

CHLOE WALSH

Keeping

13

BOYS OF TOMMEN #2

Also by Chloe Walsh

Boys of Tommen

Binding 13

Keeping 13

Saving 6

Redeeming 6

Keeping
13

CHLOE WALSH

 *Bloom books*

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Published by Bloom Books, an imprint of Sourcebooks

P.O. Box 4410, Naperville, Illinois 60567-4410

(630) 961-3900

sourcebooks.com

Originally self-published in 2018 by Chloe Walsh.

Cataloging-in-Publication data is on file with the Library of Congress.

Contents

[Front Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Author's Note](#)

[Name Pronunciations](#)

[Glossary](#)

[1](#)

[2](#)

[3](#)

[4](#)

[5](#)

[6](#)

[7](#)

[8](#)

[9](#)

[10](#)

[11](#)

[12](#)

[13](#)

[14](#)

[15](#)

[16](#)

[17](#)

[18](#)

[19](#)

[20](#)

[21](#)

[22](#)

[23](#)

[24](#)

[25](#)

[26](#)

[27](#)

[28](#)

[29](#)

[30](#)

[31](#)

[32](#)

[33](#)

[34](#)

[35](#)

[36](#)

[37](#)

[38](#)

[39](#)

[40](#)

[41](#)

[42](#)

[43](#)

[44](#)

[45](#)

[46](#)

[47](#)

[48](#)

[49](#)

[50](#)

[51](#)

[52](#)

[53](#)

[54](#)

[55](#)

[56](#)

[57](#)

[58](#)

[59](#)

[60](#)

[61](#)

[62](#)

[63](#)

[64](#)

[65](#)

[66](#)

[67](#)

[68](#)

[69](#)

[70](#)

[71](#)

[72](#)

[73](#)

[74](#)

[75](#)

[76](#)

[77](#)

[78](#)

[79](#)

[80](#)

[Extended Chapter](#)

[81](#)

[82](#)

[Excerpt from *Saving 6*](#)

[August 30, 1999](#)

[Song Moments](#)

[Playlist for Shannon](#)

[Playlist for Johnny](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Back Cover](#)

For Nikki Ashton, a treasured friend for life.

Author's Note

Keeping 13 is the second installment in the Boys of Tommen series and the second 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 of 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

- the Angelus: Every evening at six 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 out 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: 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 (plural: Gardaí)
- Gardaí Síochána: Irish police force
- gas: funny
- get your hole: have sex
- 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 small, hard balls)
- Jackeen: a person from Dublin. A 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 24 bottles of beer
- solicitor: lawyer
- spanner: idiot
- spuds: potatoes

- St. Bernadette's: the name of Aoife, Casey, and Katie's all-girls primary school
- St. Stephen's Day: Boxing Day/ December 26th
- 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

Him or Us

Shannon

"Make a choice, Mam," Joey said. "Him or us?"

Numb to the bone, I sat on the rickety chair at our kitchen table, with a tea towel pressed to my cheek, and held my breath for two reasons.

First, my father was less than four feet away from me, and that particular piece of knowledge caused my body to switch into shutdown.

Second, it hurt to breathe.

Dropping the blood-soaked towel on the table, I twisted sideways and tried to rest my side against the back of the chair, only to groan in agony when a surge of pain coursed through my body.

My flesh felt like it had been doused in gasoline and set on fire. Every inch of my body was *burning*, screaming out in protest every time I inhaled too deeply. I was in trouble, I realized. Something was seriously wrong with me, and still I remained exactly where I was, exactly where Joey had placed me, without an ounce of fight left inside of me.

This is bad. This is really bad, Shannon.

The sounds of my little brothers' sobs and sniffles as they huddled behind Joey were almost too much to bear. I couldn't look at them, though. If I did, I knew I would break. Instead, I focused my attention on Joey, taking strength from his bravery as he stared our parents down and demanded *more*.

As he tried to save us from a life that none of us were getting out of.

"Joey, if you just calm down for a moment—" Mam began to say, but my brother didn't let her finish.

Wholly enraged, Joey erupted like a volcano right there in the middle of our run-down kitchen. "Don't you fucking dare try and talk your way out of this!" Pointing an accusatory finger at our mother, he snarled, "Just do the right thing for once in your fucking life and put him *out*."

I could hear the desperation in his voice, the last sparks of his faith in her fading out fast, as he implored her to *hear* him.

Mam just sat on the kitchen floor, her gaze flickering over each one of us but never once moving to go to us. No, she remained exactly where she was.

By *his* side.

I knew she was afraid of him, I understood what it felt like to be petrified of the man in our kitchen, but *she* was the grown-up. She was supposed to be the adult, the mother, the protector, not the eighteen-year-old boy whose shoulders that role had fallen onto.

"Joey," she whispered, giving him a pleading look. "Can we just—"

"Him or us," Joey repeated the same question over and over, tone growing colder. "Him or us, Mam?"

Him or us.

Three words that should have held more meaning and importance than any other question I'd ever heard. Problem was, I knew in my heart that whatever answer was given, whatever lie she told herself, and us, the end result would be the same.

It was *a/ways* the same. I think in this moment my brothers realized that, too. Joey certainly did.

He looked so disappointed with himself as he stood in front of our mother, waiting for an answer that wouldn't change a thing because actions spoke louder than words and our mother was a living, breathing puppet with strings that our father held the reins to.

She couldn't make a decision. Not without *his* permission first.

I knew that even though my younger brothers were praying for a resolution, this was going to be an anticlimactic moment.

Nothing would change. Nothing would be fixed.

The first aid kit would be brought out, the blood would be mopped up, the tears would be wiped away, the cover-up story would be invented, our father would disappear for a day or two, and then everything would go right back to the way it always was.

Promises made, promises broken—the Lynch family motto.

We were all shackled to this house like a great oak to its roots. There was no escaping this. Not until we all came of age and got out.

Too worn out to think about it, I slumped in the chair, taking in everything and taking in nothing at all. It was almost like a prison sentence with no parole.

Sagging forward, I clutched my ribs and waited for it to be over. The adrenaline inside of me was dissipating at a rapid pace, replaced with more pain than I could consciously endure. The taste of blood in my mouth was thick and potent, the lack of air in my lungs was making me feel light-headed and woozy. My fingertips danced between numb and tingling.

Everything hurt and I was done.

I was so completely done with the pain and the bullshit. I didn't want this life I had been born into. I didn't want this family. I didn't want this town or the people in it.

I didn't want any of it.

"I want you to know something," Joey finally bit out when she didn't answer him. His tone was ice cold as he spat out the words I knew were churning around inside of him like poison that needed to be exorcised from the pits of his fractured heart. I knew because I felt the same way.

"I want you to know that I hate you more right now than I have *ever* hated him." His body was shaking, his hands balled into fists at his sides. "I want you to know that you are no longer my mother—not that I ever had one of those to begin with." He clenched his jaw, striving to keep the pain inside of him from expelling. His pride refused to allow him to show emotion in front of these people.

"From this moment on, you are *dead* to me. All your shit? Handle it yourself. The next time he hits you? I won't be there to shield you. The next time he drinks all the money and you can't feed the kids or get the electricity switched back on? Find some other asshole to get cash from. The next time he throws you down the staircase or breaks your fucking arm in one of his whiskey tantrums? I'll turn a blind eye just like you did right here in this kitchen. From this day on, I won't be there to protect you from him, just like you weren't there to protect us."

I cringed with every word that poured from his lips, feeling his pain in the deepest part of my soul as it mixed together with mine.

"Don't talk to your mother like that," our father snarled, tone menacing, as he hauled himself to his feet, all six feet and two hundred pounds of him. "You ungrateful little—"

"Don't even think about speaking to me, you scummy piece of shit," Joey warned, glowering at Dad. "I might share your blood but that's as far as it goes. You and me are done, old man. You can burn in hell for all I care. In fact, I sincerely fucking hope you both do."

I felt a hand clamp gently down on my shoulder then, startling me and causing me to groan in pain. "It's okay," Tadhg whispered, keeping his hand on my shoulder. "I'm here."

I closed my eyes as the tears trickled down my cheeks.

"You think you can talk to me like that?" Dad wiped his face with the back of his hand and, in doing so, smeared a trail of blood up his arm. "You need to settle the fuck down, boy—"

"You're calling *me* boy?" Joey threw his head back and laughed humorlessly. "Me? The one who's been raising your fucking kids for most of my life? The one who's been cleaning up both of your messes, taking care of both of your responsibilities, picking up the slack for two worthless, piece-of-shit parents?" Joey threw his hands up in outrage. "I might be only eighteen, but I'm more of a man than you'll *ever* be!"

"Don't push your luck," Dad growled, red-eyed and sobering fast. "I'm warning ya—"

"Or fucking what?" Joey taunted with a careless shrug. "You'll knock me around? Hit me? Kick me? Get your belt out? Take a hurley to my legs? Bust a bottle over my head? Terrorize me?" He shook his head and sneered. "Guess what? I'm not a scared little boy anymore, old man. I'm not a defenseless child, I'm not a scared teenage girl, and I'm not your battered wife." Narrowing his green eyes, he added, "So, whatever you do to me, I can promise you that I'll return tenfold."

"Get out of my house," Dad hissed in a deathly quiet tone. "Now, boy."

"Teddy, stop!" Mam wailed, hurrying toward him. "You can't—"

"Shut the fuck up, woman!" Dad roared, turning his fury on our mother. "I'll break your face for ya! Do ya hear me?"

Flinching, Mam looked to Joey, expression helpless.

Joey remained rigid, clearly fighting an internal battle, but he didn't go to her.

"You can't throw him out..." Mam's words drifted away as she stared up in pure, unadulterated fear at the man she had married. "Please." Tears dripped down her pale cheeks. "He's my son—"

"Oh, so now I'm your son? Don't do me any favors."

"This is your fault, girl," Dad barked then, turning to glare at me. "Whoring around the fucking town, making trouble for this family! You're the problem in this—"

"Don't even go there," Joey warned, voice rising. "Keep your goddamn eyes off her."

"It's the truth," Dad snarled, keeping his brown eyes locked on my face. "You're a waste of space and you always have been." With a cruel expression etched on his face, he added, "I told your mother about ya, but she wouldn't hear it. I knew, though. Even when you were small, I knew what kind you were. A fucking runt." Glowering at me, he spat out, "Don't know where you came from."

I stared back at the man who'd spent my entire life terrorizing me. He stood in the middle of the kitchen, a formidable force to be reckoned with, two strong arms attached to fists that caused more damage to my body than I could remember. But it was his words, his tongue, that had damaged me so much deeper.

"That's a lie, Teddy!" Mam choked out. "Shannon, baby, that's not—"

"We never wanted you." Dad continued, tormenting me with his words. "Did ya know that? Your mother left you for a week in the hospital, debating whether or not to give you up until the guilt got the better of her. But I never changed my mind. I couldn't even stand the sight of you, let alone love you."

"Shannon, don't listen to him," Joey commanded, tone thick with emotion now. "It's not true. The bastard's unhinged. Just block it out. Do ya hear me, Shan? Block *him* out."

"I didn't want you either," Dad snarled, turning his glare on Joey.

"My heart's bleeding," Joey shot back mockingly.

"Well, we feel the same about you," Tadhg growled, hand shaking on my shoulder as he stared at our father. "None of us want *you*!"

"Tadhg," Joey said in a low, warning tone, panic lighting his eyes. "Be quiet. I've got this."

"No, I won't be quiet, Joe," Tadhg choked out, filled with more rage than any eleven-year-old boy should be carrying. "He's the fucking problem in this family and he needs to hear it."

"Get him out of my sight!" Dad roared, turning his attention to Mam, who was hovering slightly apart from both of them. "Now, Marie!" Dad bellowed, pointing a finger at her. "Get him out before I do away with the little bastard."

"I'd like to see you fucking try," Joey taunted, shifting both Ollie and Sean, who were clinging to his sides, behind him.

"No!" Sniffling, Mam moved to stand between our father and Joey. "*You* need to go."

Dad took a step toward her and Mam automatically cowered away, hands shooting out in front of her face.

It was the epitome of pathetic.

None of us ever had a fighting chance with these people. How could love and fear coexist in one human heart? How could she *love* him when she feared him so much?

"What did you say to me?" he hissed, turning his fury on our mother. "What the *fuck* did you say to me!"

"Leave," Mam choked out, shaking from head to toe as she backed up a couple of steps. "It's over, Teddy. I'm done—we're done. I can't... I need you to *go away!*"

"You're done?" Dad sneered, glaring at her. "You think you're leaving me?" He laughed cruelly. "You're mine, Marie. Do ya hear me? You're fucking mine." He took another step toward my mother. "Think you can throw me out? Walk away from me?"

"Just go," Mam choked out. "I want you gone, Teddy! Get out of our lives."

"You think you have a life without me? You are *nothing* without me, bitch!" Dad roared, eyes wild and full of unrestrained madness. "The only way you're leaving me is in a box, girl! I'll kill you before I let you leave me. Do ya hear me? I'll burn this fucking house to the ground with you and your cunts in it before I let you go."

"Stop." A small cry tore from Ollie's throat as he clutched Joey's leg. "Make him stop," he sobbed, clinging to our brother as if he held all the answers.

"Please."

"Are you a girl now?" Dad demanded, looking disgusted. "Toughen up, Ollie, ya little bollox!"

"That's enough, Teddy!" Mam screamed, clutching her chest. "Get out!"

"This is my fucking house," Dad roared back. "I'm going nowhere!"

"That's fine," Joey stated in a cool tone before turning to look at our brothers. "Ollie, go outside and take Sean with you." Sliding his hand into his jeans pocket, Joey pulled out his phone and handed it to him. "Here—take this and phone Aoife, okay? Call her up and she'll come get us."

"No, no, no!" Mam began to panic. "Joey, please, don't take them away from me."

Nodding once, Ollie caught ahold of Sean's hand and hurried from the kitchen, running past the outstretched arms of our mother without hesitation. At nine and three years old, they didn't trust her. Because even at their tender young ages, they knew that whether she meant to or not, their mother would inevitably let them down.

"I told him to go. I told him, Joey. Please, I choose you. Of course, *of course*, I choose you!" Hurrying toward my brother, Mam fisted Joey's hoodie in her frail hands and looked up at him. "Please don't do this... Please, Joey. Don't take my children."

"What good are you to them when you can't keep them safe?" Joey demanded, unmoving. His voice was shaking, though, as our mother clung to him, begging him for one more chance to let us down. "You're a fucking ghost in this house," he bit out. "You're wallpaper, Mam. A mouse." He ran a shaky hand through his blond hair and hissed, "You are *not good* for us!"

"Joey, wait—wait! Please don't do this." Clutching my brother's hands, she dropped to her knees and began to beg. "Don't take them from me."

"I can't leave them here," Joey choked out, chest heaving. "And you've made your choice."

"You don't understand," she cried, shaking her head. "You don't see."

"Then get up, Mam," Joey choked out, pleading. "Get up off your knees and walk *out* of this house with me."

"I can't." Shaking her head, Mam exhaled a broken sob. "He'll kill me."

"Then die" was all Joey replied, tone void of all emotion.

"Let him go, Marie," Dad barked, tone laced with malice. "He'll be back with his tail between his legs. Cunt is useless. Won't survive a day on his own—"

"Shut up!" Mam screamed, louder than I had ever heard her. Sniffling, she scrambled to her feet and swung around to glare at Dad. "Just shut up! This is all your fault. You've ruined my life. You've destroyed my children. You're a fucking madman—"

Whack.

Our mother's words morphed into a wailed cry as our father's fist connected full force with her face. She dropped to the floor like a sack of stones.

"Think you can talk to me like that?" Dad snarled, glowering down at Mam. "You're the worst of the lot, you fucking whore!"

It took Joey all of two seconds to backtrack on all he had just said, because his hands shot out as he roughly shoved Dad away from her. "Keep your fucking hands off my mother." He shoved him hard again. "Don't touch her!" Crouching down, Joey attempted to pull Mam to her feet. "Mam, please—" His voice cracked as he knelt on the floor and brushed her hair back off her face. "Just *walk away* from him." He cupped her face in his bloodied hands. "We'll figure something out, okay? We'll sort this, but we can't stay here. I'll take care of you—"

"Who the fuck do you think you are?" Dad roared menacingly, lunging for Joey. "Think you know it all, boy? Think you're better than me?" Clamping his huge hand around the back of Joey's neck, he forced him onto his knees. "Think you can take her away from me? She's going nowhere!" Dad pressed down harder, shoving Joey's forehead to the tiled floor. "I told you I'd put manners on you, ya ungrateful little bastard." He pressed his knee into Joey's lower back, rendering him helpless. "Think you're a man now, boy? Show your mother what kind of a man you are, crying on your knees like a little bitch."

"Stop it!" Mam screamed and pulled at my father's shoulders. "Get off him, Teddy."

"I'm more of a man than you," Joey hissed, voice muffled from the force it was taking to hold himself up with the weight of our father looming over him.

"Oh, you think so?" Dad grabbed a fistful of Joey's hair, pulled back, and then slammed his face into the tiles. "You're a piece of shit, boy."

Spitting out a mouthful of blood, Joey planted his hands on the tiles once more and heaved his body up, desperately trying and failing to break free of

our father's hold as he continued to slam Joey's face against the tiles. The sound of bone crunching filled my ears and my stomach churned, but Joey refused to give in. "That all you got?" He bared his teeth, blood glistening over white, as he snarled and fought wildly against Dad's hold. "You're losing your touch, old man!"

"Get off him!" Mam continued to scream as she pulled at Dad's shoulders. "Teddy, you're going to kill him!"

"Good!" Dad roared, throwing an arm back and knocking Mam away once more. "And you're next, ya turncoat whore!"

Trembling violently, I needed to do something, but I *couldn't*. I couldn't get my limbs to *move*. I didn't have the strength left inside of me to get back up.

Years of mistreatment, mixed with the beating I had just taken, had driven me to the point where at sixteen years old, I couldn't stand on my own two feet.

Pathetic, I remained slumped on the chair where Joey had set me, with blood flowing freely down my face and my heart slowing in my chest.

I was dying, I realized. That, or my body had gone into shock. Either way, something was very wrong with me, and I couldn't help the one person who had never failed to help me. With my head spinning wildly, I watched through glazed eyes as Joey managed to twist his body sideways, only for them to both end up wrestling on the floor.

My heart plummeted into the pit of my stomach when Dad came out on top once more. With his hand curled around Joey's throat, he closed his fist and began to hit him repeatedly in the face. Joey bucked wildly beneath him, desperately trying to get out from under him, but it was no use. Our father had at least forty pounds on him.

He's going to die, the fire in my heart screamed. Save him.

I tried.

Panic-ridden, I tried to get to Joey, but I just couldn't move. I felt like I had been paralyzed.

"Help her," I could hear Joey strangle out, coughing and spluttering. "Fucking help her!"

Help who?

Help who, Joe?

Every few seconds my vision went blank, and I knew that meant I must be drifting in and out of consciousness. I also knew that this was a bad sign, alerting me to the fact that he had hurt me worse than before.

So much worse.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Tadhg move for the cupboard. Yanking open one of the drawers, he withdrew a knife, and without a hint of hesitation, he lunged.

Do it. I sent a silent plea to the heavens above to give my brother the courage to *just do it*.

"Get off my brother!" Tadhg screamed as he held the tip of the knife to our father's throat, hand steady as a rock, eyes locked on our father.

"Tadhg, put down the knife," Mam cried, moving slowly toward him. "Please, baby."

"Fuck you," Tadhg shot back, never taking his eyes off our father. "Get. Off. My. Brother."

Do it, Tadhg, I silently prayed, *make him stop forever.*

"Don't be stupid, boy." Dad laughed, but there was no humor in his voice now—just apprehension.

Good.

Be afraid.

"I'm not stupid," Tadhg replied, voice deathly cold. "And I'm not Joey." He stepped closer, pressing the tip of the knife that bit closer. "I won't stop because Shannon says so."

My heart broke.

He was eleven years old and this was what they had turned him into. I was praying for him to kill our father, to finish this off. What the hell did that make me?

A part of me wanted to beg my brother to just stick that knife through me so I could be done with it all. They were all so strong and I was weak. I wasn't tough enough. I couldn't bounce back like the rest of them.

I was defective.

"Tadhg," Joey panted from the floor, chest rising and falling quickly as he drew breath after desperate breath into his lungs, our father's hand still wrapped around his throat. "It's okay." His face was covered in blood, his nose

clearly broken again. Both of his hands were wrapped around the one hand Dad had pinning his throat. "Just take it easy—"

"It's not okay, Joe," Tadhg replied, voice void of all emotion. "None of this is okay."

"What are you going to do, boy?" Dad sneered, still straddling Joey, but his bloodshot eyes were full of anxiety and locked on my little brother. "Stab me?"

"Yes."

Calling his bluff, Dad reached a hand up to take the knife, but quickly flinched away as a trickle of blood ran down the side of his neck. "Jesus Christ, Tadhg!" he bellowed, Adam's apple bobbing nervously. "You cut me."

"This ends now," Tadhg replied, taking another step forward. "Get off my brother and get out of this house for good, or I'll slit your throat and you can die."

I wasn't sure if it was immense relief or bitter regret I felt when I watched my father release Joey and climb to his feet. A mixture of both, I suspected, though it was hard to form coherent thoughts anymore so I couldn't be sure.

Too tired to hold up my own body weight, I leaned forward and rested my cheek on the table. Taking in quick, short breaths, I tried to hold still, to not move and jostle my bones.

Everything hurt so bad.

The taste of blood in my mouth, trickling down the back of my throat, made me gag. Shuddering, I whimpered from the reflex and just stopped moving altogether. I resigned myself to the sensation of it, to the metallic taste of copper on my tongue.

Feeling woozy and disconnected, I allowed my eyelids to flutter shut, blocking out their voices as they shouted at one another by concentrating on the erratic beat of my heart as it thundered in my ears.

"Fucking help her, will ya!"

Thump, thump, thump.

"I'm going to kill you, Marie."

Th-thump...thump, thump, thump.

"Get the fuck out!"

Thump...thump...thu...thump...

"You're a dead woman walking."

Thump...thump...thu...thump...

Door slamming.

Thuuuump...thu...thu...thump...

"I love you, Shannon like the river..."

Thump, thump, thump, thump...

Devastation flooded my body, joined by deep regret. Johnny's face was a beacon of lost hope behind my closed eyelids as I accepted the hand I had been dealt.

Hot tears of bitterness and regret dripped from my lashes, splashing onto my cheeks and mixing with the dried blood.

I felt so sad, like I had been robbed. Maybe in another life things could have been different. I could have been happy.

"I think I need you for keeps..."

"What's wrong with her?" I heard someone demand then, someone who sounded an awful lot like Joey's girlfriend, Aoife. "Why is she bleeding out of her mouth?"

"Don't look so scared. I won't hurt you..."

"Shannon! Shannon! Jesus Christ, do something!"

"Tell me who put their hands on you and I'll make it better..."

"Look what you've done!" I heard my mother scream.

"I'll look after you..."

"Call an ambulance."

"You're safe with me..."

"She's dying. He killed my sister. And you're doing nothing!"

"I won't let you fall... It's okay, I've got you..."

"Call a fucking ambulance!"

"Stay with me..."

I could feel the warmth of two hands against my face and reveled in the gentle touch. "Can you hear me?" Joey's voice filled my ears. "I'm going to get you out of here, okay?"

"Just keep kissing me..."

"Shannon, can you hear me?"

"I love you, Shannon like the river..."

"Shan?" I felt something poke at my eyeball then, Joey's fingers, I realized, as he lifted my lids. "Shannon, come on, talk to me."

Eyelids fluttering open, I forced myself to focus on his terrified-looking face as he stared right back at me. "I'm going to get you help, okay?" He exhaled a ragged breath. "The ambulance is on the way."

I opened my mouth to respond but nothing came out. My lips couldn't form the words I needed.

"Shannon, breathe." My mother crouched in front of me then, kneeling beside Joey's feet, touching my face with one hand as she held a bag of frozen peas to my chest with the other. "Breathe, Shannon," she kept repeating. "Breathe, baby."

Was it helping? Was it making it worse?

I didn't know.

I only knew that I *couldn't* breathe. The scariest thing was that I didn't care. I wasn't panicking. I wasn't scared.

I was just...done.

"Shan," Joey repeated, voice rising as fear enveloped his features. "Shannon, please." Crouching down in front of me, he placed both hands on my shoulders and gently shook me. "Jesus Christ, Shannon, talk to me!"

I tried, but nothing came out.

Coughing, I began to gag against the foreign metallic taste as blood spilled out of my mouth in a thick, oozy gush.

My head lolled to one side, brought back to an upright position when Joey held my face in his hands. "Aoife, give me your keys," he choked out, green eyes glued to mine. Releasing my face, he moved out of sight. "I'll take her myself."

"Joey, don't move her. She could have internal—"

"Give me the fucking keys, baby!"

Without the strength of his hands holding me up, I automatically slumped forward, only to sag heavily against my mother.

"It's okay," she whispered, wrapping her arms around me, fingers moving through my hair. "Everything's going to be fine."

I wished I could hold my own weight and not lean on my mother. I didn't want her touch but I had nothing left inside of me.

The last thing I remembered before darkness enveloped me was my brother's touch as he folded me in his arms, followed by the sound of his voice as he whispered the words "Don't leave me" in my ear.