

Chapter 17

GANNON

Liam leans back against the fridge, a wicked grin spreading across his face. “So, I hear you have a mighty fine butcher in town,” he taunts, causing Mrs. Daley’s hand to freeze midair as she goes to take a sip from her cup. I observe her closely, noticing the sudden gulp that betrays her nerves.

“Now that looks like a guilty face, now doesn’t it, brother?” Liam says, nudging me.

“Very guilty. Do you have something to confess, love? Want to get it off your chest before you meet your maker?” Liam taunts.

Caught off guard by Liam’s comment, Mrs. Daley stammers.

“What do you mean?” she says, and I click my tongue.

Her fake confusion only fuels our amusement.

I decide to play along, my voice dripping with phony innocence. “Oh, we were just hoping for a friendly chat, a little slaughter, but if you insist on being difficult, I suppose a little practice won’t hurt.” I extend my hand toward Liam.

Liam, always prepared, retrieves a rolled-up leather pouch from the pocket of his jacket and hands it to me. I unravel it on the wooden bench, revealing an array of gleaming blades. With deliberate movements, I pick up each knife, showing them to Mrs. Daley. The sweat glistens on her forehead as her eyes dart anxiously between Liam and me. Liam’s sadistic smile grows wider, and I turn my attention back to Mrs. Daley.

“Now, which one shall we use?” I inquire calmly. She shakes her head vehemently, clutching her mug tightly in her trembling hands. Liam takes the opportunity to snatch the cup from her grasp.

“Come on now, no need to be coy,” Liam sneers. “Confess your sins.”

“I... I never... It was just that one time... I had to feed the children, funds were low,” Mrs. Daley stammers, her words tumbling out in a rush of desperation. “She probably doesn’t even remember...”

With a cold smile, I tighten my grip on the boning knife. I twirl it between my fingers, relishing in the weight and balance of the blade. Slowly, I move closer to Mrs. Daley, the sound of her racing heartbeat filling the room. The blood from her injured hand pools at her feet, a

stark reminder of the power we hold over her. With deliberate precision, I place the back of the blade against her cheek, tracing a chilling path down to her chin. Tilting her head up to meet my gaze, I hold her captive with my cold, gray eyes.

“Name or the ear goes first, then the toes, then I will de-glove your hand,” I tell her calmly, my voice laced with a dangerous edge. I have every intention of following through with my threats if she refuses to comply. The horror in her eyes tells me she knows this, too.

“Doyle Mathews,” she blurts out, her voice tinged with fear.

“And his address?” I press, my grip on the knife tightening ever so slightly.

“3 Lincoln Way,” she answers, her voice barely above a whisper.

“Any wife or children we should be aware of?” I continue, but she shakes her head, tears welling in her eyes.

“Figures a pig like that would have no family,” Liam sneers, his contempt evident in his tone.

“Go check it out and bring him back,” I command Liam. With a nod, he swiftly exits the room. When he leaves, I clean up the blood on the floor and wrap Mrs. Daley’s hand in case any of the children wake up.

Twenty minutes pass before the shrill ring of my phone pierces the silence. Pulling it from my pocket, I answer the call just as a little girl descends the stairs, rubbing her sleepy eyes. Hastily grabbing a tea towel, I discreetly cover Mrs. Daley's wrapped hand.

"Yep," I answer the call, watching the child as she walks down the stairs. She peers up, hearing my voice, and I wave to her before kicking the wheelchair. Mrs. Daley smiles fakery and waves to her, earning a strange look from the child, who waves briefly as she steps off the last step.

"I've got him, and I'm on my way back," Liam's voice crackles through the phone.

"The trunk?" I inquire, anticipation coursing through my veins.

"Nope, he showed me to his store. He's tied up in the cold room," Liam chuckles wickedly.

"Even better," I respond, ending the call. Now it is time to focus on the little girl before me.

"What's your name?" I ask gently, bending down to her level. She hesitates for a moment before answering.

"Kimmy, sir," she replies, her voice filled with a mixture of shyness and curiosity. I scoop her up into my arms, holding her securely.

“Are you hungry, Kimmy? What do you usually have for breakfast?” I inquire, noting the furrow in her brows and the rumble of her empty stomach.

“We haven’t had breakfast since Abbie and Ivy left, sir. You came with the king?” she whispers into my ear, her innocent question catching me off guard. I nod solemnly, glancing at Mrs. Daley, who lowers her head in shame. A low growl escapes my throat as I redirect my attention to Kimmy. Her hair resembles a tangled haystack atop her head, some strands matted and neglected for far too long.

“What did they usually make for breakfast?” I probe gently, hoping to ease the hunger that gnaws at her small frame, that’s if any food is in this place, the cupboards looked pretty bare.

“Pancakes, but Mrs. Daley can’t get the flour from the basement. The bag is too heavy for us to lift, we did try, though,” Kimmy explains.

“Very well, I’ll fetch the flour. You go and do whatever it is you kids do in the morning,” I instruct, gently setting her back on her feet.

“Can we watch cartoons?” she asks before her eyes go to Mrs. Daley, who purses her lips.

“Yep, and make sure you turn the volume all the way up,” I tell her, just as a few more kids start rushing down.

Kimmy scampers off to join the other children. More little ones descend the stairs, their excited chatter filling the air when Kimmy tells them they are having breakfast this morning.

Within minutes, the room buzzes with activity as I make my way down to the basement. The sight that greets me is chaotic and an utter mess. Flour is spilled haphazardly across the floor, evidence of their futile attempts to scoop it out with cups. Shaking my head at their efforts, I grab a fresh, fifty-pound bag of flour and climb the steps.

Liam reenters just as I drop the bag onto the counter, his eyes widening at the sight. “What’s with the flour? Planning to batter the old hag?” he jests, a mischievous glint in his eyes.

A snort escapes me before I reply, “No, Liam, the kids are hungry.” Turning my attention back to Mrs. Daley, I ask, “When does your staff usually arrive?”

“Katrina comes in at lunch,” she responds hesitantly.

“Call her in early,” I instruct firmly. Liam hands her his phone, and she dials the number obediently. As she carries out our orders, Liam takes it upon himself to count the number of heads in the room, determining how many pancakes would be needed.

“Who wants pancakes?” I hear him call out and all the kids cheer.

“Alright, alright, settle down. Uncle Liam is going to make them, so settle down and watch your dancing puppet show,” I hear him say. Then, a little boy stumbles down the stairs, a tattered blanket trailing behind him.

“One-hundred and three, fuck me, that’s a lot of pancakes,” Liam says, coming back in. Liam’s gaze shifts to him, and I catch a whiff of something familiar in the air. A rogue. Mrs. Daley growls softly before realizing who stands beside her. She flinches away, cowering in fear, and the young boy mirrors her reaction, whimpering as he tries to escape back up the stairs. Acting instinctively, I reach out and grab the back of his pants, plucking him off the steps. He can’t have been more than three years old, dressed in worn-out pajama pants and no shirt. Goosebumps cover his exposed skin, and he clings desperately to his dirt-stained blanket.