

Chapter 18

GANNON

The rogue boy's little arm has a deep, purplish bruise, causing him to wail in fear as I take hold of him, making me wonder if it is fresh since my grip appears to hurt him. "Shh, shh. What's your name?" I whisper, attempting to soothe him. His gaze shifts anxiously toward Mrs. Daley, who sits nearby, emanating an air of intimidation directed at the child. The boy appears fragile, his emaciated frame attesting to a lack of proper care. Hollow cheeks and sunken eyes accentuated his desolate countenance, while his matted, knotted black curls cascaded down his shoulders.

"He doesn't speak," a young girl named Kimmy interjects, emerging from the dimly lit room in her tattered pajamas. She seems to be one of the older children here, a fact that strikes me as peculiar because where are the older children?

However, seeing a rogue child is more bizarre, and I have a feeling it is just for show in case the king stops by. One thing is apparent—none of these children are cared for properly, and that really grinds my gears.

“Is he unable to speak, or does he not know how?” I inquire, my gaze shifting between Kimmy and Mrs. Daley. Kimmy shrugs, her eyes darting nervously toward Mrs. Daley. It is evident she fears the woman.

“Mrs. Daley is leaving today; she’s retiring. You can speak freely now; she won’t harm you,” I reassure Kimmy. Biting her lip, she hesitates before scratching at the tangled strands of her hair.

“I overheard Mrs. Daley arguing with Katrina. Katrina wanted to take him and his brother, but Mrs. Daley refused,” Kimmy divulges.

“He has a brother?” I ask with surprise.

“Had; we haven’t seen him in two days. He bit Mrs. Daley when she struck Oliver,” Kimmy explains, pointing toward the boy in my arms.

“His name is Oliver?” I confirm receiving a nod from Kimmy.

“And the brother’s name?”

“Logan, sir,” she replies.

“What about Katrina? Does she harm you?” I press further. Kimmy shakes her head, her gaze darting nervously toward Mrs. Daley, who stares vacantly out of the window above the sink. She knows she has made a grave mistake, and her death now will be painful.

“Mrs. Daley had the butcher hurt Katrina for defending them. He broke her arm, but she’s okay now,” Kimmy reveals, her voice laced with fear.

“Kimmy, could you find some clothes and socks for Oliver?” I request, to which she nods, extending her arms to take him. He timidly moves toward her, and she leads him upstairs while I maneuver Mrs. Daley’s wheelchair with my foot.

“Where is his brother?” I demand, my tone sharp as I confront the withered old hag.

“The kid is nothing but trouble; he bit me like a savage,” she sneers defiantly.

“Where is the boy?” I snarl, my patience waning. Liam glares at her, his knife twirling ominously between his fingers as a silent warning.

“You better answer him. We have no tolerance for child abusers, and you know that,” Liam cautions, causing Mrs. Daley to gulp audibly.

“He’s in the laundry room outside,” she finally admits reluctantly. Fueled by anger, I storm outside searching for the room, eventually discovering it hidden behind the shed. The sound of whimpering grows louder as I approach the wooden door. Pushing it open, my eyes fall upon another small boy huddled inside a cage beneath a bench next to the washer. A surge of fury courses through me as I crouch down. He appears to be around the same age as Kimmy, his frail form shivering

from the cold, covered with numerous bruises and signs of mistreatment.

“Did Mrs. Daley do this to you?” I ask gently, not wanting to scare him further. The boy shakes his head, retreating to the back of the cage.

“I won’t harm you; I am here to help,” I reassure him.

“My brother, please help my brother,” he whimpers, flinching away as I break the front door of his cage open. Taking a step closer, I extend my hand toward him.

“Who put you in here? Was it Katrina? I promise I won’t let them harm you,” I say, removing my jacket and draping it around his emaciated frame. He hesitates for a moment before finally placing his hand in mine, allowing me to pull him out of the cramped enclosure.

“How old are you?” I ask softly.

“Eight, sir,” he replies meekly. Nodding in understanding, I notice his bare feet and swiftly scoop him up into my arms.

“So was it Katrina?”

“No, she tried to help me.”

“Who brought you out here, then? Daley couldn’t have. She wouldn’t have got down the back steps.”

“The Butcher did, sir,” he says as he stares at me, his entire body trembling.

“Come on, you and your brother are coming home with me; I won’t hurt you, but I need you to come inside where it is warm; Liam is inside. You will like Liam; he is making pancakes,” I tell him.

I carry him inside before stepping into the kitchen.

“Where’s Daley?” I inquire, noting her absence and Liam turns to face me, his eyes take in the boy, but he says nothing about his state.

“She went to get more flour,” Liam informs me, offering a sly wink.

I smirk, taking Logan to the living room, where I wrap him in the warmth of a blanket retrieved from the couch. Returning outside, I gather firewood and stoke all the fireplaces, trying to get some heat flowing throughout the space. The aroma of pancakes wafts through the air. Just as I finish setting up the living room fireplace, a woman who must be Katrina walks in, her presence announced by a sniff of the air. She glances at me nervously, her gaze fixating on my face.

“Who are you?” she inquires, her voice tinged with apprehension. Catching a whiff of her fear, I glance at her.

“I’m Gannon. Liam is out there. I assume you’re Katrina?” I respond.

She nods in confirmation as I set the fire poker down.

“Where’s Mrs. Daley?” she asks nervously.

“In the basement, getting flour for the pancakes,” I inform her, prompting a flicker of concern to cross her features. She opens her mouth to speak, but abruptly halts upon spotting Logan by the fire, causing her eyes to widen with surprise. Rushing toward him, she attempts to grab both him and Oliver. Instinctively, I reach out and grasp her arm.

“I won’t harm them; I’m not like Daley,” she assures me firmly, I release my grip. She hurriedly tends to the boys. Letting out a sigh, I make my way toward the door.

“Assist Liam in feeding the children; consider yourself promoted to headmistress,” I instruct Katrina, receiving a nod of acknowledgment from her. As I stride toward the kitchen, the anguished groans and cries emanating from the basement grow louder.

“Do you need any help?” Liam offers, his body covered in a dusting of flour and pancake batter covering his hands.

“Nope,” I reply curtly, seizing the knives from the counter before swinging open the basement door. The sound of the radio suddenly fills the kitchen as Liam switches it on, music blaring from its speakers.

Descending the stairs, I discover Mrs. Daley sprawled on the ground, desperately attempting to crawl away. Her legs tangled in the wheelchair, she claws at the floor in a futile attempt to escape.

“Change of plans. I want to hear you scream,” I proclaim, my voice dripping with venom. Reaching down, I seize her hair and yanking her head back. “And trust me, you will scream,” I snarl, relishing the fear in her gaze.