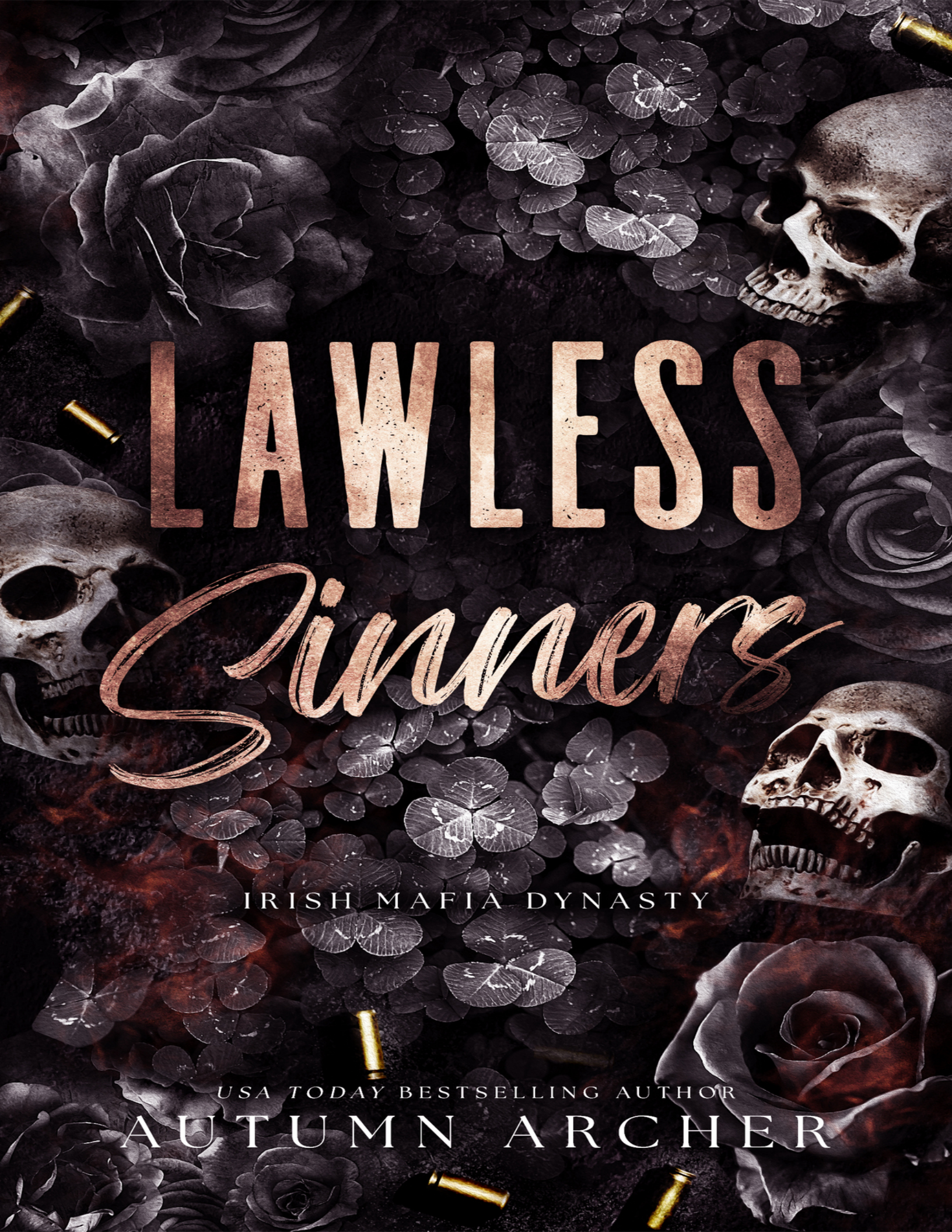

LAWLESS
Sinners
IRISH MAFIA DYNASTY
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
AUTUMN ARCHER

Lawless Sinners

Irish Mafia Dynasty

Book 2

Autumn Archer

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Chapter 1

Sera

Rain hammers the iron roof above me, turning the old barn into a metal drum full of damp bales, ancient machinery, and two dickheads who think black ski masks make them brave.

“Come on, fuck-face, untie me.” I wriggle my wrists, dragging a raw rope burn across my skin. “Or are ya scared a woman will beat the shit out of ya?”

“Fuck up, Tallon,” the taller one snaps.

The single bulb above me swings from a warped beam, light spilling over the dusty concrete floor, highlighting the wet tracks my boots made when the two men dragged me in here.

My hair sticks to my cheeks, and goosebumps cover my bare arms because my coat is still in the passenger footwell of my car, along with the yard keys and my phone.

“You’re on the Harrington payroll, right?” I ask, twisting my wrists in the hope they’ll break free, only for the rope to bite deeper. “Bringing me to a shitty barn instead of putting a bullet in my head on the road tells me someone wants to send a message, and Alasdair never gets his hands dirty unless there’s applause waiting.”

The shorter guy steps in fast and jams the barrel of his gun under my chin. The metal jabs deeper as he forces my head back, sending an ache through my jaw.

“Keep bitchin’ all ya want,” he grits. “You’re not going anywhere unless it’s an early grave.”

Charming.

I hold his stare through the holes in the mask and spit at him.

When he moves back, I brace on one foot and let the rope take my weight as I drive my knee up to slam into his balls. The hit makes him grunt as he creases forward.

“You’ll need the grave,” I laugh. “I’m not going anywhere quietly.”

Pride is a stupid thing to keep feeding when I’m hung from a hook, but I’ve never been good at letting it starve.

The other guy moves in, but the barn door slides open before he does anything.

Wind whips up the rain, pushing it inside so the bulb swings like a pendulum.

Both men straighten on instinct, and that gives away more than the expensive black dress shirt, tailored trousers, and build of the third masked man walking toward us.

Rain clings to his shirt as he crosses the barn and shoves an old wooden stool closer with the toe of his polished shoe.

In silence, he takes his time to sit in front of me while the other two men wait.

“Watch the lane,” he orders. “Both of you.”

My pulse kicks at the deep tone of his voice, and I hate the little shiver that rushes over my scalp because of the texture of it.

The two men leave, boots scuffing over dirt, and the dusk beyond the door swallows them almost immediately.

Dogs bark somewhere close by, then farther away another dog answers.

From inside the barn, I should hear the regular hustle of a working yard, staff calling out, horses restless in their stalls, engines turning over, but there’s only pelting rain, barking and rusted machinery where a business should be.

This isn’t a ransom lift. It’s personal.

And whoever ordered it is either stupid, desperate, or too protected to care that my three brothers will turn Black Heath inside out once they realize I’m gone.

The man in front of me watches the rope bite deeper instead of telling me to stop yanking.

His dark gaze wanders to my T-shirt, soaked through and hitched high so the skin above my jeans is on show.

His attention stays there while I thrash, then ever so slowly lifts to my face.

“So the Tallons thought they could snatch Keira Harrington from the gala and there wouldn’t be consequences?”

His voice is rich and familiar, carrying just enough amusement to make my teeth lock.

“I didn’t snatch anyone,” I say. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

His head tilts slightly.

“You know exactly what I’m talking about, Sera Tallon.”

I hate that the mask hides his expression and all I get are intense dark eyes that scrape over the bruise forming at my cheekbone before flicking to the grazed skin on my knuckles, where I caught one of his men in the mouth before they tied my wrists.

“Oh yeah?” I bare my teeth. “And who are you?”

“I’m the one asking the questions,” he says. “If I were you, I’d start talking.”

“What do ya want me to talk about?” I ask, twisting my wrists again, because if he’s focused on my mouth, he might not be watching my hands. “The horrendous weather we’re experiencing this evening? Or shall we go deeper into the sad little psyche of a man who needs a mask before he can act big and powerful?”

His laugh is deep and rough enough to hold my attention, and I hate that I noticed.

“Do the Tallons always talk this much when they’re losing?”

My brows hitch. “Do Alasdair’s men always mistake money for class?”

“You’re deflecting,” he says. “Do you really expect me to believe you had no part in it?”

“I expect ya to use your brain, but I’m willing to accept that might be asking too much from a guy like you.”

His eyes narrow when I smile at him.

“That’s a brave tone for someone hanging in my barn.”

“Your barn?” I glance up at the leaking tin, then back at him. “Christ, times must be hard. Are your nice clothes from a thrift store?”

His stare holds on mine, and the lack of reaction annoys me more than a threat would.

“Harringtons don’t send men dressed like you to a place like this unless someone’s embarrassed them,” I say, letting my gaze pass over the open collar of his black shirt and lower to the gold watch half-hidden beneath his

cuff. “So you’re either his top man, or you’re pretending to be something you’re not.”

“That attitude will get you in trouble one of these days, Sera.” He says my name as if he owns the sound of it, and my fingers curl.

I lift my chin and stare right at him. “Take off the mask and say that again.”

He leans forward on the stool, elbows resting on his thighs. “You think my face changes your situation?”

“I think a man who hides is weak.”

Outside, a dog barks again, and somewhere past the barn, a man shouts for it to shut up.

I drag a breath through my nose. “I grew up with three brothers. I can handle you.”

He checks his watch with an air of boredom, then pins me with those dark eyes of his. “Can you?”

I glare at him. “Take it off.”

For a moment, he gives me nothing but the blank black shape of the mask and those eyes fixed through it.

Then he rises, and my pulse picks up.

In a few strides he’s before me, close enough for his body heat to press against the wet chill around my skin and for his clean scent of rain-soaked cotton and expensive cologne to pierce through the barn rot.

“Say please.”

Another story, whenever you're ready.

Come to Lokepub to pick your next novel.

“That word isn’t in my vocabulary,” I say. “But *fuck you* and *dickhead* are right at the top, if you’re taking requests.”

The corners of his eyes crease. “You always this mouthy when you're at someone else's mercy?”

“Only for the ugly ones.”

His hand closes around my jaw before I can pull another breath, firm enough to still me, careful enough that I can't call it pain. “Then you should hope I keep the mask on.”

“Nah,” I counter. “I wanna see the coward hiding behind a stupid balaclava because he’s too scared to own his mistake.”

“Mistake?” he says, bringing his face closer. “The last man who spoke to me like that left this yard in the back of a livestock trailer.”

“Wow… A coward with threats. How original.” I strain away. “Then by all means, please show me your face so I can add ugly to your assets as well.”

When he releases me, he slides his fingers under the edge of the mask and drags it off.

I expect power to come with it, a rush of satisfaction, and the clean little victory of making a man obey me, but then Fionn Vaughn Harrington stands before me with his dark hair mussed from the ski mask and a shadow along his jaw.

The victory withers before I can enjoy it.

Of all the Harrington men Alasdair could have sent, he chose his son, the one I’ve only ever glanced at because I was never allowed to stare too long.

And God, his face isn’t the only issue, I tell myself, while my attention lingers on his mouth. It’s the fact that a man like him knows exactly what his looks can excuse, and I’ve spent my life hating his family.

“There,” he says, dropping the balaclava onto the stool. “An informed insult is always better. And being here is a serious fucking problem for you.”

His sleeve rides up when he runs a hand through his hair, and I catch the edge of a tattoo curling around his wrist.

I’ve seen him across rooms before, at wakes and hotel bars, but never this close. Tallons and Harringtons never share the same space for long.

My fingers flex above my head, useless and half-numb. My calves burn from keeping me balanced on the balls of my feet, and whenever my heels dip, the rope bites deeper into my wrists.

“Has the penny dropped?” he asks. “Your brothers kidnapped my sister, and now you’re out here in the middle of nowhere with me.”

“Am I meant to be impressed by your big villain reveal?”

He shakes his head, all amusement gone. “Brave, considering you don’t know what happens next.”

“Ya think?” I hiss. “How about you untie me, and we’ll see how that plan of yours unfolds. I’ll have ya face down in the dirt, Fionn.”

His mouth curves and his cheek dimples. “All that fighting talk just to convince me you’re not afraid.”

“And you’re confusing fear with boredom.”

His gaze drops to my throat, to the pulse beneath rain-cold skin giving me away, and when he looks into my eyes again, the amusement has thinned into something far more certain.

“Then we’ll work on that.”

Fionn steps in and reaches above my head, tugging at the knots. I jerk my knee up, but he blocks the movement with his thigh against mine.

As he stands too close, I turn my face away from his throat because noticing how good a Harrington smells is unforgivable.

When my arms drop, they’re stiff and achy as I clench my fist and swing at him, aiming for his jaw with everything I have.

I don’t want to miss a good opportunity.

As if expecting it, he catches my wrist, stopping the punch before it lands.

His grip locks around me, his strength more than I’d anticipated. Locked in place before him, our gazes clash, and a hot thread of fury burns through me.

He angles me around, driving me back until my ass hits a thick post and his body crowds the space in front of mine.

Fionn lowers his face inches from mine. “Point made. Try that again, and I stop being generous.”

His gaze lingers at my mouth for a beat, then returns to my eyes as if he has dragged it back by force.

“Shall we make this interesting?”

“Like your teeth hitting the floor?”

His grip loosens, but he doesn’t let go. “I’ll give you the count of ten.”

My mouth dries. “To do what?”

“Try to escape,” he says. “I’m giving you a head start.”

“Why?”

I hate that my breath comes faster, that every bruised part of me wakes for the challenge, because I’ve never been good at letting snobby men get

the better of me.

“Because you’re so certain you can handle me. And I’m going to prove you wrong.”

I twist my wrists, and he allows the first inch of freedom before trapping me again, making me fight for the rest.

“You won’t catch me,” I grit, hating the roughness in my voice.

“I will.” He takes off his watch and slips it into his pocket. “I guarantee it.”

I lean closer, tugging my wrists away from him.

“Even if you do, I’ll win the fight,” I say. “I guarantee that.”

His attention drops to my mouth, and for one reckless second he smiles as if he knows how fast I’m about to run, the arrogant bastard, and every stubborn part of me locks onto the need to prove him wrong before I’ve even reached the door.

Then I remember who he is and stomp my boot down on top of his shoe. I take a few steps back. Then another.

His eyes sharpen, and that’s when I smile, stick up my middle finger and bolt for the barn door.

Behind me, he laughs, and the rumble follows me outside.

Icy rain hits my face, and I dart into the yard with my wrists burning, my lungs dragging in wet air. Fionn Harrington’s voice carries in the wind behind me.

“Run faster, little wild thing.”

I make it past the barn, past a broken gate and a machinery graveyard choked with weeds.

The lane ahead is blocked by a moonlit black Range Rover with its lights off and two men standing on either side of it.

When I finally check over my shoulder, Fionn’s mask is on, and he’s closing in behind me through the shadows.

A breathless laugh catches in my burning throat, and I force more speed from my aching legs as he drives me deeper into unknown Harrington territory.

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Chapter 2

Sera

The first rule of running is to never look back.

I know that.

Every Tallon kid knew that before we learned how to spell our own name. But fuck, there's something about knowing he's chasing me that keeps me checking over my shoulder.

Fionn's fast and he's getting closer, relentless beneath the dead silver wash of the moon.

I wade through tall crops, pushing ahead and thinking fast. The main lane is somewhere behind me. I sprinted across the yard, then ducked through a gap in the hedge.

There should be a road nearby if I circle around. Maybe another house. Witnesses… Or people paid to keep quiet.

Fuck, there's only darkness and sprawling land.

The next field rolls unevenly under my boots, and thorny hedges appear as thick blocks.

I swallow the panic before it rises because that makes people stupid. They scream when they should listen, freeze when they should run like hell, and beg when they should bite.

And I sure as fuck won't beg Fionn Harrington for anything.

I veer right on instinct, and he follows. Something hot and hateful flashes under my ribs because he's not chasing like a man trying to catch a woman.

He's hunting me.

Ahead, there's a stone wall stretching the breadth of the horizon. Low, old, built from gray stone slick with moss, rising out of the grass.

I throw myself at it, trying hard to climb, but the stones are slippery, and the top is higher than I thought.

On my next breath, a powerful arm clamps around my waist.

“I should be angry,” he says. “Instead, I’m impressed you made it this far.”

I twist before he can lock his hold, driving my elbow into his ribs. His breath grunts against my ear and satisfaction sparks through the adrenaline as he takes us both down.

We hit the ground in a brutal roll of mud, grass, and limbs. The air leaves my lungs in a gasp and a dull ache spreads through my shoulder.

“You almost made me work for it,” he says as his weight comes over mine, heavy but controlled, while his hand catches the back of my head to ease its fall.

“I don’t need your help, Harrington,” I hiss, squirming and shoving.

He catches one of my wrists before I can rake my nails across his face, then the other when I try to drive my fist into his throat.

“Let go of me.”

“No.”

He says it against the side of my face, breath warm through the mask, and moves before I can use my knee to lever him off.

“What would be the point in that, little wild thing?”

I try to throw my head into his face only to watch him duck, moving just in time so I headbutt his shoulder instead.

Damn, he’s too quick. I’m surprised that Alasdair's preppy son can take damage and absorb it. I always thought private school boys were wimps compared to my brothers.

“If you’re gonna fight me, do it like a man.”

My arm pulls free of him for barely a heartbeat, but it’s enough to grab the edge of the balaclava and drag it up and over his head.

Moonlight shadows one half of his face, and I suddenly wish I’d left it on him. Having Fionn above me is worse.

The mask made him simple. A threat to fight and hurt. But his face gives the danger striking features and eyes that pull me in.

“Happy now?” he mutters, breathing hard. “I’m starting to think you like my face.”

“There’s nothing about you I like.”

His chest moves against mine each time he inhales, and the heat of him seeps through the wet cold.

Fear tangles with the closeness of him and the smell of rain, earth and that rich cologne lacing his damp skin.

A strong thigh pins mine, his hands clamp my wrists above my head, and God help me, my body doesn’t know the difference between danger and desire right now.

And I hate him for it, although I hate myself more.

A muscle jumps in his jaw.

He lowers his face, bringing his mouth close to mine. “Say, ‘you caught me, Fionn Harrington.’”

“Never.”

For a few brutal seconds, the fight turns into something else by accident. My hips drive up as I try to throw him off, his body bears down to stop me, and the drag of him lands so precisely on my clit through the wet denim that my breath tears in half.

I do it again before sense catches up. Chase the pressure like an animal. And when I realize what I’ve done, shame floods in behind the heat and does absolutely nothing to cool it.

He’s aware of it too. Every muscle in him locks, and the hard length of his dick settles against me exactly where I’m aching, thick through his soaked trousers so my body registers the hardness before my brain gets a chance to refuse it.

Instead of getting off to pretend the chase and the fight haven’t dragged something raw out of us, he holds my wrists tighter and lets me feel exactly what I’ve done to him.

“Typical Tallon,” he says. “Still trying to win when I've caught you.”

My cheeks flame because I should be disgusted, and I am, but disgust does nothing for the heat pooling low in my belly or the wet, insistent throb between my thighs that’s been building since he put his hands on me in that barn.

His eyes stay locked on mine, his jaw clenched as if control is something he’s biting in two.

“You’re so fucked in the head, Fionn,” I say, because if I can make it ugly, I can survive it. “Bet your da would be proud to know chasing women through the dark gets your dick this hard.”

His pupils flare, and when his mouth comes close to mine, I think our lips are going to touch.

“There’s a first time for everything,” he says, the words dragging over my mouth with his breath.

My throat tightens. I try to laugh, but it comes out broken.

“Truth is, little wild thing,” he says, voice dropping to a rumble that vibrates through my chest, “if you wanted saving, you would’ve run for the road. Instead, you led me out here… where no one can hear what happens when I catch you.”

I yank against his grip, nails digging into his wrists. “Get the fuck off me, Harrington.”

“Make me,” he taunts.

I buck harder, hips snapping up, only this time the thick ridge of his dick drags right over my clit through our clothes. The whimper that spills out of me isn’t a fighting sound. It’s a wrecked groan that’s very unmistakable.

My hips chase him for it. Twice. Three times. Riding the ridge of him through my denim like I’ve got no say in what my own body does, and God help me, I don’t.

I need more. That’s the ugly truth of it, lying in the mud with rain running into my mouth. Not less of him. More. Harder. Bare. His hand between my legs instead of his hipbone, his fingers instead of the seam of my jeans, and it’s so wrong that my eyes sting with it while I keep rolling up into him anyway.

“Fight me,” he bites out. “Come on, little wild thing. Or were you all talk back in the barn?”

His mouth moves dangerously close again. We both take deep, heavy breaths, the possibilities throbbing through the contact until I shove my shoulder into his chest and hook my leg around his.

Using his weight, and the half a beat of arrogance in his eyes against him, I force us to roll.

The ground knocks a grunt out of him, and then I’m straddling his waist with my knees digging into the wet earth.

For a heartbeat, I study what he looks like beneath me, breathing hard, rain tracking his face, eyes black with fury and something else.

Then his hands rip free and clamp around my hips, dragging me over his hard dick, grinding me on top of him so my clit swells and the victory

leaves my lungs entirely.

My body betrays me with a broken whimper I was too late to swallow. His grip tightens, and he does it again, slower this time, hauling me the full length of him, making sure he feels the helpless roll of my hips before I can pretend it's part of the fight.

My thighs shake around his waist. Four more of those, and I'd come apart on top of him in a wet field, fully clothed, and we both know it.

"Fuck you," I hiss, but my voice cracks.

He laughs under his breath. "I think you left your pride in the barn and now there's only the truth."

"You want the truth, huh?" I grit. "Like how much I hate you."

His expression morphs into a wicked, feral grin.

In one powerful surge, he flips us again, using his weight and strength to get the upper hand. He's back on top in a heartbeat, heavier now, more insistent.

His hips settle between my thighs, pressing me open as he snares both of my wrists in one large hand and yanks them above my head. The new angle puts him flush against my clit, and my whole body clenches around nothing.

"Nice try," he says, though he's panting. "But you'll never get the better of me. Tell me to stop."

He's gone completely still above me, waiting, sitting right there between us in the rain. One word, and he gets off me. I know it. He knows I know it.

Though I don't refuse him.

"That's what I thought," he breathes.

We're inches apart, bodies pressed and hips grinding together in the dirt. I arch into it, a needy little moan breaking free, and my legs fall open wider for him without a single instruction. Traitors, both of them.

His hips settle heavier, and he rolls again, studying my face the whole way through.

"Something tells me you like being caught," he says. "You ran so well, but you kept looking back like you were waiting for the inevitable."

"Jesus, you're so full of yourself."

I hate the shiver that runs through me when his hand moves under my T-shirt, up over my ribs, and his fingers find the soaked cotton of my bra and drag the cup down until my nipple pulls free into the cold.

And just when his lips hover close to mine, and he rolls my nipple between his thumb and finger, pinching it so hard that my back leaves the ground, and I make a whimper I'll be hearing in my head for weeks, a long, eerie howl carries through the night.

The barking is distant but coming fast, joined by another and another until all we can hear are the dogs.

"For fuck's sake." Fionn rears back.

The change in him is instant; whatever wrongful heat or tension had sparked in the moment vanishes beneath a surge of cold, controlled rage.

"Those assholes let the fucking dogs out."

He withdraws his hand, releases my wrists and squeezes my jaw.

"This isn't the part where I save you, little wild thing." His thumb presses into my cheek, forcing my face up. "And it sure as fuck isn't the part where I give you what you want."

The fucker is right. I'm throbbing for him while I stare him dead in the eye and lie. "The only thing I want is your blood on my hands and your family's name ruined."

"If your brothers have hurt my sister, everything the Tallons own will burn."

His eyes darken, and then he's off me. I roll to my side, fix my bra and push up, but my legs are shaky for some reason, and I stumble.

Fionn catches my arm, his fingers wrapping tight, but he doesn't look at me when he does it.

"Don't touch me." I shake his hand off.

Three dogs tear through the dark like hounds released from hell.

My heart pounds in my chest, and I take a step back. I know dogs. I love dogs, but these aren't cuddly pets. They're trained to hunt, attack, maybe even kill on command.

Fionn steps in front of me. "Down."

The dogs skid, their paws ripping the wet grass. One drops to its belly. The other two freeze, heads low, ears forward, bodies vibrating with the need to obey and the instinct to attack.

My pulse trips, and I hate that he put himself between them and me. Fear I can forgive myself for but having an attraction to the enemy is harder to excuse.

He angles back to me, reaches behind his waistband and pulls out a gun.

"Walk," he says, nodding toward the distant small holding.

I look from the gun to him. “So, you’ve gone from dry humping to threatening to shoot me? I’m guessing you're single.”

His eyes move over me as he shakes his head. “Even if I wasn’t already making future plans, I still wouldn’t want you.”

I swallow hard, not sure why the insult hurts, so I laugh it off and rebuild the walls I live behind. “Oh please, Fionn. If you were the last man on earth, and I was desperate, I’d still avoid you like an STD.”

“Start walking, Tallon.”

He keeps close behind me, the dogs moving at his command in a silent formation that makes my skin prickle.

The barn grows out of the dark ahead, moonlight bleeding across the yard. Fionn’s hand closes around the back of my neck, and he drags me closer, his mouth brushing against my ear.

“Start something and you’d better be ready to finish it.”

My skin tightens beneath his fingers. “I’ll happily finish it.”

He ushers me into the barn, where the air is warmer. The wind slips through the gaps, whistling and rattling loose boards.

Fionn removes the gun from my side and lets it hang by his hip.

“Who opened the kennels?”

He peels off his dirty shirt with one hand and tosses it onto a bale of hay.

My thoughts fail for half a second.

The man is built with strength that keeps its worst intentions hidden until it’s too late. He’s got smooth muscles across his broad shoulders and tattoos crawling over one arm and along his ribs.

There’s mud on his stomach where his shirt tails rode up when we wrestled, a red scrape near his collarbone, and a bruise blooming beneath his ribs all because of me.

I smile at the sight of it, then my chest tightens because I’m staring, gawking at the carved planes of his abdomen and all the ink.

As if sensing my inspection, his gaze snaps to mine, catching my eyes all over him.

“I asked a question,” Fionn says to the men, his gaze locked onto mine. “Who the fuck let the dogs out?”

The masked man by the door clears his throat. “We thought she’d escaped. The dogs would turn her back.”

The silence stretches for an uncomfortable few seconds before Fionn looks away from me and steps toward him, his gun tight in his hand.

“Did I give the order?” he asks.

The man tries to recover. “She’s a Tallon.”

“She was running blind across my land with my dogs behind her,” he says. “And you know what happens when dogs take a runner in the dark?”

The man doesn’t answer.

“They don’t bring her back neat and breathing because you got impatient.”

The man by the table swallows. “I thought—”

“You didn’t think,” Fionn bites out. “Her brothers have Keira. And having a Tallon turn up dead would risk my sister's life.”

My stomach drops.

Bastard.

I take one step back while Fionn’s attention stays with the man by the door, the argument becoming the perfect distraction.

There must be another way out.

“You let my dogs loose without my order,” Fionn says. “How about I put you in the field and see how fast you make it to the wall.”

When I take one more step, a hand clamps over my mouth from behind.

The other catches my hair and yanks my head back so hard my scalp burns. My scream dies under a rough palm, and before I can bite down, cold metal slides against my throat.

“Don’t fucking move, Tallon,” the man mutters.

His breath saws against my cheeks, and his palm seals harder over my mouth when I try to scream.

Despite the knife in his hand being sharp, his elbow is flared because he’s more interested in scaring me than holding me properly.

If I drop my weight, he’ll pull up to keep the blade at my throat. And if he does that, his ribs will open, and I’ll have half a second.

The palm over my mouth slips a fraction as the masked man adjusts his grip, and I seize the opportunity, angling my head and biting hard on the exposed flesh of his hand.

He jerks, and his loud curse makes Fionn turn as I clamp both hands around the knife and drive my heel into the masked man’s shin.

It all happens so fast.

His hand leaves my mouth to grab my hair, and I use the space, throwing my forehead into his nose with everything I have.

Once the blade falls, he lunges at me, but I catch him around the neck and lock my forearm hard across his throat.

I get behind him and drag him down with me, my teeth clenched against the pain in my ribs, my boots sliding through dirty straw.

His hands claw at me, but I sink the hold deeper and squeeze his neck in the crook of my arm until his breath starts to break apart in wet, panicked rasps.

A man shouts somewhere across the barn, but I barely register it until a boot catches my hip first, knocking me sideways.

The masked man standing over me kicks me again, harder this time, and my vision goes black at the edges.

Another kick comes, followed by a gunshot that tears through the barn. The man booting me drops where he stands.

Blood spreads black beneath him through the straw.

My ears ring as the man I'm choking convulses. I look up to find Fionn lowering his gun at the same time as the dogs outside start barking.

Headlights sweep across the barn walls in jagged strips of white. I hold on because Fionn Harrington just killed one of his own men.

The man thumps weakly at my forearm, and his body bucks once, twice, then he goes heavy against me.

He falls from my arms and slumps on the floor, mask twisted, eyes glassy and fixed on nothing.

I drag in a breath that scrapes all the way down.

My ribs ache, and my scalp pulses where he'd grabbed my hair. Mud dries cold against my skin, and blood sits warm under my nails.

Fionn stands there, gun in hand, chest bare, black mask still covering his face. The light slashes over his skin and the controlled rise and fall of his breathing.

"If I find out they've hurt my sister," he says. "I'll come for you."

"They haven't."

"Good." He slides his gun into the waistband of his trousers. "Then we're done here for now."

He crosses to the bale and grabs his dirty shirt, his eyes meeting mine through the mask for a racing heartbeat, then he turns and walks out.

I stay where I am, sitting between two dead men and let him leave.

Blood creeps through the straw toward my boots, and I press my thighs together against the ache that bastard left there.

What kind of unhinged woman enjoys being hunted through the dark by an armed man in tailored trousers, a starched shirt and a balaclava?

Apparently, I do.

And the bastard knows it.

“Sera!”

My brother’s voice carries from beyond the barn. I push to my feet as the doors fly open and Rafe bursts inside with his gun raised.

His gaze jumps from me to the bodies, and I press a hand to my chest as though the gunfire is the reason my heart is still racing.

He can never know it started before anyone pulled a trigger.

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Chapter 3

Fionn

Last night, my men dragged Sera Tallon off the street because her brothers stole my sister first.

A Tallon for a Harrington. That's how this works.

But fuck, the sight of her in that barn has followed me across the heath. Wet black hair stuck to pale skin, blood streaked across her knuckles, and not one trace of submission on her face.

Most people shrink once they're restrained. They bargain, beg, or cry.

Sera kept her glare strong and mouthed off to me as though the ropes around her wrists were my disadvantage.

The memory of her twisting beneath me spreads heat across the back of my neck. I crack the window lower and loosen my tie, letting the cold air blow through it.

Then I check my watch.

In a few minutes, I'll be on Tallon land.

Keira has been with those people long enough.

Eventually, Black Heath Stud comes into view with its rolling hills and wooden barns. I slam my foot on the accelerator and speed along the lane in a Harrington estate black Range Rover.

The gates are open when I reach them, and I drive straight through without an invitation.

A man leading a chestnut horse stops when I park. Two others pause mid-task, feed sacks half-lifted, their attention tracking the blacked-out windows.

I kill the engine but stay behind the wheel, assessing the yard before I step into it.

The main house sits farther back. Cottages dot the land behind it, and a long barn runs along my left with its doors wide open.

There's no sign of my sister or the little wild thing.

My thumb drags once along the steering wheel before I reach for the door.

I step into enemy territory, the wintry chill pushing through my suit as Tallon men begin moving closer.

Rafe appears from the barn, lights a cigarette, and fixes his gaze on my suit. The other Tallon, Dane, walks out of a stone building, props his shoulder against the door, and folds his arms.

He's checking for my security team, and rightly so. My men are close by, even though the Tallons know their backs are to the wall now.

The gun beneath my jacket rests against my ribs. Saint can decide how difficult this becomes.

Leaving his sister alive wasn't kindness. It proved I could reach a Tallon whenever I chose.

I close the car door and adjust my cuffs. "I'm here for my sister."

Movement inside the barn catches my attention. A figure passes between the stalls and disappears.

"I don't have all day," I say. "It's time for her to go home, where she belongs."

"You've got fucking nerve coming here, Harrington." Rafe takes a drag of his cigarette. "How about ya get back in the car and fuck off?"

"What part of collecting my sister didn't compute, Tallon?"

"Oh, really? You wanna talk about sisters, do ya?"

"Sure." I shrug. "How's Sera?"

Rafe chuckles. "She'll be better when she puts a hole in your face."

Saint appears on the gravel path beyond the barn, his broad shoulders stiff. My sister follows close behind him, sliding her arms into a jacket as she walks.

Her hair is loose and messy; a pink flush sits high in her cheeks. There aren't any visible bruises or signs of fear. In fact, she's never looked better.

Then Saint places his hand on her back, and the hairs on my nape rise.

Keira stays beside him. Worse, she glances up at him, and the softness in her eyes tells me everything I need to know.

She's fallen for his bullshit.

A few more Tallon men appear, spreading out around the yard. Whatever happens next, my sister will sleep in her own bed tonight. My father has already made sure of that.

I slide a hand into my trouser pocket and wait.

Seconds later, Sera storms across the yard with a shotgun raised. The corner of my mouth threatens to lift, but I contain it and cock a brow instead.

No one points a gun at me. I should reach for mine. Instead, I wait to see how close she comes.

Bruises darken one cheekbone, spreading beneath her pale skin. Her lower lip is split, the cut still fresh.

Both men responsible are dead, but my gaze still lingers on the damage they left behind.

None of her brothers have tried to kill me yet, which probably means she hasn't told them what happened in that barn.

Not all of it, anyway.

The barrel of her shotgun stops at my chest. "Off our land, Harrington."

Wind blows strands of black hair across her face, catching in her lashes. She doesn't blink. Even half-blinded, she keeps the barrel steady.

"Great to see you again, Sera." My gaze drags over her. "I see you've still got that hostile Tallon bite."

Her navy-blue irises are almost swallowed by dilated pupils.

"Yeah," she says, finger resting near the trigger, "and this time I'm the one with a gun."

The rough scrape of her voice pulls last night to the surface.

Wet mud beneath her back. Rain running down her face. Her pulse thrumming beneath my grip while she wrestled under me, every twist of her body dragging her against my cock.

Her stance holds, but her breathing changes when I drag my tongue across my lower lip.

Interesting.

Apparently, I'm not the only one remembering.

"I'm not here to finish what we started." I stare right at her, not flinching at the threat, "just here to collect my sister."

Saint moves toward me, and I turn my chest away from Sera's aim.

"You're not welcome in my yard, Harrington."

I look past him to where Keira waits, jacket buttoned now, arms folded in close to her stomach.

She spent the last year in France rebelling against our father's expectations, and now she's staring at Saint Tallon like he's her whole world.

"Seems like you enjoyed having my sister around."

Saint's jaw muscles clench.

"You've got three seconds," he says, "to turn around and get the fuck outta here."

He moves in front of me, blocking my view of Keira, placing himself between us without thinking about it. I'm here to take her home, and he's already making moves to stop me.

How tragic for him.

"She's a good girl, isn't she?" I check my watch again. "The one you never thought would be the threat."

When Sera clears her throat, it breaks my focus. I glance at her for a racing heartbeat before returning my attention to her big brother.

"How long has she been here now?" I ask. "Long enough to learn everything about you, your family, your business…"

Saint's brow creases.

"She's locked it all away and won't hesitate to tell her daddy every single weakness you have, Tallon," I continue. "Just like we were trained to do if we were ever taken. He'd stall, and she'd watch."

His eyes narrow, and he folds his arms over his chest, widening his stance.

Keira's face loses color. She remembers the lessons our father drilled into us years ago, preparing us for the day one of his enemies tried something this stupid.

Saint shakes his head. "You're full of shit."

I laugh.

He wants me to be lying. That's all I need.

"Oh shit, Saint…" I shake my head. "Did you fall for—"

His fist slams into my jaw.

The impact jerks my head sideways and drives me into the side of the Range Rover. My shoulder slams into glass. The blow knocks the breath from me, and a hot jolt shoots down my arm until my fingertips go numb.

Blood spreads when I run my tongue over the split inside my mouth and smile. Saint wants a fight, and I'm happy to give him one.

At the edge of my vision, Sera keeps the shotgun trained on me. Her aim remains steady, but a line forms between her brows as she watches us.

Then Saint closes in again.

I spit blood onto the gravel, pull up my defense, and drive my fist straight into his face.

He takes my punch and returns it harder. He might know how to throw a fist at his brothers, but I've been training since I was a kid.

Boots scuff the concrete underfoot as Tallon men circle. Saint catches me across the cheek, but I stay upright and swing again, knuckles connecting before he drives me into the fence.

"Stop it!" Keira yells.

Neither of us listens.

Saint catches me low, driving his shoulder into my middle before taking us both into the dirt. Gravel tears through the knee of my trousers and strips the skin beneath, grinding grit into the raw flesh.

A little pain has never distracted me from a fight, not even when his fist catches my mouth and tears the split open against my teeth.

"Saint!"

Keira rushes towards us, but Dane catches her around the middle and drags her back.

"Let me go!" she yells.

Saint's attention breaks for a fraction of a second.

I laugh through the blood coating my teeth and drive my fist into his jaw.

At that very moment, a gunshot cracks overhead, leaving my ears ringing.

Saint releases me and glances over his shoulder. I follow his attention to Sera, who's standing with the shotgun raised as smoke drifts from the barrel.

She fired to stop the fight. Whether she thought Saint needed saving or simply wanted the show to be over, I can't tell.

I wipe the blood from my mouth with the back of my hand and straighten my suit jacket.

Saint draws his gun, leveling it with my face. If he expects the weapon to make me flinch, he hasn't been paying attention.

“Saint—” Keira says.

He doesn’t lower it.

“Don’t.” Her voice is quieter this time, but it reaches him.

Sera lowers the shotgun as her gaze holds mine without apology or regret, carrying the same glare of challenge that she brought into the barn.

Just then, Saint’s phone rings. He ignores it and keeps the gun trained on me.

It rings again as I check my watch.

Bang on time.

He pulls it from his pocket without breaking eye contact. “What?”

Silence follows while he listens, and for the first time, his focus shifts away from me.

“Stop talking in riddles.”

Confusion creases his brow before his gaze cuts to Keira. Whoever is on the other end has just told him whose name is on the deeds.

He’s being told that the land he intended to take from our father belongs to her now.

To Keira.

Saint thought kidnapping Keira gave him leverage. Instead, the stretch of heathland beside the river now belongs to her, and the Gardaí already know she’s here.

The smallest smile pulls at my mouth.

Saint ends the call and lowers his gun. “Take your brother and get off my land.”

Keira rushes to him. Her hand closes around his, but Saint rips himself free.

“What’s going on?”

“Get off my land, Harrington.”

The venom in his voice stops her. Her lips part, but nothing comes out. Her eyes shine as she blinks quickly and reaches for him again.

“Saint—”

Their gazes lock.

“You’re not welcome here anymore. Leave.”

Keira’s fingers curl into her palm. “I don’t understand…” Her voice cracks. “What happened to me and you…”

Saint pivots and starts walking away while she’s still speaking.

“To us being—”

Her hand remains suspended between them before slowly falling to her side.

My sister has faced our father at his worst without lowering her chin. Now it trembles as she presses her lips together, fighting to keep herself composed in front of every man in the yard.

Saint will pay for that.

Keira presses a shaky hand to her stomach and walks towards the Range Rover without another word.

My attention returns to Sera.

“Time to go,” she says. “Next time I see ya, I won’t aim for the sky.”

“Point a gun at me again, and I’ll shoot you first.”

I wink, then turn my back on her and stroll towards the Range Rover.

Keira sits facing the passenger window, one hand pressed to her stomach. I climb behind the wheel and start the engine.

“Let’s get you home.”

“Yeah,” she whispers.

As we pass through the gates, I glance in the rear-view mirror. Sera remains in the middle of the yard, watching us leave with the shotgun lowered at her side.

Whatever happened between us ended in that field and with the two men we left behind.

She disappears from the mirror when the road bends.

Next time I see ya, I won’t aim for the sky.

The little wild thing should know better than to challenge me.

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Chapter 4

Sera

A week later

The doors behind me swing open, and I glance back to check the latest arrival. Another married horse breeder strolls inside, not Fionn.

Clonmore racecourse has opened its doors to the wealthiest breeders, councilors, and developers in the south of Ireland, along with several powerful men whose revenue streams aren't talked about.

I take a drink before Eilish notices me looking. I keep telling myself I only need warning if Fionn shows up, but that excuse stopped working four glances ago.

"The male stock isn't getting any better," my best friend murmurs next to my ear. "There goes my chances of a wild one-night stand."

The two of us walk another circuit of the crowded function suite, collecting filled champagne flutes as we go and avoiding creepy men who eye us up while standing beside their wives.

I lean closer to Eilish. "The guy beside the windows looks like his teeth come out at night."

Eilish follows my gaze to the suited man who's spent the last ten minutes boring people about his superior bloodline. "He keeps checking his reflection in the glass."

"Maybe he's making sure he still has one."

“Do you think he arrived on the Demeter?” Eilish considers him. “I mean, I’m all for a brooding man who waits centuries for my rebirth, but I’d prefer his teeth to be immortal too.”

I lift my glass towards him. “Welcome to Ireland, Count Dentula.”

Eilish chokes on her champagne and grabs my hand, squeezing it as the man looks across the room and smiles at us.

“Shit, he can hear us,” she giggles, angling away from the windows. “Fucking bat sonar.”

Her gold satin dress glints under the overhead lights and the diamonds at her throat cost way too much to even think about.

Everyone knows she’s a Kinnane.

More importantly, they know her da answers to the Irish mafia in Dublin, which prevents most of them from doing anything more ambitious than gawking.

We met in a bar when we were eighteen, back when she carried a fake ID with a different name, and I had blood under my thumbnail from breaking a lad’s nose behind the bins. She bought me a double vodka and said my punching technique lacked finesse.

I called her a stuck-up Kinnane princess. She called me a Tallon gobshite.

By the end of the night, we were drunk enough to sing together like feral cats and sober enough to know we’d chosen each other.

A breeder’s son detaches himself from the group at the bar and wanders toward us with the hopefulness of a man approaching the last lifeboat.

Eilish catches my wrist. “Keep walking.”

“He might be good in bed.”

“Aye, to bore me to sleep.”

We turn before he reaches us and head straight for the fireplace.

The black satin dress I’m wearing belongs to Eilish. She spends ninety percent of her life in designer gowns, while I own multiple pairs of work boots and fitted denim.

She never wears the same thing twice, so borrowing from her wardrobe is practically recycling.

Since my run in with Fionn, I’ve kept a low social profile. I considered giving this event a miss too, but Saint organized it, and the Tallons don’t hide.

Eilish helped me camouflage the fading mark along my cheekbone, and the dress hides the bruises covering the rest of me.

Some came from wrestling with Fionn Harrington. The others came from two men who regretted touching me.

Unfortunately, it isn't either of them who haunt me.

It's Fionn dragging off his balaclava and looking down at me with that smug-wide smile on a face that has no right to be so goddamn handsome.

The bastard needs to be taken down a peg.

Preferably several.

By me.

"You're glaring at the fire like you want to jump into it." Eilish bumps her elbow against mine.

"I'm bored."

"Me too."

Across the room, Keira Harrington stands beside my brother, Saint's hand resting openly at the small of her back.

She appears composed beneath everyone's scrutiny, her chin held high beside a Tallon who worships her.

My big brother doesn't answer to anyone or shy away from war, but once he realized Keira wasn't like her father, he chose her, and she chose him.

And having her beside him tonight is the boldest declaration they could've made. They've chosen to make their relationship public at a Tallon charity event.

Nothing says love wins like armed men at every exit.

"Keira looks happy," Eilish says.

I shrug. "Yeah."

At the end of the day, Keira is still a Harrington, and Saint choosing her has given our enemy a route straight into our family if any of us are stupid enough to forget her last name.

Despite that, the way she leans into my brother is natural and pathetically adoring. And nothing about the way he touches her comes across as strategic.

Whereas I know exactly what strategy feels like after Fionn's men dragged me into the back of an unmarked van.

It leaves bruises.

Fionn left me with those and a restlessness beneath my skin that whispers through me even now.

“Does that mean you’re okay with her living with him?” Eilish asks.

“Saint didn’t ask any of us. He just moved her in.” I sip my champagne. “So, I kinda have to be okay with it.”

“He seems really into her.” Eilish sighs. “I want a man who looks at me the way he watches her.”

I laugh under my breath. “I’m sure Count Dentula would love to watch ya sleep.”

“If my father ever introduces me to a man like him, please, please, please plan my escape.”

“Deal.”

I raise my glass and clink it against hers.

Men drift close, discover neither of us intends to rescue them from their wives or their dull personalities, and drift away again.

Then the conversations nearest the entrance falter.

The change moves through the room in a wave. My scalp prickles before Eilish peers around me to see who arrived.

“Guess who just walked in,” she whispers.

My fingers tighten around the stem of my glass. “Please tell me Fionn isn’t here.”

“He’s here.”

I take a long drink before turning.

Fionn stands inside the main doors with three men behind him. He shakes Aileen Crowley’s hand, and a dimple appears beside the smile I bet he uses when he wants a room to forget what his family does to people.

His suit is black, his shirt white and buttoned to the throat, with a narrow tie pulled into a neat knot. Every inch of him has been arranged to suggest respectability.

But fuck, I know what those hands feel like when they aren’t shaking someone else’s for show. I know how quickly the Harrington charm disappears when he has my wrists pinned and his pelvis grinding into mine.

I know the change in his breathing when the rush of whatever twisted thing happened between us got the better of him.

My clit pulses and swells, proving it has poorer judgment than the rest of me.

I turn back to the fireplace.

“He’d need a death wish to try anything in a room full of armed Tallons.” Eilish strokes my arm. “And I’m right beside you.”

“I don’t need protecting from him.”

“I know. But you seem a little edgy, or something. It's not like you.”

I drain my glass and ignore the heat spreading under my skin. “Even if nobody in here had a weapon, I could still handle that pretty-boy prick. He’s all looks and no substance.”

“He has the looks all right,” Eilish agrees. “But I’ll never forgive him for tying you up in that barn.”

“Get in line.”

I face the room again and meet Fionn’s intense glower.

He takes a whiskey from a passing tray. A councillor intercepts him with an outstretched hand, forcing Fionn to look away from me, and the dimpled smile returns as they exchange pleasantries.

Seemingly, it’s a performance he's mastered over the years. A way of persuading half the county he’s civilized while the other half would never dream of challenging him.

The councilor releases him and practically bows as he backs up.

Fionn starts walking in my direction.

He moves through the crowd at his own pace, stopping for greetings and handshakes while every pause brings him closer. People shuffle out of his path before he even reaches them.

For one stupid second, I forget to breathe. Then I straighten my shoulders and take another flute from a server's tray.

No man gets the better of me. Especially not a Harrington.

“If you grip that glass any harder, it’ll crack,” Eilish says.

I loosen my fingers and relax my jaw.

Fionn reaches us and stops at my side, close enough that moving away would look like surrender. I sure as hell won’t give him that satisfaction in public.

So, I hold my ground, even as my pulse blips.

His attention sweeps across the crowd while he lifts the whiskey to his mouth. He behaves as if I crossed the room and planted myself in his path, which makes me want to throttle him with that neatly knotted tie.

“You look like a lost dog, Harrington.”

Fionn cocks his head and lowers his voice to a taunting, deep rumble. “Woof.”

Christ, that shouldn’t tingle down my spine, but it does, and the field returns in a violent rush.

Dogs tearing through the moonlight. Wet dirt beneath me. Fionn’s strength pinning me down, his eyes fixed on mine, dark with something that had nothing to do with violence.

I clear my throat before my body fully betrays me and glare into my champagne. “Try the bar. It’s safer.”

Fionn’s shoulder angles closer to mine. “For me or for you, Tallon?”

Eilish steps closer. “I heard Mick Hennessy wasn’t impressed when your father brought Harrington trouble to his Dublin associates.”

The mafia don’s name lowers the nearest conversations. Fionn smiles, all charm and bad intentions, his dimple appearing far too easily.

“You mean he didn’t appreciate the Tallons calling in debts from half of Dublin and pretending it was strategy?"

Eilish takes a slow sip, eyeing him over the rim. “That would be one version.”

“Hennessy knows exactly who caused trouble,” Fionn says. “And he’s not known for overlooking disrespect.”

His gaze slides to me.

The warning ought to be political. With him, it’s not that simple. I narrow my eyes, ready to argue when Keira joins us.

Fionn notices her before I do, and the playfulness in his expression closes.

“Keira,” he says, leaning in to kiss his sister's cheek. “Our father sends his regards.”

“No, he doesn’t.”

“No.” Fionn sighs. “He’s at home pretending he expected better from the daughter he gave everything to.”

“I know what he gave me. That’s why it hurt when he turned me into one more thing he owns.”

For a moment, Fionn says nothing. His gaze drifts past Keira and lands on me before he takes a drink.

And just like that, the Harrington manners return.

He turns to Eilish. “You’re Eilish Kinnane, right? Art’s daughter.”

Eilish offers her hand, and Fionn takes it.

“Please…” I sigh. “Get your paws off my best friend.”

Fionn’s fingers wrap around hers while his eyes find mine. “Why? Are you jealous?”

My brows rise. “Jealous of being mauled by a Harrington? Hardly.”

He releases Eilish and slips his hand into his pocket. His posture remains relaxed, his expression contained, yet every inch of him seems aimed at me.

I hold my glass like I might smash it and go for his jugular, because the intrusive thought has merit.

“Your brother seems to like Harringtons,” Fionn sets a hand on his sister's shoulder. “Maybe he’s evolved.”

“Keira’s basically a Tallon now, Fionn,” I counter. “You’re a betting man, aren’t ya? How about we put a wager on my brother asking her to marry him and making it official?”

Keira’s expression changes beside him, surface level shock, with an undertone of pure delight.

Fionn takes a confident step toward me and holds out his hand. “If my sister becomes a Tallon, you’ll have to become a Harrington to balance the scales.”

His open palm waits between us.

I look at it and laugh. “I wouldn’t wish that fate on any woman.”

“And I wouldn’t choose a Tallon as my bride.” He laughs. “My future’s already arranged.”

Something tightens beneath my ribs.

Not jealousy. I’d have to want him before I could be jealous, and Fionn Harrington is not a man I would choose.

He’s an enemy with an expensive tailor and an inflated ego.

The fact that I can still feel his mouth on my skin is an unfortunate failure on my part, but it doesn't mean a single thing.

“I have zero interest in your life plans.” I hold my ground, even as he darkens the space in front of me. “I’m only humoring ya out of respect for Keira.”

Fionn lifts the whiskey to his mouth and makes me wait while he drinks.

“Trying to win my approval, little wild thing?”

I make a face at him. “Little wild thing? I bite harder than I flirt, Harrington.”

His smile stays in place.

“I remember.” Fionn takes a mouthful of liquor, swallowing before he adds, “The Tallons will respect my sister while she decides where she wants to stand. If anyone struggles with that, I’ll make it very simple for them.”

Keira bumps Fionn with her shoulder. “Stop it. This conversation is over.”

Fionn glances at her. “You’re right. This isn’t the time or place. Come home soon, Keira. There are things we need to talk about.”

“That’s it,” I say. “Be a good dog and behave yourself.”

His gaze drops to my mouth. “Say dog one more time, and I’ll start thinking you want me to chase you.”

The fire snaps behind me, and my blood burns red-hot. For a fleeting second, the room smells of wet earth instead of perfume and cigar smoke.

My calves remember the drag of long grass. My clit remembers him dragging me over the length of his full, hard dick.

Eilish touches my wrist and pulls my mind back into the room. I chew the inside of my cheek and decide it’s better to just let him leave without getting into it.

“Nice meeting you, Eilish.” Fionn winks. “We’ll be seeing a lot of each other.”

“I hope not,” I mutter, unable to help myself.

Fionn puts a safe measure of distance between us, one hand still in his pocket, the other carrying his drink.

“Not you, little wild thing.” His gaze slides to Eilish. “Your pretty friend.”

Goosebumps rise across my skin. Something small and unpleasant twists beneath my ribs.

As Fionn angles away, Keira rises onto her toes and wraps her arms around his neck. I stand there hating myself for wanting to taunt him into looking at me again.

Instead, I notice the lock of dark hair falling across his brow and the flash of his gold watch beneath his cuff.

Entirely against my will, obviously.

While they hug, Saint appears beside Keira, making his presence felt without pulling her away.

Fionn releases his sister and glances past her.

“Tallon,” he says.

Saint’s eyes narrow. “Harrington.”

My mouth curves. “Almost civilized.”

Fionn’s rich amber gaze snares mine. “Coming from you, that almost sounds sentimental.”

“Over you?” I roll my eyes. “I’d rather choke.”

His smile comes quick and cold. “Yeah. You would.”

The words slip beneath the edge of my control. Heat flares low in my stomach, a sudden, searing heat that steals half a breath before I lift my glass and hide my reaction behind it.

“Off ya fuck, Harrington.”

Fionn turns away, smirking as though he’s already won. Around the room, his men push off from the walls and fall in behind him.

I lift my champagne but don’t drink.

People move out of his path as he crosses the room. Women watch him leave. Men watch the women. I follow the breadth of his shoulders beneath his suit, remembering the ink over his skin and the muscle tightening beneath my hands.

Information I could have happily lived without.

Eilish leans closer. “Are you—”

“Don’t.”

“You did well not to stab him.”

“I’m not going to prison because of a Harrington.”

Keira and Saint have moved away, swallowed by men who want their attention and women desperate for details about a relationship nobody is brave enough to question directly.

“He unsettles you,” Eilish says.

I click my tongue at her. “He irritates me.”

She looks over my shoulder. “The arsehole is loitering.”

I last almost three seconds before turning towards the main doors.

One of Fionn’s men speaks close to his shoulder, but he isn’t listening. Fionn stands with one hand in his pocket and that perfect public smile in place, staring across the room at me.

The distance should make it easier to hold his gaze.

It doesn’t.

“That bastard thinks he can walk into a Tallon event and taunt us for sport.”

Fionn turns away. His men follow him through the doors, and the conversations nearest the entrance slowly recover while my heartbeat

continues thundering in my ears.

“You’ve come over all flushed,” Eilish says. “I’ll get you a glass of ice water.”

“It’s okay. I’m fine.”

The lie comes easily because I haven’t told Eilish what really happened. I also haven’t told my brothers why some of my bruises came from fighting Fionn while others came from dragging him closer.

Nobody knows that Fionn created the danger I was in, then killed one of his own men to pull me out of it.

I’ve spent days refusing to ask myself why he did it. The question I can’t silence is why, after everything that happened, my body burned so fucking hot beneath his.

I don’t want to understand it.

I want it gone.

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Chapter 5

Sera

Two days after Clonmore, I still haven't told Eilish that every encounter with Fionn leaves me hating him more and secretly wanting to know when I'll see him again.

She sits opposite me and tucks her bare feet beneath her on a cream sofa that probably cost more than my first car, one hand wrapped around a mug of hot tea.

"What did he say exactly?" I ask.

She stares at the gold rim of the mug, one thumbnail rubbing the porcelain handle. "He wants me downstairs in twenty minutes."

"Okay." I shrug. "What's wrong with that?"

"With my mother."

I lean back in the armchair and cross one boot over the other, making the leather creak. "That's less promising."

"And Father Cormac is here."

"Christ."

Eilish lets out a breath that almost becomes a laugh. "Exactly."

Father Cormac doesn't come to Kinnane House for brunch. He comes for baptisms, burials and arrangements that need holy water thrown over them.

If he is downstairs with Art and Mara Kinnane, then this is not a regular family chat.

I reach for my china cup and take a sip. "Maybe someone died."

Eilish makes a face at me. "Like who?"

"I'm trying to be optimistic. Death is usually quicker than whatever your father has planned."

“Did he say if anyone else was coming?” I ask.

“No.” She shakes her head and sighs. “But if it was a family death, they wouldn't have told me to wear this blue dress.”

I put my tea down before I crack the cup. “Eilish—”

“Today’s the day.”

The carpet swallows the scuff of my boots as I get to my feet and cross to the window.

Outside, two Kinnane men in black coats stand near the fountain, heads bowed against the weather. Past them, the drive curves toward the iron gates, and every inch of it is watched by surveillance cameras.

Behind me, the door opens and Mara Kinnane enters first, dressed in dove gray with pearls at her throat. Art fills the doorway in a navy suit, silver hair combed back, eyes hard enough to cut meat.

Father Cormac follows, white collar stark against his saggy jowls, the smell of incense clinging to him as if he has brought the chapel with him.

Eilish rises out of trained ceremony.

I stay by the window until Art’s gaze finds me.

“Sera,” he says, civil enough to be insulting. “I didn’t realize you were still here.”

“I can leave,” I suggest, even though Eilish glares at me.

“We’re going out soon,” she lies. “There’s no point leaving now, Sera.”

“You won’t be going anywhere today.” Art gives me the same look men give dogs when they want them to behave. “This is a family matter. I’ve no doubt you won’t want to be here when our guest arrives.”

“Sera stays,” Eilish says.

Mara crosses to her daughter and smooths a hand over Eilish’s hair. “Darling, this will be easier if you’re not difficult.”

I look over at Eilish, who catches my eye and nods. “She’s my best friend, Mother. If you’re about to tell me something important, I want her to hear it too.”

Art walks to the fireplace and turns to face us, positioning himself beneath a portrait of some dead Kinnane patriarch.

“An arrangement has been made,” he says.

Eilish’s fingers curl once at her side. “You mean a marriage arrangement?”

“Yes, my darling,” Mara confirms.

Father Cormac lowers his eyes while Art keeps his attention on Eilish because men like him prefer to watch the wound open while they're cutting.

"Who agreed?" she asks.

Art's mouth twitches. "Fionn Harrington."

For a racing heartbeat, I'm back in the dark field with that bastard on top of me. With his face so close, I stupidly thought about kissing him. Before I know it, my fingers skim my lips.

I snap myself out of it and focus on Eilish, whose expression is blank. Her mouth stays closed, trapping all the things I know she wants to say but can't because Art Kinnane doesn't take no for an answer.

Her fingers uncurl slowly at her side, one by one, as if she has to teach her hand not to reach for anything.

Anyone else might call it composure. I know better.

"No," I say.

Art's face hardens. "I beg your pardon?"

"No," I repeat, because apparently my survival instinct has taken the morning off. "He's not the right man for her."

"Sera," Eilish mutters.

She's not telling me to stop because she disagrees. Rather, she knows that arguing with her father is a waste of time.

Art clasps his hands behind his back and squares his shoulders.

"Isn't all that bad blood between the Harringtons and the Tallons over with now that Saint has Keira?"

"It's worse than it was before," I say. "Alasdair Harrington is nothing but a fucking pig in a pricey suit."

Father Cormac inhales as if my language has cracked a stained-glass window.

Mara's eyes sharpen. "*Your* quarrel is with them, Sera. We'll be proud to welcome Fionn into our family. You should make peace with that if you want to continue your friendship with our daughter."

"Who she's forced to marry will never come between us," I say.

Eilish turns her head, just enough to catch my eye. There's nothing left to be said when even she can't fight against the decision.

"A marriage to the Harringtons will offer stability within the families," Art declares. "Eilish will have a husband who can protect her."

Eilish takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly.

Art glances toward the doorway, and Mara reaches for Eilish's shoulder, brushing imaginary lint from the sleeve of her dress. Father Cormac straightens.

I know before the morning room door opens, from the way Art's mouth settles into satisfaction, that Fionn is about to walk in here and greet his new fiancée.

The air stalls in my lungs when a male member of staff peers inside. "Mr. Harrington is here, sir."

"Let him in," Art calls out.

Fionn Harrington walks into the room without breaking stride.

The midnight blue suit looks new, his tie knotted neatly, his dark hair dry and pushed back from his forehead, but my skin remembers rain, mud, and the weight of him pinning me to the ground.

His gaze reaches the window and passes over me as if I'm furniture.

My pulse kicks at the memory of grinding into him that night and how much I fucking enjoyed it.

I fold my arms, trapping my hands beneath them before my fingers can stray to the fading rope marks.

Alasdair Harrington comes in behind him, wearing a charcoal suit and a smug smile.

"Art," he says, offering his hand before kissing Eilish on the cheek. "Great news, my dear. You'll make an excellent wife for Fionn."

Eilish straightens. "And will he make a good husband for me?"

"I'll try," Fionn says, strolling toward her and setting a hand on her shoulder. "Saying yes is the first step. After that, we'll figure it out."

"And Sera Tallon is here," Alasdair says, full of mockery. "How fortunate we are that such a beautiful lady could join us for this important family announcement."

"Ladies wear dresses and heels, Father." Fionn glances over at me. "As you can see, the Tallon sister was raised by men."

For one humiliating moment, I wish I'd worn a dress. Then I want to smash my fist into his mouth for making me think about it.

"And you were raised by staff who clapped when ya used the right fork."

"It's called *etiquette*, Sera," he deadpans.

"Cute. Did they give ya a certificate, or is the entitlement implied?"

Mara murmurs my name, and Alasdair pulls two cigars from inside his jacket pocket. “Still no dress, no manners, and no sense of occasion, I see.”

I fold my arms over my chest. “That’s rich coming from a man who sends his son to do his dirty work.”

“I’d be careful, Father,” Fionn says, without taking his eyes off me. “Miss Tallon bites harder when cornered, and I’d hate for anyone to lose a hand.”

“Relax, Harrington,” I say. “I only bite men worth the effort.”

His mouth curves, just enough to be irritating. “Then I won’t take your restraint personally.”

Heat crawls up my neck before I can stop it, and I force my arms tighter across my chest. “We should head out for our lunch before they start measuring ya for a veil, Eilish.”

Her eyes find mine, and there’s a tiny fracture there no one else would see because no one else knows how hard she works to keep herself intact.

“We’re having a champagne lunch,” Mara says. “Given you’re not dressed for dining, you can leave now if you wish, Sera.”

“I’ll take her upstairs and find her something to wear.” Eilish finally uproots her feet and sidesteps Fionn. “We’ll be back down for lunch.”

“I wonder what you’ll talk about,” Fionn says, watching me meet Eilish by the door.

“Divorce,” I say over my shoulder.

Eilish tugs me, and I go with her before my mouth gets me buried under the patio.

We climb the stairs without speaking, her hand sliding along the banister, mine wrapped around my midriff as I mull it over.

Fionn and Eilish.

Married.

Together.

Two housemaids vanish through a side door before we reach the landing, their lowered eyes carrying more information than gossip ever could.

Inside Eilish’s bedroom, the air smells of roses and the expensive candle she lit earlier.

After a beat, she turns toward me. “I mean… At least he’s hot.”

The laugh that leaves me is too dry to be useful. “Sorry, I thought you said *hot* when I know ya meant *rot*.”

Her lips twitch to a small smile. “I can’t believe it, Sera. Of all the families in Ireland, it just had to be the Harringtons. Please promise me this won’t come between us. Don’t stop hanging out with me because you hate him.”

I told Eilish about the barn. That Fionn was there, watching, calling enough of the shots to damn him. However, I didn’t tell her how much that night haunts me, or that his voice comes to me in the dark when I close my eyes.

As far as I’m concerned, we’ll never be that close again.

Eilish watches me for a long moment because she knows me better than almost anyone.

“I know you’re angry,” she says. “I can see it in your face. Just promise me you won’t distance yourself from me now. I can’t pick my husband, but I can pick who I spend my time with.”

I let out a heavy sigh and head for her wardrobe. “Fine. I won’t let the Harringtons ruin our friendship.”

She comes up behind me and wraps her arms around my waist, resting her chin against my shoulder.

“They always said I’d marry for power.” Her arms tighten. “They’ve been preparing me for it my whole life.”

I cover her hands with mine. “You’re Eilish Kinnane. You can handle Fionn.”

Her breath catches against my shoulder. “I know.”

“For the record, plenty of marriages end in divorce,” I tell her. “Marry the bastard, keep your parents happy for a while, then get rid of him. Easy.”

That gets a light laugh out of her before she reaches for the wardrobe rail, trailing garments across it one by one without looking at any of them properly. “I don’t think it’ll be that easy, Sera.”

Her fingers stop on the bright pink dress.

“I don’t love him.”

“You don’t have to love him. You just have to take his name and dodge his bed.”

The hanger bites into my palm before I realize how hard I’m holding it. I loosen my grip and drag the next dress free, while my thoughts drift back to the adrenaline, the mask, and Fionn Harrington’s voice behind me in the dark.

“How do we dress for such an occasion?” I ask, holding the black dress against myself. “We make a statement.”

Eilish looks from the dress to me, and the first real spark of the day catches in her eyes. “We wear black for lunch instead of cornflower blue.”

“Exactly.”

I strip off and step into the tight black dress, tugging the hem down my thighs before reaching for a pair of heels high enough to make Mara Kinnane regret having me at the table.

Eilish opens the velvet-lined drawer beneath her vanity and takes out two gold cuffs, both thin, delicate and wide so they'll cover the damn marks circling my wrists.

“Here,” she says, fastening the first one around my left wrist. “If we’re making a statement, we may as well accessorize.”

The metal closes over the tender skin, and I hold still while she secures the second cuff on my other wrist.

One by one, flashes of Fionn return, from the way he looked at me when he had me beneath him, to his hands pinning my wrists while I pretended I didn’t enjoy how hard he was against me.

And now he’s marrying my best friend.

In the mirror, the bracelets look expensive and pretty.

I flex my fingers, watching gold flash over the imprint of his fingertips.

My chest tightens and I look away, hating myself for being jealous when the reality is that Eilish will be at his mercy now. She’ll be the victim of whatever sickness lives in him.

If I’m sitting at the same table as the Harringtons, I’ll dress for a funeral and pretend Eilish is the only reason I want their marriage dead.

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Chapter 6

Sera

I run my palms over my black dress before Eilish and I enter the dining room. Everyone seated around the lunch table looks up, even Fionn. However, I pretend not to notice him.

Crystal glasses sparkle in the afternoon light, silver cutlery sits in perfect rows, and white roses spill from low arrangements between bottles of champagne and sparkling water.

Every beautiful detail is curated, so no one has to acknowledge that a father is trading his only daughter for power.

Fionn stands at the far side of the room with a glass in his hand, listening while Art talks at him. From a distance, his attention looks polite, but his eyes lift the second we walk in.

They go to Eilish first, as they should.

Then, after a heartbeat, they flick to me.

The tight black dress was not designed for a midday luncheon, which is exactly why I chose it.

I care even less when Fionn's gaze travels over the hem at my thighs, the heels, and the gold circling both wrists before he takes a slow sip of his drink.

Mara's mouth tightens when she sees the black dresses.

"Why did you change out of the blue dress, Eilish? I told you it was your engagement outfit."

Eilish lifts her chin, and I keep my hand near her elbow to remind her she's not alone.

"I prefer this dress, Mother."

"Ladies," Art says, gesturing toward the table. "Let's sit."

Of course, they put Eilish beside Fionn and Mara ushers me to the seat across from him.

Wonderful.

I lower myself into the chair, smoothing the linen napkin over my thighs as one of the staff pours champagne into my glass.

“The bangles are a nice touch.” Fionn nods to my wrist.

I laugh into my champagne flute. “They’re not bangles.”

His brows drift up. “Oh, really? What would you call them?”

“Cuffs, Harrington.” I sigh. “They’re called cuffs.”

Mara speaks quietly to Eilish beside him, and Alasdair reaches for his cigar case, but Fionn’s attention stays on me.

“Interesting.”

I smile. “Try not to be dazzled by them. I know beautiful things confuse simple men.”

His mouth curves. “I wouldn’t say *confuse*.”

“No?”

“Distract.”

I reach for the gravy boat at the same time as he does. His knuckles skim over mine, and for one stupid breath, our gazes clash, and I notice the flare of his pupils, blackness swallowing amber.

After a quick breath, I pull back, and he pours gravy over his meat, unaware that my heart is racing and the skin under my dress is covered in goosebumps.

“Manners, Sera,” he says. “Harringtons first.”

“Choke on it.”

The word slips beneath Art’s voice, quiet enough to behave itself in company.

I set my champagne flute next to my freshly poured water and suddenly have nothing to do with my hands. “You should be used to shiny things, given ya grew up surrounded by them.”

He glances down the table at his father, then brings his dark eyes to mine. “I prefer things a little less polished.”

“That doesn’t surprise me.” I tap my nails on the tablecloth. “I’m sure you ruin everything ya touch.”

His gaze drops to my hand, brief and exact, before lifting to my mouth. “Probably.”

I resist flipping him off because I’m a guest here and understand how the game works, how manners override morals.

Mara leans across Eilish. “Your fiancée looks lovely, doesn’t she, Fionn?”

“Beautiful,” he replies, full of respect for the woman beside him.

However, that’s all he says. One word. Nothing more elaborate or charming.

I lean sideways while a server sets a plate of carved turkey in front of me. “Lucky her. Nothing says romance like a man forcing a woman to be his bride.”

“Sera,” Eilish murmurs.

I look at her, and the warning in her eyes reins me in before Art has time to lose his patience with me.

Even though I'm used to sitting around a table with Tallon men who say what they think, I’ve also grown accustomed to Mara’s high society formalities.

“Sorry.” I shrug. “I just can’t hide from the elephant in the room.”

“Why hide, Sera?” Fionn sits deeper into his seat. “Be a good girl and eat your dinner.”

“You’ll be wearing my dinner if you continue to patronize me.”

“Ah, so praise isn’t your thing.” He actually fucking smirks. “I’m guessing you prefer direct instructions like *run*.”

My smile stays in place, and I lower my voice while reaching for the gravy boat. “I don’t need to run while the predator is busy playing fiancé.”

His glass pauses halfway to his lips, then he sits forward and rests his elbows on the table.

“You’re only sitting at this table with me because of Eilish. How about you go home and give her space while I get to know her better.”

I glance at Eilish.

Her spine is poker straight, her hands folded, her expression composed while she watches me argue.

“She doesn’t want to get to know ya,” I whisper, lifting my fork. “You’re just a bland man in a nice suit.”

He swills the whiskey in his glass and takes a drink, keeping eye contact. “Are you her chaperone?”

“I’m her friend.”

“Right.” He takes a drink. “And how far does the job go? Are you planning to sit between us at dinner and take the middle of the bed? I agreed to a wife, Sera, not a scrappy little guard dog from across the heath.”

Bastard.

“Woof,” I whisper, throwing the word back at him because he taunted me with it at Clonmore.

For one private second the smirk falters before he slots it back exactly where it belongs.

“Believe me, Harrington,” I say, dipping forward and keeping my voice a whisper. “There will never come a time when I lay my head on the same pillow as you.”

His eyes stay on mine. “No?”

“Not in this life, or the next.”

His cheek dimples. “Funny. The ground didn’t seem to offend you half as much.”

“Stop taunting her.” Eilish fists her knife and side-eyes him, oblivious to the meaning behind his statement.

Art clears his throat at the end of the table, oblivious to our conversation and raises his glass in the air. “To marriage and the union of our two families.”

I swallow the urge to scoff and drain my glass instead.

Across from me, Fionn stares at my wrists, and my skin flames beneath the gold when his thumb drags once across his lower lip.

I sit there in my black dress, forcing a smile over the top of the flowers while I process my best friend sitting beside him.

Fionn raises his glass and makes a toast and my lungs cramp.

“To family,” he says.

Everyone drinks, and I keep my glass on the table even though a server refills it.

Fionn says something to Eilish then, too low for the table to hear, and she gives him her best Kinnane smile that would make harder men than him underestimate her.

This is really happening.

While they continue to talk, my chest tightens, and suddenly I’m just a helpless bystander watching the unthinkable happen.

I set my napkin beside my plate and rise. “Excuse me.”

Eilish glances up. “You okay?”

“Just need the loo.” I push my chair back and leave the table.

The downstairs bathroom sits at the end of a narrow corridor paneled in dark wood and lit by a single brass sconce.

Inside, it smells of orange blossom soap, expensive candles, and old pipes hidden behind pretty walls.

I bolt the door behind me, set both hands on the marble sink, and take deep breaths. After a few moments, I shove my fingers under the cold water.

When I look up, the mirror reflects a woman who knows better than to lose her head over a Harrington who’s set to marry her only friend.

All I have to do is get through lunch, and then I’ll be back on the yard in my own territory. Far away from the cocky bastard.

I dry my hands, fix my cleavage, and open the door. The moment I step into the hall, Fionn’s waiting with his back resting against the opposite wall, arms folded across his chest.

I stop with one hand still on the handle. “Is stalking the guests a special engagement lunch service?”

He checks his cufflinks, not looking at me. “You like running away, don’t you?”

“Are ya disappointed I left?”

“Do I look disappointed?”

“It’s hard to tell with your face,” I say, tilting my head. “You always look blank, like the lights are on in that big head of yours but nobody’s home.”

I shut the bathroom door behind me, because standing half inside makes me look cornered, and I’d rather choke on holy water than give him the satisfaction.

His mouth curves, slow enough to make me regret watching it. “I like to keep people guessing.”

I roll my eyes. “How mature.”

The corridor seems narrower when he pushes off the wall, though he doesn’t come any closer. He knows how much space to leave so we appear civilized.

“You left fast,” he says.

“I needed air.”

“No.” His gaze moves over my face with irritating patience. “You didn’t like how I made your best friend smile.”

I prop my hands on my hips. “I was trying not to throw up in my mouth while everyone pretends it’s a love match.”

“It doesn’t have to be love to be useful.”

I feign a gushing gasp, pressing my hand over my heart. “Oh, Fionn, that sentiment will look delightful on the wedding invitations.”

He slides a hand into his pocket. “Will you wear black to the wedding as well?”

“If she chooses black as the color for her bridesmaid then yes, Fionn, I’ll wear black.”

His brows drift up. “Aren’t you too old to play bridesmaid?”

“I’m only twenty-three, dickhead.”

“Twenty-three and never been kissed.”

I balk at that and immediately regret rising to the bait. “Of course I have.”

Fionn touches two fingers to his lower lip, considering me with a patience that makes my skin heat. “Not by a man who knows what to do with your bratty mouth.”

“Right, and you’d know what to do?” I laugh under my breath.

“I’d have you quiet in under a minute.”

My laugh dies before I can stop it.

A ghost of a smile plays on his lips. “That was quicker than I thought.”

I roll my eyes even though my pulse is still making a fool of me. “Don’t get excited. I go quiet before I cause damage, too.”

“You keep saying that.”

“Because ya keep pushing.”

“And yet here I am, undamaged.” He shrugs. “All that talk, Sera.”

Heat snaps through my chest, and I close the distance between us. “Don’t test me. As for my best friend, you better not screw her around or try to hurt her. Or I swear to fuck—”

His hand closes around my throat before I finish speaking, and he drives me backward into the wall with his solid chest against mine and his thumb resting beneath my jaw.

“Don’t threaten me.”

“I’ll do more than threaten.”

I shove against him, but he has my head tilted back and the hard line of his dick digging into my hip. His warning would be a lot more convincing if his body wasn’t betraying him too.

“She’s my fiancée,” he says, his lowered voice rumbling right through my chest. “Not your excuse to keep putting yourself in my way.”

When I push harder, he widens his stance by a fraction.

“Keep your distance, Sera. That’s the only warning you’ll get.”

My breath comes faster as I shove against him again.

“For a man who claims to want distance, you’re too fucking close,” I bite out. “Let go.”

His thumb stills against my throat.

For one breath, he makes me wait.

Then his hand opens, and he steps back before I can decide whether I hate his obedience more than his touch.

I smooth my dress over my hips, check the fall of my hair in the gilt mirror beside us, and ball my hands when they lower to hide how my hands shake.

“Oh, by the way, Fionn,” I say over my shoulder, walking away. “Eilish and I are close, and you won’t get in the way of that. You’re the one who needs to fuck off.”

When I glance back, he’s standing where he let me go, jacket smooth, tie straight, one hand adjusting his cuff, every inch of him restored to Harrington composure except for the way he’s watching me.

His dark eyes follow my every step. The distance between us should come as a relief, but Fionn Vaughn Harrington is tied to my best friend now, his name wrapped around her future as tightly as his hand was around my throat.

As long as Eilish stays at his side, I’ll never be far enough away from him to be safe from this dreadful attraction.

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Chapter 7

Fionn

My grandfather kept stallions in this barn.

My father killed men who'd wronged him.

Whereas I turned the old barn into a gym because men are easier to understand when they're being hit.

Strip away suits, surnames, money, Catholic manners and whatever lie he uses to sleep, and all that's left is whether he steps in or gives ground when pain comes for him.

Graves is already waiting on the mats when I walk in.

He's sixty-one, broad through the shoulders, broken twice through the nose. His hair has gone white at the temples, but his hands are steady as he tapes his knuckles.

My father's head enforcer taught me how to take a punch before I was old enough to understand I could fight back and win.

"You're late," he says.

I shrug out of my jacket and hang it on the hook beside the door. The white shirt underneath pulls across my shoulders as I unfasten my cufflinks and set them on the windowsill, then slide the gold watch from my wrist and place it beside them.

"By three minutes," I say, unbuttoning the shirt and dragging it off.

"Three minutes gets a man buried."

My trousers hit the floor, and I pull on my training shorts. "Only if he spends them talking."

Graves tosses a roll of tape at me. I catch it one-handed and start wrapping my left wrist.

Outside, rain works against the roof in a steady rhythm. Beyond the barn, the estate staff are preparing for this evening's event. By tonight, the house will be full of guests because the Harringtons like to put on a show.

Eilish will wear an official engagement ring, and I'll play my part.

I finish taping my wrists and walk to Graves. "Let's go."

"You haven't warmed up."

"You're my warm-up."

The first jab comes fast for a man with arthritis in two fingers. I turn my shoulder, catch it on my glove, and answer with a body shot that makes his breath leave through his nose.

He grunts approval and holds his defense.

For the first three minutes, there's only the mat under my feet, the bite in my lungs, the dull crack of glove on skin. There's comfort in training that punishes carelessness with pain.

I know where Graves's weight sits before he throws. I know which shoulder dips when his knee starts hurting. I know the sound his breath makes right before he decides to test whether I've become arrogant.

He drives a hook toward my ribs. I take it on my elbow and send him back two steps.

"Crowe boys had men outside Portlaoise last night," he says, circling to my left.

"Near the depot?"

"Near enough. Two cars at the tire yard, one lad asking about drivers who run night loads to Dublin."

I duck, missing his next jab. "That yard pays for half the horses my father pretends are family tradition. If Crowe men are asking questions there, they're counting more than tires. Have you got names?"

"None worth remembering." He braces as the next punch lands. "And all of them warned."

"Right."

Recently, the Crowes have become brave. The two brothers from the north are pressing south by inches, buying men but not loyalty, pushing against routes that don't belong to them, and getting in our fucking way.

I slip Graves's next punch and catch him under the ribs.

"Are they moving product through the docks?"

"Can't confirm that." Graves resets his mouthguard with his tongue. "Your father gave the order to warn them off. That's what we did."

“My father likes warnings because they sound powerful at dinner.”

“He *is* powerful.”

“True,” I say, blocking a jab that comes too close to my cheek. “But he’s not always right.”

Graves laughs, rough and short, then hits me harder for it.

My father sits at the head of the table, signs the orders, instills fear, speaks of legacy while other men bury the cost of it in ditches, warehouses, and missing police reports.

Whereas I’m his son, his counsel, his heir, his alibi in court, and his weapon when he wants violence to arrive wearing manners.

His next shot rams into my shoulder. I answer with my right, hard enough to make him give a fraction of ground.

“Send word to Mullan,” I say. “Quietly. If Crowe runners cross into our territory again, I want addresses, plates, and who they spoke to before anyone lifts a gun.”

Graves circles left. “You want Mullan answering to you on this?”

“He already is.”

“That official?”

“He didn’t have the balls to ask.”

Graves’s eyes narrow with old amusement. “Don’t get ahead of yourself, boy.”

I step inside his reach and put a glove against his chest, reminding him I’m no longer twelve with blood in my mouth and his boss watching from the doorway.

“Don’t call me that.”

He holds my stare for a second, then nods and taps my glove away. “Then make sure your ole man knows the plan too.”

“He’ll know when there’s something worth telling.”

Graves comes at me again.

The next exchange drives us across the mats toward the far wall, where an old iron ring juts from stone at shoulder height. My father used it once for a man who stole from us and lied about it.

I was fifteen when he made me watch the man cry before he shot him. That was then. Since Crowley senior retired and his son took over as the head of the local Gardaí, my father prefers to keep business off site.

We work another round before he brings up the one name I’d rather he didn’t. He does it with a left hook, because Graves has always understood

timing.

“Is Saint Tallon still a problem?”

My glove snaps up. “He’s fucking my sister—of course he is.”

“She lives there now, Fionn. We can’t hit their yard without putting her at risk.”

“I don’t need to burn down their yard to hurt them.”

Graves’s brows lift. “Your sister will object.”

“My sister made the wrong choice.”

“Funny that. A stubborn Harrington with their own mind.”

“Tallon got in her head,” I say. “He’ll enjoy her until the insult wears thin, and when she finally understands who he really is, I’ll be the one cleaning him out of her life.”

Graves throws another jab, and I block it fast.

“Now you’ve warmed up,” he says, out of breath. “Start fighting properly.”

I laugh at that, duck low, and get in a hard shot to his ribs. “I was being considerate.”

The man gives ground, one step, then another, and the mat squeaks under his heel as I push him closer to the corner.

“Saint Tallon is only useful while Keira stays unharmed,” I say. “If he hurts her, there won’t be enough of him left for his brothers to bury.”

He studies me from behind raised gloves, his chest moving hard under his sweaty T-shirt. “And the Tallon girl? Sera. The one stuck to Eilish’s hip. Is that a problem?”

Sera fucking Tallon.

The woman from the barn, with rope burns on her wrists and mud on her pale skin.

Graves’s glove cuts through my guard and hits my mouth before I turn my head. Blood breaks against my tongue. The barn goes quiet except for the rain pounding the roof.

He lowers his hands by a fraction. “Was that a free shot?”

I run my tongue along the split inside my lip and taste copper. “No.”

He watches me wipe blood from the corner of my mouth with the back of my glove. The red smears across the leather, bright and irritating.

“Fionn.”

I lift my guard. “Again.”

Graves steps in, and this time I let him think he has the same opening. He commits his weight, shoulder dipping before the punch, and I move under it where older fighters hate younger men’s patience.

My glove drives beneath his ribs. His breath catches. I follow with a clean hook to the side of his guard and stop the third punch an inch from his cheek.

He looks at the glove, then at me. “Something got ya rattled.”

I lower my hand. “You got lucky.”

“Right.” Graves moves to the bench and drags a towel across the back of his neck. “Luck usually has help.”

He pours water over his head, breath still heavy from the round. “You think the Tallon girl will show tonight?”

I strip one glove loose with my teeth. “If she’s smart, she’ll stay at home.”

The cut in my mouth stings, and I taste blood again.

“Your fiancée will want her to come.”

“Eilish doesn’t decide who walks into my house.”

“Women decide more than men admit.”

I look toward the barn doors, where rain drags silver lines down the glass. “Not here.”

He wipes his face, then throws the towel aside. “Are ya pleased with the arrangement? Eilish is pretty and well connected.”

I pull the tape from my other wrist. “*Pleased* has nothing to do with it.”

“No?”

A novel for your next quiet moment.

Find something to read on Lokepub.

“No.” The tape rips away from my skin. “She brings Kinnane access, Art’s routes, Mara’s social reach. Once that ring is on her finger, the southern gaps close before the Crowes get in.”

“And the Tallons?”

I look at him.

Graves returns my stare; he’s too old to be frightened of my temper. His towel is loose in one hand, face red from the round. “They’re already boxed in,” I say.

“Not enough for your father.”

My father doesn’t want the Tallons inconvenienced. He wants them crushed. Every single thing under their name will burn.

That’s the plan.

I strip the tape from my fingers and let it fall to the bench. “Hennessy likes old families better when they don’t make him clean up their mess.”

Graves gives a low hum. “That sounded almost like your father talking.”

“It was meant to.”

“And what do you get?”

The gloves come off with a pull, and I drop them beside the tape. “Positioning.”

Graves nods as if the word has weight enough to satisfy him, though he has never been satisfied by one-word answers.

“Not a partner, then.”

A laugh leaves me as I reach for the towel and press it to my mouth until the cloth takes the blood. “I have business partners. That’s more than enough to deal with.”

“The Kinnane girl understands duty.”

“And so do I.”

“Aye.” Graves wipes the back of his neck with the towel. “But her friend doesn’t.”

My hand stills.

He notices, because Graves notices everything.

“If Sera comes tonight, she’s not just some mouthy girl in a party dress. She’s a risk.”

Rain ticks against the roof. Somewhere outside, a van door slams, and staff voices carry through the wet air, already preparing the house for champagne, flowers, and bullshit smiles.

Graves tosses the towel onto the bench. “Although a Tallon close to your fiancée could be an opportunity.”

My smile pulls at the cut inside my mouth, intensifying the throb.

“Let's see if her loyalty to Eilish makes her foolish enough to stand under my roof.”

Graves nods again, which is why I keep him. He is one of the few men in the Harrington circle who can make me bleed, talk through tactics, and walk out with all his teeth.

I walk to the mirror bolted against the stone wall and stare at the split in my lip. It's small, angled at the corner, no worse than a shaving nick. By the time I'm ready for the party, no one will notice unless they come too close.

The last person to be that close was Sera Tallon. The memory shoots through me like a live current. My hand curls into a tight fist, and I shake her off.

Graves appears behind me in the mirror, arms folded, his expression too familiar with my silences.

"What's wrong with ya today?"

I head to the sink in the far corner, turn the tap on, and wash the blood from my mouth.

"Weddings aren't my thing," I say.

Water drips from my chin into the basin, and for a second my mind gives me Sera's mouth, her throat under my hand, and my cock hard against her hip when I should have been teaching her a lesson.

I turn the tap harder.

"I'm used to playing up to the crowd." I turn into him. "Now I'll have to learn how to deal with a wife I don't give a fuck about."

Graves shrugs. "You're on your own with that task, Fionn."

I take a clean towel from the shelf, dry my face, and unscrew the lid from a bottle of water.

"Your father wants you in the house by ten," he says. "Security walk-through before the florists finish turning the place into a botanical garden."

"Fine," I say, heading straight to the shower room. "You better be there later."

"Wouldn't miss it," I hear him say as I turn on the water and step under the jets.

Once I'm done, Graves is already gone.

I redress and leave the barn, moving past armed men in black coats doing security checks.

My phone vibrates before I reach the gravel path.

I answer without slowing. "Talk to me, Donnelly."

"The old haulage yard by the dock road," Donnelly says. "The seller's solicitor wants to know why the buying company changed."

“Because the yard isn’t buying itself.”

“He needs a reason.”

“Give him one. The first company holds the lease. The second buys the land.”

“That makes it look like two separate deals.”

“It is two separate deals.”

A delivery van idles near the side entrance while staff carry crates of champagne under canvas. Flowers pass through the doors in armfuls, their scent fighting the wet air.

Donnelly lowers his voice. “Once this completes, you’ll have the haulage yard, the back road into the warehouses, and the storage units beside it.”

“I’m aware.”

“That gives you control of the whole run from the dock road.”

“Not the whole run,” I say, looking left and right, my voice low.

“No,” he replies. “Not yet.”

I glance at the house, where my father’s men move through the rain with guns under their coats and orders in their ears.

“Time to get it finished.”

“No problem, Fionn. The seller’s solicitor wants reassurance about the change in company first.”

I exhale a sigh. “Give him reassurance.”

“Like what?”

“Tell him it’s an internal restructure. The funding position hasn’t changed.”

“And there’s nothing to tie you to it?”

“Not unless someone knows where to look.”

“Understood.”

That was the first useful thing my law degree taught me.

Power hides in the small print.

I end the call and slide the phone back into my pocket.

Inside, my father stands in the hallway with a phone pressed to his ear. He crooks his fingers at me in the expectant way he’s done since I learned how to walk.

“Christ, son. You’re bleeding,” he says. “You’re not a thug.”

“It’s just a scratch,” I tell him.

His eyes pass over the thin slit, the damp hair at my temples, the gym bag in my hand. He's always hated signs of effort. Apparently, men should look born to power, not trained into it.

Blood belongs on other men, not on the Harringtons.

"Tonight should run without interruption," he says. "We've got a lot of influential people coming. Keep focused on Eilish and give the crowd something to celebrate."

"It'll be fine," I assure him. "Unless you invited Keira and her new boyfriend."

My father's mouth twitches at the suggestion. "She wasn't invited, and that mouthy Tallon girl had better not show up. If she thinks—"

"I'll deal with Sera."

A security man approaches with an issue about the main gate comms.

When I nod and step away, my father grabs my arm. "Tonight is theater. Remember that."

"I never forget there's always an audience." I meet my father's eyes and smile with the part of me he trained best. "I'll have the Kinnanes eating out of my hand."

He studies me for another second, then turns toward the house. "Be dressed by six."

I watch him go inside beneath garlands being lifted over the door by two staff members who don't meet his eyes.

The engagement party will be in full swing soon. Eilish Kinnane will arrive because duty has already placed its hand at her back, and Sera Tallon will know better than to show her face.

And if she does, I'll understand it as a declaration of war.

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Chapter 8

Sera

Iron gates close behind us as the car glides through a tunnel of clipped trees lit up with cold white lights underneath.

Ahead of us, a separate car carries Art and Mara toward the Harrington mansion.

“I was meant to be working on a job with Rafe tonight,” I sigh.

Her gaze moves from outside the car to me. “And?”

“And I had to make up a very convincing bullshit story about where I was going to get out of it.”

“What kind of story?”

“One where I definitely can’t get caught stepping a black Prada heel on Harrington land.”

Eilish sighs. “So, your family doesn't know I’m engaged to Fionn?”

Telling my brothers that my best friend is tied to the enemy would surely be the death of our friendship.

“Nope.”

I pull at the gaping slit in the dress I borrowed from her after leaving Black Heath stud in jeans and a jumper. Working in the yard with horses leaves me with bumps and scrapes, so I picked a dress that hides the evidence of hard labor. Although helping Rafe collect tribute envelopes in the evenings leaves bruises I can’t blame on horses.

“Maybe coming tonight wasn’t my brightest idea.”

This is the first time I’ve been this close to the ancient gray stone mansion. I've heard rumors about the maze-like layout and how there are a stupid amount of bedrooms for a family of Harringtons.

Apparently, staff have their own entrance and living quarters because heaven forbid the family should have to make their own midnight snacks.

Men stand at the front steps in dark suits, their attention fixed on every car that comes up the drive.

“You’re Sera Tallon,” she says. “You don’t back down from threats *or* the Harringtons.”

“No, but I don’t usually invite myself into their home, either.”

“You came because I brought you,” she corrects. “I need an ally. Someone who has my back. And you promised me.”

Her fingers tighten around the sparkly designer clutch in her lap.

“The man I have to marry is inside that house that looks like Dracula's Irish bolthole, and the thought of going inside to celebrate losing my freedom and pretending I’m okay with it makes me want to vomit.”

The driver slows the car as we approach the entrance with its thick columns holding up a portico.

“That’s why I’m right here,” I mutter. “But if your future in-laws murder me, I’m haunting you first. You’ll have the Harrington name after all.”

Her smile is small, grateful, and gone too quickly.

The car stops behind her parents’ vehicle. One of the suited men steps forward, opening Eilish’s door. Another waits on my side, his gaze flicking over the tinted windows, the long driveway, the shadows beyond the floodlights.

These men aren’t here to hold doors and smile at guests. They’re wearing earpieces, oversized jackets to hide weapons, and have eyes skimming for a threat.

One stands near the top of the steps with his hands folded in front of him, watching Art Kinnane climb out of the first car.

Cold air slips into the back seat and crawls over my skin. I gather the side of my dress, lifting the black satin before I step out.

The slit parts high against my thigh, revealing ridiculous high heels and a lot of leg. The bodice hugs so tight it makes breathing a conscious decision, the neckline is low but respectable, and the sheer sleeves are delicate over my arms.

It's a rare occasion for me to put on make-up and wear a dress that costs the same price as three yearlings.

Now, climbing the steps toward the 18th century manor house with Harrington men watching my every move, my chest tightens, and the knot in my stomach twists.

Eilish slides her hand into mine, diamonds at her ears, spine straight, face composed like Mara taught her.

“Remember,” she murmurs, staring at the well-presented staff taking coats. “Where I go—”

“I go,” I finish.

Warmth spills over us the second we cross the threshold. There’s a string quartet playing creepy music, a waft of perfume and floral arrangements, and the loud chatter of guests dressed in their finest.

The entrance hall opens around us in mahogany from the walls to the split staircase. Wall sconces bleed light into shadows, and ancestral portraits stare down at us from the high walls.

“Jesus,” I whisper, holding my purse tighter. “You should recommend Mara’s interior designer. This place needs to be dragged into the twentieth century.”

Women in fancy dresses and jewels fawn over men in tailored suits, all nodding in Eilish’s direction as we move deeper into the house.

A waiter appears, placing a full tray before us.

“Champagne?” he asks.

Eilish takes a glass with a smile that looks perfect from a distance and brittle from where I’m standing. I take one too because I need alcohol to get me through, and my throat has gone dry.

A shiver moves down my spine, and I sense the danger before I turn.

Fionn Harrington moves our way, the crowd parting for him without being asked, conversations stalling as he passes.

Power sits on him quietly, in the tailoring of his navy suit, in the broad line of his shoulders, and the way his presence leaves men straightening under it.

My heart hammers against my ribs. I want to rip it out of my goddamn chest for reacting to him.

He’s clean-shaven, dark-haired, devastating in that controlled Harrington way. His white dress shirt is unbuttoned at the throat, and whiskey-amber eyes notice me but don’t linger.

He reaches Eilish first.

“Hey,” he says, his voice softening as he leans in and kisses her cheek. “You look beautiful, Eilish.”

She smiles, and when he pulls back, I catch sight of his cheek dimple and hate how it makes him so utterly charming.

When his gaze slides to me, the warmth in his expression folds away.

“I didn’t see your name on the list,” he says under his breath, careful not to insult me loud enough to hear.

I press a hand to my chest. “With all your daddy’s money, you can’t afford an eye exam? Or are you too vain to wear glasses?”

His expression doesn’t change, perfectly stoic, not a flicker of irritation showing where I want it.

As I stand there, his gaze wanders over the dress I’m poured into, over the neckline and lower. My pulse makes the humiliating decision to trip over itself.

I lift my chin before he can notice it thrumming in my neck.

“Your fiancée invited me,” I add, my eyes flicking to Eilish for a moment before returning to him. “And you wouldn’t want to piss her off before ya give her a ring.”

Something moves at the corner of his mouth, too tight to be a smile and too knowing to be nothing.

“How do your brothers feel about you being with me this evening?”

“I’m not with you,” I counter. “I’m with her.”

He cocks his head.

“No, I’m with her,” he says. “So now that we have that cleared up, make yourself at home, Sera. Don’t get too comfortable, though. The guards have guns, and the security cameras will pick out a snooping Tallon.”

Eilish gives him a warning look. “Fionn.”

He turns to her at once, the shift so smooth it almost annoys me more than the insult. “Have your mother and father arrived?”

Her expression softens despite herself. “Yeah, they came in the first car.”

Fionn offers her his arm and leads her away, asking questions about her day, if she likes the flowers, all of it polite and performed.

I walk behind them with champagne in my hand and the uncomfortable realization that I’m a spare part.

A man laughs near the doorway. A woman air kisses Mara on both cheeks. Security lingers at every exit, sticking out from the guests.

Even the waiters move like they've rehearsed every step.

For one brief, panicked second, I wish I'd never come.

"A Tallon at a Harrington party," a silver-haired man mutters to his wife. "Standards must be slipping."

"Funny," Fionn says without breaking stride, "the guest list dropped its standards years before she arrived. More champagne, Mr. Delaney?"

Fionn changes the subject before I can decide whether I imagined it.

"Sera?"

The familiar voice hits me from the left, and I turn into Ronan Gallagher. He grins at me from between two older men in suits, his dirty blond hair cut neat, and his face carrying that boyish grin he's had since school.

He opens his arms, and I step in, the two of us hugging like always.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he mutters. "And in a dress. Christ, you clean up dangerously well."

The pressure in my chest loosens. "You didn't think I'd leave Eilish to the wolves."

"No, but this is the last place I expected to see a Tallon."

I raise my brows and clink my glass with his. "Surprise!"

He laughs and, for one second, I forget I'm in enemy territory.

Across the room, Fionn angles his head in my direction, his attention drifting over. The next thing I know, he's walking our way with Eilish by his side, his posture casual and relaxed.

When they join us, I look at my best friend and ignore Fionn. "Ronan's here."

Eilish smiles. "I haven't forgiven you for those shots, Ronan. That hangover was lethal."

"I didn't put a gun to your head." Ronan holds his hands up, his gaze moving to Fionn.

An evil little spark catches in my chest. "You've met her fiancé before, right?"

I glance at Fionn with my best attempt at innocence.

"Damn… Sorry… Your name has slipped my mind." I frown, pretending to think. "Frank? No, wait, something even duller."

Fionn watches my performance in silence, arching an eyebrow before his gaze moves to Ronan's arm slung around my shoulder.

"I thought you'd be smarter than your brothers," he finally says. "Guess not."

"She was top of the class in school. Weren't you, Sera?" Ronan says, holding out his hand. "Congratulations on your engagement, Fionn. When's the bachelor party?"

"Soon." Fionn returns the handshake.

When Ronan pinches a lock of my hair and sweeps it behind my shoulders, Fionn's smile disappears, and his eyes darken.

"I don't think I've ever seen you in a dress, Sera." Ronan takes a step back, gathers my hand and turns me under his arm. "I can't take my eyes off you."

"You've never seen me naked either," I tease.

"That could be arranged."

He slides his hand around my waist, and Fionn takes a slow drink of his whiskey. "The bedrooms are off limits."

"This is what they do," Eilish explains. "They flirt with each other all the time but never follow through. Why don't you two just fuck already."

I roll my eyes at her and hook an arm through Ronan's, even though I can't take my eyes off Fionn. His full lips are wet from the booze, and his gold watch catches the light as he lifts his glass.

If I didn't hate him so much, I'd think he was gorgeous. But I do hate him.

So that's that.

"Let's leave the happy couple to get acquainted," I tell Ronan, tugging him away because I need air. "I'll be back in a few minutes, Eilish."

Ronan grins. "Oh yeah. Got something on your mind?"

I don't look back as we move away from Fionn and Eilish. Despite knowing better, my heart is racing, and deep down, I know it's got nothing to do with Ronan.

He steers me toward the edge of the room and tells me about his father's latest investment, his sister's pregnancy, and some cousin who's bought a membership to an elite sex club in Belfast.

I laugh when he laughs. Drink when my glass is refilled and let the champagne loosen the knot sitting behind my ribs.

Every so often, I glance across the room to check on Eilish.

Fionn stands beside her with one hand resting on her elbow while they talk to guests, faking the act of a perfect couple.

A silly wave of jealousy creeps over me. I can’t understand why seeing them together has me so ridiculously angry.

It shouldn’t bother me, other than my best friend is marrying an asshole. But watching them stand side by side, smiling, seems to hit deeper.

As I’m staring, Fionn’s eyes find mine. My fingers tighten around the stem of my glass and just like that, he turns away.

My phone rings inside my purse. I slip my hand into the small satin bag and pull it out far enough to check the screen.

Rafe.

His name burns up at me, all capital letters and bad timing, and I stare at it until the call goes to voicemail.

“Everything okay?” Ronan asks.

“Fine.” I shove the phone into my purse and force a smile. “Just Rafe calling. He can wait.”

“I’m surprised they let you come alone tonight.” He leans into the side of my face, his breath warm against my ear. “Don’t you need back-up in this place?”

My phone buzzes with an incoming text message.

I pull it back out of my purse and clench my teeth as I read.

I know where you are. Phone me now.

Fuck.

Ronan’s hand brushes my cheek. “Sera?”

“I need to call him back.”

“Do you want me to come with you?”

“Nah.” I shake my head. “Stay here and drain Alasdair's expensive whiskey.”

I slip through the nearest archway, needing somewhere quiet to make the call.

Harrington wealth follows me along the corridor with its mahogany panels that make everything darker. I pass two men muttering out of earshot. One of them glances at me, then at the phone in my hand, but neither stop me.

Another corridor branches off to the left. I choose it because the party is distant now, and I only need a few minutes to plead my case.

At the end, I push open a door and walk straight into a glass room filled with potted plants and couches.

The air smells faintly of damp earth and citrus, and the temperature is just right.

A huge Harrington family portrait hangs on the only stone wall.

Fionn stands near the center in a dark suit, younger than he is now but already too controlled around the eyes. Keira is beside him, pretty and innocent, her chin raised like she came out of the womb unimpressed.

Their father sits in front of them, pretending he's a king while their mother poses next to him, though her smile doesn't quite fit.

The youngest sister with dark hair falling over one shoulder has a faint, guarded smile, probably because she's been at St. Killians' private boarding school for most of her life.

The last face is Lorcan. The cousin I've seen around at times but don't know much about other than he's a St. Killians' alumni.

I take a deep breath and tap Rafe's number.

"What the fuck, Sera?" he hisses without a hello.

The way he says my name scrapes straight through the champagne and the dress and every stupid little thrill taunting Fionn has managed to pull out of me.

I glance towards the door. "Good evening to you too."

"Don't fuck with me, Gobshite," he says. "You lied."

"I creatively redirected."

"You spun bullshit."

I lower my voice. "How did ya find out?"

"I just heard from someone who's at Fionn Vaughn Harrington's engagement party that my sister is there."

"He's engaged to Eilish."

"You're in their fucking house," he bites out. "I don't care who the hell he's marrying: you shouldn't be there."

My silence answers before I do.

Rafe's exhale blasts through the line. "I'm guessing Saint doesn't know?"

"No."

I look back at the portrait despite myself.

Painted Fionn watches the room with that same awful restraint, as though even a canvas version of him forgives nothing.

“It wasn’t my news to tell.”

“Don’t give me that loyalty shit. Not tonight.”

“She’s my best friend.”

“And Fionn’s nothing like Keira,” Rafe mutters under his breath.

“I’m here to support Eilish, not Fionn,” I say. “She’s not happy about the whole forced wedding thing.”

“You think because Keira is shacked up with Saint that Fionn will play nice?” Rafe’s voice drops lower. “That he won’t screw with ya again? Jesus, Sera, you’re literally rubbing shoulders with the fuckers who kidnapped ya.”

A cold line moves down my spine. He’s right, and somewhere along the way, I forgot the truth and only remembered how alive I felt when our bodies collided.

I clear my throat. “Eilish needs me.”

“Eilish needs a lawyer,” he says. “You walking into their house is a big fucking mistake.”

“I’m here now…”

“Listen to me. Get the hell out of there.”

“I came with Eilish in one of the Kinnanes cars.”

“Then take Eilish with ya.”

“She has to stay.”

“Jesus fuck, Sera. Do I have to come get ya myself? Because I won’t be alone, and I’ll be armed.”

My scalp prickles because my gut told me coming tonight was a bad idea, but somewhere underneath it, I wanted to push Fionn harder for how he made me feel that night.

“You’re in danger, Sera.”

I close my eyes. “I’m leaving now.”

“Get your ass back home and don’t lie to me again, or l’ll tell Ma.”

I end the call, take a steadying breath, and slide the phone into my purse before turning toward the door.

But the moment I take a step forward, my heart stops so violently it feels like the rest of me carries on without it.

Fionn’s gaze drills into mine from the doorway. “Leaving so soon, little wild thing? The party’s only started.”

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Chapter 9

Fionn

I should be standing next to Eilish, getting ready to publicly announce our engagement and hand her an heirloom ring.

Yet for some irritating reason, I pretended I was taking a call, dipped out of the main room, and now I'm staring at Sera Tallon with her long, soot-black hair falling across her cleavage.

Working the room was the same old shit, different event. The boredom doesn't change because the guests are there for me, and standing next to Eilish reminds me how dead I am inside.

I feel nothing when she smiles. Nothing when I look into her eyes. Nothing when she puts her hand in mine.

And I don't need to. All I have to do is say my vows and get back to business.

Sera's navy-blue eyes glide over my suit, and that bratty mouth of hers parts a fraction because she's about to rattle off another insult.

"Are the conversations too intellectual for you?" I slot my hand into my trouser pocket. "Given you can't remember the important things like the host's name."

Fuck, even her smirk sets off a buzz in my veins. I bite down on the split inside my mouth until blood blooms over my tongue and concentrate on the metallic taste instead.

"And there's your problem," she says. "Narcissism. You're only important inside this house."

"You mean the house you're standing in."

"Not for long." She steels her spine. "Eilish can get a lift home with her parents. I'm bored with the pantomime."

This woman has a bad habit of poking me when she should know better. Every time she bites back, I want her to sink her teeth in harder.

“What a shame.” I pull my sleeve up and note the time.

She frowns. “That I'm leaving?”

“That you think you can.” I glance over my shoulder, checking that we’re alone, then look back at her in that damn dress with a slit so high I could rip the fabric in two.

Moving into the room, I undo the clasp on my watch, slide it off my wrist, and slip it into my pocket.

“Don’t come any closer.” She backs up, looking left and right, but her pupils flare and the vein in her neck pulses faster.

“You had the nerve to walk into my house, come to my event, and think you’d walk out untouched.” I take another step closer. “I know you’re smart, Sera. I didn’t need to be told you were top of the class, or that you're the brains behind your family business. I already know.”

She kicks off her heels, then lowers to her haunches and gathers them in one hand. The slit in her dress falls open, baring her leg to the top of her thigh.

“Why did you really come tonight?”

“Why aren’t ya at the party charming your guests?” She glances at the French doors beside her and inches toward them. “You don’t need a mask when your face hides your lies.”

I laugh and shrug off my suit jacket, draping it over the arm of the couch.

“It takes a liar to know a liar.” I fold my arms. “If I can’t catch you within ten minutes, then I promise you’ll leave my home untouched.”

“And if ya do?” She puts one hand on the door handle, the other bunching her dress at the thigh.

“Do you want to find out now, or are you going to run because your survival depends on it?” I ask, cocking my head sideways.

She stares at me, blinking, as if her mind is turning over the options, coming up with a strategy to win. She won’t, though.

After a beat, she pushes open the door and slips out into the dark without another word.

Cold air rushes into the orangery behind her, carrying the scent of rain and the manicured gardens my mother uses to soften this place.

I stand there and let her go.

One second.

Two.

Three.

Then I move.

The terrace drops into formal gardens, the lawns open too wide under the security lights, the hedges clipped too low to hide a woman in a black dress. She can only follow the gravel path toward the converted barn.

The party continues inside the house, all music, champagne, and dull conversations with people who never do anything without wanting something in return.

My shoes hit the paving hard as I jog through the night air and pick up my pace when I reach the stones. Ten minutes is all I have to teach her a lesson before someone comes looking for me.

I've chased men through warehouses and across concrete transport yards. I've hunted problems and put an end to them. But fuck, I've never chased a woman. Never got a kick out of hunting someone so full of hatred that I could fuck more into her if she begged me.

That thought drags something rough through me.

A thrill I don't like having. A hunger I like even less.

My body reacts before I can discipline it, heat spreading under my skin, making me hard.

She moves fast despite the dress, one hand gathered in the skirt, hair catching in the wind, pale legs flashing through the slit with each desperate stride.

She's not helpless. Far from it.

Sera's clever. Reckless enough to run and too proud to pretend she doesn't want me to catch her.

But this isn't a game. And she crossed the line coming here tonight.

When she glances over her shoulder, the security light catches her face, and then she runs faster.

I smile when she reaches the barn and slips inside, probably thinking she can hide or hoping there's another exit.

There's only one way in and one way out.

I slow before I reach the door so the realization of her bad choice has time to sink in.

When I open the door, she's standing on the mats, panting.

The low emergency light highlights the shape of my hanging punch bag, the weight racks along the far wall, and her heaving chest.

Her mouth is parted, angry and breathless, and every inch of her looks like trouble I want to punish.

I step inside and close the door.

“You might catch me,” she says. “But ya won’t keep me down.”

“You reckon?” I uncuff the links on my starched shirt, pocket them and roll up my sleeves. “Let’s see if you’re right.”

She darts left, aiming for the space between me and the door, and I let her come because there’s arrogance in trying to pass me in my own gym.

Her shoulder brushes mine, her sweet perfume invading my personal space, and for half a second, she almost makes it.

Until I catch her around the waist and drag her into me.

Sera twists hard, elbow driving back toward my ribs. I turn with it, taking the force across my side instead of letting go.

She fights like she means it, hands grabbing, nails scraping through my shirt. If she knew how much that gets me off, she’d probably stop.

“Let go,” she snaps.

“Make me.”

She tries to overpower me. Christ, she tries.

We hit the mats together, and I take the worst of the fall on my forearm and shoulder to keep her from getting crushed.

But when her hand slaps my cheek, my muscles brace. Graves is the only one who can survive hitting me.

Her eyes widen a fraction while my little wild thing waits to learn what kind of man I become when pain lands.

“Do you want me to hurt you?” I catch her wrists and pin them above her head. “Want me to fight the brat out of you?”

“Hit me, and I’ll hit ya back.”

She bucks under me, hips lifting, body straining against my strength, and the sensation of it fractures my restraint in an uneven, rapid break.

While we’re wrestling, the neckline of her dress lowers, the bodice dragging low from her twisting. One breast has already slipped free, and when she wriggles again, the other one comes out too.

Her nipples pull tight into hard peaks in the cool air, and the sight of them has my veins burning red fucking hot. I want them in my mouth. I want them bruised.

My cock is hard, pressed against her pelvis, impossible to hide and pointless to deny. She feels it. I know she does, because her eyes flash, her tongue darts between her lips, and her thighs press together around my hips like she's trying to stop herself from being turned on.

"I caught you, little wild thing," I taunt.

"Don't ya have somewhere to be?" Her voice is breathless, and it hits like temptation. "Like with your fiancée?"

I'll never admit that I'd rather be here, staring at her pretty face, cock hard because her nipples are out and she's under me.

"I have five minutes to spare." I lower my head. "Five minutes to show you why you shouldn't be here."

I pause with my mouth a breath from her breast and hold her stare as I spit onto the hard peak.

Her eyes flash.

I lick over it, slow enough to make it a punishment, warm enough to make it feel good. Her back arches, and I close my mouth over the nipple, sucking hard, grunting from the back of my throat when a dirty, desperate moan escapes her.

Her back comes off the mat, pushing herself deeper into my mouth, and the fight changes beneath my hands.

She still pulls at her wrists. Still twists under me like she can turn this into resistance if she makes it look vicious enough. But her hips are no longer trying to escape mine.

Her thighs have opened just enough to damn her, her body giving me the truth while her mouth stays stubbornly silent.

She grinds up against my thigh, a movement she should definitely deny. Then she does it again, and her breath shakes on the way out, and I know exactly how wet she is before my hand goes anywhere near her.

I lift my head and look at her.

Her nipple is wet from my mouth, flushed and tight, and her chest rises hard beneath my stare.

Fuck, she's perfect like this.

She jerks against my grip.

"I fucking hate you," she spits through clenched teeth.

I lower my mouth again and suck harder, letting my teeth drag just enough to turn the pleasure sharp.

Her knee lifts against my hip, and when I release one of her wrists to take her breast in my hand, she grabs at my shirt instead of pushing me away.

Her fingers claw at the buttons, impatient and shaking, and something dark in me stills long enough to appreciate the contradiction.

She wants to fight me.

And she also wants me naked.

The buttons give, one after another, and I shrug out of the fabric, leaving it somewhere on the mat beside us. Her gaze drops to my chest, taking in my tattoos.

I catch her chin and force her eyes back to mine.

“You should’ve run the other way.”

She swats my shoulder, but the blow has no weight behind it, not when her breathing stutters as I palm her breast again.

Then I slap it, and the sound fills the gym.

Her whole body jolts.

Her eyes widen, bright with outrage and heat, and I take her nipple back into my mouth and suck hard, knowing it’ll leave a mark.

“More.” Her voice is urgent and raspy while she lifts her shoulders off the mats.

“Say that again.”

“Fuck you.”

“Wrong answer.” I close my teeth over the other nipple, and she arches straight off the mat.

She moans, and her nails dig into my shoulders, scoring tracks down my back until pain threads through the pleasure.

The scratches she’s making will be visible on me for days.

I drag my hand down her body, over the satin twisted high at her thigh. She goes still when my fingers slip through the slit.

“Fuck…” She gasps.

Her lashes flicker, her nails biting harder into my skin as my fingers find her soaked through her panties. The cotton clings when I press two fingers against her clit through it, and she’s so fucking hot and ready that my control pulls so tight it hurts.

“You’re wet for me, little wild thing.” A slow smile plays on my lips before I can stop it. “So fucking wet.”

She bares her teeth. “I hate you.”

“I know. Do you want my fingers inside you, Sera?”

She holds my stare for three full seconds, jaw set, hating me. Then her thighs fall open.

“Say it.”

“Yes.” It comes out through her teeth in a hiss. “Yes, you bastard.”

I hook her panties aside and drag two fingers over her clit.

Her breath breaks.

The first stroke is slow and torturous, two thick fingers pushing into her tight cunt to the second knuckle while my thumb grinds circles into her swollen clit. The way her body clamps around them makes my cock jerk against her thigh.

She tries so hard to hold my stare in a stand-off, and it almost makes me merciful.

Almost.

But I’m not that man. I press a little harder, and her head tips back against the mat.

“Oh fuck,” she gasps.

“No,” I say, lowering my mouth to her ear. “Not yet. But I am going to taste you.”

Her hips lift into my hand, fucking herself on my fingers, betraying her so beautifully that I nearly lose myself. The dress is bunched around her waist, her breasts bare and marked, her nipples raw from my mouth, and she’s still fighting me with every breath while her cunt milks my fingers and soaks my hand.

“Don’t stop.” It leaves her in a rush, and the shock of hearing it hits her face the instant it’s out.

She turns her head to the side like she can take it back.

Though she rides my hand harder, chasing it, hating herself for it, needing it anyway.

I’m one bad decision away from ripping her dress at the seams, tearing off her panties and fucking her on the floor, when the door opens behind us.

“Fionn,” Graves mutters. “They’re lookin’ for ya inside.”

My body locks except for my lungs, and I keep my torn up back to him, hiding Sera’s flushed face and bare breasts.

Her eyes pop wide and our gazes stay tangled.

“I’ll be there in a minute.”

“Alasdair sent me lookin’,” he says. “You don’t have a minute.”

“Fine,” I bite out. “Then give me thirty fucking seconds.”

I know he’s gone when the door clicks shut, and then reality bleeds back in under the lust.

Sera lies beneath me, dress caught around her hips, chest rising hard, eyes locked on mine.

She knows how close we came.

So do I.

I get off her before either of us can mistake it for something else.

“Get up.”

I push to my feet before I touch her again and drag my shirt from the mat, pulling it over the scratches burning down my back. The fabric catches against torn skin. I let it. Pain is useful. Pain reminds a man what desire makes him forget.

Sera rolls onto all fours and stands, pulling the front of her dress up. She fixes herself with her chin lifted, breasts tucked away, hair wild around her face.

I didn’t chase her for this.

I wanted her cornered. Wanted her to fight.

She needed to learn that under all that mouth and Tallon pride, I could put her back in my house, on my mats, beneath my hands.

Nothing more.

“You’re not leaving until I say so.”

Her eyes narrow. “Try stopping me.”

I step closer, slow enough to give her time to move. Except she holds her ground.

“That’s the problem with you, Sera,” I say quietly. “You dare me, then hate me for understanding the invitation.”

I turn for the door, tucking in my shirt tails as I walk, forcing my breathing into line, forcing the hard, ugly throb in my blood back under discipline where it belongs.

If Sera Tallon thinks this has changed anything, if she thinks marking means she’s taken something from me, she is mistaken.

She came here to stand beside her friend.

So she can stand in my home and watch me take Eilish’s hand. Watch me put a Harrington diamond on her best friend’s finger and know there’s not a fucking thing she can do about it.

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Chapter 10

Sera

I follow Fionn back to the house with Eilish's borrowed heels back on my feet, and my panties soaked under the dress.

We both know what was about to happen. Even if he chased me, pinned me to the mats, and took my nipple into his mouth. He still did it.

I got to him.

He hasn't said a word since he opened the door and waited for me to walk out first, then strolled back the way we came as if nothing had happened.

Unfortunately, it did, and I'm not wondering whether I'd have gone all the way. I know I would have. I would have let him tear that dress at the seams, put my ankles over his shoulders, and fuck me on those mats while a hundred people drank champagne forty feet away.

I'm still clenching around nothing. Still so damn wet because of him. Minutes of walking hasn't fixed one single thing, and the worst of it is that I'd turn around right now if he crooked a finger at me.

Christ, what's wrong with me?

I would've let Fionn Harrington strip Eilish's dress off me and take me on the floor of his private gym while his engagement party carried on inside the house.

My stomach twists.

Shame burns through me, and I berate myself for even considering it. Not only is he a Harrington, he's my best friend's fiancé.

Fionn pauses at the French doors to the orangery for a beat and then pushes inside.

I follow, keeping my chin lifted because pride is cheaper than therapy, and I have plenty of it lying around.

Inside the orangery, the chatter from the party fills the silence between us.

I rake my fingers through the length of my hair and check my dress one final time.

He looks over at me while he shrugs on his jacket, and for one suspended second, his eyes move over my face, my mouth, the neckline, and the thigh slit.

Nothing changes in his expression as he plucks out his links from his trouser pocket and returns them to his cuffs.

I could say something cutting. Throw an insult his way or even toss a framed photograph at him for revenge. But the darkness lurking behind his eyes reminds of Rafe's warning.

Once he’s content he’s immaculately presented again, void of any sign that he almost lost control, he turns and walks out.

I stand there, alone and shaking. Furious that I let him get to me. After a quick internal pep talk, I walk back to the party.

Ahead of me, Fionn walks into the middle of the crowd. His cousin Lorcan steps into his path and claps him on the back. He’s handsome in a careless, dangerous way, with a grin built for bad decisions and dark hair shaved close to his scalp at the sides.

“Thought you’d got cold feet,” Lorcan says to him as I keep my head down and walk. “Alasdair was getting pissed.”

Fionn accepts a glass from a passing waiter without breaking stride. “He’s always pissed about something.”

Lorcan laughs.

I pass behind them without slowing and find Ronan near one of the tall windows, speaking to an older woman with a jeweled necklace.

His gaze catches mine over her shoulder, and he excuses himself at once.

“There you are,” he says, moving toward me. “I was starting to think you’d escaped.”

“Not yet.”

His smile fades a little as he looks at me properly. “You all right?”

“Of course.” I swipe a glass of champagne from a tray and knock it back. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Because you look like you’ve either murdered someone or you’re about to.”

“Unfortunately, I didn’t bring a gun.”

Before he can ask another question, a hush pulls through the room, and Alasdair Harrington steps into view.

He stands at the stone fireplace with a whiskey in his hand and a smile that doesn’t look human.

“Friends. Family. Allies,” he begins.

My gaze searches for Eilish, and I find her next to Mara and Art, spine straight, face composed.

She looks beautiful. And she also looks like a woman placed on an altar for the crowd to admire the sacrifice.

Fionn joins her side and my stomach knots.

Across the room, he’s the attentive fiancé. The Harrington heir. The man in the navy suit wearing a heart-stopping smile that convinces a room full of monsters he’s entered into a civilized engagement.

Alasdair talks about family ties, respect, and the future being strengthened by shared loyalty. He says Eilish’s name like she’s already been added to the inventory.

I swallow hard when Fionn reaches into his jacket and pulls out a small velvet box. The guests hold a collective breath when he takes Eilish’s hand and slides a huge diamond ring onto her finger.

The sparkly stone dazzles in the light. People applaud. Mara presses a hand to her chest. Art’s mouth stays flat, but he nods. Eilish smiles, and from a distance it could almost pass for happiness.

Fionn raises his glass.

“To the next Mrs. Harrington,” he says. “The wedding date is set for eight weeks from today. We hope to see you all there.”

While I struggle to catch a full breath, his gaze clashes with mine, and my pulse beats against my throat.

Everyone claps around us. My best friend studies the ring on her finger while I stand across from Fionn in her borrowed dress with his mark burned into my skin.

Ronan leans closer. “Sera?”

“I need to go home,” I whisper, looking away first.

His hand settles on the curve of my spine. “Now?”

“Yeah.” I angle into him. “Can your driver take me?”

“Of course. Let’s go.”

I don’t look back because I’ve seen enough, heard enough, and done enough to send me straight to hell.

Ronan guides me toward the main entrance, takes my empty champagne glass from my tight grasp, and hands it to a server.

Outside, the wind whips at me, lashing sense back into my brain.

Ronan says something to a man near the steps, and within minutes his silver Mercedes rolls around the front of the house.

The driver opens the rear passenger door, and I slide inside before my legs fail. Ronan gets in beside me and squeezes my hand.

“Did something happen, Sera?”

I shake my head. “Not really. It was a big ask for Eilish to want me there. Now Rafe knows, and by the time I get home, Saint will know too.”

The car pulls away from the Harrington-Kinnane celebration, creeping along the driveway until the electric gates close behind us.

“You know your brothers have eyes and ears everywhere.”

“I know,” I say, staring out at the dark trees. “I didn’t expect them to have men in there. I must have missed that briefing. No one else knew Eilish was the chosen bride until tonight.”

His hand stays on top of mine. “You’re shaking.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Yeah, you are.”

“You try wearing satin on a night this cold,” I say. “The wind out there would cut ya in two.”

Ronan is quiet for a moment, then he leans back against the seat and lets the silence stretch.

I turn my head toward him because deflection is a survival skill, and I’m excellent at it.

“When are you going to stop pretending ya fancy me?”

He rolls his head so he’s facing me, and blinks.

“Pretend?” He laughs deep in his chest. “I do fancy you.”

“Do ya?”

“Yeah.”

“Ronan.”

“What?”

“We’re like a fade-to-black romance novel,” I say. “All flirt and no fuck.”

His brows draw together. “Do you want it to happen?”

“Not anymore.”

I soften my voice because I’m not cruel when someone doesn’t deserve it.

“We’ve had enough opportunities to know neither of us is really into it. I flirt with you because that’s what we’ve always done, and it’s easy, and you flirt with me because it’s safe.”

He huffs a laugh, but it doesn’t last. “Safe?”

A novel for your next quiet moment.

Find something to read on Lokepub.

“I saw you eyeing up Lorcan.”

His brows snap together. “Everyone looks at Lorcan.”

“True. He does have the slutty cheekbones of a man who ruins marriages.”

“Sera.”

“What?”

“He’s straight.”

I study him in the passing flicker of streetlights.

“Yeah, he is,” I say. “And there are plenty of guys around who aren’t.”

His hand flexes on top of mine.

“I’m not saying you’re anything,” I tell him. “I’m saying stop trying to trap yourself in a version of your life that makes you miserable. You’re too pretty to be that tragic.”

He stares out of the window and for the next while, he says nothing.

The city disappears as we take the dark county roads, where the full beam bounces with every dip.

When we reach Black Heath stud, Ronan tells the driver to continue down the lane and turn in the yard.

“Thanks for the ride.” I reach for the handle as the driver exits the car and comes to my side.

“Sera.”

Ronan stares out through the windscreen, not looking at me.

“I’ve always thought you’re pretty,” he mutters. “Maybe one day I’ll figure my shit out.”

I lean across and kiss his cheek.

“I know we’ll never be more than just friends,” I tell him. “And I’m good with that. It won’t change things.”

He turns his head, his smile genuine. “Does this mean I’ll never get to see you naked?”

I laugh, happy to pretend. “You show me yours, and I’ll show ya mine.”

“It’s a date.”

I climb out and wrap my arms around my middle, shivering.

The car pulls away, and two of our men swing the gate shut. Shay heads in my direction, black baseball cap shadowing his eyes and a cozy looking Sherpa on his back.

His face tells me everything before his mouth does. “Saint knows where ya were.”

I keep walking because the wind is like needles puncturing my skin. “For fuck’s sake.”

“He’s in the cabin cooling off.”

“I doubt Keira’s keeping him cool.”

Shay shirks out of his coat and sets it on my shoulders. “Rafe told me to bring ya straight in.”

“Rafe can wait.”

“Sera.”

“I’m going to see Fury.”

Shay looks at the dress, the heels and makes the wise decision not to argue. He knows I’d rather be with my horse than face up to Rafe's bad mood.

I slip my arms into the warm sleeves and head straight to the stables.

The knots in my chest unwind at the familiar smell of hay and horses.

Fury had been iron gray when my father brought him home for me, all thick neck, black mane, and bad temper.

Ironically, I’ve spent more years with Fury than I did my dad. He’s been there through it all.

I teeter into the tack room, hating the high heels more than ever, and kick them off with a groan.

My bare feet press onto the cold floor, sore and grateful. I find an old pair of boots near the bench, shove my feet into them, then grab a thick horse rug from the hook by the door.

The black dress looks ridiculous paired with work boots and a man's coat. It doesn’t bother me. The woman wearing this dress made a reckless mistake. Whereas the woman who lives in dirty boots and jeans, she threatens assholes with shotguns.

Fury lifts his head when I slide the bolt back, ears flicking forward, dark eyes calm and questioning.

Age has silvered him almost white, except for the darker shadows at his knees and the stubborn black still threaded through his thick mane.

He blows softly through his nose as I step inside, then he moves closer, heavy and sure on feathered legs, because he knows he’s my comfort.

“I did something stupid,” I whisper into his neck. “Something I can’t take back.”

He lowers his head to my shoulder.

I stroke the warm line of his neck, fingers smoothing over his groomed coat, and let myself breathe properly for the first time tonight.

“I wanted him.”

The shame comes first and builds into anger. It slides under my skin, replaying every second in hot, thrilling fragments.

Then confusion follows.

Because I wanted Fionn to catch me. To fight with me. To want me.

I move to the corner of the stall, put the rug under me, and sink into the shadows. I tuck my knees to my chest and stare at the opposite wall until the grain of the wood blurs.

Fionn is engaged to Eilish.

He had my nipple in his mouth and fingers between my legs.

A laugh slips out of me, small and strained.

“Excellent willpower, Sera,” I whisper. “Really maturing beautifully.”

Fury flicks an ear like he agrees, and I close my eyes.

For a few minutes, there’s only his breathing, the muted rumble of men outside the barn and a dog barking. I’ve slept in this stable countless times before. Tonight won’t be any different.

“Sera,” Ma’s voice startles me. “You got something to tell me?”

The familiar waft of cigarette smoke comes first, and then I see her face beyond the stall bars. Her hair is scraped back, and gold hoops dangle from

her lobes.

“Sounds like ya already know.”

“What were ya thinking?”

I shrug. “They won’t risk hurting me when Keira’s playing housewife with Saint. Eilish made me promise to stick by her, and I thought I could suss them out in their own territory. Men let things slip when they’re comfortable and have had too much booze.”

She cocks a brow. “So, what did ya learn?”

“Alasdairs a vain old bastard, and his son, he’s…” I trail off.

“Dangerous.” Ma finishes for me.

“Yeah,” I agree. “I won’t go back there, Ma. I promise.”

Ma takes a drag of her cigarette and blows the smoke into the stall. “Forget about Eilish. She’s dead to ya now.”

I shake my head, get to my feet and move to the bars. “I said I won’t go back to the Harrington estate. That doesn’t mean I’ll forget about Eilish.”

“What will ya do when she moves in with him? When that very place becomes her home.”

Fuck, I hadn’t thought about that.

“Alasdair controls everything and everyone around him,” Ma points out. “He’ll keep Eilish under his thumb and squeeze ya out of her life eventually.”

“She won’t let that happen.”

“She won’t have a choice, Sera.”

Ma turns and walks away while my heart thumps faster in my chest.

I stay at the stall bars, staring after her, Fury’s warm breath stirring against my shoulder.

I promised Ma I wouldn’t go back there.

But I promised Eilish I wouldn’t abandon her.

And after tonight, Fionn Harrington knows exactly how to make me betray myself, my family and my best friend.

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Chapter 11

Sera

Eilish rubs her temples and glares at the third dress she's tried on.

She stands on the platform in front of the mirrors while the stylist fusses with the zip. Her scrunched-up face says it all.

I lean back on the velvet chair and ignore the expensive champagne on offer. I've got business to deal with later. Dane and Rafe have roped me into a job.

"Take it off," I say.

The stylist pauses, pin between her lips.

Eilish's eyes flick to mine in the mirror. "I can't."

"What? You hate it."

"I don't hate it… I just didn't want all of this puffiness."

"It's elegant," the stylist says.

"She looks like a cute marshmallow," I say. "And that's not really the vibe she's going for."

Eilish gives me a warning look in the mirror.

I lift one shoulder. "You asked me to be honest. Choose a dress you're confident in. That's not the one."

Eilish looks at her reflection, smoothing one hand over the full skirt. "It's what they set aside."

Suddenly, the locked front door, the two men posted outside, and the bottles of pricey champagne seem less like luxury extras and more like Harrington control.

I sit up. "So, they're dictating what ya wear now too?"

The stylist busies herself with the pins, and Eilish sighs. God, she looks defeated.

Like she’s given up.

“Eilish.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“It matters to me. You’re standing there looking like someone else picked out your skin.”

The stylist gives a bright little laugh, brittle enough to snap. “We have several other Harrington-approved options. Let me get a few more.”

“Harrington-approved,” I repeat. “This is a joke, right?”

Eilish closes her eyes. “Believe me, Sera: I’m not laughing.”

I set the champagne on the marble-top table before I throw it at the mirrors in a temper. “Get out of it.”

“They’ll all be the same predictable gowns. I have to pick one.”

“Well, you’re not picking that one.”

The stylist looks toward the door. “Perhaps I should call Mr. Harrington’s office.”

“Perhaps you should bring the bride something she actually wants to wear and save yourself the trouble.”

“I’m afraid the account instructions are very specific.”

“Then the account can marry the dress.”

“Sera.”

I look at Eilish in the mirror. “What?”

She just stands there, swallowed in material, her face paler than usual beneath the soft salon lights. “I can’t fight against everything. It’s exhausting.”

My anger folds in on itself.

I get up and cross to her, lowering my voice because I need to calm down. This isn’t just about the dress. It’s about her father thinking an arranged marriage is acceptable—and that her duty is to fall in line.

“You’re right. Pick your battles. But the dress you wear has to be your decision. Or they’ll walk all over ya. And that’s not who you are. You’re tougher than that.”

Her eyes shine behind a layer of unshed tears. I hate seeing that more than the ugly dress.

“I asked my mother if the wedding could wait a year,” she whispers. “It feels so rushed.

Her expression hardens, and she dabs the corner of her eye with the heel of her hand.

“She just laughed,” she continues. “And repeated the story about her and my father. How they were forced together. How she didn't like him at first. But they had me…and I’m expected to fuck Fionn and get pregnant, too.”

My stomach drops and a wave of nausea or fear or jealousy catches me off guard.

“Do ya fancy him?” I whisper.

“He’s going to be my husband,” she says. “So, what does it matter?”

I don’t know what to say, and I don’t know what I’m feeling either.

“And last night you said you won't go back into Harrington territory. That’s where I’m getting married, Sera. Where I have to live.”

I don’t have an answer for her. That’s the problem with loyalty. It’s easy to say the word until sacrifices are involved.

Eilish looks at me in the mirror. “Who will I have in my corner then?”

My chest tightens.

Before I can lie, the salon door swings open, and I see him in the mirror first.

Fionn moves inside wearing a dark overcoat, open at the front, parted a little so his suit peeks out. His expression is calm and eyes laser focused.

The stylist steps away from Eilish at once. “Mr. Harrington.”

His gaze goes to Eilish.

For some reason, that irritates me, though I hide it by folding my arms across my chest and glaring at him. He takes in the dress, her flushed cheeks, glassy eyes, and the rail of dresses.

“What’s the problem?” he asks.

Eilish draws back her shoulders. “I want to pick my own dress. I don’t like any of these.”

His gaze moves over the gown, and there’s something in his eyes that haunts me. Maybe it’s the lack of emotion at seeing his bride-to-be in a wedding dress. “Fine.”

The stylist blinks. “Sir?”

“She doesn't like the damn dresses.”

Eilish looks startled.

Fionn removes his gloves finger by finger, unhurried. “Bring her other options. Whatever the cost.”

The stylist practically bows. “Of course, but the notes from your mother were very clear about the preferred silhouette.”

“My mother isn’t the bride.”

“No, sir.”

“Miss Tallon was very clear about the collection my mother chose.” He doesn’t look at me. “She’s right. Give the bride whatever she wants.”

Something warm and horrifying moves through my chest. Fionn Harrington just agreed with me without giving me his eyes.

Fionn folds the gloves together and sets them on the arm of the nearest chair. “Eilish has excellent taste. A bride should choose her own dress.”

For a second, I almost like him. Naturally, that can’t be allowed.

So, I snort out a laugh. “Shame she can’t pick her husband.”

Eilish utters a small, defeated groan. The stylist freezes with her hand on the pincushion.

Fionn turns his head toward me, and my pulse jumps.

The look in that gaze reminds me of the man from the gym. The man who pinned me to the mats and had me aching for him.

“Miss Tallon,” he says.

My skin tightens at the formality. “Mr. Harrington.”

“You’re very comfortable speaking for other women.”

“I’m very comfortable noticing when they’re being mistreated.”

“And yet Eilish asked me to come here.”

That shuts me up for half a second. My gaze tears to Eilish. “You called him?”

Her cheeks go pink. “I texted him in the dressing room.”

“You texted Fionn?”

“I needed to tell him the options aren't right.”

The words knock some of the sharpness out of me.

“She asked me for help.” He shrugs like that was a normal thing for her to do. “So I came.”

“How heroic. Do you invoice separately for emotional availability, or is that included in the full Harrington package?”

“It seems like you're the predictable Tallon package.” His eyes rake over me. “Smart mouth and tight denim.”

Heat goes straight into my face.

“Do you two have to go head-to-head every time you're together?” Eilish steps down from the platform.

He doesn’t look away from me. “Can you please explain to your friend in whatever language she’ll understand that we *are* getting married.”

“He’s right, Sera.” Eilish kicks the merengue shaped material at her feet so she can walk. “I don’t blame Fionn for any of this. Our families want this.”

I smile because if I don’t, I’ll show teeth. “So, you two are friends now?”

“Yes,” he says, his stare vacant. “Have you got a problem with that?”

My pulse changes, and I hate him for being in my veins. For being so fucking cruel.

“I need to get out of this dress.” Eilish heads to the changing room. “Please don’t kill each other while I’m away.”

When Fionn’s attention leaves me, I wither and sit in the velvet chair.

“Remove the dresses my mother picked out and let her review your full collection.”

The stylist hurries off. “Of course. I’ll bring alternatives.”

Eilish stares at him. “Thanks, Fionn.”

He walks to the chair next to me, pinches the fabric at his knees, and sits. “When you’re ready to come out, I’ll turn away.”

“You could leave,” I mutter.

“So could you.”

The stylist guides Eilish toward the fitting room, leaving me alone in a bridal salon full of mirrors with the man I've spent too many hours thinking about.

“You left with Ronan,” he says when Eilish is out of earshot.

“Ya noticed.”

“I notice men who put their hands on things that don’t belong to them.”

My stomach flips, which is deeply inconvenient because I do not belong to him and both of us know it.

“Forever the entitled prick,” I say under my breath.

“Forever the annoying brat.” He looks at me then, his gaze tangling with mine, holding me prisoner to whatever this unbearable madness is.

My chest is tight, and the two of us being this close without physically fighting is its own form of torture.

“Have ya even asked her what she wants?” I whisper.

“How about you ask me what I want,” he snaps.

“I don’t care what you want,” I lie. “She’s all I care about. Are ya gonna kiss her and pretend you’re into it? Make her fall for ya and then break her heart?”

Fionn rises to his full height, moves in front of me, snares my arm and hauls me to my feet. “Since you’re her friend, how about I show you how I’m going to kiss her and you can decide if I’m into it.”

“Absolutely not.” I raise my hand to slap him, but he’s too quick.

He catches my wrist, and the contact spreads heat right through me. “When we’re in neutral territory, little wild thing, we don’t fight like that. Understood?”

My heart hammers against my ribs.

I’m horrified at the effect he has on me. How his fingers wrap around my arm and the scent of him so close makes my knees weak.

He tugs me closer, our bodies colliding, and a helpless little gasp breaks free. I’m high on the darkness in his eyes, on how his grip is tight, and he won’t let go.

“Still have my mark on your breast?” he breathes, his face ever so close now.

“Still have scratches on your back?” I counter.

“I took a picture of them,” he says, voice low. “To remind myself of a debt that needs to be paid. No one marks me without paying the price.”

I frown. “We’re even. Do you want me to show ya what you did to me?”

His hand comes to my throat so fast my next breath stalls, and before I react, he tilts my head and walks me backward with a calmness that makes resisting him impossible.

“What are ya doing?” I hiss, grabbing his wrist as my back hits a wall of mirrors.

“Educating you.”

“I’d rather throw myself through a window.”

“You say that now.”

The corner of his mouth lifts, and I hate his cheek dimples almost as much as I hate the way my body remembers his touch.

“Let go of me, Fionn.”

“Not until you’ve paid attention.”

“To what?”

His thumb skims beneath my jaw, steering my face back when I try to turn away, and his hand tighter around my wrist.

“The lesson.”

“She’s gonna come out here any second.”

His gaze stays on mine while his mouth lowers. “Stop talking.”

“Don’t tell me what to do.”

“You wanted to know if I’d kiss her properly.”

“I don’t care now.”

“Liar.”

“You’re a prick.”

“And you’re a brat.”

His cheek dimples, and the next few words brush the corner of my mouth. “I could kiss her like this...”

I drag in a breath because this is the part where I should scream, but his hand is warm against my throat, his chest a solid wall of muscle in front of mine.

His lips brush over mine, clinging ever so slightly.

It is barely a kiss, controlled and smug and designed to make me furious, and it works because every part of me ignites.

I bite his lower lip and for a racing heartbeat, his body goes rigid.

Then his hand leaves my wrist and slides into my hair, and the kiss turns savage, stealing the breath clean out of me.

For one stupid second I forget to hate him and wonder if this is simply how he kisses; if this is what Eilish will get when he finally decides to touch her.

The thought should cool the fire racing through me. Instead, it pours petrol on it.

Because I can already picture her standing where I am.

And the jealousy that follows is so hateful and unjust that I almost choke on it.

My fingers twist in his shirt, dragging him closer when I should be pushing him away, and the grunt he makes into my mouth is so low and rough that it ruins every lie I’ve ever told myself about being done with him.

The dressing room door opens and Fionn breaks away.

He steps back and checks the time on his wristwatch while I fight to remember how my lungs work.

One of the stylists freezes in the doorway with a garment bag hooked over her arm.

Fionn looks at her with the same cool irritation he’d give someone interrupting a phone call.

“Yes?”

My mouth is swollen, my pulse is a crime scene, and the bastard doesn’t even look bothered.

The stylist blinks. “Miss Kinnane is ready. You should cover your eyes, Mr. Harrington.”

“No need.” Fionn wipes the side of his mouth. “I’m leaving now. Her bridesmaid can help her choose.”

“Wait until he leaves before sending her out,” I manage.

The stylist backs away, and Fionn finally glances at me.

There’s nothing on his face.

No apology, no hunger.

No crack of emotion. Just that cold, controlled expression with the faintest touch of cruelty on his wet lips. The bastard knows exactly how hard I have to work to pull myself together.

“You wanted to know how I’ll kiss my wife,” he says quietly. “Just like that…but with my cock inside her. Have a good day, little wild thing,”

Jealousy twists with an anger so vicious that I’m moving without thinking. I storm up behind him, slide in front and block his exit.

“While you two are engaged, you’ll never fucking touch me again, Fionn. I’m not desperate for your Harrington cock or counting down the seconds until I see ya again. So, keep your hands to yourself from now on.”

“Fine.” He leans forward, calm and relaxed, his lips coming closer. “She’ll taste better when she’s officially mine.”

My lungs lock.

Bastard.

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Chapter 12

Fionn

Three Harrington shipments have stalled inside Tallon-controlled docks in forty-eight hours. That isn't a coincidence. Someone is interfering with our cargo, and I want a name.

Lorcan paces the concrete floor of our logistics yard with his phone in one hand and a cigarette burning in the other.

Two refrigerated lorries idle near the loading bay. The cargo inside them is legal on paper, profitable off paper, and useless if the Tallons keep making our crates sit beneath their cranes for too long.

“The Tallons are taking the piss,” Lorcan says, ending a call without saying goodbye. “They run the docks, not the whole south.”

“They run enough to slow us down.”

“What are we going to do about it?”

I sign the delivery sheet a driver pushes into my hand and pass it back without looking at him. “Right now, it’s our reality. But it won’t be for long.”

Lorcan exhales smoke through his nose and looks toward the closed gate, where two of our men check an arriving van before allowing it into the yard. “We should put our own men in the docks.”

“They run the dock.”

“Well, what about our fucking shipments, Fionn? We’ll lose customers if this continues.”

“It’s Tallon cranes, their crews, their customs officer in their pocket, and their police contact waiting to shred any complaints.”

I button my coat against the wind and watch a lorry reverse into bay three.

“We push into the docks right now and start a war with the Tallons, Crowe swoops in,” I remind him. “We have other options.”

Twenty years old, and he’s still as impatient as he was as a teenager.

Our father kept him close after his mother turned up dead on the heath between us and the Tallons. It left him with too much anger and nowhere useful to put it. St. Killians could only teach him so much.

“I’m sick of waiting,” he groans.

“Your yapping is giving me a headache.”

His mouth curves. “You love my company.”

“I tolerate it for family morale.”

“Jesus, that’s almost affectionate coming from you.”

“Don’t get carried away.”

He draws smoke into his lungs and breathes it out as he speaks. “It’s freezing, Fionn. How long are we standing here like two spare dicks?”

“Sometimes it’s like bring-your-kid-to-work with you, Lor.” I run my hand over my jaw. “Power sits in the quiet nights too. We’re building intel.”

Lorcan’s eyes slide to me when a truck rolls in. “You think Crowe’s men have got inside our network?”

“Crowe wants us all guessing. He’s trying to use chaos and confusion to his advantage.”

“So, what you’re saying is we wait him out.”

“Clever boy,” I laugh. “You got there in the end.”

Crowe doesn’t need to hit the port with guns to cause damage. A missing manifest, delayed cargo, a bribed foreman, a rumor placed in the right ear, and suddenly Harrington men look weak while Tallon men look incompetent or complicit.

Lorcan flicks ash onto the wet ground. “I’ve heard they're going to hit the port.”

“They’re trying to weaken it first,” I point out. “Get us fighting amongst ourselves, and then they’ll clean up the mess. But we’ll be ready and waiting.”

His jaw works as he looks past me to the trucks, the drivers, the men going about their business.

“We’ve got chatter from the east side saying Crowe’s been buying up dock crews,” he says. “Our containers were held for inspection after they cleared the prelim check. And then there’s a Tallon foreman who suddenly can’t answer his phone. I bet the Tallons are talking with the Crowes.”

“You think they’d willingly hand over fifty percent of their business? For what?”

Lorcan smiles without warmth. “Well, the Tallons aren’t the smartest.”

I cock a brow at him, my patience thinning.

The name pulls at a place inside me that I’ve tried to bury since I kissed Sera. I was toying with the girl. Having fun watching her get all hot and bothered.

Until my lips touched hers and she bit me.

That was a big fucking mistake. And one I’ve spent the last week trying to forget.

I keep my attention on the yard while the memory of her warm, wet mouth tries to drag itself through my dick.

“They’re smarter than you think,” I tell him.

Lorcan laughs and steps closer, lowering his voice because he knows better than to mention family business outside of our circle. “Keira needs to be dragged home.”

“She’s got a crush on the wrong man. It’ll end in tears.”

He drops his cigarette and stamps it out. “The Tallon girl looked good enough to eat at your engagement party.”

I look past him, acting unbothered.

“I can’t believe Sera walked straight into our house.” His mouth curves around her name, turning it into something dirty. “That was either really fucking stupid, or she has brass balls.”

It takes every last shred of self-control not to throw my fist into his face. It’s not his fault Sera fucking Tallon is under my skin.

Lorcan grins to himself. “That black dress. Jesus. She knew exactly what she was doing walking into our house looking like that.”

I take a breath before I give him my attention.

“She walked in with legs up to her throat and a mouth on her that hasn’t learned when to close.”

Lorcan checks the time on his phone, then slots it into his pocket.

“I’d give her one thing,” he says. “For a Tallon, she knows how to make a man look twice.”

“Enough.”

He laughs under his breath. “What? You’re telling me you didn’t notice her?”

I'll never admit that I hate myself for lying in bed at night, my cock hard, needing a release but refusing the urge because I won't let myself come while thinking about Sera Tallon.

"I'm telling you not to make yourself sound hungry over a Tallon."

His smile drops.

"She's fit, Fionn. I didn't propose marriage."

"No. You opened your mouth and made yourself sound easy to distract."

His jaw tightens.

Good. Pride always lands quicker than sense.

"She walked into our house," I say. "Let that be the problem. Not how hard your dick got while she did it."

Lorcan looks away first, dragging his tongue along his teeth.

The yard noise continues around us, tires rolling through puddles, metal doors clanging, and men calling out to one another across the bays.

Nothing changes except the temper pressing against the back of my teeth.

"She's still Tallon scum," he says.

"Yes," I say. "So, stop sounding like you'd crawl over broken glass for a taste of it."

The amusement leaves his face by degrees.

"You used to call them worse," he says.

"I still do."

I keep my fists loose because Lorcan is family in every way that matters, and busting his nose over Sera would bring drama that I don't want to have to dig deeper into.

"It's a sensitive subject since Keira betrayed us. Drop it."

Lorcan's mouth twitches. "What if Keira marries Saint and becomes a Tallon. Would that make Sera your sister-in-law?"

I hold his stare. "Do you want to pick your teeth off the concrete?"

A second passes before he laughs again, but the rumble carries less ease than before. "The tide has changed, cousin."

"The tide hasn't changed."

"Then why am I the only one saying the Tallons are scum?"

I drag a hand down my face.

"I'm marrying Eilish Kinnane so we can ruin them once and for all," I say. "Doesn't mean I need to talk about the Tallons every fucking day."

Lorcan's smile fades. "I get it. You're marrying Eilish for more power."

“For leverage,” I correct. “Power is what you have. Leverage is what makes other men use theirs badly.”

He studies me.

“Right now, the Tallons think they’ve got the better of us with Keira in their pocket. We’ll let them keep freight moving, watch the dock, and see if they welcome the Crowes. You don’t cut out a family like the Tallons while they’re still holding the port. If we move too soon, we open it up and invite every hungry bastard in Cork to test the gaps.”

“So, we wait.”

“We stay patient. We let the Crowes show us how they operate. Then we remove the threat and deal with the Tallons when the port can survive it.”

My phone vibrates in my pocket. I check the message and read it out loud.

“Unknown crew member identified near Berth Twelve. Possible Crowe association. Tallon security doing a sweep.”

I slide the phone into my pocket. “Patience pays.”

Lorcan’s posture changes at once. “And if the guy is working for the Crowes?”

“Then we’ll get one of our men in the same room as him.”

“And if the Tallons block us?”

“They won’t.”

Lorcan gives me a thin smile and walks toward the office, already barking orders into his phone.

I stay in the rain and watch the gate open for another truck, giving myself time to bury every thought of Sera behind locks, walls, and discipline.

The Crowes are making moves.

They’re waiting for a Tallon or a Harrington to make the first mistake and it sure as hell won’t be me.

Graves hits harder when he thinks I deserve it.

This afternoon he drives a bare fist into my ribs the moment I give him the opening. The impact travels through bone and forces the breath out from behind my mouth guard.

I recalibrate quickly with an elbow he barely avoids, then catch his shoulder on the next strike and drive him back across the mat.

He grunts and keeps bouncing on the balls of his feet.

Graves circles me, breathing fast. “You’re fighting ugly.”

“You taught me well.”

He comes in low. I block, pivot, and put him on his back hard. He lies there for a moment, looking up at me with the expression of a man deciding whether retirement would bore him.

Then his gaze drifts past my shoulder to the mirror.

I know what he sees.

The scratches have faded to pale lines, but they’re still visible on the skin that’s got no ink. They don’t mean anything. Men in my position collect scars the way priests collect sins.

Graves gets to his feet. “Who was she?”

I reach for the towel on the bench. “No one important.”

“Right,” he mutters. “That *no one* almost got ya in trouble. If the Kinnanes caught you fucking some woman at your—”

“They didn’t.”

He gives me a look that would make a weak man confess everything. “You took a risk, Fionn. I know ya, and I know business comes first. But you’re walking around with marks on your back and a fiancée you’ve only kissed on the cheek.”

I wipe sweat from my neck and toss the towel aside. “You asking questions or making accusations?”

“I’m trying to figure out how much trouble you’re in so I can help.”

Graves gave the best years of his life to protecting my family. Even now, he’s still dedicated to the core. I respect him for it and consider him a mentor. Maybe even a friend.

But if he sees a weakness, he names it. And if he names it, he expects me to cut it out.

“There’s nothing to worry about,” I say.

His eyebrows lift. “You still fucking this mystery woman of yours?”

I put my guard up.

“You cock-blocked me,” I tell him. “I never got far enough to make it count.”

Graves comes at me again, and I dodge his punch. “Sera Tallon looked flustered when she rejoined the party.”

“Why do you think I care?”

Graves stops and lowers his voice. “You’re weeks away from marrying Eilish. If there’s a woman in the middle of that who could ruin everything, I need to know whether she’s a problem. Did you forget about the outside security cameras, Fionn? You’re lucky it was me doing the checks.”

Fuck. I got careless. She makes me careless.

I take a long drink of water while I think of how best to address this with him.

“Sera showed up at our place. I taught her a lesson in manners. She won’t be back.”

“And Eilish?”

She’s a clean arrangement, one made with clear terms and no illusions. Eilish doesn’t claw at the inside of my discipline. She doesn’t know the darker, unrespectable parts of me or need me to spit on her. She doesn’t make me do things that I’ve no business doing.

“What about her?” I ask.

“Marriage usually comes with expectations.”

“Not ours, and she knows it.”

Graves watches me closely.

I take another drink. “Eilish understands the arrangement. I made it clear to her after the party. She gets my name, my protection and my respect. But she doesn’t get me. There’s no feelings involved for either of us.”

“You sure? What if you catch her screwing around like you are?”

“That’s her business.”

He nods. “Is she good with that? With knowing you’re fucking her best friend and the family rival?”

“Graves,” I warn. “I told you already. There’s nothing happening between me and Sera. Don’t ever say that out loud again.”

Graves goes silent, and his eyes narrow as if he’s trying to read me. Probably hunting for a sign that’ll give away my lies. Luckily, I have the best poker face…because he taught me.

“Come to me if she becomes a problem,” he says at last.

I laugh under my breath. “I can handle Sera. She’s nothing to worry about. Her brothers, though. That’s different.”

Graves picks up his towel and drapes it around his neck. “They’re all the same.”

My phone rings from the bench. Lorcan’s name flashes across the screen.

“You got something?” I ask.

“The foreman turned up,” he says, the noise of the yard loud behind him. “He’s dead. And we’re not talking a clean kill, Fionn. Someone butchered him.”

“Where?”

“Inside a Harrington container. We caught it just in time. The guy we suspected as a Crowe associate disappeared."

Graves reads my face and reaches for his hoodie. Our sparring session is over.

The Crowes have placed a body between Harrington cargo and Tallon ground, then they’ve stepped back to see which family reaches for a gun first.

“Nobody touches the container or calls the Gardaí,” I say. “Move it immediately and dispose of the body. We’ll wait.”

Lorcan’s voice lowers. “Saint will think we did it.”

I follow Graves to the door, buttoning my shirt as I go. “If he wants to side with Crowe, then we blow up the fucking dock and build a new one.”

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Chapter 13

Sera

The man who owes us money owns a tire garage on the south side of Black Heath and has the personality of wet cardboard.

He’s forty-eight, divorced twice, and currently making the poor life choice of wasting our time.

“I told Shay I needed another week,” Cormac says, spreading his hands like that makes him less irritating. “Cash flow’s tight.”

Rafe looks at him from the other side of the desk with that flat, patient stare of his.

Cormac swallows.

“I’m good for it,” he adds.

“Are ya?” Rafe asks.

“Yeah.”

“Because I know ya have it.”

Cormac glances at me like I might be softer. That’s his second poor life choice.

I lean against the filing cabinet next to him, arms folded, one boot crossed over the other. “Don’t look at me, Cormac. My patience is thinner than my brother’s.”

“True that,” Rafe says without taking his eyes off him.

“You could do with cleaning this office,” I say. “It stinks of bullshit and the distinct whiff of stashed money.”

Cormac’s jaw tightens. “You think this is funny?”

“Not at all,” I deadpan. “Am I smiling?”

Behind us, one of our men moves to the front shutters. Outside the office window, two mechanics pretend not to watch through the glass while

an engine ticks hot in the nearest bay.

Cormac reaches for the drawer.

“Slowly, big lad,” Rafe warns.

“You want your money?” the arsehole asks.

I cock a brow at him. “What’s with the bad attitude, Cormac? I’m starting to think this garage would work better as a hairdresser. Maybe we should burn it down and rebuild, Rafe. Out with the old. In with the new.”

“Why a hairdresser and not a barber?” Rafe asks, playing along.

“I heard your mate’s marrying the Harrington pretty boy,” Cormac says, half smiling. “That’ll ruin things for you.”

Usually, my focus is untouchable. I study rooms in useful pieces. Exits. Faces. Potential weapons. Lies sitting in the throat before they reach the mouth.

Today, everything keeps slipping, and the second he mentions Fionn, the gray light through the dirty office blinds turns into the pale glow of a bridal salon mirror. And the memory of our kiss floods me.

In a blink, Cormac moves. He’s fast for a man with that much weight and unpaid debt.

He grabs the glass ashtray from the desk and swings it wide. I get my arm up, but not high enough. The corner catches me near my brow, and my head jerks sideways with the impact.

Pain splits hot across my face, and a trickle of blood runs into my eye.

“Motherfucker.” Rafe lunges and shoves his ass back into his chair.

I draw my gun before Cormac has a chance to be proud of himself, and I ram the barrel under his chin.

His throat works as he swallows.

“That was your third poor life choice of the day,” I grit out through clenched teeth. “That stupid move puts you at the top of my brother's hit list.”

Cormac’s eyes go round, wet with regret.

“You can’t come in here and keep squeezing me for cash,” he breathes.

Blood drips from my brow and tracks over my cheekbone. I swipe it away, smearing red across my knuckles, but another drop follows the same path, and Fionn’s smirk flashes behind my eyes.

“You owe us.” I thumb the safety off.

“Sera,” Rafe says my name, but he knows I won’t kill a man in broad daylight.

“We came here for fifty,” I tell Cormac. “Now we want sixty.”

He shakes under the gun. “What?”

“Drawing Tallon blood is expensive, fuck-face.”

Cormac makes a broken whimper in his throat.

I tilt my head, ignoring the sting where my skin has split. “Add another ten grand to the debt and be grateful I’m letting you pay it in money instead of vital organs.”

He nods so hard the barrel moves with him.

“Words,” I say.

“Yes,” he rushes out. “Another ten. Fine. Whatever you want.”

I straighten and shove my gun into the waistband of my jeans. Rafe reaches across, grabs Cormac by the front of his shirt, pulls him off the chair, and headbutts him in the face.

Cormac drops against the desk, knocking papers and a tea-stained mug to the floor.

Blood bursts from his nose, bright against his off-white shirt.

Rafe leans over him.

“Never touch a Tallon again, or I won’t stop until your skull is in pieces.” Rafe looks at the half-open drawer. “Open it.”

Cormac obeys with shaking fingers. Inside there’s a battered metal cash box and a thick brown envelope.

Rafe takes both, opens the envelope, counts quickly, then tosses it to one of the men by the door.

“You’re short,” he says.

“How short?” I ask.

“Eight grand.”

I smile at Cormac as he sweats harder.

Rafe pockets the cash box key. “You have until Friday to find the rest.”

“Plus the ten,” I add. “I’ll buy my best friend a birthday gift with it.”

Rafe’s brows drift up, and I give him my sweetest smile, though it loses some effect with blood sliding toward my mouth.

“She’s a Kinnane,” I say. “She eats her breakfast outta gold bowls.”

“Plus the ten,” Rafe confirms.

Cormac nods, fumbling with a wad of paper tissues and holding it to his busted nose.

“Friday,” Rafe repeats over his shoulder as we leave. “Or this place will be ash by Saturday morning.”

Outside, the cold air rushes against my face and numbs the cut.

I wipe it with the back of my hand.

Rafe catches my wrist before I can smear blood into my eye. “Leave it.”

“I can bleed independently, Rafe.”

“You shouldn’t be bleeding at all.” He fishes out a cotton handkerchief from his inside pocket and presses it to my brow.

“Ow.”

“Good. Means your head’s still attached.” His gaze lingers on the cut. “Get in the car.”

I do because arguing with Rafe when his voice goes that quiet is like picking a fight with a rabid animal.

I drop into the passenger seat with the handkerchief pressed to my brow and blow out a heavy breath. My knuckles ache from how hard I gripped the gun, and my chest is too tight beneath my jacket.

Rafe doesn’t speak as we pull away from the garage with our guys following and drive through the streets.

Eventually, he glances over at me. “You’re not yourself.”

I stare out at a row of shops, noticing a couple walking hand in hand. Bitterness pushes through me. That woman doesn’t have to worry about rival families.

“I got hit in the face. Most people would call that a temporary setback.”

“Even before he clubbed ya with an ashtray,” he points out. “Which you should’ve seen coming, by the way.”

I keep the cloth held to the cut. “I did, and that’s why I don’t need stitches.”

“He got ya good, Sera.”

I keep my gaze outside of the car and roll the window down a little, needing fresh air.

Rafe jabs my arm with a gentle fist. “Your mind went somewhere else in there. Ma thinks you should let things cool with you and Eilish.”

“Ma thinks a lot of dumb things.”

“Sera.”

I close my eyes and let my head fall back against the headrest.

“Maybe she’s right,” he adds. “Because it’s got ya distracted.”

“I wasn’t distracted.”

“Tell that to the cut on your face.”

I roll my eyes. He’s right but for all the wrong reasons.

“I’m just tired,” I lie. “There’s been a lot happening lately.”

“You not sleeping much?”

“A few hours a night.”

“Are ya eating right?”

“God, are you my brother or my mother?”

“Answer me.”

“Yes, Rafe. I’m eating three meals a day and hydrating with lots of water.”

Now that I think about it, I haven’t finished a meal in weeks.

The way Fionn kissed me burns through my mind, and my skin goes hot under my coat.

Angry with myself, I press the handkerchief harder to my brow. This is getting out of control.

“Fury didn’t eat his breakfast,” I say, distracting myself with something more important than a man I can’t have.

Rafe keeps his eyes on the road. “Did he eat anything yesterday?”

“Not really.”

“That horse is old. He’s allowed to be fussy.”

“It’s not like him.”

Rafe slows at a junction. “Did he drink?”

“A bit.”

He looks back at the road, but the edge in his voice changes. “Maybe he’s sick?”

“I don’t know.” I sigh. “I’m getting the vet to check him over when we get back.”

Rafe nods. “I’ll call Liam.”

“I’ll call him.”

“I said I’d call him.” Rafe drags a pack of smokes out of his jacket pocket. “He owes me a favor.”

“Okay.” I grab the lighter from the dash and spark the tip of his cigarette as he clamps it between his lips.

“Cheers,” he mumbles. “He’ll be okay.”

My phone rings as Rafe turns the wheel hard, and we veer away from the streets, heading home.

Dane’s name fills the screen.

“I bet he wants us to pick up Chinese food.”

“What’s the order?” I answer. “Curry fried rice with chips?”

“Sera,” he replies, and the tone of his voice sends a little shiver across my scalp. “Are ya nearly home?”

“We’ll be there in twenty. Why?”

“The vets here,” he says. “Saint called him. It’s Fury.”

My stomach drops. “Put your foot down, Rafe. I need to get home.”

“It’s colic,” the vet says, and the change in his voice turns my veins to ice. “At his age, with his heart rate this high, I can’t operate.”

“I want a second opinion.” My eyes dart from him to the stable, where Fury shifts behind the half door. “Call someone else.”

Dane puts a hand on my shoulder. “Sera.”

I shrug him off. “No.”

“He’s in pain,” he says, his voice low. “He’s too old to survive surgery. We should—”

“Don’t.” My eyes fill before I can stop them. “Don’t say it.”

Rafe steps in front of me and cups my face in both hands, making me look at him. “We don’t want him to suffer, right?”

“Please.” My voice breaks apart on the word. “Rafe, no.”

Behind him, the vet speaks to Saint. “This isn’t a simple colic. His heart rate is sky high, he’s not responding to pain relief, and I can’t hear gut sounds where I should. If he were mine, Saint, I wouldn’t let him suffer through the night.”

I pull away before anyone can touch me again and slip into the stable.

Fury stands with his head low, sweat darkening the pale silver of his neck, his sides drawn tight beneath his coat. When I reach him, he turns his head toward his flank, nostrils flaring, and lets out a low, broken sigh I’ve never heard from him before.

It burns through every argument I had left.

“Fury,” I whisper, laying my hand against him.

His flank quivers beneath my palm.

Then he tries to go down.

Not the slow, tired lowering of an old horse choosing rest, but a desperate buckle, his legs folding badly beneath all that weight, pain taking him from the inside out.

I grasp at his halter. “No, no, no. Stay with me, big guy.”

He drags himself upright because I ask him to.

Because he’s always tried for me.

His whole body trembles, and I know I’m keeping him in pain because I can’t imagine a life without him. Because he’s the last thing my father gave me, and I don’t know how to let another piece of him be taken.

Fury lowers his head and presses his muzzle against my chest.

I close my eyes.

My hand slides up between his ears, stroking the place he’s always loved.

The fight goes out of me.

“Do it,” I say, my voice barely there. “Let him rest.”

After this, I’ll make sure nothing hurts like this ever again.

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Chapter 14

Sera

I finished my glass of vodka in three gulps, wishing it would numb the pain.

Eilish's bedroom is pale linen, warm lamplight, glossy magazines, and a strong smell of roses from the candle burning on her dressing table.

She sits cross-legged on the bed beside me, one hand wrapped around a glass of vodka and cranberry.

"I led him out to the field," I say, staring at the duvet. "He always liked that top corner with the pretty view. The grass grows thicker there."

Eilish reaches over to the nightstand and plucks out a few tissues.

"He went under with his head in my lap." My throat closes, but I force the words out. "I stayed with him until he went cold."

Eilish's fingers squeeze my wrist. "I'm so sorry, Sera. I know how much you loved him."

"Rafe tried to move me. Dane tried. I told them if anyone touched me, I'd shoot them in the dick."

She hands me a tissue so I can wipe my nose.

"After, my brothers built the pyre." I rub my thumb across a dark smudge on my knuckles. "I lit it."

Eilish sets her glass down and puts her arms around me. "Sera."

"I'm fine." I choke out.

"I've seen you angry," she says softly. "And feisty. I've seen you take no shit from men—"

"Sounds like me."

"But I've never seen you like this before."

"My da bought him for me," I whisper. "We worked on him together. Got a saddle on his back and a bit in his mouth."

“I know.”

“He taught me how to sit on him, how to read him, how to wait instead of force.” My breath catches. “When my da died, Fury was there. Every day. Every time I needed to talk without judgment, he was there.”

Eilish reaches for the vodka bottle on the bedside table and pours another measure into my glass.

I knock it back in one swallow without a mixer.

It burns my throat and lands in my empty stomach like a lit match.

“I can’t fix grief with vodka, but I can get you blind drunk.”

A broken laugh slips out of me. She takes the glass from my hand and sets it aside before lying down on the bed.

After a second, I lie beside her, both of us staring at the ceiling like teenagers hiding from the world.

Her hand finds mine between us, and she links our fingers. “Stay here tonight.”

“Okay.”

I breathe out a long sigh and blink up at the ceiling, shocked at how everything in my life has changed.

A knock comes at the door, and she sits up as Mara pokes her face in. “You’re needed downstairs.”

Eilish glances at me. “I won’t be long. I’ll bring up more vodka and a bag of popcorn.”

“Take your time.”

She leans down and kisses my forehead, careful of the cut near my brow, then leaves with Mara.

At first, I stay on the bed because I promised. Because my limbs are heavy, and my head has gone light from vodka and crying.

I listen to the stillness, then hear laughter from downstairs and the distant opening and closing of doors.

Time stretches.

The candle burns lower.

My skin begins to itch.

It’s the feeling of being in a place that doesn’t belong to me, surrounded by walls that aren’t scuffed stable boards. There’s no sweet smell of hay or the comfort of my family. I need my own bed, my own locked door, my own grief without anyone looking at it.

So, I sit up, scoot off the bed, and put my boots on.

I slip out of Eilish’s room and head down the stairs, ignoring the two security men in the hall who straighten when they see me.

“Miss Tallon,” one says.

I keep walking.

The night air nips at my skin, icy and damp against my hot face.

I pull my jacket tighter around myself and jog toward my car, passing a line of parked Kinnane vehicles. When I reach the driver's side, I shove my hand into my jeans pocket for my keys.

I check the other pocket, then my jacket pockets, my temper climbing.

Fuck my life. The keys are upstairs in Eilish’s bedroom.

“Fuck you.” I curl my hand into a fist and thump the car window.

Pain bursts across my knuckles.

“Motherfucker.”

The word tears out of me as I fist the glass again because the pain in my hand makes me feel something else.

My breath shudders.

I press both hands to the cold window and lower my head as the first sob escapes on a tattered breath.

Then another comes, and I let it all out. Hating myself for the weakness but too torn up to stop.

“What’s wrong, Sera?”

Fionn’s voice slips over my shoulder, and I hurry to wipe my face, breathing hard.

“Nothing,” I choke out, keeping my back to him.

“Then why are you crying?”

“I’m not.”

I sense him before he reaches me. The heat of his body at my back and that awful Harrington calmness pressing against the worst night of my life.

His hands wrap around my arms, and I go rigid.

He turns me into him, and I keep my eyes on the gravel at his feet. With the slightest of touch, he nudges my chin higher and thumbs away a fallen tear.

“See,” he says quietly. “Tears.”

“Go away,” I whisper.

In his silence, he studies my face, his attention lingering on my brow.

“How did you cut yourself?”

I fold my arms across my chest. “Some asshole took a swing at me.”

His forehead creases. “Is that same asshole the reason you’re crying?”

I let out a cracked laugh and look away. “Oh, please. I’d never give some low-life garage owner the satisfaction.”

His gaze stays on me. “Have you been drinking?”

“What’s with the interrogation?”

“You’re outside alone, crying against your car, with blood on your face and no keys in your hand. I’m adjusting my questions around the evidence.”

“How very forensic of ya.”

“How much have you had?”

“Two.” I stick up two fingers: it would be funny if my hand wasn’t shaking so badly. “If you’ll excuse me, I need to grab my keys from inside so I can go home.”

He stares at me for a racing heartbeat, then backs away. When I take a step forward, he moves his sleeve back a fraction and checks the time on his gold watch.

My breath stalls.

It’s a stupid reaction.

Humiliating, in fact.

The movement drags me straight back to the barn. To the orangery. To him taking off his watch before he chased me.

My throat tightens. “Please don’t take it off.”

His gaze lifts to mine.

I swallow, and the words scrape on the way out. “I don’t have the… I can’t run tonight. I need you to leave me alone.”

For once, he says nothing. Only glances over his shoulder at the Kinnane house.

“Fionn,” I whisper as he turns to me. “No.”

However, his watch stays on, and he comes at me before I can dodge him. He bends and throws me over his shoulder.

“What the hell are ya doing?” I snap, grabbing at the back of his jacket. “Put me down.”

“No.”

“Fionn Harrington, I swear to God—”

“You can swear at me in the car.”

He carries me across the driveway as the security looks away because they wouldn’t dare challenge the Harrington heir and the Kinnane groom.

After the wedding, Fionn will be the most powerful man this side of Ireland.

Fionn stops beside a black Range Rover and sets me down at the passenger side.

My balance wavers, and his hand comes to my waist.

I smack it away as he opens the door, places one hand over the top edge of the frame and looks at me.

“Get in.”

“No. I can drive myself.”

“You don’t have your keys.”

“I can get them.”

“You’ve been drinking.”

“I had two vodkas, not a bottle,” I say, even though I know he’s right. I’m light-headed and held together by pure spite. “Anyway, I’d rather poke my eyes out than get in your car.”

He watches me for a second, then opens his jacket and takes a gold fountain pen from the inner pocket.

“Then go ahead.”

He holds it between us, his expression perfectly calm.

I stare at the pen, then look up at him.

His pupils are so black and wide his eyes look bottomless, and the worst part is, he doesn’t seem amused. Rather, I get the impression he’s prepared to stand here all night long and let my pride exhaust itself against him.

“Poke out your eyes,” he says, “or get in the car.”

I wipe my face with my cuff, not admitting defeat, not even to myself, and climb inside because the hurt in me is bigger than my anger.

Bigger than my pride.

Bigger than him.

While I clip in my seat belt, he walks around to the driver’s side, gets in, and glances once at the belt across my chest.

The engine starts, and the car pulls away from the house, both of us staring forward in silence.

Once we leave the Kinnane mansion, the road winds through the dark, the window wipers dragging off rain, the heated seat pushing warmth into my exhausted muscles.

Fionn drives with one hand resting on the wheel and his elbow on the middle armrest.

I let my head fall back against the leather upholstery, relaxing a little in our silence.

“I had to put down my horse today.”

He glances my way for a beat, then looks back at the road.

I swallow the lump forming in my throat.

“My da bought him for me before he was killed. He was more than just a horse.” My voice comes out scratchy, nothing like mine. “I don’t usually cry.”

“Cry all you want.” The muscles in his jaw clench.

I turn back to the window and press my sleeve beneath my eyes.

The car moves through another stretch of darkness.

“What did you call him?” he asks.

“Fury.”

Silence settles between us again, and I almost feel grateful that he doesn’t say something stupid to try and make it better. It’s like he knows the only thing I need is space and time.

The car takes a bend, and my phone slides across the console. We reach for it together, and his hand closes over mine, warm in the dark.

Neither of us pulls away.

One heartbeat. Two.

Then he puts it on the wheel, and I stare out the window because grief has made me stupid enough to miss the warmth of his touch.

Once we get to the country roads close to home, I let out a heavy sigh. “Leave me at the top of my lane.”

“It’s raining.”

“I’m used to the rain.”

The Range Rover slows, and just as I think he’s going to pull in, he reaches into the back seat and grabs a black baseball cap.

He puts it on without looking at me.

A plain black cap. Nothing special. Nothing that deserves my attention.

Except it changes him.

The suit is still there, the clean shirt, the expensive watch, the controlled Harrington persona, but the cap drags something rougher out of him. Something younger. Meaner.

My stomach tightens before I can stop it.

Fionn glances over. “What?”

“Nothing.”

His eyes hold mine from beneath the brim.

“They’ll never know it’s me,” he says, putting his foot on the gas and driving straight past the Black Heath Stud plaque at the top of our lane.

Adrenaline pulses through me the closer we get. I know Shay will be around somewhere, even if my brothers have hung their coats up for the night.

“You heard of the Crowes?” he asks out of the blue.

I frown and glance over. “Yeah.”

“Their people killed a Tallon foreman and dumped his body in one of my containers.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Because you’re smart, Sera.” He keeps driving, his face shadowed, voice a deep rumble. “They’re waiting for us to fight each other. Harringtons and Tallons. It’s the cleanest way to take over the port.”

I stare at him, trying to find the lie in his face.

“How do I know you’re telling the truth?”

“You don’t.” He shrugs. “It would be wise to inform your brothers that the Crowes are closing in on your territory…and mine. Don’t dismiss the warning because you hate who said it.”

“Stop here,” I say quickly when we reach the main gate.

The car rolls to a stop, and I glance over my shoulder. “There’s a stupid part of me that wishes we didn’t hate ya so much.”

“Get out of my car, little wild thing.”

And I do. I climb out, close the door and jog toward the gate, not looking back.

“Who’s that?” Shay asks, dragging the gate open.

“A Kinnane driver,” I lie. “I drank too much vodka.”

As I head for the main house, the Range Rover tears up the lane, and my stomach knots.

Because every time Fionn Harrington appears, hating him gets harder.

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Chapter 15

Sera

The yard is exactly the same even though Fury's only been gone a few days.

Rain runs over the concrete between the house and the barns.

One of the dogs barks from near the kennels, then loses interest. Men move between parked cars and the far barn with their collars turned up, cigarettes burning orange beneath cupped hands.

The main barn door is half open.

I swallow the lump in my throat and slip inside, freezing opposite Fury's empty stall. I do a one-eighty turn and walk straight back out.

"Hey, Sera," a guy calls out as he jogs over. "I need your autograph."

I grab the sheet for a fuel delivery and sign it off.

Shay comes up behind me. "Want me to clean out his stall?"

My throat tightens.

"Might be easier for me to do it," he adds.

I shake my head. "I'll do it later."

Shay pulls at the peak of his cap. "If you need a hand, just shout."

"Thanks." I offer him a tight smile and walk off, crossing toward the feed room when Saint steps out from the shadow of the farthest barn.

He's scowling and heading my way.

"Saint," I say. "You look cheerful."

"What the fuck happened at Cormac's garage the other day?"

I lift one shoulder. "He took a swipe at me. Rafe put him in his place, and I raised the debt he owes."

His stare drops to the fading cut near my brow.

"He's in the hospital."

My brows tug tight. "The pussy went to hospital for a busted nose?"

Saint narrows his eyes. “Try two broken hands and a concussion,” he says. “Someone wearing a balaclava broke into the garage and attacked him.”

For a second, all I do is stare at him, keeping my face blank. “That’s unfortunate.”

Saint sighs. “Was it you?”

“Right, like I have time to waste on him,” I laugh. “The guy’s an asshole who beat his wives. One of them must’ve taken their turn.”

“Sera.”

“What?”

“Did Rafe send someone back without running it past me?”

“No.”

“Are ya sure?”

I look him dead in the eye. “Why would he when Cormac still owes us money.”

He studies me in silence, and my skin starts to prickle because something turns over in my stomach.

A masked man. Both hands broken.

It couldn’t have been Fionn. Cormac is our guy on our turf. But my head gives me his voice anyway.

I notice men who put hands on things that don’t belong to them.

I clear my throat. “I’ve got stuff to do. It wasn’t us this time. Okay?”

When Saint nods, accepting the truth, I decide now’s the time to bring up the intel Fionn gave me.

I glance toward the office, then back at him. “I heard something about the Crowes.”

“From who?”

“A reliable source.”

His mouth thins. “Name.”

“That doesn’t matter.”

“Sera.”

“Don’t give me the big-brother voice, Saint. Just trust me.”

He folds his arms across his chest. “What did ya hear?”

“Apparently, they’re trying to move in on the port. They’re causing trouble and waiting for the families to start tearing chunks out of each other so they can creep in behind and take what’s left.”

Saint’s forehead furrows, and I step closer, lowering my voice.

“Our foreman was found dead in a Harrington container. My source told me he was planted there.”

His eyes stay on mine. “You think the Crowes killed him?”

“I think convenient chaos creates a smoke screen.”

“And your source?” he asks. “How reliable are they?”

“I don’t bring gossip to the table. I bring facts.”

He breathes out through his nose in a hard sigh. “I’ll look into it.”

“That’s all I ask,” I tell him, backing up.

Saint looks past me toward the main house, already thinking through angles, threats, names, consequences. Then his eyes cut to mine, and there’s a flicker of the younger Saint there.

“You’re gonna need a new horse to ride one of these days—”

“Don’t,” I choke out, caught off guard.

“All I’m saying is, one day, when you’re ready, I’ll take ya to the sales. Me and you.”

“Okay,” I whisper.

He nods once, sharp and grim, then walks toward the office with his phone already in his hand.

I stand there, throat tight, the cut throbbing near my brow, and my heart pinching behind my ribs.

As I turn back to the feed room, Dane appears.

“Jesus,” I snap. “Do men in this yard only approach by ambush now?”

He lifts both hands. “Wow. You’re jumpy today. Scared I caught ya slackin’ off?”

“I should be so lucky.”

“A courier dropped something off for ya.”

“For me?”

“Yeah. It’s sitting on the kitchen table.”

I frown. “Is it big? All the orders are meant to come through here.”

“Nah, it’s small. Looks personal,” he says. “You must have ordered a new personality.”

“You’re a dick.”

I flip him off and head back to the house.

At the back door, I kick off my boots and step inside, shrugging out of my coat as I follow the bitter scent of old coffee into the kitchen.

A small plastic courier bag sits on the table, my name printed in black ink across the label.

No return address.

No logo I recognize.

The prickle at my nape comes back. I pull open the cutlery drawer, grab a pair of scissors, and snip through one end.

Inside there's a small velvet box.

For a second, I just stare, because whatever I expected, it wasn't this.

I set the scissors down and crack it open.

Gold shines in the gray daylight pouring in through the windows.

A short chain lies coiled against black silk, delicate and weighty, with a heart pendant resting in the center. Black diamonds sit across the surface, dark little sparks trapped inside the gold.

My breath leaves in a long sigh because next to the pretty heart is the letter F, also set in black diamonds.

I'm dumbstruck for a second before I drag out a chair and sit with the box open in front of me, then close the lid before opening it again because apparently, I don't trust my own eyes.

The F is still there.

Small. Dark. Expensive.

My hand moves inside the courier bag, and something stiff catches against my fingers. I pull out a crisp white card.

Gold lettering gleams on one side.

Harrington Estate

My stomach tightens, and I flip it over to the handwritten word on the back.

Condolences.

The air changes in my lungs.

The F is for Fury.

I swallow the lump in my throat and shove the card inside the bag, hiding the evidence before anyone walks in.

A heart for the horse my da gave me.

A letter for the name I had to let go.

And from Fionn Harrington, of all people.

My phone rings from inside my pocket, and I nearly jump out of my skin.

I dig it out, check the caller ID, and press it to my ear. "Hey."

"Hey, girl," Eilish says. "I'm so sorry about leaving you alone the other night. Mother threw wedding plans and seating arrangements at me for

hours. How are you holding up?”

“I’ve been better,” I reply. “You?”

“Same.” I stare at the necklace as she continues, “I asked the stud farrier to make a little horse from one of Fury’s old shoes for the grave.”

The necklace blurs, and I blink back the sting of tears threatening to fall. “Thanks.”

“When it’s ready, we’ll put it on his grave together. Yeah?”

I nod, the first attempt at an answer catches behind my teeth. I swallow and try again. “Yeah.”

“So…” she begins. “Mother has organized a birthday party for me at the house this weekend. It's the last thing I want, especially when you’re going through a hard time with losing Fury but—”

My eyes close for a moment. “Eilish—”

“It’s okay… I can’t *not* invite you though. You’re my bestie.”

I drag a hand down my face and stare at the courier bag where the Harrington card is hidden. She’s marrying Fionn. Not me. I’ve no right to put his gift around my neck.

“It’s not a good idea for me to be around Fionn,” I mutter.

“I know it’s hard for you, especially when you two keep going for each other's throats.” Her voice tightens. “In typical Mara fashion, she’s turning my birthday into another social pantomime, and I’ll struggle to get through it without you, but I’ll understand if you can’t face it.”

“Has he kissed ya, Eilish?” I ask, thumbing the pendants.

“Fionn… No,” her voice drops. “Why would he?”

“The Harringtons like to keep up public appearances. I just thought he’d test his limits.”

For one fleeting second, I want to tell her.

About the necklace and the card. The fact that Fionn sent me black diamonds because my horse died.

But Eilish thinks I hate him.

She probably thinks that hatred is simple.

And maybe it is. Maybe the gift is only condolences from a man who saw me fall apart and decided money was the closest thing he had to comfort.

Saying it out loud would make it strange.

So, I close the box and say nothing.

“What time will I come over?”

“Oh my God, are you sure?” Eilish says in a rush, her tone brighter now.

“What sort of friend leaves her bestie to the wolves on her birthday.”

Eilish’s exhale comes out like relief. “Come over at five before everyone else. We’ll have drinks and get ready together.”

“Okay.”

“Thank you.”

“You won’t be thanking me if I get drunk and call your da an arsehole.”

“Even you know that’s a bad idea,” she says. “Even more so now he and Alasdair are like best friends these days.”

When the call ends, silence settles around me.

I drop the phone onto the table and pick up the necklace, telling myself I’m only going to see how it looks on me before I put it back in the box.

The clasp is small and awkward beneath my fingers, but I get it fastened, and the chain settles against the base of my throat, the black diamond heart resting in the hollow with the little F beside it.

F for Fury.

That’s all.

I touch the pendant once, then tuck it beneath the neckline of my jumper.

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Chapter 16

Fionn

I force a smile for Mara Kinnane, the future mother-in-law I'd happily strangle.

Her gaze slides over my dark trousers, open-necked shirt, and jacket.

"Fionn." She comes toward me with both hands out. "You made it."

"I said I would."

"Yes, well." She kisses the air near my cheek, perfume and champagne and nerves clinging to her. "Men say a lot of things."

"They do."

She laughs because she thinks I'm charming her when I'm simply going through motions. Another event in a different location with the same boring conversations.

The Kinnane house is lit from every corner, music drifting through the rooms, guests mingling.

Art is across the room with my father, both of them smoking cigars and drinking whiskey.

Eilish comes to my side and hands me a drink. "There you go. Your favorite."

"Thanks."

She's learned what liquor I drink in social settings and probably knows a few other basic details too. I'll give her credit for putting in the effort, whereas I haven't cared enough to learn what color her eyes are.

"Happy birthday." I raise my glass.

The Harrington ring flashes on her finger as she lifts hers. I was raised to understand the importance of that ring. No one ever asked whether I wanted to marry the woman expected to wear it.

When she gives me a brief, closed-mouth smile, I return my attention to the guests.

“Your present is on the gift table. My mother usually has good taste. However, if you don’t like it, she can swap it for something else.”

She takes another sip. “I’m sure it’s fine.”

Mara claps her hands softly. “Right. Before everyone gets pulled into different rooms, I want a few photos of you two together.”

Eilish’s smile fades. “That’s not necessary, Mother.”

“Of course, it is.” She clicks her fingers at the photographer. “Fix your hair, Eilish.”

“Your hair is fine,” I tell her because Mara’s getting on my nerves.

Mara moves to the fireplace. “Over here. The lighting is more flattering.”

She positions us beneath an old watercolor painting. Eilish stands beside me, shoulder almost brushing mine. Neither of us get too close.

The photographer lifts his camera.

“Lovely,” Mara says. “Fionn, perhaps put your arm around her.”

I place my hand on her back, not wanting to insult Eilish, and keeping myself relaxed even though this is fucking irritating.

The camera flashes.

“Beautiful,” Mara says. “Maybe you could lean a little closer, Fionn. Maybe even kiss her.”

“No,” I say, voice firm.

Mara’s smile freezes.

“It’s a partnership, Mara. Not a relationship.”

Mara recovers with impressive speed. Being married to Art has taught her to gloss over a wound.

“Well,” she says, all fake smiles. “Partnerships can still look friendly.”

“Just stop, Mother.” Eilish sighs. “You don’t need to pretend we’re in love.”

The photographer lowers his camera, unsure whether he’s being paid enough to witness this.

Mara’s eyes sharpen, but her smile stays fixed. “At least he’s beautiful, darling. Some women are handed brutes and told to be grateful.”

Eilish stills beside me.

“And these arrangements are not made to be unmade,” she adds.

My muscles brace at the comment, and I step away from Eilish.

“Photo shoot’s over.” I take a drink and scan the room.

And that’s when I see her.

Sera’s standing near the glass doors with Ronan beside her, head tipped toward him, a flirty smile on her face that he returns.

She’s poured into a dark green dress tonight, softer than the black one she wore at my house, but sexier somehow. Thin straps frame her shoulders while the dress fits close at her waist and brushes her thighs as she moves.

Dark waves bounce around her face as she laughs, her bright red lips spread in a smile directed at Ronan.

And fuck, my dick is straining against my zipper because around her throat, almost lost in the light, are black diamonds on pale skin.

My pulse switches gears. A private, intense thrum through my body.

Sera laughs at something Ronan says, and his hand settles at her waist as he dips in closer.

Eilish follows my gaze. “Fionn?”

I drag my eyes away from Sera and take another drink. “Your mother needs to back off.”

“Is that why you’re throwing daggers at Sera?”

“I didn’t even see her.”

Eilish gives me a look which I choose to ignore.

“We could call it off, you know,” she says quietly. “There are plenty of other powerful families with firstborn daughters.”

I want to agree so quickly it pisses me off. I take a drink and keep myself in check.

“This isn’t a dress fitting,” I tell her. “You don’t get to try it on, decide it doesn’t suit, and send it back.”

“I know that.”

“Then don’t act like you don’t.”

Her jaw tightens, but she holds my stare. She has more steel than people give her credit for.

“This marriage was agreed to in front of both families,” I say, keeping my voice low. “Your father gave his word. Mine gave his. Men have moved money, routes, favors, and protection. People have already started adjusting around the fact that you’ll be a Harrington.”

“I’m aware.”

“No. You’re uncomfortable.” I glance back at Sera. “That isn’t the same thing.”

Eilish’s gaze burns into my side profile. “So that’s it?”

“That’s it.”

“We just get married because they say so.”

“Yes.”

“I need a drink.” She turns on her heel and walks off.

I take another slow sip of whiskey, already regretting my sharpness without having any intention of taking it back.

Across the room Sera laughs at something Ronan says, and my temper rises.

Jesus fuck. Who is this guy? A comedian?

Then he tilts his head toward the terrace doors, gesturing to go outside, and she follows him.

Settle in with a love story.

Head to Lokepub for more romance novels.

My feet move before I give them permission.

I set my glass on a side table and move through the guests, stopping at the glass doors they went through to stare out at a black sky.

Beyond the potted plants lit beneath the terrace lights, Ronan cups her face and leans in for a kiss.

And she doesn’t pull away.

My hand tightens on the door handle.

It’s not anger. Anger, I understand. This is harder to control.

This is Ronan’s mouth on hers, his hand at her jaw, her body close to his when it should know better, and the sudden, violent certainty that if he doesn’t step back, I’ll bury him.

I open the door and discreetly draw my gun as I head in their direction.

Sera breaks the kiss.

“Nope. Nothing,” she says.

“Me neither.”

I come up behind Ronan and press the barrel of my gun to the back of his skull.

Her eyes pop wide. “Fionn—”

Ronan goes absolutely rigid.

“If you don’t want to leave here in a body bag.” I nudge the gun in harder, “then I suggest you back the fuck off.”

His hands raise slowly. “Jesus Christ, Fionn. What did I do?”

Sera grabs at my arm. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Is this because I kissed Sera?” he asks.

“You made a mistake.”

“I was just trying to see if I felt something.”

My finger rests alongside the trigger.

“Put a hand on her again,” I say, calm and controlled, “and you’ll lose it. Kiss her again, and I’ll put you down where you stand.”

Ronan’s breath leaves him in a gust.

“Sera,” he says. “What the fuck is going on here?”

“Go inside,” she snaps, but her eyes stay on me. “Fionn and I need to have a chat.”

Ronan takes a slow step away from my aim, then another, and glances over his shoulder at me as I lower my arm. He keeps walking, and I slide my gun into its holster under my jacket.

The terrace door opens behind us, spilling a flash of music and voices before closing again.

She turns on me. “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“Nothing. Why?”

“You put a gun to his head at a party?”

“I’m aware. I was there.”

“Because he kissed me?” Her laugh is high and furious. “Oh my God. You’re an arrogant piece of shit.”

“I wouldn’t say arrogant.”

The garden lights catch on the black diamonds at her throat. Her gaze follows mine to the necklace, and her cheeks turn pink as she covers it with her fingers. “Don’t ever threaten him like that again.”

“I won’t have to if he understands the warning.”

Her eyes flash. “You’re so delusional."

When I step closer, she holds her ground, but her chest rises hard beneath the green dress, and the anger in her eyes has already started mixing with something more dangerous.

Something she tries to hide but can’t. Something I’ve seen on my mats with her wrists pinned above her head and me holding her down.

“And you’re in trouble,” I tell her.

Her breath stutters.

There it is.

Her body's deception.

The dark little door between us opening on its own.

Her pupils flare, and she glances over my shoulder, checking that no one's watching us, then looks at me, and I know she understands what's about to happen.

Sera straightens her spine and fixes her posture, already preparing herself. “You’re out of your fucking mind.”

“Probably.”

“Everyone’s inside.”

“And you’re out here.”

Her anger breaks open wider, but beneath it, her body betrays her with a shiver that spreads over her arms in goosebumps.

“Fuck you.”

“Not right here on the terrace, little wild thing.”

Her lips part. The wind, the creaking of a weathervane, the roar of laughter behind the glass all seem to pause with that one gasp.

I pull back my sleeve, unfasten the clasp, and slide my watch from my wrist.

Her gaze drops to it.

Want and fear and memory all tangle together in a way that drags every disciplined part of me tight.

“This isn’t fair,” she whispers. “They could catch us.”

“No.” I put the watch into my jacket pocket. “It isn’t. And I’m the only one who’ll catch you.”

Her throat works as she swallows, her feet rooted to the flagstones, her body primed to move.

“Sera.”

She blinks up at me.

“The safeword is necklace.” I watch her understand that she can stop me with one word, if she really wants to.

Her chest heaves, and her gaze darts to shadows moving on the other side of the glass, then out across the Kinnane grounds. Trees. Hedges. Stone

walls. Darkness broken by garden lights and old paths.

My blood goes hot.

“Run,” I take one step into her. “And be ready for what happens next.”

She takes one raw breath, grabs a fistful of material at her thighs, turns, and runs straight into the dark.

My heart is pounding.

There are a hundred reasons not to follow her.

Yet I don’t give a fuck about any of them.

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Chapter 17

Sera

The night swallows me when I leave the terrace lights behind.

When my heels jab into the soil, I stop for a second to kick them off, hooking them in one hand.

My bare feet slap the soggy earth as I run. The garden stretches ahead, black and wide, full of shadows and places to hide, while my heart beats so fast it feels lodged in my throat.

I cut left past the box hedges, bunching the dress in my fist so it doesn't tangle at my thighs.

The formal lines of the garden give way to older trees, moonlight slicing through the canopy in thin, silver strips. I aim for the thickest dark, lungs burning, blood alive in a way it has no right to be.

Eilish's birthday party is behind me. Ronan had a gun to his head. Fionn Harrington is somewhere in the night, coming after me.

And still, I run like a prey that wants to be caught.

The obsession is sick but knowing that does nothing to slow me. Hate should have made this easier to walk away from.

Instead, it's only fueled the thrill.

A twig snaps behind me.

Heat floods between my thighs as I sprint deeper into the trees, bare feet tearing over damp leaves, panties already damp.

Another crack echoes.

"Give up, Sera."

My name in his mouth out here, deep and rough, does maddening things to me. I'm running with my heart in my throat, and every snapped branch behind me pulls another pulse out of my clit.

Despite that, I won’t make this easy for him. And he doesn’t really want me to.

I snarl and change direction, bolting for the old stone wall. It’s chest height and moss-slick, but I hurl my shoes over, plant one foot against the rock, and haul myself up.

A hand clamps around my ankle.

“Damn it... Let go.”

I kick my other leg, clipping his shoulder, but he doesn’t let go. He drags me back just enough to ruin my balance, then vaults the wall and lands on the other side with me.

We face each other in the long grass, his shirt pulled crooked from the chase, chest rising and falling beneath it.

“You sound different when you run from me,” he says.

“Do I?”

“Yeah.” His gaze drops lower. “Wetter.”

He lunges at me, and I meet him with elbows and nails. We fight together in a snarling tangle of legs and hands, stumbling through the wild grass until every sensible thought in my head disappears under the scrape of his body against mine.

Christ, I want him. Not a polite, deniable want either. I want him inside me, tonight, in the wet grass, and I want it so badly that my hands shake.

I claw at his jacket, ripping it down his arms. He shrugs out of it, and I attack his shirt next, buttons popping open. Once his chest is bare, I sink my nails into his skin and drag them across his pecs, leaving raised red lines behind.

Fionn hisses, but his cock nudges against my stomach.

Whatever this is, it turns him on.

And me doing it to him turns me on more.

He spins me, bands one powerful arm around my waist from behind, and wraps his other hand around my throat.

“I’ve got you now, little wild thing.”

His thumb presses under my jaw, fingers curled against my racing pulse, and the control he has over me makes my knees threaten something humiliating.

“You’ll never have me.”

I buck and twist, grinding my ass back against the thick, hard length of him. He bites down on the side of my neck, and I know it’ll mark, but I

don’t care, especially when he drags his flattened tongue over the sting and my knees actually give.

This is the part that should horrify me. That being held down by a Harrington in the dark has my pussy clenching around nothing, and my mouth open on a moan I can’t stop. It’s wrong however I look at it. It doesn’t make me want it less. Rather, it makes me need it more.

“Still fighting?” he rasps against my ear, voice wrecked. “Or ready to surrender?”

“Never.”

I drive an elbow into his ribs. He grunts, spins me again, and crushes his mouth to mine.

The kiss is all teeth, tongue, and hunger. I bite his bottom lip until I taste copper, and he growls into my mouth, tightening his hand around my throat just enough to make my head spin.

We devour each other as if restraint was only ever something waiting to be punished out of us.

Next thing I know, he takes me down into the grass.

I land on my back with him between my thighs, the torn dress pushed up around my waist. I scratch his skin again, nails carving deep so he shudders and his hips roll against me, grinding his thick dick over soaked lace, catching my clit on every pass.

“Fuck,” he snarls. “You get off on hurting me.”

I bite his shoulder in answer and pray it leaves a mark on him.

He groans, then grips my panties and rips them clean off.

When his fingers find me wet, I whimper, and a deep rumble scrapes the back of his throat like it hurts him.

“Jesus, fuck, Sera…” he pants, nostrils flaring.

Two thick fingers shove into me, all the way, curling hard while his thumb grinds circles into my clit. I arch, nails raking his sides, heels digging into his ass.

I’m so wet I can hear it. So can he, and the bastard smiles about it.

Then he’s unbuckling his belt, shoving his trousers lower, and the blunt, hot head of his cock notches against my entrance, thicker than his fingers, thick enough that my body braces before it even starts.

I freeze for a heartbeat—hate, need, and shame crashing together.

We’re really gonna cross the line…

Every reason not to is right there, lined up and shouting. Eilish. My brothers. The engagement party. And every one of them loses to the throb between my legs telling me that if he stops now, I'd beg him to fill me.

Fionn looks down at me, his inked chest marked, his hand collared around my throat.

"Say what you need."

God, I hate him, and I need him anyway.

"Fuck you," I hiss.

"That can be arranged." His thumb presses beneath my jaw. "If you just say it, little wild thing."

"Fuck me, you bastard."

"Fuck me, Fionn," he corrects.

I should spit in his face and fight harder. I should do anything except crave the damage my mouth can do when I give him what he wants.

"I'll say it if you stop pretending this is only happening because I want it," I breathe, scraping my nails over his shoulders. "Say it."

His fingers dig into my jaw, forcing my face to stay in place as he lowers his mouth close so his breath mingles with mine.

He stares into my eyes, jaw clenched, breath rough, and when my nails scrape over his shoulders, his dick parts the opening by a fraction.

The movement is shallow, barely an inch, and I feel the stretch of it everywhere. My muscles clamp around him, and he swears against my mouth. I need the rest. I need all of it. I need him buried so deep it ruins me for anything gentler.

He won't give me words, but his body gives him away in the brutal restraint of every locked inch of him.

His mouth brushes mine with a barely-there kiss.

"Say my name," he mutters against my lips.

I find his nipples and pinch, watching his control tear a little more.

"Say it, Sera." His fingers tighten on my jaw.

"Fionn," I whisper.

His fingers flex, control fraying down to the last thread.

"Protection?"

"I'm covered."

As soon as it leaves my mouth, the first hard inch of his dick pushes past the resistance, stretching me open, and it steals every scrap of air out of my lungs.

He doesn’t stop there. He works himself slowly, forcing me to take him inch by thick inch until my thighs are shaking around his hips, and I’m clawing at his skin.

The relief is shattering.

A broken cry tears out of me as my inner walls stretch around the thick push of him, burning at the edges, and for one helpless second all the fight goes out of me, because he’s in my lungs, on my tongue, under my nails.

Everywhere I should never let him be.

He’s too much and exactly enough, hot and deep and finally inside me after weeks of hatred turning into hunger every time we got too close.

I clench around him so hard he curses, his forehead dropping to mine.

“Christ, Sera.” His voice cracks on my name.

I scratch his back again, urging him deeper, and he gives it to me with a rough snap of his hips that drives him in deep and punches a gasp out of me.

He drives us into the grass, each stroke dragging out slow and slamming back in hard, forcing needy whimpers out of me on every one. My breasts bounce with the power while his eyes stay on my face.

Every breath from him breaks against my mouth as if his control is being stripped away every time he sinks back in.

He fucks me the way he chased me, with no room left for mercy or distance, one hand tight at my throat and the other hooked beneath my thigh, folding me open so he can get deeper. The angle changes, and he hits something inside me that makes my vision white out at the edges.

“There.” It’s out before I can stop it. “Fionn, right there, don’t you fucking dare stop—”

“That’s what I like to hear,” he grits out, giving it to me exactly where I asked. “All that mouth, and all it wanted was to beg.”

I drag him closer with my nails buried in his skin and bite the side of his neck, making his rhythm falter.

When I turn my mouth against his shoulder and bite again, the grunt that leaves the back of his throat vibrates straight through me.

His hand leaves my thigh and hits the grass beside my head. Then his mouth is on mine, rough and wet and tasting of blood and grass and everything we should’ve left alone.

The pressure builds too fast, coiling low and tight until I can feel it in my teeth.

I try to fight it because giving him this feels dangerous, but my body has already chosen sides.

My back bows off the ground, and when I come, it rips through me so violently that I can't tell if I'm moaning his name or cursing him for making me need this. I clench around him in hard, greedy waves, my thighs locked around his hips, and I don't stop coming.

Fionn fucks me through the rush, jaw locked, breath coming faster. The hand on my throat stays in place as his whole body goes rigid above mine.

"Fuck…"

The word hisses out of him as he comes, his dick driving in deep and staying there so I feel every pulse of him spill inside me, filling me up until it slicks the tops of my thighs.

He stays over me, heavy and hot despite the cold night air. His chest drags against mine with every breath. The realization of what we've done presses around me, and the party might as well belong to another life.

I should be horrified. Instead, I lie there in the wet grass with a Harrington still inside me, aching, full, marked, and absolutely mortified that I want him all over again.

Fionn drags his thumb over my swollen bottom lip.

"Every time you run," he says, his voice still rough. "I'll catch you."

I shove him to get off me.

"I need to get back inside," I say when I can form words. "Eilish will be looking for me."

He rolls sideways onto the grass with the irritating ease of a man who has absolutely no regrets, jacket abandoned, shirt god knows where, looking altogether too comfortable for someone who just had sex in his fiancée's garden.

I sit up and pull my dress over my hips.

My underwear is nowhere to be seen, and I decide to leave it because it's windy out here, and I'm too tired to crawl through wet grass looking for scraps of lace.

He gets to his feet and offers me his hand, which I refuse. When I struggle to stand, he hooks his hands under my arms and hauls me into him.

"I'll give you a three-minute head start," he says. "We had a disagreement. I walked off. You were in the garden getting air."

"I know how this works," I say tightly. "And I certainly don't want anyone thinking you—"

“That I came inside you?” He cocks a brow. “Because I did. And you’ll walk back into that house with me still inside you.”

He bends, picks up my heels from the grass, and holds them out. “Put them on before you cut your feet.”

I snatch them from him.

“You didn’t care about that when you were chasing me.”

“I’m not chasing you now.”

I look skyward. “This has to stop, Fionn.”

“You could have stopped it anytime.” He runs a hand through his hair. “You knew the word to cut me off, but you didn’t say it.”

“Why are you doing this to me?” I whisper.

Fionn steps into me and strokes a lock of hair away from my lashes, the touch too careful for the violence within him.

“Maybe you should ask yourself why the fuck you’re doing this to me. I have a wedding coming up. A family watching every move I make. A life plan already paid for in blood and signatures, and you’re—” He cuts himself off, jaw tightening. “Forget it.”

His expression closes, all that heat gone behind an icy wall.

“You go ahead,” he says, voice deep as his gaze settles on the necklace at my throat. “I’ll keep my distance and let you walk inside first.”

He moves out of my way, grabs his jacket, and shrugs it on.

There’s nothing left to say.

No promises to make for a future we’ll never have.

So, I turn back to the wall, climb over it, and walk toward the house through the dark with the distinct sensation of his cum leaking onto my inner thigh and the knowledge he’s walking behind me.

By the time I reach the side door, guilt has its hands around my ribs.

I glance over my shoulder and see him waiting in shadow under a tree, almost blending into the night.

Taking a deep breath, I slip inside, padding barefoot through the narrow staff entrance.

The mirror above the little side table catches me in pieces. Hair tangled around my neck. Lipstick kissed away. Dress twisted, damp at the back. Feet dirty against the clean floor.

I look like exactly what I am.

My stomach turns.

I open the nearest door and find a small downstairs bathroom, locking myself inside before anyone can ask questions. The light pings on, highlighting every mark.

My hands shake as I wash them in hot water and move to my muddy feet. Using a wet towel, I scrub at the grass on my knees and blot the dampness on the back of my dress.

After a long, steadying breath, I trail my fingers through my hair and rub at my swollen lips. When I look in the mirror again, I don’t see someone who surrendered. I see a woman who let Fionn close enough to learn what she craves, but I learned something too.

I felt him lose control when my nails tore into him. Heard it in the way his breath broke. Felt it when he came for me, because of me, and right then, he had no control left to hide behind.

I unlock the bathroom door, check the hall is clear, and hurry up the stairs to change my dress.

The landing is empty, though music and voices still carry up from downstairs. I keep my head down as I move, one hand gripping the banister while the other holds the torn side of my dress in place.

Every step makes the damp fabric drag against my skin, every movement reminding me exactly why I need to switch dresses before I find Eilish and tell her the truth.

I reach her door, already reaching for the handle, then stop when I hear voices inside.

Eilish.

And a man.

I freeze, listening.

For one awful second, I think it might be Ronan. My stomach drops as I catch a low murmur and imagine him telling her what happened on the terrace, piecing together bits of the truth before I can explain it myself.

I edge closer to the door, straining to make out the words, but they’re too muffled through the wood. Eilish says something I can't hear, followed by a quiet laugh that doesn't sound upset or angry or betrayed.

Relief moves through me so fast I almost sag against the frame before I push the door open. “Eilish, I need to tell you something about me and Fionn—”

The words are out before I see the room properly.

Eilish is on the bed, naked, the sheet twisted around her hips, her hair loose over one shoulder, her eyes going wide with the same horror that slams through me when she turns.

Beneath her is Lorcan Harrington.

Fionn's cousin.

For a second, all the air leaves the room. I stay in the doorway, stunned, while Eilish sits frozen, straddling Lorcan, who looks from me to her with a smirk on his face.

"Oh, shit… Sorry," I say. "Bad timing…"

"I'll be down in a few minutes," Eilish replies. "Cover for me if anyone asks where I am."

I stare at her, then at him, then at the floor. "Of course. I'll tell them we got covered in champagne, and you're changing your dress."

Lorcan clears his throat. "What were you about to say about you and Fionn?"

My eyes snap to him. "Can you please not talk to me when you're still inside my best friend?"

"What happened to your dress, Sera?" Eilish frowns.

My stomach drops because Lorcan heard me mention Fionn's name, and Eilish notices the state I'm in.

"You two carry on as you were." I lunge sideways and grab my overnight bag from the floor beside the dresser. "Pretend I was never here."

I back into the hallway and pull the door closed, leaving Eilish to whatever happiness she's managed to steal for herself.

I should be shocked that she picked Lorcan, but he has that Harrington arrogance down to a fine art and a roughness he makes no effort to hide.

What I feel first is relief, strange and warm beneath the panic, because she's screwing Lorcan, flushed and messy and alive in a way I haven't seen her since this engagement started closing around her throat.

She's sticking up her middle finger to the misogynist world she was born into.

Despite all that, Lorcan's smirk flashes through my head, and the relief curdles.

I said Fionn's name.

They both saw my dress.

I came upstairs ready to confess because Eilish deserved the truth, but Lorcan makes one thing brutally clear. The truth doesn't just hurt people in

this world.

It gets them killed.

By the time I reach the landing, I know two things.

I won't be Fionn Harrington's plaything while he rebels against marriage, and he can't be my dangerous obsession.

I dig out my phone from my bag. Eilish's name is pinned above Rafe's because she's always been the first person I tell everything to, but tonight I scroll past her and message my brother to come pick me up.

Tomorrow, I'll have to tell her I fucked Fionn at her birthday party and I have no idea how that conversation will go.

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Chapter 18

Sera

For the past few nights, I've had little sleep and too much business to deal with during the day. Staying focused on work is the only plan I have for keeping Fionn out of my head.

Now I'm in Fury's stable with a shovel in my hands and the wheelbarrow backed up to the door.

His rug is gone, and his feed bucket is washed and stacked outside the tack room, but his leather headcollar still hangs from the hook outside his stall.

I drive the shovel into the damp bedding and lift another heavy clump into the barrow.

Footsteps shuffle along the aisle, but I keep working.

"If you're gonna tell me there's another horse going in here, I'll hit ya in the face with my shovel."

A second later, Ma steps into the stall wearing an old coat over her house clothes, her hair pinned back from her face, her boots already muddy.

Without looking at me, she drives her own shovel into the corner where the shavings are packed tight.

"You didn't have to do this alone," she says.

"I'm fine."

"You always say you are, but Fury heard the truth."

I shove another load into the wheelbarrow. "Yeah, well, he was good at keepin' secrets."

"You got any secrets ya wanna talk about?"

"Have you?" I counter. "The older I get, the less I understand about your hatred for the Harringtons."

“What do ya want me to say?” She keeps her eyes low. “They stole our land days after I buried your da. That family thinks they’re above everyone.”

We work in silence after that. Shovels scrape. Horses snuffle in the neighboring stalls. The wheelbarrow fills with the last of Fury’s bed, and every inch we clear removes years of comfort.

I fucking hate it.

“He was a good horse,” Ma says after a while.

My grip tightens around the handle. “Yeah.”

“He was a bolshy wee bastard when your da first brought him home.”

She keeps working, eyes on the bedding. “Gray as smoke, mane all over the place, belly on him like he’d robbed a bakery. Your da led him off the trailer with you standing there in Rafe’s old rain boots, shaking with excitement.”

“His boots were like buckets on me.”

“You wore them to bed the first night in case Fury needed ya.”

Memories flood back—Da laughing when I told him I’d carry a full water bucket into the stable and ended up soaking myself instead. Fury tossing his head because he wouldn’t let me near him with a headcollar. Me sleeping in his stable for weeks after Da’s funeral because the house felt too empty without him.

I shake it off. “He sure was wild.”

“Aye,” Ma agrees. “And your da was never any good at telling his little girl *no*.”

The ache behind my ribs pulls tight.

Ma drops another shovelful into the barrow. “He said you had Tallon hands. Said ya were smart and just as reckless as your brothers.”

I huff out a breath. “It’s either fight or fall in our family.”

“Aye,” she says, quieter. “And your da fell eventually…because of *that* family.”

“What d’ya mean?” I look over at her. “Did you know the woman who died out there too? Alasdair’s sister?”

Ma stops mid-scoop.

“She was found days after yer da,” she says, voice firm. “There was never anything to connect the two murders.”

“Don’t ya think it’s strange?”

“The case was closed because there wasn’t any evidence. But that bastard Harrington would kill his own ma if she got in his way. I’ll never trust any of them.”

“What about Keira?” I straighten. “Saint loves her.”

“That wee bitch has her name on our land,” Ma hisses. “She’s sitting in that cabin with my son, thinking she’s won.”

Her head turns, and our gazes lock.

“Harringtons are bad news, Sera. Don’t be fooled by the girl just because she smiles. You’ve always had a level head on your shoulders because you think with a brain and not a dick.”

Her eyes hold mine, fierce and knowing. “Don’t trust her, and don’t trust anything that comes out of a Harrington’s mouth. The girl is close to outstaying her welcome.”

“You won’t hurt her, right?”

“I learned to keep my hands clean.”

“Ma…” I look right at her. “Saint loves Keira. Don’t do something you’ll regret.”

She lights up a cigarette, draws in a lungful of smoke, and props her shoulder against the wall.

“I’ll do whatever it takes to protect my family.”

“Even if it breaks Saint?”

“Men are fickle,” she says, exhaling smoke. “Once the thrill dies, they learn to get it elsewhere.”

I fall quiet after that.

There’s no point talking when Ma gets that look on her face. So, I keep my head down as I work. Sweat cools beneath my shirt despite the chill creeping in through the open barn door.

I set the shovel against the wall and reach for the wheelbarrow handles.

Ma steps in beside me, her eyes settling on my neck.

The chain must have worked its way free while I was working.

Her gaze narrows. “That’s a pretty pendant. Looks expensive.”

I move my hand to the necklace too fast. “Eilish bought it for me…for Fury.”

Her gaze lifts to mine. “That’s a lot of black diamonds.”

She stares at the pendant as she inhales smoke. “Shame that kindness will be destroyed by the Harringtons.”

I swallow hard, knowing Fionn has a layer of kindness under all that arrogance.

“Maybe not all of them,” I say before I think better of it.

Ma’s gaze darts to mine through the cigarette smoke.

“Keira makes Saint less of a gobshite anyway,” I add, shrugging, and drive the shovel in so she can’t see my face.

She watches me for a beat before she lets it go.

“Why was Alasdair’s sister on the Heath?” I ask, changing the subject.

Ma’s brow creases.

“Why do ya care about her all of a sudden?” she says. “Her dying was nothing to do with us.”

“I just thought ya might know.”

“Sera.”

“Someone must know the truth.”

Ma puts her back against the wall and folds her arms. “All I know is they found her face down with a bullet in her back.”

I stare at her. “Who would do that to her?”

Her head turns to the shadows in the aisle, and her mouth presses into a tight line.

“I wasn’t there, Sera,” she says. “How would I know?”

“So, you expect me to believe that a Harrington and a Tallon were both killed out there and no one knows why?”

“Someone knows, Sera. But that someone isn’t me.”

Ma clamps the end of her cigarette between her lips, picks up the shovel, and drives it into a stray clump of bedding near the wall, ending the conversation with the scrape of metal against concrete.

All I can think about is Alasdair’s sister dying on Tallon land, my da’s coffin sitting in our front room, and the necklace around my throat.

“Did Eilish enjoy her birthday party?” Ma asks.

“I think so.”

“Why did Rafe pick you up early?” Ma glances at me then, brow furrowed. “Did something happen?”

My throat goes dry when flashes of Fionn spreads heat through me.

“I got bored. She was preoccupied most of the night.”

“With Fionn, I presume?”

I grab the wheelbarrow handles.

“With his cousin, Lorcan,” I announce over my shoulder. “She has her own mind. You know that. If anything, she’ll be our ally.”

Ma walks up behind me.

“She was with Lorcan Harrington?”

“Aye.” I push out into the evening air, thankful it’s not raining anymore. “He’s not Fionn.”

“No,” Ma says, her voice going flat enough to lift the hairs on my arms. “He’s a bastard child raised too close to power he’ll never be allowed to hold.”

I look over at her.

She doesn’t look back.

“Sera!” Rafe calls when I push the barrow across the yard toward the dung heap. “We need to talk. Bring Ma with ya after you’ve emptied that.”

I leave the barrow at the dung heap and walk with Ma back to the house.

The kitchen is warm when we get there, the windows steamed at the edges, the smell of coffee and damp coats heavy in the air.

Saint is at the head of the table with Dane to his left and Shay to his right, whereas Rafe stands by the counter with his phone in one hand and a brown envelope in the other.

I walk inside and pull out a chair. Ma follows me in and sits beside me.

“I’ve got news,” Rafe says. “About the foreman at the port.”

My stomach tightens.

Rafe moves to the table and sets the envelope in front of Saint. “We couldn’t get in touch with Stan, the port foreman. Sera heard he was dead. So, I did some diggin,’ and it turns out she was right.”

Saint slides out the images and leans back. “And this person killed him?”

“Yeah, I got footage from the yard,” Rafe says. “Not the cleanest, but ya can see. The foreman didn’t wander into that container himself. Someone let the killer in through security.”

Saint flicks through the stills.

“Who let them in? One of our crew?” I ask.

“A lad on the night shift,” Rafe says. “Only he’s gone now. House cleared out, phone dead. No one’s seen him since.”

Dane swears under his breath.

Shay’s face hardens. “This has to be the Crowes. Harrington isn’t dumb enough to dump a body in his own container. Unless they’re trying to distract us.”

“Alasdair doesn’t get his hands dirty,” Rafe says. “Apparently, this was a bloodbath. There’s no way it was the Harringtons.”

My mouth goes dry. “Can you see the killer's face?”

Saint slides the photographs toward me.

“No, they were masked. Hood up,” Rafe continues. “Came in through the side access after our man opened it. Took the foreman near the east sheds, dragged him into one of the Harrington containers, then walked out alone seven minutes later.”

“And inside the container?” Saint asks.

“The Harrington’s removed it,” Rafe says. “The guy who found the body said it was butchered. Blood everywhere. Fionn Harrington sent the container off somewhere else.”

Icy cold pressure slides through my chest.

A mask and hood.

My mind goes straight to Fionn, to the black mask, to the way he moves when he takes his watch off.

However, the images are grainy, caught from high above the yard in the washed-out gray of security footage.

A figure stands near the container doors with a hood pulled up and a hard black mask covering the face, smooth and blank to hide an expression.

I scan the narrow shoulders and feet set too close together. Fionn always stands with one shoulder forward and his feet staggered, his weight balanced for a fight even when no one is threatening him. I’ve watched him too many times to mistake this figure for him.

My lungs unlock, and air rushes back in so quickly that I resent how badly I needed him to be innocent.

Saint watches me from the head of the table. “You know that mask?”

I shake my head and lower the stills. “No.”

Dane leans forward and drags the images toward himself. “That thing doesn’t look like any old Crowe foot soldier.”

“No,” Rafe says. “That spells trouble.”

Shay studies the image next. “Looks like they sent someone to make a point.”

Saint’s jaw tightens. “And what if that point is to blame the Harringtons, start a war so we destroy each other, and clear the path for the Crowes.”

“Good tactic.” Shay lets go of the images so they fall onto the table. “One enemy we know: the other has sent a fucking butcher.”

I flip the still facedown and look at my brothers, imagining one of them in the next set of photographs. Then Fionn takes their place in my head, and my fingers crush the edge of the image.

He’s a Harrington. I shouldn’t be afraid of losing him too.

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Chapter 19

Sera

I woke up this morning knowing I'd have to come clean with Eilish, and it's taken me all afternoon to pluck up the nerve to make the call.

"I can't be your bridesmaid."

The words leave my mouth before Eilish has the chance to say *hello* when she answers the phone.

Behind me, Rafe wanders into the kitchen just when I thought the house would be empty, because apparently privacy in this family is a myth.

"I'm afraid it's too late for that," Eilish says. "You're booked for a dress fitting on Tuesday. My mother will hunt you down herself."

I close my eyes. "Don't do that."

"Do what?"

"Not take this seriously."

"You opened with resigning from my forced-marriage bridal party to leave me to fend for myself. I can either accept your suggestion or ignore it. You know which one I'm choosing."

I hear the scrape of Rafe's mug touching the table, the clink of him stirring in sugar.

"I'm not resigning from you," I say. "Just the circus."

"Oh, Sera." She sighs. "What a mess. If I was in your shoes, I'd probably try to bail too."

Rafe's chair legs drag against the floor, and I resist the urge to snap at him.

I turn enough to catch him at the edge of my vision. He sits at the kitchen table in a dark T-shirt, with rain-damp hair, a mug in hand, and a deliberately blank expression.

“Yeah, it’s a mess, alright.” I return my gaze to the rain on the window. “Wherever your fiancé goes, I don’t want to be, so if Fionn is the man waiting at the altar, I respectfully step down as your bridesmaid.”

A quiet snort comes through the phone. “He’s going to be at the wedding. They usually let the groom attend.”

“Then make one of Fionn’s sisters a bridesmaid. Keira or little Fia, take your pick.”

“Oh, sure, surround me with Harringtons. Drown me in them, Sera. That sounds wonderful.”

“Look, I can’t stand there with him opposite me and pretend everything’s delightful.”

“I know,” she says quietly. “You’ve only just buried Fury, and I’m asking you to stand opposite a Harrington of all people. I know it’s horrendously unfair. But I’m scared, Sera. I need one person beside me who’s on my side.”

I almost give in.

Then I remember Fionn in the garden and what we did. My stomach draws tight, fingers pressing into the counter, breath catching in a place too low for guilt to reach.

Rafe’s eyes narrow, and he stares right at me as if he senses something’s up.

“Our families hate each other,” I say, making each word colder than the memory beneath it. “You know we do. He says one thing, I say worse, and your wedding turns into a Tallon-Harrington war fest.”

“You wouldn’t have to speak to him. You wouldn’t even have to stay after the ceremony. I just need you beside me until it’s over.”

“It’s not just one day, though, is it?” I reply. “It’s every time I’m at your house.”

“Sera.” The banter disappears from her voice. “If you can’t be anywhere near him, when am I supposed to see you after I marry him?”

I have no answer that doesn’t hurt both of us.

“You promised you’d stand beside me,” she whispers. “I know I’m asking too much of our friendship, but I need my best friend.”

“We need to talk properly.” I turn away from the window when Rafe lights a cigarette. “Somewhere there isn’t a big-eared brother earwigging on my conversation.”

I should’ve made this call upstairs in my room.

I should’ve made it from the farthest field before the phone signal cut out.

“Okay,” she says. “Let’s go out tonight for a drink. You and me. Like old times.”

“This is not old times.”

“No. Old times had freedom, shots, and bad eyeliner.”

A laugh presses at the back of my throat, and I swallow it because if I let her make me laugh, I’ll have to admit she can still pull me back from the edge by the wrist.

“I’m serious,” she says, quieter now. “No wedding talk. No brothers. Just us.”

Rafe drags the ashtray closer, and I make a face at him.

“A night out sounds good,” I say. “Rafe will drop me at the bar around eight.”

His brows drift up. “Am I your personal chauffeur these days?”

“Was that Rafe?” Eilish asks.

I stick my middle finger up at him. “Yeah, that was him pretending he has a life.”

“Tell him I said *hi*,” she says.

I roll my eyes. “Eilish says *hi*.”

Rafe grins around the cigarette before taking it from his mouth. “She lookin’ for a final fling before she’s trapped with that pretty boy prick?”

“Oh, Jesus,” I groan. “This conversation is over before I vomit. See you at the pub, Eilish.”

“I love you,” she says, which is unfair because she knows exactly when to use it.

I press my fingers into my brow. “I love you too, you manipulative nightmare.”

By five past eight, most of the ice in my rum and Coke has melted. Rafe dropped me off far too early because, apparently, he had people to see and things to do.

I sit in the back corner of Black Heath's local pub with my jacket on, one boot tapping the seat opposite me.

It’s warm inside, so the lower panes of glass have fogged, and the sour-sweet smell of beer soaked into floorboards never seems to fade.

Eilish walks in and closes her umbrella, propping it next to the door.

She sees me, waves, then goes to the bar.

To place her order, she leans in and smiles at Paddy behind the counter with that soft, dangerous charm of hers, and I take the moment to study her from behind my glass.

She deserves better than a friend who keeps secrets and a family who bred her for the purpose of power.

My stomach tightens.

After a few minutes, she brings over a gin and tonic and a packet of crisps.

“Paddy says he’ll bring you over another rum.”

“You’re late,” I say.

She grins. “By five minutes.”

Eilish slides into the seat beside me and drops the crisps between us. “So, what’s this bullshit about you not wanting to be my bridesmaid?”

I look to the ceiling. “I thought you said no wedding talk.”

“I lied, and you should know me by now. I always get what I want.”

The laugh gets out before I can stop it, and her mouth softens because she knows she’s won a little ground.

“I won’t let you bail on me,” she says.

“It’s not that straightforward.” I stare at the salt and vinegar crisps instead of her face.

“What do you mean?”

I breathe through my nose and make myself meet her eyes. “I can’t be that close to him all the time.”

“Because you hate him.”

“Well, yes, I do hate him.” I set the glass down. “There’s something I need to tell you.”

And then the pub door opens.

Cold air whispers through the room, carrying rain and the faint smell of wet pavement. My spine reacts before my eyes do, every nerve turning toward the door with a humiliating precision I would pay good money to have surgically removed.

Eilish’s gaze flicks past my shoulder.

That is when I know.

Slowly, I turn my head.

I know the man who walks in is Fionn Harrington. The well-dressed man people expect, with tailored suits and groomed hair.

However, this evening he wears dark sweats, a black hoodie, and a cap pulled low to shadow most of his face.

His hair is still damp where it curls beneath the brim, darker from a shower, and there's a fresh redness across his knuckles. He looks undercover or just comfortable in his own appearance.

But he also looks lethal.

My body knows him without the suit. Worse, it knows him better like this, stripped of all that Harrington haughtiness, with his shoulders loose beneath the cotton and his jaw roughened by stubble.

His gaze moves over the bar, the tables, and the exits before settling on me, as if the rest of the room has served its purpose and can be dismissed.

I glare at Eilish, waiting for the grin that tells me this is one of her terrible jokes. It doesn't come. My best friend listened while I told her I couldn't be around him, heard every reason I could give her, and invited him anyway.

"What the hell have you done?"

Eilish curls both hands around her glass. "I asked him to join us."

"Why would you do this to me?" I hiss at her through clenched teeth.

"I'm sorry." She offers me her sweetest smile and sets her hand on mine. "If avoiding him means avoiding me too, then I need to find out if there's any way through this."

"I gathered that from the Harrington currently walking toward our table."

"We're going to sort this out like adults."

"No, we're not."

"Yes, we are."

I lean in, holding her gaze as I lower my voice. "I was about to tell you something important."

Her hand squeezes mine, but she doesn't call him off. "Then tell me after."

I slide my hand out from under hers. "After I kill him?"

"After we figure out how I'm supposed to marry him without losing you."

Fionn heads in our direction and my pulse thrums faster.

He hasn’t even reached the table, and I’ve already considered three exits, two weapons, and one throat punch.

Fionn stops at our table, one hand tucked in the front pocket of his hoodie and the other loose at his side. Up close, there’s a faint flush beneath his skin as if he’s been in the cold too long.

His gaze moves to Eilish for half a second before he looks right at me.

It is not a glance. It is a hand at the back of my neck without touching me, a quiet pressure that drags the memory of the garden to the surface and leaves me aching for him.

“I hear you’re letting your friend down,” he says. “Never took you for a quitter.”

I smile because anger would please him too much. “You don’t know me well enough to call me anything.”

“I know enough.”

Eilish closes her eyes. “We’re only thirty seconds in.”

“He started it,” I say.

Fionn folds his arms across his chest. “Would you like me to finish it?”

“Please sit with us, Fionn,” Eilish says. “I appreciate you coming out tonight.”

“As soon as you said she’d be here, I finished up early.”

“See…” She eyes me. “That was a normal thing to say.”

“He was being sarcastic,” I reply.

Fionn lowers himself into a seat, making sure he sits directly opposite me. He stretches one leg beneath the table, so his shin touches mine and stays there.

I should move mine away or get up and go to the bar, but something in me refuses.

Eilish looks between us. “You both hate each other because of family, right? But I know something about the two of you.”

My spine locks, and a prickle of unease climbs over my scalp.

Fionn’s gaze stays on me beneath the brim of his cap.

“You both like Metallica,” Eilish announces.

The breath leaves me in a sigh. “Jesus Christ.”

“What?” she says. “It’s common ground.”

“We aren’t gonna bond over music, Eilish.”

“Why not?”

I sigh and look over at Fionn. “What’s your favorite? ‘Seek & Destroy’? ‘Creeping Death’? Something that matches your personality?”

Eilish laughs into her drink.

Fionn’s mouth quirks. “You’ve clearly given this some thought.”

“Don’t flatter yourself. I wouldn’t pair ya with any of my favorite songs.”

“I think you just did.”

“Well then, I’d bet ya fifty euros you play ‘Master of Puppets’ when you’re brooding in the mirror.”

Fionn leans back. “You think I brood?”

“Yeah, and you probably make the mirror apologize after, too.”

A low laugh leaves him, and mine follows too quickly, too unwillingly, because the deep texture of it gets under my ribs before I can harden against it.

Eilish lowers her drink. “That right there is you two getting along.”

I clear my throat and reach for my rum. “Hardly.”

Fionn’s mouth still holds the edge of a smile. “No. That was slander.”

“More like a character analysis.”

“From a woman who probably listens to Metallica as therapy.”

“Turning their tunes up full blast is better than therapy.”

He shrugs. “And it doesn’t expect you to offload bullshit and improve after.”

When I stare over at him, his cheek dimples with the slightest smirk, and I feel the thrill of it in my core.

Eilish points between us. “You did it again. There’s a friendship happening here.”

“Don’t force it, Eilish,” I bite out.

Her eyes narrow. “It’s a good thing.”

“No, it’s not,” I say. “Ma would literally shoot him in the face if she knew we were in the same company. This was a terrible idea.”

“Then leave,” Fionn says, his voice thick.

Eilish’s head turns toward him. “Fionn.”

His eyes stay hidden under the cap, but I know where they are. On my face. On my mouth. On every inch of me.

I lift my glass and take a drink. “Well, now that you’ve told me to leave, guess I’ll have to piss you off and stay.”

“Do you really think that’s what it takes to piss me off?”

Eilish exhales a groan. “I’m going to need a stronger drink to get through this.”

Fionn looks at her then, just long enough to come across as polite. “You knew this would happen.”

“I thought Metallica would be a starting point.”

“What? That we’d drive off into the sunset together playing ‘Nothing Else Matters’?”

I smile before I can stop myself because, irritatingly, that deserves a tip of the cap.

Eilish catches it instantly. “You just smiled at him.”

I reach for my rum and coke. “That was indigestion.”

“The two of you,” she says with a sigh. “You’re both impossible in exactly the same way.”

“I’m nothing like him.”

“Yeah, actually,” she says. “You’re more alike than you think.”

“How could ya say that when he’s so full of himself?”

“What are you full of, Sera?” Fionn asks, smirking, and fuck, he almost has me speechless. “Salty snack, anyone?”

My cheeks blaze, and I shift in my seat.

Bastard.

Eilish takes a crisp and crunches loudly while I sit here, knowing he came inside me, and trying hard and failing to think of a decent comeback.

Fionn reaches for the crisps at the same time as I do. His fingers brush over mine and stay a half-second past accidental before we both pull back.

“Seems like you both enjoy salt and vinegar too,” Eilish says slowly, looking between us.

Paddy sets a glass of water in front of Fionn and puts a tall glass of rum and coke on a coaster.

Fionn takes a drink. I hate that my eyes follow the movement of his throat as he swallows.

“Water?” I say when he lowers the glass.

“I’ve been training.”

“For what?”

His lips quirk. “To fight.”

“Wow, so winning doesn’t come naturally. You have to work for it.”

Eilish snorts.

Fionn’s fingers turn the glass once against the table. “Want to find out how it feels to fight under me, Sera?”

“Christ.” Eilish looks between us. “Are you sure you two hate each other? Because from here, it sounds like you’re one insult away from fucking.”

A voice cuts across my shoulder before I can answer.

“Well, look at this. A Tallon out without her brothers.”

I turn my head and find two men next to our table, both flushed with booze.

One tall, one broader, both stupid enough to look at Fionn once and dismiss him because of the baseball cap, the plain sweats, and nothing about him says Harrington heir unless you know where to look.

“Cormac is still in hospital,” the tall one says.

I sigh. “What makes you think I care?”

The broad one laughs. “Mouth on her.”

“Aye,” the tall one says, stepping closer. “Her brothers aren’t around to fight her battles tonight.”

I swivel in the seat. “You’re ruining my view, lads. How about ya go visit your scumbag pal in the hospital.”

The tall one grins. “That’s fighting talk, Tallon. C’mon then, get to yer feet. Let’s see who ends up in the ER tonight.”

I push back my chair and stand. “If you’re gonna fight a woman, better make sure ya win.”

“C’mon then, bitch,” the broad one says, already reaching inside his jacket.

When he pulls out a flick knife, Fionn stands, pulls off the cap, and sets it on the table.

Recognition hits both men at once.

The tall one’s face empties of color.

Fionn kills the distance between them while they stand there frozen.

“Harrington… We didn’t know you’d be drinking with a Tallon.”

Fionn's hand closes around the tall one’s throat, and he drives him back into the nearest table.

“You say that like I need your permission to drink with Sera.” Fionn says, low and controlled. “I don’t.”

Everyone in the pub turns toward us. And that’s when I notice his security detail.

They move, stepping in from three different points around the pub, plainclothes and hard-eyed, crossing the room by degrees while Fionn keeps his hand around the man’s throat.

Fionn leans in closer. “The only man who fights with her is me. So, don’t ever approach her again, or Cormac won't be the only one in the hospital with hammer-smashed hands.”

My breath stutters, and a tingle runs the length of my spine. How did Fionn know Cormac’s bones were broken with hammers?

Fionn releases him with a shove. “Now fuck off.”

Eilish comes up behind me as the men scramble toward the exit and puts her mouth beside my ear. “What the hell is going on between you and Fionn?”

I turn and grip her wrist.

“We had sex,” I whisper. “Once.”

Eilish’s eyes widen before her attention shifts over my shoulder. Fionn’s reflection appears in the darkened window beside us.

This wasn’t how I planned to tell her. I was supposed to explain before she figured out there was something else brewing.

Fionn’s shadow falls across us as Eilish slowly pulls her wrist from my hand. Her gaze moves between us, but she isn’t laughing about the flirting now.

She thought she was forcing two enemies to make peace. With Fionn at my back and Eilish in front of me, there’s nowhere left to hide from the shame of wanting the man she has to marry.

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Chapter 20

Fionn

Sera's *once* follows me as I flex the hand I had around that bastard's throat, my gaze sweeping the bar.

My men are where I expect them, spread through the bar and watching the entrance, the by-standers, and the rear corridor.

Chairs scrape into place again, drinks are lifted, and conversation begins because no one else has a reason to interfere.

I come up behind her. "Just once?"

She turns, her chin raised and her mouth already set for battle.

Good. Let her defend it to my face.

Her forehead wrinkles. "That's the part you object to?"

"It's the only lie in the sentence."

Eilish looks between us, shock morphing into confusion. "Sorry. I'm trying to catch up. You two are fucking each other?"

Sera doesn't look away from me. "Were. As in past tense."

"So, the fighting is fake?" Eilish asks.

"Not in the slightest," I tell her, putting my baseball cap back on. "And it changes nothing."

The wedding goes ahead, and the orders attached to it, but knowing all that doesn't stop my eyes from dropping to Sera's mouth.

Her fingers close around the back of the chair, and her stare cuts clean through me. "Nothing at all."

My gaze drops to her hand, to the white pressure at her knuckles, then all the way up to her mouth again because I can't seem to look anywhere else.

Eilish frowns. "But you two hate each other."

“Yeah, we do,” Sera says at once. “Fucking him was a mistake.”

I hold Sera’s stare. “Is that so?”

Her breath changes for a beat before she laughs under her breath, but it has no humor in it. “Yeah, Harrington.”

Eilish’s gaze flicks between us again, slower this time, as if she’s finally seeing the scandal. “Wait. Is this like Saint and Keira?”

Sera looks genuinely horrified. “God, no. Those two are in love. Saint protects that girl from the rain.”

The corner of my mouth twitches. I’m sure she remembers the man I put down in the barn. I guess murder ranks lower than a golfing umbrella.

Eilish blinks. “Right. So, what is it then?”

Sera opens her mouth, and for once, nothing comes out.

The silence gives her away better than an answer.

I watch her shoulders draw tight as she considers a reply, so I give her one.

“It’s an inconvenience.”

Sera turns her head. “Aye, for me.”

“How come?”

Her eyes hold mine. “I’m the one losing my best friend.”

“Right. And you only like losing when there’s something in it for you.”

She nips the edge of her bottom lip with her teeth, and I track the movement even though my fiancée is right next to us.

A glass smashes near the bar. Every head turns except mine.

I keep my eyes on Sera because she’s just standing there, brow creased, and a hand on her belly.

Another glass breaks, and chaos erupts around us.

Another glass shatters behind me. Footsteps hammer closer, and chairs overturn as people scramble out of the way. I pivot to find the same two idiots charging back through the bar, unfamiliar men fanning out behind them.

Dumb fucks.

The tall one I almost strangled has red marks on his throat, and the broader one looks between Sera and me.

Eilish catches Sera’s elbow before she moves. “Wait.”

“Not now,” Sera says. “These guys are here to cause trouble.”

“I don’t want Fionn,” Eilish rushes the words. “I don’t want the marriage. But I do want my best friend, and I’m trying to find a solution

where I don’t lose you.”

Sera’s eyes narrow. “What d’ya mean?”

Eilish’s eyes dart from me to Sera. “You could move in with us.”

My attention snaps to her. I should shut the idea down immediately. Instead, I picture Sera’s boots at my door, her voice carrying through my house, and her bedroom close enough to reach in the dark.

Footsteps rush up behind me. I pivot inside the first man’s swing and drive my fist into his face. His nose gives beneath my knuckles with a wet crunch, and I grin as he staggers back.

“In public, I’ll be his wife,” Eilish continues. “At home, you can be his—”

“No. I’d rather get trampled by a horse than be hidden inside someone else’s marriage.” Sera pulls her arm free. “We both deserve better than that.”

My jaw tightens as the uncomfortable truth digs in deep. That’s exactly what this becomes if I let it.

“We deserve all or nothing, Eilish.”

Eilish looks from her to me. “Do you want all or nothing with him?”

A knife flashes at the edge of my vision before Sera can answer. I step across her and sweep one arm behind me, forcing both women back as a man lunges.

When he slashes again, I catch his wrist, twist the blade to the floor, and drive my forehead into his nose. His fingers open. Steel strikes the floor, and I kick the knife out of reach before throwing him across the nearest table.

Deeper in the room, Darragh sends another man crashing into a row of chairs.

Some brunette screams.

A bottle swings at Kane’s head, and he ducks before driving the man face-first into the bar. Nolan catches another by the back of his collar and throws him into the fruit machine, making the lights flash.

Sera reaches sideways for Eilish. I catch her upper arm and pull her behind my shoulder as another man breaks through. An empty chair stands between us, so I kick it into his shins. He pitches over the seat, and my knee catches his mouth before he reaches the floor.

“Stay behind me.”

Her eyes cut to mine. “Don’t start giving me orders.”

“Then stay behind me, Sera.”

A man charges between two tables, shoulder lowered, heading for the gap between Sera and Eilish.

I step into him before he reaches them.

Pain shoots through my ribs, but I keep my feet, grab him by the hair, and send him headfirst into the edge of the table. Glass breaks. He drops.

“Kane,” I call out.

He looks over after landing a solid punch. “Take Eilish home.”

“And Sera,” Eilish snaps. “I’m not leaving without her.”

“We’re all leaving,” I tell her, wrapping my hand around Sera’s arm and yanking her into me.

Eilish is the duty. Getting her out is straightforward. Keeping Sera with me is anything but.

She pulls against me. “Hands off. We’re in public.”

“I know.”

“Then let go.”

“No.”

Kane reaches Eilish and puts a hand on her back, steering her toward the door. She twists, trying to see Sera through the bodies closing in. “Sera!”

“I’m right here,” Sera calls, voice full of steel.

The tall one with the red throat comes out of nowhere, grabbing for her.

I spin her out of reach, snare his wrist before he touches her, and twist until his knees buckle.

“Back the fuck off,” I snarl into his face. “Or I swear to fuck, I’ll end you right now.”

“She’s the reason Cormac will never fix a car again,” he hisses.

“No, asshole.” I shove him into Nolan, who takes him down without a word. “He brought that karma on himself when he hurt her.”

When I glance back at Sera, she’s already throwing a left hook at the other man. His jaw cracks sideways, and he staggers into the table behind him.

Christ.

The sight of her like that gets under my skin in the worst possible place.

It throws my mind straight back to the Kinnanes’ garden, to her wrists straining in my hands, her warm mouth against mine, and the awareness that I’ve fucked her with all that violence spilling out of her.

“Outside. Now,” I order, steering her toward the door as she shakes out her fist.

Sera stays tight to my right, her shoulder brushing my arm. My hand lifts toward her waist before I force it back to my side. Protecting her is one thing. Pulling her against me in front of the whole bar would stake a claim I have no right to make.

A bottle swings toward her head from the right. I step across her and take the blow on my forearm. Glass bursts against bone, and a shard slices through the skin below my wrist. Blood runs over my hand, but I drive my elbow into the man’s jaw and send him sideways into the wall.

Sera’s gaze drops to the blood running over my hand, then jumps to the man against the wall. Her fingers curl, and her weight shifts toward him. “That bastard cut ya!”

The concern is there before she can swap it with an insult, and when my eyes come to hers, she lifts her chin as if that might erase all traces of it.

“Keep moving.”

“But he made you bleed.” She stops, fists clenched, ready to fight for *me*.

“Door.”

Kane forces the exit open, and rain and cold air hit us. Graves is positioned to one side of the doorway, handgun held low, with two cars already idling at the curb. His gaze checks Eilish and Sera, drops to the blood on my hand, then fixes on the bar behind us.

He steps aside to let us through before filling the opening, raising his weapon past my shoulder to cover our retreat.

Eilish is bundled out first, swearing at him with enough venom to prove she’s fine. Kane gets her across the pavement and into the back seat of a Harrington car, one hand braced over her head as she ducks inside.

“Sera,” Eilish calls through the open door. “Stay with me tonight.”

Sera jerks against my hold. “I’m going with her.”

I let her take one step, then drag her into me. “She’s not going in the same direction as you.”

Kane slams the door before Eilish can argue again, then taps the roof. The car pulls away from the curb, tires hissing through puddles.

Sera watches it go before she angles into me, her gaze tracking the blood on my hand still clamped around her wrist.

“You’re bleeding on me, Harrington.” She yanks herself free and peels off her cardigan.

Taking my hand in hers, she wraps the thin material around the slash under my wrist, then catches my eye.

“It might need stitches.”

“Can you do it?”

She shrugs. “If ya don’t cry for your ma.”

“My mother chose booze over emotional support.”

Across the street, Graves heads for my Range Rover, expecting to drive me home, his expression tight while his eyes take in every threat bursting out of the pub.

When I bring her over, he straightens and folds his arms across his broad chest.

“Ride with Kane.” I nod at him. “I’m taking her home.”

His gaze slides to Sera. “You want to think about that.”

“I have.”

“No,” he says. “You’ve decided. That’s a different thing, Fionn.”

“He’s right. I can’t get in your car.” Sera reaches into the pocket of her jeans and digs out her phone. “Rafe will come get me.”

“In the space of an hour, you’ve become a quitter and a liar,” I say. “You’re doing wonders for the Tallon reputation.”

Her brows snap together. “How the hell am I a liar?”

I lift my hand, her cardigan wrapped around it and blood already darkening the wool. “I’m not going to the hospital, and you said you’d stitch it.”

Graves exhales loudly. “I’ll do it.”

“If your stitching is anything like your boxing, I’ll take my chances with her.”

He stares at me for a beat, then understands his place, and steps away from the car as the rain falls heavier.

“Try not to start a war with your old man,” he says over his shoulder. “Alasdair doesn’t play fair, and she’s exactly the kind of thing he’ll use to rein ya in.”

He’s right.

Which is exactly why I don’t leave her standing in the rain where anyone else can decide she matters before I do.

I flip off my cap, position it on her head, and open the passenger door.

Sera peers up at me from under the peak, and the blue of her eyes in the rain makes something warm move behind my ribs.

I hate her for it.

I hate her because all I want to do is kiss her.

“Get in.”

She stares at me. “Have ya got a first-aid kit in the car?”

“No.”

Her eyes narrow. The pub door crashes open behind her, and more men spill onto the pavement, fists swinging.

Graves moves before I do, cutting them off with his gun drawn while I open the passenger door.

“Sera. Get in.”

This time, she obeys and ducks into the Range Rover. I slam the door and leave Graves guarding my back while I round the hood, unwind the cardigan and check the pulsing gash.

It doesn’t look bad enough for stitches. Though it will work as an excuse.

Graves watches from the pavement, saying nothing now, which is the closest he comes to approval.

I get in, start the engine, and turn the heat up.

Sera sits stiffly beside me, the tips of her hair wet and her arms folded. I reach across the console and press the heated-seat button on her side before I think better of it.

Her gaze drops to my hand.

“Did you just put my heated seat on?”

“You’re cold.”

“I didn’t ask ya to.”

“Shall I turn off your heated seat, Sera?”

She stares ahead, pretending she’s interested in something outside the windscreen.

“No, Fionn.” Her mouth quirks at the corners. “You can leave it on.”

I hit the windscreen defogger next, and warm air pushes hard against the glass, clearing a path through the condensation while the pub lights blur behind us.

I unlock my phone, thumb through Spotify at a red light, and find the song.

When the first notes of “Nothing Else Matters” fill the car, she turns her head slowly, and I keep my eyes on the road.

“No,” she says.

I say nothing.

“Absolutely not.”

The guitar keeps playing.

She glares at me, and I glance over. For one second, the fight, the rain, the blood, Eilish’s question, all of it vanishes as she tries not to laugh.

Sera shakes her head, small and defeated, as if she hates that I put that pretty smile there.

The sight of it pulls hard behind my ribs, and I tighten my grip on the steering wheel because wanting her to fight is easier than wanting that again.

“I bet you’re pleased with yourself,” she says.

“It’s a great song, that’s all.”

“Ya think you’re funny.”

“You’re the one who smiled.”

“Only because I like the song.”

“Right.”

Sera begins paying closer attention to the road. When I drive past the turn for Black Heath Stud, she twists to watch it disappear behind us, then slowly faces me.

“Where are we going?”

I keep the car steady through the next set of lights. “Home.”

“No.” Her hand goes to the door before she remembers we’re moving. “This isn’t the way to my house.”

“I know.”

“What’s going on, Fionn?”

“I’m taking you to mine.”

The change in her is instant. Her body comes forward against the seat belt, fingers bracing on the edge of the console.

“Like fuck ya are!”

“Sera.”

“Stop the car.”

“No.”

“Stop the fucking car.”

I glance at her, because there are limits to how much of that tone I can leave unanswered. “Relax.”

“Don’t tell me to relax when you’ve just announced you’re taking me to your house.”

“My parents are away for the week in Dublin, rubbing shoulders with Mick Hennessy and Tiernan Mannix.”

“Someone will see me.”

“No one will.”

Her stare drills through the dark between us. “How can you know that?”

I keep my eyes on the road. “Because that house has always been better at silence than company.”

The car goes quiet except for Metallica, the heater, and rain pelting glass.

Sera stares out at the streets passing in wet strips of orange and white. The lights catch on her face beneath the cap, and I try very hard to remind myself this is just me having fun before I have to publicly behave.

I know what I’m doing.

I’ve known since the first time I looked at Sera Tallon strung up in our barn and made the mistake of liking what I saw.

Stay out of her way. Keep my eyes off her mouth. Stop imagining what that temper would feel like with my hand at her throat. Never give her the time of day or a reaction, or the satisfaction of knowing she got either from me.

Those were simple enough instructions I’d given myself.

Despite them all, she tried to put distance between us, and I went to the pub to close it.

And when she looked at me.

That was all it took.

But this isn’t love. It’s a fucking unsatisfied appetite, violence, bad blood, and a woman I keep failing to leave alone.

Still, she’s in my car, coming home with me, and whatever happens after that belongs to me, not my father.

The road bends toward home.

“Will you take me home after I sort out your hand?”

“That depends.”

“On what?”

The gates to my house come into view beyond the windshield wipers, black iron and wet stone caught in the sweep of the headlights.

“On whether you have the energy to leave.”

Sera’s hand slips from the door handle. She watches the gates divide, then turns to me, her gaze dropping to my mouth before rising again.

Once can be dismissed as a mistake. Twice means we chose it.

And if the wrong person catches her leaving my house, that choice becomes a betrayal neither family will forgive.

I drive us through anyway, my pulse kicking harder as the gates close behind us.

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Chapter 21

Sera

We pull up outside his family home, and Fionn turns off the engine.

Rain pelts the Range Rover's roof while the gray stone mansion waits to swallow me whole.

Getting into the car with him was a reckless move. Last time, he actually dropped me home, and I was foolish to think I could trust him again. I never imagined he'd bring me here. Even if Alasdair isn't inside, it still counts as a Tallon betrayal.

And the way my pulse thrums when I look over at him, that's worse.

"I gave the house staff the night off," he says when no one comes out to greet us. "Wait here a second."

"All of them?" I ask as he opens the door.

"All but the chef."

I make a face. "Didn't think you'd be much of a cook."

"And I didn't bring you here to eat dinner."

"Where's all that Harrington hospitality your da lives and breathes by?"

His gaze sweeps the house. "It's not my hospitality that interests you. My father only performs it properly when there's an audience."

"What is it you think I'm interested in?"

"We'll figure that out tonight."

"I'm only here to fix your hand," I say in a rush when he steps into the rain and shuts the door.

I watch him cross in front of the headlights, rain soaking his shoulders before he disappears inside. For a moment, I consider getting out and running back the way we came—then he returns with a black umbrella.

He opens it and comes straight to my side, shielding the gap as he pulls my door open.

I remember what I'd said in the pub about Saint and Keira and brush off the dumb comparison.

We aren't like them.

"How gentlemanly of ya," I say, climbing out. "Maybe there's a redeemable side to ya after all."

Fionn's face stays blank. "What do I need to be redeemed for?"

I laugh as we walk. "Try kidnapping me for starters."

"Right, I thought you were going to say *murder*." He holds the umbrella over me as we climb the steps. "Then again, we both have blood on our hands after that night."

I step under the portico. "Why did ya shoot that man?"

Fionn closes the umbrella, moves inside, and drops it into a cast-iron stand. "If I wanted you hurt, I would've done it myself."

"Well, just so we're clear." I drag the cap off my head and rake my fingers through my damp hair. "I could've really hurt you out there in that field."

He moves ahead, leading me deeper into the house. "Why didn't you?"

"I've been asking myself that same question."

The entrance hall is dark wood and gold framed portraits. My boots leave faint wet marks on the floor, and I resist the urge to make them worse on purpose.

"This way," he says.

We walk past a staircase wide enough for a wedding photograph and into a downstairs room that looks more like a private clinic than a place where normal people keep plasters.

Cabinets line one wall. A leather chair sits beneath a brass floor lamp. There's a sink, folded towels, and a locked metal box that probably contains supplies to patch a bullet hole.

"Of course you have a post-murder pantry," I say.

"My father refuses to sit in a doctor's surgery, so they come to him."

"Is he sick?"

"No."

"Shame."

Fionn pulls his hoody up and over his head and drops it over the arm of the chair. "Probably doesn't need a stitch, but it'll need to be cleaned."

When he holds it out between us, I take a quick look at the dried blood on the side, the sight of it ugly and dark against his skin.

"Sit down," I tell him. "Were you this difficult as a child, too?"

Fionn shrugs. "Depends which nanny you ask."

"So, your ma never patched you up after a fall?"

"My mother didn't handle blood, noise, or children before her noon Bloody Mary."

"Her loss," I mutter. "Now sit."

Fionn stares at me for a beat, his expression blank, then lowers into the seat.

"I'll do as I'm told," he says. "This once."

Him seated should be a victory. It isn't, because Fionn Harrington taking orders still comes across as control.

His knees are spread, his T-shirt clings to his broad shoulders, and he watches me as I open cabinets and find antiseptic, gauze, and a dressing.

I tuck my hair behind my ears, turn away, and wash my hands at the sink.

"Right, give it here."

He holds out his hand again, and I slide mine beneath it, inspecting the damage as we connect. His skin is warm against my palm, his fingers heavy and relaxed as I angle it toward the light.

There's no grease under his nails. No torn cuticles from yard work. No rough evidence of labor that stays no matter how hard a man scrubs.

Despite that, his knuckles are marked from training, the tendons firm under my touch, the bones broad enough to make damage look easy. These aren't workingman's hands, but they *were* built for violence.

He lets me hold his wrist steady while I work. His pulse stays slow under my thumb, and the whole time his eyes stay on my face.

I tear open an antiseptic wipe and drag it over the cut. "You're lucky there's no glass in it."

"Would you have sucked it out?"

When I look up, our gazes clash.

"Try sterilizing tweezers and shoving them in deep."

Fionn chuckles under his breath, and I continue cleaning the cut. "Nearly done."

"Oh, we're far from done, little wild thing."

Little wild thing.

I take a steadying breath, tear off a thick square of gauze, fold it once, and press it over the cut before taping it into place.

Anticipation moves under my skin. We can pretend I came here for this, but the truth is, we both want what we shouldn't.

I smooth the last strip of tape down, and his uninjured hand closes around my wrist. When I look up again, his face is close enough for me to smell the rain on his skin.

"You'll live," I tell him. "Which is devastating news for everyone."

His uninjured hand rises, and for one fast beat I think he's going to pull me in by the nape. Instead, his thumb drags over my bottom lip.

My tongue skims the pad of it before I can stop myself.

His hand goes still. "Thanks."

I release him and turn back to the sink, washing my hands before drying them on a paper towel.

He stands and unfastens the gold watch from his wrist.

My breath quickens with the first tug at the strap. Gold glints under the lamplight. Metal shifts under his fingers.

"Fionn," I whisper.

He sets the watch on the edge of the cabinet. "You have until five."

My stomach drops, then pulls tight.

"Run wherever you like."

I take one step backward while he just stands there, watching the vein in my neck go wild.

"What if ya can't catch me?" I taunt. "I'm the hide-and-seek champion."

"*When* I catch you." He smirks. "You're done running for the night. Do you remember what to say if you want to stop?"

"Necklace," I whisper.

His hands go to the hem of his t-shirt, and the air leaves me in a muted gasp as he drags it up over his stomach and shoulders.

Ink moves over muscle in the lamplight, black against warm skin, and my mouth goes dry before I can pretend I'm unaffected.

He drops the shirt onto the chair.

"One."

I step away slowly, making it look like defiance, though fast enough to give myself a chance.

"Two."

The corridor waits behind me, and I hate how badly I want to know what he'll do to me this time.

"Three."

I reach the doorway and grip the frame, my pulse beating hard in my throat.

"Four."

I smile despite myself.

Then I fly out into the corridor, boots heavy against the floor, the whole huge house opening around me.

The thrill of it is wrong in every way that should matter. Wrong because it's him. Wrong because this is his house. Wrong because heat coils low in my stomach…because this is the only thing my body has craved all night.

I take a corner too fast, one hand skimming the wall to steady myself, and keep going, passing a formal lounge with a chandelier hung over pale furniture.

The door stands half open. I dart inside, breathing hard, and perform a three-sixty turn on the spot.

There are tall windows with heavy drapes I could hide behind. However, that's too obvious, and I'm not about to make catching me an easy thing to do.

I back out again and hurry farther down the corridor, pulling my hair back into a messy ponytail and securing it with the band from around my wrist.

I slip into another room, smaller this time, some sort of morning room with glass-fronted cabinets and a long sofa beneath a painting of a woman who looks like his mother.

My breathing fills the room, and I turn back on myself, darting into the corridor again and looking all around me.

I stand still and listen, not hearing a single footstep.

The bastard is probably taking his time on purpose, letting the silence work me over, letting me imagine him at the next turn, in the next doorway.

My heart races harder, and I move again, quicker now, dipping through shadow where the wall lamps cast weak amber pools over every step.

My shoulder brushes thick wallpaper. A runner muffles my steps. I glance behind me and see only corridor, darkness, and my own nerves coming apart under the skin.

I take another corner, nearly slide on the polished floor, catch myself, and laugh once under my breath because it comes out half-wild and half-excited.

The corridor ahead splits in two directions. I hesitate for a beat, choose left, and hurry on, passing another closed door, then another, the whole place unfolding into too many choices.

However, when I charge into the drawing room, every light dies.

Darkness slams into place so completely that I stop dead, breath locked high in my chest.

Rain taps on distant windows. Somewhere deeper in the house, old pipes murmur within the walls. My own pulse pounds so hard I can hear it in my skull.

I wait with one hand half lifted in front of me and the dark pressing close on all sides, every nerve in my body alive, waiting for the first sign of him.

"Fuck," I whisper into blackness.

I inch forward until my shoulder clips a wall. My hip catches the edge of a piece of furniture and glass rattles somewhere to my left.

Using the wall as support, I take my time to skirt the room, fingers dragging over wooden panels and empty air.

My breathing comes faster and my heart hammers against my ribs. I know he's coming for me.

If I can’t run, I’ll stay perfectly quiet. And if I can’t see him, maybe he can’t see me.

However, somewhere in the dark, there’s a click, and I sense him all around me.

After a few shallow breaths, the air changes right in front of me and a hand closes around my throat.

“Found you, little wild thing,” he says, voice deep.

His thumb presses against the pulse I can’t slow.

“You can see me?” I whisper.

“Yes.”

“How?”

He lifts my hand, and I tense because I expect him to pin it, twist it, use it to remind me what little power I have left. Instead, he brings my fingers to his face, where they meet warm skin first.

His jaw is hard beneath them, the scrape of stubble rough as he guides them higher, brushing the edge of something smooth and hard across his eyes.

The dark stays absolute, but the shape beneath my touch feels like a narrow frame. Some sort of casing. A strap drawn close against his temples fitting something where his stare should be.

“What the hell is that?” I ask.

“A thermal visor we use for security.”

“For intruders?”

“For anyone who thinks the dark gives them an advantage over us.”

My fingers curl against the casing. “You’re a fucking cheater, Fionn.”

“I never set any rules.” His mouth is close enough that I catch the slight change in his breathing. “Now take off your clothes.”

“In the middle of your house?”

“No one can see you,” he confirms. “Only me.”

I should order him to turn the lights back on, but the command sinks through me, dragging heat so low that the throb between my thighs turns unbearable. I’m wet before a single button is undone. That’s what he does to me, and I hate that he knows it.

The hem catches under my fingers because I move fast, gathering the material at my ribs before pulling it upward.

For a brief moment, my arms are trapped above my head and my sightless world senses only cotton over my face, cool skin, and the heat of Fionn standing close.

The top clears my head and drops from my hand, falling somewhere near my feet. Cold air touches my stomach, then my breasts when I take off my bra next.

“Still watching, Harrington?”

“Every second.”

My fingers go to the button of my jeans, and I push it through the denim before lowering the zip.

“Do you always use security equipment like this?”

“No.”

My stomach pulls tight at how quickly he answers, and I hook my thumbs beneath the waistband before shoving the jeans down my legs.

The denim catches at my ankles, leaving me half-naked and balancing badly while I kick off one boot, then the other. I refuse to reach for him, so I

work the jeans loose by touch alone and step free with less grace than I'd like.

By the time the jeans are off, my pulse is everywhere.

I stand in front of him in the dark, unable to see a single thing, knowing he can somehow see all of me.

"What now?" I ask, my voice rough around each breath.

His fingers come to my breast, skimming the skin before circling my nipple with a patience that makes my thighs press together.

"Now," he says, his mouth brushing my ear, "you're going to kneel."

My chin lifts, even though he can't see the look I give him. "Ask nicely."

His hand closes around my throat, and his lips skate across my jaw.

"No." The word moves straight through me. "Get on your knees, little wild thing, and put that mouth to better use."

I lower myself carefully because I refuse to stumble for him. The floor is cold beneath my knees, and the dark makes every sound sharper. His belt buckle coming undone. His zip opening. The quiet drag of fabric passing his hips.

My hands find his thighs first, warm and hard beneath my palms, then the cut of his hipbones and the thick, heavy length of his dick lying against his stomach, the head already slick.

My mouth waters. "Say one smug thing, and I'll bite."

"Now that I'd like."

I shuffle closer, skating my hands over his skin before pressing my mouth to the base of his dick and flicking my tongue over the smooth heat there.

"Wait," he bites out.

Something cool brushes my temple, and I go rigid before his fingers settle at the back of my head.

"What are you doing?"

"Giving you the rest of it."

A visor comes over my eyes, the strap sliding over my hair as he adjusts it. For a second, the dark stays whole, then Fionn appears above me in colored heat.

His skin burns amber through the lens, his throat brighter where his pulse beats, his hands almost white where they hover near my face.

Lower down, his dick burns hotter, hard and thick in front of me, edged in white gold against the darker heat of his hips.

“The dark was kinder to you,” he says. “It let you lie.”

My nails dig into his thighs, and the heat at his throat flares brighter.

His hand fists my hair, and his voice drops until it belongs to the dark, the visor, and the part of me still trying to hate him.

“Lick your lips, nice and slow.”

I drag my tongue over my bottom lip at the same time as a needy little groan slips out of me.

His thumb comes to my mouth and drags across my wet lips.

“I can see the heat between your thighs. Open your mouth, little wild thing, and give yourself away.”

Every warning I grew up hearing about the Harringtons tells me to leave this house immediately, but my lips part for him.

I obey.

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Chapter 22

Sera

I open my mouth and lean in, letting the weight of his dick press heavy on my tongue, taking him until the blunt head nudges the back of my throat.

The first thing that changes is his breathing.

I hear the break in his inhale when my lips close around the width of him and the low hiss of air through his teeth when I gag on it.

The visor turns him into a rainbow of color as heat warms his throat, his abdomen muscles flex under my touch, and his fingers tightens in my hair while his other hand reaches past me into the dark.

Something creaks under his grip, wood or leather, some expensive Harrington heirloom taking his weight while he tries not to put it on me.

“Don’t rush,” he says, voice low. “You’re so hot when you taste my dick.”

My nails dig harder into his thigh, scraping over his skin. I should bite him for making me so needy, so goddamn hungry for him.

Instead, I hum around the thickness.

His breathing goes shallow, but he doesn’t give me the satisfaction of losing it.

“That’s what I wanted to see,” he murmurs. “That flare of need in your pussy.”

My skin prickles under the visor, and I know from the way his grip tightens that he’s seen more than I meant to give him.

The taste of him fills my mouth, a hint of salt and clean soap beneath the darker pull of his cologne. It’s expensive, Harrington, too familiar already, and I hate that I know it well enough to crave more.

His hips move a little, though his control stays intact, and that restraint pulls harder than fighting me would have.

I draw back, letting his length slide over my tongue. His fingers flex against my scalp, and through the visor, his heat glows brighter in front of my face, his body telling me exactly what I'm doing to him.

He wanted the truth in color, and all I see is white-hot skin, his body lit up because of me.

I take his dick into my throat again, deeper this time, until my eyes stream and spit runs down my chin, one hand gripping his thigh and the other cupping his balls, dragging my nails over the tight skin.

"Jesus fuck," he mutters.

The first rough grunt that leaves him sends a pulse through me so intense I moan around him.

This is the version of Fionn that gets under my skin.

Not the smug Harrington heir, but him breathing above me as if I've found a place he can't keep hidden.

"Sera," he hisses my name, and the ache between my legs throbs hotter.

This is the part I'll never confess to. That kneeling on a Harrington's floor with his dick in my throat is the least conflicted I've felt in months. That every wrong thing about it is exactly what's making me clench.

He fists my hair, and I watch the heat spread when I hum around him.

"Fuck, that's it," he says, voice deep and uneven. "Use that bratty mouth for something other than lying to me."

I hollow my cheeks and make him curse under his breath.

His hips move again, then he goes rigid, and the effort it takes him not to thrust into my mouth shoots a rush of delight through me.

"I know," he says, rough now, "you felt that."

I pull back just enough to speak. "Felt what?"

"The way you got wetter when I nearly stopped pretending I'm patient."

My pulse kicks hard.

"Maybe I should make ya wait," I say, scoring my nails up his thigh while my hand tightens around his dick. "Punish ya for thinking I'd make this easy."

His thumb moves against my scalp, almost gentle, which somehow makes the rest of him worse.

"You think making me wait is punishment?"

The question is quiet enough to make my fingers still.

“It is if ya want it badly enough.”

“I do want it.” His voice drops lower. “That’s why I can wait.”

He goes quiet before stepping back.

The loss of him leaves my mouth empty, my lips wet, my body furious with the sudden absence.

“That’s not what I meant.”

“You said punish me,” he says. “You picked the wrong weapon.”

I shift on my knees, my hand closing around nothing. “And what weapon should I have picked?”

“Yourself.”

His fingers hook beneath my chin, lifting my face toward the heat of him. I can’t see his expression, but I hear the control in his voice.

“You want to make me suffer, little wild thing?” he says. “Spread your legs and show me what I shouldn't touch.”

I swallow hard when his thumb drags over my lower lip, gathering the wet there before pressing it back against my mouth.

Warmth spreads under my skin, and I hate that the visor lets him see every trace of it.

“Lie back,” he says, voice deep and rough. “Hands above your head.”

The command moves through me so hard my thighs clench.

“Now.”

I lower myself onto the rug. The fibers scrape against my spine and the air feels colder when I’m flat on my back in the path of a draft.

Obeying him, I lift my arms over my head and wait, not caring for anything beyond this room.

“Don’t just stand there,” I say.

“I’m not.”

“Ya are.”

“I’m watching you realize you like being told where to put your hands.”

The words slip under my skin, filthy because they’re right, and my fingers curl above my head.

“I don’t.”

“No?” His voice drops. “Then move them. Touch yourself.”

Air snags in my throat like I’ve swallowed something too big to breathe around.

“Put your hands where you want my mouth.”

The silence turns hot around us, and I skate my fingers lower, over my stomach and between my thighs, my heart hammering and skin on fire.

“That’s what I thought,” he says.

Fionn lowers between my legs, and I know it more by sound and heat than sight, the shift of his body, the brush of his hands against the inside of my thighs, the solidness of his body moving down through the lens until his shoulders are a broad burn between my legs.

His breath is warm against me. The heat of it rolls over my soaked skin, and my clit throbs when his hands slide under my thighs and shove them wide.

“What are ya doin’ to me, Fionn?”

“Giving you what you crave.”

He buries his face between my legs and every thought of how wrong this is burns to ashes around us.

I arch off the rug, moaning for him, sliding my hands into his hair and tugging tight.

“You wanted punishment,” he says between licks. “Take it.”

Heat breaks through my body, strong and violent, and my head tips back as he licks me with the same focused patience he uses for everything else.

Slow at first. Cruel with it. Learning the places that make my thighs tense, the pressure that makes my breath falter, the rhythm that has my hips chasing him.

His tongue drags the length of me, then circles, and when his mouth closes over my swollen clit and sucks, the cry that comes out of my throat is loud enough to startle me.

“That,” he says, voice rough against my skin. “That’s the sound I wanted.”

“Fionn.”

“Again.”

He licks faster and drives two fingers inside me, curling them hard.

“God, Fionn, that feels so good,” I whisper-moan.

When my hips lift, he presses a hand to my pelvis and pushes down.

“I knew you’d taste this fucking good,” he says, pushing deeper, his voice thick now. “But I think you’d taste better tied up.”

I drag in a breath that barely works. “What?”

He adds another finger, slow enough to make me feel every inch, and curls them while his mouth returns to me.

The pressure turns everything white-hot under my skin. My back bows, and my nails claw at his shoulders.

Every lick makes me hotter, every slow thrust of his fingers makes me wetter, and every rough grunt of approval he gives against my pussy travels straight up my spine.

“I want to fuck you like this,” he says, finger fucking me with slow, confident certainty. “Flat on your ass in my father’s house, watching the heat spread through your body when I put my cock inside you.”

His thumb strokes over my thigh, almost gentle, while his fingers curl deeper.

“But I want to see you fall apart for me, little wild thing.”

I can’t even breathe properly to respond.

“And most of all,” he says, lowering his mouth back to me, “I want you so close you can’t tell whether you’re begging me to stop or begging me to let you come.”

He sucks my clit and as I rise, on the edge of a release, my body already starting to take it, he pulls away.

The sudden loss of contact is brutal.

I whimper, reaching for him, but his hand catches my wrist and holds it down.

“No.”

My chest heaves. “Fuck ya, Fionn. I really hate ya for doing this to me.”

“No, you don’t,” he says, and I hear the smile in his voice even though I can’t see it. “You hate that you crave it, and you hate that I stopped.”

He shifts above me, his heat moving higher through the visor until his breath drags over my cheek.

“Tell me you want me.”

I turn my head, and the roughness of his jaw scrapes against my skin. I’m furious, soaked, and aching so badly I could scream.

He’s engaged to my best friend, and I would let him fuck me on this rug in front of a window. Both of those things are true at once, and only one of them is winning.

“Say it,” he demands. “Admit you want my dick again.”

His mouth brushes mine, barely there, and my whole body jerks.

“Because I want you to have it.”

“I want it,” I whisper. “As badly as you want to put it inside me.”

His hand goes to the strap at my head. The visor lifts from my face, and the colors disappear.

Blackness swallows everything so completely that my breath stutters.

“Fionn.” I push up on one elbow, my body shaking from the need begging to be released.

“Stay there.”

The order stops me halfway.

There’s a noise, and a quiet breath leaves him, controlled and uneven at the same time.

Then light slices through the dark as the beam from his phone spills across the floor, moving over the room in a narrow sweep.

The drawing room comes back in pieces. Heavy curtains. Mahogany furniture. A marble fireplace and him.

Fionn drags his visor over his head and drops it onto an armchair, then walks across the room.

He opens a cabinet near the wall and takes out a lighter. The flame snaps alive with a flinty click. One wick catches, then another, and the shadows begin to flicker around us.

His hair is disordered, his inked chest rising when he turns to face me.

He walks back across the room, candlelight moving over him with every step, and I stay exactly where he left me. The light makes it more real now because I can see exactly whose house I am naked in.

“You said you wanted it,” he says.

My throat tightens. “I did.”

Then his attention drifts toward the windows where heavy curtains are pulled shut against the night, and beside them, a pair of thick braided tiebacks hang from brass hooks.

He crosses to the windows, and by the time he grabs one of the tiebacks, my body understands how much trouble I’m in.

“Fionn.”

“Is that your warning or your permission?”

“Depends what ya plan to do with that.”

He lifts the tieback from its hook, and the tassels slide over his knuckles. “You already know.”

My stomach tightens.

He draws the cord through his hand as he walks back to me, the braid thick in his fist as he lowers beside me.

“Turn over,” he says. “Let me see how pretty you look tied up for me, my little wild thing.”

The *my* in it hits before I can defend against it, going straight between my thighs.

Despite that, I’d rather not let him believe he’s the one calling the shots. So, I hook my foot behind his calf and pull.

Fionn catches himself with one hand on the rug, a low laugh leaving him as his body comes over mine.

“Still want to fight?”

“You said to turn over.” I drag my nails down his ribs. “You didn’t say I had to make it easy.”

“That’s why I didn’t ask.”

I shove at his shoulder.

He lets me move him a fraction to make me think I have gained ground, then he hooks my thigh and drags my leg higher against his hip.

The friction tears a whimper out of me.

I know he’s aware of the wet heat against him, the way my body gives itself away every time I pretend this is still about winning.

“You like the fight,” he says.

“You like it more.”

“I like earning what you pretend you won’t give me.”

His hand tightens and his weight pins mine. I go for his shoulder again, but he snares my wrist and presses it into the rug beside my head.

“You’re taking too long,” he says.

“Then try harder.”

He moves then, so fast it steals my breath. One second, I am under him with my nails scraping his back; the next, he has me half-turned beneath him, his thigh between mine.

I twist under him, not to get away, but to make him work for the part of me already going soft beneath him.

He lowers his mouth to my throat, teeth grazing skin.

“I fucking love that you don’t make it easy,” he says against my skin.

“You need to earn what I let ya have, Fionn.”

He pulls away before I can chase his mouth and flips me onto my stomach with a strength that makes my stomach drop. I land with a gasp, cheek against the rug, hair across my mouth, and before I can push up, his body covers mine from behind.

I try to get one arm under me, but he catches my wrist and pulls it behind me. When I reach back with the other, he catches that too, and for one heated second, I could twist, kick, bite, make him fight for the last inch of it.

Instead, I let him bring my wrists together.

He tests the tension with two fingers before he secures the knot, then leans over me, his chest pressing against my back and his mouth at my ear.

“This isn’t surrender,” he says, voice thick. “It’s me stopping my little wild thing from getting away.”

My body goes liquid beneath him.

I turn my face to the rug. “Enjoy it while it lasts.”

His hand tightens on my hip, and the hard length of his dick presses against me from behind.

“Oh, I will,” he says. “Every second.”

Truth is, I want him to enjoy every second.

But I’ll take that admission to my grave.

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Chapter 23

Sera

Fionn angles me around and puts me on my shins.

Candlelight flickers across the room, painting his naked body in shifting light and shadow. My wrists stay locked tight behind my lower back.

He moves away, drags a chair closer, and drops into it with his thighs spread, cock hard and heavy against his stomach, the head already wet from my mouth.

I can’t stop staring at him.

“Open your knees.”

I do it slowly, loving the way his attention follows every inch.

“Wider.”

“Greedy bastard.”

“You have no idea.”

I obey, knees sliding apart on the floor, heat flooding my face and my core. He sits deeper and lets the silence do the humiliating part, watching until my knees want to close again just to spite him.

Then he leans forward, elbows on his knees, stare piercing straight through me.

“Look at you,” he says, voice rough. “Tied up, naked, and still trying to work out how to hurt me.”

His hand fists his dick, and he strokes up and down.

“That’s why I want my cock inside you.”

The words hit low, and my knees press harder into the rug. I twist against the ropes, a desperate, needy whimper slipping out of me, thighs slick and useless.

“Use your mouth again or untie me, Fionn.”

He slides off the chair, sinks to his knees in front of me so we're eye to eye. His hands map my body, palming my breasts, rolling my nipples until I gasp, then sliding up to collar my throat in a firm, possessive grip.

"You gave me your hands," he says. "Now I'm going to see what the rest of you gives me."

I plaster on a smirk, even though I'm too far gone in need to be remotely amused. "Your hard dick tells me what you're ready to give."

His hand leaves my throat, traces my collarbone, my stomach, and travels lower.

"You're kneeling in front of me, tied up and wet. I don't have to give you anything."

His fingers skate between my spread thighs, stroking through my soaked folds before driving inside and curling just enough to tease that spot before pulling out.

He lifts them to his mouth and sucks with a deep, obscene groan. "Fuck, you taste like desperation."

He shifts back, sitting on the floor, legs stretched out, dick standing rigid. "Get over here."

I stare at him.

"Come sit on my dick."

This is not a stranger in the dark anymore. This is Fionn Harrington, bare and hard beneath me, and I still shuffle forward on my knees—thighs trembling, heart beating out of my chest, the position forcing me to lean into him.

Every awkward inch should make me want to kill him. Instead, it makes me wetter, and I clock the exact moment he notices.

The moment I'm straddling him, his hand closes around my throat again, and he pulls me into a bruising kiss.

He takes my mouth like he's still angry I almost made him come with it.

My breasts drag against his chest, nipples scraping his skin as I rock against him. His other hand reaches between us, gripping his thick cock and rubbing the fat head along my slit.

"Sit on it," he says.

I lower myself onto it, just a fraction of the way, then stop.

His grip tightens on my hip.

"Sera."

"You told me to sit. You didn't say how much of ya I had to take."

“All the fucking way.”

I spear myself slowly because I want to watch how he draws his lower lip between his teeth and his pupils blow wide.

The first inch steals the air from both of us. By the time I sink lower, taking him in slow drags until my ass meets his thighs, his grip has gone brutal on my hip and my thighs are shaking.

“More,” he says.

“Ask nicely.”

His laugh is rough against my mouth. “Never.”

Then we’re moving together, skin slapping, wet sounds filling the room between us, his teeth grazing my jaw and his hands pushing my breasts up into peaks in front of him.

He sucks hard on my nipples and bites them one by one.

“Every time you look at these marks, you’ll remember my mouth was here while my cock was inside you.”

The angle, the tie at my wrists, the fullness of him all drag me to the edge at once, and I hate that he knows the exact second it happens.

My skin flames, my muscles go tight around him, and a filthy little moan slips past my lips.

Fionn stills for half a breath, buried deep, his fingers digging in firm, and his mouth against the marks he left on my breast.

“That’s it,” he says, voice gritty and rough. “Give me that one.”

The words break whatever is left of me.

I rock into him and come with a moan I can't hold back, my chest pushed out so my spine arches while pleasure tears through me in fast, violent waves. My wrists pull against the tie, my thighs tremble, and every pulse of release drags another low grunt out of his chest.

He hisses as my muscles clamp and flutter around him, his restraint going to shit because I’m coming on his cock, and he’s still trying to hold himself back.

“Fuck...Fionn—"

When his name comes out broken, his hips drive up into me.

“Take it, Sera,” he says, voice wrecked at the edges. “Every fucking inch.”

I have no defense left for the groans that leave me.

He grips my waist, holding me where he wants me as he fucks up into me, and the tie bites just enough to remind me I gave him this. Not

obedience or defeat. This.

Me, tied, hungry, and taking him because I wanted the fight and the surrender.

His breath turns harsh against my skin.

“Every drop,” he says.

Then I feel the first hard pulse of him deep inside me, and the intimacy hits worse than the force. Hot, thick cum spills into me with every thrust, and Fionn Harrington buries himself to the balls, coming inside me all over again.

For a few quick heartbeats after, we take deep heavy breaths together.

Fionn lowers his forehead to my chest, his mouth brushing the marks he made there.

“Jesus, Sera…”

This time, my name doesn't come out with a warning.

It sounds like damage.

With his cock inside me, I sit there on his lap, my body recovering and my breathing turning shallow.

Candlelight catches the sweat on his brow, the shadow of his jaw and the darkness of his hair.

A strand of my hair sticks to my mouth, and before I can blow it away, Fionn reaches up and moves it away.

His fingers skim my cheek, then my jaw, and for one strange second, he looks at what he’s done to me without making a joke of it.

“Those look good on you,” he says.

Then his hand slips behind my back, and he loosens the knot. The curtain tie slides from my wrists and drops behind me.

Blood rushes back into my arms.

I hiss and shake out my hands, rolling my shoulders, then my wrists, the skin marked where the braid held me.

Fionn catches one of my wrists and turns it over. His thumb passes over the red line. “Was it too tight?”

“No.”

“Don’t lie.”

“It wasn’t too tight, or I would’ve said.”

“Good.”

He thumbs the underside of my wrist, and even though I’m not restrained anymore, I don’t climb off him.

We stay joined together, naked and peaceful in this weird aftermath truce. I slide my fingers into his hair and tug hard, so his head dips back.

His breath leaves him through his clenched teeth, and I rise up onto my knees, lean over and kiss him before he can warn me.

The pressure is firm, wet, and mean, licking into his mouth like I'm taking something from him.

His hand clamps around my hip, the other spreading wide across my back, and the kiss turns rough. He tastes like me, and God, that lights a spark in my chest.

Settle in with a love story.

Head to Lokepub for more romance novels.

I tug his hair harder until a thick grunt moves through his chest, and I know I have him.

I start to get up, lips clinging, kissing him as his semi-hard dick slips out of me in one slow drag that makes both of us stop breathing for a racing heartbeat.

When I try to climb off him, his hands jump to my waist. "Leaving first doesn't make you less caught."

I look down at him, hair draping his brow and eyes dark.

"Temporarily caught." I offer him a sugary-sweet smile. "That's all."

He holds onto me, just to prove he can, then releases me.

I sit on the rug with my knees drawn in, reaching for my jeans. Fionn gets to his feet and gathers my clothes one piece at a time and hands them to me without comment.

"Very gentlemanly," I say.

"Must be my Harrington hospitality."

"Right, so this is a typical evening for ya?"

I take my bra from him and start dressing while he pulls on his boxers, then crosses to the drinks cabinet as if this is exactly how men in this house behave after ruining women on the floor.

Glass clinks. A stopper pops free. Whiskey pours in two short glasses, the measures generous.

He walks in my direction and hands one to me. “I don’t bring women home often.”

I get to my feet, zip up my jeans and take the drink. “How come? Too afraid your da wouldn’t approve?”

Fionn watches me over the rim of his glass.

“Something like that,” he mutters before taking a sip. “Is this how my sister ended up with your brother?”

My brows snap together. “Drinking whiskey together?”

“Fucking,” he replies.

“Well, I wouldn't exactly say Keira’s innocent if she’s with Saint.”

“You do realize if he hurts her in any way, I’ll kill him.”

A shiver runs down my spine, and I stand taller. “Kill him, and I’ll kill you.”

Fionn smirks, and my stomach flips. “Would you fuck me while you’re doing it?”

“I wouldn’t give ya the pleasure of something you enjoy in your last minutes.”

That pulls a low laugh from the back of his throat. “How do you think your brothers would react to a Harrington tying up their sister and fucking her on the floor?”

The cold draft at my feet rises and my skin prickles, the weight of his words settling in the pit of my stomach. “Is that what this is… You’re doing this to get back at Saint?”

When I step back, he moves closer, crowding me with his bare chest and whiskey laced breath.

“I’m not using you to get to your brother, Sera. If I wanted to hurt Saint, I wouldn’t need your body to do it.”

“No?”

“No.” His voice stays low. “You’ve had plenty of chances to turn this into a weapon. Your brothers knew enough to come for me. They didn’t.”

“Maybe they decided you weren’t worth the petrol.”

“Maybe.” He takes a slow drink. “But I think you kept that night a secret.”

The whiskey burns differently after that.

“I told Eilish.”

“You told your best friend we fucked.” His eyes hold mine. “Not the rest.”

I set my glass down. “Why am I here, Fionn? Why bring me to this cold, empty house when you’re still marrying Eilish?”

Fionn exhales a slow, steady breath.

“The wedding is still happening,” I remind him.

“It is.”

“And my ma would sooner shoot ya than shake your hand.”

He takes a drink, considering me.

“I brought you here,” he says, voice thick, “because if I took you home, the night ended.”

My chest tightens. “Which it should have.”

“Really.” He sets his glass on a side table next to the armchair. “Do you regret it?”

He steps closer, but not enough to touch me.

“Didn’t you enjoy the chase, Sera? The way your heart raced. The way your skin burned.”

I swallow hard, unable to deny it.

“I know what waits for me,” he continues. “I know what my father expects. What Eilish is supposed to be to me. And you came on my dick knowing all of that too. You like the danger, little wild thing. Admit it."

“No.”

“No?” he repeats.

"No, I won't admit anything."

He smirks. "Good answer."

“So, what happens tomorrow?” I ask folding my arms over my chest.

His eyes hold mine in the candlelight.

“Tomorrow, you’ll go back to pretending you hate me.”

“And you?”

He looks past me, shadows flickering over his face, and the answer comes too easily.

“I’ll find another excuse to see you again.”

The pulse in my neck goes wild.

“I should go now.” I lean down, scoop up my boots, then sidestep him and head for the drawing-room door. "Could ya drop me back to Black Heath. I’ll get a taxi home from there.”

“No.”

I stop with my hand halfway to the door. “No?”

“No.”

My spine stiffens, and I turn back to face him. “Excuse me?”

“You're not getting in a taxi at this time of night.”

“Oh my god.” I sigh. “I don’t need to ask for your permission.”

“And it's still a *no*.”

I narrow my eyes as he crosses the room and stops in front of me, so we're toe to toe.

“You’re staying here,” he announces.

A burst of laughter breaks out of me. “Am I fuck.”

He reaches out and fixes my top where it's caught in my jeans. “Yeah, you are.”

“And where exactly would I sleep? The floor?”

His gaze slides to the rug beyond us, then drifts back to me.

“Well, that’s already been used, so you’ll join me in my room.”

My stomach drops, and a little gasp catches me off guard.

“How about *no*?”

“The front door is locked, the gates are manned, and I’m not driving you home when the night isn’t over yet.”

The confession lands between us, ugly and hot and real.

“I’m not sleeping in your bed.”

The muscles in his jaw flex. “And I never said anything about sleeping.”

“We shouldn’t—”

“We already did,” he says, walking ahead of me. “But first, Megan needs to be fed. This way.”

I stare after him. “Who the hell is Megan?”

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Chapter 24

Sera

Instead of answering, Fionn crosses back to where his joggers are lying near the armchair and pulls them on.

He takes his phone from the pocket, taps the screen twice, and beyond the drawing-room, the house wakes.

Lamps and wall sconces flick on while something beeps from another room.

Of course, the Harrington gothic mansion has an app to control the lighting.

“Come with me,” he says.

The corridor outside the drawing room is cooler than the room we leave behind.

Fionn walks ahead of me, barefoot and half-dressed, because prowling through a creepy house at night is an ordinary thing for him to do.

Shadows sit thick along the walls. Portraits watch from gilt frames, their dead Harrington eyes following me.

I carry my boots in one hand and a whiskey in the other as he leads me along a narrower passage, then into a chrome chef's kitchen.

The floor is old stone, the ceiling high, and the counters gleam. Copper pans hang over an island. A black range sits against the far wall. At the back, a glass door shows nothing beyond it except darkness and the faint silver smear of moonlit rain against the panes.

Fionn opens the tall steel fridge built into the wall, because God forbid a Harrington would have to bend for milk.

“What are ya doing?” I ask.

He takes out a covered dish. “Feeding you.”

“I didn’t ask to be fed.”

“True,” he says. “But you’ll eat anyway.”

I glare at the back of his head.

He lifts the lid from a dish, glances inside, then takes a fork from a drawer and sets both on the island in front of one of the stools.

“Sit.”

My eyes narrow. “Do you ever say please?”

“Sometimes.”

“Like when? Because now would be a great time to start.”

His gaze moves over me, slow enough to make my stomach tighten. “Please sit, Sera.”

I should throw the food at him, but I’m pretty hungry, and it does smell good.

“I guess that’s progress,” I say, dropping my boots by the stool and climbing on to it.

The food is cold chicken, roasted vegetables, some kind of salad with herbs and oil.

When I stick my fork into a bunch of leaves, he turns away, opens a cupboard near the back door and takes out a tin.

“Have ya got a dog?”

“No.”

“A cat?”

“No.”

The lid comes free with a soft metallic snap.

I lower my fork. “Then who the hell is Megan?”

“A fox.”

For a second, I stare over at his muscular shoulders as he spoons meat into a shallow bowl.

“Megan…the fox?”

“Yes.”

“Are you for real?”

“I was nineteen and didn’t expect her to live long enough to be embarrassed by it.”

I look at the chicken in front of me, then back at him, needing to know more but knowing I shouldn’t want to ask.

“How come?” I ask despite myself.

Fionn carries the bowl to the back door. “I found her in the lower field. Wire had torn her open. My father told Graves to shoot her.”

Of course, the bastard did.

“I told Graves I’d take her to the vet instead.” He unlocks the back door and pulls it open to allow the night air to roll in. “Graves drove me.”

I take a bite of chicken and watch him step outside onto the stone and set the dish near the edge of the dark before he comes back in.

“She comes every night?” I ask.

“Most nights.”

“Can I watch?”

His eyes flick to mine. “She won’t come close with the lights on.”

“I don’t need close.”

He studies me for a second, then walks to the wall and switches off the kitchen lights.

Darkness drops over the room. The counters turn black. The copper pans dull to shadow, and Fionn becomes a shape where he stands.

I tell myself I’m being ridiculous, slipping off the stool and moving to the door to wait for Megan the fox while Fionn watches the same patch of night.

Then something moves near the edge of the garden.

A small red shape slips out from under the hedge and pauses at the dish with one paw lifted, ears pricked, body held like she might vanish again.

“She’s beautiful,” I say quietly.

He rakes a hand through his hair. “She’s a thief with an attitude problem.”

“That’s your fox, all right.”

Together we stand at the glass in the dark, and his hand comes to rest against mine on the counter’s edge. Our fingertips lightly skim and then I inch mine a little closer.

I don’t move away, and neither does he.

Megan drags a piece of meat into the hedge, and for one minute of my life, touching him doesn’t feel like a war crime.

After a few minutes, his phone vibrates on the island.

One second, he’s watching a fox eat food from a dish. The next, his face empties, and Fionn Vaughn Harrington returns like a dark shadow.

He picks up the phone and checks the screen. Whatever name he sees kills the last trace of peacefulness in him.

“What?” he answers.

I glance toward the window, but Megan is gone. Only the dish remains near the hedge, half-dragged into shadow.

“Bring your food,” he says, covering the phone with his hand.

“Where?”

“Bring it.”

The quiet order annoys me more because it’s so expecting and dismissive.

“I’m not a child.”

“No,” he says, gaze holding mine. “You’re a woman who’s had booze, sex, and only two bites of chicken. Bring the food.”

Then he uncovers the phone and walks out of the kitchen.

For a second, I consider leaving it on the island out of principle. However, my stomach chooses betrayal. I pick it up and follow him.

“Not in the Harrington name,” he says a few steps ahead.

His voice is different now, the lazy edge from the kitchen is gone, replaced by something flat and dangerous.

“No. Use the Galway company.”

He turns at the foot of the stairs and glances over his shoulder to check I’m following.

With the dish in my hand, the fork tucked against the edge of it, I pick at a piece of chicken because my belly needs obedience in the most irritating way possible.

Fionn starts up the stairs.

“I don’t care what his solicitor thinks,” he continues. “Buy the debt first, then the land.”

Land.

Debt.

Solicitor.

“I’m not letting those northern fuckers put a footprint south of the river.”

He’s talking about the Crowe brothers, I know he is.

I follow him along the first landing, past a window where dark glass throws our reflections back at us. Him ahead, broad-shouldered and barefoot, phone to his ear. Me behind him, leaking his cum and carrying leftovers through his family house like I’m his girlfriend.

Which I’m definitely not.

“And if Alasdair asks?” the voice on the other end says, faint but just loud enough for me to catch.

Fionn stops on the next set of stairs.

I stop too.

His hand rests on the banister, and he stares up at the dark sweep of the top floor, jaw set.

“If my father asks,” he says, “you tell him you know nothing about it.”

Something tightens beneath my ribs.

This conversation isn’t Fionn acting as his father’s son moving pieces for the Harringtons. He’s moving pieces around his father, too.

I should listen carefully and consider how to use it against him. Instead, I want to know what he’s building beneath his da’s nose and why he’s letting me hear him.

He starts walking again.

“No,” he says. “Nothing that connects to me until I decide it does.”

I glance at the food in my hand, and my stomach knots.

Truth is, I don’t really know this man.

This situation is just a pull of the forbidden. The danger of wanting something that only feels alive because it’s out of reach.

Something that would die the second it became available.

When we reach the top floor, the air changes, and the space becomes private with lower, slanted ceilings. There are zero portraits, and all the doors are shut tight on both sides.

Fionn stops outside the last door on the landing.

“Email me everything by midnight," he says. “I want the boundary maps before breakfast.”

He ends the call, pushes the door open, and looks back at me, knowing exactly how much I heard.

“Keep eating.”

I pick at a piece of chicken with my fingers. “Are ya going after the Crowes?”

His mouth curves, but there is no warmth in it now.

“Aren’t you?”

I stare at him as he walks inside, not waiting for an answer.

I stay in the hall, gazing into a room that belongs to him.

There’s a huge bed neatly made at the far wall and a leather chair next to the small window. On the desk that’s covered in beige folders sits a

closed laptop and a brass lamp.

Through an open door on the right, I glimpse black tile and golden taps. Through another, rows of shirts hang in a room dedicated to clothes.

“Sera,” he says without turning. “You can come in. I don’t expect you to linger in the hall all night.”

“This is such a bad idea,” I mutter, moving inside.

“Good to see I have your obedience now.”

I stick up my middle finger. “I pick my battles wisely.”

I walk past him before he can look too pleased with himself and cross to the bed, sitting on the edge of his mattress and spearing a piece of chicken with the fork.

Fionn props his hip against the desk and watches me.

“Want some?” I ask, chewing. “It’s actually nice for something that was made here.”

He comes toward me, joggers sitting low, his abdomen carved and smooth, and stops in front of me.

Instead of taking the fork, he reaches into the dish and pulls out a piece of chicken with his fingers.

“You were right, by the way,” I say.

Fionn’s brows drift up. “About?”

“That foreman,” I say. “The guy who was killed in one of your containers.”

Fionn drags a thumb over the edge of his mouth.

“We dug a little deeper, and it wasn’t your men who killed him.”

“No,” he says quietly. “It wasn’t.”

“The Crowes paid someone in our crew to let their butcher in,” I tell him. “They got him through the gate, dragged the foreman into your container, hacked him to pieces, and made sure the body pointed straight at you.”

Fionn nods. “Did you find the man who opened the gate?”

“No. He disappeared.”

“Dead?”

“Probably.”

“Crowes like tidy endings.”

I glance up at him. “You sound familiar with their work.”

“I pay attention.” He looks at the dish, then back at me. “So, you believed me enough to raise it in a Tallon meeting.”

“I’m not an idiot.”

“That’s not what I said.”

My fingers tighten around the fork as our gazes clash. “Doesn’t mean I trust ya.”

Fionn takes another piece of chicken and chews as he stares right at me.

“That’s a brave thing to say when you’re sitting on my bed,” he says.

“What d’ya expect me to say? That we’re allies now?”

“You could thank me for the tip-off.”

“How about me cleaning up your cut is my debt paid.”

“Damn, Sera, for a second I thought you did it because you cared.”

I huff out a laugh despite myself. “You were bleeding on everything. It was disgusting.”

“You still did it.”

“Keep pushing, and I’ll tell everyone you have a fox called Megan.”

I smile before I can stop myself, and Fionn smiles back at me. God, he’s beautiful when he’s unguarded.

“You’re threatening an innocent fox now?”

“I’m learning your weaknesses.”

“That’s a dangerous hobby.”

“Isn’t that what we do best, Fionn?”

He leans over me, slides both hands into my hair, and angles my face up. The kiss is hard, wet, and over too fast, his mouth taking mine just long enough to make the fork slip in my hand.

When I moan into his mouth, he pulls away.

“Finish your food,” he says, straightening. “I’m grabbing a shower.”

Then he backs up, thumbs hooked in the waistband of his joggers.

“Make yourself at home.”

He disappears into the adjoining bathroom. The shower turns on behind the half-open bathroom door.

For a few seconds, I sit on the edge of his bed, the rush of water and the knowledge of him naked in the next room pulling at me.

I stare at the gap, at the steam beginning to form, and my body makes a very poor argument for common sense.

Joining him would be stupid.

Reckless.

Exactly the sort of thing I would do tonight.

I carry the dish over to the desk and set it beside a neat stack of papers.

That’s when I see my family name printed in black across the top of a document tucked half beneath a folder.

Everything inside me freezes.

The shower keeps running.

I glance toward the bathroom door and slide the document out.

Black Heath appears three lines down.

Then again.

And again.

The text mentions site boundaries around the docks. Acquisition schedules. A company I’ve never heard of. Debt purchase.

I turn the page, reading quickly.

A map slides out beneath it, marked in thin red lines around several areas. Small strips at first, then wider blocks, stitched around certain roads, businesses, and places close enough to the docks to make my stomach twist.

“No,” I whisper.

The shower beats harder against the tile.

I leaf through another page, then another, my fingers moving faster now.

My throat tightens when I find the Harrington Trust deed with Keira Harrington as the owner and Fionn named as legal adviser.

This is the land Alasdair stole from my family.

Behind me, Fionn returns to the room. I angle around to face him, holding the deed in my hands. His hair is wet and dark, his bare chest dripping onto a towel wrapped low around his hips.

He takes one look at me, then at the papers in my hand.

“Found anything interesting?”

My blood turns cold.

“The Harringtons are buying up Cork and Black Heath right under our noses,” I say.

His gaze holds mine. “Not the Harringtons, Sera.”

He crosses the room, unhurried, until I have to tip my head back to hold his gaze.

“Me.”

The calls I overheard and the papers I found lock together. Fionn is building power behind his father’s back, and if he ever turns it against my family, he could win.

Wanting him was dangerous before. Now it could cost me everything.

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Chapter 25

Fionn

Sera stands in my bedroom, her skin marked, hair loose around her shoulders, and a deed in her hand that shouldn't have a Tallon's fingers on it.

Her gaze drops to the document again, to Keira's name.

"You created this," she says. "Didn't ya?"

"Yes."

"And you're the one who put the land in Keira's name."

"Your family lost that land before I'd even enrolled in St. Killians."

Her gaze holds mine, full of fire. "But now you're older."

I fix the towel at my hips.

"My father wanted it in a family trust," I say. "I did what he asked."

Her laugh is quiet. "Good little Fionn."

The muscles in my jaw clench.

"So that's it?" she asks. "Alasdair pulls a string, and you move?"

"When I was younger, I mistook obedience for power."

Her eyes narrow. "And now?"

"Now I know power is deciding who moves first."

She turns and drops the deed, letting it float to the desk.

"And this?" She points to the stack of papers. "Is this you getting ready to destroy my family?"

I step closer, and she holds her ground, standing straighter, so full of confidence she almost convinces me she is not shaken.

"That's me making sure no one controls the ground around the docks unless I let them."

"The docks belong to us."

“And now everything around them belongs to me.”

Her hand presses to her stomach.

“You’re no different from your father,” she says. “I don’t know what I expected.”

There it is. My father’s shadow, thrown across my bedroom by a woman still wearing what I did to her.

“If I were no different from him, you wouldn’t be with me right now.”

“Clearly, I shouldn’t be with ya, Fionn. You’re using me to satisfy whatever kink you’ve found, and one of these days, you’ll destroy my family and me with it.”

I let the silence press against her before I answer. “Perhaps you should stop pretending you don’t understand men like me.”

“Oh, I understand men like you just fine.”

“No,” I say. “You understand men like my father.”

Her chin lifts. “Then what are ya?”

“Worse in some ways.”

Color climbs her throat, and I know it is anger as she sets her hands on her hips. “Just some?”

“My father takes what’s in front of him.” My voice drops, raspy and thick. “I see the bigger picture and take what gives me the next move.”

“That’s supposed to make ya better?”

“No.” My gaze holds hers. “It makes me harder to stop.”

Her breath quickens. “And what’s the bigger picture?”

“Control,” I say simply. “Not my father’s. Not the Crowes’. And not the Tallons’.”

“Why are ya telling me all of this?”

I fold my arms and study her. Bruise-red lips. Messy hair. Bright, relentless eyes. She understands more than most men I know.

“You’re smart,” I tell her. “You know the danger of talking when you shouldn’t.”

Her throat works. “Does that include me and you?”

“There is no us, Sera. You know that.”

Her brow creases. “Right.”

I should leave it there, but her pupils flare before I even touch her.

“If this were only a kink, I’d be bored the second you stopped running.”

She swallows hard. “And are ya bored?”

“No.”

Her chest rises as she takes a deep, steadying breath. I catch her chin before she can turn away.

“There is you.” I lower my face, bringing her mouth closer to mine. “There is me. And there is everything we both know we shouldn’t do next.”

“I won’t let you destroy me, Fionn,” she whispers.

“That’s not my plan for you,” I say against her lips. “But doing this is.”

That’s the thing I keep coming back for. Not the chase or even the fight. The fact she sees me clearly and still makes me earn another inch.

Then I kiss her, sliding my tongue into her warm mouth, and it irritates me how little of her I need before I want all of it again.

Sera’s fingers slide into my damp hair and pull. When I hum out my approval, she opens her mouth wider beneath mine, giving me more.

That’s the problem with her. She makes her surrender feel so fucking hot.

I grip the backs of her thighs and lift her. She gasps into my mouth, then her legs wrap around my hips, ankles locking behind my ass.

My towel loosens, and I don’t bother to fix it.

I carry her to the bed and lay her down. She props herself on one elbow, lips swollen, eyes bright as I drag her jeans down her legs.

I need her anger and brattiness, too. But for all my sins, I crave the part of her that gets turned on by the wrongness of us and how she surrenders to it.

She lifts her hips to help me when I hook my fingers into her underwear and pull her panties off.

I throw her clothes aside and take her top off next, dragging it over her head and tossing it on the floor. Her bra follows. Then she’s naked on my bed and still looking at me like she’d rather bite than beg.

My towel slips from my hips, and her gaze drops to my dick.

Instead of climbing onto her, I take her ankle and drag her toward the edge of the mattress. She doesn’t fight it, watching me the way she always does.

I press my lips to the inside of her knee and get harder when she sucks in a little gasp. I take my time, licking my tongue up the inside of her thigh, and fuck, the slick heat of her is already there, waiting.

When I lower my mouth to her clit and taste her, the whimper she makes goes through me in a line of heat.

I work my tongue through her wet pussy in long, unhurried strokes, learning her with the same patience I use for anything worth taking apart.

What makes her hips jerk. What makes her thighs clamp. What pulls the loudest moans from the back of her throat.

This woman doesn't give herself permission to want things easily. I know that much about her. Every little whimper she makes because of me is something she didn't mean to give me, and it drives me on, needing to hear her break.

When she tries to grind against my mouth, I press my forearm flat across her pelvis.

"Don't move."

"Fionn," she hisses it through her teeth.

"No"

Her fingers dive into my hair when I push two fingers inside her.

She makes a dirty moan I've never heard from her before. Raw and open, and entirely unguarded. Her pussy clenches around my fingers, and I work them deeper, slow, curling until I find the angle that makes her breath stutter on the inhale.

"You like that right there, don't you," I say against her.

"Yes," she moans. "Fuck, yes, there. Don't stop."

I close my mouth over her clit and set a pace, my fingers working, tongue steady until she starts to shake. Her thighs clamp at my ears and the grip on my hair sends a shiver down my spine.

I let her have it. Let her come apart breathing out my name while I keep my mouth on her clit until her torso's lifting off the mattress.

My lashes flick up, and our gazes snare.

Her chest is heaving, thighs trembling with a look on her face that I know she doesn't mean to show me.

I spit on her pussy to keep it wet and rise to my knees, climbing over her, pressing a knee into the mattress between her thighs, and catch her wrists before she can reach for me.

"Not yet."

"Fionn."

My name in this woman's mouth is like throwing gasoline on a fire. I lower my lips to her throat and graze the wild pulse beating there.

She arches beneath me, pushing her breasts into my chest.

I press her wrists into the mattress beside her head and drag kisses over the bruises I'd left earlier. Her skin is hot everywhere. Responsive too.

"Do you know what you do to me?" I ask against her skin.

Her fingers curl under mine.

I lift my head and hold eye contact. "Do you?"

"No," she whispers.

"You make me want you."

The admission comes out rough and honest.

For a heartbeat, she stares at me. "You make me want ya, too."

I kiss her again before either of us admits more than we should. And fuck, she takes it.

Her thighs open wider, and I settle between them, my cock heavy against the wet heat of her pussy.

"You're trouble," I say.

Her mouth curves into that taunting, sexy fucking smile of hers. "Aww, you noticed."

"Yeah, I noticed."

I grip her thigh, hitch it higher, and push the head of my dick in first, watching her face when her body starts to give.

My jaw clenches as I nudge in an inch at a time, making her suffer the way she does to me every fucking time I see her. She's tight and swollen and dripping with spit and her own arousal, and her body has to work to take me.

"Fuck," I breathe.

"More." Her nails find my back. "Fionn. More."

"Ask me properly."

The glare she throws at me is full of hunger and need. "Please."

"Come on, little wild thing, say it like you fucking mean it."

"Christ, Fionn… Fuck me… Please."

Her nails bite into my shoulders exactly how I like it, and I drive the rest of the way in with one hard thrust.

She cries out, and I muffle the moans with my mouth, kissing her while her body adjusts around the fullness of my dick.

My muscles brace while she breathes, and the second she rolls her hips, I pull out slowly and drive in hard.

She gasps.

"Again." Her voice is already wrecked.

“Beg me.”

She grunts from the back of her throat, half laugh and half desperation. “Please. Harder. Please. You know how I like it, Fionn—”

“Yeah, I know exactly how my dirty little wild thing likes to be fucked.”

I build a rhythm, dragging out slow and driving in deep, angled so each thrust has her gasping. Her hips rise to meet me. Her thighs spread wider. She lifts her shoulders a fraction and watches my dick disappear into her pussy, those sharp eyes of hers taking everything in.

“Harder,” she pants.

“Harder what?”

“Harder, please, you absolute fucking—”

I slap her breast and push in harder before she has time to finish, and the moan she lets loose goes straight to the base of my dick.

I pull out and flip her over onto all fours.

With one hand at her hip, one between her shoulder blades, she’s face-down before she processes what I’ve done.

I push back inside her from behind in one hard stroke.

The cry she makes from this angle is the best thing I’ve fucking heard. Different depth. Different view. Fuck, I spank her ass and nearly come when I see the pretty red mark I’ve left on her skin. She pushes into me, chasing more.

I set a hard pace, and she matches every thrust.

Her breathing is broken gasps, each one timed to when I bottom out. I reach under her, find her swollen clit with two fingers, and her whole body seizes around me.

“Fionn—”

“Let go.”

I work her with my fingers rubbing, cock driving in steady, and I feel her come apart for the second time. Heat shoots up my spine and through my chest as she pants and moans for me.

“That’s it,” I say, fisting her hair at the nape. “Give it to me.”

I ride her through the orgasm and don’t let up until she’s shuddering and oversensitive, and her arms give way beneath her. I fist my dick at the base and slide it out, before swatting her ass and flipping her back over.

Her lashes flutter as she gazes up at me, totally fucking wrecked, chest heaving, eyes fever-bright.

There’s no chase now. No mouthing off. No running. Only Sera under me, open and hot, and the unbearable knowledge that fucking her twice before didn’t strip the hunger out of me.

It’s made it worse.

When I slide a hand between us and find her clit again, her body jolts.

“You’re going to come for me a third time,” I say. “Aren’t you, little wild thing?”

Her eyes burn into mine. “Y-yes.”

“Then don’t swallow it.” My voice roughens as I fight the pressure building low in my spine. “Let me hear what I do to you.”

Her mouth opens, and the first broken whimper she gives me nearly finishes me.

I keep my fingers exactly where they need to be while I fuck her through the denial, through the trembling, through the next wave that charges through her.

She comes hard, and it’s fucking beautiful.

Her body locks around mine, tight and wet and violent with it, and the squeeze of her coming all over again takes the last of my restraint with it.

I bury my face in the crook of her neck and thrust harder, chasing the high she gives me.

“Fuck,” I grind out. “Sera—”

Her hands slide up my spine and into my hair, holding me there as my body starts to lose the fight.

“Come on me,” she whispers. “Mark me with it.”

That finishes me.

I pull out with a curse, fist my cock, and come over her pelvis and stomach in hot spurts. She lies there with her thighs spread wide, chest rising, skin flushed, my cum painting her belly and every other mark I’d left on her.

The sight pulls at something possessive in me.

I drag the head of my cock through the mess I’ve made, spreading it over her skin while her eyes stay locked on mine.

“Look at what I’ve done to you,” I say, breath rough. “When you should be the thing I stop touching.”

Joining forces with the Kinnanes is the right move. The strategic play. The marriage that gives my father what he wants and locks another piece of

power into place. Pulling out of it would be reckless. Stupid. A big fucking mistake.

I know that.

I know it as clearly as I know the land around Black Heath and the value of every road leading in and out of the south.

Eilish is power.

Sera is temptation.

And that’s the thing I can’t seem to stop thinking about.

Temptation is supposed to be temporary. A body to use. A mindless choice made in the dark when a man has control to step away after.

Whereas power lasts.

It can be measured. Negotiated. Put in contracts, trusts, names, land, wedding rings. Power builds if a man knows where to find it.

Wanting a woman until she changes the importance of every other decision is not how I work.

Sera lies on my bed, marked and breathless, her gaze trailing over my chest, and I know I should pull away. Get off her. Put distance between us before I make the mistake of letting this moment take over.

Instead, I grab the towel and start cleaning my cum off her skin.

She watches me the whole time, quiet in a way that feels more dangerous than when she’s arguing.

Once I’m done, my hand settles on her thigh, thumb pressing into the soft skin bruised from my grip. I lower my mouth there, not quite a kiss and not quite a bite, just enough pressure to make her moan softly.

Her fingers skate over my shoulders, light enough to be accidental and intimate enough to be anything but.

I roll onto my side, reach for the blanket folded at the bottom of the bed, and drag it over us.

Sera sighs when my arm slides around her waist. Contentment settles in my bones.

I wait for her to argue about it, but she lies next to me, warm and tired, and her breathing slows.

Mine follows.

That’s when I know I’ve made the wrong decision.

Not by fucking her.

By wanting her to stay after.

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Chapter 26

Sera

I wake up alone in his bed.

My body aches in places that remember him before my head fully catches up with my betrayal.

Christ, he fucked me in his fancy drawing room before feeding his fox. I smile at the memory until the papers on his desk remind me of who he really is.

A drawer slides shut beyond the open door to his walk-in closet. Then comes the faint whisper of a sliding hanger and the rustle of fabric.

After a beat, Fionn appears. And for one deeply irritating moment, my thoughts go blank.

This man looks lethal in a suit.

He's not just wearing it either: he's built into the damn thing. Dark fabric stitched neatly to his shoulders, black shirt open at the throat, gold cufflinks fastened, damp hair pushed back from his face.

The scratches I left on him are hidden now. The bite marks, the sweat, the man who slept behind me with his arm locked around my waist, all folded away under Dublin's finest tailoring.

His eyes find mine. "Morning."

I sit up, pulling the sheet with me. "You look like you're about to ruin someone's life before breakfast."

"I have meetings."

I look away first because his musky cologne had wafted all the way over to me, and I could quite literally get on my knees for him right now.

"Okay." I tug the sheet higher against my chest. "Can you take me back into town on your way?"

“I’ll drop you at Eilish’s.”

“Drop me in Black Heath.”

“Heading into town with you in my car at this time of the morning creates questions neither of us wants to face.”

He reaches for his watch on the dresser and fastens it around his wrist. My pulse ticks at the sight of it.

“Eilish’s gives you a cleaner exit.”

I hate that he is right.

Mostly, I hate that he looks this good while being right.

“Okay, fine.”

His gaze moves over me in the bed. “I’ll meet you downstairs.”

“You’re lucky ya didn’t snore, or I would’ve suffocated ya.”

“You’re lucky I like you this much.” He heads for the door. “Or you’d be dead by now.”

I hurl a pillow after him, but he slips into the hall and pulls the door shut. It thumps against the wood and drops to the floor.

I scramble out of bed, drag on my clothes, and hurry into the bathroom to rinse my mouth and inspect myself in the mirror.

“Holy mother of—*fuck*,” I groan.

My eyes pop wide at the messy tangles of hair at the back of my head, and after teasing my fingers through it, I look less wild.

That thought makes my stomach flip.

That’s the way he likes me. Marked, wet, and wild.

Back in the bedroom, I pull my boots on, smooth my top, fail to do anything useful with my face, and leave his room without looking back at the bed we shared.

The house is quiet. First light streams through tall windows and lands across the main staircase in pale strips.

Fionn is waiting in the main hall with his suit jacket on. Phone in one hand. Keys in the other.

Every inch of him has returned to order, except for the faint red mark at the side of his throat where my teeth sank in.

“Coffee?” he asks.

“No, thanks.”

“Food?”

“I’ll get something at Eilish’s.”

“You had chicken and whiskey for dinner.”

“That’s a balanced snack where I come from.”

His eyes move over me and a slight smile plays on his lips. “A bottle of chilled water, then.”

“Fionn.”

“Sera.”

“I’m fine.”

“Understood.”

He pockets his phone and holds out his hand.

My brows pinch tight, and I stare at it, then I look up at him.

“What?”

“Unless you want to wander through the wrong door and end up in a chapel, take my hand.”

“There’s a chapel here?”

“Does that honestly surprise you?”

I place my hand in his. “Of course it does. People like your father burn in holy places.”

His fingers close around mine. “What about you? After last night, you’ve got a lot to confess.”

He leads me through the entrance hall, opens the front door, and cold morning air rolls over us.

“I used to confide in Fury,” I tell him. “So these days my secrets will have to die with me.”

Hand in hand, we head toward his Land Rover, and he opens the passenger door.

“Tell me your biggest, and I’ll tell you mine,” Fionn angles me into him.

I laugh, gazing up at him. “Right. Like I’m telling you first.”

His gaze drops to my mouth, then returns to my eyes. “I woke up wanting Sera Tallon again.”

My stomach tightens. “That's your biggest secret?”

“No.” His thumb drags over my lower lip. “I’ve trusted you with many secrets already.”

The truth spins through my chest, hot and reckless.

All of it.

How he scares me. How he thrills me. How last night was something I’ll struggle to forget.

“My biggest secret,” I say, quieter now, “is that sometimes I think standing beside you would be better than standing against you.”

The wind blows my hair across my face, but neither of us moves.

Fionn’s expression hardens, and his knuckles nudge my chin up. “Then remember something.”

“What?”

“If my father ever reaches for you, he goes through me first.”

My throat tightens.

He backs up before I can answer, walks around the bonnet, and climbs into the driver’s seat.

Once I climb in, he watches me fasten my seatbelt, switches on the heated seats, and pulls away from the Harrington estate.

Rather than talk, I stare out at the blurring green fields covered in morning mist.

“What poor lad are you ruining this morning?” I ask eventually.

Fionn keeps his eyes on the road. “That depends.”

“On what?”

“Whether they’re sensible enough to do what I ask of them.”

“Did you go after Cormac?”

“Yes.”

“Why?” I ask. “He’s one of ours. That garage has nothing to do with the Harringtons.”

He glances over at me. “You really don’t know why I put him in the hospital?”

I shake my head.

“Because he made you bleed.”

My fingers tighten in my lap. “So, I owe ya now?”

“That one was on me.”

“Oh my,” I feign a gasp. “Is that the Harrington charm?”

“That was nothing.” He smiles. “I’m much worse when I’m trying.”

The fact he’s wearing a suit should make this easier to remember he’s the Harrington heir. My family’s enemy. Eilish’s future husband.

Despite all that, it gives him another sense of danger.

Last night, he seemed like a man I could fall for.

This morning, he’s a man who could destroy me.

“Will Graves tell your da about us?”

“I’ve known him since I was a boy,” he says. “He’d sooner try to kick my ass in the ring than run to my father.”

“I’m sure you can take a beating.”

“He was one hell of a fighter in his day,” he says. “Still is. But I’m better.”

“You’re only better than him because he’s older now.”

His gaze flicks to me for half a second. “You’ve never seen me fight.”

“I’d like to watch.”

“Would you like to see me win or lose, Sera?”

Heat climbs my cheeks because my mind puts him in the ring bare-chested, inked, hands wrapped, sweat on his skin, and absolutely winning.

His mouth curves into a smile. “That’s what I thought.”

I turn back to the window before he gets the satisfaction of watching me blush any harder.

The Kinnane house comes into view a few minutes later, pale stone beyond black railings, with the drive sweeping toward the front steps. Fionn slows the car at the main entrance.

His left hand rests on the wheel, cuff pulled back a fraction so his gold watch peeks out.

My gaze lingers on it before I look at him.

He notices.

His fingers tighten around the leather, and his tongue drags over his lower lip before he looks through the windscreen again.

I reach for the door handle. “Thanks for the lift.”

“Sera.”

I glance over my shoulder at him. “What?”

“Go straight in.”

“Really? And there I was planning to do a wee lap of the driveway first.”

The corners of his mouth twitch. “You’re terrible at taking instructions.”

I push the door wide. “Enjoy ruining someone’s morning, Fionn.”

“I will.”

I climb out and hurry to the door, refusing to look back at him.

The Kinnane doorman nods. “Miss Tallon.”

“Morning.”

He steps aside, and I walk in without waiting to be announced. I’ve been doing that since I was eighteen, and the staff are used to me coming

and going.

I take the stairs and check my phone, seeing a message from Rafe telling me I'm needed in the yard today and that later we're collecting gambling debts.

I take the stairs to Eilish's room. And after what happened with her and Lorcan, I make sure to knock this time.

"Eilish?" I say, peering around the door.

She's sitting amidst scatter cushions on the big bed with her knees tucked to her chest, hair loose around her face, eyes red and watery.

There are crumpled tissues on the duvet beside her, and a half-drunk cup of tea sits cold on the bedside table.

"You went somewhere with Fionn last night," she says, sniffing. "Didn't you?"

I close the door behind me.

"Please tell me that's not why you're crying, Eilish… I didn't do it to hurt ya."

Eilish presses her lips together, and tears track down her cheeks. "I'm so sorry, Sera."

I stop halfway to the bed. "Why are you apologizing to me?"

"Because you should have him. Not me." Her voice breaks on the last word. "I don't want to marry Fionn. I don't want to live in that house. I don't want to be in a world where men decide where I go, who I marry, what I'm worth, and how much damage I'm allowed to make before they call me ungrateful."

The bed dips under my knees as I climb next to her, wrapping her in a hug.

Eilish folds into me so quickly it hurts. Her hands clutch the back of my top.

"I tried to talk to my father," she says against my shoulder.

"What did he say?"

Her laugh is wet and weepy. "What do you think?"

My arms tighten around her.

"I told him I didn't want the wedding. That I can't do it. He said if I humiliated him by causing a scene, he'd cut me off."

"Eilish."

"He'd take everything away from me," she says, pulling back to wipe her face with the heel of her hand. "My inheritance. My trust fund and

every bank account he set up for me. He said I'd have nothing. No protection. No family name to fall back on and no place in the Kinnane family."

Anger rises so fast I almost choke on it. "That bastard."

"He doesn't see me as a daughter." Her voice cracks. "I'm just something to use for business. It's always been that way, but deep down I believed he would listen. That he'd put my happiness first."

I sit back on my heels, stroking her hand.

The worst part is that I can't tell her she's wrong. Art Kinnane threw her money instead of love, and her mother trained her to be the perfect socialite wife.

"Would it really be so bad?" I ask quietly.

Her eyes lift to mine, and I swallow, my stomach churning.

"I mean marrying Fionn."

Eilish stares at me as if I've just spoken in another language, her face contorting. "How can I marry Fionn when he's in love with you?"

"Oh please, Eilish. Don't talk shit." My laugh comes out too high-pitched. "This is Fionn Harrington we're talking about. Men like him don't fall in love with women like me."

"Sera."

"He's not."

"Sera."

"No." I shake my head. "Fionn and I had a moment. A stupid one. Several stupid ones. That doesn't mean—"

"It means something to him."

"You don't know that."

"I do now."

She wipes her cheek, then looks down at her hands.

"I didn't see it at first. I thought he watched you because you were a Tallon. Because you annoyed him. Because you were the one person in every room who would stab him in the neck with a broken champagne flute."

"That is a valid reason to watch someone."

"It wasn't just that, though." Eilish exhales and reaches for her phone on the duvet. "Here."

She unlocks it, taps through her messages, then holds the screen out to me.

The first thread is from the wedding dress fitting.

Eilish: I’m at the dress appointment. They’re all horrible. Can you help?

Fionn: I’m about to head up a meeting. Send me the owner’s number. I’ll call her later.

Eilish: Don’t worry about it. I can handle it.

Fionn: Okay.

I look up. “Charming.”

“Keep reading,” Eilish says.

My eyes drop back to the screen, to the next text message sent 30 seconds later.

Fionn: Is Sera there?

My stomach drops.

Eilish: Yes.

Fionn: I’ll be there in ten.

I stare at the message, and I am back in the dress shop with my heart racing because he walked in.

Eilish takes the phone back and swipes to another part of the thread.

“And last night,” she says. “Before we met him in the bar.”

She passes it to me again.

Eilish: Are you free tonight? Come for a drink?

Fionn: Training.

Eilish: I need your help with something.

Fionn: We’ll talk tomorrow.

Eilish: Sera’s trying to walk away from being my bridesmaid.

Eilish: I don’t want to lose my best friend because she hates you.

Fionn: Will she be there too?

My fingers tighten around the phone.

Eilish: I’m meeting her at the bar in Black Heath in half an hour.

Fionn: I’ll be there.

I stare at the words until they stop looking like words.

Eilish gives me a broken little smile.

“He came for you, Sera.”

My throat goes dry, and I rub my face as Eilish watches me.

“I only put it together last night,” she says. “After you told me you two had sex. All those times his attention stayed on you. I thought it was rivalry. Just him keeping track of a threat.”

“He probably was.”

“No.” Her voice softens. “He was keeping track of *you*.”

I stand because sitting still has become impossible.

“Fionn already told me the marriage is still happening,” I tell her. “He said it has to.”

“I know.”

“He said there is no us. No me and him.”

I press my fingers to my temples and rub. “I didn’t mean for this to happen. I swear to fuck, Eilish. Fionn’s…Fionn. And my brothers would kill him before they even let me think about being with him.”

“I know.”

“Truth is, I don’t know what I’m doing.” The words rush out as I pace the rug by her bed. “We just have this crazy, messed up, hot chemistry. And last night I went back to his house. Of all the places to end up. Christ, if Ma knew, she’d scalp me. I saw a side to him I really like… And the sex…”

I press a hand to my stomach and blow out a breath.

“But he’s still a Harrington. He’s still dangerous. And he’s still marrying you.”

I look at her, and she looks back, hugging her knees.

“None of that changes how you feel about him. But what I want to know is how you ended up screwing each other.”

My forehead creases, and I sit on the edge of the bed. “I trust him…”

“Say that again,” Eilish says, gobsmacked. “You trust the man who had you kidnapped.”

I shrug. “Yeah.”

“How are you going to deal with it?” she asks.

“With what?”

“With me being his wife, who’s expected to get pregnant by him.”

I drag in a breath and press a hand to my chest because that question is almost choking me. “I don’t know.”

Eilish’s face crumples again. “He’ll be my husband on paper, but having sex with him will be like betraying my best friend.”

I slump onto the bed and cover my face. “What a fucking mess.”

“I don’t want this life anymore, Sera,” she whispers. “I don’t want to be my father’s pawn.”

“Fionn will never be mine,” I say. “But if the wedding goes ahead, he won’t hurt ya. I know that much.”

“That’s not enough.”

“No,” I whisper. “It isn’t.”

“What about you?”

I swallow hard, the reality of it all crushing me from the inside. There’s no easy way around it.

“I’ll get over it,” I lie, my stomach knotting. “We fucked a few times. It’s not like we’re in love or anything.”

The next time I see Fionn, I’ll tell him it's over.

I’ll never respond to his watch coming off.

We’ll never be alone together.

And I’ll never let myself surrender to him again. That promise hurts most because I already know what happens inside me when he takes off his watch and tells me to run.

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Chapter 27

Fionn

Graves hits harder when he's annoyed. He proves it with a quick right hook.

I roll my neck and smile. "You're getting slower."

"I'm sixty-one," he says, gloves up, shoulders loose. "What's your excuse?"

When I come at him, he ducks out of reach, catches me once in the ribs, then again when I close the distance. The old bastard still moves fast.

"You hit the same way when you're pissed off."

"I hit the same way when you deserve it," he says.

I swing. He blocks. Leather cracks against leather.

"What did you do with the girl?"

I step in with a jab. "Which one?"

Graves catches it on his glove and gives me a look. "You know which one, Fionn. The Tallon girl."

I throw another punch. "Dropped her at Eilish's."

"That isn't what I asked."

"No."

"Where did you take her before that?"

I move around him, light on my feet. "Somewhere private."

Graves stops for half a breath. "Tell me you didn't bring her here."

I say nothing.

His jaw tightens.

"Fionn."

I bounce forward, forcing him to defend himself. "Watch your guard."

He blocks me twice, then drives a fist into my ribs. "Watch your own."

I laugh, breathless, and step back.

Graves lowers his gloves a fraction. “Are ya doing this because of Saint?”

My expression gives him nothing.

“Because he has Keira,” Graves continues. “Is this payback or something? You fuck around with the Tallon woman to even the board?”

I wipe blood from the corner of my mouth with the back of my glove. “Sera isn’t a piece on the board.”

Graves frowns. The rain pelting the barn roof grows louder in the silence as he considers me. Then he lowers his gloves all the way.

“Christ,” he mutters. “This has nothing to do with revenge.”

I hold his stare.

“You actually like the girl. Don’t ya?”

I admit nothing, because there are some truths a man shouldn’t hand over lightly. Even to someone he trusts.

Graves studies me for a moment, and his brows knit together.

He’s the man who taught me how to tape my hands, how to keep my chin down, how to take a hit without blinking. The man who spent hours in this barn with me when my father didn’t.

“You’re not going to marry Eilish, are ya?”

“No.”

Graves exhales through his nose. “Does your da know that yet?”

“He will when I’m ready.”

He looks toward the windows, then back at me. “Art Kinnane wants power more than he wants pride. He’ll rage, then renegotiate.”

“That’s not my problem,” I say. “He’ll just have to grow a set and deal with it.”

“It’s that easy, huh?”

“No.”

“Right, so you understand the size of the mess you’re making.” He shakes his head. “What’s your plan? Marry Sera Tallon and set your inheritance on fire?”

I pull at the fastening on one glove with my teeth. “I’m done being moved around by him. Being told what to do because he thinks it's the right way. I don’t need to marry anyone to position myself.”

Graves nods. “You’re a man now.”

My ribs tighten. “I’ve been a man for a while.”

“No.” His voice is rougher now. “You’ve been his heir, Fionn.”

Graves drags off one glove and tucks it under his arm.

“I’m employed by your da,” he says. “I’ve done things for him I’ll answer for when I die.”

“Graves.”

“But I’ve been by your side while you’ve grown up in this house.” His eyes hold mine. “Watched you learn. Watched you do things differently. You’re already more than what he made you.”

His mouth pulls into a gentle smile. “I’m proud of ya.”

The statement knocks me harder than his fist ever could.

I smile before I can stop myself.

Then the barn door swings open.

Cold air creeps across the mats, and my father walks inside wearing a dark overcoat, rain shining on the shoulders.

Two men stand outside the door, and my spine straightens.

“Gentlemen,” he says, offering one of his usual fake smiles. “I hope I haven’t disturbed anything important.”

“We’ve finished training,” Graves pulls off his gloves.

“Very good.”

My father unbuttons his coat and slides a hand into his trouser pocket, walking farther into the barn. His gaze sweeps from Graves to me.

“You’ve been busy, son.”

Another story, whenever you're ready.

Come to Lokepub to pick your next novel.

I take off my right glove first. “I usually am.”

“Yes.” He smiles. “That’s what I used to admire about you.”

Graves walks to the bench, drops his gloves, and reaches for a towel.

“I heard something interesting this morning,” my father says. “And I thought, surely not. Not Fionn. Not my son. He understands discipline and consequences.”

A shiver of understanding moves through me, and I head to the bench, taking off the other glove and dumping them both.

“Tell me it isn’t true,” he says over my shoulder.

I say nothing when I turn to face him.

His smile thins. “Tell me you didn’t brawl in the pub to defend Sera Tallon, then bring her into my home and fuck her under my roof.”

Graves drapes the towel around his neck, his fists curling at either end of it as he stands there. I glance over at him and notice the ever so slight shake of his head. A silent sign between us that tells me he didn't rat me out.

“What if I did?”

My father stares at me, the darkness in his expression spreading into a cold laugh. “You always had a weakness for testing the edge of a blade.”

“Because you were the one holding it.”

His eyes narrow when he sees Graves standing beside me instead of him.

“You’ll marry the Kinnane girl,” he says. “As agreed.”

I shake my head. “I’ve decided that won’t work for me anymore.”

Graves inhales.

My father’s gaze stays locked on mine, his brows drifting higher. “Really? I’d think carefully before you repeat that.”

“I’ve already weighed everything because that’s what you taught me. Right, Father?”

“So, you’ve thought about what would happen when a Tallon whore crawls into my son's bed and convinces him she’s worth more than your loyalty?”

I step into him before the thought finishes. Graves catches my wrist, and my father turns his attention to him.

“That’s the trouble with loyalty,” he says. “Men start to confuse where it belongs.”

My father takes his hand out of his pocket and checks the time on his watch.

“Thirty years, Graves. For thirty years I trusted you with the things closest to me. My business. My enemies.” His eyes flick to me. “My son.”

“Alasdair,” Graves says.

My father raises one hand to silence him. “I gave you one duty above all others. Train him to win. Keep him close and make sure he knows his place.”

My pulse slows.

“He didn’t know about Sera,” I say. “I sent the staff home for the night and told Graves I wanted to be alone.”

Graves looks at me, no fear in his face when my father’s arm moves in a blur, and a gunshot rings through the barn.

Graves’s head snaps back.

Blood spatters my face, hits the brick wall behind him, and covers his boxing gloves.

For half a stuttered heartbeat, he stays standing, then his knees weaken, and he drops.

Everything inside me drops with him.

The barn disappears.

The heavy downpour outside dulls.

The blood-spattered mats blur.

My father’s expression stays blank.

My fucking breath stalls.

Graves' body hitting the mats is an image I’ll replay until the day I die.

But I stand there with blood on my face, and his dead body at my feet, and I give my father nothing.

Not the break in my chest.

Not the scream behind my teeth.

Not the boy in me reaching for the only man who ever taught him how to survive this house.

Not. A. Fucking. Thing.

“You see?” he says. “Consequence.”

My father tucks his gun away.

“Now we will discuss Sera Tallon.”

The conversation should break something loose in me. But I lock it down so fast that I go numb.

That’s when I give him my eyes.

“Your sister embarrassed me by fucking Tallon scum. You will not,” he says. “I’m going to ruin that family once and for all, and you’re going to help me. Marry the Kinnane girl, or the next body to fall will be Sera’s.”

I stay quiet and let him think he’s still ordering the heir he made to toe the line.

He has no idea that son is dead on the mats with Graves.

“I mean it, Fionn,” he says over his shoulder as he walks to the door. “I’ll kill that bitch if you go near her again.”

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Chapter 28

Sera

By noon, I have three ledgers open, two shipping payments pretending to be feed costs, and twenty-three thousand euros in cash that needs cleaned.

The Tallons aren't short of money.

We simply need legitimate places to put it.

The kitchen table is covered in accounts, receipts, a laptop that keeps freezing, and invoices from the stud that would pass through the tax man.

I tap the end of the pen against the calculator and glare at the figures, trying my best to concentrate.

For every row of numbers I've digested, I've replayed my night with Fionn and the impossible situation I've fallen into.

The back door opens and boots scuff as Rafe comes in first, shrugging off his jacket.

"Morning, gobshite."

Dane follows with a packet of cookies already half-open in his hand.

"I'm busy, lads," I say without looking up.

Dane crunches as he chews. "I haven't even said anything."

"You're eating too loud."

"Hostile work environment," he mutters, pulling out a chair.

Rafe leans against the counter and folds his arms. "I heard there was trouble at the bar the other night."

My pen stills.

"Some scum started a fight," I say, writing a number in the margin. "Very tragic. Men embarrassed themselves. Glass broke. Everyone survived."

Dane offers me a cookie. "Heard Fionn Harrington was there."

I ignore the packet he’s waving at me and jerk my gaze to a receipt. “He’s marrying Eilish, isn’t he? She was there. So was I. He showed up later.”

Rafe lights up a cigarette, and Dane chews, both of them watching me.

“You three seem to be together a lot lately,” Rafe says.

I sit back and sigh. “What d’ya want me to do? The man is everywhere she is. I tolerate him because I love her.”

“That's what we’re calling it these days?” Dane asks.

My eyes cut to his. “Calling what?”

He lifts both hands, a half-eaten cookie between his fingers. “Tolerating a Harrington.”

“I do my best to ignore him,” I say. “Doesn’t help when my brother is in love with his sister.”

Rafe pushes away from the counter. “Are ya friends with him now?”

The laugh that comes out of me is almost convincing. “With Fionn Harrington?”

“Aye,” Dane wipes crumbs from the corner of his mouth. “The man who kidnapped you and left bruises.”

“He didn’t hurt me,” I say in a rush, realizing my mistake when they both give me a look. “I mean… His men tried to, not him.”

Dane lowers the cookie. “He arranged it, Sera. You know that.”

I look back at the accounts. “I know. I was there.”

“And you said you’d sort it.” He jabs his cookie at me accusingly. “Seems more like you’ve forgotten.”

“The men who hurt me are dead,” I remind him. “Fionn knows I’m not someone he can mess with.”

Dane scratches his jaw as he considers me, his eyes narrowing. “Does he know I’ll fucking kill him if he pulls a stunt like that again?”

“I’d remind him, but I’m actively avoiding the asshole.” I shove one of the account books open. “I’m trying to do the books, lads. Unless either of you wants to take over?”

Rafe exhales smoke while Dane devours another cookie.

With the amount of food Dane puts away, he should be the size of a pregnant mare. Instead, both my brothers are lean, hard-built, and tragically aware of it.

“C’mon, lads. Please. Fuck off and let me get this done.”

“Fine.” Dane stands. “Keep your eyes and ears open when he’s around.”

“I know.”

“I mean it, Sera. When he marries Eilish, the Harringtons will have more power in Cork, and more ways to press on the docks.”

My fingers still on the keyboard.

Dane’s voice drops. “Don’t forget what he is just because he knows how to stand close without looking like a threat.”

They both head back outside, and the door shuts behind them.

I take a deep breath and stare at the laptop screen until it blurs.

After a few minutes, my phone rings on the table. Glancing at it, Eilish’s face brightens the screen.

“If this is about wedding ribbons,” I answer. “I’m faking my death.”

“Who the hell wants ribbons?” she says.

“That sounds like a defensive ribbon-lover talking.”

I reach for my neck and play with the pendants on my necklace, an unintentional habit I’ve formed lately.

“Mother is hosting a black-tie charity event in Cork in a couple of days. She wants me there, obviously, and I need you with me. The Tallons never miss an opportunity to be seen, right?”

I drag the letter F back and forth along the chain. “I take it the Harringtons will be there.”

Eilish makes an audible sigh. “Yes.”

My stomach drops and all I can think about is Fionn standing beside Eilish.

“Maybe it’ll be good for you,” Eilish adds.

“What makes ya think that?”

“I mean… Maybe this is your chance to tell him how you feel. And maybe he’ll call off the wedding.”

My fingers go cold around the phone and my breath stalls.

“Sera?”

“I’ve already told ya,” I say quietly. “He said the wedding will go ahead. Fionn and I aren’t a thing.”

“Well, now that he’s had time to think about it,” she persists. “He might decide you're the woman he wants. You slept in his bed, Sera.”

“Since when does sleeping in a guy's bed make a girl important?”

“Oh, I don’t know—” she says, full of sarcasm. “Maybe since that’s not a typical Fionn move.”

“And how would you know what’s typical for Fionn?”

“Because I asked.”

I blink. “Who the hell did ya ask?”

“Keira.”

My stomach gives a small, unpleasant turn.

“She was here for a bridesmaid fitting,” Eilish says. “I asked a few questions.”

“About Fionn’s sex life?”

“Subtly.”

“Oh, I’m sure. You’re as subtle as a brick to the head.”

“I didn’t ask for positions, Sera.” Her voice turns dry. “I asked if he’d ever brought anyone home before.”

My muscles brace. “And?”

“And *no*,” she says. “Never. Keira said there were girls at boarding school. Plenty of them, apparently. He had a reputation.”

“I’m sure he did.”

“But no one there was important enough to bring home. He never brought a girlfriend back to the Harrington estate.”

I look away. “Probably because he knew Alasdair expected him to marry a beautiful woman like you.”

“Sera.”

“What?”

“He brought you home to his bed.”

“His house was empty.” I clear my throat as the memory floods me. “It doesn’t mean what ya think it means.”

“No,” she says softly. “I think it means exactly what you’re pretending it doesn’t mean.”

“Fine,” I say, my voice steady. “I’ll be there.”

The ballroom is already full by the time Eilish and I arrive.

Round tables dressed in ivory linen fill the room, champagne moves on silver trays, and the noise is fake laughter over boring conversations.

We stand near one of the picture windows, holding freshly topped-up champagne flutes.

She looks beautiful in a red dress, dark hair pinned up and makeup done by a professional because Mara Kinnane would rather cancel the entire function than let her daughter look tired in public.

My dress is dark green, fitted through the waist, modest from the front and bare down the back, with a slit that makes Eilish's mother glance at my thigh every time she passes.

That alone makes it worth wearing.

"You know," Eilish says quietly, "you need to speak to Saint."

My brows pop high. "About what?"

"Fionn."

"Are ya for real?" I make a face at her. "Me bringing up his name is the quickest way to start a fight."

She angles her body a little more toward the window, keeping our conversation hushed. "Saint's in love with Keira Harrington."

"I know."

"And Keira is in love with him."

"I know that, too."

"Then he can't stand there with a straight face and act as if Harrington blood is unforgivable when he has a Harrington in his bed."

I sip my champagne, knowing that's the truth. "You're making this sound much simpler than it is."

"I'm really not." Her voice stays low. "I'm saying he doesn't get to freak out about Fionn for being exactly what Keira is."

"That's different."

"Why?"

"Because Keira didn't tie me up in a barn, and she's not an heir to a mafia empire."

"No," Eilish says. "But Saint kidnapped her, didn't he?"

"I can neither confirm nor deny that allegation, Eilish Kinnane," I say, acting all prim and proper. "Anyway, that's not the same."

"Why?" She studies me. "Because it was Ciarán Tallon the Saint?"

"Because Keira wasn't an actual threat to my family." I cock my head at her. "And Fionn's marrying you for power."

Eilish sighs. "If Saint gets to love Keira, then you get to feel whatever you feel for Fionn without acting as if it makes you a traitor."

My throat tightens. "I don't feel anything for him."

"You're such a bad liar, Sera."

“I mean it,” I protest. “Sex is sex.”

Her expression softens, but she doesn’t back off. “I know you. If he meant nothing, you’d be cracking jokes about how bad he was in bed and telling me all the things he did that gave you the ick. Instead, every time his name comes up, you look lost.”

I glance over my shoulder across the ballroom, past the tables, the sea of people, and the auction display on the stage.

“He’ll be here soon.” A small smile plays on her mouth, but it fades before it reaches her eyes. “Talk to Saint. That’s all I’m saying. If he gets to build a life with a Harrington, then he can’t be a hypocrite when it comes to what you want.”

Before I can answer, a man near the bar steps aside, and the group of women near the exit all stop talking.

My pulse skips, and an awareness prickles over my scalp a second before Fionn Vaughn Harrington walks in through the double doors, wearing a dark suit and black tie, with a cut beneath his eye and a face that makes every sensible thought I have disappear.

Christ, I’m into him.

Not because he knows how to chase, kiss, touch, or turn every argument into a thrill, but because there’s more to him under that suit.

And somewhere between hating him and craving him, I started looking for proof that he wanted me too.

Eilish is right. Saint must’ve reached this point with Keira, where her family name stopped being an issue and the person standing in front of him mattered more than the war waiting behind her.

If I’m honest with Fionn, if I stop pretending this is only sex, and he stops pretending we’re enemies, then maybe all this generational bullshit doesn’t have to end with more hatred.

Maybe it could end with us.

Two men follow at a distance, far enough away to make him look alone.

My mouth dries, and the pulse in my throat thrums with every step he takes.

A woman moves into his path. He smiles at her, mutters something so she has to lean in to hear it, and the flirty smile she offers him twists under my ribs.

After a few racing heartbeats, his eyes find mine, and in that moment, every part of me remembers him at once. His teeth on my throat, his voice

in the dark, the way he looked at me when he marked my skin.

Despite all that, his face gives nothing away.

He looks straight past me, and the blankness hollows me out.

The glass trembles in my hand.

“Are you okay?” Eilish whispers.

“Absolutely fine.”

Fionn accepts a drink from a waiter and joins the men near the auction table. He smiles again, easy and empty, while something in my chest folds in on itself.

“That’s not a man who’ll choose me.” I drain my glass and set it aside at the same time as Alasdair Harrington enters the room.

Fuck, he’s a smug bastard.

I stay near the edge of the ballroom after that.

It is easier to watch without being judged. Easier to keep my glass full and let Eilish drift toward her mother when Mara clicks her damn fingers.

I’d break her hand if she did that to me.

Alasdair strolls through the crowd, greeting people, shaking hands, and kissing women on their cheeks. He accepts praise and gives nothing away except the exact amount of warmth required to make everyone think he’s their friend.

While Alasdair makes power look inherited, Fionn makes it look deserved.

He moves from one group to the next with a faint smile, listening to every dull bastard in Cork.

When an older woman speaks, he laughs and leans in. Touches a shoulder here, offers a hand there, gives each person just enough of himself to make them believe he’s interested in them.

When Fionn nears the stage, he pulls his phone out of his jacket pocket, sets his glass on a passing tray, and excuses himself.

He leaves the circle and slips through a side door.

My pulse kicks hard.

Stupid, stupid thing.

I wait three seconds.

Then five.

Then I hunt him like he’s always hunted me.

I skirt the edges of the room, teetering past the flower arrangement in my heels, past a waiter with his back to me, and dodging three women

gossiping about someone else’s marriage.

The side door opens into a quiet corridor with cream walls and the muffled noise of the ballroom behind me.

Fionn stands halfway along with his back to the wall, phone to his ear, one hand in his pocket.

“I can be there tomorrow afternoon,” he mutters. “And it’s the one I want?”

I walk up behind him and stop, my heart hammering in my chest.

“Fine, text me the time.”

He ends the call and pockets his phone before turning and meeting me face to face. His pupils flare, though his expression stays neutral.

There's no taunting smile, or hint of heat. Just a stillness that gives me goosebumps.

I glance over my shoulder to make sure the corridor is empty, then step into him.

“You’re doing a good job of avoiding me,” I say.

“Not good enough, apparently.”

My stomach drops a little, and I tell myself this is the game we always play, so I lift my hand to his chest.

He catches my wrist before my fingers reach his lapels and pushes my hand away.

“Don’t touch me.”

My brows snap together, and I straighten slowly because there’s no tease in his voice that gives me an opening to fire something smart back at him.

“You can’t have it both ways, ya know,” I say.

“I only need my way, so if you’ll excuse me.”

When he goes to walk away, confusion splits under my ribs, small at first, then wider when I reach for his hand, and he brushes me off.

“You can drop the act,” I say, but my voice isn’t as steady as I’d like it to be because this isn’t the same as before. “No one’s here.”

He runs his tongue under his top lip and takes a noticeable step away from me. “Who the fuck do you think you are?”

His eyes narrow with anger, and my breath stutters.

“Following me out here,” he says. “Putting your hands on me. Acting as if one night in my bed gives you some sort of claim.”

The air leaves my lungs in a rush, and every muscle in my body braces against the hit I didn't see coming.

"I didn't think that—"

"No, you didn't fucking think." His voice stays low, but there is enough venom in it to make my skin go cold. "My fiancée is in that ballroom."

Heat crawls up my neck.

"I told you I was marrying her," he says. "So back off."

For a second, all I can do is stare at him because this isn't the same man who drove me home, fed me in his kitchen, and slept with his arm around my waist. This is someone else wearing his face.

"What part of that don't you understand?" he continues, his tone almost mocking. "I'm marrying Eilish. She'll be my wife, she'll sleep in my bed, and she'll have every right to stand beside me in public. You will not."

My throat closes around all the things I should say, and somewhere deep inside, something soft and stupid starts dying.

"I know," I whisper, because pride is the only thing I have left, even if it's shrinking in my chest.

His expression darkens, and everything inside me recoils before he speaks again.

"You were a distraction," he says, taking another step away. "An entertaining one, but still a distraction. Don't embarrass yourself by mistaking my boredom for anything else."

The words go through me slowly, as if my body refuses to understand them all at once.

I swallow hard and stare up at him while the corridor tilts beneath my feet.

"Necklace," I whisper.

Fionn stops talking as if the word has winded him. His jaw locks, his throat moves, and for a breath, the cruelty slips a fraction as he stares at me.

In silence, he breaks eye contact, smooths the front of his jacket, and adjusts his cufflinks one at a time.

Then he steps around me without saying another word.

I stand there with my heart racing and my head swimming as he walks back toward the ballroom.

The door opens, spilling voices, clinking glasses, laughter, and music into the corridor. When it closes behind him, I'm left with nothing but bland walls, shaking hands, and a crack in my chest.

I don’t move as the sting settles under my skin, the humiliation blooming through my body.

My fingers curl into my palms, nails biting deep, grounding me in the ache.

For a moment, I just breathe through the hollowness he’s left in his wake.

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Chapter 29

Sera

Eilish finds me before I make it three steps into the room and pushes a glass of champagne into my hand.

“Well? I saw you follow him,” she whispers.

I keep my eyes on the ballroom, and my spine poker straight.

“And you saw me come back alone.”

She angles herself into me, obviously sensing something is wrong because she knows me better than anyone. “What happened?”

“Your plan won’t work.”

“Did you tell him how you feel?”

“Thankfully not.” I look at her then, because there’s an ache in my stomach, and I might just vomit. “He was using me, Eilish.”

Her cheeks go pink, and her forehead scrunches.

“I don’t get it…”

“There’s nothing to get,” I say, palming my belly. “He fucked me. I fucked him. It’ll never happen again.”

“Bastard,” she whispers. “Are you okay?”

The softness in her voice almost wrecks me, because Eilish is the one person who knows that I let my guard down with the wrong man.

“I’m fine,” I lie.

“No, you’re doing that thing where you pretend you are.”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” I say. “Not here, anyway. I won’t give him the satisfaction of thinking I give a shit.”

Her mouth presses together, and she turns, blocking me from the room with her shoulder, and the small act of kindness almost ruins me. But I don’t need anyone standing in front of me.

Across the ballroom, Fionn holds court while in a circle of donors. He's leaning into a gray-haired man who's speaking with both hands.

Fionn nods at something the man says, though I get the feeling he's not in the slightest bit interested when he checks his watch.

The instant the gold links catch my eye, my ribs tighten, and my breath stalls.

Eilish is called from somewhere near the auction tables, and he looks up to find her.

My body betrays me before my pride can stamp it down. When he glances our way, my spine tingles, my lungs stop working, and every inch of me becomes aware of his gaze.

However, his eyes pass over mine, and he finds Eilish before he crosses the room and juts out his elbow for her to hold on to.

"Eilish," he says. "Your mother wants you."

Eilish slides her hand into the crook of his arm and leans into the side of his face. "I know what you did to Sera, and you'll never get that close to her again."

Fionn takes a slow inhale. "Call me a liar again, and it'll be your last mistake."

I step closer, chin raised, and shoulders pulled back. "Threaten her again, Harrington, and it'll be *your* last mistake."

Even though he looks right at me, his expression stays blank. "Enjoy your evening alone, Miss Tallon. Eilish will be sitting with the Harringtons."

My stomach turns when he ushers Eilish away. I bring the champagne flute to my lips and drain the whole thing.

The bubbles burn down my throat, but they don't drown the violence in my chest.

I watch Fionn guide Eilish through the crowd, his hand resting over hers where it lies in the crook of his arm.

The fucking bride and groom-to-be.

Harrington and Kinnane.

An arrangement tied up in lies while I stand alone with an empty glass, and his taste still somewhere in the back of my mouth.

A waiter passes, and I set the flute onto his tray before I smash it against the wall.

Mara finds me before I can work out where to stand without looking abandoned.

“Sera,” she says. “Come and save me from the auction tables before Art bids on another horse portrait in the name of philanthropy.”

I glance over at Eilish, who looks back at me and offers a small smile, her own situation impossible, too.

“Lead the way,” I say.

Mara links her arm through mine and steers us to the far side of the ballroom, where the auction lots sit beneath lamps.

There’s a racecourse weekend package at The Curragh. An old oil painting of the harbor. A private whiskey tasting. Grotesque ruby earrings in a velvet box.

And a photograph showing a private dining room lit by modern light fittings with a stunning harbor view.

The Harrington’s Michelin star restaurant.

Everyone in Ireland knows Ríoga. It’s got private rooms, waiting lists, staff trained to serve every whim. A restaurant that doesn’t need to show prices on the menu because those who dine there have money to burn.

Dinner for ten in the private dining room at Ríoga, the Harringtons’ Michelin-star restaurant.

I pick up the card before I can talk myself out of it. The paper is thick with the same embossed crest and gold lettering that came with my necklace.

On the reverse, there’s a short description of the chef, the underground wine cellar, and the dining experience.

I’d rather eat beef stew on a bench at the docks than dirty the boring white tablecloths of that place. I put the card down.

“Not to your taste?” Mara asks, watching me. “We dined there with Alasdair the other evening. The food was outstanding.”

“I’m sure the chef is very talented.”

“The waiting list runs into next year,” she adds, laughing, then her gaze moves past me, and the sound disappears.

Alasdair approaches with a woman in pearls and two older men behind him.

“The coveted Ríoga experience,” he says, gesturing to the photograph.

Fionn appears next to him and mutters to one of the men as they inch closer, his expression composed, his voice carrying that low, social warmth

I now hate more than his face.

Alasdair greets Mara before he looks at me.

“Miss Tallon.”

“Harrington.”

His attention drops to the auction card beside my hand. He offers a crooked smile.

“Ambitious choice.” He cocks a brow.

“Ambitious for who?”

“Ríoga is particular about presentation,” he says. “Borrowed dresses may pass at a charity event, but dinner there would require a little more class.”

The woman beside him laughs into her glass.

“You think this dress is borrowed?”

I flip the material open at the slit to reveal my bare thigh.

“Oh, silly Mr. Harrington. This designer dress was the bargain price of fifteen thousand. I’ll donate it to charity tomorrow. Although, that suit you’re wearing… Isn’t that the same one you wore to your son's engagement party?”

I can sense Fionn’s eyes drilling into me and refuse to give him my attention.

Even though the seductive bite of his cologne surrounds me, and my stomach twists.

“Isn’t it wonderful that the Kinnanes have taken you in as their project?” he says. “Your family has never quite understood the fine line of class.”

Mara laughs under her breath. “Oh, Alasdair. Every bad penny can shine.”

Jesus Christ.

“True, Mara,” he says, smirking. “Though I don’t think this particular bad penny would be welcome in Ríoga.”

In a heartbeat, Fionn is between me and his father, his expression void of emotion. One moment Alasdair has a clear line to me, and the next Fionn is in it, his shoulder cutting across my view, his body buffering me from the insult.

He’s so close that the warmth of him reaches through my dress.

The treacherous part of me that remembers what we did together wakes under my skin and flames.

I hate it so much I could claw myself apart for letting it happen because he's already brushed me off, taken Eilish on his arm, and still, there's a second where the nearness of him makes me want to surrender.

I draw my shoulders back.

"You'd never eat in Ríoga," Fionn says, eyes holding mine. "Leave it to someone who'd appreciate it."

The woman clutches her pearls, and the ballroom drops away so suddenly I have to lock my knees.

"You're done here, Sera," he says. "Go home."

The music keeps playing around us. Champagne corks pop. Men laugh near the stage as if the world hasn't just narrowed to Fionn's face and the horrible, public embarrassment of him humiliating me.

A hot and fiery rage rises behind my ribs, and for once I don't try to kill it. I let it reach my throat and sharpen in my mouth. I give it the power to hold me upright.

Then I reach past Fionn and pick up the pen beside the bid card.

Mara goes still.

Alasdair watches me.

Fionn's gaze drops to my hand, and for the first time tonight, a flicker tightens at the edge of his expression before he buries it.

The current bid for the Harrington dinner sits at twelve thousand euros, written beneath a name I don't recognize.

I write twenty thousand on the next line. The number is reckless, but it's for a good cause, and I'm feeling really fucking generous.

I sign beneath the number and hand it to the volunteer collecting final bids.

"Thank you, Miss Tallon," she says, checking the name.

I step back, putting space between me and Fionn. Mara moves with me, her fake smile fixed so there's no sign of how the Harrington's tried to bully me into a retreat.

Eilish walks over from the stage and reaches us as we pass the first row of dinner tables.

"What happened?" she asks.

"Nothing."

Her eyes flick to Fionn, then to Alasdair. "That didn't look like nothing."

"I bid on dinner."

Her eyebrows lift. “At Ríoga?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

“Because I can.”

She leaves my side and joins the Harrington-Kinnane table while I sit opposite them with a bunch of strangers.

The boring speeches begin, and I find myself staring over at Fionn. He looks exactly as he did before I thought he was a different man.

Charming. Unbothered. Hatefully beautiful.

The auction results are announced by the man at the microphone with silver hair, a red face, and a pleased expression.

He thanks donors and the Kinnanes for organizing the event. Thanks the sponsors and the Harringtons for their generous contribution to Lot Nine.

And the whole time Fionn doesn’t even spare me a single glance.

“Lot Nine, dinner for ten in the exclusive Ríoga restaurant, has been won by Miss Sera Tallon.”

Everyone applauds. Heads turn to find me, and the man to my right tosses his napkin because I outbid him.

The host smiles towards me. “A wonderful evening ahead for you and your guests, Miss Tallon.”

I raise my glass.

“I’ll gift it to a few of the dock workers,” I say, loud enough for the nearest tables to hear. “Their wives can wear whatever dresses they like.”

Mara’s smile turns bright and lethal. Eilish looks down at her hands, her expression full of pride.

Alasdair presses his elbows into the table and steeples his fingers, the muscle in his cheek jumping.

As I smile, Fionn looks over.

For one stupid second, I hope he might give me something. A twitch of his mouth. A flash of temper. Anything that proves he’s not as untouched as he looks.

He lifts his glass, drains it, and turns back to his table.

Right.

So that’s how we’re doing this.

The host clears his throat and moves to the next lot. Conversation rises around me, and my name disappears beneath the remaining prizes and their winners.

Out of the corner of my eye, I watch as Fionn pushes back from his chair.

I don’t look over as he crosses the space between the Harrington table and mine. Instead, I stare at the candle flame in the centerpiece as it bends in the disturbed air, watch wax gather at the base, cock my head a little as a white flower dips its head toward the heat, the whole time pretending I don’t care.

Fionn stops beside my chair and places a cream envelope beside my plate with two fingers, at the exact distance where our hands can’t accidentally meet. Ríoga is stamped across the front in gold.

“Your prize, Miss Tallon,” he says.

I’m sure every person at the table will translate his tone to simple courtesy, whereas I hear cold formality.

I glance at the envelope. “Hand delivered by a Harrington. How unexpected of ya to do something a courier could handle.”

“The staff at Ríoga will need the name of the guest using it.”

“Then I'll be sure to check in with my lads at the docks.” I offer him a tight smile and look away.

“You made your point,” he says.

“What point?" I raise my eyes to his. “That even dock workers can enjoy a meal at your overpriced restaurant.”

For the first time, the public perfection in his face tightens. He bends closer so his voice belongs to me. “You’re making yourself visible to the wrong people.”

I almost laugh. “You mean your father.”

As his eyes hold mine, the heat under my ribs turns over, unwanted and alive.

His gaze drops briefly to my mouth before he lifts it again, and the movement is so controlled I might have imagined it if my stomach didn't flip like an idiot.

“I told you to go home,” he says.

“Yeah. You did.” I shrug. “And I don’t answer to you, Fionn. Why are ya still standing at my table?”

His silence closes the space between us more brutally than his body ever could.

Then he steps back. “Enjoy the rest of your evening, Miss Tallon.”

“I will,” I say, bright enough for the table to believe me.

He turns and walks away.

A woman asks about the fish. The man beside me talks about his wine.

I stare at the envelope beside my plate and slide the certificate free. The men at the docks can have their dinner. Their wives can wear pretty dresses and order from a menu without having to care about the cost.

After I fold the certificate, I shove it into my clutch, tear the envelope in half and toss both halves onto my plate.

Eilish remains with the Harrington-Kinnane party, sandwiched between Fionn and her father.

I get to my feet and glide between the tables with my shoulders level and my chin lifted, letting everyone see a Tallon leaving on her own terms instead of a girl cracked open by a man.

At the doors, my hand closes around the handle.

Everything behind me keeps moving, and I stay facing forward because if I turn now, I'll search for the one thing he's spent the whole night refusing to give me.

I open the door and leave my best friend behind with the man I was stupid enough to fall for.

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Chapter 30

Fionn

Eilish’s breath whispers down the phone line while I stand at the glass wall of my new penthouse and prepare to tell her something that will start a war.

Graves should be behind me while I make the call. For a mindless second, I wait for his voice to break the silence at my back and glance over at his boxing gloves sitting on the sofa.

They're the first thing I unpacked.

Outside, the harbor is black water, streetlights and cranes looming against the evening sky. Trucks thread between warehouses and perimeter fencing while floodlights burn over the Tallon gates. Beyond them lie the access roads, locked yards, and strips of land no one in my father’s circle bothered looking at twice.

The Tallons own the docks. Through holding companies, I own the routes around them, the warehouses overlooking them and every pressure point that could bring their operation to its knees.

I spent years building the power to rival my father’s. Then he murdered Graves, threatened Sera’s life as the price of disobedience, and my loyalty fucking disappeared.

“Fionn?” Eilish’s voice pulls me back to the conversation.

I clear my throat. “I wanted you to hear it from me before your father hears it.”

“Okay—”

In the glass, my reflection looks calm. Black shirt, sleeves rolled to my elbows and a whiskey in my hand. And I am because I’m ready for the fallout, but beneath the discipline, I’m all alone.

“I’m not going ahead with the wedding.” I bring the glass to my lips and drink to that.

Eilish exhales, and the whisper turns into a laugh before reality hits. “Fuck. Good. Yeah. Okay.”

It isn’t the response my father would expect. He would prefer tears, bargaining, or panic, but mostly he’d expect fear. My fingers loosen around the glass for the first time since I called. Eilish never wanted me. She wanted out, and now I don’t have to turn her into another casualty of my father’s plans.

“Knowing your father, he’ll be pissed,” I say. “Even if you’re not.”

“Are you sure you want to piss him and your father off?”

“I’m sure.” The answer comes easily. The apology doesn’t. “And I’m sorry for the position this leaves you in.”

Silence stretches between us. Sorry won’t protect her from what comes next. Her father will find another way to use her, another man to take her hand who’ll expect obedience.

Below, a container truck swerves too wide near the old haulage yard, and the driver corrects it seconds before the rear wheels clip the curb. Whoever it is, they’re in a rush.

“At least with you, I knew what I was getting,” Eilish whispers.

“Yeah, a husband who didn’t want you.”

“I know.” Her voice thins around the admission. “Because you’re in love with Sera.”

The liquor stops swilling in the glass and I close my eyes for a moment. The hurt in Sera’s eyes punches me clean in the chest all over again. I told her a lie because it’s the only way I can keep her alive.

“No, I’m not.”

Eilish lets out a long breath. “My father will need time to find someone else suitable. And in the meantime, I’ll need to figure out how to get out of it.”

“If you have access to your trust fund, use it before he promises you to someone else. Invest it. Build something in your own name that he can’t control. I’ll help you.”

“You’d do that for me?”

“Yeah.” I look out at the harbor again. “Your father will get over it. Mine will try to contain the embarrassment, but I’m not under his control anymore.”

“Are you sure about that?”

My attention moves to the dark strips of land beyond the Tallon gates. Below me is proof that I’ve built something my father can’t control. Yet he threatened Sera, and I haven’t gone near her since.

I own every pressure point around the Tallon docks, whereas my father found mine.

“I’m sure.”

Eilish goes quiet again for a beat, and I get ready to end the call. “I have to go.”

“Why won’t you just admit you’re doing this because of Sera?”

I take a mouthful of whiskey, considering my reply, and step closer to the window until my breath fogs the glass. “This has nothing to do with her.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“I don’t care what you believe.”

“Just admit it,” she continues. “If Sera hadn’t happened, we’d still be getting married.”

“I don’t agree.”

“Come on, Fionn. I’ve seen how you look at her. Sera told me everything.”

“This decision has been coming for a long time.”

“Maybe, but you only made it after she let you get close to her.”

The Tallon gates blur behind the rain rolling down the window. It’s been seven days since the charity event. I know because I’ve counted every one and noticed every fucking empty hour pass.

I knock back the rest of my drink and set the glass down. “Sera Tallon was not a decision.”

“No, she wasn’t,” Eilish persists. “She was a detonation.”

I run a hand through my hair and sigh. “She was a distraction.”

Eilish’s laugh gets on my nerves. “Stop lying to yourself.”

“I’m not.”

“You are if you expect me to believe that.”

I turn away from the window and cross to the kitchen island where there’s a stack of property files that my solicitor sent over this afternoon. The top file carries no Harrington markings. My father gets off on family crests, letterheads, and fountain pen ink signatures.

I prefer subtlety when I’m expanding my reach. There’s a certain satisfaction in buying power while everyone else is too busy looking in the opposite direction.

“Whatever it was—” I tap the files “—is over.”

“That right there makes you sound pathetic, Fionn,” she says with a half laugh. “You know Sera doesn’t fold for just anyone…and you knew what you were doing.”

“I’d tread carefully with those accusations,” I remind her. “You aren’t my fiancée anymore.”

“You fell for her,” Eilish continues, cutting even deeper. “And even when you lied and said it meant nothing, you blocked your father when he humiliated her.”

My fingers tighten around the edge of the folder, leaving a deep crease in it.

What haunts me is the way she whispered *necklace*. A word meant for the chase and everything she trusted me to do until it became the only way she could make me stop hurting her.

I knew what I was doing, and I did it anyway.

“You’re talking like you know me, Eilish.”

Her sigh comes heavier now. “I’ve seen enough to know you’d never step between that man and just anyone.”

I stroll back to the window, my gaze settling on the city.

“I’m building my own position. I won’t let my father bribe me with an inheritance for my obedience. The wedding ties me to his plans, so it ends.”

“And where does Sera fit into yours?”

“She doesn’t.” I keep my eyes on the dark water. “When you see her, tell her to stay away from me.”

“Because that worked so well last time?”

“Because my father knows.”

Alasdair Harrington doesn’t need a confession. He only needs to know what a man will protect before he uses it against him.

“Take the relief of your freedom and leave the rest alone.”

“I am relieved. I’m also worried about her.”

“She’s a Tallon. She’ll move on.”

“Is that what you want, Fionn? For the woman you care about to find someone else?”

Another man beside her would give my father no reason to keep watching. The logic is clean. My fist draws back, and I stop the punch an inch from the glass.

“If that’s what it takes.”

“Takes for what?”

“For my father to believe I used her.”

Eilish goes quiet, and I let the silence settle because there’s no point getting into it.

“Well,” she says. “Because you gave me the heads up, I’ll return the favor. The other night, Sera was going to tell you how she felt. She was going to tell Saint, too. She was going to admit she’d fallen for a Harrington.”

A flash blooms without warning on the eastern side of the docks.

White-orange fire tears upward, lighting the cranes from beneath and turning the rain to sparks against the glass. The sound hits a moment later, a low detonation that travels through steel, glass and height before shifting the floor beneath my feet.

Another flash breaks across the dock road.

One explosion could be an accident. Two is an attack.

“Is Sera at home?”

“What was that noise?”

Smoke rises beyond the warehouses and swallows the floodlights.

I press my hand to the glass. “Where is she, Eilish?”

“I don’t know. The last I heard, she was going to the docks with her brothers.”

“When?”

“This evening. She said Rafe needed her there for something. Fionn, what’s happening?”

A third detonation punches through the smoke near the southern access road and my lungs cramp. The Tallon docks disappear into red light and shadow.

Sera is somewhere beneath it. If I lose her tonight, she’ll never know I was lying. I spin on my heel and march to the door.

“Fionn—”

I end the call and hit Brennan’s number as I cross the penthouse.

He answers on the second ring, and it rubs me up the wrong way. Graves would’ve been the one calling me.

“Fionn.”

“The Tallon docks are under attack.”

“I’m seeing it.”

“Did my father sanction it?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

“It’s not ours,” Brennan says. “If Alasdair planned an attack this size, he didn’t route it through our men.”

That isn’t a Graves answer. He would’ve known before I asked, had a car waiting, men moving and the name of whoever lit the first fuse.

He spent years teaching me how to walk into war, then stood beside me every time I did.

For one hateful second, my breath locks in my lungs, and I come close to fucking tears. This will be the first war I enter without him.

I clear my throat and throw open the door. “The Crowes must be making their next move.” “Get men in there. Those fuckers aren’t going to sabotage our logistics.”

“I’m on it.”

“Three cars.” I look over the armed men forming up around me as one calls the lift. “No Harrington plates near the main gate. We take the old customs road and come in behind the warehouses.”

The numbers above the doors climb too fucking slowly.

“You expecting Tallons to let us help?”

“I’m not asking for permission.”

“They’ll shoot at anything coming through the smoke.”

“Then tell our men not to look like targets.”

Brennan is quiet for half a second. “If Crowe men are still inside?”

“Then we kill them.”

I end the call before he can ask more annoying questions. The lift doors open, and as we descend, I text Eilish for Sera’s number.

The moment it appears, I call. It rings until her voicemail cuts in.

My palm cracks against the metal wall. “Fucking answer.”

The doors slide open into the underground garage, where the air is cold and thick with exhaust fumes. My Range Rover sits in the first bay beneath the strip lights.

I open the boot and lift the panel beneath the floor. A gun, a spare magazine, and a black balaclava sit inside. I take all three, slam the boot,

and get behind the wheel.

The engine turns over as I hit the garage control. Eilish's name appears across the dash.

"I just heard. Is this your father, Fionn?"

"No. Keep calling Sera. The moment she answers, let me know."

I end the call and throw the Range Rover into gear while the garage door is still climbing. The instant there's enough space to pass under it, I stamp on the accelerator.

Those bastards haven't just hit Tallon ground. They've hit the port, the routes and the freight, and every family with money moving through Cork will feel the damage by morning.

I should be calculating retaliation, containment and which alliances will fracture first. Instead, all I can see is Sera inside that smoke, fighting for her life, and everything inside me goes to war.

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Chapter 31

Sera

Rafe stands over the desk, pointing at the delivery sheets while Saint reads through the latest shipment figures.

Dane has taken the chair nearest the door, one ankle resting over his knee.

I lean against the filing cabinet and watch rain stripe the window overlooking the harbour.

Most of the night crew are outside moving freight, their voices carrying whenever the office door opens.

Somewhere near the loading bays, someone shouts for a forklift before another man tells him where he can stick it.

Rafe draws a line through one of the figures. “That truck was meant to clear customs this morning.”

“It did,” Dane says.

Rafe looks toward the yard. “Then why’s it still sitting out there?”

“Gearbox went.”

“Fuck, why didn’t someone write *gearbox* instead of leaving the reason blank?”

Saint turns the page without looking up. “Stop whining and get the dock manager to sort it.”

Dane smiles at the ceiling.

I push away from the filing cabinet and move to the desk. “The delay’s going to have a knock-on effect.”

Rafe glances at me. “No shit.”

My brows snap together. “Don’t get pissy with me, ya gobshite.”

“It’s been a long fucking day, Sera.”

“Tell me about it.”

He looks back at the sheet as the floor kicks beneath us. A blast wrenches the office door and throws it against the wall.

I throw an arm over my face and drop behind the desk as glass rains across the wood and catches in my hair. The deafening boom collapses into a high whine inside my skull, stealing every shout and scrape around me. Then the lights die.

Blackness swallows the office. I grip the edge of the desk and search through the ringing for my brothers’ voices.

The emergency lights flicker on.

Rafe rises beside me with his gun already drawn. Saint moves to the wall beside the open doorway and checks the corridor without exposing himself while Dane brushes glass off his shoulder.

Thank fuck, they’re all upright. My lungs release the breath trapped inside them.

“You okay, Sera?” Rafe’s gaze snares mine.

I grab my gun from the waistband of my jeans and nod. “Aye.”

Thick black smoke rolls across the loading area, swallowing the floodlights along the eastern fence.

A second explosion flashes. The force hits the warehouse walls, sending dust raining from the ceiling.

“Fuck… The bastards are attacking us.” Dane covers his head with one hand while he holds his gun with the other.

I stay still in the following hush before gunfire explodes from somewhere outside.

“Lock the main gate,” Saint orders into his phone. “Nobody leaves until I know who’s doing this.”

Rafe catches my arm before I can pass him. “Stay behind me.”

I wrench free. “Wise up.”

Another burst of gunfire cracks, followed by the scream of tires and the hard metallic impact of something hitting steel.

“Rafe. Sera,” Saint says. “East warehouses.”

Rafe nods, and so do I.

“Take Murphy, Eamon, and Cal with ya,” he continues. “Secure the loading offices, then work back toward the main exit. Shoot anyone who’s a threat.”

Dane checks his magazine. “And us?”

“You’re with me. We take the west side and the gatehouse.”

Saint points at us. “We’ve got too much to lose if this place is destroyed. If anyone gets separated, head straight for the gates.”

His gaze sweeps across all of us before settling on Rafe. “Understood?”

Rafe’s jaw shifts. “Aye.”

Saint grips the back of my neck for a brief second as I pass him, anchoring me with a brief kiss to the forehead before he lets go.

“Watch your back,” he says.

Dane pats me on the shoulder. “Try not to shoot Rafe. We know he’s a spare dick, but he’s still ours.”

“Fuck you,” Rafe mutters when we spill into the yard behind Murphy and Eamon while Cal takes the rear.

Smoke drags low across the concrete, the bitterness catching in my throat. One of the smaller freight sheds is burning, orange flames chewing through the edge of the roof.

A truck sits across the access road with its cab crushed against a concrete post, the driver’s door hanging open.

A body lies on the ground as if the driver was pulled out. Rafe clocks the scene at the same time I do.

“Keep moving,” he says.

Murphy takes the left side of the loading lane while Eamon covers the right. Rafe stays half a pace ahead of me.

A guy appears between two parked containers with his hood up and rifle raised.

Rafe fires before the man gets the sight level.

The shot catches him high in the chest and throws him back against the container.

Bullets crack and ping overhead. I scan left and right, then check the top of the warehouse, finding a figure hunkered low, rifle raised.

“Roof,” I shout, taking cover and aiming upward.

Rafe ducks, and I fire twice at the shape moving along the warehouse edge. The first shot sparks against metal. The second catches the man who folds out of sight.

Rafe glances back at me as a round punches into the container beside his head.

I keep low and hurry to his side, shooting behind him. Rafe twists, drops to one knee, and shoots past my shoulder.

“Christ, Rafe. Ya nearly took my ear off.”

“Don’t worry, it’s still there. C’mon, let’s move, Sera.”

We run for the warehouse where the side door has been forced open, the lock hanging loose from splintered wood.

Murphy enters first with Eamon behind him, while Rafe and I follow.

Inside, it’s dark except for emergency strips along the floor and the pulse of firelight coming through the high windows.

Rows of stacked pallets create narrow lanes.

Rafe raises two fingers, then points left.

I nod and take the right.

We advance slowly, keeping each other in sight through the gaps between pallets. Cal stays near the door.

A shadow moves near the loading office. I raise my weapon as a man comes out fast.

He grabs my elbow before I can fire and slams it against the frame. I drive my knee into his groin, twist under his arm, and smash the heel of my palm into his nose.

Blood spills over his mouth, and Rafe fires.

The bullet hits the man beneath the ribs, and his grip falls away as he collapses against me.

I shove him to the floor and look at Rafe. “I had him.”

Rafe steps over the body and checks the office. “He had you.”

Murphy’s voice comes from the far aisle. “Clear here.”

Then Eamon shouts, and gunfire erupts from the loading bays behind us.

We spin back as two more men breach the side door, firing into the warehouse. Cal hits the dirt beside the entrance.

Murphy drags him behind a stack of timber while Rafe and I split up, each taking a different side of the aisle.

Rafe fires and a guy drops. When the other guy turns toward him, I shoot before he can pull the trigger.

The bullet clips his neck; blood spurts, and he crumples.

Rafe looks over at me and smirks. “Nasty shot.”

When we reach Cal, Murphy has both hands pressed to the wound, blood running through his fingers.

“I’ll get him out,” Murphy says.

Rafe crouches beside them. “We all go through there. Murphy, take Cal. Eamon, cover him.”

Cal grips Murphy’s sleeve. “Leave me.”

“No,” Rafe says.

“I’ll slow ya down.”

“You already do that.”

Cal tries to laugh and chokes instead.

Rafe hooks an arm beneath his shoulders while Murphy takes his legs. Together they lift him and start toward the corridor.

I cover the rear with Eamon, firing in turns. Then a shadow shifts above the loading bay.

“Someone’s on the walkway,” I say. “They’re wearing a black mask like a respirator. The one from the pictures.”

Rafe glances back and clocks the slim figure. “That’s the Crowe’s Butcher, alright.”

The masked head turns toward us. Even at this distance, the stillness in the butcher is eery as we’re watched.

Rafe lowers Cal into Murphy’s arms.

“That’ll be the fucker directing this shitshow.” He reloads his gun. “I’ll go after them. Head straight to the offices and down the emergency exit. Sera, stay with them.”

I grab his sleeve. “Saint said pairs.”

“He also said to kill any threats.”

The Butcher turns and disappears along the walkway as Rafe pulls free. “I’m not letting that bastard walk out of here.”

“Rafe.”

He checks his magazine and looks at me, his expression tight with the same rage burning through mine.

“I’ll circle straight back,” he says.

“You’d better,” I shout after him as he runs between the pallets.

Eamon and Murphy drag Cal through the office doorway, and I follow.

The corridor beyond is narrow, and a light blinks overhead. It’s lined with glass-fronted offices that look over the warehouse floor.

“Last door,” Murphy says through his teeth. “There’s a stairwell behind it.”

Another burst of bullets rips through the office windows.

Glass explodes everywhere. Murphy ducks, loses his grip, and Cal falls to the floor. I turn and fire through the broken window.

“Get him up,” I shout.

Eamon bends for Cal.

A shot punches through the wall and tunnels into his shoulder.

“You okay, Eamon?” I shout.

“I’ll live,” he says, already reaching for his weapon with his other hand.

Blood pours down his sleeve and drips from his fingertips, but he still plants himself against the wall and fires toward the warehouse.

Murphy drags Cal by his high vision vest. “Get to the stairwell.”

I back up, keeping my gun pointed until we reach the last office, and Murphy kicks the door open.

“In here,” Murphy grits, nodding.

He hauls Cal toward it while Eamon stays behind, covering us.

“Come on, Eamon,” I order. “This way.”

“Go.”

“Don’t be stupid.”

He glances at me over his shoulder. “They’re already here, Mae.”

Three men appear at the far end, and Eamon’s body jerks as he takes shots to the chest.

For one pained breath, all I can see is the blood blooming across his chest. My lungs seize and I bite back his name. If I freeze now, he dies for nothing.

I fire until the men disappear behind the corner, then I grab the door handle and drag the office door shut.

Murphy has Cal halfway across the room.

“Eamon?” he asks.

I lock the door.

“Move,” I say.

We reach the stairwell door just as the office door behind us shudders under the impact of a machine gun.

Murphy pushes through and disappears onto the metal steps with Cal.

I follow, but another round comes through the office wall and catches Murphy in the side.

He stumbles, and Cal drops.

“Run, Sera…” Murphy hisses. “Leave us. Get back to Saint.”

My hand locks around the railing. Cal's down, there's blood pumping through Murphy's fingers, and the open staircase gives me no way to defend either of them. Stalling won't save them. It will only give those men another body.

I hate how clean the calculation is.

"Hold the stairs," I order. "I'll find Saint."

Murphy nods once. "Go."

Above us, someone fires through the railing and the round tears into Murphy's back.

Cold prickles sweep across my scalp as he pitches forward beside Cal. Eamon is dead behind the office door, Cal hasn't moved, and now Murphy is bleeding out at my feet. Three men have fallen in less than a minute.

This isn't an attack. Someone is wiping us out.

I fire up through the metal steps, aiming at legs and movement. One man screams and falls sideways against the rail, but another replaces him before the first has stopped moving.

I turn and take the stairs two at a time, finally reaching the ground-floor door that slams behind me as bullets hit the wall where my head had been.

Computers glow on abandoned desks. Chairs sit pushed back from tables. A phone rings somewhere and keeps ringing.

I check the magazine.

Fuck, I've only two bullets left.

My pulse slams in my throat as I overturn a chair behind me, shove a cabinet across the doorway, and take cover behind the reception counter.

Men enter from both sides.

The first fires over the cabinet. I aim, shoot, and when he drops, I know I've got one bullet left.

Another man charges at me instead of firing. I take a steadying breath, waiting until he's close, then pull the trigger.

The second it fires, he dips out of its reach, and my last bullet disappears.

"Fuck," I mutter.

I throw the gun at his face and duck as a rifle butt swings toward my head. When it wallops the counter, I grab the wheeled chair beside me and ram it into his legs.

Despite putting up a fight, strong arms circle my waist from the side, and a man wrestles me to the ground.

I slam my forehead into his nose, twist free, and snatch the fallen stapler from the floor, bringing it down against his temple.

He swears and grabs my hair at the scalp, yanking my head down before he drives his forearm across my throat and pins me against the wall.

The other looms over us with his gun pointed at my face.

I claw at the arm crushing my windpipe, but the pressure keeps building until my lungs cramp and my vision starts to blur.

Three shots crack on my next tattered breath.

The man ready to kill me jerks before dropping. The one pinning me to the floor follows half a heartbeat later, his weight collapsing against me until I shove him aside and drag air into my lungs.

A figure advances through the smoke wearing a balaclava, a fitted black shirt open at the collar, and tailored trousers streaked with ash and blood.

He is dressed for business, not for war.

His gun stays raised while his eyes sweep over me, before moving to the bodies and the corridor behind him.

The gold strap of his watch catches beneath the emergency lights.

“Fionn,” I whisper.

He checks the magazine in his gun without answering, glances behind him and turns to leave.

Anger gets me on my feet before he takes another step.

I climb over the dead man and grab Fionn’s arm, positioning myself in front of him. “Why the fuck are ya here? Are the Harringtons attacking us?”

“This is Crowe.”

Gunfire cracks again, closer this time, and another shout carries through the building.

“Then why did ya come?”

“Attacking the port affects Harrington business.”

I stare into the eyes that found me through smoke, bullets, and half the fucking docks.

“You’re a terrible liar, Fionn.”

“Sera.”

“Why are ya pretending it meant nothing?”

His hand closes around my arm, and he turns us so quickly that my back hits the wall. His body crowds mine while his gun stays angled away at his side.

“Answer me.”

He lets go, but doesn’t step back.

Instead, his fingers slide beneath the collar of my top to find the chain resting against my skin. He draws the necklace into the light until the heart settles against my top, then presses his thumb over the black diamond letter.

“I wasn’t pretending,” he says. “F is for Fionn.”

I’d let myself believe it was for Fury because admitting I wanted to wear his initial had been too close to admitting what I wanted from him.

“You let me think it meant nothing.”

His eyes hold mine through the balaclava. “I know.”

“You let me hate you.”

“I know.”

There’s no apology, and I’m not sure I could accept one while the hurt is still burning through me.

“Why are ya really here?”

His gaze lowers to my mouth, although the black fabric still covers his.

“I wasn’t leaving you in here.”

The anger inside me collides with something hotter.

He came for me.

Not for the port, the routes, or the freight.

Me.

His thumb remains against the F while gunfire rattles through the warehouse and men shout in the distance. The emergency lights flicker across the bodies at our feet.

Neither of us breaks eye contact.

Fionn releases the pendant and catches the bottom of the balaclava. He drags it over his mouth and nose, leaving it bunched above his forehead.

His jaw is locked, and his lips part around a hard breath.

I can’t stop looking at them.

His hand closes around the side of my neck and slides to my nape, drawing me in until his forehead rests against mine.

His breath warms my mouth while his thumb presses beneath my ear. The wait stretches between us, filled with everything he said in the ballroom and everything he’s admitted by coming here tonight.

I lift my chin until my lips brush his.

Fionn holds me there for another heartbeat.

Then his mouth takes mine.

The kiss is hot, hungry, and rough, tearing a whimper from me. I grab his shirt and pull him closer until our chests bump, and the ache that drops through me is immediate and obscene, given there are men dying forty feet away.

I bite his lower lip, and his grunt vibrates against my mouth.

He tastes of smoke, rain, whiskey, and Fionn, and I've missed all of it. I've missed the way he takes control while giving me room to fight him for it. I've missed the anger he drags out of me, and the hunger waiting beneath it.

My body doesn't care where we are. My nipples are hard against his chest, my thighs are pressing together, and I'm wet in the middle of an ambush with a gun at my hip because Fionn Harrington put his mouth on me.

His free hand braces against the wall beside my head, keeping the gun away while his mouth moves over mine with none of the distance he forced between us at the charity event.

I kiss him harder because he came for me. Because I need this version of him. The man who's consumed my every waking thought for weeks.

Because the F has always been his.

Because he tried to make me believe I was alone in this, and now his mouth is proving I never was.

Saint's voice tears through the corridor.

"Sera!"

Fionn breaks the kiss, but his hand remains at my nape, and his fast breath warms my mouth.

"Come with me," he says. "I'll get you out of here."

Reality pushes back in around us. My brothers are under attack inside the docks, with the Crowe threat still out there.

"I won't leave them."

"I brought men. We'll clear the docks."

"They're my brothers."

"And you're coming with me."

The hard certainty in his voice sends another rush of heat through me, but I shake my head.

"I'm not bailing on my family."

His jaw tightens. "You're my priority."

The words stop me.

All week, he kept me at a distance and made me believe that whatever had happened between us was dead. Now he's standing in Tallon territory with a gun in his hand, ordering me to leave with him.

"They're my family," I say. "Right now, helping them is my priority."

"I won't leave you here."

For a moment, I can only stare at him.

Another burst of gunfire snaps through the building, reminding us of the danger.

I sidestep him and bend to take the gun from the dead man, then check the magazine. "You need to go. If Saint sees ya here, he'll think you came with the Crowes."

Fionn pulls the balaclava over his face. "I don't give a fuck what Saint thinks."

"Fionn."

His eyes return to mine through the mask. "I pick you, Sera. I'm not hiding it again."

My grip tightens around the gun.

He turns toward the gunfire, then looks back at me.

"The next time you see me, I won't be wearing a mask."

"Sera!" Saint's voice carries through the corridor. "We've got to get Rafe to the hospital. Are ya in there?"

Everything inside me drops.

"I'm coming now!" I shout back.

I push past Fionn and run toward Saint's voice, but the warmth of his mouth and the promise in his words linger.

Nothing between us is resolved. He's got a hell of a lot to answer for after the charity event, and I don't know how I'm supposed to trust him again.

But whatever's happened to Rafe, that comes first.

Fionn and I will have to wait.

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Chapter 32

Fionn

My father doesn’t ask how many people died at the docks.

A pulse of disgust moves through me, but I shut it down, so my expression is as empty as his. I’ve mirrored the bastard my whole life.

He sits behind the desk in his study with one hand cradling a crystal tumbler, his suit jacket unbuttoned, and a fresh cigar waiting beside the ashtray.

Rain pelts the windows harder here than it did in Cork, and the fire burns in the grate without warming any part of the room.

I sit opposite him.

“The eastern loading shed took most of the damage,” I say. “Two access points are blocked, the yard has lost power, and three of our shipments have been delayed.”

“For how long?”

“Until the Tallons clear the blockage.”

His eyes lift to mine. “You’re relying on them to reopen a route carrying Harrington freight?”

“It’s their dock.”

“It’s our business passing through it.”

“If you want it moving again, they need time to count their dead and deal with the authorities.”

His mouth tightens at the word *dead*, not because he cares about lost lives, but because bodies bring police, questions, and delays.

I press my palms against my thighs before they curl into fists. Sera could’ve died at those fucking docks and my father is irritated because the dead have slowed his freight.

As my father takes a slow drink, I wonder how I ever mistook his indifference for strength. I watch him swallow and mentally note that I wouldn’t move if he started choking.

He eyes me over the rim of his glass. “Was anything stolen?”

“No.”

“Were our containers breached?”

“The Crowes weren’t there to steal. They were there to destabilize the port.”

He takes another mouthful of whiskey while he considers that. “Or to persuade the Tallons that our trading agreement is no longer worth the trouble. Saint has tried to cut us out of those docks for years.”

“The contract we have is watertight. I checked it myself. Grandfather knew what he was doing. If the Harringtons couldn’t own the docks, we would always have access to them.”

My father sits back, clips the end off his cigar, and turns it between his fingers.

“Why were Harrington men there?”

“The port was under attack.”

“I heard the report.”

“Then you know why.”

“No.” He lights the cigar and draws until smoke leaves his mouth. “I know three cars arrived at the docks without my authority. I know Harrington weapons were fired during an attack that wasn’t ours. What I don’t know is why my son gave the order.”

Because Sera was there, and if she and my father were trapped inside a burning building, I’d drag her out first without thinking twice.

“We need the port operating.”

His stare hardens. “Don’t dress disobedience as business acumen."

“I’m not dressing it as anything.”

“Then explain why you moved men without consulting me.”

“There wasn’t time.”

“There’s always time to remember who gives the orders.”

Yes, sir rises automatically, carved into me by years of standing in this room giving this man my loyalty. I press my tongue against the back of my teeth, so the words die before they escape.

“The docks were burning,” I say. “I made the decision.”

“You don’t make decisions involving Harrington men.”

But they came when I called. Three cars of armed men followed my order without asking whether my father approved. I’m guessing that's what has pissed him off.

“I did last night.”

My father lets his annoyance simmer as he draws on his cigar, eyeing me through the smoke.

Years ago, that silence would’ve had me searching for something least likely to provoke him. Now I hold his stare and let him wait.

“You’re becoming careless,” he says.

“No. I’m tired of asking permission when the right decision is obvious.”

He taps ash into the tray. “I make the decisions, son. I would’ve let the Crowes damage the Tallons before deciding whether intervention benefited us.”

“You would’ve made the wrong decision.”

His eyes narrow. “Brennan tells me you’ve been spending more time in Cork.”

“I have business there.”

“You have business everywhere lately.”

“I’ve been working.”

“Not on anything I sanctioned.” He drinks again, then swirls the whiskey in the tumbler. “Cancelling your wedding is also a decision you’re making without my permission.”

Eilish was right. Without Sera, I might have gone ahead with the wedding because it would’ve served me well in the long run. But once she let me close, marrying her best friend became a line I couldn’t cross.

I’ve spent my life playing the part my father wrote for me. I’m not following his script all the way to the altar when Sera is the one it would hurt.

“The engagement isn’t right for me.”

“It’s right for this family.” The glass meets the desk with a controlled thud. “Art Kinnane called me this morning. He wants to know how I intend to repair your disrespect.”

“Art will find another alliance. Men like him always do.”

His brows nip together, the creases at the corners of his eyes deepening as cordial tolerance slips away. “You’re speaking like a boy.”

“Why?” My brows drift up. “Because I don’t want the bride you chose for me?”

“You would inherit both families’ interests.”

“I don’t need them.”

My father leans forward, pressing his elbows into the desk. “What did you say?”

“I don’t need the Kinnanes, and I don’t need your inheritance while it comes with so many conditions.”

A low laugh leaves him. “You own a rundown warehouse and a little apartment in Cork.”

“The apartment is my home.”

“How impressive.”

Years ago, that contempt would’ve followed me back to Cork and poisoned every room and thought of success. Now I picture the view from the penthouse. My father inherited this mansion, but he never made it a home for his family.

“It isn’t meant to impress you.”

He cocks his head. “Then what exactly is this meant to be?”

“The truth.”

He studies me across the desk. “Everything you have came from me.”

“You gave me the name and the education.” I shrug. “You paid the nannies, sent me to boarding schools, and gave Graves the job of turning me into a man. I know what you provided.”

He funded my childhood, though he didn’t take part in it.

“Then don’t act like you built yourself from nothing.”

My scalp prickles, anger mounting inside my chest. “I never said that.”

The answer catches him. He expected denial. Some childish attempt to erase where I came from so I could claim every advantage as my own.

I get to my feet and move toward the tall windows beside the desk, looking beyond my reflection to the misty grounds outside. Somewhere beyond the trees, the path turns toward the barn where Graves taught me how to fight.

Part of me still hopes he’ll walk along that path right now and give me an approving nod. My throat closes over, and I take a deep breath, letting my gaze follow the estate land that stretches farther than I can see. Land bought by my grandfather and expanded by my father until the boundary became another declaration.

For most of my life, I believed this was the only kind of power that mattered.

“I own the old haulage yard north of the Tallon docks,” I announce.

My father glances over at me. “That’s a pointless purchase when the access road beside it belongs to another company.”

“Yeah. My company.”

His silence deepens.

“I control three warehouses feeding the eastern route, the storage land behind the customs road, and the commercial units running back toward the city. My property holdings stretch from Cork to Dublin.”

His chair squeaks as he swivels his toward me, the amusement in his face gone.

“You used the Harrington name.”

“The Harrington name isn’t attached to any of it.”

“Men took your meetings because they knew who your father was.”

“Your name got me into rooms.” I admit. “It didn’t choose the assets, negotiate the debt, or close the purchases.”

“You would’ve had none of those opportunities without me.”

“I know.”

I don’t need to deny what his name opened for me. He taught me to turn every advantage into leverage, and now he hates that I did just that.

“You showed me how power works.” I fix my cuffs one at a time. “I stopped waiting for you to decide when I was allowed to have some of my own.”

His complexion pales as the scale of it becomes clear. “You arrogant little bastard.”

I check the time on my watch. “I’m still your son.”

“Don’t use that as a shield, boy.”

“I’m not. I’m reminding you where I learned ambition.”

For one second, pride flickers across his face.

It reaches an old part of me in a wave. For one humiliating beat, I want his approval. Then it vanishes, and I hate that I wanted anything from him at all.

Cigar smoke clouds the space between us, and he narrows his eyes. “You’ve been moving behind my back.”

“I’ve been moving outside your shadow.”

“You think owning roads and warehouses makes you powerful?”

“No.” I shake my head. “Making my own decisions does.”

“And what decision have you made?”

“That I won’t marry Eilish. I won’t live in this house, and I won’t wait for you to die before I’m permitted to become my own man.”

My father glares at me, and for the first time, it seems like he’s measuring me without assuming I belong beneath him.

“This is about the Tallon girl.”

Having her in this conversation is too fucking dangerous, so I laugh under my breath for show.

“No, father, this is about my future.”

“Your sister has already handed Saint Tallon one victory. I won’t watch my son offer those bastards another.”

“When Keira lived in Paris, it was to get away from you.”

When Keira left for Paris, I monitored every address, flight and person who moved too close. Part of me envied her freedom. Hers came from leaving while I knew mine would come from building an empire of my own so no one could ever force me to run.

“Should have stayed there because now she’s humiliated this family.”

Christ, he says *humiliated* as if Keira’s happiness is something he’s offended by.

“She chose her own life with someone you hate.”

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“And now you imagine you can do the same because you’ve bought yourself ground to stand on.”

I don’t buy land to stand on; I buy it so no one can move me.

“I’m not imagining anything.”

He places his cigar in the ashtray. “Sera Tallon has made you reckless and weak.”

The urge to smile catches me off guard. That woman is the reason I’m finally sitting across from him without asking permission, and he’s too blind to understand the difference between weakness and choice.

“She has nothing to do with the decisions I made years ago.”

“But she’s the reason you’re making a move now.”

When I don’t answer, he puffs on his cigar and lets the silence thicken. “You moved my men onto Tallon ground to save her.”

My fingers curl halfway into fists before I stretch them open. The bastard has stripped away every business explanation I could give him and found Sera underneath. Graves is buried in the dirt beyond these walls, and she’s within my father’s reach next.

“I gave the order because the port was under attack.”

“You’ve already given me that lie.”

“Believe what you want.”

“I warned you to stay away from her.”

“Killing Graves wasn’t a warning.” His name catches in my throat, dragging the grief up so violently that I have to turn it into movement. I step away from the windows and move closer to him. “It was a reminder that you’re everything I don’t want to become.”

My father’s nostrils flare.

I’ve never said the thought aloud with such certainty. I expected it to leave me exposed, but now that it’s between us, I don’t want it back.

“Graves forgot who he served.”

My fists tighten at my sides. “He served our family for thirty years.”

“In the end, he served you.” His tone is full of condemnation. All I hear is Graves is dead because he stood with me.

“The man respected me. He was loyal.”

My father shakes his head, the movement mocking. “He hid your mess and made you think you were better than me.”

“He taught me the difference between loyalty and obedience.”

“They’re the same thing.”

I spent years obeying my father because it was the only relationship he offered me. I refuse to call it loyalty anymore.

“Only to a man who wants a servant instead of a son.”

His hand closes around the edge of the desk, the tendons popping out beneath his skin.

“You walk into my house, reveal that you’ve used every advantage I gave you to build assets behind my back, tear apart an alliance I arranged and defend the family that has undermined us for generations. What exactly do you expect now?”

“Let it end.”

Those three words aren’t a request. They’re the last chance I intend to give him before I end it myself.

His laugh is harsher now. “End?”

“Let Keira stay with Saint. Leave Sera alone. Stop dragging all of us through a feud none of us chose.”

“You mistake desire for peace.”

“This didn’t begin with Saint, Keira, Sera, or me. It began on the Heath sixteen years ago, and everyone born after it has paid the price.”

The color of his eyes turns flat. “You know nothing about what began between us.”

I fold my arms across my chest. “So why don’t you enlighten me then?”

“The truth will come out when it needs to.”

Anger burns in my throat. He’s shaped our lives around a secret he refuses to trust us with, then demanded loyalty to every consequence.

“Right. When it suits *you*.”

After placing his cigar in the ashtray, he slides open the top drawer in his desk. I know what sits inside it, but I also know he won’t pull a gun unless he’s willing to destroy the Harrington succession and face jail time.

Leaving it open, my father picks up his cigar again. “You think wars end because my children decide desire matters more than blood?”

“Wars end when the men feeding them die or decide they’ve taken enough.”

“And you believe you’re the man who gets to decide that?”

“I believe I get to decide what I inherit from you.”

His mouth curls. Two fingers ease the drawer closed with a quiet click. “You inherited the Harrington name.”

“I don’t have to inherit your hatred with it.”

The cigar rolls between his fingers as he studies me. “And Sera Tallon will save you from becoming what you are?”

“She doesn’t need to save me.”

A column of ash drops into the tray. “But she will compromise you.”

My pulse hits hard at the base of my throat. The last time he spoke this calmly about someone I cared for, he murdered them.

I walk over to the desk. “Leave her out of this.”

The corners of his mouth twitch into a faint smile. “So that’s what all this is really about. The Tallon girl you should have stayed away from.”

The coldness in his voice makes the meaning unmistakable. Every muscle in my body locks. I resist the urge to reach across the desk and shake her name out of his fucking mouth.

Instead, I lean over until my face is level with his. “Don’t speak about her as if she’s a weakness you can exploit.”

His gaze wanders over me, then he pushes back and rises slowly. “Little Sera Tallon.”

The same cold calculation I’ve watched him use against enemies my entire life moves across his expression.

“You actually love her.”

“Yes,” I say without hesitation.

My father studies me as though the admission has exposed a defect in the bloodline. “You’d risk everything for her?”

“If I have to.”

“And you imagine she’d do the same for you?”

“That’s none of your concern.”

“Everything you do is my concern.”

“Not anymore.”

He folds an arm over his chest and points the burning tip of his cigar at me. “So Fionn Harrington plans to fuck a Tallon girl, move into his penthouse and pretend he can walk into a peaceful future while the rest of us forget the betrayal?”

My whole life, he’s used family loyalty as a fucking rope to tie us down with. Even now, some part of me recoils at the accusation of betrayal. But he isn’t asking me to choose my family. He’s asking me to choose *his* war.

“Why does being your son require becoming exactly like you?”

His expression hardens. “A son who stands against his father has already chosen not to be like him.”

“I’m not standing against you. I’m asking you to stop.”

“Wars don’t stop because sons fall in love with the wrong woman.”

Wrong woman. Sera is the first person I’ve chosen without considering what she could offer me in return, and he reduces her to a mistake.

I hold his stare. “If you go after Sera, you lose me.”

His brows rise. “Is that meant to stop me?”

“It should.”

Ash drops from the end of his cigar and breaks across the desktop. “You would turn your back on your family for her?”

“Would you choose a feud over your son?”

His face remains unreadable, but a muscle pulses along his jaw.

“There is no choice,” he says. “Lorcan can step into your place.”

My next breath stops halfway in. I gave him a choice, and he answered by replacing me in a heartbeat.

“Then use him. Let him spend the rest of his life trying to become whatever version of me you’ve decided you’re owed.”

“You think your roads and companies make you untouchable.”

“No one is untouchable.”

“Exactly,” he says. “Not even Sera Tallon.”

My breathing turns shallow. Whatever has stopped me from treating my father like any other threat is no longer there. I shift forward by an inch. His gaze drops to the movement, and he smiles.

“You came here asking for peace, yet you look ready to start a war.”

“I’m ready to stand between you and her.”

The smile disappears as I straighten to my full height and check my cufflinks.

“I respect what you’ve built,” I say. “I respect what you taught me when you had the time. I know exactly what I owe the Harrington name, but you don’t own every decision I make because you gave it to me.”

His stare burns into mine. “You really believe you can just walk away without consequences?”

“I’d like to believe you’d respect *me*, respect the fact I’m your son, before anything else.” My voice roughens on *son*. I run a hand through my hair and force the rest out evenly. “But I’m not really surprised that you chose your ego.”

The cigar holds steady before his mouth. I wait for him to contradict me, but the denial never comes. Instead, he takes a slow draw and exhales the smoke between us.

“Get out.”

My shoulders loosen for the first time since I entered the study. He’s made it simple. I was only ever his son while he had control over me.

“You’ll leave Sera alone.”

“You don’t give orders in this house.”

I head for the door.

“Fionn.”

My hand closes around the handle, though I don’t turn because nothing he says can repair what has ended. Whatever comes next will tell me whether this war begins tonight.

“You built your little empire quietly.” His voice slips over my shoulder. “Let’s see how well it survives when people realize you don’t have my backing. Pick that girl, and you’re dead to me.”

I face him again.

“If you come for what’s mine, make sure you’re ready to lose what’s yours.”

For the first time in my life, I leave my father’s office without waiting to be dismissed.

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Chapter 33

Sera

Rafe reaches for the back door before I can stop him. When I catch his jacket and yank him backward, a hiss moves through his teeth.

"Don't even think about it," I warn.

"You're worse than Ma.” He narrows his eyes at me, his mouth all pouty because he thinks that’ll work on me. “I'm going outside."

"No, you're not."

"Sera."

"Try to leave again, and I'll tell everyone you cried in the hospital."

He glares at me. “I’m going for a walk, that’s all.”

“Then walk back to the sitting room.”

“Ya know me… I can’t sit in this fucking house all day and not do something.”

“It’s only been a few days.” I roll my eyes. “You’ll be cooped up indoors even longer if ya don’t rest.”

Rafe sighs as I plant myself between him and the door. He took a knife deep into his right shoulder, missing an artery by an inch. After the surgeon stitched him up, he was told he was lucky to come away without any major mobility issues.

“The feed delivery is due,” he says.

“I know.”

“We’ve got debts to collect.”

I fold my arms across my chest. “I’ll get them.”

“I’m supposed to be in the Cork bookies later.”

“I’ll tell them you’ll be there next week.”

Rafe stares at me. “Next fucking week?”

I lift my eyebrows. “Good to know there’s nothing wrong with your hearing. Anything else ya need me to take care of?”

He pats his jeans pocket, finding it empty. “I need more smokes, and the yearlings need checked.”

“Dane’s with them.”

He shakes his head and drags his hand over the coarse hairs on his jaw. “Dane couldn’t find his own fucking arse.”

I shrug. “Well, he found the yearlings.”

The corner of Rafe’s mouth twitches before his shoulder pulls and kills it. After a beat, he reaches for the handle again, and I catch his wrist.

“C’mon on, Rafe. You were stabbed.”

“I remember.”

“You passed out before we reached the hospital.”

“Like fuck I did.”

My brows drift up. “You went limp across the back seat.”

“Jesus, Sera.” He sighs. “I was resting.”

“Resting?” I make a face at him. “You stopped answering me.”

“I heard your yappy voice loud and clear.”

He glances down the hallway and scratches his jaw.

“You’re enjoying this,” he says. “Aren’t ya?”

“Immensely.”

“I’ll remember this, gobshite.”

“You can remember it from the sofa.”

I keep a hold of his wrist until he gives up arguing and lets me guide him back to the sitting room. He lowers himself into the armchair with his jaw locked, taking twice as long as usual to get comfortable.

The blanket I’d left folded over the armrest slides onto the floor. I pick it up and throw it across his legs.

“Jesus fuck, Sera, I’m not eighty.”

“Then stop trying to die before ya reach thirty.”

“It’s the risk we all take.”

“You never did tell me what happened,” I say. “You went after the butcher, right?”

He nods.

“And?”

“We fought. I took a knife, and then I got a good swipe at—” Rafe exhales and shakes his head slowly. “—her.”

“*Her*?” I repeat, looking at him again. The masked butcher is a woman. I shouldn’t respect anyone who put a knife in my brother, but I’m kinda impressed.

“Yeah, her. The butcher's a woman,” he replies. “And I stabbed her with her own blade. Then she scurried off.”

“Did ya see her face?”

“No,” he sighs. “Just heard her voice as she swore at me when I knifed her.”

His phone rings on the coffee table before I can get more information out of him. He keeps my stare for another second, then answers the call, tosses two pills into his mouth, and swallows them dry as he listens.

I leave him alone to talk and throw on my coat before heading out the door

The rain has held off since morning, but the clouds sit dark and heavy over the far-off fields. Rafe's right. All of us take risks. These days, though, peace never seems to last for long.

When I reach the main barn, Shay comes out to meet me. “Is he still milkin’ it?”

“It’d be easier if he was. He thinks everything will collapse if he spends another hour lying low.”

“It might.” Shay cocks a brow. “Dane’s doing the invoices.”

I groan. “That explains why the feed company called me three times.”

Shay wanders off, and I walk into the office where there’s paperwork spread across every available surface.

I blow out a long breath, sit in the chair behind the desk, and leaf through the pages.

One of the invoices belongs to the Kinnanes’, and Eilish pops into my thoughts.

I glance at the wall clock. It's half past three, and she hasn’t replied to any of my messages. In fact, my best friend has left every single one unread.

When I pick up my phone and tap her name, the call disconnects immediately.

I check the signal bars and try again.

Nothing.

My thumb hovers over the screen while I search for a reasonable explanation. Eilish once answered me from the chapel toilet during mass.

Two days without a single phone call is unheard of.

I type a message.

Text: Where are ya?

Boots scuff in the aisle beyond the office door, and Shay appears again, smoking a cigarette.

“You heading somewhere?” he asks because I’m already standing and shoving my phone into my jeans pocket.

“I need to check on Eilish. She’s not picking up my calls.”

“Maybe she’s busy with the wedding plans.”

“Eilish is never too busy for me.” I round the desk and check for my car keys in my jacket. “And even if she was, she’d call me back an hour or two later.”

Shay braces one shoulder against the timber frame. “Want me to do anything?”

“You’re tasked with keeping Rafe inside.”

“He’ll be out through a window within the hour.”

“Board them up.” I pass him and pat his shoulder. “Good luck.”

The drive to the Kinnane estate takes sixteen minutes with my foot down. The gates open before I reach them because the guard recognizes my car and even salutes as I drive past him.

Eilish’s black Mercedes is sitting on the gravel by the main entrance. I park next to it, kill the engine, and climb out, already smiling at the doorman.

However, this time, instead of standing aside, he blocks the entrance.

“Miss Tallon.”

“Hey.”

He stays put. “Miss Kinnane no longer lives here.”

I stop one step below him and make a face at him. “What?”

“I’ve been instructed by Mr. and Mrs. Kinnane to inform you that their daughter no longer resides at this property.”

My breath stutters.

“What do you mean she doesn’t live here? Then where does she live?” There’s a horrible nausea churning in my gut and then it hits me. “Did she move in with Fionn?”

He looks past my shoulder toward the gatehouse. “She was taken away by Mr. Kinnane the other day.”

My lungs cramp. “Why?”

He doesn’t give me anything, so I step into him. “Where did he take her?”

“I don’t know.”

“Did she pack a bag?”

His jaw tightens. “I have nothing else to tell you.”

His gaze flicks through the open doorway toward the entrance hall, and I understand he’d risk his job by saying anything more.

“I need to speak to Art.”

“Mr. and Mrs. Kinnane are having their afternoon drinks in the garden room. They shouldn’t be disturbed.”

“I need to know where Eilish is.”

I slip past him before he closes the gap.

“Miss Tallon, you shouldn’t go inside.”

The maid near the staircase freezes with a vase in her hands. Knowing the layout of this house like it was my own, I march through the corridors, my pulse ticking.

Two men I recognize from Art’s security detail rise from chairs beside the study, neither stop me, but they do tail me.

The door to the garden room stands open and a soft wave of jasmine greets me as I move inside. Mara is perched on a pale green sofa beside the windows, a full glass of gin and ice in her hand. Art occupies the armchair opposite with a scotch in one hand and a newspaper spread across his lap.

He glances up, though Mara keeps her attention on the manicured lawn outside.

“Where did Eilish go?” I ask, moving deeper into the room.

Art glances back at the paper and turns a page. “You may have walked freely through this house while my daughter lived here, but that privilege ends today.”

My brows snap together. “I don’t understand?”

He takes a slow sip of his drink and lets my confusion bleed. Art’s known me since I was eighteen, but there’s no trace of friendliness in his demeanor today.

Rather, the head of the Kinnane family reads the paper, ignoring me. I draw in a steadying breath through my nose.

“Where’s Eilish?”

“Since her engagement to Fionn Harrington ended, I’ve secured another husband for her.”

The air fills my lungs in a muted gasp, and my heart bucks. “She’s not marrying Fionn?”

"My daughter's future has been rearranged."

My car key bites into my palm. “By whom?"

"By me."

Mara lifts her glass and sips through the thin black straw, though she still won’t look over, which tells me something is very wrong.

“But she’s my best friend.”

“As of tonight, she’ll be a wife with more to think about than your friendship.”

“Can I speak to her?”

“No.”

When Mara places her gin on the table, I speak to her directly. “Mara… Will Eilish be happy with this new man?”

Her eyes meet mine at last; however, Art answers before she can open her mouth.

“Eilish understands what is expected of her.”

“That wasn’t what I asked.”

He folds the paper and drops it onto the coffee table in front of him. “You should turn around and leave before you overstay your welcome.”

I take another breath, knowing I’m pushing it but needing answers. “When’s she coming home?”

“She doesn't live in Black Heath anymore.”

The certainty in his answer sends my nails deeper into my skin and guilt creeps through my veins. This is my fault.

“Has she even got a phone?” I ask. “A contact number or a forwarding address? If I give you a letter, could you send it to her?”

I take a step closer to Mara while her fingers grip the edge of her skirt, tugging at the fabric before she releases it.

“Please,” I say. “I just want to check on her.”

Art sighs loudly.

“You’re testing my patience.” He rises and smooths the front of his waistcoat. “Return to your family, Miss Tallon. I understand they’ve enough trouble of their own.”

I hold Art’s gaze. “Will you tell her I came?”

“If the opportunity arises, I’ll send her your regards.”

My temper kicks hard. “Can you at least tell me who she’s marrying?”

“After the last embarrassment this family suffered, I’ll wait until she’s wearing a ring and the ink has dried before I make the official announcement.” He checks his watch. “Now leave, or I’ll have you escorted out.”

I spin on my heels before stalking out of the heated garden room without saying goodbye.

The doorman steps sideways and lets me storm out into the icy wind, and I keep going even though my head spins and my heart is beating too fast.

My car unlocks on the second press after my thumb misses the button. Inside, I grip the steering wheel and stare at Eilish’s car.

She’s gone.

I rest my forehead against the wheel and try to breathe through the landslide of emotions.

Deep down, I wanted him to walk away. And that wish came true. Except nobody told me the ground would disappear beneath Eilish because of it.

I was so fucking naive to hope for a different ending. That Fionn would walk away from the engagement, and Eilish would have time to choose a husband herself.

Hot tears sting my eyes no matter how hard I try to hold them back. I wipe at them with my sleeve, take a deep breath before starting the engine and slamming my foot on the accelerator, tearing along the driveway.

The sensible thing would be to head home and help my brothers, but I speed past the turn when I reach it and keep driving.

Eventually, I end up outside the pub in Black Heath and pull into the car park.

The place is almost empty at this hour, with only two older men watching the horse racing on the wall mounted television and a young guy dressed in high vis gear supping a pint near the fire.

“Rough few days?” the barman asks when I drag out the stool and sit.

“Rum and coke.”

He takes down a glass. “Double?”

“Aye.”

He drops ice into the glass, free pours a healthy measure, and adds a splash of cola. I knock back half to feel the coldness move through me.

The jukebox stands near the back wall, glowing blue around the screen. I carry my drink over and scroll through the songs until I find Metallica. The opening guitar of “Nothing Else Matters” fills the pub, and the choice snaps awake memories.

Fionn in a cap and dark sweatshirt, sitting across from me in this very bar while Eilish tried to force the three of us into a friendship.

I return to the bar and drain the rest of the rum. The barman replaces it after I slide the empty glass forward.

By the third, heat has spread across my chest and loosened the control I’ve kept on my guilt since leaving the Kinnane estate.

When a man takes the stool beside mine, I don’t bother to acknowledge him.

“You’re Sera Tallon, right?”

I stare at the rows of bottles behind the bar. “Unfortunately.”

He laughs and all it does is piss me off.

“Heard about the trouble at the docks,” he says. “Rafe got busted up?”

“He was stabbed,” I say, uninterested in conversation. “Not the first time, not the last.”

“My brother does work for Saint. Said the damage was bad.”

I lift the glass and drink, already bored. “Nothing we can’t fix.”

He leans closer. “You wanna talk about it over a few drinks?”

“Nope.”

“Heard the Harrington heir ditched his fiancée and pissed off his ole man,” he says to Paddy. “About time someone knocked that prick down a peg.”

“He built more than you’ll ever rent,” I say into my glass.

I sit there, stunned, listening to myself defend a Harrington in public.

“How come you’re sitting here all alone?”

“Christ,” I mutter. “Maybe because I want to drink alone.”

I keep my eyes forward and swill the rum in my glass, tinkling the ice while he collects his pint and finds somewhere else to sit.

My phone remains on the counter beside my hand. I open Eilish’s contact details again, press the button and listen as it cuts off, the line dead.

The screen returns to my recent calls.

Fionn Harrington’s name sits beneath hers from the night the docks were attacked. He’d rang me eighteen times, and I hadn't heard any of them because my phone was in Dane’s car.

I stare at his number until the digits blur, then for some reason, I tap it because maybe he can tell me what happened to her. It’s a slim chance, but I'm willing to take it. That's what I tell myself while I ignore how my pulse races.

He answers on the second ring. “Sera.”

“Me and you need to talk.”

“We do,” he replies, his tone calm and controlled. “How about now?”

“Okay. I’m at the pub in Black Heath.”

“I know.”

I close my eyes. “Of course ya know. You know everything except how to tell me you’re not marrying my best friend.”

“Come outside, Sera.”

I straighten on the stool and glance over my shoulder at the pub door.

“You’re here?”

“I am.”

The call ends.

I stare at the screen before sliding from the stool, my heart racing and mouth dry. The floor tilts a little beneath me, and I catch the bar with one hand.

The barman reaches for my glass. “You having another?”

“Not tonight.” I pull a few twenties out of my jacket pocket and slide them across the bar. “See ya around.”

I push through the door, and the bite of the late afternoon air mixes with the rum and sends a shiver across my shoulders.

Across the road, Fionn’s black Land Rover waits at the edge of the car park, its engine running and rain silvering the bonnet. Fionn gets out from behind the wheel before I reach the first row of cars.

He walks around the front, opens the passenger door, and waits for me.

His knee length dark coat is unbuttoned, the collar raised around his neck. He says nothing as he stands beside the open passenger door, his attention traveling over my face, my open jacket and the uncertain placement of my feet.

I stop a pace away from him and swallow against the rapid pulse thrumming in my throat.

His hair is damp from the rain, and there’s a healing cut near his temple. He looks tired beneath the gray sky, although his posture is strong and self-assured as always.

Everything hits me at once, and my lower lip trembles. I press my lips together, hating how my emotions are all over the place tonight, but the movement betrays me anyway.

“Fuck,” I whisper, dragging both hands over my face because I can't hold everything together for another second.

The crunch of gravel reaches me before he does.

By the time my hands fall away, Fionn is before me. One arm slides around my back while his other hand settles against the nape of my neck, steady rather than demanding, and I don't think about whether I should lean into him. My forehead simply comes to rest against his shirt, the cotton warm beneath my skin.

“She’s gone,” I whisper into the rough wool of his coat. “Art traded her to someone else.”

His hand spreads wider between my shoulder blades and for a few seconds neither of us says anything. The only sound is the rain hitting the Land Rover.

“I’m such a bitch.”

His fingers press firmer against my head.

I let out a humorless laugh that catches on a sob. “She’s my best friend, and all I can think about is the fact I’m relieved you’re not marrying her.”

“I’m not sorry I ended it, Sera.”

The certainty in his voice leaves no room to question whether he'd make the same choice again.

I swallow hard. "She'd have been safe with you."

“She would have been lonely.” Fionn holds me tighter.

I turn my face deeper into his chest, tears soaking into the fabric. “Art sent her away, and I’ve got a really bad feeling he’s forced her to marry a man who won’t treat her right.”

“Get in the car,” he says. “You’re getting cold out here.”

He pulls away, keeping one hand near my lower back while I climb into the passenger seat. When my boot catches the sill, he steadies me before I topple.

I reach for the seat belt, but before I can grab it, Fionn leans across me. His arm brushes mine as he draws it from the pillar with one smooth tug before fastening it into place.

"How long were ya waiting?"

"Since the barman poured your second drink."

I blink. "You could’ve come in."

“I was about to.”

"Then why didn't ya?"

He pulls back and straightens, though his eyes stay on mine from outside in the rain.

"Didn't think you'd want me there... Then you called."

I watch him round the front and get in the driver’s side. He starts the engine before reaching across the center console to turn the heat higher.

"Too warm?"

I shake my head.

"Good."

Fionn fishes his phone out of his coat pocket and types a message before hitting send.

"I'll find out where she is." He drops his phone into the cup holder. “Someone will know who she’s marrying.”

“Okay.”

Rain washes across the windscreen in steady sweeps; the engine hums beneath us, and the warmth gradually makes me sleepy.

At some point, I stop watching the road and don't even register that I've fallen asleep until the Land Rover slows.

“Where are we?” I ask, my voice croaky and weak.

“Near my place.”

I lift my head and scan the streets beyond the windshield. “This isn’t Black Heath.”

“I don’t live with my parents anymore.”

My forehead creases, and I sit forward, recognizing the city landmarks. “You live in the city now?”

“Yeah, I bought a penthouse a while ago, and it's finally finished construction."

He looks so casual as he turns the wheel, taking the next junction.

“What does your da think about that?”

His shoulder hitches a fraction, offering the slightest of shrugs. “My father and I had a disagreement.”

I look over at him, my eyes gritty and my throat dry. "I take it he was pissed that you ended the engagement."

“That, and the rest,” he says. “We’re no longer on speaking terms.”

The car rolls down a concrete slope and into an underground car garage beneath the building. He parks up near the elevator doors and kills the engine.

"Come upstairs." He waits until I meet his eyes. "We've got things to settle."

My thumb hovers over the seat-belt release. He walked away from the Kinnanes and moved out of his family’s estate.

While he watches me consider my next move, my pulse goes wild in my throat. I don’t know if I’m part of the future he fought for or if this really is the end of us.

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Chapter 34

Fionn

The two armed men outside my penthouse doors straighten when the lift opens. Their gazes move from me to Sera before lowering.

Sera takes my hand when I offer it to her, and I almost smile at the satisfaction of it.

Exhaustion sits heavily through her posture, and her shoulders have drawn inward beneath her damp coat. The liquor on her breath carries the sweet burn of rum each time she exhales.

One man opens the door for us without being asked. I give him a nod, then guide Sera inside and lock us in.

She stops beneath the recessed lights and takes a quick look at the new space.

There's not much to see other than an open-plan tiled floor that stretches toward a wall of windows overlooking the city.

A black sofa faces the glass, with a low table in front of it and a matching armchair pulled near the window. The dining table arrived yesterday. However, the chairs didn't.

"I moved in earlier than I'd planned."

Her gaze reaches the unopened boxes against the far wall. "I can tell."

I squeeze her hand and walk her to the sofa. She leans into the pull without resisting, allowing me to decide where she goes for once because she no longer has the strength to argue over it.

"Take a seat."

She lowers herself onto the cushions and rests her head against the back. Her eyes close for a second before she forces them open again.

I shrug out of my coat and toss it on the armchair, then crouch in front of her and reach for the wet laces of her boots.

Her fingers twitch against her knees. “What are ya doing?”

“Taking these off so you can relax.”

“Fionn,” she whispers.

I meet her eyes and continue to unpick the knot. “I’ve got it.”

I tug the lace free and work it through the top holes while she watches.

“Do you remember Graves?” I ask, pulling her foot free of the first boot. “The man outside the pub the night I took you to my parents’ house?”

“Yeah,” she says quietly.

“Graves gave my family thirty years of loyalty.” I loosen the second boot and keep my attention on the lace. “He spent half of that time looking out for me. We were together more than I ever was with my father.”

She sits forward the moment her other boot comes off. I press my palm against her ankle and lower her foot to the floor.

“My father killed him.”

“What?” she gasps. “Why?”

I line up her boots at the end of the sofa and stay on the floor. Our gazes lock, and all I see is her pale complexion and dark circles under her eyes.

“I brought you to his house while they were away. Graves knew and didn’t tell him. My father considered that deceit.”

Sera stares at me and swallows hard. “He killed him because of me?”

“No.” I shake my head. “Graves was close to me, and he wanted to make a point.”

Her mouth parts, but nothing comes out.

“Killing him was a warning.”

I wait where I am while she processes it. Her lower lip draws between her teeth as she shuffles to the edge of the sofa, lowers herself to the tiles and settles opposite me, knee to knee.

“So, you’ve lost someone too,” she whispers.

I nod once.

Her eyes drop toward my shirt. “And the gala…”

“I regret hurting you like that, Sera.”

She takes a deep breath and closes her eyes for a moment.

“My father had just put Graves in the ground and made it clear you’d be next if I gave him a reason.” The muscles across my shoulders tighten beneath my shirt. “That doesn’t excuse the way I treated you.”

“It’s okay… I understand… You were hurting.”

“That, and I didn’t want him to see how much power you have over me.”

Her breath stalls.

I lift a hand and close my fingers around the side of her neck, bringing my face closer to hers.

“Disrespecting you like that will never happen again.”

Her eyes search mine.

“Not in public. Not in private. No matter who’s watching.”

Sera leans forward until her forehead touches mine. Together we breathe in silence as her arms slide around my shoulders, and she folds herself against me.

I drag her onto my lap, letting her knees settle on either side of my hips, but there’s no heat in the position tonight.

Her cheek rests against my shoulder while I hold her tight against me.

Her hair smells of the winter wind mixed with the faint hint of her shampoo. Beneath it, is the scent I know from my sheets and from every encounter we’ve ever had. Right back to the night in the barn when my little wild thing became my obsession.

“So, what happens now?” she asks.

“I’ve already made my decision.”

She draws back far enough to see me. Her eyes have gone bright again, the glassy shine of exhaustion and alcohol sharpening the navy-blue circling her wide pupils.

“What decision?”

“I won’t lose you.”

Her arms tighten around my shoulders, and for a moment, she only stares.

“How am I supposed to trust that when you’ve been buying the land around us for years?” Her voice roughens. “You’re still a Harrington, Fionn.”

“Come on, Sera,” I say, cocking my head. “How long has it been since you looked at me and saw a Harrington?”

Her brows draw together.

“Over time, you called me Fionn, and I’m guessing it’s because you didn't want to hate me anymore.”

Her mouth almost moves to deny it. Instead, she sighs.

“That doesn’t mean the name disappears,” she says. “Or the threat to my family.”

“No.” I slide my thumb along the line of her jaw. “But neither of us are who we were before we stepped into that barn.”

“Are ya still planning to destroy us?”

“I don’t take orders from Alasdair Harrington anymore.”

Her eyes narrow.

“So, who’s going to protect you—” she jabs my shoulder “—from him?”

I wrap my hand around her prodding finger. “I can protect myself, don’t you worry about me.”

“You think I’m worried about ya now, Fionn?”

“Yeah.” I tug her hand to my mouth and kiss it. “I do.”

She draws in a breath, preparing to argue, but I lift her off my lap and return her to the sofa before she finds the energy to pretend. “When did you last eat?”

She looks away.

“Sera.”

“I’m not sure.” She shrugs. “I made Rafe porridge and berries this morning and ate with him.”

I check my watch, noting it’s after seven in the evening which means she hasn’t eaten in hours and has had more booze than water.

“Do you like pizza?”

She blinks up at me. “Everybody likes pizza.”

“What do you have on it?”

“Anything.” She lets her head fall against the back of the sofa. “I’m not fussy.”

Moving to the kitchen, I take out my phone and call downstairs.

“Order a few pizzas. Pepperoni, ham, mushrooms, chicken, vegetables, garlic bread and chips, too.”

I add two desserts before ending the call, then reach into the fridge and pull out a bottle of water.

“How many people are ya feeding?”

“You refused to tell me what you like.”

“So, ya ordered enough to feed the whole building?”

“There’s no one else living here yet.” I return to the sofa. “I bought the whole place. From the ground up.”

A ghost of a smile plays on her lips before she turns her face away and stares out at the city lights.

I sit beside her, twist the cap off the water bottle, and hand it to her. “Here.”

She takes it without stalling and drinks almost half before handing it back.

“Thanks.”

I reach forward and set it on the floor, then sit deeper, getting comfortable next to her.

Her hand moves over mine, linking our fingers, settling against my palm before her other hand comes to rest over my watch. Her thumb follows the edge of the glass face, tracing the metal as she thinks.

A while later, she’s nestled against my side with her head resting on my arm.

“When I was tied up in your barn, I thought ya were going to kill me. I ran because I was terrified.” She brushes the pads of her fingers over the metal links in the strap. “Then when we fought in the field… The look on your face wasn’t hate, Fionn. It was something I wanted to see again and again. So, when ya killed one of your own men for me…”

“He deserved it.”

She presses her fingers into my wrist.

“After witnessing that, something inside me changed,” she says, deep in thought. “I knew there was more to you… A line ya wouldn’t let anyone cross.”

Her statement burrows beneath my ribs, finding the place where Graves, my father, and every decision I’ve made for her have been waiting.

“At the gala, when you said those things, it hurt because I thought the whole thing was a lie.” Her gaze rises to mine. “I was ready to tell ya how I felt.”

When I lift our joined hands and press my mouth against her knuckles, her eyes close for a moment.

“And now?”

“Now Eilish is living in hell. Graves is dead, and I’m sitting with you,” she whispers. “And even though my heart is breaking, I don’t want to run anymore… I mean…”

Sera presses her hand to her face and takes a deep breath.

“If you hurt me again, Fionn, I’ll kill ya.”

A smile breaks across my face when she pouts, trying her hardest to act tough. “Just say it.”

“Say what?”

“That you want to be mine.”

She laughs under her breath, and when I think she’s going to hit me with another false threat, her fingers tighten, and her head settles on my shoulder again.

“I’ll have to tell my family about us.”

Us.

“That’ll go off like a nuke,” I say. “I’ll stand beside you if it helps.”

“No, it’s okay. I’ll talk to Saint on his own first and then deal with my ma.”

The front door knocks, and I get to my feet to unlock it.

One of the men brings the food inside and stacks the boxes on the table. I dismiss him, then carry everything over while Sera watches the number of containers gather in front of her.

“This is ridiculous.”

“You need to eat.”

“I needed a slice of pizza.”

“One slice is never enough.”

She reaches for the pepperoni and takes a slice. I lower to the seat beside her as the topping slides off.

I catch the loose pepperoni and cheese before it falls, lift the whole mess back onto the slice and press it into place.

She stares at the slice, then her eyes cut to mine.

“Did you just touch my pizza?”

I reach for a napkin and clean my hands. “It was falling apart.”

Her lips part, and a girlie laugh escapes her, the moment suddenly lighter.

The laughter fills the empty apartment and catches me somewhere I’ve no defence against.

She shakes her head as she takes a bite, smiling around the mouthful as she chews.

I sit back and watch the happiness linger.

All the threats from my father, blood spilled, land bought behind his back, and years spent building my empire becomes easier to carry when she looks at me that way.

She smiles because of me.

“I’m taking a shower,” I tell her. “Won’t be long.”

She glances at the food. “Don’t ya want any?”

“I’ve already eaten.”

I leave her with the feast, head straight to the master suite, strip, and shower.

Afterward, steam follows me into the bedroom where I pull on a clean pair of sweatpants and drag a T-shirt over my head.

The black folder I'd prepared earlier lies in the center of the bed. I pick it up, look inside, and stare at the name on the first page. The documents behind it are mostly the same but significantly different.

I read each one before glancing at the open bedroom door, knowing she’s out there, and I’m in here, holding this.

With a sigh, I close the folder and place it on the chest of drawers out of the way.

Sera needs a clear head for what comes next.

I return to the sitting room and find her curled up on the sofa, one hand tucked beneath her cheek. Two slices of pizza are gone. Everything else remains untouched.

I pivot and head back to the bedroom to grab a blanket and spread it over her.

My apartment is mostly bare and unfurnished, but with her lying there sleeping, it already feels complete.

I pour a whisky and stand over her for a while, just staring at how peacefully she sleeps.

Eventually, I sit beside her head and make sure she’s warm enough by turning up the heating from an app on my phone.

Strands of her hair have fallen over her face. I sweep them back, careful not to wake her, and the next thing I know, I’m running my fingers through the silky lengths.

Sera shifts beneath the blanket, her hand finding my thigh. I cover it with mine and keep it there.

Tonight, she sleeps right where she belongs.

The folder can wait.

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Chapter 35

Sera

My lashes flutter open to the first blush of a periwinkle dawn peeking out behind the city skyline.

I stay where I am for a moment, tucked beneath a cosy blanket, listening to the quiet around me.

The pizza boxes are gone. My boots sit neatly beside the sofa, and my jacket is draped across the back of the armchair.

I turn my head, hearing the gentle rhythm of Fionn's breathing. He's laying back on the sofa wearing gray sweats and a white T-shirt, one arm beneath his head, the other resting between us.

Sleep softens the usual sternness of his face, so he seems at peace. Even dressed like this, with his hair ruffled from sleep and no suit in sight, he still carries power.

When I push the blanket aside and ease forward, his hand shoots out and snares my forearm before my foot reaches the floor.

I suck in a breath as he tugs, angling me into his chest, my knee caught between his legs, while his arm locks around my waist. His mouth presses against mine.

Our lips cling with testing licks and wet warmth. There's none of the hard possession he usually brings to it, but the hand spread across my ass leaves no doubt that I'm staying where he put me.

"Good morning," he says against my lips.

The rough shadow along his jaw grazes my cheek.

"Were you pretending to be asleep?"

"No." His rich amber eyes drill into mine. "You make more noise than you think."

“I barely moved.”

“You were leaving.”

“I was only getting a drink of water.”

His gaze travels toward the bottle on the table before returning to me. “Sure you weren’t trying to sneak off?”

I make a face at him. “My mouth’s dry.”

“That tends to happen after rum.”

“And pizza,” I agree.

“You only ate two slices.”

“I’m sure your security team enjoyed the rest.”

“I feed *you*, little wild thing. No one else.” His thumb strokes back and forth across my lower back beneath the blanket. “You’re smiling.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Yeah, you are.”

“I’m dehydrated. My mouth is doing weird things because it needs liquid.”

His lips cover mine, and the second kiss is firmer, wetter, hotter, pressing me into the sofa until the warmth around us has nothing to do with the heating.

“I like it when you smile for me,” he says against my lips.

My heart does a stupid little stutter, like it just skipped a beat, and I pull away from him. “I need a shower.”

He runs a hand over his hair and down his face, still tired. “Sure. Go ahead. I've got a few things to sort out.”

When I get to my feet, he pats his sweatpants pocket and digs out his phone.

“Have you heard anything yet?” I ask. “Does anyone know where she is?”

He unlocks the screen and swipes across. “Not yet. Give me a few days. I’ve assigned my best guy to the search.”

His gaze follows me as I gather the blanket around my shoulders.

“Take your time,” he says before pointing to a corridor near the kitchen. “Use the shower in the bedroom straight through there.”

The bedroom door stands open at the end of the hall. I find a clean towel folded on the bathroom counter and a toothbrush in the packet. It’s not his, because there’s an electric toothbrush charging in the corner.

Either he keeps a suspicious number of spare toothbrushes in an apartment, or he arranged it while I slept.

I tear open the packet, cover the bristles in paste, and rinse my mouth.

Once I’m in the shower, water pounds the back of my neck and runs through my hair. I brace both hands against the tiled wall and let it beat across my shoulders.

Being here hasn’t changed anything beyond this apartment.

My family still hates the Harringtons. Ma will never accept Keira, and I have a horrible feeling she’ll try to remove her from Saint’s bed. I just don't know how she’ll do it.

Rafe would rather put Fionn in the dirt than see him stand beside me. While Dane would throw a fit before understanding that I love Fionn.

And Saint… He’ll understand more than any of them while hating every second of it.

They’ll never fully get my attraction to Fionn. It’s complicated.

The man has killed to protect me. Broken Cormac’s hands before he even admitted we had a thing. Stood between me and his father’s threats, then pushed me away because he thought hatred was safer than putting me in danger.

Every choice has cost Fionn a little piece of himself.

Suds run down my temples as I wash my hair and replay everything he'd said last night.

My chest tightens beneath the falling water.

Loving Fionn will tear through our families, and my Ma will only see a betrayal. The real question is whether she loves me enough to put my happiness before her hatred.

I turn off the water, wrap the towel beneath my arms, and squeeze the ends of my hair. When I open the door, Fionn is sitting on the edge of the bed with a black folder in his hand.

He’s freshly washed and dressed in smart trousers and a black shirt, his gold watch cuffing his wrist.

His eyes travel from my wet hair to my bare legs before returning to my face.

“I need to give you something,” he says.

The tone he uses strips the warmth of my shower away.

“What’s wrong… Is it Eilish?”

He stands and holds out his hand.

I look at the folder. “Are ya gonna give me bad news?”

“It’s not bad news.” His open hand lingers between us. “We’ll talk in the sitting room.”

I place my hand in his. “You sure know how to build tension.”

He leads me along the corridors and brings me to the big windows overlooking the city.

Cranes rise above the docks in the distance. Traffic moves along the streets in quiet streams, and the sun is slowly rising.

Fionn comes up behind me, and his arm closes around my waist, drawing my back against his chest. His mouth brushes the damp hair near my ear while his fingers find the knot in my towel.

The fabric drops to my feet.

Cool glass stands inches from my skin with the sprawling city beyond it, while his palm spreads flat across my stomach.

"Every warehouse along the eastern bank," he says.

His hand moves further north.

"The logistics park beyond the bridge."

His finger shifts again, tracing the line of the river.

"The industrial estate."

I follow the path he's drawing across the city. At first, they seem scattered until the shape begins to emerge.

They aren’t separate purchases. Rather, they form a perimeter. Or a noose.

"They're mine." His raspy voice sends a shiver through me.

I take in the scale of what he’s built. Roads join around properties I’ve passed all my life without ever knowing they were for sale.

“The docks belong to the Tallons.”

“And you and I will own the rest, Sera.”

I study his reflection in the glass. His mouth holds tight while his eyes search mine, as if he needs me to believe in the *you and I* he’s offering.

“The Harringtons have always wanted ownership of the docks. It’s something your da’s been after for years. Do you think being with me gives ya something he could never achieve?”

His breath warms my cheek, the rich cotton of his shirt snug against my spine. "The docks aren't what I want."

"Then what do ya want?"

"You."

I turn within the circle of his arm.

His gaze drops to my mouth before he reaches for the folder on the armchair beside us, but instead of handing it over, his fingers close around my throat, my pulse thrumming against his palm.

"Turn back to the city."

I hesitate.

His fingers settle lightly beneath my jaw.

"Kneel for me."

I do a one-eighty turn and lower to my knees, keeping my back against his body. He swathes my throat and tips my head with his thumb beneath my jaw, so his face is upside down, towering over mine.

The angle leaves me exposed to the windows and held entirely by him.

His mouth comes down over mine while his tongue slips past my lips, his hand at my throat. He kisses me until the heat between my thighs pulses, and my nipples peak.

Then he pulls away and places the first document in my hand.

“What’s this?” I ask, scanning the heading, then the legal description beneath it.

My heart pounds faster as I recognize the boundaries.

The land Alasdair Harrington stole from my family after my da’s murder. The same land Saint kidnapped Keira for.

My forehead creases, and my lips move as I read to myself, taking in every word on the page until I whisper the name printed beneath the trust beneficiaries.

Keira Harrington.

Alasdair Harrington.

Sera Harrington.

I read it again.

Heat rises through my chest, spreading like a wildfire that quickly turns cruel and savage.

"You expect me to marry ya to get our land back?"

"No,” he says. "Read the next one."

“So, you’ve decided ya want me, assumed I’d want the god awful Harrington name, and you'd hand me the land like it’s yours to give?”

He removes the page from my fingers and gives me another.

“How about you look at this one?”

The hurt of his expectation has my hands shaking. And now, reading the next document, my eyes jump straight to the names at the bottom.

Sera Tallon-Harrington.

I let out a short laugh and shove it at him. “Seriously, Fionn?”

He takes the page from and returns it to the folder.

“I thought you understood,” I say, trying to get to my feet. “I thought I meant something to ya, but you expect me to take that name by waving that land in front of my face. When I agree to marry someone, it won’t be because they bribed me.”

Fionn comes around me and lowers himself before me until we’re face to face.

The city remains beyond him, the outline of his body glowing in the sunrise.

He places a third page into my hands.

“Sera, I don’t expect you to marry me.”

My throat tightens.

“I *want* you to marry me.”

He taps one finger against the document.

“Read this one.”

I look down, my eyes passing over the legal language until they find the beneficiaries again.

Sera Tallon.

I trace the letters with my fingertips as I take in the sight of my name.

Sera Tallon.

Not Sera Harrington.

Or Sera Tallon-Harrington.

Just… *Me*.

My vision blurs.

He’s not asking me to become someone else; instead, he’s giving room for the woman I already am.

“There aren’t any clauses,” he adds. “Or conditions. And no hidden small print.”

My breath turns shallow. “When does this take effect?”

“As soon as I hand the chosen draft to the underwriters.”

I look up. “Why?”

“That land has stood between our families for too long. I won’t let it stand between us anymore.”

My fingers curl around the page. “And Keira?”

“She’s still named. You both own it.”

“But I have a claim to it now… We can use it?”

“Yeah.”

My stomach drops because there must be a catch. “And if I say *no* and don’t marry ya?”

His eyes hold mine. “It’ll be legally in your name no matter what.”

The anger drains, taking every thought with it. My lips part, but I can only stare at his handsome face while my heart beats faster.

“So, this is your way of asking me to marry ya?”

His hand slips into his trouser pocket, and he takes out a small black box.

Inside, there’s a narrow band of diamonds surrounding a larger stone set low enough that it won’t catch on anything.

“This isn’t a Harrington heirloom.” He watches me closely. “There’s no family history attached to it.”

Fionn lifts the ring from the box.

“I bought it with money earned through my own businesses. Everything I've built until today was mine."

He turns the ring between his fingers before offering it to me. "Everything after today belongs to us."

Diamonds sparkle in the fresh daylight spilling in from the windows.

“Why now?” I whisper, our fingers brushing as I take it from him. “You’ve only just ended your engagement with Eilish and left home. You’ve got freedom now.”

"I left that wedding dress shop and spent an hour thinking about you wearing one." Fionn gives a small shake of his head. "That's when I knew the only man you'd walk down the aisle to meet was me."

The corner of my mouth rises. "What if this all falls apart?"

"Then we'll rebuild it."

I look down at the ring. The diamond blurs, and I blink until its edges focus again. If I meet his eyes, I’ll say yes and let everything else burn.

"I want you, Fionn. I've wanted ya since you took that mask off in the barn and ruined every sensible thought I've had since." The setting bites into my palm as my fingers close around it. "But I'm not saying *yes* to you in secret. Not after everything we've already hidden."

The muscles in his jaw tick, and I think he’s going to argue or tell me the outcome’s already decided, and I just haven’t caught up yet.

My stomach drops. I’ve spent so many nights wishing Fionn would choose me, and now that he has, I’m the one making him wait.

"Then what do you want?"

"Ask me again when I can answer ya properly." My voice breaks, forcing me to swallow before I continue. "When Saint knows. When Ma knows. When it's not just us hiding."

“So, you’re saying *no*…”

That two-letter word knocks the breath from my lungs. I take his hand in mine and press the ring between our palms. My pulse slams, but my voice comes out steady.

"It’s a *yes* that’s waiting to happen, Fionn."

His hand tightens at the base of my spine, and the next hungry kiss is a claim.

When he finally releases me, my lips burn, and his shirttails hang open where I’ve pulled them from his trousers.

“Give me the ring,” he orders.

I set it into his hand and watch as he takes my left hand and slides the ring onto my wedding finger. “I just want to see what it looks like on your finger.”

“I can’t wear it yet,” I say.

Fionn nods. “Wear it when it’s official. In the meantime, I want you to live here.”

I glance around the modern apartment. "My life's at Black Heath."

"I'm not asking you to give it up."

"Then what are ya asking?"

He turns my hand beneath the morning light, the diamond scattering tiny flashes across my skin.

“Go to Black Heath every day. You’ll always be Sera Tallon.” His thumb settles over mine. “And every night, you’ll come home to me. You’re mine too.”

The words settle deep inside me.

Home.

For one reckless heartbeat, I let myself picture building my life with him in this penthouse apartment in the city.

Then Black Heath pushes back into my thoughts.

Ma.
Rafe.
Dane.
Saint.
The ring catches the light as I curl my fingers into my palm.
Not saying *yes* to Fionn was the hardest thing I've ever done.
Telling my family is going to be worse.

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Chapter 36

Sera

The diamond catches the morning light each time I turn my hand, and my breath comes faster as I picture walking into the yard wearing it.

Ma will blow a fuse. Dane and Rafe will see a Harrington making moves on their sister, and Saint will want to know why he was the last to know.

Fionn's on his knees in front of me, his hands resting on his thighs as he watches me.

"Engaged or not, I want you to live here with me," he says. "For this to be our home."

My thumb rubs the gold band. I go home already engaged and tell my family I've moved out too.

"Give me a few days to work it out."

"Does it take you that long to pack?" He smirks, making light of the bomb I'm about to drop on my brothers.

"If Fury was still around, I'd have to knock ya back," I say. "He was my everything."

"Then I have to try harder to steal his title."

Kneeling before him, this close, with the truth surrounding us, is something I've never had with him before.

I've never had the right to study every inch of him as a man I could keep.

His eyelashes are darker than I realized. There's a faint shadow beneath one eye that wasn't there the night we officially met.

I wonder if I put it there. If wanting me has stolen as much sleep from him as wanting him stole from me.

My fingertips skate over his cheek, skimming his jaw.

I've touched him in darkness. Gripped his shoulders while we fought against the heat raging between us. And dragged my nails over his muscles to leave marks that only I knew were under his shirt when I saw him in public.

But stroking him now is different.

The stubble along his jaw is rough against the pads of my roaming fingers. His eyes stay fixed on mine, while the rest of him becomes so rigid that I know the control is restraint.

"Do you know how many nights I lay awake thinking about us?" I ask.

"Tell me."

I exhale a sigh. "Every night since the barn."

"Then that makes two of us," he admits.

My thumb drags across his lower lip. "Did ya ever think we'd end up like this?"

He inhales through his nose. "I made sure we did."

His gaze moves from my eyes to my mouth with the same concentration he gives everything, before he leans in, his lips brushing my mine.

"I'm a man who knows what he wants and will do anything to make it happen."

I shuffle closer until my knees nudge his trousers. His hand comes to my waist, yanking me closer.

Fionn Harrington has never waited for anything in his life. He buys it, takes it, or builds enough power that it has no choice but to come to him.

I push my fingers into his hair.

It's shorter at the sides, softer on top, and a little damp. "You enjoyed chasing me, didn't ya?"

"I liked knowing you'd forgotten how to hate me."

I brush my fingers over the thread-like scar on his cheekbone. "Who did this to ya?"

"Graves." The name comes out rough. "The only man ever allowed to hit me and survive."

"I'm sorry."

I start to lower my hand, but he catches my wrist and keeps my palm against his cheek.

"You've nothing to apologize for." His grip tightens. "My father pulled the trigger."

I run the pads of my fingers down the curve of his neck until I reach his shirt collar, undo the first button and smooth the starched cotton.

When I look up at him again, his pupils have blown wide, and his eyes lock onto mine.

In the silence, I open another button, then rest my lips over the beating pulse in his neck.

“You’re nervous,” I tease. “Having a Tallon with your ring on her finger would do that to a man.”

“I don’t do nervous.”

“Your thumping heart says otherwise.”

“My heart has been unreliable since I met you.”

“Oh yeah?” I draw my lower lip between my teeth and take my time to unbutton his shirt, one button at a time. “So, ya really are in love with me,” I whisper.

His eyes hold mine. “I am.”

“And wanting to marry me isn’t a plot to get full control of the shipping routes?” My voice comes out surprisingly soft, even though I’m terrified that what I’m saying could be true. “I mean, you were prepared to marry Eilish for power.”

“And I declined that alliance because no other woman has sunk her nails into me like you have.” He smiles. “Metaphorically speaking, of course,”

I lean closer until my forehead rests against his. “Then say it. I want to hear the words… Not just hold a deed and wear a pretty ring.”

His breath warms my lips.

The lightness leaves his expression, and the man beneath it looks back at me without charm or calculation.

“I love you,” he says, kneeling on the floor with my heart in his hands. “And I’ll do whatever it takes to protect this, us…you.”

I thought hearing him say it would bring relief. Instead, it cracks open something inside me that’s been sealed shut since the first night in the barn.

Dragging his shirt off his shoulders, I smooth my hands over his inked skin, taking my time to appreciate his muscles.

I smile to myself and gently run my nails down his pecs, only to be rewarded by his skin coming alive with goosebumps and faint scratch marks.

“I love ya too,” I whisper.

His eyes close for a beat when the shirt lands on the floor beside us. When he opens them again, the intensity in his stare catapults a shiver across my scalp.

“Say that again.”

“I love ya.”

His hand slides into my hair and gathers it at my nape.

“Again.”

“I love ya, Fionn.”

He kisses me harder than before as he tilts my head to deepen the kiss. When his fingers tighten in my hair and his breathing changes, my hands drop to his belt buckle.

The leather resists for half a second before it gives.

“Do you know what I hated most?” I ask.

“What?”

“Every time you entered a room, my eyes found ya before sense could stop me. And all I could think about was doing this—”

I tug the belt open, watching his expression while I do it. His jaw is tight. His breathing has gone shallow and controlled, as if he's letting me lead.

It won't last. It never does with him. But I take what he's giving me while he's giving it.

I lower his zip and slide my hand inside.

He's hard. Hot, thick, and heavy against my palm, and the grunt he makes when I wrap my fingers around his dick has my temperature rising.

"Sera."

I stroke the length of his dick and his hand flexes against my waist.

"I can feel the ring," he says, his voice like gravel. "Your engagement ring. On my dick."

"Does it feel good?”

"Do it harder."

The band of the ring drags along the length, and his eyes go darker, wide pupils swallowing amber.

"You like that," I say.

"I like what it’s going to mean for us." His hand comes up and closes around my wrist, stilling me.

The control he's been holding by a thread finally snaps. He strips the rest of his clothes off in seconds, no ceremony, no patience, and then he

stops himself and smiles at me.

A beautiful, seductive smile that reaches right inside my chest and squeezes.

Then his hands are on me.

One grabs my hair, the other spreads wide across my bare back, pulling me into him, skin to skin.

The kiss is all teeth and heat and everything we've been trying to suppress for months.

"Tell me you've always wanted this," he says against my mouth.

"You know I have." I bite his lower lip. "I was jealous of my own best friend, Fionn."

He turns me with one hand on my hip, guiding me around on my knees until I'm facing the windows, and the whole city is spread out below us in the morning light. Rooftops. The river. A city bought up by a Harrington.

"Hands on the glass," he orders.

I press my palms flat against the window. He kneels behind me, his chest hot against my spine, and his hand slides over my stomach, lowering between my thighs.

His fingers find me soaked, sliding through me and his breath hisses against my neck.

"Look," he says.

And I do. I stare out at the city but find our reflections first. Him and me.

"I see us."

"Exactly." Two thick fingers push into me, and my forehead nearly hits the glass. "And you're dripping down your thighs because of it."

"Because of you—" It breaks off into a moan because his thumb has found my clit, and he's circling it slowly.

He works me until my thighs are shaking, until I'm riding his hand and swearing at him, and my palms are squeaking down the glass, and then, because he's never once given me anything without making me feel the hunger of it first, he takes his fingers away.

"Fionn, I swear to god—"

"Look at what we have." His dick drags through my wetness, notching against me. "I want you to understand that I've built my empire alone, and now I want to build the rest with you."

He pushes inside me in one long, relentless stroke, widening me around every hard inch of him until his hips are flush to my ass.

My gasp fogs the glass.

He's everywhere. Stretching me, filling me, his hand splayed on my stomach to hold me where he wants me, and for a heartbeat he stays buried while my muscles clamp around him.

Sunlight pours over us. His heart slams against my back.

"I don’t give a fuck what anyone says about us." His voice is wrecked. "Do you understand that?"

"I do now."

He drives into me hard, dragging almost all the way out and slamming back in, and I have to brace both palms on the glass to take him. Every thrust puts my breath on the window.

"Harder." I don't recognize my own voice. "Fionn—harder."

He gives it to me until my forehead butts the glass.

"Say it," he grits out, his mouth at my ear. "Say you love me while I'm inside you."

"I love ya."

"Again."

"I love ya— Fionn—"

His hand leaves my hip and covers mine on the glass, his fingers sliding between my fingers, pressing against the ring.

"Come for me, Sera. Let the whole city hear."

His other hand drops to my clit, works it in tight, ruthless circles, and I shatter.

The rush rips through me in a wave that folds me forward, and he holds me through all of it, working me with his fingers and his dick until my body clenching around him drags him over with me.

He comes with my name behind his teeth, his arm like iron around my waist as he pulses cum inside me.

Settle in with a love story.

Head to Lokepub for more romance novels.

Once he’s done, he eases out and turns me around. We end up facing each other again, wrecked and bare in the morning light. He gathers my hand in his and kisses my knuckles, just beside the ring.

"Can you believe it? A Harrington ring on a Tallon hand," I whisper.

"No." His thumb sweeps over the diamond. "It’s my ring on my little wild thing’s finger."

We stay together for another minute, my cheek resting against his chest while his heartbeat settles beneath my ear. His fingers drift lazily through my hair before he presses a kiss to the top of my head.

“Come on.”

I tilt my chin until I can see him. “Where are we going?”

“We’ll take a quick shower together.”

He gets to his feet and offers me his hand.

“Thanks,” I mutter as my legs wobble the second I stand.

A grin tugs at his mouth. “Wow. You thanked me.”

I laugh and shake my head. “I guess you’ll have to get used to the nice side of me now.”

“Does Nice Sera come out often?”

“She does.” I smirk. “But only for the right person.”

His hand settles against the small of my back, steadying me more than guiding me as we make our way into the en-suite and into the shower cubicle.

He holds his hand out. “Give it here.”

I work the ring off my finger and drop it into his palm. He unclasps the chain at the back of my neck without asking, threads the ring onto it beside the F, and fastens it again.

The two of them settle together against my breastbone, still warm from his hands.

“It looked better on your finger,” he says.

“I'll wear it properly the day I say *yes*.”

When I turn on the water, he reaches around me for the body wash, earning himself an unintentional elbow in the ribs.

“You take up a lot of room.”

He lathers suds over his chest, and my mind goes blank.

“I’ll get the builder to make it bigger so we can do this more often.”

He chuckles under his breath before stealing a kiss beneath the spray, and I find myself grinning.

By the time we step out, he wraps a towel around me before fastening another around his hips, then crouches in front of the vanity and pulls open the bottom drawer.

I pause halfway through rubbing my hair dry. “What are ya looking for?”

“A hairdryer.”

I narrow my eyes. “Why?”

“So I can dry your hair.”

I stare at him, my forehead fully creased. “Have ya completely lost your mind?”

He glances up without the slightest hint of embarrassment. “I’ll take that as a *no*.”

“It’s definitely a *no*.”

Fionn shrugs. “I was only offering.”

“Look, you know me.” I continue to rough dry my hair. “I like to do things myself.”

“Hm.”

He closes the drawer, sets the hairdryer on the counter, and wanders into the bedroom while I plug the hairdryer in myself.

Once I’ve finished drying my hair, dressed in yesterday's clothes, and joined him in the kitchen, he’s pulled on the same shirt and dress pants he’d been wearing earlier. His phone is in one hand, his thumb tapping across the screen.

“What are ya doing now?” I ask.

“Ordering coffee.” He looks up. “I take it you want one?”

“I always want one.”

He sets the phone on the kitchen island before walking over to me. For a second, he just stares at me.

“What?”

“You’ve got your hair caught.”

His fingers disappear into the ends, freeing a strand trapped beneath the collar of my jacket before smoothing it over my shoulder.

“There.”

My stomach flips. “Nice Fionn is very attractive."

As he smiles, I wander over to the screen built into the wall and tap it, curious what it’s for.

Music comes out of speakers I can’t see, drifting into the apartment.

Fionn looks over from the kitchen. “That’s a good choice.”

I glance over my shoulder. “I just tapped the screen. Is it your Spotify account?

“It is.”

I blink.

“You listen to I Prevail?”

“I do.”

“‘Hurricane’ is one of my favorites,” I tell him.

He nods. “It’s one of mine too.”

I walk over, holding out my hand. “Gimme your phone.”

He passes it over without question, and I scroll through his most recent playlist.

“Bad Omens.”

“Sleep Token.”

“Motionless In White.”

My eyebrows climb higher with every swipe.

“You’re kidding me.”

“What?”

“You’ve been hiding this.”

“I haven’t been hiding anything.”

“We practically have the same playlist, Fionn.”

A corner of his mouth lifts. “Why are you surprised?”

I look up from the screen. “I don’t know.”

“Eilish told us we had the same taste in music,” he points out.

Fionn takes his phone back. “You assumed we had nothing in common.”

I shrug and smile. “I think we’ve got a lot in common, actually.”

His eyes meet mine. “I worked that out a while ago.”

The intercom buzzes, and he moves away. “That’ll be your coffee, little wild thing.”

A couple of minutes later, he returns carrying two takeaway cups and hands one to me.

I take a sip and hum out my approval. “This is exactly how I take my coffee.”

“I know.”

“How?”

His brows drift up, genuinely puzzled by the question. “Eilish told me.”

“You asked her?”

“Sera.” He gives me a look that says I should already know the answer.

I stare at the cup, unable to hide my grin until thoughts of Eilish creep in, and the happiness fades.

“I have to talk to her.” I take another sip. “Just to hear her voice and make sure she’s okay.”

“I’m working on it.”

We drink the rest of our coffee leaning against opposite sides of the kitchen island, talking about nothing important until the silence settles comfortably between us.

Eventually, I set my empty cup on the counter. “I should get going.”

His expression softens, but he doesn’t argue. “Okay.”

“I need to spend some time at the yard with my family.”

He nods and slides a hand into his trousers pocket.

“And I need to talk to Saint alone, or with Keira, maybe.”

“How long will you be?”

I blow out a slow breath. “I don’t know.”

“They won’t make this easy.”

“No, they won’t,” I agree.

At the door, I slip my boots on before turning back to find him exactly where I’d left him, watching me.

“Sera.”

“Yeah?”

“Don’t take too long.”

“I won’t.”

“I mean it.”

He crosses the room until he’s standing in front of me, one hand braced on the door, the other pinching my chin.

“You’re my fiancée now, Sera.”

“You’re jumping ahead of yourself.”

His thumb stops against my chin.

“You will be.”

I lift my left hand and press it over his heart. “And you’ll be mine.”

The smile that answers me is faint, but it’s the most unguarded one I’ve ever seen on his face.

“Glad you paid attention, little wild thing.”

I lift onto my toes and brush a kiss across his lips before reaching for the door handle.

“I’ll see ya soon.”

“I’ll be counting on it.”

Cold air prickles over my skin the second I pull away and step into the hall. I glance over my shoulder to find him leaning against the doorjamb, his arms folded and a slight furrow between his brows.

I offer him a smile while my fingers press against the ring through my top.

If my family won’t accept Fionn, I’ll have to choose where I stand. God help me, I can’t turn my back on them, but how the hell could I walk away from him?

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Chapter 37

Sera

I grab another invoice from the pile, flatten the dog-eared corner and slide it across the desk toward Rafe.

"You missed one."

Outside, the dogs prowl through the yard, and every so often they bark at the wind.

Reclining in the old chair, Rafe takes a gulp of coffee before adding the paper to the stack without reading it.

"I was hoping ya wouldn't notice."

"I notice everything."

"Yeah, little miss fucking ballache."

Across the room, Dane rocks back on two legs of a battered wooden chair, boots planted against the filing cabinet.

He flicks idly through his phone, the corner of his mouth lifting before he pockets it again.

"You know," he says, stretching his arms above his head, "there are lads our age enjoying their Sunday instead of drowning in paperwork."

Rafe snorts. "Aye? And what exactly were ya doing until half three this morning?"

Dane grins. "Taking in the local scenery."

I don't even bother looking up. That smug tone tells me some poor girl was talked into spending the night with him, and judging by the size of his ego, he's planning on dining out on it for the rest of the week.

"I hope ya paid her well," I say.

"She got a night she'll never forget."

"Oh, Jesus Christ."

Rafe laughs into his mug. "Was it that brunette who’s been eyeballin’ ya for weeks?"

"The very one."

"The one with the cute tattoo on her inner thigh?"

Dane points at him. "See? You noticed."

"I noticed because she nearly knocked over my pint with her tits trying to get to you."

“What can I say, she—”

I fire my pen at him, and it bounces off his chest. "I don't need to hear this shit."

Rafe's chair squeaks as he leans deeper, balancing his mug on his stomach. "You're only saying that because you've nothing to contribute."

"I've plenty to contribute."

"Oh, yeah?" he says. “Who’s been rattlin’ your bones?”

“Yeah, Sera,” Dane chimes in. “We want names and addresses so we can grill them.”

Through the window, Shay crosses the yard with his phone against his ear. He paces in the wind with his back to us and his free hand on top of his head.

Dane reaches for the tin on the windowsill, opens it, and frowns. “Who the fuck ate all the chocolate chip cookies?”

"I did," I say, flipping up my middle finger. "Snooze, ya lose, big lad."

He mutters something under his breath before settling for a plain one instead.

"I actually feel sorry for Ronan," Rafe adds.

The smile slips from my face, and I glare at him. “Why?”

"The poor lad has followed ya around for years."

"Doesn’t mean I have to marry him."

"You could give him something for the effort," Dane says through a mouthful of oatmeal cookie.

I roll my eyes and gather another handful of invoices. "I’m not interested in Ronan."

"No kidding," Rafe laughs.

Dane brushes crumbs from his hoodie onto the floor. "I reckon he's still hoping you'll change your mind."

"He'll be waiting a long time."

Rafe studies me over the rim of his mug. "So."

Here we go.

"You're twenty-three."

"And?"

"When was the last time you actually went with a lad?"

Heat creeps into my cheeks.

My hand skates to the chain hidden beneath my jumper, my thumb finding the gold F first.

Threaded beside it, hidden against my skin, sits my engagement ring.

Dane drops the front legs of his chair onto the floor with a thud and leans forward, elbows on his knees.

"Hang on..." His eyes narrow. "You're hiding something."

I shake my head and let out a forced laugh. This would be the perfect opportunity to come clean, but I need Saint to back me up.

"No, I'm not."

"Sera."

"I'm not."

"You are."

Outside, movement catches my eye. Saint stands beneath the overhang of the main barn, sleeves rolled to his forearms while he tightens the latch on one of the feed bins.

Keira leans against the doorframe beside him, a mug cradled in her hands.

He says something I can't hear, and she laughs.

Like really laughs, and he nudges her shoulder with his own. She bumps him back and smiles up at him, so fucking infatuated with my big brother.

They make it look...easy.

Like loving each other is worth it.

If I don't tell him today, he'll hear it from someone else. And after everything that's happened, I know he’s the only one who’ll understand.

I push my chair back. "I'm away to speak to Saint."

Rafe frowns. "You’re leaving us with this shit?"

“You’ll manage.”

I leave Dane and Rafe to argue over the last cookie and the stack of invoices that need sorted.

Saint looks up from the feed bin as I approach, brushing the dust from his hands. "You alright?"

"Aye." I force a smile that doesn't quite reach my eyes. "Have ya got a minute?"

"For you?" He grins. "Always."

Keira offers me a small smile before glancing between the two of us. "I'll leave you to it."

When she turns to go, I reach out and catch her by the forearm. "I'd...actually like you to stay."

Her brows knit together. "Me?"

I nod. "Yeah."

Saint studies me for a moment. "Is something wrong, Sera?"

"No." I shake my head, my throat dry. "Nothing's wrong. But we should go somewhere private. There's something I need to tell you."

Saint tips his head toward the feed room across the yard. "Come on."

The three of us cross the yard, the wind chasing loose strands of hay around our boots. Somewhere behind the barns, a horse stamps against a stable door, and water hits the bottom of a metal bucket.

We step inside, the familiar scent of grain and molasses wrapping around me as Saint pulls the door almost closed behind us.

I look from my brother to Keira.

"Do you miss your family?"

Keira blinks.

"Sort of," she says. "I was away at boarding school, then Paris. I got used to being away before I ever came here. Fionn checks in every so often, and my little sister’s too busy with school and her friends these days."

Saint slips his hand into hers without a word.

"So it wasn't hard?"

Keira smiles. "Fighting with them was. Living here wasn't."

“Do you see this going somewhere?” I ask. “Like do ya have a future together?”

My hand settles over the chain beneath my jumper, and the ring presses against my palm.

Saint’s eyes narrow. “Am I going to need my gun at the end of this conversation?”

I make a face at him. “Don’t be so dramatic."

“Well, the fact ya answered that so quickly worries me.”

“Just answer the question.”

His fingers tighten around Keira’s, but he stares right at me. “She’s it for me.”

“And Ma?”

The curve at the corner of his mouth disappears. “Times are changing. She has to accept it.”

“I don’t think she ever will, though.”

Saint frowns. "Is Ma up to something? Is that what this is?"

“This is about me.” I swallow hard against the pulse slamming in my throat. “And Fi—”

The feed-room door flies open, and Shay appears in the doorway.

"Saint! We've got a fucking problem."

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Chapter 38

Fionn

The wrought-iron gates part before my Range Rover reaches them.

Floodlights throw light and shadow over the drive, strobing the armed guards stationed on either side of the entrance.

One nods as I pass. The other presses a hand to the radio clipped to his shoulder, announcing my arrival.

At the turning circle in front of the main entrance of my family home, I kill the engine and sit for a moment, fingers resting on the steering wheel.

I nearly didn't come.

After everything he's done, the invitation to Sunday dinner seemed less like tradition and more like an opportunity to get payback for Graves.

But maybe we can work things out, which would keep Sera off my father's radar.

I climb out, lift the collar on my coat against the rain, and march to the front door. The head doorman steps aside and welcomes me home.

"Good to have you home, Mr. Harrington."

"My home's in the city now."

"Let me take your coat."

I shrug it off and hand it to him.

Inside, warmth rolls over me, carrying the scent of old floor rugs, cigar smoke, and fresh flower arrangements.

Staff move quietly through the corridors preparing for dinner, running like clockwork as always.

Two more guards stand outside my father's study, jackets hanging open, so their gun holsters are visible.

They both acknowledge me; however, these men are loyal to *him*. Not me. I know the men who'd put their neck on the line for me and those who'd put a bullet in my back for him.

One of them opens the double doors.

"Mr. Harrington."

My father sits in a leather wingback beside the fire, a fat cigar burning between his fingers. A crystal tumbler of whiskey glows in the firelight on the narrow table beside him.

Mother occupies the chaise by the window, wearing a long emerald silk dress, her usual high ball gin accessory clamped in one hand while the other turns a page of a magazine.

When she notices me, her red lips spread wide.

"There you are, Fionn," she says, dropping her kitten heels to the floor. "Prompt as always."

She crosses the room, kisses my cheek, and smooths an imaginary crease from my shirt.

"You look tired. Are you not sleeping, son?"

"I'm fine, Mother."

Her smile fades, and she drifts back to the window because she's never really been interested in small talk.

"I just opened a new bottle of McGrath whiskey," my father says from his armchair. "Pour yourself a drink."

There's no *hello*, just an order.

I walk to the drinks cabinet and fill a crystal tumbler, pouring it straight, no ice. It's not from obedience. I just need a fucking drink to get through this pantomime.

When I angle back to the room, my father gestures to the matching wingback chair opposite him. "Sit with me."

I set the glass on the small side table next to me and pinch the knees of my trousers before lowering into the leather, the fire crackling and spitting in the silence.

He draws on his cigar and puffs out the smoke, so it swirls before his face. "I hear you bought the old scrapyard."

I take a sip, considering him. "News travels."

"It wasn't on the market."

"Everything's on the market for the right price."

His brows drift higher, and a subtle smile tugs at the corners of his lips. “So, I did teach you something.”

“The owner took some gentle persuading.”

“I imagine he did.”

He studies me through the smoke. “What are you planning to do with it?”

“I haven’t decided.”

“You don’t spend that kind of money without having a plan.”

“I’ll probably flatten it.”

“For?”

“A mix of development opportunities. Apartments, retail units. Depends what planning permission lets me get away with.”

He nods at that. “The place is an eyesore.”

“Which means the planning department will be happy to approve a change.”

Talking with him almost seems normal. Like old times, without the restrictions. However, my chest tightens when he drinks, and I’m thrown back ten years to the sixteen-year-old me waiting for his approval.

“I hear you’ve acquired three more properties near the waterfront as well.”

“I have.”

“Ambitious.”

“I’ve never lacked ambition.”

“No. You get that from me.” He says it so easily that I almost believe he’s being sincere.

For years I’ve chased exactly this. Not his money or his empire. Just the belief that he’d be proud enough to let me take the lead and do things my way.

I set my glass down.

“So…why am I really here?”

His eyebrows rise a fraction, and his expression changes as if I’ve asked a stupid question. “Why wouldn’t I invite my son for Sunday dinner? We always eat together as a family.”

There’s a knock against the study door, and a suited staff member comes inside. “Mr. and Mrs. Harrington… Dinner is served.”

Father rises, clamps his cigar in his teeth, and buttons his jacket. “Let’s eat, son. You’ll enjoy this meal.”

I watch as he juts out his elbow for mother to latch onto and then check my phone, something not sitting quite right in my chest.

Once I've eaten, I'll hear what he has to say and leave. There's nothing this man could offer me that would fill the void Graves' murder left behind.

The dining room hasn't changed since I was a boy.

The same twelve-seat mahogany table dominates the center of the room, the gold ceiling lights spreading warmth across silver cutlery and crystal glassware.

Portraits of Harrington ancestors watch from the walls as two members of staff skirt the room.

On ceremony, my father waits for my mother to take her seat before pulling out his own chair at the head of the table.

I sit opposite her, aware of the silence as she folds her napkin across her lap and reaches for a freshly poured wine.

There's only the clink of serving spoons on china and the two-way door swinging closed behind the staff.

My gaze drifts to the empty chairs along the table.

"Lorcan's late."

I glance toward the doorway, expecting him to stroll in any minute.

My father unfolds his napkin.

"He won't be joining us this evening."

I frown. "How come? He never misses dinner."

"We had a rather interesting conversation this afternoon."

I wait for him to elaborate, but he just gathers a knife in his hand and spreads butter on the demi-baguette on his side plate.

"What about?"

"Family."

Mother's glass pauses halfway to her mouth before continuing to drink as though she hasn't heard a thing.

"What about family?"

Father salts his venison before answering. "I decided it was time he heard a few things."

"What sort of things?"

"The truth about his mother."

The room settles into silence except for the tinkle of a serving spoon hitting a plate.

I sit straighter as he pops a piece of meat in his mouth with infuriating calmness.

“The truth?” A knot begins to tighten low in my stomach. “You know how she died?”

Father chews, swallows, and takes a sip of his red wine before answering. “I know the parts that are important.”

I glance over at my mother, who’s keeping her gaze on her fucking fishbowl-sized glass of red wine.

“You’re being deliberately vague, father,” I say.

He reaches for another potato. “Am I?”

“Tell me what you know.”

A faint smile touches his mouth. “People tend to listen more carefully when they don’t have all the answers.”

One of the staff replaces mother’s empty bread plate before disappearing as silently as he’d arrived.

I set my knife and fork on the linen tablecloth, anger simmering in my veins. “I’m listening. What did you tell him?”

“I told him enough.”

“Christ…” I grit. “Stop playing games.”

Father meets my eyes across the table. "I answered the questions he'd been asking."

My stomach tightens another notch. “I don’t understand.”

“No.” He dabs the corner of his mouth with his napkin. “You rarely do until it’s too late. That’s why you needed longer to learn, rather than think you were ready to go head-to-head with me.”

A muscle jumps in my jaw. “What the hell does that mean?”

“It means Lorcan deserved honesty.”

“And where is he now?”

Father leans back in his chair. “On his way to Black Heath Stud.”

The dinner table blurs, and my hand fists the linen napkin. “Why?”

He runs the top of his finger around the rim of his wineglass. “To avenge his mother.”

My hands go numb, and my blood runs cold.

The Tallons.

Lorcan.

My aunt.

“He wanted to know who destroyed her life.”

“You sent him to Black Heath Stud to cause trouble?” My chair scrapes across the floor as I lean forward. “Why the fuck would you do that?”

“I didn’t send him anywhere.”

“You just said—”

“I gave him the truth.” He watches me, almost smug. “What he chooses to do with that information is entirely his own decision.”

“You’re talking in riddles.”

“I don’t believe I am.”

“What. Did. You. Tell. Him?”

Father doesn’t answer. Instead, he selects another chunk of venison.

“Tell me.”

He continues eating, and my temper spikes, but I refuse to give him the satisfaction of seeing me lose control.

After a few seconds, he lays his knife and fork together.

“Are you still playing with the Tallon girl?”

“I’m not playing,” I tell him. “I asked her to marry me.”

Mother lowers her glass, and the smile on my father vanishes. His chest rises and falls as if he’s trying to keep himself in check, then he clears his throat.

The prongs of his fork spear a potato as an almost imperceptible smile appears before he glances at the grandfather clock. “I wonder if she’ll still want to marry you after tonight.”

My heartbeat begins to drown out the room. “What the hell have you done?”

He reaches for his wine and takes an unhurried sip before he sets the glass next to his plate.

“You’ve always had one flaw, Fionn.”

I don’t blink.

“You think a father should be kind. Lessons are what make real men.”

I lean across the table and glare at him. If this bastard wasn’t my father, I’d punch his fucking teeth out. “I asked you a question.”

“And I’m answering it.”

“No, you’re avoiding it with your sanctimonious bullshit.”

“You’ve spent months risking your inheritance for a Tallon.”

“Sera has nothing to do with this.”

“Doesn’t she?”

“Leave her out of it.”

“I would have,” he says evenly. “Had you done the same.”

The room suddenly becomes too warm.

My pulse pounds against my throat and my shirt collar tightens. “What’s Lorcan planning?”

Father shrugs. “To avenge his mother, of course. In whatever way he thinks is deserving.”

I stare at him, certain I’ve misheard. “What has Black Heath Stud got to do with my aunt?”

“That isn’t the question you should be asking.”

“Then what is?”

“Whether you’ll get there in time.”

Every muscle in my body locks.

My gaze drops to my plate where my venison sits untouched, the gravy cooling around the edges. Father's is nearly gone. Someone has refilled Mother's wine without me noticing, and the side plates have disappeared from the table altogether.

Christ.

I push the chair back and stand, tossing the napkin onto the table. “You know your daughter is at Black Heath stud?”

“That’s not my problem anymore,” he says. “Your sister is a traitor.”

“If anything happens to her—” I say over my shoulder, heading for the door. “Or Sera—I swear to fuck—I’ll kill you with my bare fucking hands, old man.”

“Fionn,” his stone-cold voice slips over my shoulder. “Lorcan won’t be alone.”

The words stop me mid stride, but I refuse to look back at him.

“I imagine the Crowe’s butcher will have reached Black Heath Stud by now.”

Everything finally clicks into place, and the ticking of the grandfather clock grows louder as everything else falls away.

For one pathetic hour I'd believed him.

I'd sat across from him talking business, chasing the same approval I'd wanted since I was a boy.

He'd known exactly what I needed to hear.

And he'd used every fucking second of it against me while he sent a war to Black Heath Stud.

“You’re a fucking sick bastard.”

“And you're not worthy of the Harrington name,” my father calls after me.

But I don’t grant him a reply.

I wrench the front door open so hard it slams against the stone wall, and the doorman rushes up behind me.

Rain lashes across the drive as I sprint toward the Range Rover, open the boot, grab my gun, and leave the balaclava behind. Then I turn away and head for the helipad, my shoes clipping on the wet tarmac.

The helicopter sits dark against the night, its blades motionless beneath the floodlights.

"Get the pilot," I bark at the nearest guard without breaking stride. "Now."

I drag my phone from my pocket and call Sera. The ringtone pulses in my ear while I keep running.

When she doesn't answer, I end the call before it reaches voicemail and try again.

“Come on, Sera,” I mutter. “Pick up.”

The second call rings out too, and my fingers grip around the phone.

Reaching the chopper, I slide the door open and climb in, then call Keira.

She answers before the first ring has even finished.

"Fionn..." she whispers.

A crash explodes somewhere beyond her. She sucks in a sharp breath. Then comes the unmistakable crack of gunfire.

"Where are you?"

“The Tallons are under attack.”

“Are you with Saint?”

“He put me in the hayloft.” Keira drags in a quick, uneven breath. “I can hear them shooting.”

“Where’s Sera?”

“She went after them.”

I suck in a breath and grip the phone. Christ, Sera’s facing my father’s men while I’m miles away, inside a helicopter that hasn’t even left the fucking ground.

“Stay hidden,” I bite out. “I’ll be there soon.”

The pilot opens the cockpit door, and I end the call.

“Black Heath Stud. How quickly can you get me there?”

“Fifteen minutes.”

I drag a hand through my hair. In the ring, the threat is always close enough to hit. Here, the only man who can get me to Sera has just told me those bastards have another nine hundred fucking seconds before I can reach her.

My fist slams into the bulkhead. “Make it less.”

If they reach the hayloft or Sera reaches them first, fifteen goddamn minutes will be too late.

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Chapter 39

Sera

Shay ignores us for a second, listening to whoever is speaking on the other end of the phone. His expression is hardened, every trace of color gone from his face.

“Get everyone back to the main yard,” he orders. “I don’t care where they are. Leave the fucking machinery and move.”

He ends the call.

“What the hell is going on?” Saint asks, beating me to it.

“Two vehicles coming down the main track. Another three on the lower road, and I’ve just heard there are armed men crossing the fields behind the broodmare barns.”

The blood pounding in my ears grows louder.

“How many men?” Saint asks.

“Too many.”

Shay’s phone rings again. He answers and turns toward the doorway, his gaze sweeping across the yard.

“Black Heath Stud’s under attack. We need back-up. And don’t fucking hang around.”

Saint pulls his gun from the back of his waistband.

“Crowes?”

“Has to be,” Shay agrees. “They’re coming at us from every direction.”

Keira’s hand tightens around Saint’s.

He turns to her so fast she barely has time to react before he takes hold of her arm and pulls her out of the feed room.

“Saint—”

“Move.”

Shay and I follow them across the yard as Dane and Rafe come out of the office.

Rafe still has his coffee mug in one hand, but he drops it when he sees Shay's gun. It hits the concrete and shatters beside his boots.

"What the fuck's happening?" Dane reaches for his own, then swears. "Fuck. I must've left it at that girl's place."

"We're surrounded," Shay says, already dialing another number. "Get armed."

Rafe and Dane disappear into the office for spare weapons while Saint marches Keira toward the ladders.

"Where are we going?" she asks.

He points to the hayloft. "You're going up there."

"I'm not hiding while you're in danger." She stares up at him and steels her spine. "Give me a gun."

Saint checks his clip and hands her his. "Take mine. Now get up the ladder and use that if any of those fuckers comes near ya."

I shove my hand into my jeans pocket and mutter a curse. I left my phone on the charger in the house.

"Keira," I call out. "Have you got your phone with ya?"

Her brows pinch together, and she shakes her head, looking over at me. "It's in the cabin."

Fuck, I haven't memorized Fionn's number.

Horses stamp in their stalls as the rising rumble of engines outside unsettles them.

I dart over to the barn doors where Shay is and take a look at the vehicles heading our way in numbers.

"How long before more of our men get here?" I ask.

Shay runs a hand down his face. "Maybe ten minutes, or longer."

"Jesus fuck," I mutter, turning from the icy wind as Saint drags Keira to the bottom of wooden ladders.

"I need you to listen to me," he says, tucking hair behind her ears. "Stay outta sight."

Her eyes shine as she looks at the gun in her hand. "What about you?"

"I've got a cabinet full of guns." He cups the back of her neck and brings his forehead down to hers. "Get up those steps, lock the hatch and stay there until someone comes for ya."

“Someone?” Her voice rasps. “What do you mean, *someone*? You’ll come and get me.”

A vehicle roars closer, tires tearing over the gravel beyond the main gates.

I press a hand to my necklace when Saint kisses her.

He holds her face between his hands and claims her lips in a way that makes me feel how difficult this decision is for him. When he steps away, Keira clutches the front of his Sherpa jacket.

“You’ll come back for me.”

“I love you.”

Her face crumples. “Saint—”

“I love you,” he repeats, pressing one last kiss to her forehead. “Now get up the fucking steps.”

Keira hesitates before turning and climbing. Saint watches until she reaches the top, then waits for the hatch to close above her.

The bolt scrapes into place, and he lowers his head for a breath before any trace of softness disappears.

By the time he turns around, he’s Saint Tallon again.

Dane and Rafe return from the office carrying three guns, ready to hand me one when Saint steps in front of them before they can pass.

“If anything happens to me, you look after Keira.”

Rafe’s mouth hardens because he’d rather chew his hand off than help a Harrington.

“Swear it, Rafe.”

“Saint—”

“Swear to me.” He grips the front of Rafe’s jacket and drags him closer. “As my fucking brother, swear you’ll protect Keira. Whatever it costs.”

Rafe glances toward the hayloft before nodding. “I swear.”

Saint releases him and turns to Dane, whose mouth is set in a firm line.

“Yeah, me too.”

A gunshot cracks outside.

One of the horses rears in its stall, striking the door with its front hooves.

Saint grabs the gun from Dane and looks at me as he heads past. “Load up. Whatever ya were going to tell me can wait until after.”

Dane and Rafe follow him out of the barn, leaving me beneath the hayloft with Keira hidden above my head and the ring digging into my

palm.

Tallon men pour from the smaller barns and workshops, weapons drawn as they spread along the walls and behind the parked vehicles.

Shay stands near the main gate, shouting instructions into his phone while Saint moves across the yard.

I sprint into the office, wrench open the gun cabinet, and grab the shotgun from the rack. The box of cartridges slips from my hand and spills across the floor.

“Fuck.”

I drop to my knees, shove as many as I can into my pockets, and load two into the chamber.

Gunfire erupts. I duck below the window as glass bursts over my head and rains across the desk.

Dane appears in the doorway, catches me by the shoulder, and drags me into the corridor behind the office.

“Stay with me,” he says. “There’s a fucking army out there.”

“Christ…” I pant. “How do we get out of this?”

“We fight.”

Another volley tears through the building. Plaster spits from the wall beside Dane’s head.

“Cover me.”

He runs, and I follow him out.

The main gate hangs twisted against one post. A black four-by-four has forced its way through and sits diagonally across the entrance, its bonnet smoking as men spill from behind it.

I raise the shotgun and fire.

The recoil slams into my shoulder. One of the men drops behind the vehicle while the others scatter for cover.

Saint fires from behind the stone water trough, his shots measured and controlled. Rafe crouches near the workshop doors beside Shay, returning fire toward the lower field.

More vehicles approach from the far side of the stud.

Shay looks over his shoulder. “They’re through the south boundary.”

“Move three men to the house,” Saint shouts. “Nobody gets near Ma.”

As if summoned by her name, Ma strides out of the back door carrying Da’s old rifle.

Her hair whips across her face in the wind, but her hands are steady as she lifts the gun and fires at the gate.

“Get back inside,” Saint roars.

She reloads without looking at him. “This is my home, son.”

A bullet strikes the stone beside her shoulder, sending shards over the steps. Saint swears and signals two men toward the house.

Straight after, he swivels and fires at the men coming through the broken gate, then freezes.

“What?” I shout.

One of the men turns so the floodlights highlight his face.

Saint keeps his aim. “That’s a Harrington man.”

My stomach drops.

Another man runs across the track wearing the same dark jacket as the guards at Fionn’s family home.

Then another.

“Alasdair,” I whisper to myself. “Fionn must have told him.”

“Fionn told him what?” Dane asks.

“This is a fucking Harrington attack,” Saint yells.

“Doesn’t matter whose men they are,” Shay shouts. “They’re firing at us.”

More figures appear along the field boundary.

However, they aren’t dressed the same. One has a white crow stitched across the shoulder of his jacket.

“The Crowes are here too,” Dane mutters beside me. “Jesus fuck. They’ve come together.”

Saint returns fire and takes out a shooter.

A masked figure emerges from behind the wall near the machinery shed, hood up, a long knife gripped in one hand.

I wave over at Rafe and point across the yard. “The butcher’s here.”

Rafe looks over and lunges without hesitation. Dane bolts after him, grabbing him by the arm and swinging him close to the barn for cover.

“We stick together.”

“She’s here,” Rafe grits. “That bitch has the nerve to show up again. Well, this time she won’t get away.”

The woman who put a blade into him darts across the yard. Rafe checks his magazine and presses his back against the wall.

“Rafe,” Saint shouts. “Hold the line. Don’t go anywhere.”

“That bitch fucking stabbed me,” he snarls. “I’m going after her.”

“Not on your own, Rafe,” I yell. “We secure the main gate first and then take the fucker down together.”

The Crowe butcher slips behind the barn and a knot twists in my stomach. Rafe has never listened to anyone, and never let anyone off with wronging him.

Dane fists Rafe’s jacket, keeping him close. “She wants ya to follow her. You know what she did last time.”

“And this time I’ll put a bullet in her.”

Rafe glares at Dane, fury burning in his eyes. “This is my chance.”

Before anyone can stop him, he runs after her.

“Rafe!” I shout. “Get back here!”

“My boy can handle himself,” Ma says, coming up beside me as Rafe disappears out of sight.

Gunfire tears across the yard. Ma and I both take cover behind Dane’s Ford.

One of our lads sprints across the paddock. “They’re through the lower fields!”

Shay looks toward Saint. “They’re trying to flank us.”

“If they get behind us, we’re finished.” Saint points across the yard. “Shay, with me.”

He turns to Dane. “You hold the gate. Don’t let anybody in.”

Saint looks at me next. “Stay with Ma and don’t let anyone in the barn.”

I nod before he and Shay disappear through the machinery sheds with half a dozen armed men.

Overhead, the thwapping of chopper blades reaches us through the gunfire.

It flies low over the lower fields, the dark shape banking over Black Heath.

“Incoming!” Dane roars.

Out of nowhere, a petrol bomb sails through the rain and smashes against the side of the main barn.

Flames rush across the timber where spilled fuel catches the dry hay stacked inside. For one suspended heartbeat, fire clings to the wall in a thin orange sheet before it surges upwards.

Keira.

The second I move, Ma snares my arm and wrenches me backward.

“No.”

I angle into her. “Keira’s in the hayloft. I have to get her out.”

“The bitch can burn.”

For a second, I think the roar of the fire has twisted what I heard.

Rain spatters Ma’s face while she watches the barn catch fire, not caring that Saint's girl is trapped inside.

“You’re not serious, Ma?”

“You heard me.” Her fingers tighten around my arm until her nails bite. “She made her choice by staying here when she wasn’t welcome.”

“Saint loves her.”

“She’s a Harrington.”

“No.” I wrench free. “I won’t stand out here and watch her die.”

Ma’s expression turns a notch closer to feral. “You’d run into a burning building for a Harrington?”

“Yes, Ma. I would.”

She reaches for me again, and I shove her away before she can get a hold.

I’ve never put my hands on my mother in my life.

She staggers back a step, and for half a second, she looks at me like she doesn’t know who I am. Then her expression contorts.

“Sera—” she hisses. “Having her die in there is cleaner.”

“What the hell happened to make you so bitter?”

A shadow moves behind her eyes. Something old and hidden locked away.

“I’m protecting ya.” Her voice cracks on it. “It’s all I’ve ever done.”

When I look over at the barn, Dane is at the stable doors. Smoke pours through the gaps in the timber.

"Get the horses out.” I run over. “I’ll get Keira.”

His gaze follows mine to the flames devouring one side of the barn. "I’ll get her—"

I haven’t got a word for what Keira is to me now. Saint’s girl. Fionn’s sister. Something that makes her family twice over, and I don’t have the time to explain the second one while she’s stuck inside a burning barn.

"Get. The. Horses. Out."

For a heartbeat his eyes search mine, weighing the order against the fire climbing higher with every passing second.

Then he gives the smallest nod, pulls off his t-shirt, and dunks it in a bucket of icy water before shoving it at me.

“You’ll be in there longer. Put it over your mouth and nose.”

Dane turns on his heel and disappears into the smoke.

"Keira!" I yell. “The barn’s on fire. Let’s go. Move it out.”

When she doesn’t respond, I secure the soaked t-shirt around the lower half of my face.

Heat blasts from the doorway, stinging across my skin in blistering waves as I force myself inside.

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Chapter 40

Sera

I push inside and duck beneath the smoke packed under the rafters. Ash catches in my lashes as I squint, trying to see along the central aisle. Waves of heat distorts the stalls and stresses the beams I spent half my childhood racing past.

A horse bolts past me, its hooves skidding beneath it.

The old timbers groan under the heat, fighting a battle they'll never win.

"Keira!" I shout, though the fabric over my mouth muffles it.

I search desperately through the smoke until the ladder finally appears.

Each step rising higher steals another breath. My lungs burn, and my eyes stream so badly I can barely see the hatch when I reach it.

I hammer both fists against the wood. “Keira!”

All I can hear is scratching and kicking from the other side.

“The bolt’s stuck!” she yells.

“Get back.”

I fist the hatch, driving as much force as I can into the wood. Pain tears down my arm and through my hands with every strike.

Metal scrapes against metal. Seconds blur and sweat rolls down my spine. After what feels like an eternity of fisting the door, the frame splinters, and the hatch flies open, revealing Keira’s smoke-streaked face.

She twists back for Saint’s gun where it’s lying on the boards.

“Leave it.”

“But—”

“You enter the yard with a gun in your hand, and one of ours will drop ya before they see your face.” I grab her wrist. “Leave it.”

She scurries on all fours and turns before dropping onto the ladder. Smoke curls around us. An explosive crack tears through the barn below, and the ladder shakes.

Dust, sparks, and burning straw rain from the rafters.

Another beam splinters somewhere beneath us.

"Faster!" I shout, hearing her cough.

Once we're both on solid ground, a gelding canters along the aisle, eyes rolling white with fear as it charges blindly past us.

I grab Keira's arm and flatten us both against the wall. Then I drag her down to the floor so we're both on our hands and knees. She's wheezing now, the heat and smoke too much.

I pull off the wet t-shirt and wrap it around her face. "Stay beside me."

She nods.

Heat lashes across my face with such force my skin feels tight against my bones as we crawl to the doorway.

The second we burst through the barn doors, rain lashes against my skin, shockingly cold after the furnace behind us.

I drag fresh air into lungs that refuse to work, folding over as a violent cough tears through my chest.

Smoke burns the back of my throat while Keira hunches over beside me, fighting just as desperately for every breath.

The battle hasn't stopped.

Gunfire still cracks beyond the yard. Men shout through the rain, their voices muted beneath the relentless thud of helicopter blades.

Then another voice cuts through all of it.

"Harrington men. Stand the fuck down."

Every part of me stills. My head lifts, my stinging eyes trying to focus, but all I can see is smoke.

Fionn.

"Stand down or die for disobeying a direct order."

Ten feet from me, a man in a dark Harrington jacket lowers his rifle.

He doesn't argue or look around for someone to check with. He simply drops the barrel toward the concrete and takes a step back like the ground's gone soft under him.

Along the wall, another one does the same. Then the whole line of them.

Harrington weapons lower across the entire yard, and the noise falls away with them, until there's nothing left but the rain and the fire and the

chopper engine.

Smoke rolls between us, torn open by the downdraft as Fionn walks through it.

Rain has soaked his white shirt through, the fabric molded to his chest and shoulders, sleeves shoved back to his forearms. There’s a gun in his hand, though he keeps his aim lowered.

He crosses open ground without once ducking his head, and every man in that yard, ours and his, watches him do it.

And then his eyes start moving, darting across the yard, over the bodies, the vehicles, the burning barn, searching every face and every shadow.

“Sera!” The command ripping out of his voice all at once. “Where the fuck is Sera Tallon?”

Beside me, Keira sits back on her shins. She's known her brother’s voice her whole life.

"Sera." Her eyes come to mine, red-raw and streaming. "Why’s he calling for you?"

“What the fuck do ya want with my daughter?” Ma’s voice cuts across the yard as she raises her gun and points it straight at him.

A Harrington soldier immediately lifts his own weapon toward her.

I push myself upright, my lungs screaming in protest, and run.

“Ma, don’t!”

She looks over her shoulder at the sound of my voice and dips the rifle, but I don’t slow to even look at her because I only want him.

The moment his eyes find mine, he starts moving with long, purposeful strides.

By the time we meet, we’re both almost running.

His arms open before I reach him.

I collide with his solid body with so much force it knocks the breath from us both, burying my face against the warmth of his neck as his arms lock around me.

His heart hammers beneath my cheek, and there’s a slight tremor running through the breath he finally releases.

His hand slides into my hair before moving over my face, my shoulders, my arms, making sure I’m okay.

“This wasn’t me,” he whispers against my temple, his voice rough with emotion. “It was my father.”

He draws back just enough to look at me, rain running from his hair onto his lashes as his thumb brushes soot from my cheek.

“I came as soon as I found out.” His gaze searches the smoke behind me. “Keira?”

“Over there. She’s okay.”

Fionn’s hand never leaves my hair, and his mouth finds mine, warm despite the rain, and for the smallest heartbeat the war disappears.

There’s only him and the familiar taste I’ve grown to crave.

“I’ve got you now,” he murmurs against my lips, his forehead resting briefly against mine.

Behind me, Keira is on her knees where we’d stumbled out of the barn, coughing smoke onto the rain-soaked concrete.

“Fionn!”

I glance over my shoulder as she pushes herself upright, unsteady after the fire, one hand pressed against her temple as she steadies herself.

She’s exhausted from smoke inhalation and the adrenaline crash, probably dizzy too.

“Where the fuck do ya think you’re going?”

Ma stands twenty feet away, rain soaking her coat, the barrel of her rifle aimed squarely at Keira as she stumbles toward her brother.

“Ma….” I sidestep Fionn, though he doesn’t let go of my hand. “What the hell are ya doing?”

“Don’t either of ya fucking move.”

Horses scatter around the yard, their hooves thundering as the fire spooks them with its savage flames.

“What the hell’s happened to ya, Sera?” Her voice rises in fury. “You’ve dragged that Harrington bitch out of my barn…”

Her eyes rake over me before settling on Fionn.

“…and now you’re standing there letting that Harrington bastard kiss ya.”

“Ma…”

“Shut up.”

“Do not point a gun at my sister, Máirín,” Fionn warns.

Her glare jumps back to Keira. “Your sister shouldn’t be here. And neither should you.”

“Put the rifle down, Máirín.” The command comes from the darkness behind her.

Lorcan steps through drifting smoke, rain dripping from his hair, both hands wrapped around the gun aimed at my Ma.

“Keira’s not your enemy tonight.”

Ma turns without lowering her rifle, and the floodlight finds his face.

In that moment something happens to her. There’s a flicker of recognition like she’s seen a ghost. Her chin lifts, and her mouth opens a fraction.

The barrel of the rifle drifts down an inch, then two, before she catches it and hauls it back up.

“You,” she hisses.

“I was four years old when my mother didn’t come home.”

“So—” Her voice has gone strange. “Alasdair finally decided to tell ya a story.”

“He did.”

“Well, we all know that lying bastard will tell ya what suits him.”

“Put it down.”

“He told me you murdered her.”

“And you believed him?”

Ma’s boots stay planted, her shoulders squared, and her chin lifted toward his face. The gun in his hands doesn’t draw so much as a flinch from her, and I don’t understand why.

“Ma.” My throat is raw from the smoke. “C’mon, put it down.”

She doesn’t even glance at me.

“Sixteen years.” Rain runs off her jaw. “Sixteen years, and ya still walk into my yard with that Harrington face on ya.”

Lorcan’s jaw ticks. “Don’t talk about my mother.”

“I wasn’t.”

The way she says it lifts the hair on my arms.

“Lorcan.” She announces his name like it pains her. “There’re things about that night ya don’t—”

“I said, *don’t*.”

His hands are shaking now. Sixteen years of not having answers shaking down the barrel at my mother.

Ma returns his stare, then whatever she was thinking closes over, and she’s my ma again, turning the rifle back on Keira.

“Harringtons aren’t welcome here. None of ya are.”

“Ma—”

“Your time with my boy ends tonight.”

Goosebumps race over my scalp as the rifle explodes.

“No, Ma!”

The bullet crosses the yard and Keira jerks, folding onto her knees.

I run at my mother as Lorcan fires. His bullet turns her upper body. Her finger clamps around the trigger, and the rifle fires again as Fionn’s arms lock around my middle and pull me to the ground as a third shot cracks through the rain.

We hit the concrete hard, and he rolls on top of me.

It takes me a second to register what’s happened. There’s bright red spreading through the soaked fabric of his shirt.

“Oh, my God—”

I get out from under him, my hands tearing at the cotton to get to the wound.

“Jesus, Fionn. You’re bleeding.”

“It’s nothing.” He winces, trying to sit up. “Went through the side.”

“Don’t move.”

“Sera.” He gets his hand under him and pushes up anyway, and the snarl he makes doing it is one I’ve never heard out of him. “Keira—”

Across the yard, Ma lies where she fell. Her rifle rests across her chest, the barrel angled toward us, but her fingers are loose around the stock and her open eyes are fixed on nothing.

I brace for the shot. My fingers go numb, and my knees soften as one second passes, then another, and nothing hits me.

My ma shot Keira and Fionn.

And now she’s dead.

I stood in this yard ten minutes ago with her, shoved her away, and ran headfirst into a burning barn against her order. I told her I’d do it for a Harrington when she’d already decided Keira should die tonight.

And now my ma’s lying motionless on the ground, and I’m waiting for an emotion to arrive in my chest, but nothing does.

Nothing at all.

That’s the part I’ll think about later. Not what she did, or how she died, or how the rain sits in her open eyes.

That I stood over my ma and felt nothing other than confusion.

Movement flashes in the corner of my eye as Dane sprints straight to Ma behind me.

Fionn rises. His gaze flicks to Dane before he goes straight to his sister, hunkering by her side.

I get to my feet and turn to Dane, who’s on his knees beside Ma, one hand resting on her neck.

“Ma…?” Dane’s hand goes to her neck, and he holds his fingers there, searching for a pulse.

He doesn’t say anything, just takes his hand away and sits back on his heels in the water.

I spin round to find Lorcan.

He’s already backing away, gun still raised, heading for the broken gate with his eyes on Fionn and not on me.

The two Harrington men between him and the road step aside, and Lorcan disappears through the gap.

Fionn is on his knees beside his sister with both hands pressed to her side, his attention focused on her.

“Keira.” Fionn gets an arm under her shoulders. “Keira. Look at me.”

Her hand is over his, where he’s pressing down on her side, but there’s too much blood between his fingers, some of it hers, some of it his.

He shifts his weight and gets her six inches off the concrete before a strained grunt breaks from the back of his throat. One knee hits the ground, and he lowers her before folding over her with one hand clamped to his wounded side.

While Fionn kneels over his sister with his head bowed, he digs out his phone from his pocket.

I’m fighting for a breath when boots hammer the concrete behind me.

“Get your fucking hands off her,” Saint shouts.

I turn to find Saint charging across the yard toward Keira. Fionn doesn’t so much as glance at him, his phone pressed to his ear.

“Get clearance for CUH. Two gunshot wounds. One critical.”

“Saint—” Keira sobs.

“I’m here.”

He's already down in the puddles with her. Both hands on her face, then her throat, then the wound, telling her it'll be okay over and over.

Her lips have gone the color of concrete.

"We’re taking the helicopter." Fionn pockets his phone. "It's faster."

Saint doesn't answer him. He slides one arm behind her knees and the other under her shoulders, and he's up with her before the word's finished.

The look the two of them trade over her head lasts half a second and is far from civil.

Fionn holds Keira’s hand over the wound and presses down. “Keira. Stay awake.”

Saint draws Keira higher against his chest. My heart sinks when his gaze drops to her face, then lifts to Fionn, his mouth barely moving around the question. “You got enough fuel in the chopper to get us there?”

“Yes.”

Saint takes three strides before his next step falters. His head turns toward Ma’s body, and he stops.

Pressure climbs from beneath my ribs into my throat. I swallow, but it refuses to move. Rain falls harder, thinning Ma’s blood into red streams that run toward the drains.

"She's dead." Dane hasn't moved from beside her. "Ma’s dead, Saint."

My big brother stands there with his Harrington woman in his arms while his ma lies dead, and it costs him one second before he’s moving again.

"Who?" he asks, not slowing.

I jog to keep up with him. "Ma shot Keira."

"And Ma?"

"Lorcan Harrington."

He hears it without breaking stride. "Rafe?"

"Went after the butcher and hasn't come back." Dane's up off his knees, Ma’s blood on his hands. "The Crowes are gone. Every fucking one of them.”

"Find Lorcan," he orders. “And put the fire out before it spreads.”

Dane backs away and calls out for Rafe, then Shay.

Beyond the broken gate, the rotors are still whipping up smoke.

I stop in the middle of the yard and angle back for Fionn. He’s on his feet with a gunshot wound leaking blood. The rain has thinned the blood on his shirt, and he's breathing in a way I don't like at all.

When I hurry over to him, he understands exactly what I'm going to do before I do it. His eyes go past me to Saint, along the wall to the men still standing there, then back.

"Sera.” He offers me his hand, and I take it in front of every Tallon and Harrington standing in my yard and kiss his knuckles.

His fingers close hard around mine.

"Come on," he says, heading for the gate. “I won’t let Keira die too.”

We hurry across the yard together with his blood slick between our palms, and my mother lying behind us in the rain, and neither of us lets go.

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Chapter 41

Sera

The final stitch pulls Fionn's skin tight beneath the doctor's gloved fingers.

I watch the needle disappear into the torn edge of his side and come out again, dragging black thread behind it. The wound has stopped bleeding, but his skin is stained orange from whatever they used to clean it, and bruising has already begun to darken above his hip.

"You were lucky," the doctor says, tying off the stitch. "The bullet tracked across your side rather than entering the abdominal cavity. It's taken a reasonable amount of skin with it, but there's no damage beneath the muscle. With rest, you'll be fine."

I repeat the diagnosis silently until it sticks. No abdominal damage. Rest.

Fionn keeps eye contact with me as the doctor works. "My sister?"

"Someone will update you as soon as they can."

"We've been waiting for an update all night."

"I'll speak to the nurse once we're done."

"Ask whether she's through the surgery," I say, a little prickly. "We need something more than another promise of an update."

The doctor cuts the thread, then reaches for a dressing from the tray beside him. Fionn's jaw tightens as gauze is pressed over the wound, but that's all he gives away.

I take everything in because if they release Fionn tonight, I'll know how to care for him myself.

Gauze. Tape. Painkillers. Clean dressings. I hold on to each practical detail because Fionn is here, wounded but alive, and taking action doesn't require me to think about anything else.

His shirt and trousers were bagged up and taken away ten minutes ago, and two Gardaí have been stationed outside the door. A detective has already tried twice to question us. Both times, the doctor sent him back into the corridor.

If he tries to come through that door again before someone tells us whether Keira will live, I'll give him a piece of my mind.

I stand between the examination bed and the wall with my arms folded over a jumper someone found for me. It's too big and smells of hospital laundry. My damp hair sticks to the back of my neck, and there's blood beneath my fingernails that won't come out no matter how hard I scrub.

Some of it belongs to Keira.

Most of it belongs to him.

The doctor secures the dressing with strips of tape. "Keep this clean and dry. The antibiotics should prevent infection, providing you take them as instructed. You'll need the dressing changed, and I want the stitches checked in seven days."

"I'll look after him at home," I tell the doctor, moving closer.

Fionn's attention locks on me. For one unguarded second, the hard line of his mouth loosens before he brings it back under control.

He told me before that his ma chose booze over taking care of him. Nothing else has reached inside me tonight, but that brief softening of his mouth does. I inch closer until my hip meets the examination bed.

He sits bare-chested on the edge of the bed, smoke scenting his hair and dried blood marking his forehead. Bruising spreads above his hip beneath the stark white dressing, but even stripped down to his boxers, there's nothing vulnerable about him.

"I need to see my sister."

"I'll arrange your prescription and find out whether there's been any news about your sister." The doctor removes his gloves and throws them into the clinical waste bin. "Don't leave this room until I come back."

The door closes behind him.

In the corridor, shoes squeak against the floor. A trolley rattles past, and a telephone rings twice before someone answers it.

The closed door stays at the edge of my vision. Keira is somewhere beyond it. So are my brothers, the Gardaí and the first moment I'll have to admit to myself that Ma is dead.

I move between his knees and wrap my arms around his neck. My first breath against his skin breaks halfway out.

His arms close around me. One hand spreads over my back while the other settles beneath my hair, holding me against the solid heat of his body. Smoke, antiseptic and the last trace of his cologne cling to his skin.

“Seeing ya like that scared the shit out of me.” My voice disappears into the curve of his neck.

“I’m all right.”

“You were shot.”

“Technically, it’s only a graze.”

“A bullet tore through your side, Fionn.”

“And kept going.”

I pull back. “That’s not exactly reassuring. You’ve got a bunch of stitches holding your side together.”

His thumb passes beneath my eye, wiping away whatever ash is left there.

“I’ve got you, right?”

“You have me.” I close my hand around the back of his neck. “And I’ve got you.”

I leave my palm against his chest where his heart strikes strong and steady.

“Ma shot Keira. Lorcan put a bullet in her, and I still ran to her.” My nails skate over his skin. “I thought I could help.”

“Of course you did.”

I see it again. How Ma stood in the rain with the rifle trained on Fionn. I was running toward her when I crossed into the barrel’s path. Her finger tightened, and the muzzle flashed, but her gaze never left him.

“She never saw me.”

“No. But I did.”

“You came after me.” My fingers curl against his chest. “You dragged me down, and the bullet caught you instead. She wouldn’t have fired if she’d known I was there.”

“I know.”

“She was my ma.”

“I can’t forgive what she did to Keira.” His voice is gravel-thick. “But I’m sorry you’ve lost your mother.”

The room narrows around memories of my ma standing at the kitchen range, cooking up a feast and shouting across the yard at my brothers. Then the warmth evaporates, and all I see is her body lying in a pool of blood, and the wind tugging her hair.

“I don’t know how I’m supposed to grieve the woman who raised us when she died trying to kill you and Keira.”

My hands disappear into the sleeves of the borrowed jumper, fingers twisting into the fabric. I can still hear Ma saying my name, but every time I reach for her face, I see the rifle lifting instead.

“You don’t have to make sense of her tonight.”

I take two restless steps toward the door, then turn back before reaching it. I can’t settle anywhere, not even inside my own skin.

“I need to know why. I need to know what your da told Lorcan.”

“Then we’ll find out,” he assures me. “Whatever happened in the past, we’ll get the answers.”

The doctor knocks before I can answer and steps into the room, followed by a nurse carrying a blister packet of tablets and a folded set of pale-blue scrubs.

Fionn looks at the scrubs and shakes his head. “Not a chance.”

“You can’t walk through the hospital like that.”

“Watch me.”

A rough huff of laughter escapes me. Bloodied, stitched and half naked, and he still expects the entire hospital to get out of his way.

“Your sister is out of surgery,” the doctor announces.

Fionn is on his feet before the rest of the sentence leaves the doctor’s mouth. His hand clamps over the dressing on his side, and I catch his arm when he sucks in through his teeth.

“She’s stable,” the doctor continues. “The bullet entered high in the shoulder. It missed the subclavian artery, but there was significant bleeding and extensive damage to the surrounding tissue. The surgical team removed the bullet and repaired what they could.”

“Will she recover?”

“They expect her to. She’ll need physiotherapy, and it may take time before she regains full movement in that arm, but there’s no reason to believe the damage will be permanent.”

Fionn closes his eyes for a beat before his posture rebuilds and his shoulders draw back. “Where is she?”

“They moved her to a private room. The anesthetic is still wearing off, so she’ll be groggy.”

He takes my hand in his. “Take us to her.”

The nurse holds out the scrubs. “At least cover up your underwear, Mr. Harrington.”

My scalp prickles. I was raised to hate that name, and one day it will be mine.

I take the scrubs and antibiotics from the nurse. “He’ll put them on.”

Fionn looks at me, his need to resist warring inside him before he accepts the scrubs and puts on the trousers.

“I don’t know if I can tell Saint tonight,” I say as we step into the corridor.

Fionn’s attention drops to the ring hidden beneath my jumper. “Then don’t. We’ve nothing to prove.”

By the time we reach Keira’s room, his steps have slowed.

Two armed Gardaí stand outside her room, and Shay lingers at one end of the corridor with a Harrington man at the other end.

The detective sets down his coffee, gets to his feet, and steps into our path.

“Five minutes, Mr. Harrington,” he says. “Your cousin is still unaccounted for. Every unit in the county has his description.”

“Okay.”

His gaze slants to me. “I’ll need a statement from you, Miss Tallon, and from each of your brothers.”

Fionn doesn’t stop for him. “You’ll get them when our solicitors arrive.”

Settle in with a love story.

Head to Lokepub for more romance novels.

The detective opens the door for us. “I’ll be waiting.”

Saint is sitting beside the bed, his head lowered to Keira’s hand enclosed between both of his.

His hair is damp and wild, and there's soot across one side of his face, but his attention doesn't leave the woman lying beneath the white hospital sheet.

Her injured arm is secured against her body, and a thick dressing disappears beneath the neck of her gown. A clear tube runs into the back of her other hand, and her eyes are closed.

Saint's thumb moves across Keira's knuckles.

"Hey," I say softly. "Want me to get ya a coffee?"

He shakes his head, not looking at me.

Fionn crosses to the opposite side of the bed. His hand hovers above Keira's hair before settling carefully against her head.

"Keira," he mutters.

Her eyelids flutter.

"Fionn?"

"Yeah. I'm here."

She turns her head toward his voice, blinking to focus on him before her forehead creases ever so slightly. "You're hurt..."

The breath he releases almost becomes a laugh. "It's just a scratch."

"Where's Sera?"

"I'm here." I move closer. "Do ya need anything?"

Her gaze finds mine, blurred by anesthetic but awake enough to understand. "You came for me."

"Of course I did."

"There were flames everywhere."

Saint's eyes drift to mine but his expression gives nothing away.

"I was trapped," she croaks. "Sera got me out."

Saint presses her knuckles against his mouth and holds them there for a moment. "I won't forget it, Sera."

His gaze slides from me to Fionn and travels to the dressing visible at his side, then drops to our joined hands.

"You should go, Harrington," he says.

My fingers close harder around Fionn's. "He's not going anywhere."

"Sera," Saint warns. "Ma's body is lying at home, Rafe's missing, and we've no idea if the Crowes took him. I'm not doing this shit with you."

"You know that makes you a hypocrite, right?"

He places Keira's hand carefully on the bed before rising.

Saint closes his hand around the metal rail. It rattles beneath his grip before he releases it and rounds the foot of the bed.

I hold my ground beside Fionn, our fingers still locked while Saint takes in the united front we present.

“Those men shooting at us were Harrington soldiers.”

Keira tries to push herself higher. “Saint.”

“Don’t move, princess,” he says over his shoulder.

“Lorcan brought them,” Fionn says. “After my father fed him a story about his mother.”

Saint steps around me. “Do you think that makes ya different from him?”

Fionn holds his ground. He’s pale beneath the bruising, his spine straight even though he’s in pain. Nothing in his face gives Saint the fight he wants.

“I know exactly how different I am from my father.”

“Do ya?” Saint’s voice lowers. “Because I love your sister. I would’ve died before I let anything bad happen to her, while you’ve been sneaking around with mine to prove some fucking point.”

“Your sister has never been a point I needed to prove.”

“Was she just another Tallon ya could fuck with?”

Fionn’s expression hardens. “No.”

“Then what the fuck is she to you?”

“She’s the woman I love.”

Saint cocks his head and glances at me. “Tell me you didn't let him use ya.”

“It’s not like that—”

“And I’m supposed to believe this fucker actually cares for you?”

“Saint.” Keira’s voice is weak, but it stops him. “He was terrified.”

His head turns toward her.

“At the yard,” she murmurs. “I’ve never seen him afraid of anything until he couldn’t find Sera.”

“This isn’t a bullshit game.”

My pulse races as I reach beneath my jumper and pull the chain free. The letter F appears first, and the ring follows, settling against my chest.

“I’m in love with him.”

My brother stares at the diamonds burning beneath the harsh hospital light.

“We’re engaged.”

His gaze jerks from the ring to Fionn, then back to me. “You’re going to marry Fionn Harrington.”

“I am.”

“You’re going to marry *Fionn Harrington*?” he repeats. “What the fuck have I missed?”

Fionn’s fingers loosen around mine, leaving me free to step away. However, I tighten my grip instead.

“He came when he heard we were under attack and took a bullet saving me. The Harringtons are the ones with stitches, Saint. Don’t blame him for what happened tonight.”

My brother’s fists curl at his sides. “How long has this been going on under my nose?”

“Since the night his men kidnapped me.” I glance at Fionn. “There were two dead Harrington men in the barn that night. You wanted to know what happened and I wouldn't tell ya. Well, that’s because I killed one and he killed the other.”

Saint’s eyes narrow as he processes everything. “And you expect me to accept him when he kills his own men?”

“I’ll kill anyone who hurts her,” Fionn says, his voice rough and gritty. “Right now, my sister needs you beside her, and I’m staying beside yours.”

Saint turns away and drags a hand down his face. “Jesus fuck…”

“I’m not asking Sera to choose me over her family,” Fionn continues. “She’ll be my wife, but she’ll always be your sister.”

Keeping my fingers linked with Fionn’s, I hold my other hand out to Saint.

“Ciaran.” His real name draws him back to me. “We’ve lost Ma tonight. I’m not losing you, too.”

Saint stares at my open palm, his brow creased. After a few racing heartbeats, his hand closes around mine.

He pulls.

Fionn releases my other hand before Saint hauls me into his chest. One arm locks across my back while his other hand cups the back of my head, crushing my face against smoke-stained cotton.

“You’re not losing me,” he says into my hair.

My fingers knot in his shirt. His heart pounds against my ear. Ma’s has stopped, and none of us knows whether Rafe’s is still beating.

The first sob tears out of me.

Saint holds me through it, his chin pressed against the top of my head while my body shakes against his.

When he finally lets me go, his hand stays on the back of my neck.

“I’ve got men looking for Rafe,” he says. “Once I get Keira home, I’m going after answers. And no one’s getting in my way.”

He returns to Keira’s bedside.

Fionn steps up behind me and slips his hand into mine. I thread our fingers together again before turning into him. His arms close around me, and I bury my face against his chest, letting my next breath leave without fighting to keep it steady.

When Rafe comes home, I’ll tell him about Fionn. He can lose his fucking mind as long as he’s here to do it.

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Chapter 42

Sera

The wind whips across the heath as the four of us drive our shovels into the mound beside Ma's grave.

Saint stands on my right with his black coat pulling tight across his shoulders. Dane is on my left, his shirt collar open despite the chill, while Shay works beside him with his head lowered.

An ache twists in my stomach because Rafe should be here too.

The handle grinds against my palm as I lift and angle a scoop of dirt over the grave.

Ma's coffin lies in the deep hole Dane dug last night while Saint carved out a temporary wooden marker with her name on it.

Máirín Tallon. Devoted mother.

We work until my shoulders burn and the skin across my palms turns red. The thud of soil striking the coffin grows duller with every load.

The dark red roses I'd thrown in disappear first, then the brass plate bearing Ma's name, until Dane throws another shovel full, and the final strip of lacquered wood vanishes beneath the earth.

I let go of the shovel and reach inside my knee-length coat, taking out a copy of the land deed.

"What's that?" Saint asks.

I crouch at the edge of the grave and lay it across the freshly turned soil.

"We got it back, Ma." My fingers remain on the paper as the wind tries to take it. "The land where Da was killed. It belongs to us again."

"What did ya just say?" Saint reaches for the page.

I rise and wipe the mud from my palm onto my coat. "The land is in Keira's name and mine."

He unfolds it and scans the printed document. “How the fuck did it become yours?”

I look over at Fionn. “He added me as a beneficiary of the trust. I have a legal interest in everything it owns.”

Saint follows my stare, then lowers his attention to the document and reads it again.

“Just like that?” he asks. “No strings?”

“No strings,” I echo.

I take the page back, set it in the dirt, pick up my shovel and send the next load of earth over the top of it.

Ma died believing Harringtons only knew how to take. She’ll never know that Fionn returned the ground where Da was killed, or that he chose me over his own blood.

“You were wrong about him, Ma,” I whisper.

The next load of earth buries the last of the paper.

I wish she’d lived long enough to prove me wrong instead.

Shay plants his shovel into the mound and bows his head. Saint stops scooping and glances at our da’s grave next to Ma’s while Dane keeps packing in the dirt.

His shovel bites into the earth again and again, each load of dirt hurled into the hole one after the other.

“Dane,” Saint mutters.

Dane dumps another load. “What?”

“We’ve done enough.”

“I’ll stop when the hole’s filled.”

He lifts another shovel-full of dirt.

Shay’s gaze stays lowered as he dips the peak of his cap. He spent most of his life working alongside Ma, taking her orders, and arguing with her over horses neither of them would ever admit they loved too much.

Rafe might run the stud for our family, but Shay has been part of its bones for years.

He rests one weathered hand on the end of the shovel handle.

“Rest easy, Maírín,” he murmurs.

My stomach churns.

Ma never rested. She woke before everyone else, went to bed after us and could find work in a room she’d already cleaned.

Even on the nights when we were children and storms battered the house, she moved between our bedrooms, checking windows and pulling blankets over us.

I woke this morning half expecting to hear her in the kitchen, before the knot in my chest dragged me back into the nightmare.

Behind us, the men start lining up to help.

Fionn stands next to the wooden chair Saint had carried out for Keira. He's dressed in black from his open overcoat to the shine of his shoes.

A blustery wind presses the expensive wool against his broad chest and sends the hem snapping around his legs. One hand curls over the back of Keira's chair while his attention is on me from across the grave.

Only the pallor beneath his stubble and the coat left unbuttoned over the dressing above his hip betray the bullet Ma put through him.

The doctor ordered him to take it easy; however, he's standing out here as if pain is simply one more thing expected to obey him.

His gaze holds mine.

I offer him a tight smile and drop my gaze to the grave before the emotions in my chest give way.

Our men have gathered behind Fionn and Keira, most of them choosing dark clothes and all of them wearing work boots. Some have been on our payroll since before I was born. Others came here as lads and grew into men under Ma's eye.

Dane's shovel stabs into the mound again.

Saint reaches across me and catches the handle before he can lift it. "Enough."

Dane's knuckles whiten against the wood. His eyes are bloodshot, and dark stubble covers a face that hasn't smiled since Ma died and Rafe disappeared.

Every search for him has ended with Saint and Dane returning with nothing.

"We can't leave her like that," Dane mutters.

"The lads will finish it," Saint tells him. "They want to show their respect."

Dane's eyes glaze over. "She shouldn't be down there on her fucking own."

The last word breaks beneath the wind.

He stands over the grave with his chest rising beneath his open coat, staring at the disturbed earth covering Ma's coffin.

When I run my hand down his arm, he pulls away before my fingers find his.

"Don't fucking touch me, Sera."

My hand drops between us, fingers curling into my palm until my nails bite. Dane has never pulled away from me before. I swallow the instinct to reach for him again when he chucks the shovel onto the dirt, pulls out a pack of cigarettes, and lights one.

After he inhales in a lungful of smoke, he bends to grab a whiskey bottle half-hidden in the coarse grass where he left it before the service and takes a long drink, his head tipped back, his throat working again and again.

"It was bad enough knowing Saint was fucking a Harrington…and now you're marrying one."

He turns his back on Ma's grave. "When Rafe finds out, he'll go fucking ballistic."

With the bottle in one hand and the cigarette clamped in his teeth, he throws me a glare before marching off.

"I'll go after him." I lift the collar on my collar and back up.

"Don't bother. Let him cool off." Saint takes my shovel and hands it to one of the workers.

"He needs to talk about it."

His hand settles on my shoulder and squeezes. "Give him an hour."

Saint walks toward Keira while Shay waves the stable hands forward to finish filling the grave.

Fionn heads in my direction as soon as Saint reaches Keira. His stride is measured, giving no sign of the bullet that cut him up two days ago.

I quicken my pace, though Fionn reaches me first and pulls me into a one-armed hug. I close my eyes against his chest.

His heartbeat runs too fast beneath my ear, and when the wind tears across the heath again, his arm locks tighter around me.

He pulls back a fraction and slides his other hand around the back of my neck, our foreheads pressing. "We're going back now. You're freezing."

"You're the one who needs to keep warm."

He takes my hand in his and turns it over, inspecting the rubbed skin beneath my fingers.

His thumb moves to my engagement ring. Mud has worked beneath the stone and into the narrow edge of the band. He wipes it away and settles the ring straight against the base of my finger.

I curl my fingers around his thumb before he can take his hand away. He offers me a slight smile before he takes my other hand and inspects that one too.

Men move around us with shovels and wheelbarrows as they finish filling Ma's grave, but Fionn doesn't let go.

Even here, in the middle of Tallon territory, men alter their path around him.

"You can soak in the tub when we get home," he says. "I'll run you a hot bath before bed."

Up close, I can see the strain carved around his eyes and the faint sheen across his skin despite the cold.

"Fionn."

"I'm here."

His absoluteness stops everything else I'm about to say.

He releases my hands and slides his arm around my lower back, drawing me against his uninjured side. His mouth presses to my temple with a gentle kiss as he turns his body between me and the icy wind.

"Come on," he says. "I'll pour you a double rum and coke."

I slip my arm beneath his coat, keeping it high enough to avoid his wound. He guides me toward the dirt track without looking to see if anyone objects.

"We're going into the main house for the wake," I tell him. "With my family."

His hand presses firmer at the base of my spine. "Of course."

Together, we leave the Tallon graveyard behind and make our way along the track. Fionn steers me around the shallow puddles without looking down, taking the worst of the mud across his dress shoes.

"You need to rest." I brush my fingers over the gold watch peeking from beneath his coat sleeve. "It's a shame you can't soak in the tub with me later."

"You'll take the bath, and I'll sit beside you."

"You're supposed to be resting."

"I will be." His fingers spread across my back. "Where I can see you."

I press my smile into the wool of his coat. Behind us, another shovelful lands on Ma's grave, and I keep my face against him until his phone vibrates in his pocket.

Fionn fishes it out without taking his arm away. His gaze drops to the screen, and the warmth in his expression disappears.

"I need to take this."

He answers as we walk toward the yard.

Dane is ahead of us, the whiskey bottle hanging from his hand. I glance over my shoulder to find Saint behind us, holding Keira close.

We manage two more steps before Fionn stops. His muscles go rigid against mine.

"When?"

There's nothing urgent in the word, but his gaze jumps straight to Dane in the distance.

I watch the curve of his jaw lock as he listens.

"They have it?"

The wind beats against us, carrying the whispered thud of shovels from the grave. Fionn's arm slips from around me, and my scalp prickles.

"And the ballistics?"

Saint and Keira come up beside me, though they don't stop.

"Fionn?" Keira calls over to him.

He lifts one finger without looking at her.

"Who gave the statement?" he asks. "My father?"

My fingers close around the front of his coat, my eyes searching as he brings his gaze to mine.

"No. Don't approach either of them." He listens for several more seconds. "Send me the report and the full statement. Now."

He ends the call and lowers the phone away from his ear.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

"I'm sorry, Sera…"

"What for?"

His gaze passes over my face as he releases me and returns his phone to his coat pocket.

He turns to Saint. "Call Dane back. We need to talk."

Saint's brows snap together. "If you're going to bark orders on my own land, Harrington, you'll be fucking disappointed when no one listens."

“The Gardaí are on their way,” Fionn says. “They’re here to arrest Dane for your mother’s murder.”

My spine straightens.

“What the hell?” I hiss. “We all know it was Lorcan.”

“Dane!” Saint yells. “Come here.”

Dane lifts the whiskey bottle into the air without turning and keeps walking away.

“Get the fuck back here. Now.”

He glances over his shoulder, flicks his cigarette, and does a one-eighty turn, walking back to us, his pace slow and a scowl on his face.

“Why the hell would they think Dane killed Ma?” I ask.

“They found the weapon that killed her.”

I stare at him. “Lorcan had the gun.”

“He must’ve tossed it before he left.” Fionn takes my hand in his. “My father has given a statement claiming Lorcan was with him the night your mother was killed.”

Keira sucks in a breath behind us. “Oh God…”

Saint steps closer. “That lying cunt.”

“The first ballistics report confirms the bullet was fired from the weapon they recovered.” Fionn watches Dane approach us. “It’s registered to him.”

The wind pulls the edges of my long coat open, but no cold reaches the sickness spreading through me.

Dane stops in front of us. “What the fuck’s going on?”

Fionn faces him. “Where’s your gun?”

His brow creases and his grip tightens around the bottle's neck. “What the fuck do ya want to know that for, Harrington?”

“Where is it?” Fionn asks again.

Dane looks at Saint. “Why’s he asking me that?”

“Answer him,” Saint says.

“I was with a girl the other night.” He shrugs. “Must’ve left it at her place.”

Jesus fuck.

The brunette with the tattoo on her inner thigh. The woman he joked about in the office only hours before Ma died.

My attention snaps to Fionn. “That woman took his gun. That’s why she kept flirting with him.”

Fionn steps closer to Dane. “When were you with her?”

“The night before that Harrington fucker murdered my ma.”

“Did the girl know who you were?”

“Of course she did.” Dane laughs. “She’d been circling me for weeks.”

“And you left your gun beside the bed?”

“I didn’t plan on fucking her with it.” Dane raises the bottle to his mouth. “So yeah, I left it on the bedside table.”

Fionn waits until he takes a drink. “The Gardaí have it now.”

The bottle lowers to Dane’s side. “She handed it in?”

“They recovered it from the murder scene,” Fionn continues. “Your prints are on it, the serial number leads back to you, and the ballistics confirm it fired the round that killed your mother.”

Dane stares at Fionn, the bottle hanging forgotten at his side. “That’s not possible.”

“I saw Lorcan shoot her.” My pulse pounds inside my skull. “We all know it was him.”

Fionn looks past Dane’s shoulder to the blue lights speeding along the country road toward Black Heath Stud.

“I don’t know for sure, but I’d say that girl you were with was working for my father.”

The bottle drops from Dane’s hand and hits the ground beside his boots, the last dregs of whiskey leaking over the dirt.

“Lorcan killed her,” he says. “I’d never—”

“They’re here for you.” Fionn points at the cars. “Don’t say anything without a solicitor present.”

Saint marches over to Dane and grabs his arm. “You’re not going anywhere. This is bullshit. Go inside the house.”

“No.” Fionn’s voice stops both of them.

Saint turns on him. “They’re not taking my brother.”

“If Dane runs, they’ll use it against him.”

“I’m not asking for your opinion.”

“And I’m not giving it.” Fionn holds Saint’s stare. “I’m telling you facts. They’ll arrest you as well, and Sera has to watch two more Tallons leave.”

Saint’s jaw muscles tick.

“He’s right,” I say.

Both my brothers glare at me, but I keep my attention on Dane. “You go quietly, say nothing, and let us tear their fucking case apart.”

The first Garda car pulls into the yard, followed by another, and my heart rate goes berserk. Gravel spits beneath their tires as they skid to a halt.

Fionn’s coat blows open, revealing the starched white shirt beneath and a visible trace of blood from his wound dressing.

He positions himself between Dane and the officers climbing from the cars.

Dane looks ready to push past him. “I didn’t fucking kill her.”

“Then stop talking,” Fionn bites out.

“Don’t tell me what to fucking do.”

“Everything points to you right now. My father has given Lorcan an alibi, and the woman you screwed has screwed you over.” Fionn steps into me, standing closer now. “Anything you say before a solicitor arrives gives them something else to use.”

I pull out my phone, scroll through the contacts, and call our solicitor’s office.

“Fuck…” I mutter after it goes to voicemail. “They’re not picking up.”

Dane’s chest rises hard beneath his open coat as the Gardaí walk up the path.

“Give them your name,” Fionn says. “Nothing more.”

I move to Dane’s side until our shoulders touch. “Listen to him. We know ya didn’t do this, so don’t give them anything they can twist.”

Dane glances toward the approaching officers. “Fuck—”

Fionn dips into his line of sight, forcing Dane’s attention back to him without laying a hand on him. “Don’t admit to anything. Don’t argue. And when they put their hands on you, you keep your temper in check.”

“Who the fuck do ya think you are, Harrington?”

“I’m the man who knows exactly how my father built this trap.” Fionn holds his stare. “And the man who’s going to get you out of it.”

Dane’s mouth presses into a hard line.

“If you screw me over,” Dane glares at him. “I’ll get Shay to cut you up and feed ya to the pigs. Ya hear me?”

Fionn nods before turning to meet Crowley Junior and a few officers I’ve never seen before. “How can we help you?”

“We’re here for Dane.” Crowley looks past Fionn and nods at my brother.

Dane steps forward. “That’s me.”

A female officer removes a set of handcuffs from her belt. “Dane Tallon, I’m arresting you on suspicion of the murder of Maírín Tallon.”

The metal shines in the gray light, and every instinct in me screams to throw a punch at the officer. Instead, I plant my boots and stand my ground. Losing control now would only tighten Alasdair's trap.

My hands fist as they lower Dane’s head and push him into the back seat.

He twists before the door closes, searching past the uniforms for Saint. “Promise me you’ll find Rafe.”

An officer slams the door closed, shutting him off from us, and then they climb into their vehicles. One by one, the cars peel away and disappear beyond the trees.

A wave of nausea rolls through me while Keira squeezes my wrist.

Saint stalks to her side, and when her hand slips from mine, Fionn draws me next to his hip and kisses the top of my head.

“Can you really help Dane?” I ask.

He already has his phone in his hand and thumbs the screen, flicking through names. “He’ll have a solicitor present before they finish processing him.”

“And Rafe?”

“I’ve got every man we have out looking.” Saint scrubs his coarse haired jaw, eyes fixed on the horizon. “Rafe went after the Crowe’s butcher. We need to find those bastards.”

“You work on them.” Fionn types out a message on his phone. “I’ll deal with my father.”

Saint’s gaze hardens. “Do you know something about Rafe?”

“The Crowes came here with my father’s men. He built the evidence against Dane, then had him arrested.” Fionn hits send. The faint swoosh barely carries over the blood pounding in my ears. “I’ll find out whether Rafe disappearing was part of the same plan.”

The pounding in my skull intensifies. Alasdair framed Dane, and Rafe vanished that same night. I’ve been treating them as separate disasters, but both lead back to him.

“Since when did your da side with the Crowes?” I ask.

“I don’t think he sided with them. He’s using them, or they’ve found a way to use him. I’ll find out which.”

Saint holds his stare across the churned mud. “Press whoever ya need to. The second you find a link, call me.”

“I will.”

Saint answers with a single nod, without the usual warning or threat. Whatever else Fionn is to him, my brother has just let him into this fight.

Fionn selects a number, but before he makes the call, he reaches for my hand and pulls me close. Our arms press together as he lifts the phone to his ear.

Someone answers.

“It’s Fionn. I want every contact between my father’s men and the Crowes. Start before they came south.”

When he ends the call, he pockets his phone and turns me to face him, taking my face in his hands. “It’ll be okay.”

“Will it?” I whisper. “Ma’s dead, Dane could get locked up and Rafe’s missing. And I have no idea who Eilish married. If she’s even safe. How am I going to get out of this fucking nightmare, Fionn?”

“The way you always do. You fight.” Fionn bends and presses his lips to my forehead. “Then you’ll marry me, little wild thing, and I’ll destroy anyone who tries to come between us.”

The End…

Turn the page and meet Rafe and Tate in *Lawless Vows*, where a forced marriage binds him to the Crowe sister—and he has no idea his new bride is the masked assassin who wants him dead.

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Tate

Rafe’s blood spatters like black ink on the wet concrete.

Under the security light fixed above the old farmhouse door, it marks a path where a bare-chested Tallon fights for his life.

I lean against the stone wall beneath the overhang, ignoring the cold night air working its way through my hooded jacket while I enjoy the ringside view a few feet away.

After dragging him out of Cork last night, I spent most of today waiting for whatever we pumped into him to finally clear his system.

I could’ve started his punishment while he was half-conscious, but where’s the fun in that?

I’ve already spent too long staring at Rafe, but the light streaming across his wet skin provides details that photographs don’t offer.

My hood sits low over my forehead, my hair scraped back under the balaclava I swapped with my usual respirator mask.

Callum charges him again, throwing everything behind a wild right hand, but Rafe slips outside his reach and catches him across the side of the head.

My eyebrows rise, and my head nods a fraction.

For a man built as sturdy as he is, Rafe’s sloppy technique is somehow giving him the upper hand.

Despite that, he’s standing tall after several rounds with one of the Crowes’ top enforcers.

Worse, he looks annoyingly cool as fuck doing it, which earns him perhaps three seconds of respect.

However, physical attractiveness and a semi-decent uppercut will not change how this ends.

My phone vibrates against my thigh, and I pull it from the pocket of my combat trousers without taking my attention off the two brawling men.

“Hey,” I grin as I answer. “I treated myself to an early birthday present.”

“Oh yeah?” My brother Gideon’s chuckle comes down the line. “Did you cut out Tallon’s heart for giving ya stitches?”

Rafe catches Callum’s next swing and drives his shoulder into the center of his chest, forcing him backward through sheets of rain.

My head cocks and I make a face beneath my mask. Not bad for a low-life criminal.

“Not yet.” I draw my favorite Japanese boning knife strapped to my thigh and angle the blade into the floodlight, clocking my non-descript reflection. “I brought him back to base, though.”

Gideon laughs under his breath. “You’ve always had a knack for getting revenge in your own sweet way, sugarpuff.”

Fractured light cuts across Rafe as he circles Callum. It casts shadows beneath the carved lines of his abdomen and clings to the black ink covering his arms and chest.

Callum fires another punch. Rafe keeps his guard high, absorbs it, then drives his knee into Callum’s gut hard enough to fold him.

I resist the urge to applaud.

Damn it. I should’ve microwaved popcorn, poured lemon soda over ice and brought a blanket outside for the show.

“He’s earning the right to sleep indoors.” I roll the knife once through my fingers before sliding it back into the sheath. “Believe it or not, Callum’s met his match.”

Rafe knocks Callum’s hand aside, traps his arm behind his back and uses his momentum to drive him face-first into the stone wall.

A grunt carries across the yard.

“Make him suffer but don’t put him down just yet.” Gideon’s order tugs my attention back to the call. “We could get intel out of him.”

“Oh, I won’t.” I push away from the wall and walk towards the edge of the shelter as rain spits through the security light beam. “I’m owed some fun first.”

Rafe releases Callum and inches away, dragging air into his lungs while water streams from his dark hair onto his face. His hand jerks to his

shoulder before he catches himself, curls it into a fist and stands that little bit taller.

Blood gathers at the corner of his mouth, and he thumbs it off before lifting his head.

His stare finds mine immediately.

I take a step closer and stop beneath the edge of the overhang.

Even with the mask between us, Rafe watches me with the steady concentration of a man trying to figure out what my next move is.

Good luck with that.

My pulse gives one inconvenient kick beneath my ribs, which I blame entirely on the fresh blood staining his lips and the excellent plans I have for the rest of him.

“Jude and I will be with you before lunch time tomorrow,” Gideon reminds me. “We’ll talk more then.”

Callum tries a roundhouse kick, and I nearly choke on muted laughter. The poor bastard needs a bed, painkillers, and possibly a new career in being useless.

“Okey dokes, G. See ya soon.”

Rafe yanks him off balance and follows with a brutal right hook that sends him sprawling across the concrete.

Fuck. He won.

“Are you bringing my presents?” I ask my big brother. “Or will I wait until we’re home?”

“As if you’d wait.”

A grin breaks across my face before I can stop it, and I’m grateful the balaclava hides every trace of Tate Crowe beneath the lethal, unrepentant Butcher.

I end the call, draw my semiautomatic, and level it at the man standing over Callum with busted knuckles and rain-soaked hair falling across a pair of very inconvenient green eyes.

A few hours until my twenty-first birthday, and I may have outdone myself.

“Inside.” I point the gun toward the farmhouse. “Through that door.”

Rafe drags a hand over his face, then takes a few steps. He lowers himself beside Callum with more care than he used before the fight started, one knee touching the concrete before the other. The pause is tiny, but I see it.

And obviously he senses my observation because his jaw tightens before he starts searching Callum’s pockets.

The fucking audacity of this man.

There’s no way he didn't hear me. The bastard probably thinks obedience will happen on his schedule, not mine.

He finds a squashed packet of cigarettes, rises, and taps one out before curling his hand around the lighter flame to protect it from the wind.

“You gonna make me a champion’s dinner?” He draws in a lungful of smoke and starts toward the door with a swagger that tells me putting Callum on his arse polished the shine on his ego.

I’ll stab that out of him eventually.

“Have you still got your teeth?” I follow behind him with my aim fixed squarely between his inked shoulder blades.

He looks back and flashes me a pearly-white smile marbled with red. “You’ll have to fight me yourself if you want one of these.”

“I wouldn’t stop with just one,” I mutter. “I have pliers for cocky assholes with veneers.”

“Suppose you make necklaces with them and hang them on your rear-view mirror.”

“Quite the opposite.”

I glance over at Callum, who’s being dragged by the armpits by two of my men. He catches my eye and shakes his head.

My crew knows I earned my title as the Crowe butcher because I can disembowel a man in under a minute. And Callum totally fucking embarrassed himself tonight. However, being a shit fist-fighter won’t be the end of him tonight.

I’m a professional assassin, not a cold-hearted killer.

“I prefer to hang my victims’ ballsacks from my rear-view mirror.” I quip.

Rafe stops with the cigarette hovering near his mouth, and I wait for the disgust I’ve seen from other men when they realize I’m a woman with a collection of Japanese hankotsu knives who loves getting the chance to use them.

Even a damn blink would do.

Instead, his intense gaze travels from my shin-high laced boots to the hood shadowing my eyes, taking his time as if he’s trying to locate the best place to plunge a knife.

When he reaches the balaclava, the corner of his bloody mouth lifts and a dimple winks at me. “Aren't they a bit bulky?”

I narrow my eyes and stay tucked within the shadows beneath the overhang. “Depends on the victim.”

He takes another drag, entirely unbothered. “Suppose mine would block the windscreen.”

An involuntary smile plays on my lips under the wool. “You’re assuming I’d keep yours.”

His dimple deepens as his smile spreads wider. “You’re assuming I’d let you take them.”

Oh, Rafey Cakes. You’ve absolutely no idea what’s ahead of you.

I prod the gun into his kidney from behind to steer him inside.

Rafe stops dead, and I wonder if he’s giving me an excuse to shoot him, but every muscle across his back goes rigid beneath wet skin.

His head turns slightly, giving me a clear view of his stubbled jaw.

“Do that again,” he mutters, “and you'll lose that fucking hand.”

I press the barrel into him a second time.

“Keep walking."

The kitchen is warmer, although whoever renovated this place clearly spent their whole budget on old-worldly aesthetics rather than a good heating system.

Rafe slows beside the wooden counter, his attention passing over the knife block, the doorway leading to the hall and the window above the sink before his fingertips reach the first drawer.

What a waste of time.

A slight visible shiver runs over his skin, and goosebumps have the hairs on his arms lifting.

After a second or two, his fingertips trail across the worktop, slowing when he reaches the first drawer and slides it open.

The barrel of my gun is at the base of his skull before he has time to reach for a blunt kitchen utensil.

“Don’t test me,” I grit.

Rafe shrugs. “Just looking for an ashtray.”

“You were looking for a weapon.”

“My sister used an ashtray as a weapon once,” he says. “However, my ma would clip my ear if I tapped ash on the kitchen floor.”

The muzzle digs harder into him. “The second you think you can outsmart me is the second I’ll shoot you dead.”

Rafe turns, forcing the barrel to slide along the bruise blooming beneath his ribs.

His eyes stay on mine. “Why haven’t ya done it already?”

The humor has gone from his face now, leaving the same man from Black Heath stud who looked ready to tear me apart.

“I have plans for you.”

“What sort of plans?”

When his hand leaves the drawer, I bump it closed with my hip, then jab him with the gun again. “Move.”

Ash tumbles from his cigarette. “Oooops.”

“I’m not your ma.” I drag the sole of my boot through it. “You piss me off and I won’t clip your ear, I’ll slice it off.”

We cross the kitchen and enter the narrow hallway running through the middle of the farmhouse, where a wooden staircase rises to the bedrooms above.

“You planning to tell me what the fuck ya want with me?”

“Eventually.”

“How long’s eventually?” He glares over his shoulder. “I’ve never been kidnapped before, so you’ll have to fill me in on what happens next. Usually there’s a ransom demand and all that shit, right?”

“Ransoms are for people who’re meant to survive.”

His quiet laugh rumbles. “You always threaten to murder men while you’re taking them upstairs?”

“Only when their ballsacks are worth my time.”

He looks back at me and pops his brows high.

Fuck. That came out wrong.

“Worth my time to bother removing.” I correct, “My pigs enjoy scrotum more than I do.”

“You’re one fun lady, huh?”

“Keep climbing.”

I follow him up the creaky stairs, keeping the gun within reach of his spine.

Halfway up, Rafe’s hand closes around the banister, his next breath shallower than the last.

“Still groggy from the sedative?” I smile, though my voice stays flat.

His grip loosens immediately.

“Nah, I’m just bored.”

“Your body seems to disagree.”

He glares over his shoulder at me, eyes dark. “You know fuck all about my body.”

The bathroom sits at the far end of the carpeted landing. I direct him inside with another nudge from the silencer attachment on my gun.

Inside, it’s warm and painfully ordinary with beige tiles, a deep enamel tub and a diamond frosted window keeping the wind at bay.

I leave the overhead light off so there’s only a silver wash of moonlight kissing the floor tiles and a thick shadow to stay in.

Rafe stops in the middle of the room, his height and build sucking out all the oxygen and making the corners seem closer than they are.

His cigarette hangs from the corner of his mouth. “Is this where the magic happens?”

“If you call an icy water bath after taking a beating, magic, then yeah, this is the spot.”

His gaze goes from the bath to the gun and returns to me, while one hand braces against the sink as casually as he can manage.

Whiteness spreads across his knuckles.

“I’m not old-fashioned, but you should think about removing your balaclava before we share water.”

Never gonna happen, Rafey Cakes.

“Strip.”

His eyes gleam as he rakes a hand through his damp hair, dragging the wild strands back off his forehead.

“Nah, lady.” He sighs. “If you wanna fair fight, let’s go outside. I ain’t bleeding out in a fucking tub after you cut my throat.”

“Very imaginative.” I lower my aim to the zipper at his crotch. “Take off your jeans and get in the bath. The cold water will clean your wounds and reduce any inflammation.”

I check my watch, counting the hours since he arrived here.

The countdown started when he could stand, eat a piece of toast, swear at me, and understand exactly how fucked he was.

Anything before that would’ve been cheating.

“You have twenty hours left to spend with me in this deserted shithole.”

He plucks the cigarette from his lips, crushes it into the ceramic soap dish beside the sink and reaches for his belt buckle.

“Twenty fucking hours?” he mutters. “Any reason you're being so specific?”

I keep the gun trained on his smooth chest, even though the sight of him loosening the leather sends a quiver to my belly.

After he kicks off his boots and snaps off his socks, he hooks his thumbs beneath his waistband and shoves the wet denim down without taking his eyes off me. His boxers follow and I swallow hard.

There’s nothing hesitant in the movement, and nothing remotely self-conscious about standing naked in front of the woman holding him prisoner.

If anything, the bastard looks pissed off that I’ve made him do something.

Fuckin’ hell, Rafey Cakes looks hot when he’s bloodied and naked.

His stare follows the barrel downward before returning to my face.

The muscle beside his mouth jumps.

“Aim up, Butcher. Shoot me in the dick and I’ll pull ya into that bath with me and drown ya in my fucking blood.”

I grunt out a laugh because that’s dark, even for me.

“Get in the bath.”

He swears under his breath and steps over the side, lowering himself into the empty tub.

I move closer, reach past him and twist the cold tap fully open.

Water blasts against enamel and Rafe hisses when the first icy stream strikes his feet. His hands clamp around the edges of the bath, forearms tightening until the veins stand out beneath his skin.

When he catches me watching, his jaw sets and his fingers loosen one by one.

“Jesus fuck,” he hisses.

I bend and put the little black stopper in the plughole.

“You’re a sick fucking bitch. Ya know that?”

My lips twitch beneath the balaclava. “And you’re a whiny little bitch.”

Water climbs around his hips while I stand there, gun aimed at his chest.

Rafe clenches his teeth and settles deeper instead of giving me the satisfaction of trying to get out.

“Tell me how long we’re gonna do this bullshit.”

“You stabbed me,” I begin.

His attention slides to the outside of my thigh when I tap two fingers against it.

“I remember,” he grits.

“The wound needed twelve stitches.”

“So?” One dark eyebrow lifts. “I had to get a bunch of stitches too.”

My gaze wanders over the healing scar on his shoulder. However, this isn’t an eye for an eye. He drew Crowe blood. My blood, to be precise. Which makes this very personal.

“So, you’re sentenced to spend twenty-four hours here. You’ve already enjoyed four.”

He sucks in a deep breath as freezing cold water rises over his stomach.

“Twenty-four fucking hours?”

The cockiness in him disappears completely.

“One hour for every stitch.” I smile behind the wool. “And doubled to make the torture even more satisfying.”

Rafe holds my gaze. “And on the twenty-fourth hour?”

I take aim at his handsome face so reality sinks in. “I execute you.”

For several seconds, the only noise in the bathroom is gushing water. Then that fucking dimple of his appears again.

“You’re a bit dramatic over a few stitches, aren’t ya?”

“We’ll see who’s dramatic when you're begging.”

“I don’t beg.”

No one hurts me and lives to tell the tale.

Judging by the way Rafe is glaring at me, he has the exact same rule.

Except I’m the one who’ll finish the job.

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About Autumn

USA Today bestselling author Autumn Archer writes dark and gritty romance with guaranteed happily ever afters.

A lifelong daydreamer, late diagnosed autistic ADHDer, romance reader and music obsessive, she dedicates her waking hours to romancing the darkness, using fictional words to weave raw emotion into morally gray men and the feisty women who capture their hearts.

Whether it's a mafia boss, a cartel criminal or complex anti-hero, she delivers page-turning stories that will leave you hungry for more.

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