs.”

“Binding thirteen,” Gibsie snickered as he tore off way too fucking fast for comfort. “Little Shannon blew that shit clean out of the water.”

“Slow your ass down,” I barked, resisting the urge to snatch the wheel. “And what the hell does ‘binding thirteen’ mean?”

“You don’t know about that?”

I shook my head. “Obviously not since I’m asking you.”

“That’s what they say, lad,” Gibsie explained.

“Who?” I demanded as I grabbed ahold of the Oh Jesus handle and threw a few Hail Marys to the man upstairs.

Don’t let this fucker kill me.

“The girls at school,” Gibsie chuckled, pulling onto the main road without checking both ways and narrowly avoiding a milk van. “That’s what they say about you.”

Oh, Jesus. I was going to die in this car. He was going to take my bleeding life.

Sheepishly saluting the milkman who was shaking his fist at us, I turned to glare at Gibsie.

“They call me ‘binding thirteen’?” I shook my head. “Why? I don’t get it.”

“It’s not what they call you,” he corrected. “It’s what they want to do with you.”

“*What*?”

“You’re number thirteen.” He laughed. “And they want to *bind* with you.” He turned to waggle his brows at me. “Scrum style.”

“That is…so fucking creepy,” I grumbled, shuddering. “Put your eyes on the road!”

“One hundred percent,” Gibsie laughed, turning his attention back to the windscreen. “Claire told me about it last year. Said she overheard a bunch of sixth years talking about something called ‘Operation Binding Thirteen’ in the bathroom.”

“Jesus Christ,” I growled.

“Right around the time you started tapping Bella,” he filled in. “Do the maths.”

I didn’t have to.

I had already figured it out.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” I groaned.

“Yep,” Gibsie agreed with a grimace. “Be glad you got out of that, Johnny. Be very fucking glad.”

I was. More than words could express.

“What am I going to do, Gibs?”

“About Shannon?”

I nodded glumly.

“Give in,” he answered without hesitation.

“I can’t,” I croaked out.

“You can,” he assured me. “You’re just scared.”

Yeah, I was scared. I was fucking terrified of my feelings for her.

“I don’t even feel like I have a choice anymore,” I confessed. “I am losing my bleeding mind, Gibs.”

“Nah, your mind’s still there,” Gibsie chuckled, patting my shoulder. “It’s your heart you’re losing, lad.”

“Fuck,” I choked out, biting down on my lip as sheer terror seized my chest.

“Yeppers,” he agreed. “Terribly inconvenient, isn’t it?”

“I’ll fucking say,” I mumbled.

56
Loaded Threats

JOHNNY

She didn’t come back to school on Thursday. I knew this because I watched out for her in the hallways between all my classes. She never showed. It didn’t sit well with me, knowing there was a very big possibility Shannon was ditching school because of what happened in the lunch hall.

It didn’t sit well with me because I knew it was my fault.

I couldn’t concentrate for shit all day. Every single lesson, word, and command went clear over my head because I’d left my head with *her*.

Was she okay? Was she mad at me?

Should I go over there? Should I leave her alone?

I didn’t know. And I didn’t even have her bleeding phone number to call and check.

We were breaking from school tomorrow for two weeks.

I had a match in Dublin tomorrow.

What if I didn’t see her before then? What if she didn’t come back to school? What the fuck was I going to do then?

Jesus Christ, I was losing my mind.

Using every ounce of self-control I had inside of me, I forced myself to push her out of my mind, as I headed out for training after school. Because I didn’t need this—I didn’t need these *feelings*—fucking with my game.

“Are you with her?” Bella demanded when I reached the entrance of the P.E. hall after school, dragging me from my thoughts.

Shaking my head, I continued walking with every intention of ignoring her, but she grabbed my arm and hissed, “Answer me.”

“Mind your own fucking business,” I snapped, repressing the urge to shudder at her touch. “And stay out my life.”

I needed her to not come near me today. I was peppering with rage and my tongue wasn't something I thought I could control if she pushed me.

"Answer the fucking question, Johnny," Bella hissed in a warning tone.

"And if I am?" I shot back, glaring down at her. "What's it to you?"

"Then you're a fucking idiot," she hissed, eyes flashing with a mixture of hurt and anger. "Because that girl has *virgin* written all over her."

"It's not all about sex, Bella," I countered, wrenching my arm free. "And don't put your hands on me again," I added, my tone laced with distain. "Your touch is not welcome."

"Not all about sex?" she sneered. "Ha. I'll give you a month with the frigit before you get bored and stray."

"I was bored of you after one night," I sneered.

"Then why did you keep coming back for more?" she demanded.

"Because I was lazy and you were as easy as they come." I lost my temper and hissed, "You were a phone call away, Bella—one quick text to wet my dick. That's all you ever were to me."

I was expecting the hand that whacked against my cheek. I deserved a slap. No girl deserved to be called easy, regardless of how true it was. It was a low blow and one I found myself apologizing for.

"I didn't mean that," I bit out. "That was a shitty thing to say."

"Yeah, Johnny, it was," she huffed, crossing her arms over her chest.

"I *know*," I snapped, finding not an ounce of patience inside of me to deal with this girl. "That's why I said it was."

"Why are you being like this?" Bella asked, her tone taking on a softer hint. "Why are you being cruel to me?"

"I'm not being anything to you," I bit out. "I just want to get to training, and you're blocking my way."

"Because I want to talk to you," she countered hotly.

"We have *nothing* to say to each other, Bella," I told her with a shake of my head. "Not anymore."

"Did you see *me*?" she asked then, clearly baiting me. "With your *teammate*?"

"I don't give two shites what you do with my teammates," I replied calmly.

"I don't want him."

"That's your own business."

“I want you back.”

“You can’t have me back.”

“Johnny.”

“Bella.”

“Come on!”

“No fucking thank you.”

Bella stared up at me for the longest moment before screaming and stamping her foot. I shit you not, she actually stamped her foot.

“Why are you being so unreasonable?” she hissed. “I’m sorry I went behind your back, okay? I am *sorry*!”

“Fine, you’re more than forgiven,” I snapped, running a hand through my hair in sheer frustration. “Now move the fuck on with Cormac or whoever the hell you want. I really don’t care. Just leave me alone!”

“Are you honestly saying that you’re okay with me being with Cormac?” she demanded, blocking the doorway when I tried to slip past her. “He asked me out, you know? I’m his girlfriend now. You don’t feel jealous at all?”

“I. Don’t. Give. A. Shit,” I bit out. “I don’t know what else I can do or say to make that any clearer to you.”

“You really think that bitch is better than me?” she demanded. “Seriously, Johnny? Talk about downgrading. Does she even possess a pair of tits?”

“Don’t talk shit about her,” I warned. “Say whatever the fuck you want about me but keep her name off your tongue.”

“It’s the truth,” she spat out. “She’s a glorified needle.” Shrugging, she added, “She looks anorexic.”

“And you look and sound like a coldhearted bitch.” Repressing the urge to lose my shit right here outside the hall, I mustered every ounce of calm I could and hissed, “If you fuck with her one more time, I will ruin you.”

She glared at me. “I’d like to see you try.”

“I will ruin you,” I repeated, voice deathly cold. “Your reputation. Your status. Your friends. Your future relationships. Everything. If you fuck with Shannon Lynch again, I will take *everything* from you.”

Her eyes widened. “Johnny—”

“You know I can,” I added, keeping my voice low. “Contrary to your beliefs, I have more going for me than a thirteen jersey and a dick.”

“What if I told you I was pregnant?” she choked out. “What would you say then?”

I threw my head back and laughed. “You’re unbelievable.”

“Stop laughing,” she fake-sobbed. “It’s not funny.”

“I would tell you to go talk to Cormac because I haven’t touched you in four and a half months.” Sneering in disgust, I added, “Besides, I’m pretty sure you’d have used it against me by now. Pretty fucking sure you’d be showing, too.”

“Not necessarily,” she bit out.

“Are you saying that I got you pregnant, Bella?” I deadpanned. “Be very fucking careful how you answer next.”

She knew who my father was. She knew where her lies would land her if she pushed this bullshit on me.

Bella stared me down for the longest moment before grumbling, “No, I’m not pregnant.”

“I know,” I sneered.

“It was a hypothetical question,” she shot back defensively.

“*No*,” I corrected. “It was failed manipulation.”

“I love you,” she sobbed. “I’m sorry for wanting to make it work.”

“Well, *don’t* love me,” I barked, agitated. “Because I don’t and won’t ever love you back!” Twisting sideways, I slipped past her and stalked into the hall. “From now on, stay the fuck away from me.”

57
Unexpected Field Trips

SHANNON

I didn’t go back to my last three classes on Wednesday, and I stayed at home from school on Thursday. I knew it was wrong to skip school, but I just couldn’t face *it*.

It was too much.

Bella, Johnny, the stares, the whispers.

It was far too much.

I felt emotionally drained and physically battered, and I needed some time to think things through before going back.

My attempt at taking some breathing space was a complete disaster that consisted of my father losing his head with me last night for burning the dinner and resulted in a punch to the face.

Apparently, I couldn’t cook spaghetti Bolognese for shit. And apparently, that was crime enough to earn another infamous choking.

I felt like absolute crap this morning, but I would have crawled on my hands and knees out of that house if I had to. Nothing Bella did to me at school could come close to what he was capable of doing to me at home.

When I finally made it to school—over an hour late because I overslept without the aid of my trusty phone alarm—I all but got my head bitten off by Mr. Mulcahy, our P.E. teacher, for holding the show up.

“*What show*?” I had asked, because I honestly didn’t know what the hell was happening.

Apparently, I wasn’t deemed worthy enough of that information because instead of explaining what was happening, Mr. Mulcahy had all but shoved me onto a jam-packed school bus and instructed me to find a seat and fast.

Which brought me to my current terror-induced predicament as I stood at the front of the bus, at a complete loss as to what was happening or why I was being forced onto a school bus full of unfamiliar faces.

“Shan!” Claire called out, flagging me over.

Panicked, my eyes sought her out in the third row from the front with Lizzie sitting alongside her. All the girls on the bus seemed to be sitting up at the front near the driver. There were only four other girls in my class, and Shelly and Helen were paired up in the seat behind my friends. Several other girls from sixth year were sitting near them—including a glaring Bella and a huge dark-haired boy with his arm wrapped around her and his face nuzzling her neck.

Forcing myself to not look at Bella, I scrambled toward Lizzie and Claire.

“What’s going on?” I hissed when I reached them.

“It’s game day,” Claire told me, smile fading. “Remember?”

I stared blankly at her. “Game day what?”

Claire’s eyes widened. “Oh my god,” she whisper-hissed. “A text went out Tuesday night about it.”

“A text?” I croaked out. “I didn’t get any text.”

“She’s new so she’s probably not on the system,” Lizzie muttered.

No, I didn’t get the text because my phone was floating in water on Tuesday night.

“What’s going on, guys?” I choked out, terrified now. I glanced around nervously.

“The playoff is today,” Lizzie explained. “Between Tommen and Royce.”

I stared blankly back at her. “Huh?”

“For god’s sake, Claire,” Lizzie groaned. “I can’t believe you didn’t let her know!”

“I thought she knew!” Claire replied, red-faced. “I’m sorry, Shan. I thought you knew the game was today.”

“No, no, no,” I spluttered. “The Donegal match isn’t until after the holidays.” Which were supposed to start today. “Remember?”

“Royce College won their last three games,” Lizzie told me, tone laced with sympathy.

Apparently, I looked as stumped as I did petrified because Lizzie didn't dish out the sympathy gazes for nothing.

"Winning their last game put Royce College second on the table with Tommen," she hurried to explain. "Royce and Tommen are having a playoff today to see who gets to play Levitt in the final."

I pinched my nose, struggling to comprehend what I was being told. "But we're supposed to be going to Donegal *after* Easter!"

"There won't be a Donegal trip if the boys don't win today," Claire explained.

"Why didn't you guys tell me about this?"

"We didn't know for sure when the game would be held."

"Why?"

"Because Royce were playing games," Lizzie offered. "Making life awkward for Tommen in the hopes that Johnny wouldn't be available."

"*What*?"

"He has a schedule," Claire explained. "Everything he does rugby-related has to run through the Academy." Shrugging, she added, "I guess they were hoping to catch Tommen on a loop."

"Which they didn't," Lizzie scoffed. "Unlucky for them."

"Oh god," I croaked out, flustered. "Where's this happening?"

"Dublin," Claire grimaced.

"I'm not allowed to go to *Dublin*." My eyes widened. "If my father finds out—"

"It's only a day trip," she interrupted me to say. "Straight up and down. We'll be home by ten."

"Ten?" I whimpered. "*Tonight*?"

Oh god.

I was so dead.

"Guys, I can't go," I croaked out, panicking at thought of what my father would say if I came home at 10:00 p.m. "I don't have any money and my parents don't know—"

"Miss Lynch!" Mr. Mulcahy roared, cutting Claire off and drawing everyone on the bus's attention to us. "Sit down!"

"I'll move," Lizzie interjected, rising up. "Shannon, you can sit here —"

“Sit down, Miss Young,” Mr. Mulcahy snapped. “Miss Lynch is the one throwing us off schedule with her poor timekeeping skills. She can find herself a seat.”

“It’s okay,” I choked out, mortified. “I’ll find a seat.”

“Today would be great,” he grumbled.

With my head down, and Mr. Mulcahy’s impatient voice in my ear, I had to do the dreaded walk of shame, shuffling down the center aisle with my schoolbag on my back, peeking from side to side to see if there was a free spot.

There wasn’t.

I ended up having to walk all the way to the back of the bus where the team was harboring. The further back on the bus I walked, the louder the bustle grew. I wanted to turn around. I wanted climb off this bus and leg it home.

No, I mentally steeled my resolve. *No. You don’t run anymore.*

You’re okay. You’re fine.

Who cares if they’re staring at you?

They don’t know you.

Just breathe.

Finally, when I reached the back of the bus and saw the back row, my cheeks were so hot I was sure I was radiating fire. Honestly, if someone pressed a rasher to my face, it would have sizzled.

The entire back row was filled with members of the rugby team.

Oh, Jesus. I was in the danger zone.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed that the window seat on my right, just in front of the back row was vacant. Sagging in relief, I tightened my hold on the shoulder straps of my bag and turned my body to slip into the row, only to immediately halt in my tracks when I noticed who was sprawled out in the aisle seat.

My heart jackknifed in my chest.

Johnny had headphones on, and the music blasting from them was so loud I could clearly make out the sound of Jay-Z singing about having ninety-nine problems.

I hear you, Jay-Z…

Johnny wasn’t looking at me. He wasn’t looking at anyone. His entire focus was on the iPod in his hands. Strewn on top of the seat beside him—

the only remaining seat in the entire bus—was a pile of gear bags, obviously belonging to the team.

Oh god.

Clearing my throat, I gestured to the seat.

He didn't look up. His perfectly styled hair was the only part of his head I could see as he stared down at the iPod in his hands.

The engine of the bus roared to life, vibrating beneath my feet, and a huge dollop of panic set in. I reached out and tapped his shoulder before quickly pulling my hand back. Johnny's head snapped up and the flash of annoyance on his features quickly turned to a look of surprise as he did a double take of me. "*Shannon*?"

"I need to sit down," I strangled out the words, mortified by the sounds of catcalling and insinuating comments coming from the rest of the lads.

For the last two nights, I had wrestled with my emotions over him, barely sleeping, and drowning in panic and self-doubt. Now that I was faced with the unexpected prospect of spending several hours next to Johnny, I could feel myself losing it on the inside. Seriously, my stomach was rolling and I was fairly certain that if I didn't sit down soon, I was going to spew.

God…

With furrowed brows, Johnny continued to stare up at me, while I continued to babble.

"There's no other seat left on the bus and the driver's taking off now, so I need you to let me in—" I looked from him to the horde of people watching us, and then to the spare seat. "Can you just push in a seat, or move the bags so I can get in please?"

"Sorry," Johnny said in an apologetic tone. He reached up and yanked off his headphones. "I didn't catch any of that."

A barrage of laughter erupted from the boys in the back row.

Turning scarlet, I pointed to the stack of bags on the seat beside him and whispered, "I don't have anywhere to sit."

"Shite, yeah, sorry," Johnny replied and quickly began to toss the bags onto the floor by my feet. "Give me a sec to clear these."

"For Christ's sake, Lynch, sit down back there!" Mr. Mulcahy barked from the front of the bus. "And buckle up!"

Embarrassed, I glanced back to Claire for help, but locked eyes with an enraged Bella.

Oh, fuck.

She's going to kill you, Shannon. Bella Wilkinson is going to kill you.

If your father doesn't get there first…

Mortified, I made a dive for the seat, trying to squeeze past Johnny's overly long legs, at the same time he stretched over to deposit another bag.

The end result was not pretty.

It involved a lot of flailing, tangled-up limbs, one of my knees connecting full force with his nose, and a chorus of *ooooh*s and *oh shit*s from the lads around us.

"Jesus fucking Christ," Johnny hissed. Leaning back against the headrest, he cupped his face and growled. "Fucking hell, Shannon!"

I slapped a hand over my mouth, eyes wide. "I am so sorry!"

"Go on, Johnny boy!" one of the lads called out from the back row. "Get up on that!"

"Fuck *off*, Luke," Johnny snapped. He touched his nose twice, checking for blood, and when he was satisfied there wasn't any, he let out what sounded like an aggravated growl.

"I really didn't mean to do that," I choked out, mortified, as I desperately tried and failed to disentangle myself from between his thighs.

It wasn't an easy feat with my schoolbag on my back. I had a whole day's worth of books in my bag, having been unable to go to my locker before being thrust onto this bus, and the weight strapped to my back was throwing me off-balance. Holding onto the back of Johnny's headrest, I raised one leg and attempted to climb over his leg, but my foot must have traveled dangerously close to his *area* because Johnny snaked out a hand and grabbed my ankle, holding my foot in place, causing my skirt to ride up.

"Watch it!" he barked as his eyes flashed with worry. "Stop moving."

I didn't blame him for looking worried. I was a liability.

Shaking his head, Johnny expelled a heavy breath, released my ankle, and then stood to his feet. It was a terrible move that resulted in our bodies being crushed together without an inch of space to spare.

"I would have moved, you know," Johnny explained, eyes locked on me. We were in such close quarters that I could smell his cologne. "If you'd

given me a half a chance."

I opened my mouth to respond, but all that came out was a puff of air. It was impossible to form words when I was completely wedged between his chest and the seat in front, my stupid schoolbag making it impossible for me to escape.

"Are they going to ride or what?" someone called out.

"Sure fucking looks like it," another snickered.

"What the hell is going on back there?" Mr. Mulcahy roared at the top of his lungs. "Kavanagh! Lynch! Pack the canoodling in and take your seats!"

Everyone on the bus erupted in whistles and laughter.

Meanwhile, I died inside.

"We're fucking trying!" Johnny roared back. "Give us a bleeding minute, will ya?"

"How difficult is it to sit in a damn seat, Kavanagh?" the teacher demanded.

"A great deal, apparently," Johnny muttered under his breath before turning his attention back to me.

"Go left on three," he instructed. "One, two—"

My eyes widened. "My left or your left?"

"Jaysus." Muttering a string of curses under his breath, Johnny grumbled, "Never mind, just come here," and then proceeded to grab my waist, pull my body closer to his—however that was even possible—and then turn us sideways.

He released my waist and I practically flopped into the window seat, face flaming, body trembling. As soon as we were both sitting down, the bus began to move beneath our feet.

"Thanks," I croaked out, as I pressed into my seat, shoulders slumping.

"No problem," Johnny muttered as he settled back, touching the bridge of his nose. "Christ, you're a bit of a liability, aren't you?"

"Ah, yep," I managed to respond, though my voice was both breathy and pitchy. "I'm really sorry about kneeing your nose."

Slipping my bag off my shoulders, I pushed it to the floor and sagged backwards.

Johnny turned to look at me, a small smile pulling at his lips. "Are you sure you weren't being crafty and trying to get me back for the ball?"

“What? No!” I balked, shaking my head. “Of course not. I truly didn’t mean to—”

“Relax, Shannon,” he said, chuckling. “I’m only messing with you.”

Yeah, he was certainly messing with me.

My ability to breathe for one. My erratic heartbeat for another.

Johnny shifted around in his seat, obviously trying to find the comfortable position he had before I disturbed him.

“I hate traveling on buses,” he explained, when he finally settled into a position.

He stretched his legs out, angling his left leg in such a way that it rested against my knee. When he didn’t move his leg, choosing to leave it there, I forced myself not to shiver.

It was clear that he wasn’t doing it on purpose. He was six foot three and far too big for the tiny amount of space he’d been allocated.

Still, though, it was too close. He was too close. There was far too much *closeness*.

“You’re on my side,” I whispered, nudging his thigh with my knee, praying for a reprieve.

It didn’t come. He didn’t move his leg.

Instead, he cocked a brow and tossed back, “You’re on my bus.”

My cheeks flushed bright red. Dropping my head, I concentrated on pulling at an invisible thread on my school jumper—the only school jumper currently on view in the whole bus. The no-uniform memo was another one I didn’t receive.

God…

“I was joking,” Johnny said, pulling me from my thoughts.

“I know,” I replied, even though I didn’t.

I couldn’t read him. I was confused. I felt flustered. And I wanted off this bus.

“So, your class got picked to come to the match?” he asked, offering some conversation.

I nodded and tried to ignore the feel of his leg on mine. “Apparently.”

He cocked a brow. “Apparently?”

I released a heavy sigh. “I didn’t even know about this stupid match until I walked into school and got thrown on this bus.”

“Stupid match?” he scoffed. “Thanks for that.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it,” he replied. “So, you seriously had no idea about the match?”

I shook my head. “No idea.”

“Shite,” he muttered. “So, you’ve got nothing with you?”

“I have every book I need for all nine classes today,” I offered weakly, shoulders slumped.

“If it runs late, we might have to stay over,” he stated with a frown.

“What?” I croaked out. “Please don’t say that.”

Johnny shrugged apologetically. “It happens.”

“God,” I breathed.

“Do you want to run home and grab a bag?” he asked. “I can have a word with Coach and ask him to stop off at your house—”

“No,” I strangled out. “God, no, it’s okay.”

“You sure?”

I nodded.

“Listen, I’ll take you home after the match tonight,” Johnny said with a deep frown. “If that’s what you’re worried about.”

“Worried?” I shook my head. “I’m not worried.”

“You *look* worried,” he said quietly, eyes trained on mine.

“Uh, I’m just…” Fighting down a wave of anxiety, I asked, “Can I borrow your phone, please?” Squirming uncomfortably, I added, “I need to let my brother know that I’ll be home late.”

And then I need to ask Joey to get my funeral arrangements underway because I am a dead girl walking…

“Yeah, no bother,” Johnny replied. He slid his hand into his pocket and pulled out his fancy-looking phone before handing me the shiny black device.

“Um.” I stared down at the screen, clueless. “Can you unlock it for me?”

“Shite, yeah, sorry,” he muttered as he reached over and unlocked the screen.

When I continued to fumble with his phone, he swiped it out of my hand and instructed me to call out the number.

“Thanks,” I whispered, taking the phone back from him.

Pressing the green CALL button, I held it to my ear and prayed Joey would pick up. Several rings later, I was connected to his answering machine.

"Hey, this is Joey. You know what to do—"

"Joe," I strangled out, ducking my face. "It's me—Shannon. I'm on the way to Dublin with the school. I won't be back until late tonight. Can you tell Mam? He has my phone so don't call it, okay? You won't be able to get ahold of me, but I'm okay, Joe. Don't worry about—"

The phone beeped, letting me know that I was out of time.

Ending the call, I handed Johnny back his phone and exhaled shakily. "Thank you."

"Who has your phone?" Johnny asked, pocketing his phone.

"Oh, uh, my father," I mumbled.

"Why?"

I shrugged but didn't respond.

"That's different," he said then.

I stared blankly at him. "Huh?"

He reached over and touched my cheek. "The makeup."

"Oh." I ducked my face, feeling incredibly grateful for the zippy bag of makeup Claire had given me Wednesday morning. *It was one hundred percent necessary*. "I know."

Johnny shifted around in his seat then, obviously trying to get comfortable.

Dropping my head, I concentrated on pulling at that same invisible thread on my school jumper.

"Are you mad at me?"

His question threw me and I looked up into piercing blue eyes. "Mad at you?"

Johnny nodded slowly. "For what I did in the lunch hall?"

My heart hammered violently, while I assessed his question.

I was embarrassed. I was uncertain. I was fearful.

But I wasn't mad at him.

"No," I finally replied. "I'm not mad at you."

"You didn't come back," he said, voice low.

I shrugged and dropped my gaze. "I was sick."

"You're better now?"

“I guess,” I replied, voice small.

“Was it your period?” Johnny blew my mind by straight out asking.

God.

“Uh…yeah.” Red-faced, I shifted uncomfortably. “But I’m okay now.”

“Don’t do that,” Johnny said with a frown.

“Don’t do what?”

“Be embarrassed.” He nudged my shoulder with his. “It’s natural, Shannon.”

Oh god. I was beyond embarrassed.

At this stage, I was teetering toward life-altering humiliation.

“Okay?” I squeezed out.

He shook his head and smirked. “Did you listen to track nine?”

Now I was embarrassed again.

“I did,” I whispered.

“Did you like it?”

“Um.” I shrugged, unsure what to say.

“What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know what to make of it, really?”

He frowned, waiting for an explanation.

I shifted uncomfortably before saying, “‘Fuck Her Gently’?”

Johnny gaped at me. “*What*?”

“Track nine on the CD?” I shrugged. “It was ‘Fuck Her Gently’ by Tenacious D.”

“Dammit.”

“No, that’s Blink 182 and that was track four,” I replied.

“Fuck it.”

“No,” I corrected, “‘Fuck It’ by Eamon was track ten.”

“What—no!” Johnny shook his head and groaned. “Jesus, what else was on it?”

I thought about it for a moment before saying, “‘Pretty Fly for a White Guy,’ ‘The Ballad of Chasey Lain,’ um, ‘Stacy’s Mom,’ ‘The Bad Touch,’ ‘Pony,’ and a few others that I can’t remember.”

Johnny groaned again. “I gave you the wrong CD.”

“You did?”

He nodded slowly. “That was Gibsie’s.”

“What one did you mean to give me?”

Johnny had a pinched expression when he said, “A Maroon 5 song.”

“Oh?” I looked up at him. “Which one?”

He shifted in discomfort. “‘She Will Be Loved.’”

Oh.

Oh wow.

When I didn’t respond, because quite frankly I couldn’t, Johnny asked me a few more random questions, clearly trying to spark up conversation.

When all I gave him in return was a couple of one-word responses, he settled back in his seat with his arm brushing against mine and pulled his iPod back out. He fiddled with the buttons on the fancy-looking screen, flicking through song after song until finally settling on John Mayer’s “Daughters.”

“Just ask if you want to use my phone again, okay?” he offered before slipping the headphones over his ears. “Or need anything else.”

He blasted the volume on his iPod so loudly then that I didn’t need to take out my Discman for entertainment, not when I could clearly hear every word from my seat.

Grateful for the reprieve from his intensity, I blew out a shaky breath and tried to get a handle on my nerves.

It wasn’t easy, though. Not with the root of all my anxiety sitting next to me. And the words of that song tormenting me.

If only he knew how true those lyrics were, I thought to myself. *If only…*

58
Where’s My Head at?

JOHNNY

I just asked her about her period.

What the actual fuck was wrong with me? Were you even supposed to ask a girl about her period?

I had no fucking clue.

Christ, I needed to get the doctors to scan my brain as well as my balls because there was something loose rattling around up there.

Shannon was sitting right next to me, her smell was in my nose, her arm was touching mine, and I could hardly form a coherent sentence.

Seriously, this wasn’t normal.

I’d spent my entire life on display, like a bleeding show pony, and nothing ever fazed me.

But she did. This girl right here did.

Maybe I’d left it so long that I had grown back my virginity, because I certainly felt like I had reverted back to virginal status. No self-respecting lad of my age, with my kind of life experience, trembled over a girl.

Fucking *trembled*.

And yet, here I was, trying to get my body to calm the hell down so I could at least pretend that I was half-normal and not scare her back into the shell she liked to hide inside.

The questions my mouth was spurting were beyond embarrassing, but I couldn’t seem to get a handle on myself.

She had makeup on. A full face of bleeding makeup that made me want to *cry*.

She was gorgeous without putting a thing on her face, but knowing she was wearing it around all my teammates made me uneasy. I *knew* they were looking at her. In the last half hour alone, I’d had to give Luke the death

glare so he would stop fucking staring at her from his perch across the row. It was so out of order that I found myself shifting around in my seat just so I could block her from his—and everyone else's—view.

Thank Christ for Mrs. Moore, who had been roped into assisting Coach in chaperoning the trip. Tommen's guidance counselor was batshit crazy, but she had a whole host of games and team-bonding exercises planned for the three-and-a-half-hour bus ride. She even had a bag of fucking Easter eggs and little laminated award charts as prizes. She did this every damn time she joined us on an away game, and usually I just ignored the woman until she gave up and left me alone.

I always sat alone so she couldn't pair me up with the person beside me and make me do those bleeding feelings exercises—and, god forbid, reflection time—she loved so much.

But today? Today I found myself participating in the boring-as-fuck quizzes and charades games, not to mention, I bleeding Spy.

I knew Gibsie, Hughie, and Feely were laughing their asses off at me from the back of the bus—they knew I never joined in on these games—but I didn't give a shite because playing these games meant Shannon *had* to talk to me.

Every time I won, the girl next to me smiled. Every time I handed her another Easter egg or stupid little award, she crept further out of that shell she was hiding in.

That was worth the slagging I was going to reap from my team.

She was worth it all.

59
Hushed Whispers and True Colors

SHANNON

Sitting on a bus with Johnny Kavanagh was unexpectedly brilliant.

When Mrs. Moore, our kooky guidance counselor, called for everyone's attention and started passing out quizzes and games for us to play, I had expected Johnny to ignore her—because, let's face it, he was a bloody rugby star.

But that's not what he did.

No, Johnny *played*.

Because we were sitting together, we were teamed up for the games and tasks, and managed to work together in a strange sort of harmony, completing our games and activities with ease.

The games we were given were dumb and childish, but after about an hour, I felt myself completely relax with him. It also didn't hurt that my partner seemed to be this freakish genius who, when every pair was given a Rubik's Cube to solve, completed ours with ease in under ten minutes. It was seriously impressive, considering no other person on the bus had solved their cube.

Every single quiz we were given, or competitive task against the other couples, we won.

Well, Johnny won.

But he was my teammate so that meant I won, too.

I had never won so many pointless competitions in my life—or Easter eggs. I'd never won anything before today, actually.

We had a stack of *twelve* chocolate eggs on the floor because the boy seemed to just shine and excel at everything he put his mind to.

Twelve eggs.

Tadhg, Ollie, and Sean were going to be thrilled.

Johnny was so much fun to be with, and I became so immersed in playing with him, that I didn't have time to worry.

Both curious and intrigued, I studied him during our reflection sessions —which was an actual thing Mrs. Moore liked to do—absorbing every little detail, taking note of the elected variety of songs he listened to, and the way he timed his food intakes, and how many times he thrummed his finger on his thigh—which was constantly. He appeared cool, calm, and composed, but if you looked beneath the surface you could see that he was like a caged animal inside this bus.

Johnny was too big for the seat, too stunted inside the tiny rows, too broad to be truly comfortable, and he rebelled by sprawling himself out at any given opportunity, regardless of whether he touched me or not. I was sure he was doing this because he needed to stretch out his long legs.

During our first reflection session, forty minutes into the trip, Johnny reached into his bag and withdrew an expensive-looking shaker bottle, the contents of which he downed within seconds. During the next session, he checked his watch and ate a banana. The one after that, he did another time check and devoured a protein bar.

I was far too aware of him but it was impossible not to be.

When the bus driver pulled over at some filling station two hours into the journey, the rest of the team and students hurried off to use the bathroom and buy supplies, but Johnny didn't get off the bus.

"Do you want to go into the shop?" he asked, offering to move for me.

I shook my head. "No, that's okay, I'm not hungry."

And I have no money.

"You sure?" he asked, lowering himself back onto his seat, legs brushing against mine in the process. "I can get you something if you—"

"No, no, I don't need anything." I quickly cut him off. "Thanks for offering."

"If you're sure?"

"I am."

Johnny then proceeded to reach into his never-ending bag of supplies and retrieve an airtight container and fork. I watched out of the corner of my eye as he pulled off the lid, revealing a selection of steamed vegetables, four plain, skinless chicken breasts, and a couple of packets of cracked black pepper.

“Are you going to get that heated up?” I heard myself ask, my mouth inquiring without my brain’s permission.

“Why?” He turned to smirk at me. “Do you have a microwave in your bag?”

“No, but they might have one in the shop,” I stated, forcing myself not to look away. “It’ll taste better if it’s warm.”

“Nah, I’m used to it,” he replied and then shoveled a forkful into his mouth. “Besides, I’m eating for fuel, not taste.”

“That sounds dreadful,” I blurted out.

Johnny smirked between bites. “It is what it is.”

“Do you want to go sit with them for lunch?” I pointed out the window to where a bunch of Johnny’s teammates were sitting around a picnic table outside the shop, munching and chatting. “I don’t mind,” I added, not wanting him to feel like he had to stay here with me when his friends were all together over there.

“I’m happy here,” he quickly dismissed.

“Are you really never allowed to eat normal food?” I couldn’t stop myself from asking, remembering what he told me that day at the pub. “I know you’re in *training*—” I scrunched my nose up at the thought before adding, “But do you seriously never get to have a day off from it?”

Now Johnny turned to look at me. “You don’t consider chicken and veg to be normal food?”

“Well, yeah, of course I do,” I mumbled, pushing down my discomfort. “But all the other lads on your team are eating chicken fillet rolls and deli food. And you’re eating a prepacked meal.”

“Yeah, well, all the other lads on the team don’t have a bitchy nutritionist to contend with,” he explained between bites. “Or a truckload of coaches and scouts breathing down their necks.”

Huh.

I thought about that for a moment.

“Do you mind?” I asked then.

He smirked. “No, baby, I don’t mind.”

My heart stopped in my chest.

Johnny’s face flushed and he shook his head. “I mean—”

“It’s okay,” I whispered. “It’s fine.”

He looked at me with a pained expression and then exhaled heavily. Shaking his head, he tucked his lunch box back into his bag and rubbed his forehead.

Desperate to break the clammy tension enveloping us, I blurted out, “Teach me about rugby.”

Johnny looked at me with surprise. “You want me to…” His voice trailed off and he arched a brow. “Why?”

“I’m being forced to watch you guys play again,” I replied. “I should know what I’m watching.” Shrugging, I added, “Like, what position do you play on the team?”

“I play center,” he explained, still looking at me with a puzzled expression. “Outside center is where I’m most comfortable.”

“Okay.” I nodded, absorbing the information. “So, do you go in the scrums and stuff?”

Johnny snorted.

“What?” I shot back defensively. “I’ve only watched one of your games and the rules and positions went clean over my head. I’ve already told you that I’m a GAA girl.”

“I know.” Chuckling, he held his hands up and said, “I’m not judging.”

“But you *are* laughing,” I admonished.

He stared at me for the longest moment before asking, “You really want me to teach you?”

I nodded. “I want to know.”

Johnny blew out a breath and nodded. “Why not,” he mused. “It’ll pass the time before the next bullshit assignment the crazy one gives us.”

“I think it’s meditating once we’re back on the road,” I snickered.

“Stop.” Johnny shuddered. “Do you have a pen and paper in your bag?”

I frowned at his request but didn’t question him. Instead, I slipped my hand into the front pocket of my schoolbag, retrieved a small notebook and pen, and handed them to him.

“The fuck is this?” Johnny asked, staring at the pink fluffy bobble dangling on top of the Welcome to Tommen pen that Claire bought me. “Christ.” He flicked the bobble, making it sparkle, then turned his accusatory gaze on me. “Could you be any more of a *girl*?”

“You said you wouldn’t judge,” I mumbled, feeling my cheeks burn. “And I *am* a girl.”

“Right.” Shaking his head, he turned his attention to my notepad. “Let’s do this,” he announced, clearing his throat. “Prepare to get schooled.” He flashed me an indulgent smile before adding, “Again.”

I grinned. “I’m all ears.”

Johnny opened my notebook to a blank page and began to sketch out a grid with fifteen small boxes, explaining as he worked. Inside each box, he scribbled down words like *flanker*, *hooker*, *right wing*, *left wing*, and then explained each position. Alongside each box he ascribed a number. Next to the box labeled *outside center*, he wrote *13*.

“Outside center—that’s you, right?” I asked. “You’re thirteen?”

Johnny nodded.

“Unlucky for some,” I mused.

“Not for me,” he shot back with a grin.

“And there goes your opportunity to feign modesty.”

“There’s no point,” he replied with a nonchalant shrug. “I am what I am and I make no apologies for it.” He lightly tapped the pen against my nose. “Now, concentrate.”

So, I did.

“You have your forwards: numbers one to eight. So, that’s your two props, two flankers, your hooker, your two locks, and your number eight. These guys are usually the biggest, heaviest players,” he explained as he scribbled little notes.

Johnny’s handwriting was surprisingly neat for a guy, small, unjoined, and easy to read.

I banked that snippet of information in my mind for safekeeping.

“And then you have your backs,” he announced, drawing my attention back to him. “Numbers nine to fifteen. That’s your scrum half, fly half, your two centers, two wingers, and your full back. They’re the smaller, lighter, and generally faster players on the team.” With a contented sigh, he waved a hand in front of the page. “And there you have it: the fifteen positions that make up a rugby team.”

“So, these guys are the forwards?” I asked, pointing to the numbers 1 to 8.

Johnny nodded. “Exactly.”

“Like in soccer?”

“No, not like in *soccer*,” he practically choked on the words, appalled. “Nothing like *soccer*.”

“Gaelic?”

“No,” he grumbled, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“Hurling?”

“What? No! Stop talking.” Flustered, he ran a hand through his hair and growled. “Forget about other sports for a while and just *listen*.”

“You weren’t such a bossy teacher the other night,” I grumbled.

“And you weren’t such a trying student then, either,” he retorted, tapping the pen against the notepad. “Now, focus.” Exhaling a frustrated breath, he said, “In *rugby*, the backs are positioned behind the forwards at the start of play. That’s the norm. That’s how it’s *played*.”

“So, all these guys here form the scrum?” I asked pointing to the numbers 1 to 8. “The forwards?” Frowning, I added, “And they bind, set, and engage with the other team when the referee calls for a scrum?”

“Yes,” he agreed, nodding encouragingly.

“What’s a bind?” I asked, thinking back to what Claire, Helen, and Shelly had told me about the sixth-year girls having a competition about binding him.

“Binding is when your front row connects with the opposition’s front row,” Johnny explained.

“Like smashing together?” I asked. “Connecting by force?”

“It’s a little more complicated and technical than that, but yeah,” he replied, scrunching his nose up at the thought. “For the sake of our lesson, let’s just call it that.”

I frowned at the notion, not finding it one bit enticing, before asking, “And the scrum half throws the ball into the scrum?”

“Exactly.”

“And the ball has to be played backwards and behind the players at all times? A forward pass or throw results in a penalty?”

“Yes.” His eyes lit up. “That’s really good, Shannon.”

I flushed bright pink from the praise.

Encouraged, I listened intently to him.

Rugby seemed to be his life and I wanted to learn all about it. Every teeny, tiny, insignificant detail. It was pathetic on all levels, but I consoled

myself by telling myself that it was a harmless way of passing the time.

Johnny continued to talk, trying to teach me the rules of the game and the roles of each individual player, not to mention different plays and formations. To be honest, there was a huge amount of information to take in and much of it went clean over my head, but when he began to explain about the role of a center, I listened intently.

“So, on a team, you have two centers—the inside center and the outside center. Playing center means my job is about breaking down the opposition’s defensive line,” he explained. “We also have to *keep* our own defensive line, read the opposition’s play, anticipate the direction of the ball, know when to make a defensive attack, and know when to not.”

“That sounds incredibly complicated,” I admitted, feeling a little overwhelmed and awestruck.

“It’s not an easy position to be responsible for,” Johnny agreed. “Everyone talks about the fly half, but the two centers are paramount to play. I guess you can say they are the midfield of a rugby team.”

“But you said you were a back.”

“I *am* a back.”

“But you just said you were a midfield.”

“I *am*.”

“How?”

“Jesus, please stop asking questions and hear me out.” Johnny pinched the bridge of his nose and muttered several swear words under his breath. “I’m explaining this the best I can, Shannon.”

“I’m sorry,” I muttered. “Don’t get mad at me over it.”

“I’m not getting mad at you. I’m trying to—” Johnny stopped short and inhaled a deep breath before trying again. “Aside from the nine and ten, who tend to control the play, speed, and direction of the game, the centers are the playmakers,” he explained, tone gentler now. “We protect the fly half, watch out for the scrum half, take a battering from the opposition’s forwards, who are a lot fucking bigger than us. We’re smaller, faster, and nimbler than the forwards. We have to be in order to play fast ball and link with and assist other members of our team.”

“But—” I held my hand up and waited for him to give me the go-ahead before continuing. “I’ve seen you play. You’re the biggest guy on the team.”

Johnny shook his head, lips twitching. “That’s school rugby. Most of the guys in the school leagues play for fun. In professional, competitive rugby, I’m not the biggest guy.”

“But you’re huge!” I exclaimed.

“I’m *tall*,” he corrected before quickly continuing. “Speed is vital to a center. I need to be agile on my feet and accelerate the fuck out of it when opportunity arrives.”

I thought Johnny was massive, but what did I know?

Apparently, not much.

“Hold and defend—that’s my job as thirteen,” he said. “Hold the line and defend it. Competing on the ground or overturning a ruck. That’s on me, too,” he added. “Twelve and thirteen play close to each other.”

“Who’s your twelve on the school team?”

Johnny inclined his head toward the group of boys. “Patrick Feely.”

“Oh.” I nodded. “And you guys are good friends, right?”

He nodded. “Yeah, he’s a good buddy. I’m constantly watching Feely and vice versa. If he has the ball, I need to be on his ass, ready to take the pass off and capitalize by linking up with one of the wings.”

“The wings?”

“Eleven and fourteen,” he explained.

I nodded. “Okay, eleven and fourteen are the wings.”

“Exactly. Now, there’s a trust needed between your two centers—twelve and thirteen,” he explained. “You need to have complete fucking faith in each other, know your partner like the back of your hand, read his plays, his body language… Hell, you need to read his thoughts at times.”

“Why?”

“Because if I’m taking the opposition out wide, I’m depending on twelve to control the inside and vice versa. If one of us fucks up, the other suffers, resulting in the entire team suffering.” He exhaled a heavy breath and said, “It’s a tight partnership that needs transparent communication.”

“You couldn’t have made life a little easier for yourself, could you?” I asked, feeling intimidated. “You had to pick the most challenging position on the team.”

“Every position is challenging,” he said. “Like the spokes of a wheel, if one goes down, we all go down.”

“Do you kick?”

Johnny shrugged. “I can, and I do when I need to, like line kicks or the odd grubber, but it’s not a huge part of my game.”

“Grubber?”

“A kick down field to chase after.”

“But you don’t do that often?”

“Not that often.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m usually busy competing for the ball and defending the line. I need to be able to take on the opposition in both attack and defense. My body needs to be ready for the hits I take, and I take a lot of fucking hits, Shannon.”

“Why do you do it?”

“What do you mean?”

“Rugby,” I explained. “Why do you do it?”

“I love it,” he replied simply. “Everything about it. The shape of the ball. The physicality of the game. The adrenaline rush. The pressure. The rewards. Pushing myself. I fucking love the game.”

I love you, I almost blurted out, holding the three terrifying words back just in time.

Oh my god! Where did that come from?

I *didn’t* love Johnny.

I didn’t even know him. Not well, at least.

And sure, the parts I knew about him were good parts, decent parts, *beautiful* parts, but that in no way meant I felt anything deeper for Johnny than obvious physical attraction and a teenage crush.

It was ridiculous.

I was ridiculous.

Stop lying to yourself, my brain hissed. *You love him with every piece of your fractured heart…*

Startled and disoriented by the troubling thought, it took me a few moments to realize that he was still talking to me.

“You’re assigned a ton of extra bullshit that I’m not going to go into detail and bore you with,” I managed to catch him saying.

He was shifting around again, legs stretched out at an awkward angle.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“Yeah.” He dropped his hand to his thigh but quickly snatched it back again, casting me a wary look. “I seriously hate these long-ass bus rides,” he said by way of explanation. “I’m too cramped.”

“So, that’s why you prefer sitting on your own?” I offered, giving him an out. “For the leg room?”

“Yeah.” Johnny nodded, eyes flashing with relief. “With being the size I am, it’s just easier.”

“Do you sit on your own in your classes, too?”

He nodded. “Yeah, I prefer it that way.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m broad,” he replied. “And those desks are narrow as fuck.”

He was broad. He was huge. And beautiful.

Johnny glanced sideways at me, smirking, and said, “I’d sit with you, though.”

My heart leaped in my chest. “You would?”

He grinned. “You’re so tiny you don’t count.”

I huffed out a breath. “I still count.”

“You know what I mean.” he laughed quietly. “There’s no fighting for leg room.” He looked down at my feet, smile still firmly attached, and teased, “Are your feet even touching the floor?”

“Of course,” I confirmed, then quickly felt for the ground with my toes to see if I was right. “See?” I tossed back, happy to discover that I was, in fact, right. Granted, my toes barely touched the floor, but there was definite tiptoe contact happening. “Ha-ha.”

“*Ha-ha*?” Johnny threw his head back and laughed. “Are you four years old?”

“Says the guy ribbing me over my height,” I replied, giving him my best indignant glare.

“I’m only stating facts,” he replied innocently. An impish grin spread across his face before he added, “I was half expecting you to bring a booster seat on the bus.”

Against my better judgment, I cracked a smile at his remark. There was something about his tone that assured me this wasn’t vindictive behavior. Johnny was being *playful*. It was strange, unexpected, and surprisingly *welcome*.

“I decided to leave it at home,” I impressed myself by retorting. “Thank god I did, because there’s barely enough room in here with your ego.”

“Shannon Lynch has banter.” Johnny leaned back, both sounding and looking reluctantly impressed. “Who’d have guessed?”

“Well, obviously not you.” I smiled sweetly at him, ignoring the fluttering in my stomach when he said my name, as my body slowly relaxed, and my sense of humor peeked over my sky-high protective walls, intrigued by this boy’s persuasive coaxing.

“Well, shite.” Johnny was smiling now. “You’re a sarcastic little thing when you want to be, aren’t you?”

Feeling a sudden burst of playfulness, I shrugged and said, “I know you are but what am I?”

“Now you’re being a messer.”

“I know you are but what am I?” I repeated, smirking.

“Sticks and stones will break my bones,” he quipped, playing along now. “But girls will never hurt me.”

“It’s ‘words’ will never hurt me,” I corrected, finding myself mirroring his smile. “Not ‘girls.’”

“Not in my world,” he replied with a low chuckle.

“Liar, liar,” I spurted, “your pants are on fire.”

A loud snort tore out of him.

“I suppose you’re going to give me the whole ‘bitch means dog, dog means nature, and nature means beauty’ spiel next?” he snickered.

“That depends,” I challenged, feeling both at ease and on edge around him.

I was beginning to realize that I rode a turbulent wave of emotions whenever I was with him. A wave of emotions that left me feeling both sick with nerves and giddy with excitement at the same time.

It didn’t make sense to me.

But his smiles were addictive. The more he offered, the more I *craved*.

Johnny leaned closer, eyes twinkling with excitement. “On what?”

“On whether or not you’re calling me a bitch,” I filled in.

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” Johnny countered in a sarcastic tone. “Besides, if I did, you’d probably tell my ma on me.”

“You know I didn’t mean to do that,” I protested. “I never meant to get you into trouble with anyone.”

“Sure you did,” Johnny pressed, shooting me a teasing wink. “Whenever you’re near me, trouble quickly follows.” He grinned, revealing the dimples in both of his cheeks. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d think that you enjoy getting me into the height of shite with authority.”

I wasn’t naive enough not to recognize the fact that this conversation was blurring the line between banter and flirting. At least that’s how it felt for me. Johnny probably didn’t even think about it like that.

It didn’t matter, though, because when he looked at me like that, all smiles and interested eyes, I couldn’t stop myself from playing along.

I forced down a blush and replied with, “That’s not true.”

“Oh no?” He shot me another teasing wink before adding, “Now who’s the liar with her pants on fire?”

“That would still be you,” I replied. “And I’m not wearing pink.”

He frowned in confusion. “Huh?”

“Pink to make the boys wink,” I clarified, feeling smug at tripping him up in this little game we seemed to be playing. “I’m wearing blue, not pink. No need to wink at me.”

With a devilish grin etched on his face, Johnny leaned into my ear and whispered, “I reckon I can make those pretty cheeks of yours turn pink.”

I turned scarlet. “Wh-what?”

“Too easy,” he laughed, thoroughly delighted with himself.

Well aware that he had the upper hand but falling short on a decent comeback to an unfortunately accurate assessment, I resorted to sticking my tongue out at him.

Johnny’s gaze dropped to my mouth, his eyes dancing with mischief when he said, “Keep poking your tongue out at me and I’m going to catch it.”

I popped my tongue back in and gaped at him. “Yeah, right.”

“Try it,” he dared, grinning. “Go on.”

My eyes widened and I jerked backwards. I didn’t trust him not to follow up with the threat.

My reaction only made Johnny laugh harder.

“Stop looking at me like that,” he ordered, pressing a hand to his side to stop himself from laughing.

“Like what? I’m not doing anything!” I retorted, unable to stop the smile spreading across my lips. “You’re the one threatening to snatch my tongue.”

“It’s that wide-eyed, nervous look you’ve got going on,” Johnny explained, still laughing to himself. “Don’t worry,” he mused, grinning down at me. “I won’t steal your tongue.”

I feigned disbelief. “I’m not sure I believe you.”

“You believe me,” he assured me in a confident tone.

“Oh, I do?” I arched a brow. “What makes you so sure?”

“Because you trust me,” he responded with a huge megawatt smile.

“I don’t trust anyone, Johnny,” I amended quietly, feeling my carefree mood evaporate into thin air, replaced with the familiar heaviness of despair that hung over my head like a constant rain cloud.

Johnny was silent for a long moment, obviously pondering my words.

“Because of something that happened?” he finally asked. “In your past?”

“Because of a lot of things,” was all I replied, unable and unwilling to give him more.

“Bad things?” he pressed, voice low and probing.

“Personal things,” I croaked out, not liking the sudden and serious turn this conversation had taken. I cleared my throat and then added, “Private things.”

“Things that make trusting people hard,” Johnny finally surmised, watching me carefully.

“No.” Shaking my head, I clasped my hands together tightly and exhaled a heavy breath. “Things that make trusting people impossible.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

I shook my head.

“You know what they say about a problem shared,” he pressed.

“Not always,” I whispered.

He studied me for a long moment, obviously mulling over my words.

“Do you want to know what I think?” he finally asked.

“What’s that?”

“I think that you don’t *want* to trust anyone,” he stated, continuing to push for more. “But you trust me despite yourself.”

I opened my mouth to deny it, but stopped short, stumped on his words.

Was he right? Did I trust him?

Perhaps I did in my own peculiar way.

I mean, I trusted that he wouldn't intentionally attempt to hurt or sabotage me. I trusted he was a good person with a kind heart and a beautiful mind.

But everything else? The scary parts? The terrifying feelings he provoked that I didn't dare read into for fear of the unknown?

I wasn't so sure.

"Because you *can*, Shannon," Johnny's voice broke through my thoughts. "You can trust me." His gaze was locked on mine, his strikingly intense blue eyes burning holes inside of me. "I won't hurt you."

"I'm not afraid of you," I shot back defensively, feeling thrown off-kilter by his eerily accurate assessment.

"Good," Johnny replied calmly, eyes locked on mine. "I don't want you to be."

"Well, I'm not."

"I'm glad."

Feeling incredibly exposed and vulnerable, I just sat there, unable to form a coherent sentence, as I stared back at the boy who had been throwing my heart through hoops since that very first day.

He'll let you down, the defensive part of my brain argued. *He'll hurt you worse than all the others.*

"I won't," Johnny stated, seemingly able to read my thoughts. "Whatever you're used to," he continued to say, eyes locked on mine. "Or whoever you're used to. Whatever's responsible for that sad look in your eyes—" He paused to brush his thumb over my cheekbone. "That's not me, I'm not like that, and I won't do that to you."

"You promise?" I whispered, then quickly chided myself.

When I was anxious, I always asked for a promise. It was a terrible habit I had from spending years of my life living in a constant state of uncertain anxiety.

Usually, I asked for those promises from my brother, and Joey supplied me with an abundance of them to ebb some of the stress. Whether my brother meant to keep those promises or not, the small affirmation, however impossible or ridiculous, appeased something inside of me for a little while, making life a little more bearable.

“I promise,” Johnny surprised me by saying.

In that moment, and with those two small words, Johnny Kavanagh unknowingly blasted a hole clean through the wall around my heart.

“Please don’t do that,” I whisper-begged, as I frantically tried to repair the hole he’d left in me with facets of information like *Don’t get attached because he’s leaving soon*, and past experiences like the night he hurt me or, worse, the night he rejected me.

Johnny frowned. “Do what?”

“Make promises,” I breathed, heart slamming against my rib cage. “Please don’t.”

“I just did,” he told me unapologetically. “It’s out there, and I’m not taking it back.”

My stomach flipped. My heart jackknifed. My entire body trembled.

This isn’t safe, my brain warned. *Block him out. Protect yourself. Don’t let him in.*

“I don’t go back on my word, Shannon,” Johnny added. “So, you’re just going to have to deal with it.”

Then he dropped his attention to the notebook still in his hands and began to furiously scribble something inside before handing it back to me a minute or so later.

“What do you say?” he asked with a smirk.

I glanced down at the page and choked out a laugh.

In neat capital letters were the words: SHANNON LIKE THE RIVER. WILL YOU PLEASE BE MY FRIEND?

Two hand-drawn boxes were sketched below the writing. One box had a yes over it, and the other had a no. The yes box had a smiley face. The no box had a sad face.

At the bottom of the page were the words: SIGNED BY alongside a slightly crooked line with his signature scrawled across it. Beneath the line with Johnny’s name was an empty line for my name and he had dated the note January 10, 2005, my first day at Tommen.

A side note stating: PS: SHANNON PROMISES NOT TO SUE JOHNNY WHEN HE’S SIGNED FOR THE PROS FOR ANY INJURIES HE MAY OR MAY NOT HAVE CAUSED HER ON THE DATE MENTIONED ABOVE. THIS IS A VALID DISCLAIMER, I SHIT YOU NOT took up the last few lines of the page.

It was ridiculous, adorable, and I couldn't wipe the stupid smile off my face.

"To be fair, I think we've been friends for a while," Johnny offered with a boyish smile. "I'm just putting it down on paper so you can stop ducking and dodging me at school."

"I haven't been avoiding you at school," I denied quickly—too quickly.

Johnny arched a brow and the look he gave me screamed *bullshit*.

"Fine, I've been avoiding you at school." I admitted, mortified.

"I like honesty," he encouraged with a teasing lilt to his voice. "It's the foundation of a solid friendship."

I laughed and smiled down at the note. "And you actually want me to sign this?"

"I exerted a great deal of imagination drafting that up," Johnny shot back. "I'd be insulted if you didn't."

I shook my head and bit back a smile. "You're ridiculous."

"Fair warning, though." He chuckled. "I don't have sisters and I've never been friends with a girl before so if I fuck this up or say the wrong thing, you'll need to have patience with me."

"Well, I have plenty of brothers," I replied, "so I'm used to boys saying the wrong thing."

Ticking the *yes* box, I signed my name to the page, and then tore it out of my notebook before handing it back to Johnny.

The smile Johnny rewarded me with was wide, genuine, and breathtakingly beautiful.

God, he looked like a different person when he smiled.

His entire face transformed. His eyes lit up. The dimples in his cheeks were visible.

He was simply beautiful, and I almost told him just that.

Thankfully, I stopped myself just in time, scrambling together, "You look brilliant," instead.

Johnny's brows shot up, expression quizzical, while I sank further into my seat.

"I look *brilliant*?" he asked as he watched me with interest, a small smile still teasing his lips.

"In brilliant condition," I quickly corrected and then cleared my throat several times, buying myself some time to scramble for a lie before finding

one and adding, “considering you’re carrying such a bad injury.”

A flash of panic lit his eyes for the briefest of moments before the shutters clamped shut. And just like that, the playful, tender version of Johnny was gone.

“Don’t go there, Shannon,” he warned, his smiling lips flattened into a thin line as his entire body visibly tensed. He looked around, noting the line of students all piling onto the bus, before turning his attention back to me. “And especially not *here*.”

His reaction was like a smack in the face.

“Are you okay?” I asked, hating how uncertain I sounded. “You know I didn’t mean—”

“I’m fine,” he finished for me. “And I know. It’s okay. I just… I can’t… Please forget it.”

Rejection and dismissal were never nice feelings to endure, which was exactly what happened to me whenever I foolishly opened myself up to this boy. He had a knack for building me up with words and smiles and false hope, only to crush me with silence. It hurt more than it should.

It *crushed* me.

Several students filed back into the bus, their loud chattering distracted us both.

“About fucking time,” Johnny muttered under his breath.

Shrinking away from his sudden change of mood, I concentrated on the line of students all piling back onto the bus.

Several lads from the team passed by our seat, stopping to clap Johnny on the shoulder as they went. He ignored them all, keeping his attention glued to the sheet of paper in his hands.

“Exchanging love letters?” Gibsie taunted as he made his descent to the back of the bus. “How romantic!”

“Go fuck yourself, Gibs,” Johnny shot back, sounding irritated as he folded up the note and shoved it in his pocket. “I’m not in the form for your shite today.”

“Yeah, well, I’d tell you go fuck yourself right back, but I can see you already have that sorted,” Gibsie called back with a laugh.

His comment received plenty of attention from other students, who decided to jump on the bandwagon and toss out suggestive comments.

“See that, lads? They stayed on the bus when we were inside.”

“He wasn’t hungry for what they had in the shop.”

“Hup out that!”

“Gowan, Johnny boy!”

“Get in there, kid!”

Anxious, I stretched up to flag Claire and Lizzie, praying one of them would switch seats with me, but quickly sank back in my seat when my eyes landed on Ronan McGarry two rows up on the opposite side of the bus. Another dozen rows up was Bella.

Feeling trapped, I looked to Johnny, who had turned in his seat and was exchanging verbal insults with the lads in the back row behind us.

“He scores on the pitch, he scores on the bus. How many tries did you hammer into her goal line, Johnny?”

I flamed in embarrassment and dropped my head, quickly learning that spending any amount of time with Johnny meant being on the receiving end of a lot of attention.

Unwanted attention.

I didn’t quite catch what was said next, but Johnny leaped out of his seat and stalked to the back of the bus, so I presumed it was of the explicit variety.

I didn’t dare look. Instead, I kept my head down and my gaze trained on my trembling hands.

“The fuck you say about her?”

“I was messing… Ah, fuck, stop! Jesus, relax! It was a joke.”

“Am I laughing, Robbie?”

“Relax, Cap.”

“Am I fucking laughing, asshole?”

“No. Christ—ouch! Stop.”

“Do you think she’s laughing?”

“No.”

“No,” Johnny sneered. “Don’t push me again, ya little culchie bollox.”

“Sorry.”

“Say it again.”

“I’m sorry, Johnny—”

“To *her*!” Johnny roared, loud enough that it drew the attention of the entire bus. “Apologize to her. *Now*.”

“Sorry, Shannon,” a chorus of male voices called out.

“Um, that’s okay?” I offered back, because what the hell else could I do?

“Fucking eejits,” Johnny growled when he reclaimed his seat beside me a minute later.

Nudging my leg with his, he drew my attention back to him.

“Don’t mind them,” he said in a low tone. “That’s about me, not you, okay?”

Nodding, I blew out a shaky breath and turned to look out the window.

He hurt me. He dismissed me. And then he jumped right in and defended my honor.

And now?

Now, I was so confused that it was hurting my brain.

The bus roared to life a few minutes later and we were back on the road. Mrs. Moore called for everyone’s attention then and announced reflection time.

I was never so relieved to hear those words. Sitting in the silence, I tried to work through my rampant emotions.

“Shannon, I’m sorry.”

Startled, I turned to look at Johnny, wondering if I was hearing things, only to find him looking straight back at me with an expectant expression. “What?”

“I’m a prick.” Johnny shook his head and exhaled a frustrated breath. “I tell you to trust me and then I turn around and act like that?” He hurried to explain, only to stumble over his next hurdle of words. “I shouldn’t… It’s just that…I never normally… I don’t… You’re the only girl I’ve—” He blew out a breath and gestured between us before finally saying, “I’m not *good* at *this*, Shannon.”

“Not good at what?” Now it was my turn to look confused. “Talking? Because you don’t have to talk about it. I didn’t ask you to.”

“You’re not hearing me,” he snapped, then shook his head, looking annoyed with himself. “No. I’m not saying this right.”

“Saying *what* right?”

Johnny ran a frustrated hand through his hair and expelled a harsh breath.

“I overreacted,” he finally said.

“Yeah,” I replied flatly. “You’re pretty good at that.”

Disappointed, I folded my arms across my chest and then turned back toward the window, but he grabbed my arm, pulling me back to face him.

“Don’t do that,” he said, voice low and gruff, keeping his hand on my arm.

I released a trembling breath, forcing my body not to freak out from the contact, and asked, “Do what?”

“Block me out.”

“Pot meet kettle,” I snapped, turning my face away.

“You can’t ignore me,” Johnny pushed, trying for humor. “We have a friendship contract.”

I wasn’t laughing.

“Then rip it up,” I told him, then yanked my arm free.

“Shannon, let me explain.”

“Leave me alone.”

“Shannon, come on—”

“No.”

“Look at me.”

I folded my arms across my chest. “No.”

Johnny sighed. “Shannon, please.”

“I said no!” I snapped. “You did this to me in your car and you’re doing it again now. That’s a pattern. I don’t like those kinds of patterns. So, *no*!”

Johnny released a frustrated growl. Seconds later, I felt his hand on my neck as he leaned over my seat and pulled my body sideways to face him.

Stunned, I could do nothing but stare up at him. “Wh-what are you doing?”

Johnny’s eyes were wild and heated, panicked and interested, as they flickered from my eyes to my lips.

For the briefest of moments, I thought he was about to kiss me. But he didn’t.

Of course, he didn’t.

Instead, he released a ragged breath, cupped the side of my neck, bringing me closer, and touched his cheek to mine. Pressing his lips to my ear, in a voice barely more than a whisper, he said, “I’m scared, Shannon.”

“Scared?”

I *felt* him nod, his stubbly cheek rubbing against mine.

“Of what?”

“You.”

“Me?” My heart flipped in my chest. “*Why*?”

“What I told you that night?” he whispered, gently clutching the side of my neck with his huge hand. “All that shite about my surgery and how much pain I’m in? I’m furious with myself for losing my head and telling you something that can be used against me. I gave you power over me and now I’m fucking panicking, okay? I lost my cool with you in the car because you struck a nerve. Because you called me out on my bullshit. Because you were *right*.”

“I was?”

He nodded and the movement caused his cheek to rub against mine.

“I’m not thick,” he continued to whisper. “I know what I’m risking by playing, but I have *everything* riding on the next fifteen months—on my body holding out. It’s my career,” he told me, voice barely audible.

His words were coming so low and fast, mixed with a thickening Dublin accent, that it was a struggle to keep up.

“It’s my future, and I can’t bear to watch it slip through my fingers. I’ve worked too hard to get to this position to let it all go. They’re making me take a test, Shannon. I haven’t told anyone about it. And if don’t pass it—if they find out I’m not a hundred percent—they’ll pull me and I’ll be out for months, Shannon. *Months*. It mightn’t seem like a big deal to you, but for me, it’s my life. I’ll miss my shot with the U20s in June. I’ll miss everything. I’ll *lose* everything. That can’t fucking happen.”

His lips brushed against my earlobe as he spoke.

It wasn’t an intentional move or remotely flirtatious—he was clearly agitated—but I still had to suppress a shiver at the contact.

“And you knowing all of this? Me telling you? Knowing that it could be held over me?” Johnny sighed heavily, his warm breath fanning the curve of my jawline. “I don’t do that, Shannon. I don’t make myself vulnerable to anyone. *Ever*.” His fingers trembled against my neck as he spoke. “And it scares the shite out of me that I’ve handed that kind of power over to you.”

“Then why did you do it?” I asked, as a small shudder rolled down my spine. Leaning back so that I could look at his face, I asked, “Why did you tell me?”

He looked so helpless as he shrugged.

“I’ve been asking myself the same question for a long time, and I still don’t have an answer, Shannon,” he croaked out, tormented blue eyes locked on mine. “I don’t understand what’s happening between us.”

I realized that I was witnessing a rare moment of vulnerability from Johnny, and my heart could barely take the pressure.

Seeing him like this…so exposed and unguarded? It did something to me. Made me feel protective. Like I needed to nurture him or something, which was insane, because one look at the boy and it was obvious he didn’t need anyone’s protection.

But I still *felt* it.

I watched him watch me for the longest moment, soaking in his defeated expression and the way he looked down at me almost hopefully, like I had the answers to all his questions.

I didn’t.

The right thing to do would be to comfort him with words of assurance.

I didn’t do that.

Instead, I whispered my truth.

“I don’t want you to play.” Throwing caution to the wind and moving on instinct, I tucked my legs beneath me, shifted closer, and pressed my lips to his ear. “Not today, and not tomorrow. I don’t want you to go out there and put yourself in harm’s way, Johnny. I don’t want you to get *hurt*. I want you to *stop*. I want you to rest your body. I want you to take care of yourself.”

“Shannon—”

“Let me finish,” I whispered.

He nodded stiffly.

Trembling, I reached up and cupped his jaw. “I meant it when I told you that I wouldn’t tell anyone.”

I felt his body turn rigid, but I didn’t move away, the need to comfort him pushing me forward.

“I don’t agree with your choices,” I croaked out. “But I respect that they are yours to make.”

Something inside of this boy called to me. I had no idea what that something was, but it made me brave. It made me want to step out of my comfort zone and help him—even if helping him meant doing the wrong thing.

“I can keep a secret, Johnny Kavanagh,” I whispered, stroking his cheek with my fingers. “And I promise I’ll keep yours.”

With his hand still cupping the side of my neck, Johnny exhaled a heavy sigh and let his head fall forward, his hair brushing my neck.

“I’m in so much pain, Shannon,” he confessed, tone thick and gruff. “All the time,” he added, covering my hand with his. “It hurts so bad I can hardly sleep at night. I can’t concentrate for shit at school. I’m fucking up on the pitch. In training. Everything’s going to hell, and the only person I can talk to about it is a girl I barely know.” Exhaling a heavy breath, he pulled me closer. “You’re the only thing that distracts me, the only thing I can concentrate on, and I don’t even know you. I feel closer to you than my own teammates. I’m telling you things I wouldn’t tell my best friend. How fucked up is that?”

“It’s not fucked up.” My heart was hammering so hard against my rib cage that it was making my breathing come hard and fast. “It’s okay.”

“It’s *not* okay,” Johnny refuted, burying his face in my neck. “Not one bleeding thing about what’s going on in my life right now is *okay*.”

One moment, he had his face buried in my neck and the next he was gone.

“Fuck,” Johnny growled, jerking away from me like I had scalded him. “Fuck!” he repeated, running a hand through his hair. “I did it again. I did it a-fucking-gain.”

Stunned, I remained on my knees, watching his every move.

“Is there any chance of you forgetting everything I just said?” he asked in a half-hearted tone as he looked at me, eyes burning with desperation.

Unable to form words, I just stared back at him, shaking my head. I couldn’t pretend. Not anymore.

“No,” Johnny agreed glumly and rubbed his face with his palm. “Didn’t think so.”

The reasoning behind my next statement was based on basic human instinct rather than thought, encouraged by the desperate need I had inside of my chest to stop this boy from hurting.

“I was bullied,” I blurted out, startling us both with the admission.

I wanted to put him at ease, and the only way I could think of making that happen was to give him a deeply private confession of my own.

“Badly,” I clarified, my voice barely more than a whisper.

Johnny's eyes locked on mine. "At your old school?"

"Yes." I nodded, and then shook my head. "Not just at BCS. It happened everywhere."

"Everywhere?" Johnny repeated slowly, brows furrowed deeply.

"Everywhere," I confirmed, biting down on my lip to stop it from wobbling.

"For how long?" he finally asked, shifting his body back to face me.

"My whole life," I offered wearily, forcing myself to keep eye contact. "I can't remember a time when I *wasn't* hated by everyone."

"What?" he balked, sounding horrified. "No! Shannon, you shouldn't be thinking like that–"

"It's the truth, Johnny," I was quick to clarify. "I'm unlikable. It's a fact. Plain and simple."

"That's bullshit," he growled. "You're not *unlikable*."

"It's not bullshit," I countered. "I *am* unlikable."

"I like you," Johnny shot back without an ounce of hesitation.

Well, I love you, Johnny Kavanagh!

Even though you're leaving. Even though you don't feel the same. Even though loving you is going to break my heart.

I love you with everything I have. And I probably always will.

"Well, that makes you one of very few." I exhaled a shaky breath. "I was hated growing up, Johnny! Seriously *hated*. Nobody wanted to play with me. Nobody wanted me on their team in P.E., or to sit with me in class, and I was never invited to the other children's birthday parties. I was constantly picked on. For my hair. For my size. My clothes. My secondhand schoolbooks. The car my family owned. The terrace I came from. For *breathing*. It didn't matter what I did or how hard I tried to get along with the other children, they *always* found a fault in me." I shook my head and sighed wearily. "I've had *two* friends my entire life. That's it."

"Claire Biggs and Pierce O'Neill's girlfriend?" Johnny asked, voice gravelly.

"Lizzie Young," I confirmed with a nod. "Yeah, they went to my primary school, and honestly, if it wasn't for them, I would have been completely alone."

"But they moved on to Tommen after primary school?"

"They did."

“And you went to BCS?”

“Yeah,” I croaked out.

Bewilderment was etched on Johnny’s face, like this was hard for him to comprehend. And for a guy like him, it probably was.

He wasn’t short of friends or adoring fangirls. He was popular and a big star. He didn’t have the faintest idea of what it felt like to be on the other side of the popularity spectrum.

Where I resided.

Johnny’s tone was careful when he asked, “It was the same for you there?”

“No.” Inhaling a steadying breath, I continued to open myself up for danger. “It was worse.”

Johnny was silent for a long moment before asking, “They hurt you there?”

Repressing a shudder, I forced a small nod.

“Shannon?”

“Every day,” I confessed.

“Christ,” he practically snarled as he ran a hand through his hair. “No wonder your ma lost it on me that day.”

I sighed heavily. “It wasn’t the first trip from school to the A&E.”

“Jesus.” He blew out a harsh breath and pulled me closer. “How bad did it get?”

I shrugged helplessly, unable to get the words out, or maybe I was just unwilling to verbalize the trauma.

I wanted it gone from my memory. I wanted that part of my life erased forever.

“Shannon?” Johnny pressed, tone achingly soft, as he tugged me so close that my knees touched his thigh. Keeping one arm hooked around my back, he leaned closer and repeated his earlier question. “How bad did it get?”

To the point that I wanted to die.

“Bad enough that my mam had to bury herself in debt to transfer me to Tommen,” I admitted, my voice barely audible. “And bad enough that I let her do it,” I added, forcing myself to look at him and hating the sympathetic expression I found him wearing.

“Those girls?” he asked then. “At the pub?”

I nodded. “Ciara was the worst.”

His eyes darkened. “The blond one.”

I nodded weakly. “I couldn’t go back to BCS after Christmas. Too much had happened, and it was getting out of hand.”

“Getting out of hand?” Johnny stared hard at me. “Surely it had been ‘out of hand’ for years.”

“Oh, I know,” I agreed. “But it was really starting to affect my brother, and my parents were worried.”

“Your brother,” Johnny replied flatly.

“Yeah.” I nodded. “Joey was constantly getting suspended for fighting over me. He already had four suspensions because of me by Christmas, and Mam was petrified that he was going to get himself expelled in his leaving cert year. Dad was furious because he thought Joey’s behavior would cost him his spot on the minors. It was a total nightmare.” Shrugging, I exhaled a heavy sigh and said, “In the end, Mam convinced our father that it would be better for Joey if they pulled me from BCS.”

“What about you?” Johnny asked, blue eyes locked on mine. “Was it better for *you*?”

“It was the best decision that was ever made for me,” I replied without hesitation.

“And Tommen?” Johnny pressed, his entire focus on me. “How’s that for you?”

“Aside from the Ronan trouble, I haven’t had any problems at Tommen,” I replied honestly, cheeks burning under his keen observation. “Oh, and Bella threatening war on me for talking to you.”

“And this?” He trailed his fingers over my neck, blue eyes scorching me. “I need to know about *this*.”

I shivered into his touch. “I told you.”

“Don’t lie to me,” he coaxed.

“Then don’t make me,” I pleaded, knowing that I was giving everything away to him—my heart, my secrets, my trust—and was unable to stop. “Please don’t push me.”

“Shannon—” he started and then quickly stopped. He stared hard at me for a long moment before finally nodding. “For now.”

I sagged in relief. “Thank you.”

“But I’m going to find out,” he whispered. “Whether you tell me or not.” He stroked my cheek with his thumb. “I’ll find out and I’ll make them *suffer*.”

My heart seized in my chest.

I knew this.

He wasn’t going to let it go. I could see it in his eyes that night in his bedroom.

Johnny Kavanagh was hell-bent on exposing my secrets.

“And Bella won’t do shit,” Johnny continued, tone gruff, eyes heated and intense. “If she goes to war with you, then she goes to war with me, too.”

“I don’t like war or confrontation,” I replied nervously, panicking at the thought of his terrifying ex and the damage she was capable of causing me. “I don’t want her to hate me, Johnny. I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“She’s threatened by you,” he said gruffly. “Her reaction to you is based on jealousy.”

“Threatened by me?” I shook my head. “Why?”

“Because you’re beautiful,” he stated, causing my cheeks to flush a deep shade of pink.

A boy had never called me beautiful before. Not like this. Not with such forwardness. Not with such sincerity.

Johnny said it, though, and my heart was flapping around in my chest like a demented, caged bird fighting to escape.

He cleared his throat then, looking slightly uncomfortable, and for a moment I thought he was about to take the compliment back, but then he steeled his features, tucked a loose strand of hair behind my ear, and whispered, “Inside and out.”

Those extra words did the trick. Those extra words ruined me.

I could feel my body tremble as I turned my gaze to his, locking eyes.

“I am?”

He nodded slowly. “Everywhere.”

Oh god. My heart.

I couldn’t handle this.

I couldn’t cope with *him*…

Panicked by and uncertain about my feelings, I quickly hurried on. “We’re on a level playing field now. I know your secrets and now you know

mine, so you can rest assured that I won't be announcing your injury to the whole world," I told him, feeling both vulnerable and exposed. "Not when you have your own dirt on me."

"Yeah, I guess we are," Johnny replied in a thoughtful tone, before quickly backpedaling. "Wait… You told me all that so I would have *leverage* over you?"

I shrugged.

Johnny frowned. "Why would you do that?"

"I was trying to make you feel safe," I blurted out.

"You want to make *me* feel safe?" The expression on Johnny's face was one I couldn't decipher as he stared down at me with storm-filled blue eyes. "Why?"

"Because you're freaked out about me knowing about your, uh, your —" I pointed to his crotch, cheeks flaming, and then blew out a breath. "It's clearly upsetting you, and I wanted to make you feel better. I wanted to give you that so you don't feel cornered."

"I don't get it." Johnny shook his head in obvious confusion. "I mean, I'm glad that you told me—I'm fucking honored—but you telling me something extremely personal like that with the expectation that I would use it against you and feel *good* about it? The fact that you were okay with that—that you thought I'd be okay with that?" He blew out a breath. "That's the part I don't understand."

"Maybe you were right about me trusting you despite myself," I whispered, feeling a flood of heat and ice collide inside of my chest.

His brows shot up. "So, you *do* trust me."

The shrug I gave him was a helpless one because that's exactly how I felt in this moment: disarmed and utterly helpless.

"Words, Shannon," he pushed, tone gruff. "I need the words."

"What do you want me to say?" I croaked out.

"Tell me why you trust me."

"Because when I'm with you, I feel…"

"You feel?"

"Safe, okay?" I strangled out. "When you're around, I feel safe."

"Because you *are*," Johnny confirmed in a gruff tone. "I've already told you that I'm not going to hurt you, and I hope like fuck that I've shown you that, too."

I exhaled a ragged breath and ducked my face, desperate to hide how deeply those words affected me.

"Shannon, look at me."

I shook my head, refusing his request. I couldn't. It was too much.

He was far too much.

"*Look* at me," he repeated, tone soft and coaxing.

When I made no move to oblige, Johnny tipped my chin up with his hand, forcing our gazes to lock, blue eyes burning holes in mine.

"You. Are. Safe," he stated, enunciating every word with aching slowness, as he trailed the pad of his thumb across my chin. "Whatever happened to you in your old school," he said, pushing through the barriers once more. "It won't follow you to Tommen." With blue eyes burning bright with sincerity and determination, he added, "I won't let anything bad happen to you here." He pressed his forehead to mine and exhaled a pained sigh. "And if you just tell me where else I need to keep you safe, I'll do that, too."

"*Why*?" It was one word that was loaded with so many unspoken thoughts and notions, but it was all I could come up with.

Johnny hesitated for a moment and then said, "Because I care."

"Why?"

"I just do." He shrugged helplessly. "I can't help it."

"It's been you, hasn't it?" I whispered. "You're the reason no one gave me hassle over the pitch incident? You've been protecting me?"

He stared warily at me but didn't respond.

"Come on, Johnny," I sighed. "I'm not thick. I know you had something to do with it. I was half-naked in front of a field of boys. I threw up outside my locker, for god's sakes. Gossip like that doesn't just evaporate into thin air."

"I told you that day outside Twomey's office that I wouldn't let anyone hurt you," he finally admitted.

Yeah, he did. He promised.

And he kept it…

"Well, thanks for caring," I breathed.

"Thanks for being worth it," Johnny replied, hand still on my cheek.

Shivering from the contact, I leaned into his touch, seeking more. I was trying so hard to control myself, but it was virtually impossible to do when

he had his hands on my body.

I wanted to crawl onto his lap and I wanted to run far away from him all at once. It didn't make sense to me. I was incredibly confused.

My feelings were terrifying me.

His words. His eyes. His actions.

He was throwing me.

I was losing myself.

"How are the lovebirds?" a familiar voice boomed close to my ear.

Startled, I looked over Johnny's shoulder to find a grinning Gibsie.

"Hey, little Shannon," Gibsie drawled with a mischievous wink. "Don't mind me. I just need to borrow my buddy for a sec."

Oh god.

Mortified, I quickly scrambled backwards, breaking the contact.

Johnny muttered a string of unintelligible curse words under his breath before turning around. "This better be fucking important," he snapped, shoulders tensed.

"That depends," Gibsie replied nonchalantly.

"On what?" Johnny barked.

"On whether or not you still want me to remind you of that thing you asked me to remind you about?"

"Thing?" Johnny shook his head. "What thing? The fuck are you talking about?"

"Lines and bulldozers, my friend," Gibsie shot back with a meaningful look.

I had no clue as to what Gibsie was referring to; however it was clear that Johnny did, because he exhaled a loud breath, expelling the word *shite* with it.

"You're welcome," Gibsie replied, patting Johnny on the shoulder before making his way back to his seat.

"What was that about?" I asked when we were relatively alone again.

"Hmm?" Johnny replied, obviously distracted. He kept turning back to look at his friend.

"Are you okay?" I whispered.

"What? Yeah, yeah, I'm grand." He cast a quick glance at me and then turned back to mouth something else to Gibsie.

I couldn’t quite figure out what they were saying to each other. They seemed to be communicating through body language—although it was fairly easy to figure out what Johnny meant when he gave Gibsie the finger.

Shaking my head, I gave up on trying to crack the code of their unspoken conversation and turned my attention to Johnny’s iPod—something he had given me to listen to during one of our reflection breaks earlier. Slipping the headphones on my ears, I carefully scrolled through his playlists and almost had a heart attack when my eyes landed on the one named *Songs for Shannon*.

With my heart racing, I cast a quick peek up at Johnny, but he was still fully immersed in vulgar sign language with Gibsie. Exhaling a small puff of air from my lungs, I pressed into the playlist and quickly scrolled through the list of songs.

Coldplay—“Yellow”
Guns N’ Roses—“Sweet Child O’ Mine”
Goo Goo Dolls—“Iris”
The Fureys—“When You Were Sweet Sixteen”
Howie Day—“Collide”
The Offspring—“Want You Bad”
Busted—“Fall at Your Feet”
Aerosmith—“Crazy”
Counting Crows—“Colorblind”
David Gray—“This Year’s Love”
Bon Jovi—“In These Arms”
Westlife—“World of Our Own”
Eagle-Eye Cherry—“Save Tonight”
Metallica—“Tuesday’s Gone”
Snow Patrol—“Run”
The Verve—“Lucky Man”
HIM—“Wicked Game”
The La’s—“There She Goes”

These were love songs. These were *all* love songs.
Saved to a playlist with *my* name on it.
Why? Why would he do this?
Did he…? No. No, he didn’t.

Of course, he didn't.

Then why…?

"Shannon, can we talk?" Johnny's voice penetrated my thoughts, startling me and causing me to drop his iPod. Thankfully, it landed on my lap and not on the floor of the bus.

I turned to face him, feeling my heart race violently in my chest.

"Talk?"

"Yeah." Johnny nodded slowly, blue eyes dark and heated. "I need to talk to you about something."

"Uh, yeah, okay…" Wiping my palms on my skirt, I exhaled a shaky breath before adding, "What do you want to talk about?"

"Not here," Johnny said, glancing around the bus. "Tonight," he added, eyes trained on mine again. "After the match. I'll take you home and we can talk in my car?"

"Uh…" I chewed on my lip, feeling panicked at the thought of having to wait that long. "If that's what you want?"

"It's probably best," he replied gruffly.

Oh god. Was it bad? Was he going to tell me something terrible?

"Don't look so scared," Johnny said, distracting me once more from my thoughts. "I won't hurt you." Reaching over, he tipped my chin up with the back of his hand and gave me a small smile. "I promise."

I was so lost in this boy I could hardly breathe.

"Alright, everyone, reflection time is over," Mrs. Moore called out, clapping her hands to garner everyone's attention. "We only have forty minutes left before we get to Dublin, so I propose another quiz."

"For fuck's sake," Johnny groaned, dropping his hand. "Not another bleeding quiz."

I chuckled at his reaction.

"What's funny?" he asked, smirking at me. "Don't tell me you actually enjoy these things?"

I enjoy being with you.

"I'm on the winning team," I teased, nudging his shoulder with mine. "Of course, I'm enjoying this."

"True," Johnny agreed with a lopsided grin. Pulling the stack of certificates we had collected throughout the day's tasks out of his bag, he

plopped them on my lap and said, “We make a pretty good team, Shannon *like the river*.”

Yes. Yes, we did.

I waited for everyone else to climb off the bus before sliding out of my seat.

“Good luck today,” I said as I hovered in the aisle, watching Johnny as he rummaged through the discarded bags at the back of the bus, clearly searching for his own.

“Huh?” Johnny replied, obviously distracted, as he muttered something about messy bastards under his breath.

He looked stressed. The closer we got to Royce College, the more agitated he grew. Now that we were here, Johnny was *vibrating* with tension.

I understood why.

He was supposed to go to school here, which meant he would more than likely be playing against his old friends and teammates.

That was a lot of pressure.

And he was hiding an injury.

“The match,” I clarified. “I hope you win.” I gave him a small wave before hurrying down the aisle toward the exit, desperate to put some much-needed space between Johnny Kavanagh and my heart.

“Shannon?” Johnny called after me.

Pausing at the door, I swung back to look at him. “Yeah?”

His blue eyes burned holes inside of me when he said, “Thanks.”

“For what?” I whispered.

Johnny smiled. “For being nothing like the rest of them.”

“Uh, okay?”

“I’ll see you in a bit, okay?”

I nodded. “Bye, Johnny.”

Feeling off-kilter, I hurried off the bus where I was immediately intercepted by both Shelly and Helen.

Hooking their arms through mine, they led me away from the bus.

“Girl, you have some explaining to do,” Shelly said excitedly.

“And we want *all* the details,” Helen agreed with a nod.

“Details?” I asked, feeling flushed by their ambush. “About what?”

“Don’t even think about it,” Helen warned. “You just spent three hours up close and personal with Johnny.”

“I didn’t have a choice,” I replied. “The seat next to his was the only one left.”

“What did you talk about?” Shelly asked, eyes dancing with excitement. “What did he say to you?”

“I don’t know.” I shrugged, feeling awkward. “Just stuff.”

“Just stuff?” Helen spluttered.

“Shannon, I am trying to live vicariously through you here. You’ve got to give me more than ‘just stuff,’” Shelly huffed.

“Back off, vultures,” Lizzie barked. “Go and find another carcass to fight over.” She was leaning against the back of the bus, with a huge boy standing in front of her.

I instantly recognized him as Pierce.

I decided that they had to be back on again when I took in the sight of her hands on his waist, and the way he was nuzzling her neck.

Claire, Gibsie, Hughie, Coach Mulcahy, and Patrick Feely were standing close by, though they weren’t paying any attention to us. In fact, they all seemed to be in a debate over something as they circled Coach Mulcahy.

“Lizzie!” Shelly whined. “I was only asking.”

“If you want to know what Johnny Kavanagh talks about then go and ask Johnny Kavanagh,” Lizzie shot back. “Not Shannon.” Turning her gaze on me, she said, “Come on, Shan. We’re over here.”

Grateful for her interruption, I slid out from between the gossip girls, gave them a quick wave, ignored their disappointed expressions, and then hurried over to my friends.

The closer I got to my friends, the louder the discussion between the others seemed to get.

“He’s playing, Coach,” Hughie was snarling. “They can’t do this.”

“I agree, Biggs,” Coach replied with a phone to his ear. “This crap won’t stand—hello, yes, I would like to speak to the principal.” With his mobile welded to his ear, Coach hurried off, barking orders into the phone.

“What a pack of langers,” Gibsie tossed out angrily.

“Pussies,” Hughie agreed.

“To be fair,” Patrick Feely mused, “the team seems willing to play. It’s their coach with the issue.”

“Issue?” I asked, sidling up to Claire because Lizzie’s mouth was currently occupied by Pierce’s tongue. “What’s going on? Is the match canceled?”

“Royce’s coach is refusing to allow his team to play if Coach plays Johnny,” Claire explained, looking as enraged as everyone else.

“What?” I gaped at her. “*Why*?”

“Because they’re a pack of fucking cowards who are too scared to play against him?” Gibsie offered, tone laced with sarcasm. “Eejits.”

“So, what—they’re trying to punish him for being a *good* player?” I asked, quite frankly shocked.

“I think it has more to do with being a player with fifteen caps for Ireland, Shan,” Hughie responded.

“Caps for Ireland?”

“The amount of times he’s played for his country,” he quickly explained.

“So what?” I shot back defensively. “He earned every one of those. They weren’t handed to him.”

“I’m not arguing with you,” Hughie replied, chuckling. “It just intimidates some coaches.”

“What’s going on?” Johnny’s voice filled my ears, moments before he came to stand beside me.

His arm brushed against mine, and even though there were several layers of clothing between us, my skin still broke out in goose bumps.

“The usual shit,” Gibsie informed him. “They won’t play if you’re playing.”

Johnny shrugged nonchalantly. “Oh, well.”

I turned to look at him, stunned by his lack of response.

“This happens a lot,” Johnny quickly explained, noticing my expression. “Coach will get it sorted,” he added before turning to the boys and saying, “Round up the lads in the changing room. Tog out and we’ll get started on warm-ups.”

Nodding, both Hughie and the other boy jogged off in the direction of the clubhouse, calling fellow teammates as they went.

“Johnny, lad, this could take *hours* to clear up,” Gibsie groaned.

With all traces of his earlier vulnerability long gone, Johnny said, “Then we’ll have *hours* of practice. Now move your ass.”

“Say a prayer for me,” Gibsie told Claire. He then dove toward her and smacked a loud smoochy kiss on her cheek before jogging away.

“Ew, Gerard!” Claire called after him, wiping her flushed cheek with her sleeve.

“Pierce,” Johnny snapped, turning his attention to the shaved-headed boy with his tongue down my friend’s throat. “Get out of the girl and onto the pitch.”

Muttering something about Captain Cockblock under his breath, Pierce pressed one final kiss to Lizzie’s lips before sprinting off toward the team.

Johnny inclined his head toward me. “You okay?”

I nodded.

He reached up and tucked a rogue strand of hair behind my ear, then whispered, “I’ll see ya later,” and turned around and sprinted off to join his teammates.

Wow, I thought to myself, *determination flows through that boy’s veins just as potently as the terror that flows through mine.*

“Johnny?” I called after him, unable to stop myself.

When he stopped running and turned back to face me, I hurried to close the space between us, not stopping until I was right in front of him.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, frowning down at me in confusion.

“Nothing, I just—” Shaking my head, I reached up and cupped his neck, pulling his face down to mine. Pressing up on my tiptoes, I whispered in his ear, “I need you to stay safe out there, okay?” Resisting the urge to fold myself into him, I released his neck and stepped back. “Be careful.” I took another step back, eyes locked on his. “Okay?”

Johnny nodded slowly, blue eyes heated. “Okay.”

“Bye, Johnny,” I whispered and then turned around.

Johnny caught my hand and pulled me back to face him.

“You’ll come home with me tonight?” he asked gruffly, eyes burning with heat, as he fiddled with that rogue strand of hair of mine. “You still want to do that?”

“Yeah,” I whispered, stepping closer, unable to resist the urge to knot my fingers in his shirt. “I do.”

“Shannon, I’m so…” He exhaled a sharp breath and shook his head. “Tonight.” His hand moved from my hair to cup my cheek. “We’ll talk tonight.”

“Okay, Johnny,” I breathed, leaning my cheek into his large palm.

Without another word, he leaned down and pressed a lingering kiss to my forehead. And then he turned around and walked away.

Reeling, I watched him until he disappeared into the clubhouse, and then I walked back to my friends.

Confused was an understatement for how I was feeling.

The sheer depth of my feelings for him was unhealthy. The adoration, the lust, the downright infatuation I had for him…it was *insanity*.

I had never felt this much. I had never felt so consumed.

60
Cupid’s Choke Hold

JOHNNY

If feelings were objects, then I was teetering on the edge of a great precipice, and if girls were weapons, then Shannon Lynch was the greatest weapon of mass destruction my heart had ever been exposed to.

Because I was fucked.

I didn’t bother denying it anymore. There was no point. I had never felt this much for another person in my entire life.

It took every ounce of self-control I had inside of my body to walk away from her back there. Especially when everything inside of me demanded I snatch her away from the world and keep her all to myself.

“I need you to stay safe out there, okay?”

Yeah, at this stage, it was safe to say I was thoroughly fucked when it came to that girl.

I couldn’t do this anymore. I couldn’t fight my feelings.

Just like with that game on the PlayStation, she was kicking my ass. When she told me about the bullying, something I regrettably already knew, I felt something snap inside of me. It felt the last piece of my resolve evaporating.

The vulnerability I had seen in her eyes when she exposed her secrets for my benefit was my breaking point.

Girls I knew didn’t do that. They didn’t act like Shannon.

If Gibsie hadn’t come over, I would have kissed her. I knew I would have. I already knew what those lips felt like. I wanted so badly to taste them again. I *would* taste them again.

I was *starving* for her and everything she was. Every part of her. Inside and out.

I wanted to fight all her battles. I wanted to give her all her smiles and make her laugh and snatch her away from the rest of the world and keep her all to myself.

I just *wanted* her. For keeps.

I knew that was incredibly selfish of me, and I knew that I was probably going to end up fucking up everything and breaking her heart, but the problem was, my heart was involved, too.

I needed to talk to her tonight because I needed to lay it out there. I couldn't go another day without getting it off my chest. Months of wanting, lusting, and pining after her had left me at a point where I couldn't see straight anymore. Because I had caught feelings for Shannon.

Huge fucking feelings.

Permanent ones.

I knew I was too old for her. I knew she was too sweet and pure to be dragged into the limelight that came with my life. And I knew that she was too fucking broken for a guy like me to get tangled up with.

But I already felt like I was drowning with her.

That's how consumed I was in this girl. That's how much I *loved* her.

Fuck.

61
Breathe, Shannon, Just Breathe

SHANNON

Everyone from Royce College sucked. Seriously, they were pathetic. The game was delayed for over two hours because the coaches from Royce threw a very public hissy fit over Johnny playing.

It was embarrassing.

Two hours of standing around in the rain, while the coaches from Royce tried everything in their power to have Johnny pulled from the cards. They were ranting and raving about how it was unfair to have an Irish international playing in the league.

This was a school rugby game. Johnny was a *student* from one of the schools. He was a minor. He was entitled to play if he wanted to. There were no rules being broken by Tommen.

Finally, after several phone calls to the board, an embarrassing and very public bringing out of the rule book, and countless screaming matches between Coach Mulcahy and Royce's head coach, the teams took to the pitch at half past six—with Johnny sauntering onto the field in his number 13 jersey, wearing a shit-eating smirk on his face.

Early on in the game, it became clear why the Royce coach was so against letting Johnny play. His team was terrible.

Well, maybe not *terrible*, but they were no match for a fired-up Tommen side.

How they managed to draw second on the table with Tommen was beyond me, because there truly was no competition.

The sheer volume of pride that roared to life inside of me watching him take on his old friends and kick their asses was scary.

I was ridiculously wrapped up in this boy and found myself screaming and cheering for him on the sidelines, ignoring the death glares I received

from Bella and her friends. I didn't care. I was so proud of him.

By halftime, Tommen were up 48–3.

Five minutes before the end of the game and it looked even worse for Royce, with Tommen securing three more tries in the second half. Everything was going Tommen's way until the final play of the game.

With less than a minute to go, Johnny stripped one of Royce's forwards of the ball. It seemed to be his thing: delivering the final blow in the last minute of the game. With speed unmatched by anyone else on the pitch, Johnny plowed down the field, chasing the last score of the game.

It was a blur of movements that resulted in him grounding the ball seconds before a stampede of opposition players crushed him.

The try was awarded. The team began to celebrate.

But he wasn't getting back up.

Claire's brother, Hughie, moved into position in front of the posts and quickly kicked the conversion over, securing the win, before rushing over to Johnny—who still wasn't getting up.

"Claire," I croaked, gripping my friend's arm as I watched on in horror as our classmates and peers celebrated around us. "Is he moving?"

Everyone from our school was cheering and clapping, the lads on the team were hugging each other in celebration, but Johnny was *still* slumped facedown behind the try line.

Hughie, along with several players from Royce College, knelt beside him. One of them was waving his hand at the coaches on the sideline. Another one was roaring at the referee. Hughie was calling for Coach Mulcahy.

"Claire," I repeated, panicked. "What's happening?"

"I don't know!" she strangled out, sounding equally panicked now.

A swarm of black-and-white jerseys came running in their direction then, flocking their captain.

I jumped up, my feet moving of their own accord, and pushed through the crowd.

"Is he dead?" I screamed, hand still entwined in Claire's, who was following close behind me. "Oh my god, Claire, is he dead?"

"No, no, no," she kept repeating, but she didn't sound sure.

"Claire!"

"I don't know, Shannon," she cried out.

We didn’t make it far, only getting to the edge of the pitch before being swallowed up in the throngs of other students. Jumping, I tried to see above their shoulders, but I was too short. Thinking fast I dropped to my knees and peeked between their legs.

Johnny was still on the ground.

Facedown. Unmoving.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted two men in yellow bibs run onto the pitch with a stretcher in tow.

Time seemed to stand still then, as I watched them kneel beside Johnny and set to work on moving him onto the stretcher.

The screaming and cheering had turned to hushed whispers as everyone watched on.

My heart, which seemed to have been on pause in my chest for the last few minutes, slammed wildly against my rib cage when Johnny slowly sat up.

His eyes were open, his chest was moving, and though he looked like he was in a great deal of pain, he was *alive*. He was shaking his head and pushing away all offers of being lifted onto the stretcher.

I couldn’t hear what was being said, but his lips were moving at a rapid rate as he continued to shake his head and bark something to the medics. Finally, the men gave up on trying to help him and backed away.

The crowd, both Tommen supporters and Royce, began to clap as Johnny eventually got to his feet. His arms were slung over the shoulders of Hughie and Gibsie, and his head was bowed, as he limped off the pitch.

As they practically carried him off the pitch.

For a moment, I just knelt there, on my hands and knees in the muddy grass and breathed, allowing the tsunami of relief to wash over me as I watched him go.

I didn’t understand my reaction and I didn’t care.

He was okay. He was alright.

And I could finally *breathe* again.

62
Time’s Up, Lad

JOHNNY

“This stops, Johnny!” Gibsie hissed in my ear as he helped me out of the shower and onto the fold-up bed I’d spent the previous hour being poked, prodded, and stitched up on by the emergency doctor on the scene.

“Can you keep your goddamn voice down?” I hissed, glancing at the door that separated us from the rest of the team. “I don’t want anyone knowing.”

“Too fucking late for that,” Gibsie snapped. “You left a trail of blood from the clubhouse to the pitch.”

“Jesus,” I strangled out, shaking.

“This stops right fucking now, Johnny,” he warned again as he pulled a pair of jocks up my thighs, careful not to upset my groin. “No more training,” he growled, adjusting the waistband on my hips. “No more hiding your pain.” He stalked over to the bench and grabbed a towel. “No more lying.” He wiped a streak of smeared blood off my thigh. “No fucking more!”

“I’ll be fine,” I strangled out, shaking from head to toe.

“Fine?” Gibsie spat out, pausing midpace to glare at me. “Oh yeah, because you look fucking peachy right now, bleeding your mini fucking Johnnys all over the bed.”

“Stop—”

“You’re killing yourself. You do realize that, right? You do understand that you are putting your entire life on the line for a fucking green jersey that doesn’t mean shit in the long run.”

“Gibs, stop, lad,” I begged. “I can’t fucking hear this right now.”

“Oh, you’re going to hear it!”

“I fucking can’t hear this,” I choked out, voice cracking. “Okay? I can’t…”

“Look at yourself!” Gibsie demanded, jabbing a finger at my crotch. “Look at the condition you’re in.”

Blood was oozing from the gash in my leg where my stitches had been.

“*That* should have healed weeks ago,” he hissed. “It’s March, Johnny. Fucking March, and you’re walking around with your leg half-open.”

“He ripped me with his boot studs,” I choked out. “It could have happened to anyone.”

“Yeah, well, he wouldn’t have been able to rip you open like that if you had let your body heal the fuck up properly in the first place!” Gibsie roared in my face. “You’re weak. Your body’s not healing. And you almost *dick*-capitated yourself!”

Groaning, I dropped my head back on the fold-up medical bed and released a pained sigh. “It’s not that bad.”

“Not that *bad*?” he practically screamed with a furious expression etched on his face. “Lad, your leg looks like it’s about four hours away from full-blown septicemia!”

“Gibs—”

“No, Johnny!” he snapped, shaking his head. “You heard what the doctor said. You heard how serious he said it could have been!”

“I heard him, Gibs,” I croaked out, covering my face with my arm.

Of course, I heard what he said. How the fuck could I have missed it when he blew my world to pieces?

Surgery.

More fucking surgery.

Immediately.

Which meant more time. Time that I didn’t have to spare.

It was over.

The summer campaign. The U20s. I could feel it slipping through my fingers. Everything was being taken from me.

And I couldn’t deal with it.

“Coach called Dennehy at the Academy.” Exhaling a ragged breath, he took a step back and held his hands up. “And I’ve already called your mother.”

“Jesus Christ,” I strangled out, feeling tears filling my eyes.

“She’s getting the next flight into Dublin,” he added. “Called your dad, too. He’s meeting us at the hospital.”

I shook my head, unable to cope with what I was hearing.

Unable to breathe through the absolute devastation ripping through me.

“You’ll play again, Johnny,” Gibsie said in a calmer tone. “It just won’t be right now.”

“Right now is when it matters,” I strangled out. “Right now is *all* that matters.”

“No, lad,” he corrected. “Getting you healthy is *all* that matters.”

“What am I going to do, Gibs?” I choked out, keeping my hand over my face. “It’s my whole life.”

I heard him exhale heavily, and then his hand was on my shoulder.

“We’ll figure it out, Johnny.” He squeezed my arm. “Just rest here for a bit and let the meds kick in. The ambulance won’t be much longer, lad.”

“I don’t want to go out there.” I shook my head. “I don’t want them to see.”

“No one knows any details,” he assured me. “Just that you took a spill and got knocked out.”

“Don’t tell,” I begged. “Please…I can’t—”

“I won’t,” he promised.

63
Oops, I Did It Again

SHANNON

I had no rational explanation for why I had spent the last hour and a half standing outside the clubhouse in the pouring rain. I didn't want to think about it too much. My feelings were concerning me, but not as much as what was going on inside that changing room.

I should have gone back to the bus with Claire and Lizzie and everyone else from our school, but I *couldn't*. I couldn't seem to get my feet to move in the direction of common sense.

Instead, I waited. And I worried. And I desperately fought the urge to barge my way into the visitors' changing room.

Skulking outside in the darkness, I watched as players from both Royce and Tommen filed out of the clubhouse, followed by coaches, Mr. Mulcahy, and the match doctor.

No one seemed to notice me and I wasn't surprised. All of those boys seemed to be at least a foot taller than me.

That was, until Gibsie came out.

"Hey, little Shannon," he said, noticing me immediately. "What are you doing standing out here in the rain?"

"Oh, I was just… I wanted to… He was… And I…" Flapping my hands helplessly, I gave up and shrugged. "I was worried."

"About Johnny?"

My shoulders sagged and I nodded in defeat. "Is it bad?"

Gibsie frowned, looking uncertain.

"Come on, Gibsie," I pleaded. "Just tell me."

"He's fine, little Shannon—"

"Don't lie to me," I strangled out. "Please." Exhaling a ragged breath, I continued, "I need to know."

“He’s in a bad way,” he admitted quietly. “Depending on what the doctors say when he gets to the hospital, he’s looking at some serious time out of the game.” Exhaling heavily, he ran a hand through his hair. “He’s out for the final, for sure.”

“I don’t want to know if he can play rugby or not,” I squeezed out as a wave of guilt swallowed me up. “I want to know if *he* is okay! Him. *Johnny*! The person. Not the fucking rugby player!”

Gibsie tilted his head to one side, studying me with a curious look. “Well, aren’t you a keeper?” he finally mused, tone low.

“What?”

“Never mind.” Gibsie shook his head and exhaled heavily. “I heard Coach calling around hotels to see if any place can put us up for the night.” Grimacing, he added, “Reckons Johnny will be taken straight in for surgery tonight.”

Oh god.

My heart sank.

I *knew* he shouldn’t play. I *knew* he was hurt. I knew it and I did *nothing*.

I should have said something to his mother. I should have said something to Coach.

I knew he was playing injured.

Like always, I did fucking *nothing*.

“This is my fault,” I choked out.

“Because you knew?” Gibsie whispered.

I dropped my head in shame.

“Then it’s my fault, too,” he told me. “Go on in, little Shannon,” he added, giving me a small smile. “He’s in there alone, waiting for his ride in the nee-naw.”

“Uh, maybe I shouldn’t—”

“You should,” he interrupted me by saying.

“I should?” I asked, uncertain.

Gibsie nodded. “You should.”

And without another word, he walked off in the direction of the car park toward the school bus.

I stood there for another solid five minutes trying to talk myself down from the ledge I was threatening to jump from.

It didn’t work.

Nothing seemed to make sense anymore. Nothing except finding him.

Trembling from head to toe, I took the plunge and hurried inside the building and down the concrete-floored corridor, not stopping until I was standing outside a white door with the word VISITORS engraved on it.

Inhaling a huge, steadying breath, I pushed the door inward and stepped inside the empty dressing room, only to be immediately assaulted by the stench of Deep Heat. It was so potent that it caused my eyes to water.

Steam was wafting from an archway that I presumed led to the shower area. Most changing rooms had the same layout: big room, white brick walls, wooden benches lining either side of the room, and showers situated at the back.

He’s in the shower, you idiot. What are you doing?

Get out. Get out now!

Embarrassed, I swung around and bolted for the door, only to halt in my tracks when Johnny called out my name.

“Shannon?”

Mortified, I swung around to face him.

“Hi,” I strangled, forcing myself to breathe even though it felt like my heart accelerated in my chest at the sight of him.

Johnny had a towel slung over his shoulder, was gripping a metal crutch with his hand, and wore a pained expression on his face. He was once again wearing a pair of Calvin Klein’s. Tonight’s were black.

“Hi,” Johnny replied, distracting me from my dangerous thoughts. “What are you doing in here?”

“I wanted to check on you,” I blurted out, desperately trying not to stare at the way his stomach muscles contracted when he made his way over to the bench, putting all his weight on the crutch. “I was worried.”

He was limping again, blatantly obvious now, and I was instantly alert. Alert and concerned.

“I *am* worried,” I muttered.

“One of those assholes from Royce ripped me with his boot,” Johnny grumbled.

He sat down gingerly, rested the crutch beside him, and placed the towel over his right thigh.

“Ripped you?” I choked out, horrified.

Oh god.

Exhaling heavily, Johnny leaned back and rested his head against the tiled wall at his back. “Assholes.”

“You didn’t get up, Johnny,” I whispered, chewing on my lip. My gaze flicked to his thigh. “For a long time.”

“Passed out from the pain,” he reluctantly admitted.

“They’re sending you to the hospital?” I offered, forcing myself to stay where I was and not run to him like I desperately wanted to. “For tests?”

“It’s protocol, given the circumstances.” Exhaling heavily, he leaned back and rested his head against the tiled wall at his back. “It’s a fucking joke.”

Liar. I know you’re going to have surgery.

“How bad is it, Johnny?” I forced myself to ask.

He snapped his gaze on me, blue eyes full of heat. “I’m *okay*, Shannon.”

More lies.

I could hear how much pain he was in from the way he was gritting his words as he spoke.

He was hurting. And he was scared.

“Are you sure?” I pressed.

He looked at me, blue eyes full of heat. “Are *you*?”

“I don’t know.” I shrugged helplessly. “I’m so scared for you.”

Johnny arched a brow at my response and I flushed beet red.

“I should leave you be.” I clasped my hands together and swallowed deeply. “I’ll, uh, go wait on the bus.”

I turned around and hurried for the door.

“Can you stay with me?”

My feet stopped and my heart sped up.

I turned back to look at him. “Huh?”

“Please,” Johnny croaked out. “I don’t want to be on my own.”

My heart constricted tightly in my chest, making it hard to breathe.

“I can go and get Gibsie?” I offered weakly.

Johnny shook his head. “I only want you.”

I knew I should leave. I should walk out of this room and take my seat on the bus.

It would be the right thing to do. The sensible thing.

But I wouldn’t.

Because I *couldn’t* leave him.

Clumsily, I moved toward him, not stopping until I was sitting down beside him.

My brain was untrusting and wary, but my heart wasn’t, and my body was more than happy to overcompensate for both. I was physically attracted to him, emotionally connected, and mentally terrified. It made for an awful battlefield of anguish inside of me. Concern for this boy was rampant inside of me.

I didn’t understand it, and in this moment, I didn’t care.

The relief I felt when I stepped through that door and saw him alive and breathing was still overwhelming me. I knew he was terrified over his prospects of playing rugby, but all I could think about was that he was in one piece. It was that overwhelming relief and concern flushing through my veins that provoked my next move.

“It’s okay,” I promised, taking his big hand in mine. “You’re going to be okay.”

Johnny stiffened, but didn’t pull his hand from mine.

I didn’t let go, either. I just pulled his hand onto my lap and held on tightly.

“I’m in pain, Shannon,” he confessed, dropping his head. “I’m so fucking scared.”

“I know you are,” I whispered, shifting closer, fingers twitching with the urge I had inside of me to check the damage he was hiding beneath that towel. “Have they given you anything for the pain?”

Johnny exhaled a ragged breath. “Yeah, the doc gave me a shot of something—a muscle relaxant, I think.”

“Is it helping?”

He shook his head.

“I bet you wish you hadn’t wasted those ibuprofen on me now, huh?” I joked, trying to distract him from the obvious discomfort he was in. “They would’ve come in handy right about now.”

“A tranquilizer would be helpful,” he shot back glumly, his big shoulders sagging.

“Let me see you,” I instructed softly.

Keeping my right hand wrapped around his, I used my left to reach over and turn his chin.

“Those fuckers,” I grumbled, eyeing the purple bruising on the side of his cheek and the cut above his brow that was once again clotting. “Your poor face.”

Johnny chuckled then.

“What’s funny?” I asked, thrilled to hear that sound come out of him.

“It’s weird to hear you say ‘fucker,’” he explained with a weary smile.

“I’m quite partial to cursing, you know,” I told him, desperately trying to distract him from his pain.

“No, you’re not,” he replied gruffly, too clever for his own good. “You’re just saying that to distract me.”

“Is it working?”

He nodded stiffly. “Don’t stop.”

Racking my brain for something to say, I let my gaze roam over him, absorbing every groove and hard edge until settling on the hand wrapped in mine.

His hand was big and masculine, his knuckles an odd shape from what I presumed was years’ worth of roughhousing. His fingers were long, his nails were cut short, and he had a long scar running across the back of his left hand.

I raised a brow at that.

Grazing my fingertips over the jagged line on the back of his hand, I asked, “What happened here?”

“Boot studs,” he explained, staring down at our joined hands. “Illegal hand stamp in a ruck during a club semifinal two years ago, resulting in seven stitches and a tetanus.”

I winced. “Ouch.”

He expelled a harsh breath. “Yeah.”

“Have you more?”

“I’ve a few,” he replied, eyeing me curiously.

“Can I see?”

Johnny watched me for a long moment before nodding slowly. “If you want to.”

“I do,” I replied, wanting to keep his mind occupied while he waited for the ambulance to come.

“I’ve broken this more times than I remember,” Johnny told me, pointing to his nose. “The worst time was last summer.” He grimaced before adding, “They had to file the bone and rebreak it to set in back in place.”

My eyes widened. “Back into place?”

“Yeah.” He smirked. “I was walking around the place with my nose touching my cheek.”

“God,” I groaned, stomach turning. “That’s barbaric.”

“That’s rugby.” He laughed and then grunted loudly, flinching in pain.

“What else?” I hurried to ask.

Releasing a pained sigh, Johnny gave me a detailed rundown on his appendix bursting when he was thirteen and then his stomach turning inside out when he was in recovery, resulting in another procedure before treating me to an up-close-and-personal interaction with his belly scar.

Belly was a stupid word to use when describing him. It was too soft, too innocent a term to describe what he possessed.

Boys had bellies. It was quite clear that Johnny was no longer a boy. Those abs and that dark trail of hair under his navel attributed to that.

Johnny leaned forward and pointed to a disgusting-looking piece of frayed skin above his right knee. “This one put me on my ass for an entire summer.”

“What happened?” I squeaked. “Rugby?”

“For once, no. This one happened off the pitch when I was ten,” he replied. “A few of the older lads at my school dared me to jump off the cliff at Sander’s Point—”

“Sander’s Point?”

“It’s a fifty-foot diving spot we used to hang around at back home,” Johnny explained. “I was a mad little bastard back then, taking on the big lads, thinking I was the Incredible fucking Hulk.” He shook his head and smiled fondly. “Turns out I wasn’t, and I have the X-rays and a week in the hospital to prove it.”

“Jesus,” I strangled out. “You were only ten! You could’ve died.”

“I’m bigger now.” He smiled sadly. “Harder to break.”

“Yes.” I squeezed his hand tightly. “You are.”

Johnny showed me several more of his battle wounds, chuckling every time I groaned or gagged.

The conversation seemed to be distracting him from his pain and I was glad. His shoulders weren't nearly so tense anymore, and the more we talked, the more the stiffness in his frame evaporated.

"Oh, and I fractured my cheekbone when I was fourteen." Johnny leaned his face close to mine. "See there?" He pointed to a frail silvery line across the high point of his left cheek. "You can hardly see it now, but that hurt like a bitch."

"Oh, yeah," I mused, inspecting the thin scar. "I never noticed that before now." I flicked my eyes to his eyebrow. Unable to stop myself, I reached up and trailed my thumb over his brow again. "Why does this always bleed?"

"Hasn't had a chance to heal up," he explained, keeping perfectly still while I touched him inappropriately. "It'll close up properly once the season's over."

"Oh," I whispered, searching his face for more hidden battle wounds.

When my eyes reached his again, I found him watching me, his dark-blue eyes heated and locked on mine.

"The player from Royce hurt you there?" I inclined my head to where the towel was draped over his thigh. "That's why you passed out?"

Johnny reluctantly nodded.

"Can I see it?" I asked, my voice barely more than a whisper.

He tensed.

"Please?"

He shook his head slowly. "Shannon, I don't think that's a good idea."

"Please?" I repeated, eyeing him nervously. "I already know it's there and you've shown me the others."

"It's bad, Shannon," he replied gruffly. "Believe me, you do not want to see it."

"You can trust me," I whispered. "I won't tell."

Johnny stared at me for the longest moment, eyes locked on mine, before exhaling heavily. Shoulders slumped, he dropped his hands to his sides, but made no move to show me.

"Can I?" I asked.

He closed his eyes and nodded stiffly.

He was giving me the reins, I realized, to do what I wished.

Shakily, I lifted the towel away and stared down at what looked like a recently sewn scar on his inner right thigh. His thigh was swollen, purple in color, and the angry-looking, weeping scar was partially concealed by the fabric of his boxers.

“Oh god, Johnny,” I strangled out, sliding off the bench and onto the floor to get a better look at it.

“Don’t hurt me,” he warned in an achingly vulnerable tone.

“I won’t,” I promised as I knelt between his legs and waited for him to give me the go-ahead.

Nodding stiffly, Johnny leaned his head back and closed his eyes, jaw clenched tightly.

Gently, I reached for the hem of the leg of his boxer shorts and carefully lifted the fabric away from his flesh, only to gasp at the sight. His thigh was hairy with the exception of a six-inch patch of skin. And that particular six-inch patch of skin was swollen, angry-looking, and a horrendous brownish-yellow in color.

“It’s oozing,” I whispered, smoothing my fingers over the bumpy, uneven trail where they’d stitched him back up. The fragile, barely healed stitches had clearly been ripped apart by the boot of the Royce player who had connected with his groin. The pus leaking from the wound was a reddish-yellow color. “Johnny, this is bad.”

“I know,” he bit out, eyes still clenched shut. “Doc told me.”

Gently, I traced the scar and surrounding bruising with my fingers. “Does it hurt when I touch you like this?”

“It hurts,” he replied, tone hoarse.

Exhaling a heavy breath, I stroked his thigh and fought the urge to press a kiss to his cut.

“For an entirely different reason,” he croaked out.

And that’s when I noticed what I was doing—what I had been doing for the last minute or so. I was sitting on my knees between his legs, stroking his inner thigh, trying to soothe his ache away. My eyes flicked to the danger zone and my mouth ran dry.

So that’s why people referred to it as pitching a tent. I wasn’t sure that statement applied to this particular breed of teenage boy because Johnny wasn’t just pitching a tent in those jocks—he was pitching a *marquee*.

Releasing a low groan, he pushed my hand away and moved to close his thighs, but I stopped him.

I *stopped* him.

"No," I mumbled, voice breathy and soft.

I could feel the heat of his stare on my face.

He moved to close his legs again and I shook my head.

His eyes were open again, his pupils were dark and dilated.

"What are you doing?" he whispered, biting down on his swollen bottom lip.

I didn't know what I was doing. I didn't know what I was thinking.

I couldn't speak. I could barely breathe.

I was losing my mind right here on my knees in the middle of a changing room in Dublin. And it was all his fault.

A temporary slip in sanity caused me to lean forward a press a kiss to his thigh.

The sound that tore from Johnny's chest was a pained, guttural groan.

"Shannon, please—"

I kissed him again.

"Fuck," he grunted, legs shaking now. "I can't…"

The third time I kissed him, he fisted my hair and pulled my face to his.

"Shannon," Johnny groaned, sounding both pained and breathless, as he gently pressed his forehead to mine. "We can't—"

I silenced whatever he was about to say by putting my lips on his.

And just like before, he turned to stone.

"I'm sorry," I strangled out, pulling back. "I did it again."

"It's okay," he told me, breathing hard just like before.

"No, no, no," I strangled out as I scrambled to my feet and lunged for the door. "You're injured! You're waiting to go to the hospital for Christ's sake, and I just—oh god! I am so sorry."

"Shannon, wait," Johnny called out as he scrambled for his crutch. "Wait!"

I didn't wait. Instead, I did what I should have done earlier. I hightailed it away from Johnny Kavanagh.

Hurrying over to the door, I yanked it open. It opened about four inches before slamming shut again—the palm pressed against it the reason, no doubt.

“Wait,” he commanded, standing so close to me that I could feel his chest rising and falling against my neck.

With my heart hammering in my chest, I swung around and stared up at Johnny as he caged me in with his big body.

“I’m so sorry,” I whispered, unable to tear my eyes off his. “I just… I…” Shaking my head, I exhaled a ragged breath and whispered, “I shouldn’t have done that.”

He shook his head and used his crutch to step closer, pressing his body flush against mine.

“Me, too,” he replied gruffly, gaze flickering from my eyes to my mouth.

“Why are you sorry?” I breathed, trembling from head to toe.

He cupped my cheek with his free hand and tilted my chin up.

“Because I shouldn’t do this,” he whispered.

And then he kissed me.

The moment his lips crushed against mine, a fierce blast of heat coursed through my body, igniting a delicious burning ache in my belly. Unable to think straight, let alone breathe, I did the only thing I could do given the circumstance: I reached up and grabbed his forearms and kissed him back.

This was my first real kiss, minus the disaster in his bedroom, and I had no idea what I was doing.

I only knew that I never wanted him to stop.

When I felt one of his hands trail down my arm and settle on my hip, I lost it. I completely and utterly took leave of my senses.

Shivering uncontrollably, I let my back sag against the doorframe as my hips thrust closer to him.

I was drowning in my feelings as they crashed through me like a wrecking ball.

The more he kissed me, the more my body trembled uncontrollably.

The more I sought.

I moaned into his mouth when I felt the tip of his tongue trace against my bottom lip.

Realizing he was waiting for me to open my mouth for him, I parted my lips and held my breath when I felt his tongue slip inside my mouth. Gently, he touched his tongue against mine in slow, patient strokes.

Oh God. Oh, sweet baby Jesus.

I was kissing Johnny Kavanagh.

Johnny Kavanagh was kissing me *back*. He had his tongue in my mouth, his hand in my hair, and my heart in his pocket.

This was…

This was…

Everything I had never expected and *more*.

Uncertain, I tentatively snaked my tongue out and stroked his.

Johnny rewarded me with a low, approving growl that came from somewhere deep within his chest.

Trembling, I wrapped my arms around his waist and tugged him closer to me, unsure of what I was doing, but knowing that my body needed *more.*

My confidence grew with every brush of our lips, with every massaging duel of our tongues, until I was purring in his arms, rocking my body against him impatiently, as we moved clumsily to the closest bench.

How was this happening? Why was this happening?

I didn’t know. I didn’t know and I didn’t care.

Johnny staggered backwards and sank down hard on the wooden bench. The impact caused a grunt of pain to rip from his chest, but he never took his lips off mine as he tossed his crutch away and pulled me between his legs. His hands moved from my face to my waist, clamping down hard, and the move caused a moan to tear from my throat. He responded to my small gasp of surprised pleasure with a low growl of approval of his own.

“Are you okay?” I breathed against his lips as I held onto his shoulders.

“Just keep kissing me,” he strangled out. “I want you so much.”

I shivered violently. “You do?”

“So fucking much,” he groaned against my lips, and then his hands were on my thighs, his fingers hiking my fitted skirt up to pool at my hips before pulling me down on his lap, encouraging me to straddle him.

Conscious of his injury, I hitched one thigh on either side of him and hovered over his lap, keeping my weight off him, as I cupped his beautiful face between my small hands and kissed him back with everything I had in me.

Johnny shivered into my touch, but I didn’t pull back.

I couldn’t help myself.

I wanted to touch his face. I wanted to touch him everywhere.

“Am I doing it right?” I breathed against his lips, feeling achingly aware of my inexperience.

“More than right,” he assured me, claiming my mouth once again.

“This is my first kiss,” I moaned against his lips.

“You’re fucking perfect,” he assured me, filling my mouth with his hot tongue.

Falling back into a deep, drugging kiss, I allowed myself to relax and absorb the sensations jolting through me.

He felt so good.

His lips were so soft. His body was so hard. His smelled so nice. He tasted so sweet.

I was *drowning* in feelings.

Unable to stop myself, I snaked a hand through his wet hair and tugged.

He rewarded my bravery with a low growl as he clamped his hands on my hips and dragged me down on his lap at the same time he thrust his hips upward. Gasping into his mouth, I went willingly, too consumed in the intoxicatingly delicious feel of his body pressed against mine to contemplate that this could be hurting him.

He was clearly enjoying this.

I could feel his enjoyment as he strained against me.

Nestling between my legs, Johnny didn’t push for more. Instead, he continued to kiss me with hot, swiping flicks of his tongue, ruining me with his mouth alone. He was making me hot and achy all over.

Losing the run of myself and chasing pressure, I mewled into his mouth and sank down hard on his lap.

Johnny grunted into my mouth and I froze, suddenly aware of his injury.

“Am I hurting you?” I asked against his lips.

“Only if you stop.” He knotted his hand in the back of my hair and deepened the kiss.

I think I’m in love with you.

I think I’m falling.

Please don’t hurt me. Please don’t ever hurt me.

My mind was racing with crazed, lust-induced thoughts all directed at Johnny. I couldn’t seem to stop myself from falling over the edge of

emotional suicide.

I was starving for him. Ravenous. I needed this boy.

I was desperate for him. I ached and I yearned and I admitted that now, with an open mind and a vulnerable heart.

The more I rocked against him, the more he encouraged me to move, pulling on my hips, grinding our bodies together.

I was so caught up in our kiss that I didn't hear the changing room door open and close, and I was only vaguely aware of someone clearing their throat.

It was only when Coach Mulcahy said, "I see you're feeling better," that reality came crashing down on me with a tremendous bang.

"Fuck," Johnny groaned into my mouth.

Startled, I broke the kiss and tried to scramble off Johnny's lap.

Tried being the appropriate word because Johnny caught ahold of my hand and pulled me back to him. When he reached down and adjusted my skirt, pushing it back down, I almost died on the mortal spot.

"Inappropriate behavior on school grounds, Kavanagh," Coach Mulcahy snapped, casting glaring looks at both of us. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

My gaze landed on the two amused-looking paramedics standing behind Coach, and I whimpered loudly.

"We're not on school grounds, sir," Johnny replied calmly as he pulled me down to sit beside him.

"You're on school time," Coach barked.

"Actually, we're not," Johnny countered, taking my hand in his.

I was incredibly grateful for his touch in this moment. It was grounding and steadying and stopped me from anxious puking. Something I was known for doing.

"It's half nine at night," Johnny added with a shrug. "Well past school hours."

"It's inappropriate behavior," Coach bellowed, turning a furious glare on us. "Don't give me technicalities. You're both under eighteen." Clearly furious, he added, "I'll have to report this to Mr. Twomey and your parents."

"Oh god," I strangled out, panicked. "Please don't tell."

“A kiss?” Johnny sneered, tightening his hold on my trembling hand. “You’re going to report a fucking kiss?” He laughed humorlessly. “Take a walk down the aisle of that bus, Coach. Pretty sure you’ll find worse than kissing going on.”

“You are a *minor* student who was alone with a fellow *minor* student in a dressing room,” the teacher replied hotly. “In an extremely compromising position.” Coach turned to me then. “Is that the kind of reputation you want starting off at Tommen, Miss Lynch?” he demanded. “Do you want to be one of those girls?”

Tears pricked my eyes and I quickly shook my head.

“Hey, don’t talk to her like that,” Johnny snapped, leaning forward, shielding me from Mr. Mulcahy’s view.

“Come on, Johnny!” Coach grumbled impatiently. “Think about how this looks.”

“I don’t give a fuck how it looks,” Johnny snarled. He jerked to his feet only to quickly stagger backwards and collapse on the bench with a pained grunt. “You don’t talk about her like that,” he bit out, nostrils flaring. “No one talks about her like that.”

“Look at yourself!” Coach demanded, pointing to Johnny’s lower half. “Look at the condition you’re in.”

Johnny didn’t look, but I did.

I looked and let out a strangled gasp at the sight.

Blood was oozing from where the Royce player had ripped him open with his boot studs.

“Johnny,” I croaked out, reaching for his hand again.

Oh god, his hand was shaking.

I turned to look at him.

Johnny’s entire body was shaking. His face was contorted in pain.

He was rattling from head to toe.

“You’re injured, kid,” Coach snapped. “Do you hear me? Your body is *falling apart* and you’re in here doing the fucking eejit with a girl!”

“Alright, everyone just calm down,” the male paramedic ordered as he marched over to Johnny and knelt in front of him. “What have we got here, son?”

“I already told the doctor,” Johnny bit out, shaking violently now.

“Humor me,” the paramedic replied.

“Torn adductor.” Exhaling a ragged breath, Johnny slumped back and closed his eyes. “I had surgery on the twentieth of December,” he explained, sounding thoroughly defeated. “It hasn’t healed.”

“Because he hasn’t given his body a chance to heal,” Coach interjected. “His teammate and friend told me that this has been an ongoing issue he’s been hiding from us.”

“Like you give a shite,” Johnny snarled, eyes flashing with fury. “You have your trophies and your final secured, don’t ya?”

“Of course, I give a shit, you little bollox,” Coach snapped. “I give a lot of shits about you, though why is beyond me!”

“We had a report that you were knocked unconscious for several minutes during a rugby match,” the other paramedic asked, taking down notes.

“From pain,” Johnny admitted gruffly. “There was no head injury.”

“Yet,” Coach bit out. “There’s time for that, yet.”

“Fucking try it,” Johnny grumbled dejectedly. His head lolled slightly and he snapped his head back up, still trembling.

“Hey, hey, it’s okay,” I whispered, cupping his face to steady him. “You’re okay.”

He shook his head again, eyes looking slightly glazed before finding focus on my face.

“I’m sorry,” he croaked out, voice slurring a little.

“For what?”

“For not”—he closed his eyes and exhaled a pained groan—“kissing you back that night.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I whispered, clutching his face with my hands. “Don’t even think about it right now, okay?”

“I wanted to,” he grunted, clenching his eyes shut as a huge shiver rolled through his body. “I promise.”

“Johnny, it’s okay,” I croaked out, blinking the tears away.

He looked like he was in so much pain, I could hardly take it.

“He needs everything checked over,” Coach barked then, tone laced with concern. “Blood work. X-rays. Scans. Whatever he tells you, ignore it. He’s a gobby little shit who won’t tell you when there’s a problem.”

“Understood,” the female paramedic with the clipboard mused.

“He’s under contract with the Irish Rugby Academy,” Coach added, scrubbing his face with his hand. “All of his notes are in Cork, but he needs to be wrapped in cotton wool.”

“Understood,” the male paramedic replied. Turning to Johnny, he winked. “You’re not the first Academy pup I’ve treated.”

“Maybe your girlfriend can step outside, Johnny,” the female paramedic suggested.

Johnny’s response to her request was to tighten his hold on my hand.

God, he was shaking so bad my whole body was vibrating from the contact.

“Yes.” Coach nodded and turned his attention to me. “Miss Lynch, I suggest you go take your seat on the bus,” Coach barked, dismissing me.

“Are you okay?” I asked, turning to look at Johnny.

He didn’t look okay. He looked like a cornered animal. Wounded and desperate.

He stared at me for the longest moment, blue eyes churning with anxiety, before nodding in resignation and releasing my hand.

“I can stay?” I whispered, unsure whether leaving him was the right thing to do. “Or wait outside?”

It didn’t feel okay or right to leave him.

It felt all wrong actually.

“I’ll be okay,” Johnny told me, giving me a wink before grunting in pain when the paramedic prodded his thigh. “Fuck!”

“Out, Miss Lynch,” Coach barked, pushing me toward the door.

“Can I go with him?” I heard myself ask. “Please?”

“You can *go* back to the bus like I told you,” he ordered. “Now out!”

Shame, guilt, and responsibility filled my body as I moved for the door.

“Bye, Johnny,” I whispered, hovering in the doorway, fighting back the urge to run back to him.

His pain-filled eyes landed on mine. “Bye, Shannon.”

I love you.

I am so in love with you.

Please be okay.

64
Waiting Game

SHANNON

“Shan?” Claire whispered in my ear. “Are you still awake?”

“I’m awake,” I croaked out as I lay on my side, completely motionless, and stared out the window at the city lights of the capital.

I hadn’t moved from this exact position since being thrust into the hotel room with Claire, Lizzie, Shelly, and Helen several hours ago, and told to stay put by a frazzled Mrs. Moore.

The girls had long since fallen asleep, with Lizzie in the single bed next to ours, and Shelly and Helen in the double bed on the opposite side of the room. Not me, though. I hadn’t closed an eye. I was drowning in my concern.

Every once in a while, I checked the time on the analog clock on the nightstand.

05:38 was its most recent reading.

Johnny was out there somewhere, lying in one of those big, lit-up hospitals, having god knows what done to his body.

I didn’t know what was happening. No one would tell me *anything*.

I didn’t have his phone number, and even if I did, I didn’t have a phone to use.

My heart was frozen in my chest. Fear unlike any I had experienced before was battering me. I was *terrified* for him.

“Do you think he’s out of surgery by now?” Claire asked.

I shrugged a shoulder, feeling numb to the bone.

Shifting onto her side in the tiny single bed we were sharing, Claire wrapped her arm around me. “They were taking him in around midnight. Wasn’t that what Gerard said?”

Again, I shrugged helplessly. I had no idea.

“He’s going to be okay, Shan,” she whispered, squeezing me tightly. “I’m sure of it.”

“I feel like can’t *breathe*,” I confessed as teardrop after teardrop fell from my eyelashes. “Claire, I’m so scared for him, and my body is frozen.”

“That’s understandable,” she replied, rubbing my arm soothingly.

“Is it?” I strangled out, fighting back the urge to scream. “Because I have no idea why I feel like I’m dying right now.” Sniffling, I inhaled several shaky breaths, desperate to get my emotions under control. “I have never been so scared in my whole life.”

“Shan,” Claire sighed softly. “You’re feeling like this because you care about Johnny.”

Nodding, I clenched my eyes shut and tensed my body to stop the tremors from racking through me.

“And maybe because you love him?”

Exhaling a ragged breath, I rolled onto my back and turned my face to look at my best friend.

“I’m so in love with him, Claire,” I confessed, and then I burst into tears. “I love him so much that the thought of him not being okay is *killing* me.”

“Does Johnny know how you feel?”

I shook my head and cried harder.

“I shouldn’t have left him,” I sobbed. “I should have *stayed* with him.”

“You couldn’t,” she said in a gentle tone. “Mr. Mulcahy would’ve never allowed you.”

“He looked so scared, Claire,” I strangled out as my body racked with sobs. “You didn’t see him, but he was so scared. And then they took him away in that ambulance. I watched him go. I watched them take him away. And now? Now I don’t know where he is or if he’s alone—”

“It’s okay,” she coaxed, wrapping me up in her arms. “Shh, it’s okay. Everything’s going to be okay.”

“What if something happens to him?” I sobbed, clutching her for dear life. “What if something goes wrong in theater—”

“No,” she interrupted, her voice a stern whisper. “He’s going to be fine —”

A soft knock on the door startled me and caused both of us to spring up on the bed.

My eyes darted to the three sleeping girls and then back to Claire.

She stared back at me, wide-eyed.

“Girls,” a familiar muffled voice came from the other side of the hotel room door. “Let me in.”

Claire held a hand up, motioning for me to stay where I was, before sliding off the bed and tiptoeing across the room.

“Gerard?” she whispered, pressing her ear to the door.

“Yeah, it’s me, babe,” Gibsie’s voice came from the other side.

Thank god.

Scrambling off the bed, I hurried to the door just as Claire pulled it open.

We both winced when the hallway light almost blinded us both.

“Hey,” Gibsie acknowledged as he stood in the doorway wrapped in a coat and beany cap. “Thought you’d be up.”

“What’s happening?” Claire quickly asked him. “Have you heard anything?”

“Is Johnny okay?” I demanded. “Is he out of surgery yet?”

“Were you talking to his parents?” Claire asked. “Is his mam with him?”

“Is he okay?” I repeated, voice rising.

“One at a time, girls. Christ,” Gibsie muttered as he stepped back into the hallway and gestured for us to follow him.

We both went without hesitation.

“I just got off the phone from his dad,” Gibsie stated as he leaned against the wall, looking pale and exhausted. “This goes no further than the three of us,” he added, casting us both warning glances. “Is that clear?”

We both nodded.

Gibsie, in turn, nodded wearily. “He’s out of surgery. Everything went fine,” he quickly added, looking at me. “Your boy’s alright, little Shannon. Take a breath.”

“Thank god,” I breathed, pressing my hand to my chest.

The relief that flooded my body was so strong that I had to take a couple of steps back and lean against the opposite wall.

“When they opened him up, they found a huge-ass adhesion from where they operated on his adductor at Christmas,” he explained. “Apparently, it was pretty bad.”

“How bad?” I whispered, panicking again.

Gibsie grimaced. “According to his dad, it was blocking Johnny’s sperm cord or some horrific fucking catastrophe like that.” Shuddering, he added, “Could have seriously damaged his chances of having a family further down the line.”

“That’s what was causing him all that pain?” I croaked out, devastated to think that he was in so much agony. “Oh god.”

“Not just that,” Gibsie said with a sigh. “He has a bad infection in the leg and John Sr. said they had to perform something called concomitant surgery because Johnny had something called an athletic pubalgia they didn’t spot in his last tests and scans.”

“What the hell is that?” Claire gasped.

“Fuck knows, babe,” Gibsie told her. “I’m no doctor, and I have not one iota of what the fuck any of that means, but whatever it is, it was crippling him.”

“It’s a sports hernia,” I whispered, remembering reading about it once in an article at school.

“That’s pretty bad, right?” Claire asked.

“It’s excruciating,” I choked out, paling at the thought of how much pain Johnny had to have been enduring these past few months. “He must have been in so much pain playing with that kind of injury.”

Gibsie nodded grimly. “The doctors told his father that they don’t know how he walked around with the pain, let alone continued to play rugby.”

“Is he awake?” Claire asked with a hopeful expression.

Gibsie shook his head. “Nah, he’s still in recovery. They have him dosed to the high heavens, so he’ll be out for the count for another bit.”

“Are you going to see him?” I asked.

“Hell fucking yes, I’m going to see him,” Gibsie grumbled. “And you’re coming with me.”

“Me?”

“Yes, you, little Shannon,” Gibsie replied. “He’ll want to see you.”

“He will?”

He nodded. “Go get your clothes on. I’ll call a taxi.”

“What about Mr. Mulcahy?” Claire added, worrying her lip. “He and Mrs. Moore said we’re not allowed to leave our rooms.”

“Coach can kiss my lily-white ass,” Gibsie shot back without hesitation. “That’s my best friend lying in a hospital bed, babe.”

“But, Gerard, it’s only six in the morning,” Claire added, sounding concerned. “And I don’t want you to get into trouble…” She paused to look at me. “Either of you.”

“In the words of the late great Freddie Mercury: ‘Don’t stop me now,’” he told her. “Just go back to bed and I’ll text you in a bit.”

“Shannon, don’t go,” Claire turned to me and said, eyes filled with concern. “If you get caught, and they tell your father—”

“I’m going,” I croaked out, stopping her before she could finish that sentence.

I knew what would happen. I also knew that it would happen regardless. I was here in Dublin when I was supposed to be at home. He was going to kill me anyway.

I *had* to go.

Hurrying back into the room, I threw my uniform back on—not easy in the dark and with sleeping roommates—and then quickly rushed back out to the hallway to where Claire was still standing with Gibsie.

“You take care of her, Gerard Gibson, do you hear me?” she was hissing. “Don’t leave her on her own at any time for any reason. And if you get caught, then you take the rap, okay? I don’t care what you have to do, but you figure something out so she doesn’t get blamed for this—”

“Little Shannon,” Gibsie announced, nudging Claire’s shoulder to alert her to the fact that I was back and could hear them.

“Hi,” I breathed, smoothing down my coat.

“Ready for a jailbreak?” he added with a grin.

I looked to Claire, who was worrying her lip and shaking her head, before turning back to Gibsie.

Forcing the image of my father’s face from my mind, I exhaled a ragged breath and nodded. “I’m ready.”

65
Find the Girl

JOHNNY

When I opened my eyes, it was to a dark room and the sound of beeping monitors. Unsure of where the fuck I was, I automatically began to panic and tear at the wires strapped to my chest and arms. There were some stuck up my nose, too, and I smacked at them, trying to break free.

My hands felt strange—like they didn't belong to me. My head felt the same.

My eyeballs were rolling around in my head of their own accord. Seriously, I couldn't get a handle on them.

I tried to focus, I tried real hard to make sense of my surroundings, but my eyes kept fluttering and the room was spinning.

Was I stoned? Did Gibsie get me high?

That bastard…

"Johnny—it's okay, son." My father's voice came from close by. "Don't be pulling at your IV. You'll hurt yourself."

"Da?"

"I'm right here, son."

The sound of a chair scraping off tiles filled my ears.

"Da," I croaked out, calming when I felt his warm hand cover mine. "Where am I?"

I couldn't see him, but I knew he was close. His voice was right there by my ear, making me feel safe. His hand touched my forehead, brushing my hair back, just like he used to do when I was small.

"You're in the recovery room, son."

Jesus Christ, I was?

I could just about remember the ambulance ride to the hospital.

Everything was blurry. And painless. I had no pain.

Nothing.

“You had surgery, son,” my father explained.

“Fuck,” I croaked out. “Is my dick still there?”

“It’s still there.” Dad chuckled softly.

“And my balls?”

“Also there,” he mused. “All in working order.”

I exhaled a ragged breath. “Thank Jesus.”

“Do you remember the match last night?” he asked. “You were in a bad way, son.”

“I remember the girl,” I slurred. “Why’s everything dark?”

“Because you’re supposed to be sleeping,” my father told me. “It’s six o’clock in the morning. Still dark outside.”

“So, no lights anywhere?” I asked, confused. “They’re all gone?”

I heard his quiet laugh. “No lights for another few hours, Johnny.”

“You’re sure my dick’s still there?” I kicked my feet, but they weren’t being cooperative. “I really like my dick, Da. I’ll cry if it’s gone.”

“Most lads like that part of their anatomy, Johnny.” Dad chuckled. “And I promise it’s still there.”

“Check for me,” I mumbled, feeling woozy as fuck. “Just to make sure.”

I heard my father sigh heavily and then felt the covers being lifted from my body.

“All there, boyo,” he assured me before tucking the covers around me once more.

“It’s not working anymore, Da,” I groaned, feeling a huge surge of devastation fill my body. “I broke it.”

“The doctors fixed it,” he coaxed. “It’s back in working order again.”

“I can pull my dick again?”

“Yes, Johnny.” he laughed. “In a few weeks, you can pull it to your heart’s content.”

“My head’s all hazy, Da,” I slurred. “Everything’s warm and tingly… and I feel groggy as balls.”

“That’s the medication, Johnny. It’s making you drowsy,” he told me. “Go back to sleep and you’ll feel better in a little while.”

“How is he doing?” an unfamiliar voice asked, bringing with it a small flash of light and the sound of a door clicking.

“Talking out of his arse,” my father told the voice.

“Ah, that’ll be the morphine,” the voice mused, coming closer. “Try and get him to sleep. I’ll be back in an hour to do his obs.”

“Da, there’s a girl,” I announced when the door clicked again.

“I know, Johnny,” Dad said calmly. “That was your nurse.”

“No, no, no,” I slurred, shaking my head. “There’s a *girl*, Da. A girl.”

“Where, son?”

“There’s a girl on the bus,” I slurred. “I need you to find her for me.”

“There’s no girl, pet,” Dad coaxed. “There’s no bus, either. You’re jacked up on morphine.”

“Oh, fuck,” I groaned. “Am I dying or something?”

“No, Johnny, love, you’re not dying.”

“Thank fuck,” I groaned. “’Cause I wanna see that girl again.”

“Okay, Johnny. Just relax, buddy.”

“No, no, no, Da. I’m serious,” I slurred. “I think I love that girl.”

“Well, who’s this girl?”

“She’s a river.” I sighed and closed my eyes. “I’m keeping her, Da.”

“Okay, son,” he coaxed. “You keep the girl.”

“She makes my heart go, like, *whoa*.”

“Is that right?” he mused.

“So bad, Da.” I sighed. “Boom, boom, fucking boom.” I shook my head. “All the time.”

“Is he awake?” My mother’s voice filled my ears, followed by another flash of light and the sound of another door clicking.

“He’s something alright.” Dad chuckled.

“Johnny, love, it’s Mam.”

“Ma,” I slurred, feeling her hand touch my cheek. “Don’t be pissed.”

“I’m beyond pissed,” she sobbed. “You could have died.”

“She crying, Da?” I slurred, slapping at something touching my nose. “It’s because I had sex.” Smirking, I added, “*A lot* of sex.” I laughed to myself but it sounded funny. “Just kidding, Ma…no pussy for me.”

“Edel, love, he’s high as a kite,” I heard my father say. “He won’t remember a word of this. Best wait to give him the talk until he comes around properly.”

“The talk,” I groaned loudly. “All the fucking talks.”

“Johnny, love—”

“Sex is a beautiful thing,” I slurred. “When it’s between two blah fucking blahs.”

Mam laughed. “So, you do listen to me.”

“Ma!” I exclaimed. “You know the girl!”

“What girl, love?”

“My girl.” I slapped a hand against my nose, itching the scratch, or scratching the itch.

I didn’t know about anything anymore, but I felt fucking great.

“See, Da?” I slapped my chest. “Boom, fucking boom, boom.”

“What’s he talking about, John?”

“God only knows,” my father replied, sounding thoroughly amused. “But it’s the best entertainment I’ve had in years.”

“My dick works again, Ma,” I chuckle-slurred. “Da checked. My balls are there, too.”

“Oh, Jesus,” Ma muttered.

“It’s okay,” I cooed, mashing my lips together. “She’s sixteen now, and I’m—” I slapped my forehead. “Seventeen.”

“What are you talking about, Johnny?”

“The fractions, Ma,” I groaned. “They’re closing in.”

“Fractions of what, love?”

“Not too much longer to wait.” I sighed. “Thank fuck, ’cause I’m in love.”

“You’re in love?”

I nodded happily. “And she’s a river.”

“Well, that’s…lovely, pet,” Mam coaxed, sounding confused. “Good boy.”

“I’m gonna sail my boat down her river,” I snickered. “My dick boat.”

“Can they knock him back out?” Ma grumbled. “He’s going to give me a stroke with all this talk.”

“It’s okay, Ma,” I coaxed. “I’m gonna keep her, too. Make all my babies with her because my balls work—and Da says I can pull on my dick again. Woo!”

“John!” Mam gasped. “What have you been telling our son?”

Dad laughed. “He’s seventeen, Edel. It’s the first thing he’s going to ask about after a surgery like that.”

“Oh, dear Jesus,” Mam groaned.

“And I’m gonna buy her a ring…and a dog…and sail a boat…and I’m gonna look at her tits because I can.” I sighed in contentment. “She’s got the best tits, Da.”

“Knock, knock,” a familiar voice called out, followed by more light and more doors clicking. “How’s the patient?”

“Gerard,” Mam sighed happily.

“Gibs!” I called out, searching the room for my best friend and coming up empty. “Gibs, man. The fuck kind of drugs did you slip me?”

“He’s very…*high* right now, Gibs,” Dad explained. “Don’t take any notice of what he’s saying.”

“Is that right?” Gibsie chuckled. “Hey, buddy. How’s it going?”

“They fixed my dick, Gibs.” With a great deal of effort, I managed to hold a thumb up and wave my hand around aimlessly. “Happy days.”

“Woo-hoo,” Gibsie cheered, catching ahold of my hand. “Best news I’ve heard all year.” He squeezed my hand. “You know what that means, don’t ya?”

“Shifting jackets,” I slurred.

“Exactly.” Gibsie chuckled. “Soon as you’re back on your feet, I’ll have you out on the tiles.”

“Boys,” Mam chastised. “Gerard, don’t encourage him.”

“You get it, Gibs,” I slurred happily. “You get me.”

“I get you, buddy,” he coaxed, squeezing my hand. “Shouldn’t he be out still?”

“He should,” my father replied, sounding amused. “But the lad is as strong as an ox.”

“I’m a bull,” I slurred.

Gibsie snickered. “You’re a bull?”

I nodded. “With big balls.”

Gibsie laughed. “Big *working* balls.”

“I’m gonna use that lube, Gibs,” I croaked out, twisting around to find him. “Hey, where’d you go?”

“I’m right here,” he told me, patting my head. “And I’ll buy you a big basket of it once we’re home.”

“You’re my best friend,” I told him, but he looked like a pillow. “I love your big rugby-ball head.”

Mam groaned. “Oh, Johnny.”

“Listen,” Gibsie said in a serious tone. “I brought a friend to see him.”

“You’re my friend,” I replied with a sigh. “My favorite, fucked-up friend.”

“I know I am, bud,” Gibsie coaxed, squeezing my hand. “And you’re mine.”

“A friend?” Mam questioned.

“Yeah, uh, she’s right outside.”

“You found her, Gibs!” I exclaimed. “Thank fuck. I thought I lost her.”

“I did, buddy,” Gibsie chuckled softly. “I brought Shannon back to you.”

“Shannon *like the river*,” I sighed contently.

“Shannon Lynch?” Mam exclaimed. “That’s who he’s rambling on about?”

“Oh, *yeah*,” Gibsie mused.

“What happened to being friends, Johnny?” Mam asked.

“I lied,” I snickered. “I’ve been lying all along.”

“Oh, Johnny,” Mam sighed. “You never had to lie, baby. I like that girl.”

“She’s mine,” I grumbled. “You can’t have her.”

Gibsie laughed loudly. “Everyone knows that, Cap.”

Twisting my head, I tried to find my father. “Da?”

“I’m still right here,” Dad assured me, squeezing my right hand.

“She’s the one,” I whispered, trying to eyeball him in the darkness. “With the perfect tits.”

“You saw her tits?” Gibsie asked.

I nodded happily. “Yep.”

“When?”

“When she was playing with my calculator,” I slurred. “I love her, Gibs. So much. Balls much.”

“I know you do,” Gibsie mused, patting my shoulder. “Bulldozer.”

I shrugged. “And I’m not even sorry.”

“Gerard, maybe you shouldn’t bring Shannon in here,” Mam said, sounding concerned. “He’s partial to say anything right about now.”

“No, no, no,” I grumbled, not feeling happy now. “I wanna see her.”

“Johnny, love, she can come visit when you’re more yourself—”

“Shannon?” I roared, calling out her name at the top of my lungs. “Shannon?”

“Let the girl in, Edel,” Dad mused. “He’s going to scream the place down like a toddler otherwise.”

“Shannon!”

“Oh Jesus, fine!” Mam muttered. “You better behave yourself, Jonathan.”

The sound of high heels clicking on tiles filled my ears, and then I was blinded in light. A few moments passed by in hushed whispers. And then I heard those two words.

“Hi, Johnny.”

“Boom, boom, fucking boom, Da,” I groaned, slapping a hand against my chest. “I’m done for.”

66
I Won’t Leave You

SHANNON

“Shannon, love,” Mrs. Kavanagh acknowledged when she stepped out of Johnny’s hospital room and found me skulking in the corridor. “It’s lovely to see you again.”

“Hi, Mrs. Kavanagh,” I croaked out, feeling incredibly uncertain.

I’d been lurking around outside Johnny’s room for over ten minutes, forcing myself not to push my way through the door. I knew his parents were in there, and that should have terrified me, but it didn’t. Because I needed to see that boy more than I needed to be afraid.

Pushing off the wall, I clasped my hands together and asked, “Is Johnny okay?”

“Well,” she said, worrying her lip. “He’s a little off form right now, love.”

Oh god.

Concern burst to life inside of me.

“Can I see him?” I forced myself to be brave and ask.

Mrs. Kavanagh frowned.

“Please? I’ll be really quick,” I begged, hoping his mother would take mercy on my fragile heart. “I just need to see him…uh, I mean, I need to check that he’s…okay.”

With a heavy sigh, Mrs. Kavanagh nodded and gestured for me to go inside.

On unsteady feet, I walked into the dark room, illuminated only by the lights of the city shining in from the other side of the windowpane.

My eyes immediately darted to the bed in the middle of the room. There was a man sitting in a chair to Johnny’s right, and Gibsie was

standing to his left. I instantly recognized the man as the one from the photograph in Johnny's room that day.

The hero.

His father was holding Johnny's hand, sitting right by his bedside, and looking like his son thirty years into the future.

Meanwhile, I just stood there in the middle of his hospital room, with my heart hammering in my chest and my eyes glued to his slumped body.

"Hi, Johnny," I said, my voice barely more than a whisper.

"Boom, boom, fucking boom, Da," Johnny slurred, clutching his chest. "I'm done for."

His choice of words caused Gibsie to laugh loudly and Mrs. Kavanagh, who had rejoined us, to groan in despair.

"Bring the lights back, Da," Johnny instructed, slurring his words. "Light up the world. You need to see this girl."

"Johnny," his mother said in a warning tone. "Behave yourself."

"I wanna see her, Ma," he groaned. "I can't see her."

My heart leaped in my chest.

"Me?" I squeaked.

"Always you," Johnny groaned. "Fucking balls."

"He's not himself, Shannon," Mrs. Kavanagh hurried to say. "Don't mind anything that comes out of his mouth."

"Uh…" I looked to her and nodded uncertainly. "Okay?"

His father switched on a small overhead light, bathing the room in a soft glow.

With my heart racing, I took in the sight of Johnny hooked up to a beeping machine at his bedside. He had wires strapped to his bare chest, and one coming out of his arm that was hooked to a drip.

For once, I managed to not ogle his naked chest, concentrating on his beautiful, bruised, and tired-looking face instead.

"See her, Da? See? So fucking *beautiful*!" Johnny announced. "Told ye all."

Oh god…

"Oh, Johnny," his mother sighed.

"Leave him be, Edel." His father chuckled. "He can't help himself right now."

“Shannon,” Johnny slurred, sounding terribly groggy. “She’s too far away.”

“I’m here, Johnny,” I croaked out.

“You’re here?” He nodded, more to himself than anyone else. “Don’t leave me again.”

My heart squeezed in my chest and my words came out in a small puff. “I won’t.”

I felt incredibly uncomfortable, having both of his parents in the room, but I pushed down those feelings and made my legs walk toward him.

“How are you feeling?” I asked, closing the space between us, choosing to come around Gibsie’s side of the bed. “Are you okay?”

“Come closer,” Johnny purred, his bleary eyes trained on my face as he crooked his finger at me. “I wanna show you something.”

“Uh, okay?”

Stepping around Gibsie, I moved to his bedside.

“Don’t you dare!” Mrs. Kavanagh barked, causing me to jerk back and Johnny to groan.

“Spoilsport,” Johnny huffed.

“John, tuck those blankets under the mattress,” she instructed before turning her glare on her son. “I don’t care how high you are, Jonathan Robert Kavanagh Jr., I will cut it off if you so much as think about showing her.”

“Show me what?” I asked nervously.

“My dick,” Johnny announced, twisting to face me. “You wanna see?” He smiled lazily up at me. “It’s all better now.”

Gibsie threw his head back and howled laughing.

Mr. Kavanagh joined him.

“And Jesus wept,” Mrs. Kavanagh sobbed.

“He’s high, little Shannon,” Gibsie explained, still snickering. “As a fucking kite.”

“Oh, well, that’s okay,” I whispered, feeling my cheeks flame in embarrassment.

“Hold my hand,” Johnny instructed, flapping a hand out toward me.

I looked to his mother, unsure whether she would mind me touching her son in this condition.

Mrs. Kavanagh just sighed and nodded.

“I was worried about you,” I told him, taking his big hand in mine. “You gave me an awful fright.”

“And I was worried about *you*,” Johnny replied, wide-eyed and sincere. “I’m always worried about you.”

He tugged hard and dragged me onto the bed.

“Johnny!”

“It’s okay,” I assured Mr. Kavanagh before taking an uncertain seat at the edge of his bed.

I had no choice in this. It was either sit on the edge of Johnny’s bed or let him pull me on top of him because he wasn’t letting go.

“I didn’t know where you were,” Johnny continued to tell me as he shook his head, looking all flustered and sounding confused. “I thought I lost you…and my head? My head is hiiiigh as balls, baby.”

He called you baby.

He called you baby *again.*

“I’m here now,” I whispered, unable to stop my smile at how adorable he was in this moment. “And you’re going to be okay.”

“I love you, Shannon *like the river*,” he slurred.

My heart stopped.

Did he just?

No. No, of course he didn’t.

“I fucking love you,” Johnny said again.

Oh god.

He did. He absolutely did.

Twice.

He’s high, Shannon.

He doesn’t know what he’s saying.

Don’t take this to heart.

“Gibs?”

“Yeah, lad?”

“My sperm cord didn’t snap.” Johnny sighed happily. “No ball explosions.”

Gibsie snickered. “Good to know, Cap.”

“See, Ma,” Johnny said in a groggy slur. “She’ll have my babies—” He twisted his head from side to side until he found my face. And then he smiled. “You’ll have my babies, won’t you?”

“I…” I cleared my throat and exhaled a ragged breath. “I…”

“Shannon, I am *so* sorry,” Mrs. Kavanagh strangled out.

“Say it,” Johnny groaned, clutching my hand. “Tell me you’ll have my babies.”

“Johnny—”

“Just tell me you will,” he begged loudly. “Just say it, Shannon! *Please*! I can’t take it.”

“Sure?” I croaked out, feeling faint. “Whatever you want, Johnny.”

“Gibs,” Johnny called out happily. “Did you hear that, lad?”

“I sure did, Bulldozer.”

“Didn’t I do good, Da?” he continued to rave. “See? I found her!”

“You did a great job,” Mr. Kavanagh coaxed.

“Sorry, folks, but Mr. Kavanagh is only allowed one family member to stay with him outside of visiting hours,” a female nurse called from the doorway, both startling me and saving me from having to respond to Johnny’s statement. “If you’re all family, you can rotate,” she added. “There’s a family room on the third floor, but I’ll have to ask three of you to leave.”

“I’ll stay,” Mrs. Kavanagh announced. “John, you can take Shannon and Gerard for some breakfast. I’ll give you a call in a couple of hours.”

“Listen, I have to go,” I whispered, turning my attention back to Johnny, heart still hammering in my chest. “I’ll try and come back later before the bus leaves, okay?”

“No, no, no,” Johnny groaned, holding onto my hand with both of his. “You said you wouldn’t leave me.”

Oh god.

“Johnny, I know, but I have to go,” I whispered, flustered. “It’s family only.”

“She’s my wife,” he announced then, blowing my mind clean open.

“Jonathan Kavanagh,” his mother snapped. “Stop this right now! You’ll scare the girl.”

“What are ya talking about?” Johnny slurred. “I’m not scaring her. I love her.”

“Johnny, I’ll come back,” I coaxed, exhaling a trembling breath. “I promise I’ll come back, okay?”

I tried to pull my hand free from his, but he wouldn't let go. He was shaking his head and looking up at me with big, wide, high-as-a-kite eyes.

"I have to go," I repeated, feeling completely torn. "I'm so sorry."

"I'll come with you," he announced, and then proceed to use one hand to rip at his wires.

"Stop that," I ordered, capturing his rogue hand with my free one. "You'll hurt yourself."

"I want you," he groaned, pulling at my arms. "Just you."

At a loss, I glanced up at his parents, who were watching our little wrestling match.

Mr. Kavanagh simply shook his head and led a snickering Gibsie out of the room.

"I'll go," I promised Mrs. Kavanagh. "I just need to—" My words broke off when Johnny wrapped his arms around my waist and clung to me.

"You are a lizard," I muttered in despair, feeling his mother's eyes on my face.

"Take the lights away and stay with me, Shannon *like the river*."

"I'm so sorry about this," I strangled out as I tried and failed to free myself from his hold. "I'll just be a minute—"

"Stay with him."

My gaze snapped up. "Huh?"

"There's no point in agitating him," Mrs. Kavanagh stated quietly, gaze locked on her son, who was currently nuzzling my stomach. "If you feel comfortable staying with him, Shannon, then you can stay."

I didn't want to leave him. Not back in the changing room at Royce. And not now.

Not ever.

Nodding slowly, I whispered, "I'll take care of him."

"Okay, then." Mrs. Kavanagh sighed heavily. "I'll be back in a bit."

And then she turned around and left the room.

"You are in trouble with me," I told Johnny once the door had clicked shut, leaving us alone together. "When you're back to your senses, we're going to talk about what you just did."

"I don't care," he slurred groggily. "I got what I wanted."

"And what was that?" I asked. "To embarrass your mother?"

"You," he slurred. "I got you."

Oh god. My heart.

“Johnny, you’re saying strange things right now,” I murmured.

And you need to stop.

Because it hurts.

“Look at that face,” he whispered, staring up at me with a peculiar expression. “I’m gonna keep you.”

“Okay.” Relenting to his madness, I coaxed him to lie back on his pillow. “You can keep me.”

Sitting beside him, I leaned forward, rested an arm on one side of his head, and stroked his cheek with my free hand.

His hands were still wrapped around my waist, but not so tightly now.

“Close your eyes,” I told him softly. “I’ll be here when you wake up.”

“Tell me you love me,” he pleaded.

“Johnny—”

“Tell me.”

Inhaling a steadying breath, I whispered, “Johnny, I love you.”

“Thank fuck,” he groaned, exhaling loudly.

“You won’t remember this,” I added shakily. “But I will.”

Which was the only reason I was telling him my truth.

“I love your tits,” he informed me then.

“You haven’t seen them.”

He nodded solemnly. “I have.”

I shook my head. “No, you must be thinking about someone else.”

“I’m only ever thinking about you,” he replied. “Only you.”

My heart. My poor, poor heart.

I didn’t stand a chance with this boy.

“And your pussy.” He closed his eyes and groaned. “I saw that, too.”

Yes. Yes, he did.

Oh, thank god he didn’t say that in front of his parents…

“It’s mine.”

“What’s yours?” I asked.

“You.” He sighed and tightened his hold on me. “And your perfect little pussy.”

“Johnny,” I breathed. “You can’t say things like that.”

“Touch my dick.”

“No, Johnny, I’m not touching your dick.”

“Are you sure?”

I chuckled. “I’m sure.”

“But you will, right?” he asked, looking forlorn. “Someday?”

“Someday,” I whispered in his ear. “I promise.”

He smiled up at me with this adorable drunk expression.

“Gimme a kiss,” he purred.

Shaking my head, I leaned forward and pressed my lips to his.

“Don’t leave me,” he groaned then, face contorting in pain. “I’m no more good…but don’t go?”

“What?”

“I’m…broken.”

I shook my head. “You’re not broken.”

Johnny groaned as if he was in pain.

“No more…rugby,” he slurred and then shook his head.

“It doesn’t matter.”

He nodded solemnly. “It does.”

“Look at me—” I tilted his face to mine. “Johnny Kavanagh, open your eyes and look at me.”

With a great deal of effort, he did.

I waited several beats for him to focus on my face before I continued.

“You are worth so much more than rugby.” I kissed his lips because, quite frankly, I had an issue with inappropriate kissing when it came to this boy. “If you never picked up a rugby ball for the rest of your life, it wouldn’t matter to me.”

“I think I need you for keeps,” he slurred.

“I think I need you for keeps, too,” I confessed.

“You are so pretty,” he slurred. “That very first day. Boom.”

“Boom?” I giggled.

He nodded solemnly. “Boom.”

“Listen, I’m going to go and sit in the chair right next to your bed,” I coaxed him as I tried to untangle myself from his wires and slippery hands. “So you can get some sleep.”

Johnny shook his head and pulled me closer. “Sleep with me.”

“Johnny, you’re just after surgery,” I sighed. “You need to rest.”

“If this is love, then it’s you,” he replied, dragging me down to lie beside him.

“Huh?” I asked as I slid onto my side and tried my best not to poke at his legs.

“You,” he mumbled sleepily, dropping a heavy arm around my shoulders.

“Me what?” I whispered as I placed my hand on his stomach and snuggled into his side.

“You are love.” He sighed contently. “Stay with me.”

Always.

“I’ll stay with you,” I whispered, feeling more in this moment than I could handle.

“Who’s making you sad?” he asked then, voice slurred and sleepy. “Tell me, baby.”

“Nobody, Johnny.”

“You lie and it hurts my heart,” he groaned, tightening his hold on me. “All those marks. It hurts when I know someone’s hurting my Shannon.”

“Johnny—”

“Who’s hurting you, baby?” he slurred sleepily. He yawned loudly and then sighed. “I’ll fix it.”

“It’s a secret,” I breathed, feeling my body shake.

“I won’t tell,” he whispered.

Inhaling a trembling breath, I clenched my eyes shut and pressed my lips to his ear. “My father.”

I waited several beats for him to say something. He didn’t. When I opened my eyes and looked at his face, I realized why.

Johnny was asleep.

67
Plan B

JOHNNY

Everything hurt.

My balls. My legs. My dick. My head.

I felt like I had been mowed over by a freight train.

There was pressure on my chest. Something wasn't right. And I could smell coconuts?

And then I *remembered.*

It was over. All my hard work. All the years of relentless, grueling training sessions had been for nothing. Because my body quit on me.

And now I was broken.

Jerking awake, I snapped my eyes open, feeling panicked and close to the edge of a nervous breakdown. For a few moments, I stared at the ceiling, just absorbing the devastation washing through my heart like a tidal wave of destruction. Inhaling several deep breaths, I moved to sit up, only to flop back down when I noticed the small frame curled up on the bed beside me.

Holy shit.

"Shannon?"

"Hmm?"

"Shannon," I croaked out, nudging her with my hand. "Wake up."

Yawning quietly, she crept out from where she had been nestled in the crook of my arm.

"You're awake," she said, smiling down at me.

I nodded warily.

"You remember where you are?"

I nodded again.

"Do you remember the match?"

“I remember why *I’m* here,” I croaked out, feeling dry-mouthed and hoarse. “I don’t remember why *you’re* here.”

Shannon looked at me for a long moment, and then her eyes widened and she quickly scooted off the bed.

“You wanted me to stay with you,” she explained in a quiet tone, clasping her hands together.

I frowned. “I did?” I couldn’t remember. It was a haze.

Shannon nodded. “Yeah, I came to see you with Gibsie this morning… Well, it was like six o’ clock in the morning so I guess you could call it last night? I don’t know—”

“How long?” I interrupted her by asking.

I was feeling too damn desperate to listen to rambling.

Shannon stared blankly at me. “Huh?”

“How long am I out?” I bit out.

She checked her watch. “It’s eleven forty-five, so close to six hours.”

“No.” I shook my head and expelled a frustrated growl. “How long am I *out*?”

She shook her head. “I don’t understand.”

“How long am I out on injury!” I hissed, clenching the bedsheets as devastation checked into my heartbreak hotel.

“Johnny, it doesn’t matter—”

“It matters, Shannon,” I snapped, voice cracking. “It matters to *me*.”

She just stared at me with those big eyes full of fear, and concern, and sympathy.

I couldn’t deal. Not right now. I didn’t want her to see me break down.

I couldn’t cope with that.

“Can you pass me that, please?” I pointed to the chart hanging off the foot of my bed. “I need to see.”

She worried her lip, glancing at my chart nervously. “Johnny, maybe you should wait for a doctor—”

“I need to see the fucking chart,” I choked out. “I need to see for myself.”

Shannon flinched and I felt worse than ever.

“Please.” I exhaled a heavy sigh. “Pass me the chart.”

Without another word, she handed me the clipboard.

“Thank you.”

She dropped her head and sniffled.

Fuck.

Fuck!

"Can you go find my da?" I asked, desperately trying to wrangle in my emotions.

She looked up at me all lonesome and hurt. "If that's what you want?"

I bit back a groan and nodded. "That's what I want."

"W-what about your mam?"

"No, just my da," I warned her. "*Only* my da."

"Uh, okay," Shannon whispered, looking uncertainly toward the door.

I held my breath, desperate not to break down in front of her.

"I'll go?" she said, but it was more of a question.

I nodded stiffly, resisting the urge to beg her to stay and hold me and make promises neither of us could keep.

She couldn't fix this for me, and I was terrified of losing more than I already had. I knew she was fragile and I didn't want to scare her away. If she stayed in this room, that's exactly what I was going to end up doing. If I did that—if she saw the ugly side of me, the weakness in me—I would lose her, too.

I couldn't lose her, too.

With a hammering heart, I watched her open the door and pause in the doorway.

"Bye, Johnny," she whispered, glancing back at me one final time.

I swallowed deeply before strangling out the words, "Bye, Shannon."

I waited until the door closed behind her before ripping the covers off my body to check the damage.

Jesus Christ.

Dropping my head back on my pillow, I bit down on my fist and smothered my cry.

When my dad walked into the room thirty minutes later, he was alone.

"Morning, stud," he said with a smirk.

"Da," I choked out, tears streaming down my cheeks.

The minute Dad saw my expression, his smirk fell.

Placing his plastic cup on my nightstand, he sank down on the edge of my bed and pulled me into his arms.

"Johnny," he sighed. "Let it all out, son."

And it was right there that I cried like a fucking child on my father's shoulder.

"What am I looking at?" I choked out when words found me.

"Six weeks minimum," he told me with that honesty I respected him for.

"Dad, it's gone." I shook my head and resisted the urge to roar. "The summer campaign…the U20s…it's *over* for me!"

"Not gone," he assured me. "Slim, but not impossible."

"Slim," I strangled out, feeling my heart beat so hard I thought it might stop altogether. "Fuck."

"Don't you forget who you are." He stood up then and helped me to sit at the edge of my bed. "You are my son," he added, lowering my feet to the floor. "And *you* are a *fighter*."

I dropped my head. "I don't fucking feel like a fighter."

"You've been a fighter since the day you were born," he corrected, tipping my chin back up and forcing me to meet his blue-eyed gaze. "You've never let a thing get in the way of your goals, and you sure as hell are not going to let six weeks stop you."

"And if I don't make it?" I choked out, voicing my biggest fear. "If I'm not fit by then?"

"Then you don't make it," he replied simply.

I shook my head and released a pained sob. "Da, I can't cope—"

"If you *do not* make it this summer, then you *do not* make it this summer," he repeated. "You are still Johnny Kavanagh. You are still an honor student. You are still a good man. And you are still my best decision."

For the millionth time in my life, I found myself looking up at the man that raised me and thinking: *Will I ever be as strong as you?*

I watched my father as he pulled over a chair and set it down in front of me.

"Now," he said as he sat down and loosened his tie. "Let's get real, son."

Oh shit.

"Real?" I croaked out.

Dad nodded. "Say you don't make it onto the U20s in June—"

"Da, I can't—"

"Hear me out," he said calmly.

Glumly, I nodded.

“Say you don’t make it in June,” Dad continued to say, voicing my worst nightmare out loud. “It’s devastating. Your mother and I understand. You might not think we do, but we brought you into this world, and every single painful moment in your life that you endure, and every obstacle you stumble over, we’re there, Johnny. We’re right behind you, feeling everything. Your pain and frustration and fears. It’s all mirrored back to us. Your achievements are ours and your heartache is ours. Because you are all we have, Johnny. Just you. That’s it.”

Now I felt worse than when I woke up. “Da…”

“When you’re older and you have children of your own, a son of your own, you’ll understand what I mean,” he added, calm as ever. “But for now, you’re going to have to take my word for it.”

I nodded, feeling like a piece of shit and knowing full well what was coming next.

“What you did, Johnny?” Dad said. “The danger you put yourself in?” He shook his head and exhaled a shaky breath. “There are no words to comprehend how devastated we were to get that phone call last night.” He leaned forward in his seat and clasped his hands together. “To know that *our boy* was risking his health and his future like that, and that he had been for months.”

My shoulders slumped in shame. “I’m sorry, Da.”

“I don’t need an apology,” Dad replied without a hint of anger in his tone. “I need you to *understand*. To take a step back from this dream you’ve been chasing and realize that your life is already happening.”

“I just want it so bad, Da,” I confessed, biting down on my lip. “So fucking bad.”

“And I want it for you,” he told me. “I want you to chase your dreams, Johnny. I want you to make them come true. I want every single thing you want from life to happen for you. But I *need* you to do all that with a *steady head*.” He leaned back in his chair and stared at me for a long moment before speaking again. “Even the best fall down sometimes, son. What you do next—with clear, calculated, logical thought—is what will define you.”

Yeah. I got it. I heard him.

Exhaling a heavy sigh, I rubbed a hand over my face and asked, “So what’s the plan?”

Dad smirked.

I frowned at him. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

He tilted his head to one side, still smirking. “I’m just looking at my boy and feeling thankful to see the fire in his eyes again.”

I shrugged helplessly. “Was it gone?”

“Not for long,” he told me. “And the plan is recovery and bedrest. Seven to ten days.”

I exhaled a ragged breath. “Jesus, Da—”

“That’s the plan, son,” Dad said sternly. “From there, we’ll move forward with rehabilitation.”

“The Academy?” I swallowed deeply. “Did Coach Dennehy contact you?”

“They are furious with you,” Dad replied, not mincing his words. “Which is to be expected when the number-one-ranked center in the country almost ends his career before his eighteenth birthday.”

I groaned. “Christ, don’t say it like that.”

“The truth is always better than a lie,” he shot back with a knowing smile. “More painful, but much more beneficial in the long run.”

“You’re a lawyer,” I huffed. “You’re paid a fucking fortune to lie.”

“Not to you,” Dad replied with a grin. “You get my services free of charge and one hundred percent truthful.” Smirking, he added, “If you want someone to mollify you, then you should have this talk with your mother.”

“Yeah, well,” I mumbled. “You could soften the edges a bit, Da. This *stings*.”

“Stings will toughen you up,” he told me. “There’s a big bad world out there, son. It’s all sharp edges.”

“What about my Academy contract?” I dared to ask.

“Still very much in effect.”

I exhaled a huge sigh of relief.

“Don’t be surprised,” Dad mused. “You are brilliant. A careless, headstrong, suicidal idiot with a brilliant mind for rugby and the talent to take you to whatever level you wish to go to. They know this, Johnny. They won’t let you go.”

When he told me this, I knew it wasn’t bullshit. He wouldn’t bullshit me.

“Do you think I’ll make it, Da?” I asked then, staring at my father’s face. “Do you think I can do it?”

“Yes,” he replied without hesitation.

My heart fluttered.

“Really?”

My father nodded. “Yes, Johnny. *Really*.”

With those words, I felt a small root of hope shoot up inside of me.

I could pull this back from the edge. I could do it. My dad thought I could do it.

“But you are relieved of duties,” Dad added.

I sighed heavily. “Expected.”

“And Coach Dennehy will be having a heated conversation with you.”

I grimaced. “Also expected.”

“And you will need to pass three separate evaluations before you step foot on a pitch again, be it Academy, club, or school rugby,” he chimed. “And those feet are to stay firmly off the grass until May.”

“Lovely.” I ran a hand through my hair and sighed. “Jesus.”

“Don’t panic,” he said calmly. “You know the plan. It’s there. Right in front of you. Part of getting back on the squad is healing. Resting your body right now is as crucial as any other workout or rugby commitment.”

I got that.

“It just sucks,” I muttered.

“Look at it this way,” Dad offered with a smirk. “You’ll have unlimited time on your hands to spend with Gibsie.”

“Oh, Jesus.”

Dad laughed. “Who I presume will never let you live down last night.”

“Nope.” I grimaced. “He probably won’t.” I looked to him then, and asked, “So, how long am I going to be stuck in the hospital for?”

“A couple more days,” Dad replied. “We’ll take you home then, and you can get started on rehab.”

“You really believe I can turn this around, Da?”

Dad nodded. “If you start following the rules, then absolutely, you can turn this around.”

I shook my head again. “Why the fuck didn’t I talk to you months ago?”

“Because I’m a workaholic father who should have spent more time focusing on keeping my son out of danger, rather than on keeping other fathers’ sons out of prison,” he replied.

“Da, stop,” I warned. “It’s not your fault. Or Ma’s.”

“No, it’s yours,” he agreed, again stinging me with the truth. “But, you’re young and green and stubborn, and I’m supposed to be there to rein you in. I will be there, Johnny,” he added then. “More.”

“I don’t blame you for loving your work,” I replied. “I’m the same.”

He smirked. “I know you are. I’ve cleared my schedule for the rest of the Easter holidays.”

My brows shot up. “You’re coming home?”

“I am, son.”

“And Ma?”

My father laughed. “Oh, Johnny, if she had her way she’d put you back in a pram and push you around with her. She’s not going to leave you out of her sight.”

“Fuck.”

“You need to earn it back, son.”

“Trust?”

Dad nodded. “That’s right.”

“So, where is she?” I grumbled, thinking about how much crying I was going to face from my mother.

“She’ll be back in a bit,” Dad said. “She’s gone to get you some clothes.”

“And Gibsie?”

“He’s in the canteen,” he replied with a smile. “The girl behind the counter is after catching his eye.”

“I bet,” I muttered.

Horny fucker.

“Gibsie is staying with us until we take you home to Cork,” Dad said then. “And probably facing suspension when you return from Easter break.” Smirking, Dad added, “You should have heard what he called your coach when he came to the hospital earlier. That’s what took me so long to come back to you. Gerard refused point-blank to go back on the bus. Apparently, he broke out of the hotel to come see you in the early hours of this morning.

He’s in some serious trouble with your principal. I had to phone the school and his parents before Coach Mulcahy agreed to let him stay with us.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” I groaned. “Can’t take him anywhere.”

“He’s a loyal friend to you, Johnny,” Dad replied. “You’re lucky to have him.”

I knew that.

“And Shannon?” I croaked out, flinching at the memory of how horribly I had reacted toward her when I first came around. “Is she okay? Is she in the canteen with Gibs?” I swallowed deeply, feeling incredibly exposed in this moment. “Can you go get her for me, Da? I really need to talk to her.”

Dad sighed heavily. “Shannon’s gone home, Johnny.”

My heart sank.

“She left me,” I croaked out.

This was it. This was the start of it.

I wasn’t worth shit without rugby.

“No. She *stayed* with you,” Dad corrected. “When you were demented out of your head and anyone in their right mind would have run for the hills, that girl stayed right by your bedside, listening to you talk out of your arse.”

“Yeah, well, she’s gone now, isn’t she?” I muttered, feeling thoroughly fucking sorry for myself.

“When your back was to the wall last night, who sat here with you?”

I stared at him.

“Who held your hand, Johnny?”

“Dad—”

“Who waited for the ambulance with you?”

“Dad, stop–”

“Who came to check on you when you were at your worst?”

I looked at him.

Did he…?

“Yes, I’m well aware of what happened between you two in that changing room.” Dad smirked. “Your coach told me all about the *compromising position* he found you and Shannon in.”

“That fucking traitor,” I grumbled.

“He’s your teacher, Johnny. He has to report incidents of that nature. He doesn’t have a choice in the matter. It’s mandatory.”

“Her parents?”

“I would presume they are aware of the situation.”

I shook my head. “For fuck’s sake.”

He sighed heavily before adding, “I suspect she’s in quite a bit of trouble herself for sneaking over here.”

“Fuck.” I dropped my head in my hands and ignored the searing pain that shot up my legs. “Fuck, Da, I was a complete dick to her when I woke up.”

“Then fix it,” he replied calmly.

“You don’t get it,” I strangled out, feeling like the worst piece of shit on the planet. “I panicked and I reacted on her, but she’s fragile, Da. She’s so… And I’m so in—”

“Love with her?” Dad smirked. “Yes, we all know, Johnny. You shouted it from the rooftop last night.”

“Shite,” I groaned. “Was she freaked out?”

“Your mother certainly was.” Dad laughed. “When you told her Shannon would mother your children.”

“Jesus Christ,” I whimpered. “Why didn’t you stop me?”

“We couldn’t,” he replied. “You would only settle down for Shannon. You fell asleep in her arms.”

Ugh. Christ.

“I’m going to go get a coffee and check on that best friend of yours,” Dad announced as he rose from his chair. “But can you do me a favor? When your mother comes in later, can you put her nerves at ease?” Smirking, he added, “Some of the things you were ranting on about last night shook the poor woman.”

“I don’t remember a bleeding thing,” I groaned. “Everything’s all hazy.”

“You might not remember,” Dad chuckled as he walked over to the door and opened it. “But she’ll remember for the rest of her life.”

I waited until Dad had left the room before reaching for my phone.

My father.

My father.

Why the fuck was I hearing Shannon say those words? And why was my heart telling me it was vital?

Jesus, they must have knocked me out with some strong-ass Class A drugs.

Focus, Johnny. Remember.

I scrolled through my contacts with the intention of calling her to apologize, only to slump in dismay when I remembered that I didn't have her number. And even if I did, I couldn't call her. Because her *father* took her phone.

My father.

My father.

What was I missing here?

68
Frustrated Fears

SHANNON

I didn’t want to go home. But I knew I had to.

I didn’t want to get beaten. But I knew I would.

In a messed-up way, I accepted my fate. I knew there was no other way out. Therefore, I wasn’t surprised when the first thing that greeted me when I stepped through the front door on Saturday evening was my father’s fist.

The force of the blow knocked the air clean out of my lungs, and I dropped to the hall floor on my hands and knees.

“I knew it!” Dad snarled as he towered above me, bleary-eyed and stinking of whiskey. “I fucking knew you were whoring around,” he roared. “I told your mother and she wouldn’t believe me.”

I didn’t have a chance to respond or defend myself before he reached down and fisted my hair, dragging me further into the house.

“Get off me,” I screamed, clawing at his hand as it painfully dug into my scalp. “Stop!”

This is it. This is the day you die.

“You’re a little tramp,” my father snarled, not stopping until we were in the kitchen.

He literally dragged me to my feet, only to fling me away like a rag doll. My face hit the corner of the kitchen table with a thud and I collapsed on the floor, landing hard on the cold kitchen tiles.

“Your cunting school called!” Dad roared, his words slurring as he closed the space between us. “Told me what your teacher caught ya doing, you dirty little whore!”

“I didn’t do anything!” I screamed as hot tears pooled down my cheeks. “I’m bleeding,” I sobbed, clutching the side of my face as wetness trickled down my fingers.

“You’ll be bleeding a lot worse by the time I’m finished with you!” Dad roared in my face.

Grabbing my arm, he shook me so hard that my head snapped back and forth violently.

“You little tramp, riding in the fucking changing rooms.”

“I wasn’t!” I screamed, trying to pull free from his hold. “Get off me!”

“You want to end up like your mother?” he sneered. “Is that it?” He shook me harder. “You want to be humped with a baby at sixteen?”

“Get off her!” a voice cried out.

My eyes landed on my eleven-year-old brother standing in the doorway and my heart sank.

“No, Tadhg,” I strangled out. “Go back upstairs.”

“Get the fuck out, boy,” Dad barked, releasing me. “If you know what’s good for ya.”

“Leave my sister alone,” Tadhg growled, taking a step into the kitchen.

“Your sister’s a cunt,” Dad slurred, focusing his attention on my little brother. “Are you going to defend a cunt, boy?”

“Ollie,” Tadhg called out bravely. “Get help.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed my nine-year-old brother cowering in the hallway with three-year-old Sean tucked under his arm. All three boys were reincarnations of our father, with sandy blond hair and big brown eyes, and all three boys in this moment were staring at our father in horror.

“Get your holes up that stairs before I redden them,” Dad snarled.

Sean scrambled for the staircase and Ollie dove for the front door. But Tadhg stayed where he was.

“You can’t do that to her,” he challenged, glaring at our father with his chin jutted out. “Joey says we don’t hit *girls*.”

Shaking, I scrambled to my feet and hurried to intercept Tadhg before our father could.

“Go next door to Fran and phone Joey,” I pleaded, as I tried to shove him out of the kitchen and out of harm’s way. Even though he was only eleven, he was already taller and stronger than me. But he was my little brother and I would protect him with my life. “Please, Tadhg,” I begged him. “Just *go*.”

Tadhg wouldn’t budge.

“I’ll protect you,” he told me before turning to face our father.

Oh god, no…

“I’m not afraid of you!” he hissed, taking a protective stance in front of me. “You think you’re all tough, but you’re nothing but an alcoholic scumbag who goes around hitting girls!”

Our father took a menacing step closer and my heart seized with dread.

Out of sheer panic, I threw my arms around my little brother and braced myself for impact. The blow came between the middle of my shoulder blades, taking with it the air from my lungs and my legs from beneath me. Crumpling to the floor, I curled up in the smallest ball I could as my father’s boot connected with my back over and over.

“Stop!” Tadhg was screaming, beating his fists against our father’s back. “You’re killing her.”

“Tadhg, run…” Gasping for air, I tried to scramble to my feet, but Dad caught my ponytail and dragged me clean off the ground.

“You’re a little fucking liar,” he snarled seconds before his fist connected with my face. “A dirty whore.”

“Shannon!” my little brother screamed, flailing helplessly. “Shannon!”

“I’m sorry,” I strangled out, coughing when blood trickled down the back of my throat. “Please, stop—”

Another punch to my face had my teeth rattling so hard in my mouth that my legs gave out once more and I collapsed on the floor, feeling a chunk of my hair rip from my scalp.

“Leave her alone,” Tadhg sobbed, throwing his arms around my body. “Please don’t hurt her.”

I heard my little brother’s scream just as he was dragged away from me.

“Dad,” I gasped, desperately trying to drag air into my lungs. “Dad, please just—”

His boot connected with my face and I lost focus. My head drooped. My eyes rolled back.

He’s going to finish you off. It’s over.

Shaking, I curled up as small as I could and clenched my eyes shut.

You’re back in that room with Johnny. He’s telling you he loves you.

You’re okay.

Kick after kick after kick.

Spluttering and wheezing, I desperately tried to cling to the image of his face. It was fading out.

My body wasn't hurting as much. I wasn't feeling the kicks or the blows now. I couldn't hear the screams of my brothers.

Everything was warm. Warm and light.

You're dying.

Just close your eyes and give in. Close your eyes, Shannon, and it'll all be over soon…

"He's coming!" I heard my other little brother Ollie scream as the sound of the front door slamming filled my ears. "Get off my sister!"

Using every ounce of energy left inside of my body, I forced myself to cover my head with my hands and protect myself from my father's blows.

Stay awake.

It's not over yet.

You are not going to die in this house.

Not today.

I could hear voices then: both Mam's and Joey's.

Joey. I could hear *Joey*. He was *here.*

And suddenly the pain was gone. The kicking stopped.

The feel of two pairs of hands wrapping around my body filled my senses—what was left of them—and I opened my eyes to the sight of my little brothers attempting to protect my body with theirs.

Tadhg was bleeding. At least, I thought he was. His cheek was smeared in bright-red blood.

Maybe it was my blood. I couldn't tell anymore.

Gasping for breath, I struggled to drag air into my lungs, as my vision blurred for several beats before finally coming into focus.

My mother was standing in the middle of the kitchen.

My father had retreated several feet away from me, staring cautiously at the door.

Mam took one look at Ollie, Tadhg, and me huddling together on the floor and burst into tears.

Joey, who was frozen in the doorway, had a different reaction. Dropping his gear bag on the floor, he lunged for Dad, spearing him to the floor.

“You fucking bastard,” he snarled as he buried his fists in our father’s face. “You dirty fucking animal!”

Rearing back, he punched our father and then jumped to his feet.

“Hit me,” he demanded, dragging Dad off the ground. “Come on, asshole.” Shoving his chest, he gestured for Dad to punch him. “Hit someone your own fucking size.”

“Joey!” Mam cried out. “Please don’t—”

“Shut the fuck up!” Joey roared back at her. “You are the most pathetic excuse for a mother that ever walked the earth.”

“You little shit.” Dad swung out with his fist and caught my brother’s cheek. “I’ll put manners on you yet, boy!”

“Did you see that?” Joey demanded, directing his question at Mam. “Did you see him hit me?” Dodging another punch from our father, Joey reared back and leveled our father with a fist to the face. “Can’t you see what he’s doing to your *children*?”

Blood sprayed everywhere.

Dad staggered backwards, collapsing on the floor, and Joey dove on top of him.

“Joey,” I strangled out, clutching at my chest, feeling like my breastbone was about to collapse inside of my body. “Stop! He’s not worth going to prison over.”

Joey didn’t stop. He just kept swinging.

“Get off him,” Mam was screaming. “Joey, stop—you’re going to kill him!”

“Good!” Joey roared as he straddled our father and continued to hit him.

His fists were moving so fast I could hardly keep focus.

“Joey…” Spitting out a mouthful of blood, I scrambled onto my hands and knees and dragged my broken body over to my brother, desperate to save him from doing something he couldn’t take back. “You promised,” I slurred as I weakly tried to pull at his arm. Feeling woozy, I shook my head and tried again, forcing my hands to comply as I clutched his forearm. “You promised you’d never leave me.”

My words seemed to register with my brother because he exhaled a defeated sigh and leaned back.

Nodding stiffly, Joey let his arms drop to his sides and climbed off Dad.

“Teddy,” Mam sobbed, shaking her head. Clutching her stomach, she knelt alongside our father. “Oh god, Teddy, what have you done?”

Numb, I scrambled back to where Ollie was sitting with his back pressed to the fridge, crying uncontrollably. Tadhg, on the other hand, was staring at our father with a terrifying look on his face.

I knew the look. It was same look Joey wore.

“It’s okay,” I whispered, trying and failing miserably to comfort Ollie. “Shh, it’s okay.”

“I thought you were going to die,” he sobbed, throwing his arms around me, and causing me to flinch in pain.

“Ollie,” Joey barked, turning back to face us. “Go upstairs and get Sean.”

“Why?” our little brother sniffled.

“Because we are leaving!” Joey stated sharply. “We are not staying in a house with that piece of shit a day longer.”

Without another word, Ollie scooted out of my arms and bolted for the stairs.

“Tadhg,” Joey said, grimacing when he noticed the look of hatred on our baby brother’s face. “Go with Ollie.”

“But I—”

“Please,” Joey snapped, running a hand through his blond hair and streaking the tendrils red. “Go upstairs and pack your bags, kid.”

Tadhg gave Joey a hard look before finally nodding and stalking out of the room.

Turning his attention to me, Joey walked right over to where I was slumped on the floor and dropped to his knees beside me.

“You’re okay,” he whispered in my ear, pulling me into his arms. “I’m here… I’m here, Shan.”

Numb to the bone, I just sat there, slumped against his big body, my hands hanging limply at my sides, while my brother tried to comfort me.

My entire focus was on our parents.

“You’re bleeding,” Mam choked out as she dabbed at Dad’s face with the sleeve of her jumper. “Oh god, Teddy.”

Her words caused Joey’s entire frame to tense.

“Are you fucking blind?” he roared.

Swinging around to face them, he gently brushed my hair off my face and pointed to me.

“*She* is bleeding,” Joey snarled, pointing to my face. “Shannon. Your daughter!”

“Shannon,” Mam wept as she cringed in horror. “Oh, baby, your face.”

I didn’t care what I looked like anymore. It didn’t matter. Because my mother had just ended my world.

She went to him.

He beat us. Terrorized us. Tortured us.

And she went to *him*. She chose *him*.

Our own mother.

“Don’t you dare ‘oh, baby’ her,” Joey snarled as he climbed to his feet and helped me up. With his arm wrapped around my shoulders, he walked me over to the table and lowered me onto a chair. “You’re okay,” he kept whispering, and I wasn’t sure if he was telling me this or himself. “You’re okay. I’m here. I’m right here, Shan.”

Grabbing a tea towel off the draining board, Joey returned to me and pressed it to the side of my face while I just sat there, staring across the room at the people who had brought us into the world.

“Shannon,” Dad slurred, shaking his head as if he was waking up from a deep sleep. “I didn’t mean to—”

“Don’t fucking speak to her, creep!” Joey roared, taking a menacing step toward him. “I will kill you,” he seethed, tone deathly cold and terrifyingly sincere. “Do you hear me? I will slit your fucking throat if you so much as *look* at my sister again.”

Ollie, Tadhg, and Sean all hurried into the kitchen then with backpacks on their backs. All three of them went straight to Joey. Because he was our protector. He was the reason we were all in one piece. He was our hero.

“Now, here’s how this is going to go,” Joey growled, standing in front of the four us, shielding us from our parents. “Either you”—he pointed to our mother—“find some maternal instinct deep inside that cold fucking heart of yours and put that bastard out for good, or I’m taking these kids out of this house and they are never coming back.”

“Joey,” Mam sobbed. “I’m so sorry—”

“Don’t apologize,” my brother spat out. “Protect your children and put him *out*.”

“Joey, I—”

“Make a choice, Mam,” Joey snarled as he glared down at our mother. “Him or us?”

Song Moments

Shannon as her feelings deepen for Johnny: The Chainsmokers—“Don’t Let Me Down”
Johnny as his feelings deepen for Shannon: Dean Lewis—“Lose My Mind”
Shannon and Johnny in the changing room in Dublin: James Last —“Here Comes the Sun”
In Johnny’s bedroom, when Shannon is crying: Imaginary Future —“Here Comes the Sun”
Joey’s feelings for Aoife: Walking on Cars—“Flying High Falling Low”
Gibsie and Johnny in most of their scenes: Chester See and Ryan Higa —“Bromance”
Joey’s altercation with his father: The Red Jumpsuit Apparatus—“Face Down”
Johnny losing the run of himself with Shannon: Jamie Lawson—“Ahead of Myself”
Johnny when he’s realizing he’s falling in love with Shannon: The Killers—“Mr. Brightside”
When Shannon goes up to his room for the first time: The Fray—“Look after You”
Johnny after his surgery with his father: X Ambassadors—“Unsteady”
Shannon in the final scene: Raign—“Knocking on Heaven’s Door”

Playlist for Shannon

Adele—“River Lea”
Boy & Bear—“Fall at Your Feet”
Joshua Radin—“Here Comes the Sun”
Astroline—“Close My Eyes”
Adele—“One and Only”
Sia—“Breathe Me”
Raign—“Knocking on Heaven’s Door”
Natalie Merchant—“My Skin”
Carly Rae Jepson—“I Really Like You”
Nora Jones—“Come Away with Me”
The Fray—“You Found Me”
Imelda May—“Johnny Got a Boom Boom”
Jessica Simpson—“With You”
Robyn—“Dancing on My Own”
Natasha Bedingfield—“Wild Horses”
B.o.B. with Hayley Williams—“Airplanes”
Paramore—“The Only Exception”
Lady Gaga—“Paparazzi”
Pink—“Family Portrait”
Madonna—“Crazy for You”
The Corrs—“Runaway”
Miley Cyrus—“Malibu”
Hunter Hayes—“Invisible”
Camilla Cabello—“Consequences”
Taylor Swift—“Love Story”
Anne-Marie—“2002”
Celine Dion—“A New Day Has Come”
The Chainsmokers—“Don’t Let Me Down”
Kate Nash—“Nicest Thing”

Haley Reinhart—“Can’t Help Falling in Love”
Rachel Platten—“Stand by You”
Anne-Marie—“Alarm”
Paramore—“Still into You”
Katrina and the Waves—“Walking on Sunshine”
Anna Nalick—“Breathe (2 AM)”

Playlist for Johnny

The Coronas—“Give Me a Minute”
Picture This—“95”
Lewis Capaldi—“Bruises”
Kid Rock—“First Kiss”
Picture This—“Jane”
Troye Sivan—“YOUTH” (Acoustic)
John Mayer—“Daughters”
Eminem—“Superman” (Remix)
Gym Class Heroes—“Cupid’s Chokehold”
Eagle-Eye Cherry—“Save Tonight”
Bend Sinister—“Shannon”
Gym Class Heroes—“Stereo Hearts”
MAX—“I’ll Come Back for You”
Ed Sheeran—“Give Me Love”
You Me at Six—“Take on the World”
Chuck Berry—“Johnny B. Goode”
Ritchie Valens—“We Belong Together”
Reckless Kelly—“Wicked Twisted Road”
Nelly and Tim McGraw—“Over and Over Again”
Jamie Lawson—“Ahead of Myself”
Jason Derulo—“Trumpets”
Jamie Lawson—“A Little Mercy”
A1—“Same Old Brand-New You”
Jamie Lawson—“Can’t See Straight”
Making April—“Paparazzi”
Jamie Lawson—“Don’t Let Me Let You Go”
Jamie Lawson—“In Our Own Worlds”
Jamie Lawson—“I’m Gonna Love You”
Westlife—“Bop Bop Baby”

David Gray—“This Year’s Love”
New Hollow—“She Ain’t You”
Nelly Furtado—“Try” (Douglas George cover)
Imagine Dragons—“Thunder”
Scouting for Girls—“Heartbeat”
Picture This—“You & I”
Scouting for Girls—“Marry Me”
Placebo—“Every You Every Me”
Boyzone—“Love Me for a Reason”
The Script—“Nothing”
Every Avenue—“Only Place I Call Home”
Justin Timberlake—“Mirrors”
Blake Shelton—“Sangria”

About the Author

Chloe Walsh is the bestselling author of the Boys of Tommen series, which exploded in popularity. She has been writing and publishing new adult and adult contemporary romance for a decade. Her books have been translated into multiple languages. Animal lover, music addict, TV junkie, Chloe loves spending time with her family and is a passionate advocate for mental health awareness. Chloe lives in Cork, Ireland, with her family.

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http://eepurl.com/dPzXM1

HE WANTS TO SAVE HER.
SHE WANTS TO HIDE.
SHE'S DAMAGED. HE'S DETERMINED.
FATE BROUGHT THEM TOGETHER.
LOVE BINDS THEM.

Johnny Kavanagh has everything going for him. On the rugby pitch, he's a force to be reckoned with, even plagued with a hidden injury. Everyone knows he's heading straight for the top—but that means there's no room for mistakes or distractions. Not even the shy new girl at Tommen College, the one with the sad eyes and concealed bruises. He needs to stay focused, keep his cool, and not let anything get in the way of the bigger picture.

Except before he knows it, this lonely girl has become his only picture.

Life has never been easy for Shannon Lynch. Bullied and tortured, she arrives at Tommen College midway through the school year praying for a fresh start and desperate to shake off the demons that plague her. But when she meets the notorious Johnny Kavanagh on her first day, her plans to keep a low profile are at serious risk. As they fall into a complicated friendship and grapple with their undeniable chemistry, hidden pain and complicated secrets threaten to be their undoing—but Johnny won't give up on Shannon.

No matter what it might cost them both.

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