Chapter 1

As I shuffled along the queue to the check-in desk with Niamh and Sinead, I shifted self-consciously again at the sensation of eyes boring into the back of my head.

A quick glance over my shoulder confirmed that yes, Mam and Dad were still staring at me with watery eyes and forlorn expressions from where they stood beside Niamh's parents and Sinead's mam, Betty. Fionn was standing off to the side with a severe scowl on his face as he tapped away on his phone.

Today we were finally heading off on our big adventure. I should probably be grateful they were here to say their goodbyes since my impromptu decision to hot tail it out of Ireland had left them all a little stunned.

When I'd decided only a few weeks ago that I was leaving with Sinead when she booked her one-way ticket to Vietnam, it wasn't exactly a snap decision. I had agonised about the idea of going with her for months as we navigated our final year of college. I might not have been too forthcoming with everyone else about that little titbit of information.

After Mam's inevitable freakout, where her screeches had probably ricocheted all the way from West Cork as far as Dublin, she'd eventually calmed down and gotten on board with the whole idea of me leaving and doing some travelling.

Dad's calming presence had a lot to do with that, and I was so grateful for how supportive he'd been. He had unfortunately been very on board with Mam's insistence that I complete a week-long online course in travelling safely that some yoohaw had been flogging online. His scare tactics had caught Mam hook, line, and sinker during one of her relentless Facebook sessions.

I'd agreed to dedicate ten hours (I did not have) to some bald old ex-marine spouting off all the techniques I'd need to escape a sex trafficking ring, just to give the two of them a sense of reassurance. Even in the car on the drive up, she'd peppered me with questions on what I'd do if I was kidnapped, somehow anticipating I'd turned into Liam Neeson from my online instruction.

As we finally made it to the top of the queue and the flight attendant called next, Sinead charged forward, her binder holding all her itemised itinerary as well as her travel documents clutched under her arm. Niamh and I quickly followed, and from the furtive glances she was throwing at her own parents, I knew she was just as keen to get the goodbyes over with as I was.

Sinead made quick work of check-in while we dumbly handed over our passports after the cheeky bitch clicked her fingers in our face. She was lucky I was too distracted to tell her I'd

break her fingers if she did it again. Before we knew it, we were once again standing in front of our families.

Mam's eyes watered instantly as she pulled me into a bone-crushing hug, whispering all the things I was to be careful of. These ranged from men in general to quiet streets to the bubonic plague. When she finally let me go, I heaved a sigh of relief before my breath caught in my throat as Fionn towered over me.

It had been even harder to tell him that I was leaving than the parentals. Initially, he hadn't spoken to me for a few days after I'd broken the news about my new adventure, and I couldn't say I blamed him for it. Since our older brother Shea's death five months ago, we'd been figuring out how to adapt to the world without him together. And now I was abandoning him. I knew he felt betrayed, and guilt clawed me alive for leaving him to face this alone, but that was one of the main reasons I needed to leave. So I stopped basing my decisions on how they made everyone else feel and started basing them on how they made me feel. The weeks and months after Shea's death had taught me that, since I'd been so busy prioritising everyone else's grief, it had left me empty inside when it came to dealing with myself.

It was like the flight attendants said in the safety demonstrations: you had to put your own oxygen mask on first before helping anyone else. Leaving was my oxygen mask. With a face like stone, Fionn pulled me into a monster hug, tucking my head under his chin.

"I can't believe you're leaving me," he murmured into my hair.

I swallowed past the rock that had formed in my throat.

"I know, I'm sorry. But I have to do this," I whispered, squeezing my eyes shut as I clung to his back.

"You don't have to do anything, Rosie," he growled, then let out a sigh. "But I get it. Please, Róisín… just don't get murdered over there."

I frowned where I was positioned with my face squished against his chest, wondering if there was any point in protesting the Rosie nickname that was sticking to me like glue lately. Ever since Shea had christened me Rosie as a baby, being unable to say Róisín when I came home from the hospital, it had been an endearing nickname used by my immediate family because they knew I fucking hated it.

Heaving a sigh at the futility of reprimanding him, I bit down on my annoyance at his plea. I wasn't sure what it was about me that screamed victim, but I must have been subliminally communicating that to my family based on all the warnings they'd delivered.

When Fionn finally released me, Dad quickly grabbed my shoulders and spun me to face him, holding me back as his eyes gobbled up every inch of my face.

"Have you enough money to keep you going, love?" he asked with a concerned expression.

Thanks to the Bank of Dad, I had more than enough money. The man was basically bankrolling my whole trip, which probably made me a spoilt brat, but I swore to him I would pay him back, and I truly meant it. I'd had a bit of money saved from working part-time during college, enough that I would have managed for a few months, anyway. But after I told them I was leaving, Dad insisted on an advance on the wages he paid me for working part-time in his solicitor's office. The advance he'd given me was equivalent to about two years of work I owed him and should keep me going for the bones of a year if I was careful. Plenty of time to figure out what to do with my life.

"Dad, I'll be okay, I promise."

I smiled reassuringly as he hugged me, Mam, and Fionn suddenly piling on.

Hoarse I love yous whispered between us before I broke away to where the girls waited, finished with their own farewells. The combined group of our families watched us until we walked through the departures gate. When we were finally out of their eyeline, Niamh's shoulders sagged.

"Right! Let's get straight to the bar!" she announced, clapping her hands.

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As the plane climbed higher over the sweeping views of Dublin, I felt weightless. As if I were soaring through the sky, away from my troubles far below in Ireland. It had been an intense two weeks getting ready to leave, and yet the sense of anticipation buzzing through my veins had never felt so right.

This was the start of something special, something just for me, where I didn't have to worry about anyone else, and I could put myself first.

Finally.

I was excited to figure out who I was underneath the burden of my grief, my family's grief, and worrying about my friends. I was yearning to finally be the main character in my own story instead of feeling like a side plot in everyone else's.

But it hadn't made the goodbyes any easier. Saying goodbye to my family might have been hard, but saying goodbye to Sorcha had been a different kind of goodbye. Sorcha had been like a sister to me since the early days of her and Shea dating. After we'd lost him and she'd told me she was pregnant, my relationship with her became even more important. An anchor I could

latch myself to in the chaos of my grief, with the glimmer of joy she was bringing to us all as she glowed through her pregnancy. The thought of missing out on my niece or nephew's birth had my chest aching, but whenever I felt that visceral pain, I reminded myself of all the reasons I was leaving.

My beloved hometown of Clon na Darra in West Cork had started to feel like a straitjacket confining my chest, squeezing tighter until every breath was ragged. Even the excitement of figuring out I didn't want to use my law degree to follow in Dad's footsteps as a solicitor, but instead forge my own path in journalism, hadn't been enough to quell the claustrophobia.

I needed to leave and learn what it felt like to take a full breath again without my lungs aching.

I'd still been practical and put some safety nets in place. At the insistence of my mentor, Professor Walsh, I had applied for a master's in journalism next year at University College Cork. But the application had been a box to tick, something to reassure everyone else—and myself—that I was being responsible and not just running away from my life.

As I peered out the window at the carpet of green that was disappearing from my eyeline, my thoughts drifted to everyone else I was leaving behind. My Nana Ita had pressed 100 Euro into my hand and told me not to come home for her funeral… She was in perfect health but had entered the mentality that anyone leaving West Cork would never see her again.

At the huge joint farewell drinks for me and Niamh in Clon, our other childhood friend Ella had spent the entire night crying. Which only escalated the more vodka she drank. It was understandable, since three of her best friends were leaving, and it would be just her and Sara above in Galway left of our old college gang. Still, she had my brother Fionn, who was conveniently her new boyfriend, to keep her mind off things.

I craned my neck to see the last blanket of green before the plane banked and my view of Ireland was gone for the foreseeable future, unconsciously stroking the tattered remains of the tiny white feather sitting inside my phone case. The feather that had drifted down to land directly on my nose as I'd stood by my brother Shea's graveside only weeks before.

I was lodged in the middle seat in the middle aisle, and I shook off my annoyance about my obstructed view as I settled against the uncomfortable headrest. Niamh was still gripping the armrest beside me so tightly her nails were leaving little crescent shapes in the padding. Turned out she wasn't the best flier, and the two pints she'd just sunk in the airport bar hadn't done much to ease her nerves.

"Didn't you take something to help you relax before we took off?" I asked, nudging her elbow off the shared armrest she was hogging. Sinead was prattling away about what day one itinerary in Ho Chi Minh looked like, completely oblivious to the fact that neither of us was listening.

"Ya, my mam gave me a Valium she got off my aunt. She said to only take half, but I've taken the full one, and it's doing fucking nothing," she gritted out through clenched teeth.

"Jesus, you probably shouldn't have taken the full one if you've never had it before, Niamh, especially after the pints."

I fussed, a bit sceptical of her robbing her aunt's prescription medication as it was. She spun to face me with narrowed eyes.

"It's not even fucking working, Rois. So, unless you want to knock me over the head with a hurley so I'm unconscious until we get there, I suggest you keep your opinions to yourself."

I bit my lip to hide my smile as Sinead leaned forward, finally distracted from her meticulous itinerary and tuning into our conversation. Niamh was never snarky, almost as a rule, her personality was always bright and sunny. Even when her long-time boyfriend, the prick with ears Dermot, had cheated on her. She'd been angry and upset, but only with him. She never took it out on us, and if anything, the more worked up she got, the more comical her dramatics were.

A bit like now.

"Why don't you try watching a movie, Niamh? It'll take your mind off it," Sinead coaxed, shooting me a warning look when she saw I was close to laughter. "They have The Notebook on the yoke—sure, wouldn't that be a perfect distraction?"

"Oh, it will, ya! The lonely desperado who gets cheated on by the love of her life should watch Ryan Gosling demonstrate a man who doesn't exist this entire world over. Just what I fucking need," she snapped, her voice rising incredulously with each word.

Sinead caught my eye, and we both broke out laughing as Niamh's grumbles just grew louder.

"Oh, fuck off and just leave me alone, the two of ye."

I turned away to smother another laugh and finally registered the stocky build wedged into the aisle seat beside me as he turned away to hide his smirk, having clearly eavesdropped on the whole conversation. Not like Niamh had been that quiet about it anyway.

As he faced the window, I could still see the curve of his smile while I studied the side of his face. Strong jaw, enough stubble to pass as a beard but neatly trimmed, and shoulders so big

it looked like he was in for an uncomfortable flight, wedged like a sardine in the economy size seats.

I started to fidget with the entertainment system as he turned back around, not wanting to be caught staring. I hadn't gotten a good look at him, but he seemed attractive. I wasn't so damaged from my recent romantic life that I couldn't see that. I still wasn't sure how I'd managed to find myself in love with two incredible men, both vying for my heart, a dramatic love triangle worthy of a movie storyline with Connor and Ronan playing the delectable leads.

Telling them I was leaving had been akin to plunging my hand into my chest and ripping out my heart. While my other hand did the same to theirs.

Connor had lost all sense of reason when I'd told him. Accusing me of leading him on intentionally as revenge for how he'd broken my heart five years ago when he'd broken up with me at seventeen. I wish he'd been right and what had developed between us had been some calculated move on my part for revenge. That I was malicious enough to pull that off instead of managing to fall back in love with my first love. And my first heartbreak. I'd gotten that revenge whether I'd wanted it or not, since it looked like I was his first heartbreak now too.

I'd tried so hard to make Connor understand that I was doing this for me. I needed to choose myself for once. But he wasn't having a bar of it and made it clear he never wanted to see my face ever again. Then he'd blocked me on everything.

Connor was always a bit rough around the edges and domineering. It was something that had drawn me to him, so I probably shouldn't have been surprised by his predictable reaction to me not doing exactly what he wanted me to.

Ronan's reaction had been the polar opposite. Quiet resignation and respectful acceptance. Romance hadn't been on my mind when I'd come face to face with Ronan as my substitute professor the morning after we'd flirted in the nightclub. It was like divine intervention…or maybe just that Limerick was an extremely small city. But still. The attraction between us had been electric from the outset, and falling for each other seemed as inevitable as sunset at the end of a long day. But he hadn't even tried to get me to stay. This was the same man who had told me he loved me with words as poetic as W. B. Yeats. Made me think I was something so special to him, but it was like he'd moved on before I'd even gotten off our phone call. Wishing me the best of luck like I was just a chapter in his story, and it stung to realise that's exactly what I was.

Both interactions had hurt like a motherfucker, and I'd learned the hard way that losing control, letting anyone that close, only led to pain. It turned me off the idea of ever letting my foolish heart out of my grip again, and the easiest way to do that was to avoid penises at all costs.

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By the time the drinks trolley rolled around, Niamh seemed to have mellowed. Square head beside me ordered a beer, which Sinead and I both mimicked before Niamh cut in.

"I'll have a vodka and coke, please," she said in a strained voice to the flight attendant.

We'd synced our movies, so we were all coming to the end of The Notebook, which had kept her fairly calm until that point.

"Are you sure you should be having another drink after taking that Valium?" Sinead asked her quietly as her drink was being prepared.

"Sure it's not doing anything, so I may as well. The thing must have been a dud. Aunty Breda will have had that in her medicine press for about twenty years," Niamh exclaimed before smiling gratefully as the flight attendant handed over her drink.

I eyed her as she took a big slug before she slowly lowered her drink and shot me dagger eyes.

"What did I tell you about keeping your opinions to yourself, Róisín Tierney?"

"I didn't even say anything," I defended as Sinead threw her hands up in exasperation.

"You didn't need to. That face of yours does all the talking for you," she quipped before placing her headphones back on and taking another big slug.

Half the vodka was already gone, and I'd barely taken a sip from my can of Heineken.

Why I was getting the brunt of her anxiety instead of Sinead, I didn't know, but I wasn't willing to poke the bear any more than I already had. Niamh was a grown woman, and if she wanted to ignore basic common sense, that was her prerogative.

"Is she a nervous flier?" A baritone voice questioned from my right.

I'd been studiously ignoring my neighbour since I'd elbowed him off the armrest an hour ago when he'd tried to snake it for himself, but it looked like he'd decided he was in the mood for a chat.

I detested getting stuck talking to strangers in these scenarios. We were going to be trapped together for another ten hours, judging by the little plane icon at the bottom of my screen. I hated when conversation inevitably came to a stilted halt, and we were still sitting beside each other. I turned to answer him and immediately clocked his big blue eyes, framed by thick eyebrows, and his extremely handsome face. All of which I decidedly ignored, given my recent vow of celibacy, thanks to where my antics had landed my poor heart the last time.

"Ya, I thought she was being dramatic about it until the Valium came out, so maybe we should have taken her anxiety a bit more seriously." I shrugged.

"So are ye just heading away on holiday?" he turned a bit further towards me in the limited space.

"Not really a holiday, one-way ticket and see where the wind takes us. What about you?" I gestured with my can, briefly blocking Niamh's view of Ryan Gosling topless, which earned a growl from my left.

Lunatic.

He smirked again at Niamh before replying.

"Nice. I'm just heading over for eight weeks. My friends are teaching over there. Finished my course a few weeks ago, so I'll just see how it goes."

"Where're you heading once you get there?"

I'd spent some time familiarising myself with the layout of Vietnam after booking my ticket. I'd had to, since I didn't have an iota of where Vietnam was on a map. Sinead had informed us of our route, so I knew we were heading north after spending some time in Ho Chi Minh before making our way back down south and into Cambodia. A country I had no idea I'd be visiting when I'd booked my ticket on a whim that fateful day in Cork. Since Sinead had already done such meticulous planning, I was happy for her to steer the ship and just jump on board for the ride.

"I'm heading to Hoi An once I land, meeting up with my mates there. They've work lined up for me already."

His accent was Dublin, but posh Dub.

"Are you from Dublin yourself, you are?" I questioned, already pegging him as a private school rugby head.

"Ya, from Clondalkin." Case in point. "What about you?"

"I'm from Kiltee in Cork." If I were expected to know every fucking suburb in Dublin, I could passive-aggressively assume he knew my county just as well.

"Oh, I've never heard of it." He smiled politely.

"I've never heard of Clondalkin" I shrugged noncommittally, and he grinned widely.

"Okay, point taken. So, what made you decide to leave?"

He turned even further towards me when the flight attendant appeared at his shoulder and leaned over to turn off the call button I hadn't realised was on. She smiled politely at us when Niamh quickly pulled her attention.

"Can I get a vodka and coke, please?" she smiled sweetly.

She didn't seem too anxious now, half pissed after only one drink, more like. Sinead interjected this time as the flight attendant left to get her drink.

"Niamh, would you not just try to sleep?"

"Mind your business," Niamh answered sharply before throwing a side eye at Rugby Head, an exaggerated eyebrow raise at me, and then snapping her headphones on again.

I bristled at the judgement on her face. I hadn't done anything to encourage your man, and she'd looked at me like I was about to join the mile high club. I continued to chat with Greg—as he introduced himself—while Niamh slugged down another vodka that was delivered to her.

To be fair, he was a nice fella, albeit a stereotypical South Dublin Rugby Head. It hadn't taken him long to tell me he'd played rugby for the school's team—Clongowes—which meant absolutely nothing to me. And the more unimpressed I was with his tales of school glory, the harder he seemed to try.

This.

This was exactly why I hated talking to strangers in confined spaces. I'd ordered two more beers during his monologue because I needed something to do, and I wasn't sure how to snap my headphones back on in a polite way. Thankfully, Niamh provided ample distraction when she KO'd on top of my lap after her second vodka, completely out for the count. Looked like the Valium might have been in effect after all, given that she looked half dead and I had to keep putting my finger under her nose to check she was breathing.

It gave me a brief reprieve from listening to the long-winded story of a try Greg had scored at the school's cup five years ago. Again… could not care less. I did feel a little bad, though. He was clearly a nice enough fella, which was the only reason I smiled and nodded politely for as long as I did. Instead of telling him to fuck off, like I desperately wanted to. Eventually, I managed to rest my head on top of Niamh's body sprawled across my lap and got a few hours' sleep. It felt like no time before I was nudged awake by Greg when the flight attendants moved through the cabin to prepare for landing. I was instantly awake as the adrenaline shot through me.

I was about to start the rest of my life once the wheels hit the tarmac. And I could not fucking wait.

Chapter 2

I stifled a yawn as we meandered through the busy streets of Ho Chi Minh, eyes still spinning on stalks as I took in the hustle and bustle of the busy streets around us. Nothing could have prepared me for the onslaught of sights and sounds once we arrived at our hostel on Bui Vien Street.

And I loved every second of it.

The noise was constant. Vendors shouting, mopeds beeping in traffic, and constant aromas of charcoal grills and exhaust fumes tangling in the air.

Even though we'd slept on the flight, we'd still been exhausted when we finally landed in Vietnam. And the effort it took to almost bodily carry Niamh off the plane, thanks to her low tolerance and complete stupidity with the Valium and alcohol carry on, certainly hadn't made it any easier. Thankfully, Greg's rugby brawn had come in handy as he'd helped us juggle a prone Niamh and our luggage. With his help, we'd safely navigated our way out of the airport after some vague plans of meeting him again on our journey after swapping socials.

The hostel we were staying at was no five-star hotel, but it was clean and comfortable and in a great location. We'd been hoping to have a room to ourselves but had ended up sharing with two English girls who so far seemed normal, thank God. We'd only been here three days and had spent them meandering around the city at our own pace. Sinead had deemed us sufficiently recovered from jet lag to start ticking off her tourist to-do list, and the first stop was the War Remnants Museum.

As we'd moved around each exhibit, reading the placards that explained the history, I was locked in a perpetual state of horror. By the time we reached the top floor, I found myself paralysed in front of a photo. A young Vietnamese child, her skin peeling from her body as she cried in agony as a result of a gas attack by American troops. The tears poured silently down my face as I looked at the child's eyes, feeling like she was looking right back at me.

Stories.

I was surrounded by stories everywhere I looked. The brutal truth that stared me in the face in every direction I turned was someone's story, a people's story, facts for the world to know.

And in that devastating moment of realising how insulated and protected my little life was, how small my problems were, I'd never felt so utterly certain that this was what I wanted to do with my life.

Tell the stories that the world needed to hear.

By the time we'd left, we were all shaken and depleted by how horrifying the museum had been. To the point that Niamh and Sinead had erupted in an argument as Niamh lambasted Sinead for putting such a stark visit on the itinerary. I could understand Niamh's eruption since I felt a bit trepidatious about what the rest of Sinead's itinerary might be, but I was still glad we'd gone.

It was a piece of history that you needed to see with your own eyes to fully comprehend. Thankfully, I'd managed to diffuse the tension by suggesting we trawl Greg's Instagram, and that had certainly brightened the mood. Stalking his Instagram profile while Sinead did a commentary of the many videos of him playing rugby in a D4 accent pulled us out of our slump. We'd been choking into our banh mi's by the time we finished up lunch and had managed to salvage our moods enough to enjoy the rest of the evening. Not that any of us would forget the museum anytime soon.

The following days passed in a pleasant blur of sightseeing around the city and trying a new restaurant every few hours. We'd realised the conversion rate of the delicious pork roll known as the banh mi was about 80 cents, so we'd become pretty addicted. It was a good thing Sinead had the legs walked off us around the city with the amount of carbs we were loading. Tonight we'd gone to the night markets, picking up makeup products and cheap as chips outfits while we good-naturedly haggled over 10 cents. The food had been an explosion of smells, lemongrass and cinnamon aromas curling up my nose at every stall we passed. The aromas made my mouth water, and it didn't take long before Sinead and I were going to town on dishes of pho that were so delicious I'd gone back for seconds.

Niamh sniffed suspiciously at everything and dipped into a nearby 7/11 for a cheese toastie instead. Now we were finally stretched out at the rooftop bar overlooking the whole city, sipping on our cocktails and taking in the incredible views. Sinead's voice broke through my peace and quiet as she prodded Niamh.

"What are you so focused on? You've been tapping away at that phone like a madwoman."

"Nothing."

Niamh shrugged a little too nonchalantly and tried to slide her phone back into her bag.

"You have a guilty head on you. What are you up to?" I joined in.

None of us was particularly adept at lying, but Niamh was the least skilled of the group, a shifty expression written all over her face as the beginnings of a blush started to fan her cheeks.

"I was just looking something up," she replied, eyes darting anywhere but us.

"Oh ya? And what was it you were looking up that had a big penis sprawled across the page?" Sinead asked casually, and I spat my cocktail across the table in shock.

"Niamh! Are you looking up porn when we're sitting right beside you!? You're one dirty bitch!" I gasped, horrified but also choking back the laugh that threatened to take over.

"Of course I wasn't," she squealed, her face now a vivid tomato red.

"I saw it, Niamh, a big willy across the screen. I've been watching you for the last five minutes, and all that's been on your phone is willies!"

Sinead's eyes were glinting with amusement as she continued to taunt Niamh.

"It wasn't for me, okay!?" Niamh half-shouted.

I finally erupted. Throat burning as my spicy margarita came shooting out of my nose, singeing any nose hairs from the chilli in the drinks as the laughter shook my body. Wiping the tears from my eyes, I saw Sinead in a similar state and Niamh's indignation growing stronger by the second.

"It wasn't! It was for Dermot."

That was enough to stop us in our tracks. The last few weeks had thankfully involved little to no mention of the prick with ears, Dermot, Niamh's first love and long-time boyfriend who'd callously dumped her. While cheating on her for the entirety of their relationship, if half the women in Cork were to be believed, and somehow I was inclined to believe them all. If she was back in contact with him, we might need to have her sectioned. The dumping had been harsh, but the way he'd treated Niamh after he'd broken her heart had been cruel. Like he'd revelled in trying to crush her into the dirt.

"Niamh, please tell me you aren't talking to him?" I asked quietly as Sinead's eyes bored into her face from the other side of the table.

"Jesus, of course I'm not! If he was on fire and I'd a glass of water, I'd drink it. Ye know that!"

"So what's with the willies, Niamh?" Sinead asked with a serious face, but I could see the glint in her eyes again, ready to pounce on Niamh for a possible porn addiction if she was cataloguing online dicks while out at a bar with us.

"It is for Dermot, kind of… as in, I've been signing up to some newsletters with his email. For erectile dysfunction."

She shrugged awkwardly and looked down at her feet ashamedly.

There was a pause for a second before Sinead and I erupted again.

"You are a genius. Oh my God, that is so brilliant!"

I howled, holding my side as I pictured his gormless face reading his inbox clogged with erectile dysfunction newsletters. It was the most calculated and clever move I'd ever heard of anyone doing after a breakup.

"Ye don't think I'm a lunatic? And that I should be putting it all behind me?" she asked anxiously, eyes shifting back and forth between Sinead and me.

"Of course you should, but you're only human, and that fucker did you dirty. Get some revenge first. God knows he deserves it," Sinead announced, and I nodded along enthusiastically.

Niamh smiled shyly as she pulled out her phone to show us how she'd been surreptitiously torturing Dermot for weeks now, and we passed the evening plotting new and inventive ways to make him suffer.

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We'd been in Ho Chi Minh a full week, and I'd been loving every second of it. We spent our days sightseeing, trying new cafes, and taking lazy strolls through the streets, soaking in the atmosphere. Any calls from home had been fleeting check-ins from my bunk bed surrounded by the girls and our new English roommates, but today I'd just needed a little bit of space for me.

Today was Shea's birthday.

Since the plane had left the tarmac in Dublin, I'd pushed him from my mind, reassuring myself repeatedly that this trip was about being selfish and my decision to just be happy. But the swarming needles of guilt that accompanied banishing him from my thoughts had only been getting more painful, and today, I'd just needed to be alone. In this strange and different place from everything I'd ever known. I thought of Mam, Dad, and Fionn, waking up with the same suffocating grief I was. But being together. Holding each other while they cried, laying flowers at Shea's grave, and, to ease the crippling pain, spending time with Sorcha and her ever-expanding belly as Shea's baby's arrival grew closer. I felt like theirs was a story I wasn't part of anymore. Like their journey of healing and mine had taken two different roads, running parallel so we could see each other, but no longer touching or intertwining. I'd chosen to run away. And I was adamant I didn't regret that decision, but maybe I hadn't considered how lonely it might feel. Or that putting physical distance between me and my pain wouldn't mean that it stopped following me. It loomed behind me every minute of the day, a sentient, growing spectre that chased me. That was the worst realisation of all. Along with the terror that if I stopped running… it would catch up to me.

And it made me livid.

I'd decided!

Decided I was going to be happy. That losing my favourite person in the world, the one that made me feel safe and protected, all because that prick farmer Lynch was too cheap to service the tractor that had overturned on Shea that morning, wasn't going to break me. And yet here it was in Ho Chi Minh. Waiting to pounce on me the second my eyes opened, drive its claws through my chest and carve out my insides all over again.

How was it fair?

I'd quietly dressed and slipped from the room when I woke, the sun's touch barely climbing the wall with the early hour, and power walked through the streets with a purpose. Like maybe if I moved fast enough, I could outrun that looming shadow again. After thirty minutes, grim defeat washed over me, and I sank down on the edge of the riverbank to listen to the gentle swish of the current. I ached for my cliff in Inchydoney, not because I wanted to be at home, but because the sight of those steel-grey waves hammering the cliffs under an overcast sky looked just how I felt. Wild, angry, and insatiable. Constantly moving, running away from something, only for the current to bring you back to the starting point.

Today had landed me smack bang at my starting point. The day my world crumbled when we turned off Shea's life support.

Mam catatonic.

Dad and Fionn's tears.

Sorcha's screams.

Except this time, I didn't have my family around me, didn't have their pain to worry about. It was only my own pain standing in front of me like a confronting mirror I couldn't look away from.

Mam had brought up his birthday on the phone the other night, and I'd quickly changed the subject, ignoring the sad look in her eyes when I interrupted her request that I find a church and light a candle. The girls had spent yesterday tiptoeing around me and driving me insane, until I claimed a headache and went to bed early, only to find myself alone in my bunk with nothing as a distraction.

And now here it was, the day Shea had come into the world. I blew out a frustrated breath as I tried to get my mind to just shut up and found my attention snagged by two local children further down the bank.

A boy and a girl, though the boy was older. He couldn't have been more than nine or ten, and she was maybe five, and he was teaching her how to fish. Fighting the smirk on his face

when she yanked the pole out of the water and started taunting him with it to get him to chase her.

It was clear they were siblings, and the cajoling way he coaxed her back to the pier brought the softest smile to my lips while cracking my chest open. Images of Shea wearing that expression throughout my childhood smashed into me one by one. Him teaching me to hold a hurley properly when I was four, while I'd wriggled and fought him. His exasperation as we stood at the sink to wash up and I kept surreptitiously splashing suds on him whenever Mam wasn't looking to try to get a rise out of him. Each expression on his beautiful face that my memory conjured hit me like a battering ram to my chest.

The tears poured silently down my face as I watched the brother and sister before a car honked, jolting me from their interaction, and I picked up my phone to distract myself. The feather still pressed in the back cover made me pause, and I pulled out the tiny white keepsake to hold it in my palm. The feather that had floated down and landed on my nose the first time I'd visited his grave. It was barely hanging in there, and the thought of the thing finally disintegrating into nothing caused a crack through my chest. I took a deep breath as I held the feather to my heart and finally spoke to my brother.

"I don't know if you can hear me wherever you are since I'm in Vietnam now and all. I did it, though, Shea. I jumped on the plane and left. I know I haven't talked to you much lately, but I hope you know it's not because I don't love you. But I need to try to forget, just for a little while. Just until it stops hurting. I don't want to live my life in this perpetual sadness, and I know you'd want me to be happy! When it starts to hurt a little less… I'll come back to you. Please, please don't be mad at me. I love you with my whole soul forever."

I stared down at the feather before I placed it securely back in my phone cover and pushed to my feet. I took a bracing breath and wiped my face. I hadn't talked to Shea since after graduation, and even then, I'd only ever done it at his graveside. I hoped he could hear me now and understood. Being happy was a choice, and I'd decided. But that didn't mean I'd forgotten him. It only took minutes for a quick Google search to find the nearest tattoo shop, and only an hour later that I was staring mesmerised at the perfect rendition of my feather across my wrist.

❦❦❦

Our time in Ho Chi Minh was coming to an end as Sinead's plan was to head north to Hanoi before making our way to Cambodia. The last big touristy thing we wanted to do was the Cu Chi tunnels, but first we gave ourselves a nice, relaxing day by the pool at the hostel to

recharge before the bustle of sightseeing and travel took over again. We were all occupied with our own tasks, Sinead muttering out loud as she adjusted the itinerary for some festival in some place I'd never heard of that we were apparently going. Niamh was reading a battered copy of Fifty Shades of Grey, with disturbingly flushed cheeks. And I was ignoring them both as I tried to nap before a voice roused me.

"Mind if we join?" An English accent asked, and I turned to find Yas and Meg, our two roommates, standing by our loungers with their pool bags slung over their shoulders.

"Ya no bother," Niamh answered quickly as she shoved the book under her towel, gesturing to the loungers beside us.

I rolled my eyes at her theatrics. You'd swear we were a pack of puritans from the carry on out of her.

"I'm so sorry, but I can't remember which is which," Meg, the quieter one with short honey-blonde hair, asked.

"Róisín, Niamh, and Sinead." I smiled at her as I pointed to each of us in turn.

I didn't imagine the Irish names made it any easier for them to tell us apart. They both repeated after me as they took us in, trying to commit who was who to memory. We spent an easy half hour chatting to them about their travels so far and what their plans were until I couldn't take the film of sweat coating my body a second longer, and half dived/half flopped myself into the side of the pool to try to cool down.

"Jesus, Rois, graceful."

Niamh snorted from her lounger where she scrutinised my form.

"Oh, and you can do it so much better?" I scoffed at her from where I propped my chin on my arms at the ledge of the pool. "I've seen you in action, girl. You can barely manage a cannonball."

"I can do an excellent dive, actually." She preened, not moving an inch from the lounger.

"Cmon then, Niamhie, put your money where your mouth is," Yas goaded her with a smile on her face.

I choked a laugh at Niamh's shocked expression, not expecting to be called out by a girl she barely knew, but the immediate nickname of Niamhie had me grinning. It was obvious from the two girls' dynamic that Yas was the mouthier one. Her challenge to Niamh was a perfect example. Niamh blustered about for a second before eventually giving in and coming to stand at the edge of the pool, the most dramatically poised stance for a dive I'd ever seen.

"No! You can't hold your nose," I shouted as she got ready to jump, one hand perfectly arched above her head and the other plugging her nostrils like a loser.

She threw me a look of vitriol before removing her hand and… belly-flopping. That's what her dive was. And as she reappeared one second later, spluttering and coughing like she were drowning, I felt my point had been proven. That Niamh was a spoofer. It didn't take long for a bit of a competition to form, which then morphed into a choreographed routine of synchronised swimming, and the afternoon passed in a blur of shouting, laughing, and bickering.

We'd had so much fun with Yas and Meg that we asked them to join us the next day on our Cu Chi tunnels excursion, and after spending the day with them, it further confirmed they were deadly craic. They'd made the day so much more enjoyable as they'd navigated the deep narrow tunnels with us, and on the car journey back it was suddenly decided they were joining us for the next leg of the trip to Hanoi. As Niamh and I lounged on my bunk after dinner, too stuffed to join the other girls for the sunset cocktails on the rooftop bar nearby, she snorted into her phone as she read something.

"What is it?" I asked lazily, busy doomscrolling through my own Instagram.

We hadn't had a lot of spare time since we'd left, always busy with one activity or the next, but we'd all been posting regularly as we went about our days. When I did have the time to check back in, I couldn't help noticing Ronan always appearing as a viewer on my stories. We never had any interaction, but every time I saw his name pop up, a little pang went off in my chest. Maybe what we could have been if my brother hadn't died and altered my whole view on where I wanted to be. Or the way he'd looked at me when he'd told me he loved me, that every layer of me he peeled back just made him love me more.

"Dermot is spiralling on his stories on Instagram," she answered with a chuckle, pulling my attention back to her.

"How could you know that? Sure, he blocked you months ago!"

I eyed her suspiciously as a smug smirk tilted her lips.

"Well, he didn't block my fake account of Miranda Priestly."

"You have a fake account? That you named after a character in The Devil Wears Prada? Is a picture of Meryl Streep your profile picture?" I asked incredulously, at a loss for the lengths this girl would go.

"No." She guffawed. "It's some OnlyFans girl I found on Google Images. He's the only person I follow, and no, I'm not catfishing him before you ask! I don't talk to him on it, just keep an eye to make sure he's looking shit and miserable." She shrugged casually.

"Jesus… I'm scared to ask this, but what else have you been doing?" I said nervously.

At this point, I was equal parts impressed and terrified of her. Dermot 100% deserved anything she threw his way, but I just hadn't realised she had it in her. This girl was calculated as fuck. If I ever needed help to bury a body, I knew who to call.

"Swear you won't tell the girls," she said seriously, putting the phone down and turning on the bed to face me.

"I'm not swearing anything until I know it's not illegal. I'm too pretty for jail, and you're not bringing me down with you!"

"It's not illegal! I don't think anyway… I hired a male escort to show up at his house in a gimp mask and handcuffs, saying he'd been hired for two hours."

I blinked in shock a few times as she watched me hesitantly.

"Niamh… he lives with his mam."

I half laughed, wondering who this was and what she'd done with my innocent, green friend.

She grinned wickedly. "I know." Then shrugged, turned away and picked her phone back up to continue her perusal of Dermot's downfall.

"What's he spiralling about, anyway?" I asked, fully invested in discovering the ins and outs of this story before I was inevitably interviewed for a Netflix true crime documentary about her.

She turned her phone to show me a video of Dermot ranting about the erectile dysfunction emails and threatening to kneecap whoever was behind it.

We collapsed into laughter as she replayed his story on repeat until I had a stitch from laughing.

Chapter 3

We'd spent four weeks navigating our way down through Vietnam until we finally made it to Cambodia. By then, we'd tested every mode of transport available in Asia, since our budget-conscious pockets didn't allow for too much plane travel. But once you'd survived one overnight sleeper bus… you'd survived them all.

Adding Yas and Meg to our little travel pack had really livened up the group dynamic too. They were both hilarious, and Yas tended to make every travel disaster a funny story. From Sinead's missing suitcase at the train station that we recovered hours later to find all her knickers gone, to Niamh discovering at the border of Cambodia that she'd left her passport on the bus. Which had already left. That had been fun times.

Personally, I'd felt we should have left her there, but Sinead had insisted we stay together while we eventually tracked down the bus and her passport, so we could pass into the country.

It was clear by now she'd never forgive me for trying to abandon her in Vietnam, as she so dramatically put it. And I'd never forgive her for the seven hours I'd been stuck on a dirty floor, with a dead phone and only her grumpy face to entertain me.

Cambodia had been such a welcome surprise once we (finally) arrived at our hostel in Siem Reap. Because it was so close to Vietnam, I'd assumed they'd be similar, but it had a totally different character all of its own. New smells, sights, and customs with the locals. It was incredible.

After Sinead had shared the plans for this portion of the trip, I was excited to finally get here. Apparently, the nightlife on Pub Street was incredible, and I was excited to compare it to our meagre sampling in Vietnam. Sinead kept us on such a tight sightseeing schedule that we hadn't gone out all that much. And when we did, that was scheduled in too. I'd learned my lesson the hard way about going against her instructions, though, after Yas and I had had enough of her tour guide dictatorship in Hoi An.

We'd slipped off to a pub, where we'd bumped into square head Greg from the plane. Which probably wasn't that surprising since it was an Irish pub we were in. Of course it would have been impolite not to sit down and have a drink with him and his exceptionally posh friends… so we got absolutely shitfaced instead of following Sinead's plans to watch the sunset at some viewpoint before her scheduled dinner.

We'd had a whale of a time until Niamh shook me awake about two hours after I'd gotten to bed and told me it was a 7am bus we were booked on, not 7pm as I'd thought. Sinead had a document she had pinned to our chat with her militant instructions, but none of us actually read it! Why would you when she was standing right next to you?

After puking into a paper bag for six hours straight while Yas just lay unconscious next to me, I swore to never go against Sinead's schedule again. To be fair to her, she did schedule in our hangovers too. Like tomorrow. Pool day and chill at the hostel because we were about to hit Pub Street with a bang! Yas was adamant we work on our synchronised swimming routine that she'd now deemed a vital component of any pool day.

Our big night out was mainly because today was my birthday and I was finally the ripe old age of twenty-two. The girls had woken me in the morning by jumping on top of me, singing happy birthday at the top of their lungs. After I'd blown out the tea candle that they'd placed on the muffin from the hostel café, they'd presented me with a friendship bracelet. It had been extremely cute, and we all wore our matching ones after dramatically vowing we'd never take them off. But before the celebrations began, we had a full day of sightseeing ahead of us to make sure we earned all that alcohol.

We were heading to Angkor Wat, which, as Sinead had excitedly informed us, was one of the ancient wonders of the world. While I'd happily gone along with all the touristy itinerary on the trip so far, I never nerded out over these things the way Sinead did. She was like a walking encyclopaedia before we visited anywhere, to the point that sometimes I wasn't even sure the point in going at all since she stuffed our heads so full of knowledge before we'd even arrived at the place.

As we made our way up the crowded path, a local man stopped us as we approached the entrance.

"Would you like a guided tour of the temple?" he asked in perfect English as we paused in front of his smiling face.

Normally we'd brush past with a polite no thank you, but something about him made me hesitate.

"How much?" I asked before the girls had moved on.

"25 US dollars for two hours," he answered immediately.

I gawked at him.

The hostel had been touting guided tours of the temples for small groups like ours and had quoted us 150 US dollars just this morning.

"And do you know much about them?"

I eyed him sceptically. Expecting he was just a chancer with enough general knowledge to get him by.

"I'm a certified tour guide by the Cambodia tourism industry." He smiled as he flashed a lanyard with his details on it.

I was no expert, but it looked legit enough.

"Deal," I replied instantly, fishing into my bag to grab the money.

"You're not paying," Megan butted in instantly. "It's your birthday!"

As much as I was a notorious haggler from traversing the markets around Southeast Asia, something about this man made me want to make sure it was my money that went into his pocket.

"Buy me a bucket later." I emphatically pushed her away as she tried to grab her purse and pushed the $25 into the guide's hand.

He bowed his head in thanks with his palms pressed together.

"My name is Kiri," he introduced himself.

"I'm Róisín. This is Niamh, Sinead, Meg, and Yas." I pointed around the group, smiling as we all began to move toward the entrance.

Suddenly, I was excited to learn a little about Angkor Wat.

As we moved through the temple, I didn't learn a little… I learned a lot. I'd never been so engrossed in hearing the history of a place like this one. Kiri's knowledge was mind-blowing, and with the size of the place and the ground we covered, I frankly wasn't sure how he fit it all inside his brain. Mine was fit to combust just hearing a fraction of what he told us. And the temple itself. My God. I doubted I'd ever see anything to rival it for the rest of my life.

As I stood in the open expanse of lawn that provided a perfect view of the full breadth of the temple in all its glory, my mind couldn't seem to compute how long it had stood here. Nearly 1,000 years. As the girls browsed some of the local wares that were for sale at a makeshift market, Kiri came to stand beside me.

"I hope the tour was to your liking?" he asked, facing the view too.

"It was incredible. You're so knowledgeable. And the temple itself, just wow."

I trailed off with no words to capture the awe it inspired in me.

"I feel like that every time I look at it." He nodded in agreement.

"Why don't you work for one of the tour companies? It must be more reliable than needing to source customers yourself for tours?"

I'd been pondering this as the tour had progressed. The math was not mathing on the prices the hostel was charging versus what Kiri, as a registered guide, was. His cheery face clouded a little at my question.

"A lot of those companies are foreign-owned," he replied simply, and I waited for him to continue.

On seeing my raised eyebrows, he sighed.

"When my wife was sick, I needed to take time to look after her. But my boss would not allow me the time off. My pay was much, much less than now, and yet I knew how much they made from the tours I provided. They fired me when I stayed home to care for my wife." He shrugged.

"That's terrible," I said indignantly, even more so now that I realised the profit these companies were making off the backs of the locals.

"Is she okay now? Your wife?"

"Yes." He smiled softly. "And now I offer the tours myself. It is not the same stability, but at least I get paid, and I have some flexibility."

I reached into my purse and quickly withdrew another $50. I was on a seriously tight budget to keep this trip going as long as possible, but going without coffees and alcohol for a few days wouldn't kill me!

I pressed it into his hands as his eyes lit up. "That tour was worth far more than what we paid you."

He bowed as he thanked me, and after a few more minutes chatting, where I peppered him with more questions about how the tourism certification worked to become a guide and what kind of influence these foreign-owned companies had, we bade our goodbyes.

The information I'd gleaned turned over in my mind as I pondered Kiri's story. It was a story I wanted to tell.

I turned back to face the temple again, unwilling to take my eyes off the breathtaking view of the sun setting behind it.

❦❦❦

The first pub we walked into, Yas made her intentions clear, to make sure I got absolutely langers. After I'd told the girls about Kiri, they'd all insisted I didn't spend a penny tonight, especially since it was my birthday. The atmosphere on Pub Street was electric, and we swamped buckets of sex on the beach as we bar hopped.

"Oi, Rois." Megan gestured to me from the middle of the street between Angkor Wat and Ankor Tom nightclub.

Everyone dancing on the street was tuned into different music from the competing sound systems, which made the gauntlet of dance moves a thing to behold. Megan was engaged in a vigorous salsa routine to some J-Lo song with a very large, very sweaty fifty-year-old man.

I waved her off as I leaned against the wall and rested my feet from what felt like hours of dancing. The buckets were making my head swim and throbbing was starting up at the back of my eyes. I hadn't had enough water today, and I was feeling the effects of it now.

I pulled out my phone to see if Sara had replied to my last Instagram message. She'd blown up our group chat last week when she announced she'd been called up to the Galway senior ladies football team. We were all buzzing for her. She was one of the most talented footballers I'd ever seen, but she was adamant she'd never get the chance to play senior, especially when she didn't get the call-up earlier in the year.

As I checked my notifications, my heart stuttered when I saw the notification that Ronan O Sullivan reacted to your story. Fire emoji.

I'd posted a story of me sucking on a bucket with five straws in my mouth and a very drunken wink that, at the time, I had thought looked sultry. Reassessing it now, I realised it made me look like I was suffering from Bell's Palsy.

A giddiness overcame me as I liked his reaction before I could second-guess it. Just the memory of our last conversation made my heart clench in my chest. He'd sounded so dejected and resigned on the phone but told me that I needed to do whatever made me happy.

Which was a lot better than the brutal accusations Connor had sent my way, but still, I guessed a small part of me had hoped he might put up a little bit of a fight. The way things had ended had left a bitter taste in my mouth. One that consisted of all my own ingredients, of course.

But that didn't detract from the shit sandwich I'd managed to make of my heart when I'd told him goodbye and good luck. His acceptance whispered to some buried part of me that maybe he was relieved I'd left, that he hadn't wanted to fall in love with someone as broken as me.

Judging by the limited stalking I'd allowed myself of his social activity, he seemed to be doing just fine without me. He'd certainly never been as active with posting when we'd been seeing each other, but now it felt like I had to actively avoid seeing picture after picture of him looking fucking delicious on some night out or day trip around the West Coast.

I shoved my phone in my bag before I could dwell on it anymore and pushed through the pain in my head to make my way to the bar for a top-up. As I pushed my way into the crowded pub, a hulk of a man shifted to look down at me as I squeezed in beside him at the bar. He towered over me as he smiled and then moved over to make room for me beside him.

"There's a pretty big queue behind you, you know?" He leaned down to shout into my ear over the thumping music of the DJ.

"Perks of being little. You get through the crowds quicker, and no one notices you," I said with a wink.

The reminder of Ronan had left me a little bitter and reeling, and I was keen to spend my birthday taking my mind firmly off the mistakes—and failings—of my past.

"Oh, I doubt you're going anywhere unnoticed," he said as his gaze drifted up and down my short red dress. "What's your name?"

He had a strong Liverpool twang to his accent and, judging by the twinkle in his eye, was just the kind of distraction I needed right now. I'd never been one for one-night stands. I was extremely picky about who I brought into my bed. And I had firmly sworn off men after I'd imploded three hearts with my disastrous love triangle. But I was on a different continent, and it was my birthday after all!

"Róisín," I replied, with my hand held out for him to shake.

He laughed as we shook hands. "Well, nice to meet you, Róisín. I'm Harry."

We bantered for a few more minutes before the barman came our way and pointed at him.

"Two buckets of vodka Coke, and what are you having?" He turned to me.

"Bucket of sex on the Beach, please?" I smiled as he bit back a grin.

Once the barman placed our drinks in front of us, we elbowed our way out of the crush and onto the dance floor, where I happily bumped and ground the night away against Harry.

The girls had popped in and out a few times, looking more out of control every time I spied one of them. As the night wore on and the dancing started to get a lot steamier, Harry pulled me outside.

"Do you want to come back to mine?" he asked as he pulled me against his hard, muscular chest.

I paused as I glanced up at his handsome face. A face that looked wrong. No dimple peeking out on the left side when he smiled. No golden stubble coating a strong jawline or twinkling green eyes that had the ability to make me feel naked.

This. What I was doing right now was exactly why I needed something to happen with Harry.

Ronan O Sullivan was in my past—where I had firmly put him—and that's where he needed to stay. Comparing any other man to him was a fruitless exercise.

"Where are you staying?" I asked hesitantly.

Keen as I might have been to get my hole and wash all memories of Ronan from my mind, I didn't fancy ending up as the first headline on the six o'clock news after the Angelus had played.

"Just around the corner in the Grand Temple," he replied in a gruff voice as he started to nuzzle my neck.

That was almost a stone's throw from our hostel, and a five-star hotel to boot.

"And what will I be going back to yours for?" I breathed, looking up through my lashes and acting coy.

"A very good night for you, Róisín. I promise you that," he said gruffly, and that was enough for me.

I quickly told the girls I was leaving and where to find me, making sure Harry gave every detail about himself aside from his passport number, because again, I had no plans to become a statistic on my birthday.

Niamh also threatened him enough with what would happen to him in case he decided to murder me and bury my body somewhere. As soon as we made it through the door of his hotel, we wasted no time stripping off. And things moved fast. Very fast. It turned out Harry had lied… I did not have a very good night.

Harry wouldn't know where to find a clitoris if Saint Anthony himself was guiding him. He also attempted to dirty talk and asking me to call him Daddy had nearly made me as dry as the sand in the Sahara Desert. For all the muscles he had, there was a chance he partook in the odd steroid, going by his out-of-proportion appendage. Once we were underway, I was glad he didn't know how to use it so it could all be over fast. He lasted three minutes (I counted) before rolling over, exclaiming how mind-blowing it had all been and falling asleep. Maybe Sex God 1 and Sex God 2 had ruined all other men for me forever, because if that was the kind of action my future held, I might as well join the convent now.

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The remainder of our time in Cambodia flew by. After a lot of back and forth in the group, we finally decided it was time for a bit of madness again as we headed for Thailand.

We settled in Koh Samui, so we had a base and could do trips to the surrounding islands from there. We'd rented a two-bedroom apartment for peanuts a five-minute walk from the centre and Chaweng Beach. The long stretch of white sandy beach that Koh Samui was most famous for.

We spent our first week making our way around the island and learning the hotspots near our new temporary home. We rented mopeds so we could easily traverse the steep dirt roads to the best waterfall spots and explore the more undisturbed beaches on the other side of the island before we fell into a rhythm of Koh Samui life.

The place had a buzz and vibrancy that swept you up as you walked the narrow footpaths, stray dogs shadowing your footsteps everywhere you went with wagging tails. It had been an ordeal from day one to prevent Sinead from trying to adopt half the island's population of strays, but we'd come to an agreement to carry treats for them whenever we left the house.

By week two, we'd all decided to try yoga and see if we could find the inner Buddha in us. I'd lasted one class, with Yas and Niamh bailing by the second. The level of concentration and quietness was too much of an ask for us. Unsurprisingly, Sinead and Meg took to the practise like ducks to water.

It left the rest of us a bit aimless in the mornings as they sauntered off to their daily class. That is until I took a different route to cut through to the beach one morning and passed a Muy Thai gym.

Kickboxing was not something I'd ever been remotely interested in. As I'd passed the very crowded gym, I was surprised to see so many women training. Everyone in there was travellers just like us, getting a serious morning sweat up before they faced the day. I hadn't realised I'd paused to watch until a lean Thai man sauntered up to me from the gym entrance.

"You train Muy Thai?" he asked as he gestured with his head back at the aggressive scenes in the gym behind him.

The thuds of punching bags being pounded echoed loudly in the air around us.

"Oh no, I was just watching." I smiled politely before turning to leave.

"Oh. You too scared," he said tauntingly.

Cheeky fucker.

"I'm not scared. I've just never done it before," I replied, a little surprised at his brazenness.

"So now you start." He shrugged.

Before I knew it, I'd been ushered into the gym in my shorts and flip-flops and was standing, stunned, in front of the confrontational Thai man who held a kick bag. When I'd tried to protest and back out of the surreal situation I'd found myself in, he'd loudly taunted me. Drawing a lot of attention from the other gym-goers, I'd eventually just given in. I was there for fifteen minutes, dripping with sweat, when he patted me on the back and told me to come back the next day to sign up and ask for Remi. Again – not a question.

I walked out a little dazed as I made my way to the beach for a morning dip, but I couldn't deny how invigorated I'd felt. My adrenaline had been pumping, and as I gladly submerged myself in the crystal-clear water for a dip, I'd found myself excited to return the next day and try the whole thing out properly. That had been two weeks ago, and I was already hooked. I bounced out of the apartment each day to be tortured by Remi, a man of few words, and the ones he did throw my way were particularly scathing. Considering his English wasn't the best, it was impressive that his disdain never failed to land. It had only taken Niamh a few days to decide she wanted to give it a try too and found herself equally addicted.

Yas showed zero interest.

"I'm a lover, not a fighter, babes," had been her bored reply when Niamh and I had tried to wrangle her to join us.

Fionn had texted in our family group chat Muy Thai was a perfect fit for me since I was a feral badger by nature… but there was something about the pain, and the aches, that had me constantly coming back for more. Like every drop of sweat was an exorcism of bottled-up emotion that I couldn't bleed from my body in any other way.

I leaned on my hands on my knees as I fought to catch my breath from the latest round of sparring. We were on our last set of drills, and Remi was hammering me hard.

"Break over, RoRo, you go again."

I rolled my eyes as I gasped at the floor. This fucker had no mercy.

"Jesus, Remi, will you give me a second?" I wheezed out before gasping as the bucket of ice water landed all over my head.

Remi's favourite form of punishment when I acted lazy.

The man's stamina was terrifying, and despite my subpar fitness levels, he demanded the same of me. I straightened up, refreshed from his punishment and gave it my all for the last ninety seconds.

"See, RoRo, you no lazy." Then he fist-bumped me as he sauntered away.

On meeting me, he decided my name was too hard to pronounce, so RoRo was another alias to add to my repertoire.

"Good session, Róisín." Kyle patted me on the back after finishing up his own sparring.

Kyle and I had met the first week I'd started training here and often ran into each other in the bars along the main strip. He was good craic, and the thick East London accent always tickled me when he got riled up over something. He was also drop-dead gorgeous and Lord did the man know it.

But despite telling me he'd been shortlisted as a bombshell for last year's Love Island within the first five minutes of conversation, I'd warmed to him, and we had good banter whenever we were together. We'd had the odd sneaky shift on a night out, and Kyle had seemed pretty keen to take it further, but I didn't need to be Mystic Meg to clock that Kyle only wanted me because I didn't want him. It seemed like a relatively foreign concept to him.

"Thanks, lad. I might need a stretcher home though after that last set. My legs are literally shaking."

I could feel the tremble along my quads, which was why I hadn't moved an inch since finishing. I was worried I'd face plant in front of the crowded gym.

"At least you'll have quads for days from all the hard work. It's definitely paying off."

He smirked as he eyed me up and down appreciatively.

"Yeah, I know," I deadpanned.

The best way to deal with Kyle was ignoring his blatant flirting. He snorted a laugh at my reaction before gesturing to Niamh on the other side of the space. She'd finished her session but was locked in some deep stretching with one of the other expats who frequented the gym, and the depth Dereck was stretching her hamstring to was turning a bit indecent.

"Niamh may need a stretcher once Derek's done with her too." Kyle smiled.

He had gotten to know all the girls over the past few weeks and was likely hoping for Niamh to keep her scoring streak as much as the rest of us.

"A man can dream, Kyle." I winked at him and headed for the door, keen to round out my evening routine and feeling Kyle's eyes burning holes into my arse the whole way out.

I quickly made my way down the side street shortcut to the beach. The early evening breeze was a cool balm to my sticky skin as I wiggled my toes in the white powdery sand. The session had taken it out of me today, but I revelled in every ache and pain in my sore body from the strenuous workout. It had been two months now since I'd hightailed it out of Clon na Darra to start my adventure with Sinead and Niamh. That sense of utter freedom whipped through my body as another puff of breeze made my auburn locks play around my face. I breathed in the fresh smell of brine and tangy notes of seaweed before I heaved a sigh and reread the text message from Mam.

Mam: You look like your having a ball love but just give us a ring for more than 5 mins. We miss you loads xxx

That creeping feeling of guilt settled in my stomach again as I turned back to the view, taking in the stunning colours of sunset across the crystalline waters surrounding the beach. Each swath of water the sun touched shone like a million diamonds.

We called it loinnir at home, when the sun sparkled across the sea. It was used to describe people too, their own inner glow or a sense of peace. Unfortunately, the tangible version of loinnir was all I experienced these days. Peace seemed like an abstract notion, always out of my grasp. It was almost seven months since Shea had passed, and the ache in my chest hadn't lessened one iota every time I thought about him.

So I tried not to think of him.

That creeping guilt in my chest intensified as I pushed him out of my mind, unconsciously stroking my feather tattoo as if it could relieve the weight of the combined grief and guilt. I'd been avoiding my family as much as thoughts of Shea, struggling to reconcile what his loss had turned me into as I desperately clung to the scraps that remained of who I was.

Hearing their concern in their voices during the few calls I'd had with my family felt like hornets buzzing in my ears, even though they'd stopped mentioning Shea's name to me lately.

I knew they were just worried and wanted me to lean on them, but they hadn't seen themselves as I had. The way they'd all disintegrated after he'd died, my whole family falling to pieces around me after I'd lost my anchor in the world. Granted, Fionn had coped a bit better than my parents, but it didn't mean I suddenly wanted to gather up my pain and burdens and lay them at their feet. They had enough of their own to worry about, and I needed to rely on me, myself, and I, right now. It wasn't like my pain had been any less than theirs in that moment, but my role had been set as the rock they leaned against, not the other way around.

Just because some time had passed didn't mean those roles were reversed now. Besides, I'd managed just fine on my own until now, but I could feel the distance growing between us until it felt like a gaping hole growing bigger in my chest every day. It was like a chasm between us. Me on one side, and everyone I loved standing together on the other.

So I stood alone, just like I'd decided, I suppose.