

MORRIGAN BROTHERHOOD ROMANCE
MB

MY HOT
NEIGHBOR
IS AN
IRISH
VAMPIRE

ROXIE MCCLAINE

*My Hot Neighbor Is An Irish
Vampire*

THE MORRIGAN BROTHERHOOD
BOOK TWO

ROXIE MCCLAINÉ

[MCCLAINÉ & HARDING LLC](#)

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Content Warning

THIS BOOK CONTAINS:



Violence

Implied torture / aftermath of torture

Mention of sexual harassment

Thematic elements, including mentions of war, war crimes, death, and
historical events

Mention of historical discrimination against the Irish

Derogatory, antiquated Irish slurs

Mild blood play and blood-drinking in adult situations

Adult situations intended for a mature audience

Reader discretion is advised.

Pronunciation of Names & Words

LISTED IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE



NAMES

AODHÁN - *ay-don*

CILLIAN - *kill-ee-an*

FIONN - *fin*

SINÉAD - *shin-ayd*

RORY - *ror-ee*

EAMON - *ay-mon*



*To my husband,
for shamelessly enabling my obsessions*



*To Oisín,
for your long-suffering patience and for encouraging my passion for history*



*To Meredith,
for your support and hard work*

“This is the death I should have asked for if God had given me the choice of all deaths, to die a soldier’s death for Ireland and for freedom. We have done right. People will say hard things of us now, but later on they will praise us. Do not grieve for all of this but think of it as a sacrifice which God asked of me and of you.”

— PATRICK PEARSE, 1916



CHAPTER 1

Return Home

NOVEMBER, 1982



Sarah McCready

It's probably bad form to punch my producer in the mouth, but when he reaches for my breast and tries to cop a feel, I know I've had enough of the music industry.

It doesn't matter to me anymore that I'll never see a star on my dressing room door. That I've lived for five long years in California, hoping and praying to one day see my name on my own album while scraping nickels and dimes at a waitressing gig. That music could've been my gateway into movie stardom someday, like Elvis or Marilyn Monroe. I'll never get to meet Bon Jovi or flirt with John Travolta. All those big dreams have officially been flushed down the toilet.

This man's got a lot of nerve, thinking he can put his hands on me and come out unscathed. I know how things work here. Plenty of girls would've taken it like a champ in the recording booth if it meant getting them where they wanted to go. It's sleazy and shady and wrong how ladies are mistreated in this place. I wouldn't say a word against the women for it because sex sells

in this industry, and dammit, we've got to eat too.

No, I put the blame where it belongs.

But me? No. Nobody touches me unless I want to be touched. I'd rather skinny-dip in radioactive slime than let this rancid, sweaty eel of a man have his way.

Not even for chance at immortal fame.

My producer stumbles backward into the wall of the recording booth. It's a marvel he doesn't dent it, clutching his mouth, bloodied by my now pulsating knuckles. He sputters, his bowling-ball shaped head and too-thick neck turning red in a mix of embarrassment and fury.

"Y-you fucking little bitch!" His voice is almost shrill. "You'll regret that. You'll never work in this town again!"

"Good," I retort, relying on the massive adrenaline spike carrying my courage and my good Boston sense to keep me grounded in the moment, regretting nothing. It's been a long time since I've thrown a good punch; we're talking playground years here. "Keep your fucking town. Because I quit."

I quit. I've never quit anything quite like this before. I've been down for the count. But quitting? Never.

My knuckles hurt. But damn, this feels good. It feels *right*.

Grabbing my bright yellow purse by its bamboo handle, I storm out before he can start threatening me with other things, like calling the police or suing me for chipping his tooth. I'm not scared. He's not going to say a word about getting his lights knocked out by a woman who stands five-foot-eight in heels and weighs little more than a buck twenty. He can nurse his bruised ego and find another pretty caged canary to train.

It won't be me.

A huge weight is off my shoulders as I stalk away from the recording studio, trying to put as much distance between myself and that situation as I can. I've been having second thoughts and plenty of doubts about my ability

to become a big-name singer. It all started coming to a head when I heard feedback for the first time that I was *too old*.

Too old. And that was three years ago. I was defiant back then, but I'm twenty-seven now.

All producers want are the barely legal beauties. Eighteen, nineteen years old. I can't imagine trying to make it out here on my own at that age. I lost everything that meant anything to me two weeks before I turned twenty. All sorts of vultures would've descended upon me when I was vulnerable, and I'm glad I spent some time with my aunt before I made the decision to come out here.

Except now I'm regretting that decision entirely.

I should've listened to my dad when he warned me about the dark side of show business. But I thought for sure I could make it, that he was just being overly cautious and protective of his little girl. Time and time again, he was right.

I really left Boston for *this*? A few palm trees, lecherous producers, and a beach I never have time to enjoy?

It's the first time I've admitted it to myself in a long time or let thoughts of where I came from flood in. Instead of a red-bowling-ball-faced man, I'm thinking of happy Christmases, yards and fences covered in snow. It's almost December, though it's still a balmy seventy degrees here as I make my way to the metro rail. *Damn these heels*. They're digging into my toes. I didn't think to grab my sneakers on my way out. When the train arrives, I step through the doors and slump into a seat, carried away by LA's public transit, staring out the window at the city as I pass it by.

What am I doing here, really? My parents were supportive of my dreams of becoming an actress, but they were justifiably cautious, if the last fifteen minutes of my life have been any indication. Dad never would've wanted me to sell my soul or my body for fame. In fact, I'm one hundred percent certain Ma would cuss me out if she knew how long it's been since I've stepped foot

in a cathedral, let alone gone to Confession.

Well, I don't know where the nearest Catholic priest is. But there is someone I should chat with about what's happened. I can only hope when I tell her I've been thinking about leaving eternal sunshine and returning to Southie, she'll be understanding.



Considering all of my life plans are currently up in the air, I think I'm allowed a little pity party. Albeit just a small one. Most people would seek out a best friend or call their mom. Neither of those are options for me. But I do have the other waitresses at the Dill Pickle Club, and the owner I can turn to when things don't go my way.

I try not to make complaining a habit of mine, and they all know it. Normally, I'm pretty chipper. I'm not one to really come in on my days off, so when I show up and push through the doors, everyone's on alert.

"Whoa, hey, Sarah's here!" announces the teenage hostess, Milly Rogers, who works part-time here to help with her mom's hospital bills. Her frizzy blond hair is tied up in a hot pink scrunchie, and she's still in braces. "I didn't know you worked today, McCreeds!"

"I don't," I croak, on the precipice of bursting into tears.

Just like that, the owner rushes toward me, like she somehow heard me from the other side of the diner. "Miss Sarah!" Vera Monte Vigil says in an accent I've never been able to pinpoint but felt too silly to ask about. It sounds old somehow, like from those old-timey black-and-white films. I just don't know from *where*, exactly. "Whatever is the matter, my dear?"

"I walked out," I reply, and there's a chorus of gasps from the other waitresses on duty. "My producer wanted things I couldn't give him, so I left."

Vera smooths her pale hands over her apron. A comforting scent of

cinnamon and apples surround her thin frame from baking fresh pies for the dinner rush in a few hours. “You go on and have a seat now, and Miss Rhonda will take care of you. It’s all on the house tonight.”

“That’s very kind, but—”

“I insist,” Vera replies. “And I won’t take no for an answer. Rhonda, have her sit down, please. Our poor Sarah has been through an ordeal.”

“Of course,” Rhonda says in her low sweet Southern drawl, guiding me over to a table in her section. She’s the only waitress who works more hours than me, putting her adult son through college with every spare dollar she can make. “A cup of hot chocolate and some ice cream has nursed my broken heart many a time. Don’t you worry, sugar. Everything’ll get sorted the way it should, you’ll see.”

“Milly,” Vera directs. “Be a dear and tell Ernest to take over for me.”

“Yes, Mrs. Monty!” Milly bounces off.

“I know you’re busy,” I say sheepishly. “I just didn’t know where else to go.”

“You came to exactly the right place.” Vera unties her apron and drapes it over her arm. “Now, I’m going to make a call and get straightened up, then you can tell me all about it.”



Maybe I’d be more of a mess if there wasn’t some part of me deep down that always wondered if being on stage was *really* what I wanted. But the longer I sit here, pouring my heart out to Vera over my mug of hot chocolate, the real truth slowly rises to the surface.

I didn’t come here to make myself into the person I always thought I’d be. I moved to California to escape what I left behind.

“Maybe that’s why I haven’t really been much good at dating,” I admit to Vera as she listens. It’s been an hour already, and I’ve recounted everything

I've had to put up with. The dinner rush will arrive soon, but whenever I try to wind down, she keeps me talking, perfectly calm and intent on me.

"I mean, there've been guys I liked, and they'll be cute, and they aren't bad in bed, but I never actually made a connection with anyone. Not permanently. I've never even thought about marriage seriously in the slightest with anyone I've met. I've never even given a guy a key to my place. And I think it's because—"

"You always knew you were going to go home?" Vera offers, nodding a little.

"Yeah, that, and if my parents were still alive, I don't know that I would've ever wanted to bring any of them back home to Boston with me to meet them." Admitting that aloud relieves a heaviness in my bones. Guess something in the back of my head knew where this was all headed, even though I was ignoring it all to live in the moment. "Do you think I failed?"

"I think you tried your best," Vera replies. "But sometimes it's dreams that let us down, not ourselves. Sometimes they change and morph into something else. People are rivers, not stones. We're only ever set in our ways when we refuse to grow, and you're still growing. You're allowed to change your mind."

Her words lift my spirits, but only a little. There's a familiar ache in my stomach. Even though Vera can't be older than thirty, she reminds me of my mother at times. "You think so?"

"Of course. You can do everything right and still fall down. It doesn't make you lesser, it simply means you're alive."

"Mrs. Monty?" Milly approaches the table, sheepish. "Can you help me with the register? It's giving me some trouble."

"Of course." Vera rises, giving me a smile. "I'll be right back. Don't you move."

I keep my hands curled around my cup, letting my mind wander while she's gone. I haven't mentioned it to her yet, but my yearning for Boston

hasn't diminished. If anything, now it's stronger than ever. California is beautiful, refreshing, but it's still missing something. That's when there's no longer a single doubt in my mind.

As much as I like it here, it's not where I belong. I need to go home. I miss home. Why have I been so afraid of going back these past few years?

But I'm aware of the answer to that too. I lost everything on a summer night that smelled heavily of rose bushes and tobacco, hanging out with one of my high school friends, feeling like a rebel with a cigarette between my teeth. Smoking was *never* allowed in the house—Mom's rules—and she got on Dad all the time for it when he'd try to sneak one. I puffed away while my friend indulged me about what it was like sleeping with her new boyfriend.

I went home to an empty house, knowing something was wrong. My parents were big on tradition, and Friday nights were always date night, even after twenty-one years of marriage. But they were always home before eleven. It was so odd, I called the restaurant, but nobody was there. I called the police too, and they reassured me to wait it out, that there was nothing they could do, and they were sure my parents would turn up.

I thought about getting in my old jalopy and looking for them myself, but the officer I spoke to on the phone was so unconcerned, I convinced myself the moment I pulled out of the street, they'd return, and I'd feel silly for worrying them or making them look for me instead. Staying put seemed like the most reasonable decision at the time. I tried to sleep, but I tossed and turned.

The next morning, no one was there to greet me and ask what I felt like having for breakfast, or to remind me about Saturday night Mass. My heart dropped into my stomach.

Then there was a knock on my door. When I opened it, a sturdy policeman just shy of beating my height took his dark blue cap from his head, gazing at me pitifully. He introduced himself as Officer Feeney, in a somber Irish brogue, and told me there'd been an accident on Tremont Street.

The world spun. I don't know how I managed to remain standing upright with knees like jelly. Made an orphan. Just like that, in an instant. Because some asshole thought it'd be a great idea to drive home drunk and double the speed limit.

The funeral at St. Winifred was unbearable. Wanting to be a singer meant loving being the center of attention, but I didn't want it like that. Listening to Father Tommie's eulogy from the front row, trying to ignore everyone's glances as mascara stained my cheeks, I could only stare at the double pair of caskets and do my best to swallow the lump in my throat as I sat with my friends.

I inherited everything, from my family home to my grandfather's fishing trawler that is probably rusted over beyond repair, still sitting on the waterfront somewhere. I couldn't bring myself to sell a single thing. It's all still there, dusty, near-forgotten. I couldn't live in the house, though. I begged my aunt and uncle to help me cover up every piece of furniture and lock it up. Then I bought my plane ticket to Los Angeles and swore through tears I'd never see any of it again.

Maybe that's just one more sign that coming out to California wasn't for me. I couldn't let go of any of it. There was always that little voice telling me someday I'd regret it if I sold or gave anything away, that I'd want that piece of my parents and my old life. I'd be back, and glad of it.

Sniffling and silently apologizing to my parents for running away, I smile when Vera returns to sit across from me at the table. "There we are. All taken care of. Now, tell me more about—"

The glass doors of the diner swing open. "Do I smell cinnamon?" a familiar man asks in a Spanish accent. His thick black hair is swept to the side. He has an impressive mustache too, brushed, bushy, and manicured. He pulls it off really well.

His warm brown eyes scan the diner as the waitresses all chirp to him in greeting. I do my best to sound cheery, but it comes out flat. "Hi, Mr. Monte

Vigil.”

He catches sight of his wife and stops in his tracks, like it’s the first time he’s ever seen her. “My love,” he declares with the utmost affection. “You must stop looking so magnificent when I am away.” He walks over with a confident swagger I don’t think any man could hope to compete against and leans down to steal a kiss from her.

She allows the kiss, but when he tries again she chuckles and lightly pushes his cheek away, which displaces the large silver glasses resting on his nose. He adjusts them, peering down at me owlishly through those big round lenses. “Sarah, how wonderful it is to see you again.”

Everything is wonderful to Cezar Monte Vigil. I don’t think I’ve ever heard the man cuss or utter a sore word of any kind. A popular established watchmaker, he owns the shop next door, where he both sells and repairs all sorts: Rolex, Cartier, even A. Lange & Söhne. His bright demeanor and the way he dotes on his wife are both incredibly adorable and an intense reminder I don’t have that, nor do I think I’m anywhere close to finding it.

“Good to see you too.”

“You seem sad,” he observes. “Is everything all right?”

“Shall I tell him for you?” Vera offers, as though sensing my lack of energy. With my permission, she goes over all of it—the sleazy producer, the punch, the walkout, everything. Cezar sits down next to his wife and listens intently, occasionally nodding or rubbing his mustache.

“I’m very sorry to hear all of this, of course,” Cezar says once Vera has helpfully caught him up to speed on my behalf. “Do you have some plan? Some thought of what to do next?”

“I think . . .” I hesitate. “I should go home.”

“You think?” he muses. “Or you *know*?”

I exhale. “I know I need to go home.”

Vera doesn’t look surprised or upset by my admission, even though I was a little worried about leaving her high and dry without one of her three full-

time servers. She doesn't fret. She doesn't even frown.

"Good. That's good," Vera says. "I'm relieved to hear it."

"Really?" I ask. "You're not mad?"

"Why would I be angry that you're going back to where you've always belonged?" Vera replies. She rests her hand on the table, and Cezar takes it, squeezing. "I've always known California wasn't for you, Sarah."

Thrown off, I stammer, "Well, why didn't you say anything?"

Cezar smiles. "We aren't in the business of giving advice unless it is asked for. Most people need to find their own way. Is it not so?"

He's got me there. I probably would've stomped out of any place with a chip on my shoulder if anyone told me I didn't belong somewhere. Defiance is built right into my bones, like God went *I'll show you stubborn* and tried to outdo Himself.

"I don't want to put you in a difficult position," I say.

Vera shakes her head, leaning forward. Her blue eyes are so intense and crystal clear. "I mean this in the kindest way, Sarah—this is a restaurant, and it will not be difficult to find someone else to wait tables. You're reliable, and kind, and you will be missed. But your future isn't here. It's back there. In Boston."

As people cluster near the entrance, waiting for tables, Cezar rises to his feet. "I propose a little walk. Just down the way. Let us continue talking in my shop, so these people may sit and eat."

Ever the gentleman, he takes his wife's hand and helps her up. There's heat in my cheeks when he offers a hand to me. He's just so—well, everything most men these days aren't.

I take his hand graciously and let him pull me up. "Thank you."

"Let me tell Rhonda she's in charge," Vera says. "I'll catch up to you shortly."

"Of course, my love." Cezar sneaks a kiss to her cheek then smiles expectantly at me. "Tell Ernest to save a slice of pie for me? Wonderful.

Come along, Sarah. Some fresh air might do you good.”

He leads me outside, swinging the door open for me. Someone’s playing folk music on a guitar nearby, while the owner of a small ice cream truck sells sweets and snow cones, greeting customers and entertaining a bouncy pair of adolescents eager to hand over their cash. My stomach is still full of milk, marshmallows, and chocolate. But at least people around me are carefree and happy. The world hasn’t all gone wrong. As the melancholy starts to slowly lift up off me with the promise of something new, yet familiar just on my horizon, I take a slow breath and let myself plan, following Cezar into his shop.

It’s so neat and tidy. The interior is well-lit, and I listen for the soft *tick-tick-tick* of his many clocks on the walls. Two well-dressed gentleman in suits and ties oversee long glass cases of watches. They’re all beautiful, but I don’t really have an eye for them. When I glance at the price tags, I see everything from a piece for an everyday average Joe to something that’s worth more than I’ve ever made in a year. That particular collection never ceases to amaze me.

Cezar sees me gawking at the most expensive items of his inventory and grins. “Ah, yes. I don’t sell those very often, but they are beautiful, aren’t they?”

“They’re gorgeous,” I marvel aloud.

“Come, let’s go to my workshop.”

While I’ve been here before, I’ve never actually gone behind the scenes. There was never any need. Behind his counter is a small corridor that leads to a back room, and it’s like I’ve stepped back through time. There’s several wooden countertops, stools, and desks, all seemingly organized, yet also cluttered with little bits and pieces of what I can only guess is what makes a watch work: cogs, screws, and the like.

Cezar places a stool in front of me. “Please, sit,” he offers, then digs around and hums to himself.

“This is amazing, Mr. Monte Vigil.”

“As you will no longer be employed by my wife,” he says, still shuffling through a few drawers. “You may call me by my Christian name, Cezar. No need for professional formalities, anymore—aha.” He grasps a small slender watch and moves over to me with all the grace of a man in his element. He places it in my hands. “Here we are. Take a look.”

I brush my fingertips over the small glass face. The dial is gold, and there’s a woven circle bordering it. A Celtic knot. “It’s beautiful. Did you make it?”

“I can’t lay claim to it. It’s an old one. I updated it a little, but the man who made it did so at the turn of the century. I couldn’t sell it to just anyone, but it can’t languish in a drawer any longer. It’s been a lonely little watch until now.” When I peer closely at it, I can see the faint etching in the center of the dial, shaped like a crow. “Consider it a parting gift.”

“What?” I look at him in shock. “No way. This is probably worth hundreds of dollars. You can’t be serious.”

“I am.” He chuckles. “Completely.”

Tears threaten my eyes. “I don’t know what to say.”

“Words are not necessary,” Cezar replies graciously. “You’ve been a good worker for my Vera. She’s done nothing but sing your praises. And she’ll give you the very best of references, of course, wherever you end up for employment.”

“I don’t even know where to begin.”

Cezar drums his fingers on his working table, humming. “There’s a little place in South Boston, I believe. I know the owners. Mannock Tavern. Yes, I believe that will suit you well. They enjoy a fair voice, a good song. With your talent, I doubt they’ll turn you away, but you can always tell them Cezar sent you. That should be a good start.”

“Thank you.”

“Cezar,” Vera scolds affectionately as she comes to join us from the

showroom. “We are supposed to be helping Sarah *stop* crying, my love.”

“Ah, I’m very sorry. I’m a sentimental old fool,” he replies, hugging her around the waist and kissing her cheek.

Vera’s eyes flit down to the watch and she smiles. “How pretty. Here, let me help you put it on.”

As she fastens it on my left wrist, she smiles at me. “There, now. A perfect fit.”

I admire how it looks on me. I’ve never had much in the way of fancy accessories, and I plan to take meticulous care of this one. I’m also planning what comes next, in the back of my mind, as overwhelming as it is trying to sift through my jumbled thoughts and make a plan.

I’ve got to pack up what little I have, give away what I don’t want to the neighbors, and head to the airport. See about a one-way ticket East. I’ll get back home, to the house I left behind. I’ll uncover every piece of furniture, dust off every photo hanging on the wall. I’ll stop treating my childhood like a mausoleum, roll up my sleeves, and make it mine while remembering the good instead of the bad.

I can do this. I can.

“We should allow this young lady to return home,” Cezar says, something that strikes me as slightly odd, because I’m not certain he’s that much older than me. After being given something so magnificent, I’m not about to correct him. “Do you need a ride?”

“No, I’ve got bus fare, I’ll be fine,” I say, rising to my feet.

“We’ll walk you out,” Vera offers. “And you’ll give me a proper mailing address for your final paycheck. I’m going to include a month’s severance.”

I’ve never once heard of a waitress getting anything like that. My mouth drops open. “Th-that’s so generous, I—”

“Not another word. It’s the least we can do.” Vera smiles as we head out the door, Cezar once again opening it for us both. Bathed in the warmth of the setting sun, I know this is a place and a couple I’ll never forget, not for as

long as I live. “And you’ll call us and let us know how you get on?”

“I will. I promise.” I’m contemplating returning to my apartment and getting straight to work on gathering up everything. “And I’ll miss you both.”

“We shall miss you too, of course,” Vera says. “But we’ll see each other again. I’m sure of it.”

I notice a large crow with a wingspan longer than anything I’ve ever seen hopping around one of the public benches, searching for crumbs of food. It’s fearless, walking right up to Vera and around her, clicking its beak and inspecting her ankles before ruffling its feathers when it’s gently shooed away, like a cat on a countertop.

When people think of California, they imagine Venice Beach and seagulls. But for whatever reason, instead of gulls, pigeons, or any other kind of bird, the little stretch of businesses near Vera’s diner and Cezar’s shop attract these gigantic birds with their dark beaks and charcoal feathers. I usually see anywhere from two to three at a time, and whenever I head home with a meal in my hands, I always make sure to toss scraps to them.

It’s gotten to the point where they seem to anticipate when I leave my shift at night, or when I arrive on Saturday mornings. They stare, and sometimes it feels like there’s something more than just a little soul behind those eyes, peering through me. Like they understand.

But they aren’t the most graceful of birds, and this one in particular bumbles more like a chicken than a crow, making me chuckle. “I’ll even miss these silly crows.”

Cezar’s eyes glint with humor. “Oh, I wouldn’t miss them too much. They’re clever little things. And they have ways of finding you when you least expect it.”

As though listening, the crow cocks its head, staring at me, and caws.

Vera opens her arms to me, and I move in for a hug, gripping her tightly. “Take care, Sarah,” she whispers. “Be safe.”

“I will.” After a final squeeze, I let her go. “Good night.”

“Remember!” Cezar calls as we wave to each other. “Mannock Tavern. It’s on 19th and Fernhill, I believe. There will be a little sign with a plane just above the door. Follow the music, and you can’t miss it!”



Moving is always a pain, especially when it’s moving from one coast to the other. But over the course of a few days, I’ve sold most of the furniture and belongings I don’t need. All I needed to do was put up a flyer in the downstairs mail room in big letters and all of my neighbors were practically banging my door down. I even had two of them haggling over my television.

The cash is more than enough to cover a one-way ticket home. My apartment looks pretty bare now, and I’ve put in my notice with the landlord. Fortunately, I was smart enough not to renew my lease a few months back. It’s almost like someone up there is looking out for me, and I appreciate it.

I’ve packed a small suitcase and a duffel bag of everything else I need. I’ve got my clothes, photographs, a few pieces of jewelry that belonged to my mother, and my father’s watch. I’ve never felt desperate enough to part with them, even when I was barely skating by on my bills and eating little more than instant ramen. I’ve got their wedding rings too in a little box for safekeeping.

With one bag slung over my shoulder and my old leather suitcase in one hand, I exit the taxi that carried me to the Los Angeles airport and head straight for the counters. The reservation agents are polite and work with me quickly to secure a ticket for me.

“You’re lucky,” says one young lady wearing a pretty red scarf around her neck and an attendant’s cap on her head.

“Why’s that?” I ask.

“You hit that sweet spot between Thanksgiving and Christmas when it isn’t quite busy. Nobody’s trying to fly right now.”

“Oh, good for me then.”

“It’s just a bit more expensive on short notice.” She clicks her tongue.
“Two hundred dollars.”

I cringe. “That’s . . . a lot.” I have that money, but I’ll be nearly broke when I land in Boston.

“I know,” she says apologetically.

“Is there anything cheaper?”

“No, I’m sorry.” She studies me quietly as a senior agent, a middle-aged woman similarly dressed, comes over to stand with her and oversee what she’s doing. “What’re you headed to Boston for?”

“Heading home for Christmas,” I admit. “Plans fell through.”

“Been there,” says the older woman. “Not often you see a lady your age traveling alone. Boyfriend or parents going to pick you up when you get there?”

“No boyfriend.” I shake my head. “And my parents aren’t around anymore, sadly. Otherwise, they would.”

“What?” They both perk up, somewhere in between curious and mortified. “Both of them?”

“An accident, several years ago,” I say somberly. “It would’ve been their thirtieth anniversary this week. Felt like the right time to go back home.”

The women exchange looks, and the senior agent takes her coworker’s place, her bright red fingernails tapping away on a boxy computer terminal. “I can give you half price,” she says in a hushed tone. “First class, if you don’t mind sitting next to someone.”

“Are you serious?” My jaw drops. “I don’t mind at all. That’s amazing, thank you.”

“We women have to stick together.” She winks. “Don’t mention it.”

As I head through security with my newly printed still-warm tickets that’ll take me across the country, I explain myself to my parents. *Okay, I know, I know, I shouldn’t have pulled that card . . . but dammit, I want to get*

out of here. I'll go to Confession at St. Winifred once I'm back. Scout's honor.

Waiting is the worst part. I manage to kill some time in a little airport bookstore and buy a bodice-ripping historical romance that should keep me occupied until I'm back in Boston, but I don't want to nosedive into it until I'm up and away. After a few hours, when the plane is finally boarding, I get my first and probably only taste of aerial luxury—a first class seat on a Boeing 747.

It's a long flight to our first stop, and the gentleman in the seat next to me is already halfway through his cigarette, wisps of gray twirling through the air from the smoldering end. He dutifully rises when I approach and steps aside to let me get settled in the window seat. He's perhaps an inch taller than me.

"Thanks," I say, clutching my purse in my lap.

"Not a problem at all," he purrs, and I'm immediately taken by his posh English accent. I don't meet foreigners often, and he doesn't only sound fancy. He's wearing a dark blue suit with soft white pinstripes and a fine silken pink tie with a carnation on his lapel. At first I think perhaps he's some kind of wealthy businessman or on his way to a high class event that's far too refined for my currently very broke self to even contemplate.

But when I risk another look, I realize he's a bit out of style. And not just by a few seasons. I don't see men wearing suits quite like his, not in California or Boston. It's like something from another era. He looks to be in his late twenties or early thirties. His sandy brown hair is slicked with pomade. He has dark eyes and a slight cleft in his chin. He has a nice face, and there's a healthy glow to his complexion. I try to think of ways to strike up conversation, if only to encourage him to talk again. I'm not looking to flirt or take him home, even though he is almost sinfully handsome with those cheekbones, but can anyone blame an American girl for liking the way a British guy talks?

“Here on business?” I ask then immediately wish I hadn’t. I’m rusty on conversation starters.

He doesn’t even look at me, taking another drag of his cigarette. I’ve never minded the smell of cigarettes. Maybe it’s odd, but I actually like it. It reminds me of my grandmother, my namesake, a gregarious and fierce woman from County Antrim who could make anyone a straight-laced, God-fearing Catholic with a single tongue-lashing. She went through a pack a day easily, and lived to see me graduate high school, despite all the smoking-is-really-bad-for-you stuff I grew up around. She was a tough girl. Probably made it as long as she did because God Himself didn’t want to be lectured on the state of heaven.

“Something like that,” he says, dousing his smoke in an ash tray before offering his hand to me. “Peter Blackwood.”

I shake his hand firmly. “Sarah McCready.”

He nearly looks away but then snaps his gaze toward me. “McCready?” he repeats, arching a brow. “That’s a very Irish name. Northern Irish, if I’m not mistaken.”

I’m surprised he knows that. Usually everyone assumes I’m Scottish with the “Mc” at the front. Potato, po-tah-to. Scottish, Irish—what’s the difference, right?

“Guilty as charged,” I reply with a cheeky smile. “Hope you’re not MI6.”

“No such charm or luck,” Peter replies. “So your ancestors are from the Emerald Isle. Headed to Boston, are you?”

“How did you know?”

“Lucky guess.” He pulls out a pack of cigarettes. “Do you mind?”

“Not at all.”

He places one between his lips and flips open a silver lighter, snapping a flame to life.

“Flying make you nervous?” I ask.

“No,” Peter replies wryly, breathing out from his nostrils like some kind

of handsome fire-breathing dragon. His blue eyes are fixed on me. “I rather like flying, actually. Pretty American girls, on the other hand? Well . . . ”

That makes me laugh. It was smooth, but *oh my god*. I’m going to have to be careful with this one. “Are *you* headed to Boston?”

“I am.” He nods. “Oh, sorry—I’m rude. Would you like one?”

“Oh, no, thanks. Too expensive a habit for me.” I lean back into my seat as the plane door closes and the flight attendants get ready to do their safety presentation. “What part of Boston?”

“Oh, little place off Norfolk,” he replies. “What about yourself?”

“Closer to the waterfront,” I say. “Inherited my parents’ place, so I think it’s time I show it some love.”

Peter Blackwood studies me quietly. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you,” I say. “Have you been to South Boston yet?”

He shakes his head. “I haven’t had the pleasure.”

“Let me know if you’d ever like someone to show you around. I’d be happy to,” I say, hoping my warmth and friendliness comes across correctly. I was so hopelessly lost my first few days in LA. “Not to imply you can’t handle it, but Boston’s my hometown. And I know Southie pretty well.”

Peter puffs away. “That would be lovely. I’ll have to take you up on that.”

I settle in as the plane begins to move. “What do you do, then?”

Peter doesn’t answer right away, almost like he’s measuring his words, enjoying his cigarette. “I was a soldier,” he replies. “Just not special forces or anything like that.”

“Military life wasn’t for you?”

“No, I can’t say it was.” Peter chuckles. “Didn’t like being told what to do.”

“Careful. Now you sound like an American.”

“Can’t have that, can we?”



The flight is long with a layover in Dallas. But I spend almost all of it with Peter. We even grab lunch at a little café inside the airport. I only meant to pass the time with small talk, but that quickly evolved into everything from mundane discussions about everyday life—like whether or not he had any pets or what he thought of rent prices in his part of town—to current events and politics. It's clear to me he's incredibly well-educated and doesn't seem afraid to share his opinions, though he does so with a kind of diplomatic elegance I could never hope to achieve.

I've lost contact with pretty much all of my friends from my life before in Boston. I wouldn't mind making a new one. But while he's interested in personal stories about me, when I ask after his family or home life, he clams up quickly. He seems like a private person, not keen to answer those sorts of questions. All my attempts to get to know him are deflected, and I catch on quickly.

"No siblings whatsoever?" he remarks as he sips from a cup of coffee. "Odd for an Irish family. You lot tend to multiply like rabbits. No offense."

"None taken. We probably would have, but my mom had complications with my birth," I reply. "Wrecked her down there pretty good, from what she told me."

"I'm sorry you lost her."

"So am I," I say, pushing past the wave of sorrow that comes with that admittance. "I've been talking about myself for *hours*. Seriously. I need to shut up."

"Don't be sorry," Peter replies. "I find you and your stories quite interesting."

And now I'm fighting the heat creeping up to my face. "You never told me what brought you to Boston."

A wry smile tugs at the corner of Peter's mouth as he sets his cup down on its saucer. "Hunting."

"Hunting?"

“New England has some marvelous hunting grounds. I’m a bit of a fanatic, you might say, about the sport,” Peter replies. “Nothing quite so exciting as a sturdy rifle in your hand, and with certain populations of pests what they are, I like doing my part in being a good steward of the world.”

“My dad liked to hunt a bit. I’ve never been myself.”

“Perhaps I could take you some time,” Peter muses. “Though it requires getting up far earlier than what you’re used to.”

“I’ll pass, thanks.” I laugh softly. “I like my sleep, and knowing me, the animals would suffer. I’m a horrible shot, the few times I’ve tried.”

“Fair enough,” Peter says.

Our waiter brings out a singular bill, and when I’m about to protest and ask for it to be split, Peter takes it without hesitation.

“Wait, that’s not—”

“You’ve been keeping me company on what would’ve been a very droll journey, Miss McCready,” Peter replies. “I can the foot the bill easily enough.”

Being currently jobless, I let it go a little faster than I might otherwise. “Well . . . thank you.”

“Not a problem at all. I don’t suppose you have a phone number I could jot down when the fellow gets back with my change? I should like to keep in touch.”

“I do—I mean, I did, but I’m not sure it’s in service. I may have to change it. Do you think I could get yours instead?” I ask.

“Of course,” he says, ripping the small receipt when his change returns in two and writing his number down with a fountain pen. “Let me have yours anyway, just in case.”

I rattle mine off quickly.

“Very good,” he says, and I’m struck by his charming contented smile. There’s a glow to his features I notice beneath the lights of this little café. God, he’s pretty.

“When we reach Boston, I have some business to tend to, but I’d like to call later in the week. See how you’re faring.”

“That’s very sweet. I’d like that.”

Traveling moves so quickly. Before I know it, we’ve returned to our gate for the final flight and boarded again, and then we’re in the air. When our plane touches down in Boston I can sense the nippy, near-winter air awaiting us outside. Armed with the promise of a new friend and a connection to a potential job, starting over again no longer seems as daunting as it once did.

Maybe it goes to show how lonely and far from home I felt back in California. I can’t explain why I’m so compelled to share things about myself with Peter. Maybe I’m in a chatty mood, the way I was with the other waitresses on slow days when there were very few customers and nothing to do but shoot the breeze. Fortunately, he doesn’t seem to mind at all. If anything, he keeps encouraging me.

“Awful, about your ancestor. The *Titanic* was a terrible thing.”

“I know. It’s crazy hearing survivors talk these days, knowing he died on it,” I reply. “But his wife—my great-grandmother—she immigrated here with her entire immediate family after that. My grandfather was seventeen at the time. It’s a good life they made here, I can’t complain at all.”

“That’s good to hear,” Peter says as we linger by the gate exit, having finally arrived at our destination. He places a hat on his head. “Unfortunately, this is where we must part ways. But I’ll call you.”

“Sure, or I’ll call you,” I say, wondering if he’ll ever really call. I know how busy people’s lives can get. But I’ll put forth the effort and try if nothing else. “This was fun. Thank you for keeping me company.”

“The pleasure was mine. Until next time, Miss McCready.”

“You can call me Sarah,” I correct. “We’re friends now, right?”

Warmth fills his features. “Sarah.” He nods. “And yes, we are.”

“Have a safe trip, Peter,” I say.

He tips his hat and turns around, suitcase in hand, and I’m left trying to

focus on how the hell I get home.



When the taxi sidles up to the front door of my childhood home, the butterflies in my stomach really go nuts.

I was already excited, seeing the dusting of white on boulevards and rooftops. I haven't seen snow in what feels like ages, and crispness that nips at my gloveless fingers is all too familiar. When I open the door and step out, my breath escapes my lips in wisps of gray, and I'm reminded of my childhood when I'd pretend to be a fire-breathing dragon when it was cold.

After paying my fare and all but tossing my luggage to the pavement, the driver takes off, and I'm left standing on the sidewalk, admiring this first preliminary window to my past. The outside of the colonial-style house hasn't changed a bit: faded red brick walls, white shutters and windowpanes, and a slanted black roof. It's sandwiched between two other houses—the one on its left nicely decorated for Christmas, and the creepy old Darragh house on the right, closed down and shuttered, still very much abandoned.

I hoist my myriad of suitcases and bring them to the front porch, then I reach into my pocket and withdraw my keychain, toying with the scratched bronze and slipping it into the lock. It hasn't been touched in some time, so I have to play with it for a minute before it finally gives and opens with a long low creak.

I'm hit with stale air and leave the front door open to freshen up the place as I step inside and reach for the light switch. On it goes, and I'm faced with the small front parlor, my mother's chair for taking off shoes covered by dusty sheets. My footsteps echo across the hardwood floors as I continue into the living room where all the furniture is similarly covered. There are cobwebs on the old chandelier hanging over the couches. A heavy layer of gray rests upon the otherwise mostly white mantle.

Echoes of my childhood play through my head. The glow and crackle of the fireplace. The boardgame nights around the coffee table. Mom playing dress-up with me and cooking hearty suppers. Dad helping me accessorize my dolls after coming home from work or accepting empty teacups as I played tea party, even when he was tired from a long day. The way they both consoled me on the couch after my first teenage heartbreak over a boy I liked at school.

Every memory, both good and bittersweet, encircles and dances around me, and I know I'm home. This was always home, no matter how hard I tried to pretend otherwise. Nostalgia grips me tight. Pictures still hang upon the walls of us. I let forth a soft laugh as I make time to admire them, even though my legs ache from the long plane ride, and I'm tired as all hell.

I've memorized each and every one of these photos. Their wedding day, where Dad was trying his best to grow a mustache and Mom had feathered bangs. The day they brought me home from the hospital, sporting the toothiest grins I've ever seen. The only accomplishment that mattered, they used to tell me. They'd never been prouder.

I keep following the framed photographs from the main floor up the stairs. Dad and I when he taught me how to ride a bike. Mom's first attempt at teaching me how to bake a pie. Try as she might, she could never make me into much of a cook. Going to Red Sox games with my dad, wearing our caps and eating hot dogs covered in ketchup and mustard. There are condiment stains on my shirt in that one.

My heart aches as I reach the top of the stairs. My high school graduation is the most recent addition to the wall of memories, my mom and dad on either side of me as I hold my diploma. It's there I finally lose my composure and the tears come. With a soft exhale, I gently pry the frame off the wall and rub the spotty glass with my sleeve until it's clear, turning on the light in the upstairs hallway so I can admire it better.

A dark shape shifts in my peripheral vision in my parents' old room. I

jump with a gasp and turn, squinting at the outline of their bedposts and their untouched mattress.

“Holy shit,” I whisper softly, clutching my chest. I slowly approach the room. Nervously, without entering, I reach for the switch on the wall. Now illuminated, it looks precisely how I left it. A little dusty, though. Exhaling, I scold myself quietly. “Get it together, McCready.”

In a perfect world I’d never be this jittery, but I blame the news. There’s been some sick people in the headlines over the past few years, picking up girls or breaking into their homes, killing over and over again. Serial killers, psychopaths. As a woman living alone, I can’t be too careful. I return my attention to the photo in my hands, shutting the light off and going back into the hall. I try to ignore that little fright, but the hairs on the back of my neck are still standing on end. For whatever reason, I’m on edge.

Shaking it off, I carefully put the picture back and go to check my room, switching the light on there and find everything where I expected—my little single bed, my vanity, posters of my favorite bands like Fleetwood Mac, Kansas, and Genesis still on the walls. I can remember plenty of sleepovers, playing and gossiping with school friends, listening to music, daydreaming about my latest crush. I open a drawer and find rows of notebooks—my journals. I wrote my thoughts down almost religiously from middle school and onward, right up until the night my parents died. The desire to pick up a pen vanished after that. Maybe I’ll go through them all, one by one, and laugh at myself and that younger version of me who worried about whether someone liked me, or if I’d get asked to a dance.

It strikes me then how much work I have to do, and how this little space doesn’t quite suit me anymore. It feels weird, taking my parents’ old room, but this is my house now. And part of honoring their memory will be making it my own.

The light flickers then goes dead. Annoyed, I play with the switch to no avail. “Did I bust the breaker?”

Rolling my eyes, I plod back into the hallway and get halfway down the stairs, each step making the old wood creak beneath my shoes, before I stop, gripping the railing. I'm not a believer in ghost stories. Why am I so spooked?

"Nobody was supposed to be here," a voice above me rasps.

My stomach drops as my worst nightmare blooms around me. I sharply twist my head, peering toward my parents' room. In the shadows, a figure slips past the threshold, taking shape from my imagination into the form of a man.

Crimson eyes with slitted pupils that almost glow in the dark like a cat's are fixated upon me.

I'm frozen in place by a sudden terror that turns my limbs into lead. I don't know what to do. The only thought in my helpless mind is a hope that I've fallen asleep in a chair somewhere without realizing. This has to be a dream. I'm imagining those inhuman eyes.

All those stories I read in the papers—they were never supposed to happen to me.

"You shouldn't be here." The low rasp has turned guttural. Not angry but predatory, tinted with hunger. He takes another step toward me. Then another.

Run, my mind screams at me. Dammit, Sarah. Pick up your feet and run!

The stranger snarls, lunging forward, and it's enough to snap me out of it. Screaming, I rush for the door. There's thundering in my ears, and I can't tell if it's my heartbeat or the sound of him chasing me. I fling open the door and nearly slip and fall on the porch, then stumble onto the sidewalk and run for the boulevard. I glance over my shoulder as he emerges from the darkness of my house—

Only to collide with someone else.

I shriek again in terror, suddenly clutched by the idea that maybe the intruder isn't alone—maybe there's another helping him do whatever it is he

plans to do with me. I nearly slip, but strong, sturdy hands catch me by the arms and hold me upright.

“Oi! Easy, now! What’s going on? What’s the matter?”

I stare up helplessly into a pair of soft brown eyes beneath a brow knit tight with concern. The man I ran into didn’t barrel over when I smacked into him somehow, even with the slippery pavement. His brown wool coat is open over an old-fashioned blue vest and a patterned tie, and there’s a flat cap on his head, covering dark hair.

I don’t have time or the wits about me to consider that I’ve never seen this fellow before in my life, that he could be anyone, and I’ve no way of telling whether or not he’s friend or foe. There’s a phone back in the house, but it’s disconnected. I can’t possibly call the police regardless, not with an intruder inside.

This new stranger is all I’ve got. I force the words out, stammering and shaking. “There’s someone in my house.”

CHAPTER 2

Old Grudges



Cillian Darragh

Tonight I expected little more than a quiet walk home from a night of music, beer, and blood from Mannoek Tavern, the way I normally spend each night, among the familiar faces I've come to know across the decades. Nothing usually takes me off guard, not in the many years I've been alive.

And I'm nearing a full century. I figure I'll stop counting after that.

But I heard a feminine scream from a mile off, one filled with terror, and instinctively I took flight. Normally when I hear things like this, it's a petty crime. A mugging, maybe an assault. Easy enough to scare off a perpetrator. But this came from my neighborhood. Near my home.

And I don't like that kind of disturbance too close to where I've planted roots.

I arrive in a swift shimmer of swirling mist and feathers, and I'm about to take a look around when a woman comes barreling out of her front door with another frightened scream that could rival a banshee, head twisted over her shoulder just before she slams into me. I nearly fall on my arse right then, trying to keep her from hurting herself when she bounces off me like a

quarter. There's a bit of ice underneath my shoes, but I manage to keep my balance and my dignity.

Only just.

The moment we touch, I become overwhelmed with everything about *her*. My thoughts are muddled by a flood of her memories. It's an ability I can't control or harness; a burden of the curse I brought upon myself when I dared go against nature and my own faith and uttered the Morrigan's name. I'm caught in echoes of the woman's laughter as a child, the loving words of her parents, friends. I see shining lights, feel the heaviness of failure, smell cigarette smoke. It's too much for me to make sense of all at once.

Unable to shield myself from the onslaught of everything about her and my confusion that comes with it, I hear her frightful declaration as I steady myself, body and mind, and everything instantly becomes worse.

I have a growing suspicion I know who's in that house. But first, I need to quell the terror of the woman in front of me. "It's going to be all right, now. Breathe. You saw someone?"

"Yes." She points to her open front door, body trembling, if not from fear then from the cold. "He's in my house. He's got these crazy red eyes, a-and he chased me—I think he's going to—"

"Settle down," I say evenly, draping my coat around her shivering body and hoping my calm might soothe her. Her description of the intruder's eyes confirm what I thought might be happening here. Lights are beginning to turn on in the neighborhood. No doubt others have heard her and will come outside to investigate shortly. I quietly make certain she's steady on her feet and not going to slip again. She hasn't let go of my lapel, and I don't dare wring her hand free.

"I'll take a look to be safe. You've a phone, I trust?"

Though I've often resorted to lying to people in times of necessity, I don't particularly like doing it here. I need to control the situation.

"In my kitchen, but I don't think it works."

“I’ll clear the house, then,” I reply, stepping past her and heading in without so much as asking permission.

“Isn’t that dangerous?” she asks, following me. “What if he’s armed? With a gun, or a—”

“Doubtful,” I reply. When I’m in the house, I recognize the man’s scent. I know what weapon this fellow has in his arsenal, and it certainly isn’t knives and firearms. *Goddammit, Brody. Another mess of yours to clean up, like the first time you arrived to us, feeding on the plane like you did.*

I’ll have to remember to give Fionn, one of our larger and more intimidating bouncers at the bar, a proper talking-to tomorrow when I head back to the Mannoek for the evening. Brody is far too young, too fresh to our numbers, to be allowed any free rein as of yet. Especially if he lunged at a woman in the comfort of her home.

“He would’ve used it on you already, if so. Besides, if he meant any harm to you, he’ll not try anything with another man nearby. It might’ve been a drifter who saw an abandoned home and hunkered down for the night.”

“It’s not abandoned,” she protests as she follows me in and heads for the breaker. The lights return with a soft hum. “It’s mine.”

Hers? I suppose that makes sense, seeing as I saw her all but fly from the front door and slam into me. Before tonight, I’ve never seen any signs of life in this house. She must’ve only just returned. But why, then, was she gone? I’ve made note of every single neighbor on this block. I know their names and the names of their children. I make it my business to know everything that happens in my vicinity.

She’s been gone a long while. All of the furniture in the house is covered. The air is stale; I can almost taste the dust. I wrinkle my nose and clear every room on the first floor, inspecting every nook and cranny where a grown man might be able to hide, before returning to her.

“Where did you see him first?”

“Upstairs.” She points past the railings of the second floor. “My parents’

room.”

“Stay close to me,” I say against my better judgment. If she knew the truth of what I was, then she’d know she should be staying as far away from me as possible. Thousands of miles wouldn’t be enough. “Until I’ve checked everything upstairs. Don’t want whomever this is jumping out at you while my back is turned.”

The master bedroom is first, and I know for a fact that Brody was here, by his favorite brand of cigarette lying cold in an ashtray on the dresser. She notices it too, picking it up.

“Is that yours?” I ask.

“No. I don’t really smoke anymore.”

“Well, you didn’t imagine it,” I grumble. Brody and Fionn are both chimneys. Why he decided to crash in the house next to mine instead of simply asking to stay with me, I’m not completely certain, though I have an inkling suspicion it has to do with Fionn being gone for a few days.

Brody doesn’t do well with being left alone. Especially in a city bursting at the seams with healthy human beings. He’s still within his first twenty years, and self-control is hard during that period. Perhaps he felt most comfortable remaining near me.

I’m the one who helped him take the Oath, after all.

Checking each room on the second floor, I start with the master, feeling her almost hugging my back. The more I look and listen, the more I’m reassured. The house is silent. Brody’s nowhere to be seen or heard.

“He’s gone,” I say after I’ve finished a full sweep. “Whomever he was.”

“How could he get in? I locked this place up tight before I left.”

There’s a window open in a little girl’s bedroom, letting in the Boston cold. A raven feather rests on the carpet.

“Climbed through a window, I imagine. Let in a bird or too, perhaps, while he was at it.” I pick the feather up and slip it into my pocket with a sigh, surveying the window for good measure. I could shut it, but perhaps it’s

best to leave it for now, get fresh air circulating so this place feels less like a tomb.

But I have a bigger problem on my hands now. My body tenses as the winter breeze carries to me the scent of her hair—her own natural smell, mixed with the faint remnants of her perfume, invades my senses and clenches me tight. I can hear the beating of her heart in her chest, the blood coursing through her veins, and the flash of her pulse in her throat. The beast I hide within me, having slept long this past year, awakens beneath my skin, and I'm hit hard with a familiar dreadful hunger I've never quite been able to bury.

But this isn't a warrior's bloodlust. This is something stronger. Something far more insatiable. I'm no longer at ease, briefly content to mind my own business and pretend I'm nobody, just another exhausted worker on his way home from a twelve-hour shift at some office. No. Now the soldier inside me has awakened, but not to slaughter my enemy. It wants her.

I want her—with her raven hair, clear blue eyes like glaciers, pale skin, and a small beauty mark just above her mouth.

My fangs elongate instantly, hidden in my mouth. I clench my jaw until it aches, fighting the desires that pummel ruthlessly at my own restraint. I could grab her and spirit her inside, shut the door. No one would know or suspect if I sank my teeth into her porcelain neck, allowed my venom to pour through the puncture marks to calm her, sedate her, make her body sensitive to my touch.

All this, I've never experienced. Is the earth trembling beneath my feet, or is it me? I've no time, a matter of moments to decide whether I am man or monster tonight.

Drink from her, pleasure her, a part of me whispers, starving for a taste. Then Mickey can make her forget, like he's done to others.

I grip my fists until my nails dig into my palms.

No.

“You believe me, don’t you?” she asks as I turn to her. “I know it must sound crazy, but he was right there, and he was so fast, and his eyes—they weren’t red like from drugs, but *red* red, and they glowed, and—”

The sound of her voice makes me irate. Not because it’s grating or unpleasant, but because angels couldn’t hope to sing sweeter.

Jesus fucking Christ, what is happening to me?

“I imagine anything is ten times more frightening in the dark,” I reply, shorter than I mean to as I suppress this sudden and insufferable need. Her scent is driving me wild, tugging at every end of my control. An alcoholic would have an easier time sat in front of a glass of Irish whiskey. I need to get out of this house. And quickly. “Go ahead and give the police a call if you like, once your phone is working. It’ll make you feel better, I’m sure.”

She scoffs at me. “Look, I know it’s late, but I wasn’t making it up. You saw the cigarette.”

Her close proximity hits me harder than it might a normal man. Being near her is nigh unbearable. I ought to calm myself. She doesn’t know how she’s affecting me, that I haven’t been drawn so strongly to a woman like this in all the years I’ve lived.

Not even to my late wife. Pain and guilt pierce me at the memories, and now I’m more irritable than I was before.

“Yes, I saw the cigarette, but I didn’t see glowing eyes. This isn’t a horror movie. When you make your report, I’d stick to the facts.”

I head down the stairs, hearing her footsteps behind me as she mutters to herself. “You think I’m crazy?”

“No, I think you’ve had a fright.”

“Listen here, you with your—your fancy clothes and pretty accent,” she insists, annoyed. “I didn’t imagine it. It was real. I saw it with my own eyes.

I glance at her with an arched brow. Pretty accent? Fancy clothes? During the Irish struggle for independence, these were considered street clothes. Even poor working class men managed to get their hands on a decent coat

and a vest. The longer I live, the more I dislike new fashion trends. I like to keep things simple. And if this is now considered refined, well, that's hardly my fault, now, is it?

"That isn't necessary," I reply curtly. "I live next door."

She accompanies me to the door. "You're living in *that* creepy old house? Since when?"

"Creepy? Old?" I repeat these words with the utmost indignation. "There is nothing creepy about my house, nor has there ever been."

"I beg to differ." My new neighbor folds her arms. "I grew up here. You want to talk about abandoned? Nobody's lived in the Darragh house, not in my memory. Only my grandmother knew of a Darragh living there, and she said he left long ago. My friends and I used to dare each other to stand on the porch and knock on the door. We were sure it was haunted."

The heat behind her voice isn't lost on me. There's fearlessness in her eyes I can appreciate. More than that. They beckon the monster within me, and I'm reminded of the precious blood within her veins.

I take a step back, pulling my restraint and my sanity with it. "Well, there *is* a Darragh in the house again. And rest assured, it won't look haunted for long," I retort.

"You're renovating it?" she asks in a tone mixed with annoyance and curiosity. "So they finally sold it? Or you're related to old man Darragh somehow?"

Old man Darragh? Oh, she's got my goat. But while I should be angry, part of me enjoys this exchange. And I shouldn't.

"I inherited the property, yes," I lie tersely because it's always belonged to me, but deception is unfortunately necessary. My temper is short. I need to leave. Now. "Not that it's any of your business."

Sensing the ire in my tone, she shows spirit of her own, shrugging out of the coat I draped over her to keep her warm and shoving it at me. "We're neighbors, and whatever you do to that house might affect mine, so it kinda *is*

my business,” she replies. “But thank you anyway, Mr. Darragh. For scaring off that man, if nothing else.”

“You’re welcome,” I reply, doing my best to ignore the fact that my coat now smells like her, a self-inflicted torment I wasn’t expecting. I drape it over my arm. “Good night, miss.”

“Good night. It’s Sarah, by the way,” she says quickly then steps into her house and closes the door.

I stand there alone on her porch, my hands slowly balling into fists as I squeeze my eyes shut.

Sarah.

With a heavy sigh, I slowly make my way home down the pavement. I’d been avoiding asking for her name. I didn’t want to know it. If I didn’t know it, I could try to forget I ever met her tonight. She could simply be a bothersome woman next door, someone to avoid because she teases my hunger more fiercely than any woman has after I turned.

Hanging up my coat and hat inside on a few old pegs, I shut my door with a growl.

“I’m sorry, Cillian.”

Brody stands there fidgeting in my foyer like someone fending off the urge to scratch an itch, hands clasped in front of him. “I wanted to stay close without being a bother, what with Fionn away on business for Mickey. I’ve stayed in that house before. Didn’t know anyone was living there.”

“I thought that might be the case.” I sigh. “So you lunged at her.”

Brody’s youthful face grimaces. He hangs his head. “She smelled so good, I—I couldn’t help myself.”

That is something I can’t blame him for. “Take the room, then, if you need rest. There’s fresh blood in the fridge as well.”

Contrite, he nods. “Thank you, Cillian.”

“You can thank me by doing what we’ve talked about and training yourself how to properly behave around these people.” I rest my hand on his

shoulder. “We’ve all been through it. We’ve all had someone we relied on to muzzle us, keep us from biting when we couldn’t control it. But Fionn can’t be that for you forever.”

“I know.” Brody nods eagerly. “I-I’ll do better. I promise.”

“I’m sure you will, lad. Go on, then.”



When I was a boy in Dublin, a family moved into the flat next to ours—the Sullivans, opposite the Kellys, Michael’s family. They had far too many mouths to feed and not enough food to go around, something all our parents struggled with.

Even with little food and even less money, I remember my gaunt, pale mother putting on her brightest smile and dragging me to their front door with her, a few freshly baked biscuits arranged in a basket. She fussed over my hair, even when I tried to shrug her off, and told me to mind my manners.

“Da wouldn’t like you wasting flour,” I protested softly. My voice had yet to change.

“Your da can take his opinion and sod off,” she lectured me. “We’ll be good neighbors, no matter what.”

If Ma were alive today, I’ve no doubt she’d grab my ear and yank me right back to Sarah’s front door, giving me the sort of tongue-lashing that would make a priest faint and a sailor blush. But she isn’t, and I’ve no intent to make things right. It’s an insult to her memory, perhaps—Ma certainly raised me to be polite, but I’m convinced I should keep my distance. Sarah will be more inclined to keep her distance if she thinks I’m a cunt with a rude streak and won’t try to do neighborly things for me to strike up conversation, like others on our block have done. I can handle everyone else on my street just fine, but with how strongly I reacted to Sarah, she’s a danger to my self-restraint. This is for the best.

The encounter last night reminded me of another instance where I reacted poorly due to my emotions being out of my control, amplified by my curse. And it's a bridge I must mend, whether I like it or not.

There are certain customs I should observe, though I'm not human anymore, and that means remembering my mother's words. There's an offering of peace owed to my High Queen, one I've put off since I returned to Boston. While Michael and I never hold slights against each other for very long, his new wife is quite different story. Leigh is new to our world, freshly turned only twelve years ago. She doesn't know me, and I can't claim to know very much about her, besides the fact she was a widow before Michael married her, the occasion of which I dampened.

It's something I mean to rectify, now that I've returned to Boston.

It's been a good decade since I took the time to bake anything, and it's a marvel I don't burn the brown bread in the oven. I've spruced up all the home appliances. They're older models from the fifties, but they're hardy, and they still work.

I wrap the bread then put on my coat and step outside, casting a furtive glance toward the house next to mine and see no sign of anyone stirring. Good. If I'm lucky, she's not a morning person, and she'll never see me come and go. Even if she does see me, she'll hopefully have the sense to avoid me. Pushing Sarah out of my thoughts—as impossible as it is—becomes my focus as I walk through South Boston and head for Beacon Hill.

I could get there quicker if I wasn't carrying the warm and, frankly, delicious olive branch in the crook of my arm. But I've never minded hoofing it anywhere. Walking or bicycling was always my preferred way of travel before I was reckless. Before I made decisions that couldn't be taken back. This is just one more in the broad book of mistakes, written by Cillian Darragh. But unlike the Oath I've taken, this particular misstep can be reversed.

Michael and Leigh reside on Chestnut Street. It's odd, almost laughable,

trying to behave *normally*, as though there's nothing wrong with any of us. A pair of happy vampires and their little vampire love nest. But I can't think too spitefully. Michael deserves to be happy in some way, after everything he's done for me and the others.

I stand on the pavement, the street lined with cars on either side. Leigh's blue 1967 Chevy Impala sits near the curb, well-tended and looking brand-new. I stare at their front door painted blue to match.

Blue's her favorite color, Mickey told me once. *Because of my eyes, you see*. I nearly cuffed him for being obnoxiously nauseating.

I'm starting to wish I wore a different tie. "Right," I mutter to myself. Somehow, this is just as daunting as charging into battle. "Here goes."

No doubt they can both hear me coming up. I'm not trying to mask myself. I politely use the knocker and wait. I hear light footsteps, and then the blue door swings open.

I was hoping for Michael first, so he could help ease her into my attempt at sorry, but he's not so dainty when he moves. Instead, I stare down into the inquisitive green eyes of Leigh Kelly. If she's startled, she masks it well.

"Leigh," I say, offering up the bread.

"Cillian Darragh," she greets, less than enthused.

"I thought we might talk."

Leigh glances at the loaf with an arched brow, leaning against the door frame and folding her arms as she regards me skeptically. "Go ahead, then. Talk."

Grimacing, I rub the back of my neck and lower my gift. "What happened at your wedding. We ought to put it to rest, aye?"

"We ought to put it to rest?" Though she's civil, there's an edge to her voice. In all honesty, I'm impressed with how disciplined she is in comparison to most vampires her age. The first twenty years are so tumultuous. Every slight, every mistake, is keenly felt tenfold. Anyone else might try to throttle me, considering what I did.

But perhaps that's why she's vampiric royalty now, and I'm anything but. "We, aye." I try to give her the bread again.

"We have nothing to put to rest," Leigh replies evenly, not moving to accept it. "Because I haven't heard a real apology from you yet."

"I'm trying to apologize," I protest.

"And you think baked goods count, do you?" Leigh is born-and-bred Boston-American, all the clearer when she's angry, but her inflection sounds more Irish these days. Too much time around Michael, perhaps. He's beginning to wear off on her. "Because they don't. Why can't you just come out and say, 'I'm sorry I ruined your wedding day'?"

"Leigh." Diplomacy really isn't one of my strengths, and neither is patience. And I'm not entirely certain I truly *ruined* anything. "That day, you have to understand, it was very—"

"That's not an apology, that's an excuse." She stops me, calm and yet firm. Disappointment flickers in her face, and the way she purses her lips is almost maternal. "If you're not going to say it, we've got nothing to talk about." She shuts the door slowly in my face.

With a heavy sigh, I turn around, staring at the bread in my hands. Perhaps Sinéad will have some use for it.

It's early yet, but I begin the walk back to Southie. Mannoek Tavern is only a few miles away.

Plenty of time to think about how I'm going to make it up to my best friend's wife.



"She shut the door in your face, did she?" Oscar says as he gives the bar counter a good wiping down, his white sleeves rolled up and the gold in his vest catching little glints of the tavern's low light. "Sorry, Cillian, but you can't really blame her, given what you done."

Oscar Haskins is one of Mannock Tavern's several bartenders. Michael has five on rotation, Oscar being the eldest of them. He was one of the first I brought in to the Brotherhood—anti-Treaty, like I was back in the twenties. He wanted a united Ireland as much as I did. What he lacks in height and stature he makes up for with passion. It's gotten him into trouble a few times with Michael's sensibilities, but overall, I trust him.

"Thanks a lot," I say flatly. "That's very helpful. Precisely the advice I needed."

"Called a time and place," Rory McCready says, moving around the tavern and placing chairs and stools down around their tables. "I'm no expert on the fair ladyfolk, to be sure, but I know a wedding is neither of those things to be causing a scene the way you did."

"You won't find a sympathetic ear around here, Cillian. Everyone is where they should be. On *her* side," Sinéad O'Donovan interjects before Rory can respond, coming out of the back with a purse slung over her shoulder. She used to try to tame her orange mane, but now that curls are all the rage here in the States, she doesn't bother to straighten them. She ties them back instead in this strange poofy material she calls a scrunchie. "Most everyone is, considering, and you ought to be too, now that you've got your head on straight."

"Oh, come on," I grumble. "I tried to apologize. Even brought her homemade bread as a gift."

Sinéad quirks a brow. "Ah, yes. 'Hello, Leigh, sorry I ruined your wedding reception. Here, have some bread. All better now?'" Oscar and Rory burst into soft laughter at my expense. "Do you know anything about women?"

Shaking her head, Sinéad holds out her hand. "I'm off to St. Winifred's. Give me your sorry bread, and I'll take it with me."

"Off to see young Eamon?" Rory asks. By the glimmer in the fellow's eye, I know he approves. Despite Eamon Callaghan's crimes, Rory has

always had a soft spot for the lad. “How is he?”

“He’s as grand as you can be when your days are dull with prayer and tending trees,” Sinéad answers. “I’ll be leaving in a bit. I want to clean up the front first. Oi! Stop getting your fingerprints all over the bar counter, you damned savage. Oscar only just washed it.”

I hold up my hands with a scoff. “Are you my mother or my drill sergeant?”

“You could use some motherin’, make no mistake,” Sinéad replies fearlessly. “Thank God you’re not one of mine.”

“Thank God, indeed,” I call as she moves along. She and I often banter like this, all in good fun. Sinéad is not one to be trifled with, according to the few times I’ve seen her in a fight. I’d never truly try to get on her bad side, not if I could help it.

We call ourselves a Brotherhood, but it’s the sisters in our midst that our enemies should fear most of all.

Once she’s gone, I glance at Rory. “She goes to see him often, then?”

“She visits him more than anyone. Sometimes two, three times a week,” Rory replies with a shrug. “Perhaps more than amends are being made between those two.”

Oscar snorts. “Ain’t like that. I’ve heard her and Leigh talking.”

“That’s eavesdroppin’, that is!” Rory warns. “You’re going to get yourself in more trouble than Mr. Darragh here.”

Oscar is unapologetic. “I’m a bartender. I’m allowed to drop in the eaves. D’you want to know, or don’t you?”

“Apologies. Tell.”

Oscar drapes his cloth over his shoulder, putting away fresh pint glasses. “Sinéad and Eamon are good friends again, but she won’t let it go no further. Not while Eamon’s good and locked away. Doesn’t want to get his hopes up or get him riled when there’s naught he can do about it. Druids don’t allow them *conjugal visits*, or anything of that sort. Locked up means a vampire

stays calm, contrite, and celibate.”

“Conjugal visits?” Rory asks, wrinkling his nose and hoisting his hefty self onto a stool that creaks beneath his weight. “Dirty minds, the both of ye. Well. I’m glad he’s got something to look forward to. In the meantime, you might try talking to Mickey. He’d know the best way to smooth things over with Leigh. He married her, after all, and he’s been in hot water with her before.”

“That’s true,” Oscar agrees. “Got right pissed at him once before and didn’t speak to him for an entire year, she did, before things got made right.”

“And that was when she was human, was it? So I’ll have to wait a hundred years before she’ll forgive me, then?” I grumble.

Oscar laughs. “Nah. I know Leigh. It won’t take that long, but Rory’s right. Might want Mickey to butter her up first. Come on, now, it’s not the first time you’ve pissed off a queen, aye?”

“In my defense, Queen Elizabeth doesn’t rightly know who I am,” I say ruefully as Oscar offered me a pint of Guinness, the liquid dark, and harboring blood. “Gave her father plenty of trouble, though.”

“So we did, so we did. And we won’t apologize for it, aye?” Oscar grins.

“I’ll drink to that.” Rory raises his cup.

I appreciate that sentiment. I admittedly don’t know Rory half as well as the other men of the Brotherhood, even though I should probably do what I can to remedy that. He’s an old shipbuilder from Belfast, one whose hands built the *Titanic*—and then proceeded to nearly drown on its maiden voyage, or so I’ve heard.

His presence and wisdom have clearly been an anchor for the Brotherhood in my absence. Not that I’ve ever claimed to be a wise man. When it comes to everything but armed conflict, I’m quite the opposite. Coming back to Boston a year ago was the first smart thing I think I’ve done since the Troubles began in Northern Ireland back in ’68.

That was a fight I’d been raring for. For decades. Centuries of anger,

boiling up underneath the surface of every hot-tempered Irishman and woman who called any one of the northernmost six counties home, Catholic or Protestant. I carried an intense hatred for any kind of British rule for a very long time, and I was hopeful that after a few years, Ireland would finally be unified.

I wasn't against killing anyone who bombed or shot up innocents in the process on either side. I was the cause of plenty of sensationalized headlines. *Bizarre animal attack. Wolves return to Ireland, causing havoc in Ulster.*

No, no wolves. Just me.

I practically created an entire army of Irish yearning for retribution. We weren't part of any paramilitary, of course. We were separate.

That created more problems than I intended. The longer I stayed in Belfast, the angrier I became, the more hatred fueled me. Others looked to my example, and I'm not a leader. Not like Michael. I've been a monster for so long, parts of me barely remember the Cillian who came before. I can't remember simple joy in my life.

But rage can only fuel a man for so long. Year after year passed. Nothing I did mattered. The British still occupied. Innocent people died. The fighting grew worse. Every slight, real or imagined, was paid back time and again between both sides. Any sense of righteousness I carried slowly began to numb from fatigue.

I couldn't take it. It was too much. Finally, I knew I'd had enough. What's happening over there is not our fight anymore.

I'm glad Michael came and fetched me and the others when he did last August. Any longer, and we might've incited Her wrath. Bringing too much attention to ourselves isn't what She wants.

I consider asking Rory what he thinks about the whole thing, if he has an opinion on the matter. But just when I think of striking up a conversation with him directly, he wanders off.

"Where's he off to? It's early."

“The harbor won’t watch itself.” Oscar shrugs, getting back to work. “Mob’s been doing what it can to keep sending weaponry across the pond. Mickey doesn’t want them making matters worse.”

That might’ve bothered me once. I’ve a knack for searching for a fight to jump into, inserting myself into several American wars I probably had no need to be in. But when a fellow has an eternity to burn, why not take up arms in the defense of the defenseless?

“Cillian.” My oldest and dearest friend emerges from his office, greeting me warmly.

I turn and nod. “Mickey.”

Marriage suits Michael Kelly well. I’ve never seen him so content. So balanced. Before my return, when he was yet untethered, he was perpetually exhausted, trying to keep track of hundreds of vampires all residing in different parts of Boston and spread across the country. Keeping the Brotherhood safe and fed, a machine well-oiled with blood and distractions.

He didn’t blanch when I brought over fifty new soldiers from all six northern counties, from Antrim to Fermanagh last year. He welcomed them all with open arms, but I can’t give him all the credit. It was Leigh who helped in getting them acclimated to life in America, assigning other members of the Brotherhood to watch over them and ensure they didn’t give in to their bloodlust on unsuspecting Boston civilians. Because of her, there hasn’t been a single incident. Brody lunging at my neighbor has been the closest thing to it.

I could never have accomplished what Michael and Leigh have. Their leadership has ensured our treaty with our enemies, the Mediterranean vampires that compose the ranks of the Hecatēi, remains intact and stronger than ever. The only talents I can lay claim to are being the better fighter and having the ability to envision the past when I touch an object or a person. The Morrigan might have initially preferred me to be king because of my bloodlust, but I rejected it. Michael was always the better choice.

Now that he has a wife, a home, *everything* a man could want, it only reminds me of the wife I lost. For that, I'm envious.

I shouldn't be, I know. Those emotions are thick and powerful, and I harness them quickly. "I'd hoped to talk to you. About Leigh."

"Oh, boy." Michael chuckles wryly as he looks the tavern over. Nothing is too small a task for him, whether it's wiping down tables, washing dishes, or cleaning up spills. He takes pride in this place. He pours fresh whiskey into a glass resting on a solitary table tucked away from the rest. "What did you do now?"

"Nothing. Well, nothing *new*, anyway." I watch him curiously. "How much Jameson do you let go to waste pouring one out for Mannock's ghost every day?"

"I could pour the man entire kegs, and it still wouldn't be enough for me," Michael replies, arranging the glass beside a little candle at the table's center. "It's tradition. Besides, Old Mick deserves it. You remember him, don't you?"

"I do, aye," I reply. "Remember you nearly squeaking like a girl when he shook your hand."

"I didn't *squeak*." Michael sniffs. "I exhaled. There's a difference."

I watch as he readies a pile of freshly washed and pressed green napkins and a tray of clean silverware on a table. He sits down, and I join him. He doesn't need to ask me to help him do these mundane things. Keeps my hands busy, at least, as we neatly wrap the silverware for tonight.

"Going a bit overboard on the green, don't you think?"

"The Americans love it," Michael replies, unapologetic. "Stick around for St. Paddy's next year instead of holing up in your house to avoid the crowds, and you'll see."

"I'd rather be stuck in a bog," I groan, tying my first napkin tight around the silverware before setting it aside and starting another. "They're too fucking loud on St. Paddy's round here. A lot of them weren't born in

Ireland, besides. Why're they so obnoxious about it?"

"Americans treasure what culture they have," Michael replies. "They remember their grandparents, their great-grandparents. Where once people looked down on us, they celebrate us now. It's a good thing. And it's done with love, anyway, so I'm not bothered."

"Leigh's making you soft, I think."

"Hardly." Michael is making quick work of the napkins, faster than me. "Why are you here this early? Don't usually see you until late."

"I went to see Leigh."

Michael looks like he might laugh. "Sure that went well."

"You're right. It didn't." I sigh. "I don't know how to make things right with her. I've tried."

"Once," Michael points out. "You tried *once*."

"But I am trying," I insist. "Come on, Mickey, this is important, not a laughing matter. I'm your oldest friend, and she's—"

"My wife," Michael cuts in, giving me a stare that urges caution. "I'm glad you're trying to mend things, really, I am. You're my oldest friend. I love you like a true brother. You saved my life."

"Cursed it, more like," I mutter.

"Saved it," Michael insists. "More times than I can count. But I can't blame her for not taking you up on a peace branch. I won't lie, I was right pissed off at you too for a bit. You're lucky Desmond was in attendance to pry me off you, or you would've had more than that shiner I gave you for it. But I've forgiven you. Leigh will too in time."

"Patience isn't one of my strengths."

"I'm well aware," Michael says with a wry smile. "But I'm afraid you got no choice on this one." He nudges me with a grin as he stands. "This is the second queen you've pissed off in your long lifetime, isn't it? Queen Elizabeth, Queen Leigh. You should fuck off back across the pond, insult Queen Sofia in Spain while you're at it. Make it a solid trinity of angry royal

females.”

“And piss off Cezar? No, thank you. Are you done having a laugh?”

“I am.” Michael chuckles. “Chin up. If you can’t have fun when you’re immortal, what’s the point?”

Preparations continue throughout the tavern as the bar finally opens for the evening sharp at three p.m. Patrons trickle in slowly at first. Sinéad returns from her expedition shortly after that and ties on her waitress apron, getting to work while I sit at a table by myself. Leigh is there too, flitting between tables, speaking with customers as the tavern fills up with hungry and thirsty people. She’s normally in charge of the numbers, and in the mornings she alternates with Michael on overseeing the incoming truck of fresh food for the kitchens, as well as stock and inventory. But she’s always there in the evenings to socialize. Some of the patrons are human, unknowing the kind of inherent danger they’re surrounded by.

But they’ve no reason to be alarmed. Not while the liquor pours like rivers into glasses, mugs and pints, and the stoves and grill top in the kitchen are aflame, two eternal chefs filling the air with the scent of delicious charred steak, fresh fried chips, and bubbling ale-and-cheddar stew. I typically don’t bother with human food anymore, as it isn’t necessary for my survival, but occasionally I indulge when the aroma gets me nostalgic for days when I relished good food and good company.

When Rory returns from the docks later that night, Mannoek Tavern’s resident band, Brigid’s Boys, plays Irish trad on the little wooden stage with pipe, drum, and fiddle. I listen to them intently, letting their music carry me away.

Sinéad brings me back. “You look tired.”

“I am.”

“Need me to get you a drink?” She pauses by me, her hands filled with platters of food. A table has ordered fish and chips and smoked barbecue ribs. Steam emanates from the plates. “The usual?”

“If it’s not too much trouble,” I reply. “Thank you, Sinéad.”

She winks at me with a smile. “Anytime, boss.”

I watch Sinéad tend to customers. She’s changed. When I first sent her to America back in 1970, she was mistrustful, guarded, almost cold, as she always had been during her time when she operated beside me. But she’s slowly opened up. I see her smiling more. And when she speaks with Leigh in between waiting tables, she’s grinning and laughing with her as though she hasn’t a single care in the world beyond this pub.

I remember my wife could light up an entire room when she entered it, just like that. The merry sound of her laughter when I teased her, her disarming smile. Pain stabs straight through me when Michael wraps his arm around Leigh’s waist and steals a kiss.

All this anger I’ve carried around for years is doused in a single moment, replaced with sorrow and resentment so deep, I don’t realize I’ve been gripping my silverware too tightly. Spoon, knife, and fork all audibly snap in my palm.

I’ll never forgive those responsible for taking her away from me.

Never.

“Excuse me.”

All the emotions churning inside me grind to a sudden and jarring halt. I nearly snap my head as I turn my gaze toward the pub entrance. I recognize that voice through the murmur of tavern-goers, one I only just heard for the first time the night before. My fangs nearly extend in hunger, but I clench my jaw and fight that urgent and nigh unbearable desire to feed when her scent drifts to me, enveloping me, beckoning me closer.

Sarah.

Sarah is here, at the Mannoek. In our tavern. *Why is she here?*

She removes her jacket, under which she wears a plush blue sweater that hangs off one delicate shoulder, displaying her neck, and a pair of jeans.

Sinéad places several menus back in a wooden bracket on the wall where

they belong. “Hello. How many?”

I’m trying to decide what to do when Sarah smiles at Sinéad, unaware of my presence. “None, actually. I’d like to apply for a job.”

CHAPTER 3

New Songs



Sarah

When Cezar mentioned Mannock Tavern, it didn't ring a bell for me right then. But when I catch sight of the painted plane on the sign lightly fluttering on the winter breeze, I realize I've heard of it before. It was a staple of my parents' many date nights from my childhood.

Back then I could never go in myself, of course. It's the most popular Irish pub in Southie, and it's remained so for a long time, or so I'm told. I never bothered to check it out when I turned twenty-one; I was too busy going out to dance clubs with my friends. Who wants to go to taverns their parents frequent when they're finally of legal age?

It was practically a mythical place, the way my dad talked about it. He encouraged me to check it out sometime when I still had my *too cool* mentality. He told me once that the Killeen and Mullen gangs had some kind of gunfight outside its very doors, among other tall tales. But most of the stories were far less about the Irish gangs that cruise through the many corners and streets of Boston still to this day like we haven't left Prohibition, and more about the owners, whoever they are.

Dad always said the Mannock prospered because it was run by a good man. Someone he thought highly of, though I forget who exactly that man was. Tonight, all I meant to do was take a long walk through old neighborhoods I know and love, sidewalks I used to ride my bike and jump rope on, giggle and chat with friends on front steps that led into rows of red brick homes.

But then on my way to the harbor, I had to stop and listen to the music that wafted from the open door of the pub. It's been ages since I heard real Irish music, and my dad's words returned to me then. The Mannock was one of his favorite places for date night with my mom. They'd always come home after an evening there, freshly besotted with each other. If I were still awake when they returned, I knew better than to head out of my room and greet them. It was never a good idea. Not unless I wanted to see them making out like teenagers in the kitchen.

Of course, something or someone being Irish doesn't automatically mean good, if last night was any indication. My next-door neighbor clearly isn't from around here, and I can't get over the way he dismissed me. There I was, thinking my life was about to get snuffed out by some random creep, and he seemed in a hurry to get as far away from me as possible.

It was rude, and odd. I did call the police this morning after getting my phone reconnected. After some hesitation, I asked if someone could take a look. The officer who showed up, to my surprise, was the very same man who informed me of my parents' accident—Officer Feeney. Maybe my neighborhood is a part of his beat, or he lives nearby.

Anyway, I'm done thinking about my strange neighbor with his stupid old man hat and perfectly trimmed facial hair. I've got to let go of what happened. Officer Feeney cleared the entire block for me and assured me that so long as I keep everything locked down tight, it shouldn't happen again. With how we left things last night, I'll probably never speak to Darragh. His desire to avoid the hell out of me was pretty plain. I'll have to call Peter

Blackstone, the man I met on the plane, in the next few days and see if he's up for hanging out. At least he seems to like me well enough.

But, first things first. I have a little money in the bank from my parents that I've barely touched, plus my own meager savings, so I know I'll be okay until after the holidays, but I've got a lead for a job, and I might as well start trying to make a living sooner rather than later until I figure out my next steps. Cezar recommended this place himself. He must know the owners.

If I could handle a busy establishment like Dill Pickle Club back in California, I'll be able to manage this place, I think to myself with determination.

Maybe I'm being impulsive with my timing. I'm wearing a worn pair of dark-wash Guess jeans, and my hair is tied up in a long ponytail out of my face, but little baby hairs pop out around my hairline and the nape of my neck, refusing to be tamed. I'm not dressed like a businesswoman by any means, but armed with Cezar's name, I'm ready to take my shot, rallying my courage. It's a bar, for God's sake, not the Palm. The worst they can do is say no.

With a fresh dose of false confidence—being a singer, I've definitely learned to fake it until I make it—I march up the steps of Mannock Tavern's patio, past outdoor seating that's been covered for the winter, and through the doors.

The woman who greets me is sinfully pretty. I admire her red-orange curls, how wild they look, and the freckles on her cheeks. Then I tell her why I'm here.

She peers at me sympathetically. "Sorry, love, but we're not hiring at the moment."

"If I could just talk to the owner?" I'm not normally this insistent, but other places don't mean as much to me as the Mannock meant to my mom and dad. And if Cezar recommended it, he must think highly of the people here. So I'm sticking to my guns. Politely as I can, of course. "I'm a hard

worker. I've got references. You can speak to my last boss. I never called in sick a day in my life."

The redhead looks like she might tell me no again, but then she sighs and nods. "Oh, all right, but I can't guarantee she won't tell you the same as what I've told you. If you don't mind waiting here a minute?"

That's my foot in the door. "I'll wait. Thank you," I tell her in relief, not wanting to sound *too* eager but happy my persistence paid off.

She walks off, and my gaze wanders to the men playing Irish tunes on their traditional instruments. I tap my feet along happily. Music like that moves through me. It never ceases in cheering me up, knowing it's something left over from another era that's kept on, surviving hard times and never forgotten.

Everyone seems to be enjoying themselves here. The tavern is packed full. Waitresses flit to and fro, hands full of trays of pub food or mugs of beer and ale. The smell is enough to remind my stomach to growl hungrily. I made myself a sad little peanut butter and jelly sandwich earlier this afternoon, but it's been a while. I probably should—

"What are you doing here?"

Frowning, I turn and find myself face to face with my neighbor, staring me down like he caught me drawing on his house's brick walls with chalk or picking vegetables out of his backyard without asking. In an instant, my cheery mood crashes. *Of course. That's just my luck, isn't it?*

Now that there isn't anything to be scared of, I take him in. His body is trim, neither overly athletic nor too lean, but somewhere in between. He's taller than me, but not by much. His near-black hair is styled loosely in waves. His eyes seem darker in the low light of the tavern, deep and woody brown. He has a well-trimmed Van Dyke goatee, one he's had for a while since I can't see any semblance of stubble on his chin. His facial hair is thick, smooth, and healthy.

Shit. I've always liked facial hair. Standing in front of him now, I can't

deny how incredibly handsome this man is. And the fact that he dresses himself in those same elegant clothes, like he belongs in another century or something, only adds to his allure.

Except that allure dies when I remember the tone he just used with me. I'm not in the mood to deal with any rudeness today. "Applying for a job. Why? What's it to you?"

"This isn't a place for the likes of you to be working in," he replies, brows turned down.

My body tightens. Before he was short and curt. Now he's just plain insulting me. The nerve of this guy. "Likes of me? What, is my blood not green enough for us to be sharing the same air?"

I have to hold myself back from spilling my entire pedigree. But I'm not looking for his approval. Besides, trying to justify myself will only give him more reasons to look down on me. I'm hardly desperate for his acceptance.

At the mention of blood, his eyes flash. *Good.* I've pissed him off. Second thing I've done right today after that PB&J. He doesn't look away from me. *Why is he staring so hard?*

"You should leave."

"I'm sorry, do *you* own this place?"

His jaw tenses. He doesn't answer.

I'm relieved when the woman who greeted me returns. "Good news! The owner has agreed to see you." She arches a brow at my neighbor. "Need something, Cillian?"

Cillian. So that's his name. And he says he's a Darragh, so there it is—Cillian Darragh. He never bothered to properly introduce himself or even offer his hand to me.

"No," he grunts.

If she believes him, she doesn't show it. She turns to me and smiles. "Don't mind him. He can be an awful crab. What was your name, love?"

"I noticed," I say, ignoring him as I speak to her. "Sarah McCready."

Cillian stiffens in my peripheral vision. *That's right. McCready. Doesn't get more Irish than that, does it? Eat your high-and-mighty words, Cillian Darragh.*

"Sinéad O'Donovan," she replies, turning. "This way. Follow me."

It occurs to me as I follow Sinéad's almost languid sway through the tables, like she's comfortably wading through a river of wood, chairs, and faces she's memorized, that I didn't expect to get this far without actually dropping Cezar's name. If I can get this job on my own merit, all the better. I try to plan what I'll say. *My parents used to hang out here all the time, said it was magical and fun, and then came home half-drunk and got busy on the couch!* Now there's a mental image I wish I could scratch from my memory. I'm not going to mention that.

What if they ask me about what I was doing before this? The idea of explaining my failed venture as an singer isn't exactly a thrilling one. But, no. I'll deal with it. I need this. It's a good first step to . . . wherever the hell else my life may be going, and I'll feel fulfilled and keep myself busy while I figure it out.

Sinéad leads me through a short corridor into a small back office, tucked away in a corner with a view of the kitchen. She opens up the door, props it open with a stopper, and motions to me. "Go ahead."

A woman in her thirties with long silken dark hair rises from behind a desk, somewhat cluttered with little notes here and there in chicken-scratch handwriting. "I'm Leigh Kelly. Come in." She extends her hand to me. "So you're looking for a job?"

Sinéad and Cillian are very obviously Irish in their tone and accents. But this woman is American. A Boston girl, like me. She sounds a bit more polished than I do, like she belongs in a big money mansion built off the beach somewhere.

But I don't let that scare me. I take her hand and shake it firmly. "Sarah McCready."

“McCready! Now there’s a familiar name.”

“My parents came here all the time.”

“Yes, I think I must have met them,” Leigh answers, and there’s a knowing glint in her eye. “Pleasure to meet you.” She motions for me to sit down. I take her offer gladly, happy to be off my feet for a little while. “So what is it you’re looking to do? Cooking? Bartending? Waitressing?”

“Unfortunately, I’m no cook,” I reply. “But I’ve got several years’ experiences waitressing. I used to work at a little diner not much bigger than this place in California.”

“California?” Leigh rests her elbows on the desk, which looks like it’s seen some years. It’s heavy and sturdy, with plenty of wear and a few scratches. “That’s quite a journey. What took you there?”

“Singing, actually,” I reply. “But the industry and I didn’t really get along.”

“I can imagine. As it stands, I think I’ve got all the waitressing help I need at the moment. I could give you some recommendations for other establishments, if you like?”

“Are you sure? I’d really love to work here. Cezar sent me.” I finally pull the card I’ve been holding off playing.

Recognition flickers in Leigh’s eyes. “Cezar?”

“Yes, Cezar Monte Vigil,” I continue, hopeful. “The watchmaker? I worked for his wife, Vera. He recommended the Mannock to me.”

Leigh’s reluctance fades into curiosity as she pensively rubs her chin with her thumb. Like magic, she’s no longer saying no. After a long pause, she slowly leans forward. “Well. That does certainly change things a bit.”

“So you know him?” I say, doing my best to stem my excitement.

“Of course. Cezar and Vera are old friends. And they don’t vouch for just anybody.” She grabs a nearby calendar. “Let me see where we could work you in on the schedule—”

As though her words conjured out of thin air, the door is flung open

behind me so hard it hits the wall, and I swivel around in my chair, staring up at Cillian as he stands there on the threshold, hands balled into fists.

Leigh frowns, looking up from her chair at him with clear annoyance. She sighs. “What is it now, Cillian?”

“We need to talk,” Cillian declares with finality, not even giving me a second glance.

“I’m in the middle of something else,” Leigh answers, unbothered by his urgency. “Whatever it is can wait.”

“The Mannoek doesn’t need more employees. Send the girl away.”

The girl? Oh, my blood is boiling as my jaw drops. “Excuse me? Who the hell do you think you are?”

Leigh is unmoved, but her eyes—wait, no, that can’t be right. I could’ve sworn I saw them flash a different color. The light above our heads isn’t the greatest quality. My little scare from the night before is still haunting me, it seems.

“You’re being very rude, Cillian,” Leigh remarks. “And I don’t recall either Michael or myself putting you in charge of staffing.”

Cillian continues, exasperated. “Leigh, you can’t possibly let her work here. *Here*. Of all places.”

Leigh seems more irritated by Cillian’s outburst than I am, but somehow she’s managing her temper. She slowly rises to her feet. I’m taller than her by a few inches, but with her back straight and her chin held high, she looks positively fierce.

“Do you own the Mannoek?” she asks.

Cillian’s nose crinkles with a slight twitch, like he’s holding back. “No. But—”

“There is no but, Cillian. You don’t have a single hand in running this place. And this is the second time you’ve disrespected me without any justifiable reason. A third, and you’ll be wishing Michael were here in this chair instead of me.” My respect for her skyrockets. Leigh returns her gaze to

me. “You said you’re a singer, right?”

“Yes, I am,” I say.

“Would you be willing to sing for us here, on top of normal waitressing duties? We have our live band, Brigid’s Boys. They play most nights, but we have no ladies comfortable singing on stage. They’ve often lamented lacking a soprano.”

“That’s what I am!” I say quickly. “And I’d be happy to. Any time.”

Cillian stubbornly hasn’t left the room at her behest. He just stands there with his arms folded as he leans against the door, glowering at her.

Leigh continues with a smile. “That’s wonderful. Irish songs are what draw people here. Do you know any?”

“I—” My thoughts whirl. “I only know one by heart, but it wouldn’t be difficult for me to learn more.” Determined to drive this point home, to prove I’m worth it beyond Cezar’s word, I add confidently, “Hell, I’ll sing for you now, if you’d like me to. Crowds and audiences don’t frighten me.”

“You’re far braver than I am on that count.” Leigh laughs, motioning us out of the office. “You know what? I think the lads would get a kick out of that. Why don’t you show those boys how it’s done? The man with the dark hair and the beard is the one in charge. Rory. Just tell him what you’d like to sing, and he’ll take care of it. Probably knows every song there is.”

I’m seized by an adrenaline rush. She’s giving me a shot. I can’t back down, not with Cillian standing there, sizing me up like he hopes I’ll get scared and chicken out.

“All right,” I say as I head for the door, looking right at him, daring him to say something else. Anything else. *See if I won’t slug you the same way I slugged that producer. Give me one good reason.* “Easy enough.”

But he doesn’t say anything, watching me as I move past him. When my back is turned, I feel a prickle, like he’s watching me walk away.

Then I see the tavern and how it’s practically bursting at the seams with patrons. Maybe I was fibbing a little when I said crowds and audiences don’t

scare me. They still do. Everyone seems to be enjoying the music. Some folks even sing along with Brigid's Boys while they drink from their mugs, a few of them swaying with their arms slung over one another's shoulders.

Well, I guess I could call it singing. It's more like drunken red-faced caterwauling. But they're all happy and reveling in their Friday evening. That's what matters, and what's eventually going to help me make some money. The more I encourage them, the bigger the tip, right?

Weaving my way through tables and clusters of people, I head for the wooden stage, keeping a respectful distance until the song is nearing its end. I catch the eyes of the one Leigh mentioned, Rory. Big-boned and heavysset with broad shoulders, he looks a little older than my father would be right now if he were alive. Early fifties, maybe. It's hard for me to tell. He has short dark hair and a full beard peppered with gray. What really gets me, though, is those eyes of his, beneath a pair of dark bushy eyebrows. Bright blue, like ice. They remind me of my dad's.

As the crowd applauds and cheers the song's end, he leans down from the stage to hear what I'm saying over the noise.

"I'm a new waitress, and Leigh would like me to sing," I explain, trying to ignore the flush of heat that overtakes my face. I feel like Salieri asking Mozart to step away from the piano. "Guess I'm your new soprano."

"That's grand, love!" I'm relieved Rory doesn't seem bothered by the request in the slightest. He nods at me with a smile as he offers his hand. "What's your name?"

"Sarah McCready." I firmly shake his hand. "Nice to meet you."

He doesn't let me go right away, and every single member of Brigid's Boys stops to look at me. Rory's bushy brows go up. He studies me for a moment, then seems to remember himself and lets his hand drop. "McCready, you say?" It seems all of the players lean toward us curiously to peer at me.

"Did you know my parents too?" I ask, warmth spreading through me.

That so many people recognized my mother and father here makes this tavern feel more comforting, like an extended piece of home. “They came here often. William and Margaret McCready. Though my pops went by—”

“Liam, yes. I remember. I did know them,” Rory says, gazing at me intently. An emotional smile spreads across his face. “Saw their lovely faces every week or so, if I recall. It was a loss I—we all—felt when they passed.”

I’m honored by his words. “Thank you. They always spoke highly of this place. I just wish I came in sooner. I can see why.”

“Oh, here I am forgetting my manners. I’m Rory,” he says. There’s a color to his cheeks that his beard can’t hide. He twists around and gestures to the rest of the band, introducing each man one by one. I pray there won’t be a quiz later as I do my best to memorize their faces and their names. But I’ll likely fuck that up later.

“What’ll you be singing, love?”

“Um.” I clear my throat, hoping I don’t look as jittery as I feel. “‘Wind That Shakes the Barley.’”

Rory’s gaze is so intense. I wonder if my parents were very good friends with him, if he sees their faces in me. He straightens and calls my name out to the entire tavern and the song I’ll be singing, while offering me a hand to help me step up onto the stage. Brigid’s Boys all clap for me, nodding and calling to me encouragingly as they step back, hands at rest over their instruments.

I take a deep breath, gazing out across the sea of faces. This is as brave as I’m going to get. I begin to sing, soft and slow.

*“I sat within a valley green,
I sat there with my true love,
My sad heart strove the two between,
The old love and the new love,
The old for her, the new that made*

*Me think of Ireland dearly,
While soft the wind blew down the glade
And shook the golden barley.”*

The entire tavern is hushed, listening as I grow in comfort and confidence in front of them. Despite a hundred eyes on me, I don't falter. With each new verse, I'm all the more determined to prove myself the performer. But I also feel like I'm bringing the entire place down. Each word brings out a little of my parents—the soft sweet humming my mother would do in the kitchen while she cooked my father and me breakfast; the burden on his shoulders to provide financially when he got sent home early from his long construction shifts.

This song isn't a celebration. It's a lover mourning for another. Weave my own heartbreak into every lyric, and it's like Mannoek Tavern knows. Expressions of those watching me range from appreciation to sadness, some hanging their heads, unable to even watch me.

When it's over, there's a pregnant silence. I'm left standing there, wondering if I'm going to be booed or sent home. Perhaps I should've stuck to something more American, something with a beat. Better to make them laugh than cringe. Standing in the corner near the kitchens, I see Leigh Kelly watching me next to Sinéad.

And there is no sign of Cillian Darragh.

I glance tentatively at Rory, surprised when I see tears in his eyes. *Tears.* Shit. What have I done?

Then Brigid's Boys leap up from their stools, whooping and clapping and stomping for me, and the entire tavern erupts in applause. Relieved as I'm congratulated, I let Rory help me step off the stage.

“It was the only traditional song I knew,” I explain to Rory. “Sorry if I brought the mood down.”

“The Irish know how to exchange joy with sorrow, and sorrow right back

with joy,” Rory reassures me, his smile tinged with something sad and wistful. “Worry not your pretty head.”

His hand is calloused and rough to the touch, but I like his gentle face, the soft worn creases of his brow and the laugh lines in the corner of his eyes. There’s something trustworthy about his face I like. Behind us, Brigid’s Boys begin playing a slower Irish ballad, and he moves to join them.

“Lovely voice, Miss McCready.” His voice is nearly strained. “Thank you for gracing us with it.” With some reluctance, as though he’s sorry we can’t speak more, he joins in with the rest of the band.

When I turn, Leigh is already there in front of me, appearing quite impressed. “You knocked that one outta the park. I’d say I’m sorry things didn’t work out for you in California, but then we wouldn’t get the chance to hear you live and in person. Gonna have all these sentimental Irish boys sobbing into their Guinness tonight.”

“I can’t tell if I should apologize for that or not.”

“Don’t apologize. You did great.” She smiles. “Come tomorrow morning around eleven. I’ll have a tentative schedule for you to approve for the upcoming week, and Sinéad will show you the ropes.”

I can’t contain my excitement, shaking her hand maybe a little too hard. “Thank you, Mrs. Kelly. You won’t be sorry.”

“I’m sure I won’t.” She laughs. “But you can call me Leigh. I’m sorry about the interruption before. Don’t pay Cillian Darragh any mind.”

“I won’t, believe me. I didn’t even expect to see him here.”

Leigh arches a brow. “You know him?”

“Yes and no. I don’t *know* him, but he’s my next-door neighbor.” I then recount to her what happened to me the night before: the strange man in my house, how Cillian was kind enough to help me search my house and confirm whether or not it was safe until his kindness reached its limit, and the follow-up by the police.

I’m not sure why I feel so inclined to tell her everything. There’s

something about Leigh that reminds me a little of Vera. And I suppose I want to be completely transparent if Cillian is a regular here and comfortable enough to come bursting into her office without so much as knocking.

Leigh doesn't answer right away, studying me. "That's quite a story. You must've been terrified. And right when you came back home too. Not much of a welcome. I'm glad it's all settled now, though." She smiles. "Don't worry about Cillian giving you any trouble. My husband, Michael, and I will handle him." Something's on her mind by the way she shifts her weight, like she's now remembered a task she'd forgotten. "I've got some things to do, but feel free to order something from the kitchen and enjoy the rest of your evening. Okay?"

"I will," I say with an earnest nod. "Thanks again, Leigh."

There are no free tables, so I sidle up to the bar instead. The bartender introduces himself as Oscar Haskins. "Heard you're going to be joining up here shortly. Welcome aboard. One drink is on the house for you, love. What'll it be?"

Word travels fast in this place. I try to ignore that little tickle of fancy at having a handsome stranger with a charming Irish accent call me *love*. I order a glass of bourbon straight and a bowl of ale-and-cheddar soup with a side of soda bread. That ought to keep me warm on the walk home. I'm not disappointed. The food here is simple, yet incredibly delicious. The bread especially reminds me of my grandmother.

Brigid's Boys play a quieter ballad, and I can actually make sense of some of the conversations around me. It's curious to me that most of the patrons are men. There's only a handful of women around, and they all seem to be taken, sitting close to their lovers or even sometimes in their laps. I make sure not to stare.

I slip away from my seat to use the restroom. After freshening up, I head back out. I get a little turned around and end up in front of the kitchen doors, nearly running into Sinéad stepping out with a platter in hand.

I move out of her way apologetically. “Sorry.”

“No harm done!” she chirps, continuing on past me.

I’m about to head back to the bar when a hushed conversation makes me pause. It’s coming from the corridor near the back exit.

“How can you manage it, Brody?” The man speaking sounds strained, like he’s in pain. “I’m trying, I really am, but I feel like I’m about to lose my mind.”

“Easy.” A deep yet gentle voice responds, his tone lilting up at the end of his sentences. A little like Rory does. “It’s difficult for me too. But we made a promise.”

I’m about to walk away, but I stop when the other man answers, “She really going to be working here?”

“That’s what I heard, same as you.”

Suddenly uncomfortable, I rub my cheek. They couldn’t possibly be talking about *me*, could they?

“She’s intoxicating,” the other man whimpers.

“I know it.”

Intoxicating? That’s something nobody’s ever said about me, to my face or otherwise. I don’t know whether be flattered or worried. After all, they don’t know I can hear them. I can’t pretend there weren’t times when my fellow waitresses and I would remark on a pretty face in the diner out of earshot. I should go.

“Can’t I just—”

“No. Stay close to the others, for now.”

“*You* can say that when you’ve got Fionn. I don’t got nobody to keep me straight.”

While I don’t know what “keep me straight” means, I can only assume the first man talking wants to ask me out, and the second man, Brody, is urging him not to. Maybe he’s another worker. Office relationships do tend to be messy. I amble back to the bar, shaking my head.

After finishing my supper, which was so filling I fear I might need to be rolled out of the tavern, I decide it's time to head home. Slinging my purse over my shoulder, I leave a tip for Oscar and head for the door, casting one final glance toward Brigid's Boys. I catch Rory's eye and smile and wave. He tips his hat to me, and I'm reminded again of my father. Those blue eyes, and now that smile. When I see him again, I'll have to ask him about my dad, how long he knew him, if he had any stories he could tell. A bar is a perfect place to reminisce.

Wishing I could carry their tunes home with me to settle myself down, but reassured they'll play again, I slip out the Mannock's front entrance.

Surprisingly, Cillian is there on the patio, leaning against the wall, staring out at nothing until our eyes meet as I shrug on my jacket. He's wearing his coat and his hat, but his scarf is open, like the December cold biting at his neck doesn't bother him in the slightest.

He clenches his jaw. I'm on edge instantly. I haven't forgotten how he spoke to me and even tried to tell Leigh what to do.

"Whatever you're about to say, save it. I work here now, and you're just going to have to deal with it or bum around somewhere else."

"I wasn't going to say anything. Just trying to enjoy some peace and quiet," he replies, sounding calmer than he did before. "Be on your way, then."

"And stop ordering me around," I retort. "I leave when I want and go where I want. Not when it suits you." Content I've had the last word, I march down the stairs to the pavement.

I fume to myself as I make for home. That man irks me to no end. And what bothers me most is if it weren't for his superiority complex or whatever that was back there, I might actually be attracted—

Wait. No, don't you dare, Sarah McCready. It doesn't matter how hot he looks in that coat, or that he knows how to accessorize, or that you have a thing for facial hair. Your neighbor isn't hot. He's a jerk.

I'm under a lot of stress. That's got to be it. First moving back home into my parents' old house, then that intruder, now a neighbor who acts like I'm a housefly he has to swat. First thing I'll do when I get home is take a nice long hot bath, maybe treat myself to a little me time, then get a long night's sleep so I'm ready for the day tomorrow.

It's a bit of a walk home in the chill that cuts through my layers and bites at my ankles, but quietly I love it. At least, at first I do. A loud jarring *caw* takes me out of my thoughts and makes me jump. I peer up at a streetlight.

It's a crow. Cezar wasn't kidding when he mentioned crows knowing how to find people. This one is large too, like the ones I saw outside of Dill Pickle Club. Trash-diving must be lucrative in Southie, with how gigantic they are.

It isn't just one crow either. When I look around, they're everywhere. At least a dozen of them on the ledges. One flies smoothly over my head to land on the opposite side of the street, ruffling its feathers.

They're beautiful birds, but suddenly feeling like I'm part of an Alfred Hitchcock movie, I pick up the pace. Their distant caws cause a shiver not related to the cold to run down my spine.

I stop in my tracks when I turn a corner and nearly collide with a warm body.

"Where ya going, love?" the stranger croons. "It's late."

I take a step back. I don't know him, but I recognize the voice as one of the men who I suspected was talking about me in the tavern. He's got an untrustworthy smile I don't like for someone who looks so young. He doesn't even look twenty-one. Probably shouldn't even have been in the place.

"Home," I reply stiffly. "Excuse me."

I move past him, but he grabs me by my arm and catapults us both to the wall of a nearby building, slamming me into the brick. My mind spins. There's no way he should've been able to cross that distance so quickly in such a short amount of time. I try to push him off, my elbows scraping

against the wall as he holds me fast and breathes me in from the top of my head.

“Divine.” His tenor voice lowers, deepening into something that hovers between a growl and guttural sneer. Something that doesn’t sound human. “Don’t struggle none. You’ll only make it worse for yourself.”

Beating uselessly at his shoulders, I’m doing what I can not to panic, but that’s almost all I’ve got left. That same familiar fear from last night floods my senses. What’s he going to do with me? Take advantage of me, or worse? I don’t want to be another horror story used to scare girls into staying home. What have I done to deserve being attacked, not once but twice in less than forty-eight hours?

No! I won’t let it happen. I won’t make it easy. If he covers my mouth, I’ll bite him. If he tries to undress me, I’ll do everything I can to hit him in the groin. But his hands are iron vises, and when he catches my wrists, I can’t wrench my arms free. He straightens and looms over me, his eyes crimson and flecked with gold, the pupils slitted like a cat’s. He bares his teeth.

Fangs.

He’s got *fangs*.

This has to be a nightmare. Did I doze somewhere in the tavern? But my scraped limbs and the way I’m struggling for breath don’t seem like any dream I’ve ever had. I shout for help, only for the man to close his fist around my neck and squeeze, robbing me of my voice.

“No, mate! Don’t do it!” someone else shouts in the distance.

I see movement in my peripheral vision but can’t turn my head. I can’t do anything as this man, this creature, snarls at me and sinks his teeth into me between my neck and my shoulder. I jolt, yelping in pain as his fangs slice through my skin like I’m made of tissue paper, throbbing uncomfortably. I’m all too aware of my pulse thundering in my ears. My eyes roll back, mouth slackening. All that remains is pain and terror.

“Danny, you fucking shite! I said *no!*”

Someone grabs my attacker and yanks him backward. His fangs rip out from my neck, and I instinctively cover the wound, now hot and slippery beneath my palm. I'm enveloped by warmth at the back of my head, on my shoulder. Stunned, I slump to the ground and turn my wobbling head. Bloodstains flood my jacket and the clothes beneath, like I've just been shot. *So much blood.* My vision spins. I'm unable to make sense of the tussle just steps from me.

Wind and footsteps approach me. Are those feathers drifting on the air amid wisps of gray smoke? Three more shadows descend into view. Two of them prying apart the men fighting on the street.

"Brody, get off him!" A deep voice like gravel cuts through the air, strained by his exertion to grapple him.

"Brody, stop!" Cillian bellows.

Cillian is here? Everything feels so far away. *Why is he here? Of all people?*

What is happening to me?

"No! No!" Brody—I can't make him out, but I can hear him, the other man from that conversation inside the tavern—struggles. "I was in control, Fionn, I was, but I couldn't get him to stop!"

"You knocked him out cold," Fionn declares. "No need to keep beating on him."

A shape hovers over me, crouching down. His words are gentle and soothing, calmer than the others. "Sarah. Sarah, can you hear me, love? Don't panic, now. That's a good girl. Stay awake."

Is that Rory? My thoughts are foggy. I open my mouth, but he hushes me. "Don't speak. Just keep applying pressure there." He barks suddenly and with vehemence, "Cillian, help me with her."

"Oh god." Brody growls as Rory helps me stay upright. "Sh-she's bleeding. Fionn, she's bleeding. Keep me away from her!"

"You're not going to hurt her," says the man he's speaking to. He's taller

than the rest, and calmer. “I’m here now. You did well controlling yourself while I was gone. Don’t let what’s within take control. Look at me. Look at me, Brody. Breathe.”

“Take him home, Fionn,” Cillian snaps. I struggle to remain awake, trying to make sense of the chaos I’m hearing, witnessing. “We can’t risk him being near her anymore.”

“He saved her life, Cillian,” Fionn counters heatedly. “That’s got to count for something.”

“It counts plenty.” Cillian’s voice loses its edge. “You’re right. Take him home. And Brody? Thank you.”

A hand rests upon my wound, my blood still pouring out of me. Rory continues calmly speaking to me, calling me *love* and *sweet child*, and I try to make out his face through blurred vision.

“She’s still conscious?” Cillian asks, crouching next to him.

“Of course she is. She’s a McCready. Made of strong stuff, we are.” He removes his wool jacket and drapes it over me before he slips his arms beneath my body and lifts me like he’s cradling a child.

I’m confused. *Did he say we?* I know it’s Rory, but his face isn’t the one I see.

“Dad?” I croak, fearful and hoping my eyes aren’t playing tricks on me. I want it to be him, whimpering, “Dad?”

Rory hushes me, gently patting my back. My blood stains his shirt. “Shh, shh, shh, easy now. Not quite, my wee child. Try a couple more generations, and you’ll have the right of it.” Even his voice reminds me of my father and the way he would hold me when I was scared of the dark, awoken from nightmares, or skinned my knee. I’m on the verge of weeping. “You’ve had a fright. Bound to happen, being your first encounter with a vampire.”

My head pounds. *Did he just say vampire?* I reach for him and grab handfuls of his shirt, wanting to hold on to something—anything—that will anchor me to reality.

“Let me take her,” Cillian rumbles, agitated. “If I stay here with Danny I don’t trust myself. I’ll tear him limb from limb.”

“And you think I won’t be tempted to do the same? That little bastard ripped into my great-granddaughter.” Rory gently slips me into Cillian’s awaiting arms. “Why do you care so much, anyway? Here I heard you giving her a hard time.” They’re both so incredibly strong, it’s like I don’t weigh anything. And still my mind is swimming, swimming.

Great-granddaughter?

“That’s no fault of hers. It’s mine. And I know you’ve a softer spot for the Northern new bloods than even I do,” Cillian replies, cradling me close. “Go. She’ll be safe with me.”

“It’ll be your head if she isn’t. That’s my blood, Cillian. My line. She’s all that’s left of my Liam. Her parents . . . ” Rory starts out snarling then chokes up. “Nothing can happen to her. Not her.”

“I know,” Cillian reassures. He’s calmer, gentler, not like anything he’s been with me. “No harm will come to her. I promise.”

Cold. Wind. I can’t make sense of my surroundings anymore. Everything is slipping away.

“I shouldn’t have let you out of my sight,” Cillian mutters. His voice, his breath is in my ear, comforting and sure. “Stay with me, Sarah. It’ll all be set to right.”

I can’t stay awake anymore. My vision blackens, and I hear no more.

CHAPTER 4

Grave Decisions



Cillian

This is my fault. My fault. In too many fucking ways.

The first is something I cannot help. As much as I preach self-control, as much as I seem like I finally have a handle on my bloodlust after nearly sixty years as one of the Morrigan's soldiers, I don't. Sarah is proof of that. I was so overcome by her that the only way I could think of keeping her away from me was to be rude in every sense of the word. I could hardly keep it together when I saw her this evening at the tavern.

Bursting into Leigh's office making demands was a mistake. If I'd taken her to the side, explained that it's too dangerous for Sarah to work among us, that it's too difficult for me to be around her, maybe she would've actually understood. I heard it all—that Cezar sent her to us, that her parents were regular mortal folk partaking in immortal revelry, not knowing their surroundings. I caught on quickly that Sarah's one of Rory's descendants too. Just one more reason as to why it was too risky to keep her nearby.

Decorum and diplomacy were merited when I walked into Leigh's office. But the monster within me was so hungry, taunting me and tempting me with

all the things I could do to Sarah, feeding and pleasuring, if I only let go and took what I wanted. I lost my head and instantly tapped into Leigh's mistrust and dislike. Her mind had likely already been made up at the very mention of Cezar's name, but I could've gone about it in a different way, pled my case like a normal fucking person.

And therein lies the contradiction of me, monster and man. If I were Leigh, I likely would have done the same. Because if Cezar has vetted Sarah, it means she's potentially worthy.

It means she might have what the Morrigan is looking for. And that's been my sole purpose in life ever since I took the Oath—make more soldiers.

Yet ultimately, tonight was my fault because I've become too loose in my selections of the Phantom Queen's future army. I used to be cautious. But I was lax in Belfast. I'm the one solely responsible for changing Daniel Murdock and Brody O'Neill—Brody in 1970, Murdock in '79.

I found Brody dying, beaten so badly I didn't think there was a single bone intact. It was a miracle he could utter the Morrigan's name. With all the chaos surrounding the area, I did what I could to send him overseas to America, but in my haste I made a fatal mistake. He fed on every single passenger on that plane, ripped some of them to pieces and drank the others unconscious. Caused quite the headlines, which called it some kind of freak plane accident, something to do with cabin pressure. Couldn't be further from the truth. He's always been a jittery sort ever since, hasn't forgiven himself for the slaughter he caused.

For Brody, I still have hope. He has a conscience. Daniel Murdock has none. It'd been a car bomb of his enemy's making that nearly killed him. He had a reputation for ruthlessness, for doing what needed to be done, so I thought him the perfect soldier for My Lady.

But we aren't supposed to cast off our humanity, not completely. Looking back, I'm not sure how much humanity Daniel had to begin with. His upbringing in Belfast made him hard early on, and the fighting that still rages

to this day, harder still.

I wondered before if I may have made a mistake. Now that Sarah's unconscious in my arms, I know I have.

Every inch of me is awakened, not only by the fact that we're touching, that I'm carrying her swiftly down the street back to the tavern, but that she's bleeding freely. Her blood is on me. It's like I've been doused in a sweet red wine. I'm aching to taste it. Taste her.

I can't. I won't. Even as her lifeforce trickles down my knuckles from the wound on her shoulder, I will not dare lick my fingers clean, even though that's what I want to do the second I get through the tavern's back door. I stave off the imagery flowing through my mind as well. When she ran into me. Even now as she lies unconscious, I see things I've no business witnessing, hearing echoes of voices in my head, my ability drinking in everything it can about the woman I carry.

I'm so sorry, Miss McCready. I hear Aodhán Feeney, our Boston police plant, speaking to her as she weeps freely.

I don't understand . . . it was just their date night. How could this happen?

Sarah's pain is palpable; thick and buried deep. What unsettles me more is how it rivals my own, something I never thought possible. Like being pulled down under water to drown.

I feel like I'm being torn apart. If it's not her memories, her life streaming through me, it's her scent, her blood taunting my insatiable hunger. Miserably, I resign myself to bring her to safety and continue my endeavor to stay away from her. I hate that she lives right next door to me. But if Michael can erase her memory of this evening and the evening before, maybe all will be well.

She'll simply be my neighbor. My incredibly beautiful, stunning, intoxicating neighbor, but an acquaintance I can distance myself from. Nothing more, nothing less.

Pedestrians on the streets are few and far between this time of night, but I don't take any chances. I can't be seen carrying a bloodied woman. Not even Aodhán could hope to make this go away. Michael would have to get involved, and we don't need that either.

Her pulse is loudest in my ears, her blood singing in her veins, all but begging me to continue what Danny Murdock started. The monster in me hungers.

Drink your fill, it croons like a devil on my shoulder. *She won't remember, anyway. What does it matter?*

"No," I growl under my breath and shove through the back door of Mannock Tavern into the kitchen, where the cooks are cleaning up for the night. They all stop to stare at me, eyes wide. They're all members of the Brotherhood, their eyes shimmering from their normal human colors to deep red, smelling her blood. Then their clamor begins, at odds with the loud thoughts in my mind, all revolving around Sarah.

"I need Mickey," I manage to grate out through my teeth. "And Leigh. Quickly."

One of them runs out and is gone for only a few moments before I feel wind around me. Leigh zips back after him, arriving in an instant.

"Oh my god, it's Sarah," she gasps.

Michael appears next to her not a second after, bewildered at my current state and the bleeding mess of a woman in my arms.

"I go to deal with the Irish mob and their nonsense for one fucking night and everybody loses their minds while I'm gone," Michael declares, incredulous. "What happened?"

"Fucking Danny Murdock happened," I snap, exasperated and not in the mood to explain everything just now, not when my own self-restraint hangs by a thread. "Please, Leigh. Can you heal her?"

"Give her to me," Leigh says, and I gently lay Sarah in her arms. It's an odd thing, seeing Sarah cradled by a woman shorter than she is, and yet

Leigh is one of us now, able to carry her without exertion. “I’ll take her upstairs. Cillian, open that door.”

“I’ll shut everything down.” Michael doesn’t waste a moment. He goes into the tavern and declares they’re closing for the evening, ushering everyone who doesn’t work here out the door. The sounds of Brigid Boy’s instruments dies down, and the murmur of patrons, both human and vampire, fades away in my ears. My eyes are fixated on Sarah as she’s gently rested in the vacant apartment bed, Leigh deftly pulling away her bloodstained clothes to get a good look at the torn shoulder underneath.

“This doesn’t surprise me, you know,” she says under her breath with a low feminine growl. “Something’s off about that boy.”

“You’re not wrong about that, love.” Michael comes in to help, biting back an exasperated growl. “You know this girl?”

“I just hired her,” Leigh explains, pressing her hand over Sarah’s puncture wounds. “Her name is Sarah McCready.”

Michael is mystified. “What?” he exclaims and lowers his voice. “*What?* Leigh, you can’t just hire mortal women to work at the Mannoek. That’s like hiring a lamb to feed lions!”

“Yes,” Leigh agrees quickly. “I know that, dear, but Cezar sent her.”

Michael blinks, then looks at me quizzically. “Cezar?”

I nod. “She knows him. Worked for his wife.” I can say that without shame, as everyone vampiric can hear practically everything in the pub. The door to the upper flat opens, and Fionn appears, approaching us with an easy gait.

“Brody’s all settled. He’s upset, but he’ll be fine. He wanted me to come here, check on the girl. Will she live?”

“She’ll be fine.” Leigh shuts her eyes and steadies her breathing, keeping her hand clasped over Sarah’s injury.

Michael watches intently, his arms folded over his chest. In thought, he scratches beneath his chin, speaking to his wife. “I don’t think I’ve seen you

ever tend to a human before. Only vampires. Should I call Tommie or Joe? Or perhaps one of the druidwives?”

Leigh shakes her head. “No. She’s more fragile than we are, but I can manage.”

Michael comes to stand with me, hissing, “Tell me everything that happened. Leave nothing out.”

I recount the evening as best I can, pushing through the hunger and yearning that churns under my skin. Doing so helps me harness it, lessen it, and I’m grateful for Michael’s ear. His eyes widen when I explain Sarah’s connection to Rory.

“Well, I’ll be damned. I mean, I knew his grandson and his wife would stop in fairly often but didn’t have the slightest inkling his grandda was up there playing with Brigid’s Boys every time. Always brightened him up, it did. But his great-granddaughter?” He hums. “Changes things a bit.”

Not long after, Rory himself comes bursting through the apartment door, looking just as enraged. “Chased that little bastard across the city when he woke, trying to give him a proper talking to.” He stops and stiffens when he sees the wound on Sarah’s bare shoulder. He was calm before, but now his agitation is unlimited, his gaze flashing, turning red. “I’ll kill him. I’ll kill him when I get my hands on him! He thinks he can feast upon *my* family? I’ll rip his teeth out, one by one—”

“Easy, friend,” Fionn says, coming and resting a hand on his shoulder. “She’s in good hands now. Leigh will set her to right.”

I’m told Fionn Bradigan used to dislike Leigh Kelly. I heard tell of how they used to hawk on each other when she first learned of the Brotherhood. She’d tell him not to smoke; he’d tell her to kindly fuck off and mind her own business. Not exactly the *warmest* person I’ve brought into the fold, by any means.

Now the looming ex-soldier, taller than any of us, is like her shadow, one of her staunchest supporters. In Fionn’s eyes, it seems Leigh can do no wrong

—or, at least, if she does, he has the courtesy to tell her away from the eyes and ears of others. He shuffles to stand next to her, leaning slightly over the bed.

I join them, clearing my throat. “So how does it work, anyway? When you heal someone.”

“It’s a transfer of energy,” Leigh answers. Gold and red light glows beneath her palm. “I can’t exactly describe it. I center myself, focus on the Morrigan, almost like praying. Think of it like hooking somebody up to an IV. Blood regenerates us, and I’m regenerating her. I’ll need to feed after, but . . .” Sarah stirs beneath her, and Leigh draws her hand away. The puncture marks are completely gone, her skin bloodied but the wounds missing, as though they were never there. “There, now. Like it never happened.”

But Sarah is still covered in her own blood, and Leigh’s eyes suddenly churn scarlet. She opens her mouth, teeth elongated. In an instant, Fionn and I are crouched protectively over Sarah’s prone body.

Rory shouts, “Leigh, don’t!”

Michael moves faster than any of us, yanking Leigh away and putting himself between her and those of us surrounding Sarah. Leigh hisses at him like an angry cat, but Michael’s low growl snaps her out of it.

She covers her mouth, horrified as she peers up into Michael’s stern face. “I’m sorry—I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to—”

I watch her carefully as Fionn disappears and returns with a large mug that he presses to Leigh’s lips before she can protest. Michael relaxes, and I follow his example, exhaling. He rests his hand at the base of her neck and leans down to her, speaking to her softly as she drinks.

“You’re still young,” he tells her. “And healing takes it out of you, lets your thirst creep up on you when you aren’t expecting it. Being High Queen doesn’t make you immune to the hunger, aye?”

Leigh is still abashed and gazes at Rory. “I’m so sorry.”

“We were here with you,” Rory reassures, exhaling. “And you put a stop to her bleeding, saved her life. No harm done.”

“I’ll send Sinéad up,” Leigh offers. “She’ll get her cleaned up and won’t harm a hair on her head.”

“I heard my name.” Sinéad opens the door and hurries in. The flat is becoming crowded. Her eyes soften when they rest on Sarah. “Poor dear. You can leave it to me.” She goes into the kitchen and fills a bowl with warm water.

With the danger mitigated, and I’m reassured that with Fionn in close proximity I won’t snap myself, I look over Sarah’s shoulder and neck. I heard of it, but I’ve never witnessed Leigh’s ability in the flesh. Thank God for her. Before she took the Oath, our only hope of healing was under the careful watch of the priests at the cathedral of St. Winifred’s—all moonlighting as druids in a secret order of their own—but now, we have her. The very first to be able to not only regenerate herself quickly but also heal others.

When everything burns, it’s Leigh who will keep us standing. But the Hecatēi have many like her, while we only have her. We don’t know why or how. Enemy gods and their ways are a mystery to us, and old tattered mythology books can only relay so much. It’s a priority of Michael’s to see if it’s a problem we can remedy. The thought of finding more is always in the back of my mind, the fatigue constant.

“You need to erase her memory, Mickey,” I urge. “The moment she wakes.”

“What?” Sinéad zooms into view, standing defensively right in front of me. “Now, wait just a minute.”

“Cillian’s right,” Rory urges. “We should—”

“No, I’m tired of you lads trying to be noble, making all of our decisions for us,” Sinéad cuts in. She’s changed since her time in Ireland with me, no longer the cold obedient soldier she once was. There’s defiance apparent on her face. “As a member of the Brotherhood, I call for an emergency council.”

“Is that really necessary?” Fionn arches a brow.

“Yes,” Sinéad insists. “It is.”

“She’s right. We should leave the room to Sinéad, and once Sarah’s all set, we’ll hash it out,” Leigh agrees. “Come on. Sooner it’s done, the sooner we can talk.”



Having only returned to Boston from Belfast this past year, the idea of a standing council that convenes the sentencing of crimes against the Brotherhood is new and unfamiliar to me.

Michael operates our order with as much fairness and justice as he can. It’s why I can’t personally hold him or Leigh responsible for Eamon’s sentencing and imprisonment back in 1970 when he was found guilty of ripping up civilians whose words and sympathies rubbed him the wrong way. It had been other Morrigan vampires acting as jury after being presented with the facts.

When Leigh turned and Michael married her, she took that a step farther. While they remain in charge, the ones with the final say in all important things, they don’t make all of their decisions alone. Sinéad, Rory, and I all have a voice in matters, as well as one other.

And when *he* walks through the door, I have to stop myself from flying across the room with my fangs out, ready for a brawl.

Desmond Moore.

I remember his bright blue-eyed mug and his full beard all too well. I also recall years of grueling battles with him back in the twenties and thirties when his brother Sean ruled Boston and treated it like his own hedonistic playground. Desmond is older than Michael and I are, and he’s powerful and well-spoken. It still astonishes me he asked to be made part of the Brotherhood officially.

According to Leigh, he's an excellent source of wisdom. Even more than Rory. But I find that hard to believe when Desmond's wisdom is undermined by loyalty to his own family ties.

Except the Moore brothers aren't speaking now. If you hear Desmond tell it, they haven't actually spoken more than a few words to each other since the American Civil War.

Desmond appears no more delighted to see me. "Darragh."

"Moore," I reply curtly.

Sinéad gives me a look as though to say, *play nice*. I have a hard time telling whose side she's really on these days, Desmond's or mine. We all take a seat together at the largest table, one that can accommodate the six of us.

"We appreciate you coming back to town for this, Des," Leigh says. "I know South Bend, Indiana is quite a ways from here."

"The druids got me here straight away," Desmond answers. "It's no trouble, though I'm not exactly sure what you need me for."

"We're here to determine whether or not Sarah McCready's memory should be altered this evening."

"McCready?" Desmond arches a brow. "As in, one of yours?"

Rory folds his arms across his broad chest and nods.

"She was attacked this evening and fed upon by Danny Murdock," I explain. "She's resting upstairs now."

"I can hear her heartbeat, same as you," Desmond replies calmly. "It's the reluctance to erase her memory I don't understand."

Sinéad speaks up quickly, sitting across from me. "If she were any other civilian, perhaps, it wouldn't be up for debate. But she has ties to Cezar and Vera. Cezar spoke on her behalf, sent her here to us. And if that wasn't enough, she's a McCready—she's Rory's great-granddaughter. She deserves to have a choice in the matter of her own mind, what she remembers and what she doesn't."

"I trust Cezar's judgment, though her being a family relation doesn't

mean she can necessarily be trusted to keep our secret,” Desmond replies.

“You’d know all about unreliable family relations,” Fionn mutters.

Desmond ignores him.

“Not only that, but Our Lady’s wishes were quite clear,” Sinéad continues. “She wants more women in our midst. Whether they’re truly one of us or not.”

I rest my elbows on the table, frowning. “I fail to see how that relates.”

“Don’t be daft,” Sinéad replies with a snort. “You’re practically our biggest recruiter. Since I’ve known you, you’ve contributed to the making of well over three hundred members of the Brotherhood, and of those, only six of them have been female.”

I scoff. “We’re not seriously discussing this. You can’t possibly be considering making her one of us.”

“I’m not saying that she needs to take the Oath,” Sinéad argues. “Unlike a lot of us here, she should have the rare opportunity to decide her own fate. And that means keeping her memory. She wouldn’t be the first human aware of our presence, and being that her great-grandfather is one—”

“I appreciate you speaking on her behalf the way you are, Sinéad, but she doesn’t know who I am,” Rory interjects. “She’s unaware of our connection. I’m hesitant to bank on any loyalty just yet.”

Michael and Leigh have been diplomatically silent up until this point. Michael speaks carefully. “I have concerns about keeping a mortal woman in the tavern, what with the new recruits we have, but I’m willing to consider it. Cezar has spoken for her. That means she’s a woman of merit and high morals.” He glances at his wife. “What about you, Leigh?”

She shifts in her seat. “I have to agree with Sinéad. I can appreciate why you’ve been reluctant to include women in our world, Cillian. By all accounts, it’s not always a pretty one. And I know you’ve operated with a sense of . . .” She searches for the word. “Nobility, in your selection of new soldiers for the Morrigan.”

Everyone shudders instantly.

“Must you speak Her name?” Sinéad hisses. “You know when you say Her name, She listens.”

Leigh sighs, continuing, “But the fact remains, lady vampires are as fierce and formidable as any of your men.”

“I’m sorry,” I interrupt heatedly. “This was meant to be a discussion of her memory. Why are we even talking about Sarah taking the Oath? I live next to her, and I barely know her, beyond the name she carries. The rest of you hardly know her from Adam! Besides, *She* doesn’t just accept everyone and anyone who calls upon Her. You can’t be certain She would take Sarah.”

“True, but it’s a possibility we should consider, if her memory remains intact,” Desmond suggests, leaning back in his chair.

“Fuck sake, why are you even here?” I erupt, glaring at Desmond. “What good have you been, that a Moore gets to have a seat at this table?”

Desmond doesn’t answer me, and I hate how calm he remains. There isn’t a word I could speak that might rouse him into battle these days. Where did he get that restraint? He was wilder long ago. Angrier. Not anymore.

“You’re more volatile about this than I expected you’d be, mate,” Michael says, watching me. “What’s got you so up in arms? You say you barely know her, yet you’re ready to wring necks for her sake. You were never one to shirk a chance to increase our numbers.”

The entire table falls silent. Michael has me cornered, and I don’t want to explain to everyone here just how maddening Sarah’s presence is to me. How her scent, her softness, her voice, everything about her has me second-guessing my own sanity.

How the sound of her blood in her veins, her pulse, are like music to my ears.

I can’t lie. Sinéad will see right through me; she always does with everyone. I exhale slowly. “I’m trying to be more selective about who I bring into the ranks,” I reply. “That’s all. I’ve already made one grievous mistake.”

“Danny Murdock,” Michael muses. “That one?”

“Aye,” I admit. “I let my own prejudices cloud my judgment when I changed him. Looking back now, I wish I didn’t.”

“What’s done is done, on that account.” Michael looks to Rory. “You’ve been quiet. What do you think should be done?”

Rory is almost pained when he speaks. “I want her memory erased,” he says with a slow nod, the corners of his mouth turned down in an aggrieved frown. “She’s my blood, aye, but I wouldn’t wish this existence on her. She’s young. She’s your ages, ’round about, I think, when you both took the Oath. She’s got so much left of her life to live. She should be able to get married, have children, live happily and safely.”

I allow myself to shut my eyes a moment as he speaks, trying to ignore the mental images his words cast upon me, of the life I almost had. “Seconded.”

“I’m against it,” Leigh says. “She should be the one to decide. I’m sorry, Rory, but there’s more to our lives than simply marriage and children.”

“I agree.” Sinéad speaks with an almost hostile conviction. “That cannot be all that defines us.”

“Desmond?” Michael asks. “What do you think?”

“I defer,” Desmond replies, sounding almost bored. “This woman is not someone I know. She means nothing to me. I should hold no weight in this matter.”

That leaves Michael himself. He remains seated and silent, rubbing his chin. Then he exhales. “If she were a child or someone unrelated, I would vote for altering her memory and be done with it. But she isn’t. And I understand where Leigh and Sinéad are coming from.”

“Mickey, please,” Rory implores.

Michael is sympathetic but firm. “I’m sorry, Rory. They’re right. Sarah is a woman grown. She deserves to have a say in where things go from here. It could be she doesn’t wish to remember, and that’ll be that. But either way,

she was attacked by one of our own. The least we can do is let it be her decision.”

“Until she runs away screaming to the police,” Desmond says dryly. “Then you’ll step in, I trust.”

Michael rises from his chair, dismissive. “Absolutely. Goes without saying.”

Leigh is pleased. Sinéad, relieved. They exchange fond looks before getting up from the table as well.

But I’m not letting this go so easily, and I’m beyond irritated that Sinéad called this meeting in the first place. “May I speak to you?” I ask through my teeth. “In private?”

“Sure.” Sinéad eyes me. “What’s up? Where to?”

“Docks.”

She sighs. “Let’s go, then.”



“Private” for people like us means far from prying ears. Our kind can hear from a mile or two away if we’re focused and listening for it, and I like to keep my business my own.

Unbothered by the cold, Sinéad stands in front of me with her arms crossed over her chest. “What’s this about?” she asks. “Come on, what’s going on with you? That was odd back there. We all sensed it. You’ve *never* cared about anyone eventually turning, if it meant you gained yet another soldier in Her ranks.”

I didn’t expect to be on the defensive so fast. “What’re you on about?” I demand. “I brought you here to find out what the hell your problem is, coming at me like I’m planning to sacrifice her on an altar rather than allow her a normal life. I’d think it’d be opposite. Is this about the boy? Because—”

“Don’t you dare bring up *my son* to me,” Sinéad cuts in, the emotion

behind her words deep and painful. I regret my words, shutting my mouth as she continues. “And try to use him as a weapon against my reasoning. You know full well there’s a big difference. I was dying when you found me in the birthing bed. Taking the Oath was the only option I had.”

Agitated, angry, I pace in front of her.

“And I’m finally finding the good in it, Cillian, instead of all the bad,” she continues.

“There is no good!” I retort, my anger coming out in full force. “There’s never been any good. You think I saved you out of the kindness of my heart?”

“You can lie to yourself and think you’re a villain because of what happened to your wife, Cillian,” Sinéad replies, steadfast. “But you’re not.”

I don’t believe her. The burden of the choices I’ve made, from the moment I took the Oath and all but forced Michael to do the same, only seems to grow, a cloud of angry guilt hanging over my head. It’s a constant barrage of wrongdoing that no matter what I say, no matter what I claim to believe, I cannot justify, try as I might.

I took a living curse upon myself, and in doing so, punished everyone else I cared about.

“I don’t know how you can say that,” I say. “Not after everything that’s happened. Especially now. Now we have an American sharing leadership with Mickey, when she doesn’t understand our struggles, everything we’ve fought for, bled for, *died* for. And Eamon remains in prison. Still! Despite every attempt I’ve made to free him.”

Sinéad watches me move back and forth on the docks, scoffing. “You were right not to take the mantle when it was offered to you, just like Mickey was right in marrying Leigh. Yes, she’s American, Cillian, but so are we now. We’re both. You have to accept *that*. She tries to understand and listen, when and if you let her. And Eamon knows what he’s in for. He’s accepted it.”

“But he’s not free.”

“He will be eventually.”

“And if I hadn’t put those ideas into his head—”

“Fucksake, you didn’t put anything into his head that wasn’t already there, Cillian!” Sinéad exclaims. “And would you stand still and stop fidgeting, for the love of everything holy!”

I still. Her slender hand takes mine. “Cillian. Look at me.”

“What?” I say sullenly, glancing at her then out toward the dark midnight water.

Sinéad’s voice is as comforting as it can be. “When I was with you and Eamon, you were my entire world. I loved you like an older brother—still do—worshipped the ground you stood on, right alongside Eamon. But now? I know where my son is. He’s happy. He has a family. I may never be able to have a relationship with him, but I have a reason to be here beyond death and fighting. I have *grandchildren* now. Me! I’d give anything to show up on his doorstep, tell him who I am. Rory has that opportunity now. If we give Sarah a choice, it might go better than you think.”

It’s an odd thing, considering Sinéad as being a grandmother when she hasn’t aged past twenty-one, immortal as she is. “And if getting her involved with us only causes pain and strife?”

“It’s her decision to make,” she insists with a sigh, chewing on her inner lip. “You’re carrying every sin, real or imagined.”

“I don’t know what else to do,” I reply. “I don’t know how else to be. War is *easy*. You kill the man fighting for the other side. You don’t have to think beyond strategy. I don’t know what to do with myself here, except think. And when I think, I only see my failures.”

“What about the house?” Sinéad points out. “You’re renovating it, aren’t you?”

“That’ll keep my hands busy only for so long,” I mutter. “And I worry about what will come after.”

Sinéad sighs. “You’re a damned eejit. Come here.” She pulls me into a hug, squeezing me tightly. After a moment’s hesitation, I lean into it. Physical affection isn’t something she used to offer, and I’m not accustomed to receiving it at all. Finding some comfort in it, I sag slowly against her. “You have to give yourself more time. It takes longer for us. You can’t be impatient.” She rubs my back a little before letting me go. “Is that what this is about? You don’t want to be responsible for anyone else, Sarah included?”

“No. I . . . It’s—there’s something about her that worries me. It’s hard for me to keep my composure around her.”

“What do you mean?”

“She turns me into a bloodlush,” I admit.

“What?” Baffled, Sinéad rests her hands on her hips, squinting at me.

No point in lying to Sinéad, not when the Morrigan gifted her the ability to draw the truth from anyone by command. Even if she didn’t have the capability, there’s very few people walking on this earth I trust as much as her.

Michael. Eamon. But that’s it for me.

“I almost lost control and fed from her, carrying her to the Mannock. I haven’t struggled with a hunger like that in decades.”

Sinéad’s abrasiveness fades into genuine concern. “Have you told Mickey about it?”

“So he can fuss over me? No.” I snort. “And I won’t either. Not yet, anyway. I will later. When I’m certain I’ve a handle on it.”

Sinéad looks exasperated with me, but she nods. “Okay. Well, your secret’s safe with me.” She sighs. “C’mon, then. We should head back so we can be there when she wakes.”

She shifts into a raven, ashen smoke and silken feathers swirling about her, and flies back to the tavern. I’m quick to follow after her.

When I arrive back at the tavern and head upstairs to Michael’s old apartment, I find Rory sitting dutifully at Sarah’s bedside. He’s hunched

over, resting his elbows on the bed, hands clasped together in what appears to be silent prayer.

“Didn’t figure you for the religious sort.” I pull a chair from the small dusty table in Michael’s unused kitchen and stow it on the other side of the bed across from him.

“You don’t know me very well, boy,” Rory grunts, his voice deep, low. Pensive. “Taught my children how to pray before they went to sleep, all lined up in a little row by the bedside. Prayed with my wife, my arms wrapped around her, and gave thanks for everything we had.” His gaze rests on Sarah, still asleep. “Even had a grandson I was working on before I sailed for America.”

“Do you regret it?” I ask softly.

“Oh, every day,” Rory admits, lowering his hands. He looks no older than fifty, but there are times I hear weariness in his voice that makes him seem ancient. “Every single day, I wish I hadn’t taken a step upon that ship. But then, that’s the contradiction of being what we are, isn’t it? We regret, then we see the world as it is now, how it’s changed, how we’ve changed with it. I watched my wife live her life from a distance, our children grow old, their children do the same.”

My stomach churns. I think about the life I’ve left behind, what I’ve lost. If I would’ve ever stood by and watched the love of my life move on without me.

“Why do you torture yourself like that?” I ask in dismay. “Why not just stay away so you can try to let yourself forget?”

Rory nearly laughs at me. “Have you forgotten your loved ones?”

My mother’s face is still in my mind, along with the faces of my brothers and sisters. My wife. “No. I could never.”

“You know very well none of us can,” he answers. “Watching over my legacy is what gives me a sense of purpose. Yes, there’s pain. There always is. Always will be. But it’s knowing I did something right at least once in my

life. That I had a hand in making such a family. It brings me more comfort than anything else in this mortal world.” He sighs. “She’s a beautiful creature, isn’t she? Takes after her father a bit.”

Would that I could answer his question truthfully. But how can I tell him, of all people, how Sarah affects me? That she is more than beautiful, fairer than any woman I’ve ever set eyes upon. That it isn’t just her appearance that draws her to me, but her blood, her scent, her spirit. No longer covered in her own blood or dressed in stained clothes, Sarah is tranquil. Her dark brown hair is spread all around her pillow, and her chest rises and falls with slow, steady breaths.

“Did you know him?”

“From a distance, aye. Strong fellow. Looked a bit like me too, if you can believe that.”

“So she’s your *great*-grandchild?” I muse.

“Aye, so she is.” He glances at me. “You don’t have to stay. I’m looking after her. She’s safe here.”

“I want to,” I reply, sitting down. “This is partially my responsibility.”

“As you say.” Rory returns his attention to Sarah.

She slumbers there for nearly six hours. By the time she stirs, the sun has started rising. She shifts and groans, bringing both Rory and me out of our own thoughts as we sit together in silence. Her eyes flutter open. She winces then jerks up, gasping as she pats herself down.

“Where am I? W-what—” She touches her neck where she was bitten and feels around in surprise at finding nothing there. “It’s gone. He bit me here, but—where is it? What the hell is happening?”

“Easy, now, easy,” Rory says, holding up his hands to her. “You’ve had a bit of a fright. No need to work yourself up now.”

“Rory,” she mutters, shocked at his presence as she finds her bearings. “You’re here, but—no, it wasn’t a fright, not this time. Nobody can tell me it didn’t happen. It’s not there anymore, but it was.” Her tone is slightly

discombobulated. “I swear, I’m not crazy. A man tried to rip out my throat!”

Rory grimaces as Sarah’s eyes roam and settle in shock upon me, mouth slackened. “Cillian. You’re here.” Then she seems to remember she’s cross with me, but she doesn’t quite raise her voice. “Why are you here?”

“I brought you back to the Mannock,” I reply, remaining seated and exchanging cautious glances with Rory. Remembering the council’s decision, I add, “After the attack.”

Sarah stares at me. “So I didn’t imagine it.”

“No, you didn’t,” I agree softly. “You were bleeding and I carried you.”

“I remember . . . Rory,” she mutters, rubbing her head and accepting a glass of water from him when he brings it to her from the kitchen. “I remember you saying . . .” She sips from the water after a moment’s pause, like she doesn’t trust herself or her own mind. “I must have been dreaming.”

“Why’s that, love?” Rory asks.

“You mentioned vampires. But vampires aren’t real, they’re just fantasy.”

Rory lifts his brows. “Are they, now?”

She falls silent, perhaps unsure as to whether or not he is merely teasing. And when she looks at me, I confirm Rory’s words with a reluctant, slow nod. “I had to say you imagined it the other night, Sarah. I can’t exactly advertise what I am to the neighbors. You understand.”

She studies me, wary and uncertain as she grips her glass. “And that’s why you’ve been a dickhead too, I suppose.”

Wincing, I shoot a look at Rory, who bites down on a chortle in his throat. “She’s got you there, mate.”

The door to the apartment opens. Michael steps inside, Leigh following. They must not have gone home last night.

“She’s awake!” Michael says cheerily. “Sooner than we expected. That’s good.”

“How are you feeling?” Leigh asks with care. “Better, I hope? Any soreness or pain?”

“N-no, none, but . . .” Sarah stares at them both in confusion. “I don’t understand. You knew? And you fixed me up?”

“And a right good job she did too, if you don’t mind my saying,” Michael says pleasantly as he and his wife come to stand beside the bed. “You were nearly killed by a vampire, so I’m sure you have a lot of questions. Can’t imagine anything would make sense after an encounter like that.”

“Vampires,” Sarah repeats, rubbing her neck and ruffling her hair. I catch her pinching her arm and wincing, testing if she’s really awake or not. “You really just said vampires.”

“So I did,” Michael agrees.

“But vampires can’t be real, right?” Sarah insists. “This is some kind of prank everybody’s in on? An initiation to working at the Mannoek?”

“No. The jig is up, I’m afraid. You saw what you saw,” Leigh answers. “Trust me, I know too well how much you must be freaking out right now. I freaked out a bit too when I learned all of this. The trick is to take your time. It’ll all sink in and make sense, the more you think about it.”

Sarah doesn’t respond at first. She gives a short laugh, but none of us are even smiling. Pure solemnity seems to suit the occasion.

“You’re serious,” she whispers, steadying her breath. “But—that’s—Dracula. Carmilla. I thought those were just stories.”

“Stories always have hints of truth to them,” Rory says.

Leigh motions around the room. “You’ve met Rory, of course, and Cillian Darragh. This is my husband, Michael Kelly.”

Michael studies me a moment. I still don’t like this idea. I shake my head and look away from him in silent protest. He greets Sarah in a friendly manner, like she’s a new patron in the pub. “It’s very nice to meet you, Sarah. You’re all anyone has been talking about this evening. And you should know, it’s been decided. Since you were attacked by one of ours—someone who will face judgment, I promise—we want to leave this decision to you.”

Sarah glances between me and Michael. “Decision? What decision?”

“We require secrecy to operate best in this city,” Michael replies. “I can erase your memory, if you’d like for all of this to be just a bad dream.”

“Or,” Leigh says, “if you’re willing to keep an open mind and not speak about what happened to another soul, you can retain employment here like you planned. You can have safety and community.”

“Community in what?” Sarah asks.

“Our very merry band,” I reply dryly, still unhappy from the events of the past evening. All hopes of keeping Sarah at a safe distance are dashed. I have no plan solid plan now, nothing beyond keeping my own hunger in check and forcing myself to behave at all times, even in close proximity.

“The Morrigan Brotherhood,” Michael says, and the moment he does, a hush descends upon the room. The hairs on my arms, on the back of my neck, prickle.

She’s here. She’s listening.

Don’t speak Her name.

“There’s more of you?” Sarah breathes.

“A great many more,” Michael assents. “And far beyond Boston.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Sarah asks, hesitant. “Aren’t you afraid I’m going to go to the police or somewhere else and blab? Tell everyone?”

“Tell them what, exactly?” Michael says. “That you were attacked by a vampire when you’ve no visible marks to prove it? That vampires offered you something that’s never been openly offered to any outsider before? That they own a pub in Southie?” His eyes glint with amusement. “People will think you’re crazy.”

I wish I could be as jovial as Michael always has been, or that I could be reassured by just how confident he is, But I know what will happen. If Sarah attempts any foolishness, if she tries to run or escape, she’ll be caught by any one of us, myself and even Rory included among those captors. She’ll be made to forget, delivered to her home, and that will be that.

None of us will risk the Brotherhood. Eamon drew too much attention to

it once, with his attacks on civilians, ripping them apart like an animal when they dared to speak what he considered the wrong opinion on the Troubles across the sea. Those murders have remained unsolved, and locals have come to compare them to Jack the Ripper come back from the dead.

Sarah is prey, surrounded by fierce predators. By the fluttering of her throat, the color in her face, the way she grips the blankets on the bed, she understands the danger she's in. Subconsciously, at least.

“How do I know I didn't imagine it?” she says. “That you're not just some insane blood-drinking Satanic cult, playing pretend?”

Leigh arches a brow. “The fact that you've no wound on your neck isn't enough?”

“Something could've been slipped into my drink,” Sarah suggests tentatively.

“I'm not sure you could handle the proof if it was handed to you,” Michael says, but then he shrugs. “All right, if you insist on some theatrics. Cillian, the lights, please. Leigh, would you mind ensuring all the curtains are tightly shut?”

I rise to my feet and turn the lights off. Sarah's soft shriek is almost instantaneous, gripping the blankets around her chest. “Holy shit. Your—your eyes.”

Michael's eyes are unearthly and bright in the dark, churning red and flecked with gold, pupils slitted like a cat. Rory follows suit. Reluctantly so do I, reaching deep within myself to rouse the monster within me. He's already awake, fixated as he is upon Sarah, but he's grown lazy, accepting there will be no feeding tonight. Not from her.

It's not the easiest parlor trick, bringing out the insatiably thirsty creature the Morrigan has implanted in each of us. But when he's out, he stares at her with the utmost interest, and I see how perfect she is through his eyes.

I want her. The thoughts flood me, lustful and hungry. *Let me have her.*

No. My canines grow long in my mouth, and I bare my fangs. “Is this

proof enough?”

“Oh my god,” Sarah whispers, her gaze tethered to me. “You really are. You’re all really vampires.”

Leigh hurries to turn the lights back on, and the little show is over. Rory growls as his feral appearance returns to normal, rubbing his neck as he grouses. “Been a long time since I showed my fangs. Think I’m a little out of shape.”

I have no such complaints. My vampiric nature is a little too strong at the moment, and I will that hunger to sleep again. It won’t, defiant within me.

“As you can see,” Michael says. “No games are being played. All it takes is one word. And you can return to your old life, where the only vampires are in storybooks and fairytales. It’s your choice.”

Sarah is silent, her eyes wide, and I wonder if all thought and reason have been robbed from her. But she doesn’t seem panicked, rather dazed. Concern is plain on Rory’s face. He doesn’t like this any more than I do. Can she even make a choice like this right now? She reminds me of a shell-shocked soldier in a trench as she tries to make sense of her surroundings, if the people around her are friend or foe.

I can’t keep silent any further. “If I were you I’d walk away, Sarah,” I declare. This is taking too long, and I haven’t had blood in some hours. That display of my curse took more out of me than I expected. Hearing her life force pour through her veins aggravates me to no end. “Not many folks can handle a bunch of bloodthirsty bastards like us. And there’s no shame in knowing your limits. Ask yourself—is this even a secret you can keep?”

“Cillian,” Rory warns. I can see his bristles coming up. He won’t tolerate any insult to his legacy, and he’s warning me that I’m drawing dangerously close to offending him.

“I’m sorry, Rory, but it’s a big request to make of anyone mortal. You know that,” I drive on. “I understand wanting to give her a choice, but there’s so much more to consider here.”

I turn my attention to Sarah, speaking to her directly, imploring her. “You seem like a . . .” *Beautiful, intelligent, fiery, stunning.* “. . . nice person. A decent human being. But nice and decent don’t really cut it in a world like ours. It’s dangerous for the likes of you.”

Defiance sparks in Sarah’s eyes behind the calm of her words. “You don’t think I’m strong enough.”

“I don’t doubt your strength. There are many who might’ve succumbed to panic and death after an attack like the one you’ve endured.” I hesitate. I’m hurting myself. Each word out of my mouth is a dagger slicing across my skin, tearing me open. Because I want to be near her. I want her to stay. But that’s the selfish hunger within me talking. I suppress it as best I can, upholding reason over my own longing. “But life with the likes of us—I wouldn’t wish it on anyone.”

Sarah doesn’t argue. She seems like she understands, albeit with uncertainty, what I’m trying to say, and for a moment I think I might be getting through to her. Perhaps she’ll accept that her memory needs erasing. For her own good.

But there’s an inquisitive spark in her eyes, one I recognize all too well. And a part of me doubts there’s anything I could say to douse it.

Rory is torn. I can see it in his face. He frowns, speaking up. “Cillian, I don’t think you’re being fair. I’m not sure *any* of this is fair—to Sarah. This is quite a bomb to drop on her, and expect her to be rushing to make any kind of decision quickly one way or another.” He turns to Michael, who’s been silent, listening and standing beside his wife. “Perhaps we should give her some time to think it over—a night or two at the very least. If she can promise to keep the secret during that time.”

Sarah speaks up at last, her tone sincere. “I won’t say anything. If you were bad people, I think you would’ve just killed me to protect your interests or let me die. You didn’t, and then you healed me. I appreciate that you’re letting me decide, instead of deciding for me. That’s not what I would have

expected from . . .” She trails off.

“A bunch of bloodthirsty bastards?” Rory offers wryly, repeating my words and shooting me a look as though to say, *you’re underestimating her, lad.*

“I was going to say vampires,” Sarah admits.

Leigh and Michael exchange looks. “Very well, a day or two to think it over,” Michael says at last. “Cillian, I heard something about you living next door to Sarah. Why don’t you take her home?”

I stiffen a little. “Me?”

“Yes,” Michael replies, steadfast and with an all-too-knowing look I don’t particularly like. But it’s not up for argument. “You.”

“I can make sure she gets home safe, Mickey,” Rory says.

“No, not this time, old friend,” Michael replies. “Cillian will do it.”

I’m exasperated. If he suspects my impulses, why is he forcing me? “I don’t think that’s wise.”

“You’ll do it.” Michael’s voice is firm. Because he knows me. *Damn him.* He’s fully aware I’m not being honest. That I’m pretending she doesn’t affect me the way she does.

“Fine.” I storm out of the room, slamming the door so hard behind me its hinges whine with the force of it.



In the early morning light, we walk together side by side in silence. People are stirring in their houses, kissing their loved ones goodbye, getting ready for work while children ready themselves for the last stretch of school before winter break, filing along in lines for bus stops. There’s a fresh powdering on the ground, not enough to last but enough to leave footprints in our wake.

My emotions are a tempest. Then again if I’m honest with myself, they always have been. I can’t remember the last time I smiled, laughed, felt

anything beyond being pissed off at the world and everyone in it. It's not Sarah's fault. There's not a single thing wrong with her, not in anything she's said or done. It's all me. I'm little more than a storm, something made to destroy anything in my path. I always have been.

There's only two people who have ever succeeded in calming me. My own mother, may she rest in peace, and—

“Look, just say you walked me home,” Sarah suggests under her breath. “I know you don't like me much. I promised I wouldn't say anything, so you don't have to worry.”

She's wearing some of Leigh's clothes, which are a tad too small for her more full-figured frame. She couldn't go home wearing her blood-spattered garments from before. Speaking of blood, I guzzled it before this, in the tavern's kitchen. Three servings of it, straight from the bags they came in. I'm not fond of drinking it cold, but I needed something, anything, to get me through what's meant to be a simple escort. And still the scent of her taunts the monster inside. *What's one little bite going to hurt?*

“No,” I answer.

She shivers, so I remove my coat and drape it across her shoulders. The quilted button-up coat Leigh gave her in this biting cold isn't enough, and I remind myself I should probably get a car one of these days. I wrap my scarf around her neck twice, ensuring it offers some cover for the lower part of her face. She looks at me in surprise.

“And you're wrong. I don't dislike you. I never did.”

“Then why do you act the way you did? When I came by the Mannock—the way you butted in—”

“It's the way you smell,” I cut in, doing my best to keep patient. “Nothing to do with disliking you.”

“I'm sorry, are you saying I *stink*?” She gives me a withering look that could chill hell itself. “I shower, I do everything right, and nobody has *ever* complained about my smell.”

Fuck. How do I keep screwing this up? “No, that’s—it’s not what you think. Listen.” I sigh and straighten myself out, pausing our walk. “Your smell does things to me. It’s not a bad smell. It’s good. Too good. Being around you makes me . . .” I clamp my mouth shut. I shouldn’t be telling her this. But God help me, I’m struggling with the thought of sending her off, imagining I hate her and thinking I’m nothing but an asshole.

“ . . . very, very thirsty,” I finish. “In a way I haven’t been for a very long time. I’m trying to rectify that, but being around you doesn’t make it easy.”

Her stare of indignation softens. “So I was right before. That’s why you were being such a dickhead? So I wouldn’t know?”

I deserve that. “So you wouldn’t get close, aye,” I admit. “Though some folk’ll tell you I’m always a dickhead. Just came out a bit harder and meaner than I intended the night we first met. And then at the Mannock. Doesn’t excuse it.”

“Is that an apology?” she asks.

“No,” I reply. She tenses, and I drive on. “But this is—I’m sorry, Sarah. For the way I acted. For the way I treated you when you just came to inquire for a job. And for being a poor excuse for a neighbor the night we first met.”

“Wow.” Stunned at my words, Sarah slips her arms through the sleeves of my coat. “I’ve gotta be honest, I didn’t take you for a man who apologizes for anything.”

“I deserve that. I suppose I’ve no one to blame except myself. I’ve plenty in my life to apologize for, believe you me.” I shove my hands in my pockets. “But those problems are my own, and it was wrong of me to treat you like a nuisance.”

She scoffs in disbelief, looking around, then back at me. “Who are you? And what have you done with my grumpy neighbor, Cillian Darragh?”

“Pegged me for the grumpy neighbor, have you? After just a few days?”

“First impressions stick,” she replies. “Sorry to tell you.”

“Fair enough. I guess it’s accurate.” I motion as we continue our walk.

“Be yellin’ at those kids later to get off my lawn. Maybe even wave a broom around on the porch for good measure.”

Sarah’s soft laugh at my expense lifts my spirits instantly in a way I’m not expecting, her musical tone nearly holding me hostage.

“Well. You carried me to safety and watched over me *and* got your head out of your ass, it seems, so . . . apology accepted.” She holds out her hand.

“Thank you.” I take it and shake firmly.

She purses her lips, as though to refrain from smiling. “But I expect cookies. Freshly baked. To welcome me to the neighborhood properly.”

“Cookies, aye? Well, I’ll see what I can do.” As I shift my eyes forward, I catch her glancing at me often in her peripheral vision.

“So—that intruder before. He’s one too?”

I take a moment to measure my words, before relenting and choosing honesty. “Yes, he is.”

“And you were really okay with letting me wonder if I was crazy about those red eyes?”

“Not proud of it, and no, it didn’t sit right with me, but I had little choice,” I answer. “I couldn’t come out and say, ‘Oh, right, sorry. A vampire friend of mine didn’t know anyone lived there.’”

“Why do they do that?” she asks. “Your eyes, I mean.”

“Physical incarnation of the bloodlust we carry, is how I’ve interpreted it,” I reply. “Happens when we’re unbearably thirsty and presented with prey we can’t resist.”

“Do you kill people?” she whispers. “When you feed?”

“No, never,” I reassure her. “We use a blood bank system. It’s just harder for the newer initiates to control themselves. Like children. Discipline and restraint come with time and practice.”

Sarah doesn’t answer right away, as though processing my words. “I still can’t believe any of this has happened. I trust my eyes, and I know what I saw, but it’s just so much to take in.” She pauses, then continues curiously,

“Was it the same man who attacked me?”

“Ah. No.” I suck a breath through my teeth. “No, the one holing up in your place was Brody O’Neill. He’s actually the one who saved you from your attacker.”

“Brody.” Sarah hums, as though she means to commit that name to memory. “And my attacker was?”

“Daniel Murdock,” I reply, trying not to think of the hunger creeping up from within me again. How is this possible? I drank so much not long ago. This woman is maddening.

Just keep talking, Cillian. Distract yourself.

“A new vampire,” I continue. “The newer they are, the harder it is to resist feeding from humans directly. Though I don’t know how much resisting there was on his part. He’ll be paying for what he did to you, I promise you that.”

Snow begins to fall over our heads as we finally turn into our neighborhood. It’s been a long time since I bothered walking home from the tavern on my own two feet. Usually, I fly at least part of the way, not that I’m in a hurry to do anything, being immortal. But there is freedom in flight that I enjoy.

“I have so many questions,” Sarah says, staring at her door. “I keep thinking I’ll wake up at any moment and this’ll all be some weird dream.”

“That can still be arranged if you like,” I reply as she removes my coat and hands it to me. I curl it over one arm. “But you’ve been given time. Think on it and give your answer tomorrow, or the day after.”

“I’m guessing if I run off, you’ll stop me?”

“Immediately,” I answer, searching her eyes. Nothing about her suggests skittishness or fear. Only uncertainty. “I’d appreciate it if you didn’t.”

“Maybe I’ll do it just to keep you on your toes.”

That amuses me. “You’re welcome to try.”

Sarah rolls her healed shoulder as though fending off a phantom ache, and

I subtly admire the gentle pulse of her throat. *God, to sink my teeth into her—*
Stop, I warn that inner beast, testing my restraint. *No*.

“I guess this is good night, then.” She gives me a look. “Do I get to look forward to you being more of the same old dick tomorrow?”

For Christ’s sake, did she have to mention dicks? I was doing so well, avoiding my very vivid imagination of all the things my dick would certainly like to do to her. Inside and out. I grind my teeth. *Say good night, Cillian, and walk the fuck away before you make a fool of yourself.*

“I’ll try to be more neighborly, and I’ll see about those cookies, but I can’t promise I’ll be any good at it,” I reply. “I usually keep to myself.”

“You don’t say,” she says wryly. “I’m shocked.”

There’s no bite behind her words. I can’t be certain, but I think she’s playing with me. “I deserve that.”

“You do,” she says. “So get some rest and wake up on the right side of the bed tomorrow—if you even sleep—and be nice to me, or else.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I bow my head. “Sleep well.”

She lingers then offers me a tentative smile. “Good night, Cillian.”

She opens her door and disappears inside. I exhale a long-held sigh. I’m to watch her tonight since I live next door. Make sure she doesn’t try anything foolish, like rush over to the police station or make any calls she shouldn’t be making. Trust, but verify.

Which makes me feel like an idiot. I’m a warrior. I’ve fought and shed blood in five different wars. I shouldn’t be delegated into a job like spying on a woman, no matter how short-lived.

Yet I know Michael’s game. He’s trying to ease me into these little tasks. It’s peacetime. I need to learn how to put my metaphorical swords away and simply exist without bloodshed.

Easier said than done for a vampire.

But I know myself all the better as I enter my own house, shut the door, and pull off all my winter clothes. There’s something beneath this hunger that

even I can't control. The monster hiding within me is purely fixated upon Sarah in a way it hasn't ever before.

No harm can ever befall her. Not while I still exist in this place between living and death.

I won't let it happen again.

CHAPTER 5

Living Legends



Sarah

Okay, vampires. I can deal with this, right?

I've been lying in bed for what feels like ages, my thoughts all jumbled and practically running a marathon at a track meet. This is absolutely insane, but there's an ache in my shoulder where that man attacked—*no, fucking bit me. He bit me! Who does that?*

Crazy people. Or, you know, vampires.

Not only that, but you'd think any sane vampire would take drastic measures to make sure anyone exposed to their secret didn't make it out alive. At least, that's the sort of thing I'm used to reading in stories or seeing in the movies. But these aren't loners or mustache-twirling villains in a bad picture. It's a Brotherhood. They're giving me time. An entire night or two to decide whether I'd like a good rewind. Like I'm just your everyday cassette tape.

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't a little skeptical of that being in any way realistic. Come on! *Vampires*, for crying out loud.

I stare at the ceiling, willing sleep to come to me, but I'm not even that

tired. I'm too busy replaying the terror in my head of being attacked on the street—not for my purse or what little jewelry I wear, but for my blood. I think of their glowing eyes in the dark, the fangs I couldn't deny.

I can't believe Cillian Darragh carried me back to the Mannock. He carried me. *He. Carried. Me.*

I remember being in Rory's arms first, though I struggle to recall what was said to me beyond vampires, and . . . he called me "child," didn't he? But he must've given me to Cillian at some point. Now my mind latches on to that little tidbit and refuses to let go. How did he do it? Did he throw me over a shoulder like I was a sack of potatoes? Did he carry me like a bride or a princess, or tuck me under his arm like a football? Dammit, I should've checked for blood on his coat. There would've definitely been blood somewhere, right?

Wait a minute. Why do I even care how he carried me? Does it matter? The point is, he's a vampire, and he was decent enough to not leave me there after I'd been nearly mauled or eaten alive by some punk bloodsucker. Not letting me die is a pretty low bar.

Am I really going to thank him for doing what any decent person should? *Hey, thanks for letting me not bleed out and die. Okay, he's dreamy, but let's still have some standards here, vampire or not—*

Did I just think he's *dreamy*? Hell, no. *Get a grip, McCready. Seriously.*

I steady my breathing and close my eyes, trying to clear my mind. I banish thousands of questions, those bloodstained fangs that ripped through my flesh, even Cillian. He's the hardest one to stop thinking about. I keep replaying the sound of his voice in my head, how different he seems, now that I know he had something to hide. Something precious to him.

Like there's a human being behind his standoffishness. Still, I'm not letting him off that easy.

Eventually, sleep overtakes me. The curtains are drawn to blot out the sun. If I can get just a few hours rest, maybe this insanity will make just a

little more sense.



It's late afternoon when I wake. I think about everything that's happened as I shower then dress. After pinning my hair up out of my face and fluffing it up a bit until I'm happy, I pick a pair of long geometrical earrings to match a similar gaudy pendant. It's not much, but it makes me feel like something is protecting my neck.

My go-to shirt is typically an oversized top, but I don't want my sleeves draping into anybody's food for my first shift at the Mannock today. Instead, I go for a vibrant striped purple sweater with tight cuffed quarter-sleeves tucked into belted blue trousers that hug my hips. Satisfied with my appearance, I head downstairs into the kitchen, my thoughts far and away as I sift through the sad groceries in the fridge for something edible.

"Shit," I mutter to myself. "Pretty bare bones at the moment."

I've always lived that way, though, ever since I lost Mom and Dad. That's why waitressing always made sense to me. A free meal with every shift kept the meat on my bones, and on the days I didn't work, it was peanut butter and jelly sandwiches with an apple on the side. It's not exactly what doctors would recommend, I guess, but they call us starving artists for a reason.

If I'm honest with myself, my entire life after my parents died has been nothing but a disappointment. Why the hell would I ever ask Leigh and Michael to take me back to a time when I'm new in my own town, where I have absolutely no one, no job, and no prospects?

Better yet, what woman in her right mind would turn down the possibility of being part of something more? Something special, something secret?

There's a knock on the front door, so loud I nearly bonk my head on the top of my fridge. When I go to see who's there, I'm met with Cillian

Darragh.

Except this isn't Cillian Darragh covered in layers of winter clothes. He's wearing a brown vest and a long ivory shirt, the sleeves rolled to his elbows. He left one button unfastened at his collar, no tie.

I swallow. *Holy hell*. Cillian doesn't look that much older than me, but I'm used to guys my age toting their varsity jackets, wearing T-shirts, polos, sweater vests, maybe some Hawaiian print if they're feeling especially snazzy. But Cillian is different. Not quite old-fashioned, his clothes are something from another age. Timeless.

"Hi," I manage, pulling myself forcefully out of those thoughts. "Is my time up already?"

"Not yet. But I heard you grumbling, and I thought you might want some actual sustenance," he says, a paper bag tucked in his arm. "And not instant noodles, or whatever it is your lot tries to pass for food."

"Better than beans on toast." I gesture for him to come inside. "Wait, you could hear me?"

"Of course." He taps his ear. "Vampire hearing. Can hear you snoring too."

I'm not sure I like the fact that he can hear everything from my house. I scoff. "I don't snore."

"You sure about that?"

I hesitate.

He chuckles. "You don't snore. You're a little gullible, though."

"Very funny," I say, following him as he walks to my kitchen. "Do you hear everything in the neighborhood?"

"Yes. It's a lot of buzz. Sometimes it gets a bit loud, like a radio." He must sense my discomfort because he pauses. "Don't worry. I don't make it a habit of eavesdropping on people, and I don't plan on doing it to you. After so many years, you can tune it out, control it. Your secrets are safe, whatever they are. But you can always shout for me if you need me, I'll hear you just

fine.”

That makes me feel a little better. “Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it.” Cillian doesn’t just set the grocery bag down and expect me to take care of the rest. He pulls everything out: a dozen eggs, apples, orange juice, bread, bacon, and sausage.

“Wasn’t expecting you to throw yourself into the neighborly role so quickly.”

“I have some things to make up for, don’t I?” He motions around. “You mind?”

“Go ahead.” He begins putting things away. He doesn’t seem quite so bothered or uptight around me, not like before. My curiosity gets the better of me. “So . . . is the hunger still there?”

“Oh, absolutely.”

My heart flutters. Should I be worried by that or flattered? “You just act like you’re handling it better.”

“That’s because I drank half my body weight in blood before I came here.”

“Did you really?”

“No, not literally. But it was quite a bit.” He steps out of the pantry after stocking it to his satisfaction. “That ought to do it for now. I’ve got those cookies baking for you. I’ll drop them by later.”

“I’m surprised you were serious about the cookies. You know how to bake?”

“My mum taught me,” Cillian replies. “Long time ago now, when I was boy.”

“And when was that? The Middle Ages?”

“Not quite. Turn of the century.”

I want to ask more, but it doesn’t seem like the right time. He dusts off his hands and flexing one fist again and again. Almost nervously.

“Sarah, you must know how unusual this is,” he says after a moment of

awkward silence between us.

“What do you mean?” I ask, still trying to comprehend the man in front of me is an actual vampire and not just a jerk trying to turn over a new leaf one house over.

“Mickey wouldn’t usually tolerate humans knowing a single thing about us, especially strangers. When his wife found out, it was different. She’d been his friend for many years. He’s always guarded the Brotherhood and its existence. Viciously, I might add.”

“Fair enough,” I answer, folding my arms and leaning against a kitchen counter. Cillian hasn’t moved away from the pantry. He seems tense, stiff. “Do you want to sit down? You’re standing there like I’m holding a gun to your head.”

“It’s the hunger,” Cillian rasps. “Just—give me a minute.”

A flash of crimson crosses his eyes, but it’s so quick I don’t have time to study it. They’re right back to warm brown, like freshly tilled soil after a heavy spring rain. I take a step back from him, uncertain.

Calm down, Sarah, I scold myself silently. I mean, sure, he’s trying not to eat you, but if he was going to, he would’ve already, right? In the silence, I appreciate the way he looks. How he’s styled his wavy dark hair, the way his sleeves are rolled up past his elbows.

“Is it really that bad?” I ask.

“Yes.” He shuts his eyes. After a moment, he appears relaxed again. Or at least he’s faking it well enough I can’t tell. “Sorry, what was I saying?”

“About how unusual it is, for . . . Mickey, I guess you call him, to give me this chance?”

“Right, yes.” He clears his throat. “He’s a good leader, but that doesn’t mean I agree with every decision he makes.”

“You said as much last night. I remember.”

Cillian reluctantly nods. “I think your life would be happier and safer without us in it.”

“Well, I wouldn’t have gotten bitten,” I venture. My mind has been so discombobulated over this discovery, I’m not sure I’ve focused on the right things. A new thought occurs to me, and I blurt it out on impulse. “Am I going to turn into one of you now? Is that how it happens? Like zombies?”

“No.” Cillian snorts. “Not in the slightest.”

“Then how does it work?”

“That’s something we can discuss later, depending on the decision you make.” Cillian looks away. “This is unusual for me too.”

“Why?”

Smiling ruefully, he slips his hands into his pockets. God, the way that looks. So deceptively at ease, even if he is struggling with a hunger I can’t comprehend. Like he owns this kitchen and he doesn’t give a damn. It occurs to me just how dangerous this man is, being a vampire, and he’s standing in my house. I should be frightened. I should send him away.

But looking at him, now, I’m perfectly fine with him staying.

Damn. Who gave him the right to be the hot neighbor next door?

“Fifty, sixty years ago, when I first arrived here, I would’ve descended upon you. Happily. I would’ve given into the hunger, and you would’ve enjoyed yourself too, I’m sure.”

His words send a little shiver up my spine in a way that feels oddly good instead of fearful. *What does he mean by that?* “Would I? Because nothing about getting fed upon last night was enjoyable.”

“It’s not always like that, if the vampire in question is in control,” Cillian says, though his answer is still a little too vague for my liking. He continues. “But it isn’t just that. It’s unlike me to have been so against you to be allowed knowledge of the Brotherhood. I’m its biggest recruiter, you could say. I’ve traveled all over the world, fought in many wars. I’ve brought many soldiers into the fold.”

“You call them soldiers,” I muse. “Instead of vampires.”

“It’s what we are. And once your decision is made, perhaps I can tell you

why. But not now.” He pauses. “Have you? Made your decision?”

Sighing softly, I twirl the end of my ponytail around my fingers as it rests over my shoulder. “Yeah,” I say at last, being truthful to myself and to him. “Yeah, I have. I don’t need any more time. I want to remember this. I don’t know why. I know a sane person would turn around and run, but something’s anchoring me here. I’m curious. But it’s more than that too. It’s Cezar and Vera. It’s knowing people I care about must’ve known about you. And I trust them. They wouldn’t send me here as a sacrifice. They’re good people. I want to remember, and start my job at the Mannock, and see where all this leads.”

Cillian looks perplexed, like he didn’t expect that answer. “But, that’s—that’s madness. Surely you must recognize that. The danger, the—”

“Cillian, *look at me*,” I interject, motioning to myself then gesture all around. “Look at my house.”

He falls silent.

I surge forward. “Do you see friends, family, anywhere? The friends I had, I left in California. My parents are gone. I had an aunt and an uncle once, but they’re dead too. We call it the bad McCready luck. I have no idea where my cousins are, no reason to turn back to the world I’ve left behind. And if this new world has people who might care about me? *Actually* care? And who’ll let me care for them too? I want to give that a chance. I’m tired of riding alone into the sunset like some sad cowboy movie. And for a bunch of undead people, you all seem a lot livelier than anything I’ve got going on.”

Cillian mutters in bemusement, “We aren’t undead.” He sighs. “I don’t agree, but I can understand your sentiment and respect it, at least.”

“Thank you,” I say in appreciation before adding, “Did you really bake me cookies?”

“I did, aye.” Cillian looks a bit sheepish as he rubs his neck. “Went with chocolate chip. Figured that was safest.”

“Luckily for you, it’s also my favorite.” I lower myself into a chair at the

kitchen table. “So how’s this going to work?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, my neighbor is an Irish vampire.” I laugh wryly. My *hot* neighbor, at that. But I’m not about to admit that to him anytime soon. I’m glad that despite getting off on the wrong foot, we might’ve finally found the right one. “I’m still a little iffy about the whole super ears thing. You hearing everything I do? Watch TV, sing in the shower?”

“Do you sing in the shower?” Cillian asks, arching a brow.

“Of course I do, and I’m damn good at it, I might add,” I reply haughtily, folding my arms with a smile.

“That was never in question,” Cillian replies. “I heard you sing last night. Your voice, it was . . .” He trails off.

Oh, boy. I offer him a few options to help him along. “Great? So-so? Nails on a chalkboard?”

“Divine,” Cillian finally says. “It was divine. Like I didn’t deserve to listen to it. To you.”

I freeze a little as my heart skips. I wasn’t expecting a response like *that*.

Cillian recovers himself, clearing his throat. “Apologies, that was not— what I meant to say was—”

“Thank you,” I cut in, and he relaxes somewhat, watching me with appreciation in his eyes, as though he’s glad I was gracious enough to save him from himself. “But the whole point was I’m in the privacy of my own house.”

“Worry not. I’m renovating the house, but I’m not always home. We can create a system, if you like. If you need me gone, just give me a shout and I’ll fuck off, so long as I’m not in the middle of working with contractors or repairs that need doing.”

“Like roommates with ties on the door,” I muse, grateful for the suggestion. “Okay. Sure. We can give that a try. What’re you going to do with the house, anyway? Once you get it the way you like it.”

Cillian hesitates. Sensing this conversation has already far outlasted what he intended, I rise from my chair. “Never mind, you don’t have to say. I’ll be looking forward to those cookies, but I should probably go. I was supposed to head to the Mannoek for my first shift this evening.”

“I know. I’m accompanying you there.”

“Oh boy. They making you do it?”

“No. I’m making me do it,” Cillian replies.

Doing a little double take, I wonder if I heard that right. *Is he serious?* “But what about your hunger?”

“I haven’t attacked you yet, have I?”

“No, I guess you haven’t.” I click my tongue, considering his words. A part of me isn’t sure I should trust him, but then again, I might be dead if it weren’t for him and Rory and Brody coming to my rescue last night. If he really wanted to hurt me, he could do it. Any time, any place. And there wouldn’t be anything I could do about it.

But here he is. In my kitchen. He’s apologized, he’s baking me cookies, and now he’s trying to be accommodating with my concerns.

He’s dangerous, yes, but I think I’m safer with him than with most.

“Sorry about that, by the way,” I say, getting my coat. “If I knew how to turn it off, I’d help if I could.”

“No apology necessary. I’m a big boy,” Cillian counters. “Not getting what I want is the story of my life.”

“Want to tell me about it on the walk there?”

“Not especially.”

“Suit yourself.”



“It’s for my niece,” Cillian says abruptly.

His words take me off guard. We’ve actually been walking in silence for

a while now. I'm carrying a paper bag of the fresh-baked cookies he made me, intent on snacking on them when I get a break during my first shift.

It's been a little awkward. It's not like silence makes me miserable, but cemeteries are chattier than Cillian today on our way to the Mannock.

"What?"

"You asked what I'm going to do with the house once it's renovated. I'm doing it for my niece. Technically, my grand-niece." He clears his throat. "Back in Dublin. She's got two wee lads, husband died of cancer not long ago. I've written to her, letting her know when the house is ready, she and her children are welcome to stay and start their lives anew here, once the immigration papers are in order."

"She knows who you are?" I ask in surprise. "She isn't shocked you're so young?" I've still been wondering how old Cillian really is myself. It's been an effort not to ask my million questions at once.

"We've never met, no. No doubt she thinks I'm an old man."

"She's in for a surprise, then."

"I don't plan on sticking around long enough for her to find out." Cillian shakes his head. "Our Brotherhood is no place for children. It's dangerous. I wouldn't want to put her little ones at risk."

As though I need another reason to be intrigued by this man. Just yesterday I was about ready to give him hell for his intrusion in Leigh's office, but this other side to him is throwing me for a loop. The Darragh house was always a spooky background in my childhood as I played outside with my friends, darting around it and chasing one another at sunset, imagining ghosts and goblins and monsters inside.

Little did I know monsters are real.

Except this man isn't quite what I'd expect one to be. What monster writes to his niece in another country and offers her a home, much less one he's never met? I know of parents who wouldn't do half as much for their own children.

Dammit. I didn't think I'd come out of all this actually *liking* Cillian Darragh. As I try to think of something else, giant black birds fly over our heads, and I instinctively put my hand over my winter hat. The Mannock is just around the corner.

"Crows everywhere I go. Seriously."

Cillian's smile is cryptic. "That's because they aren't really crows." He points to various birds mid-flight or some hopping around on rooftops. "One of the first things we learn how to do is turn into one of them. Easy to get around Boston that way. Or anywhere, really."

"Wait. Are you serious?" I stop in my tracks. "You change into—"

"Ravens. Or crows. I've even known someone who could turn into a magpie." Cillian shrugs. "I'm not sure how it's determined what you can change into, a crow or a raven or something else. But it's always a black bird, larger than the ones you normally see."

I think of the Dill Pickle Club and Cezar's watch shop and the crows I would see outside. I'm stunned. Were they vampires, all of them? No, I don't think vampiric crows would go around eating trash and scraps on the ground.

But that brings about another question I can't shake.

Cezar and Vera—are they vampires too? If not vampires, they must know of the Brotherhood. They sent me to the Mannock.

I having to remind myself I have somewhere to be. I jog a few steps to catch up to Cillian. "Not bats?" I ask.

"No," Cillian answers matter-of-factly, as though we're discussing the weather or something mundane. "Bats are Italian. Sometimes Greek. You start seeing bats in Boston, big white or gray ones, that's when you need to worry."

"Bats . . . are Italian?" Now I'm really confused.

"Trust me, it'll make sense with time." He walks me to the porch, where Michael Kelly enjoys a cigar on a snowy chair he must've dusted off.

"There you are!" he says with delight, rising to his feet. "You look

determined to take on your day. Make up your mind already, I trust?”

“I have, yes.” I swallow, trying to stand a little taller in his presence. “I’d like to stay.”

“That’s a smart woman.” Michael nods at Cillian. “I’ll take her to Leigh. You’re off the hook.”

I blink, looking to Cillian. “Wait, what? Off the hook?”

Cillian shrugs. “Had to keep my eye on you. Make sure you didn’t cause trouble.”

“So you were babysitting me?” I huff.

Cillian only smirks. “Can’t disobey orders from the High King.”

“Oi, shut your gob. You know I hate that title,” Michael grumbles and opens the tavern door for me. “Don’t be cross. Had to make sure you had a good head on your shoulders and weren’t going to walk about the city forecasting doom.”

I suppose that’s fair, but to be watched like an untrustworthy child still stings. Wasn’t I the one who was attacked? Then again, if I were a leader of a secret order of vampires, wouldn’t I do the same thing? God, so many questions, but beneath all of them . . .

It’s hard to believe, but a part of me is actually excited. *Excited*. After years of trying to break into the music industry, of trying to be part of something bigger than myself, I’ve finally been given the opportunity to be part of something fantastic.

A bunch of mythological bloodsuckers gave me this shot. I won’t be famous. But holding on to a secret this big, being able to sing, be appreciated? This is just as good, if not better.

“Are you really the High King? Of all vampires?” I ask Michael curiously. I never imagined it. When I saw him last night standing beside Leigh, I figured he was the bar owner, the one my parents referred to when they talked about the Mannock. A good man, is what Dad used to say. He wears what you’d expect any man to wear these days, especially in a cold

December like this one—a sweater up to his neck and a worn pair of jeans. He's almost unassuming, but I have a feeling that like Cillian, there's strength in those limbs no one could anticipate. They appear to be the same height, with Cillian maybe just slightly taller.

He grimaces. "Aye, that would be me. Though I don't like it one bit. Mickey does me just fine, if you please." He turns his attention to Cillian. "The boys haven't had any luck tracking down Murdock. He's more slippery than he seems."

"I'll find him." Cillian turns up his lapels and walks away.

"Um . . . bye, then?" I mutter under my breath, watching him leave. With how swiftly he moves, it's like he's on a warpath.

"And there he goes," Michael muses, glancing at me. "One-track mind, at times. Cillian can be an abrasive sort, but don't let it fool you. He cares more than he lets on. He didn't give you any trouble, did he?"

"None at all. And I'm starting to get that feeling," I admit. The moment I step inside, I nearly run into Sinéad.

"You're here," she says, hope flickering in her eyes. "Does that mean you've decided to stick it out?"

"I have," I answer tentatively. "Yes."

Sinéad offers a relieved, yet conservative smile. "I'm glad." She hands me a short waitressing apron that I tie around my waist. "Okay. Let me show you around. We don't open for a couple hours yet. Plenty of time to catch you up on how we do things here."

Those two hours fly by. I'm fairly familiar with how restaurants run and how to wait tables, and I'm glad Sinéad doesn't insult my intelligence by trying to coach me on either of those things. When Leigh joins us, she announces I'll be given the entire *human* section, where they normally seat mortal patrons who wander in to enjoy themselves, not knowing just how dangerous the rest of the tavern is beneath the surface.

"It's important you always double check the note on the tray before you

take it,” Sinéad tells me seriously. “We mix blood into drinks for our brothers and sisters. If a human takes a sip of blood-liquor, the jig is up, and we’ve a whole mess on our hands.”

“Understood,” I say, committing that to memory fiercely. “Don’t mix up the drinks. Got it.”

“If ever you aren’t sure, ask me,” Leigh says. “I look after day-to-day operations and the restaurant and bar portions of the Mannock. Frees up time for my husband to look out for bigger problems.”

“How do you do it?” I ask Leigh. “Serve both humans and . . . well, people like yourself? Aren’t you worried something will happen, like what happened to me?”

“New members of our Brotherhood feel safest around others like themselves. With Michael and the others watching, they wouldn’t dare step a toe out of place or give in to the hunger. Plus, we make sure to keep plenty of blood on hand. The better fed they are, the less likely they’re going to act out of turn.” Leigh smiles apologetically. “I really am sorry. About what happened last night. I should’ve been more watchful or had one of the boys walk you home.”

“It’s okay. You couldn’t have known.” I turn when the members of Brigid’s Boys walk through the doors, carrying their instruments with them. Rory brings up the rear, locking the doors behind him.

“I think that’s enough work for now,” Leigh muses, smiling at me like she knows something. “Come with me, Sarah.”

Weaving around tables and chairs, she brings me directly to the stage, where Brigid’s Boys are setting up. “There’s someone I’d like you to officially meet,” she says.

Rory looks almost nervous, glancing between Leigh and myself.

“But I met them last night, remember?” I offer, wondering if she’s forgotten, unsure of what else this could be.

“That’s not what she’s up to, I’m afraid,” Rory says, straightening

slightly.

“It’s not right to hide it from her,” Leigh says as she steps away. “And I know you’ve been dying to tell her anyway. I’ll be in the office. Have fun.”

I’m left mystified. Dying to tell me what? Everything from the night before is a blur to me, when I was fighting to stay conscious. I do vaguely remember Rory holding me, except—was it Rory? I was so out of it, I thought for a moment I was with my dad. I remember hearing the word “vampire” and . . .

I turn to face him, my world slowing as I study the lines of his face, the ice blue eyes. The memory hits me as Rory hesitates, then extends his hand to me.

“Rory?”

“Aye.” Rory nods, speaking slowly and carefully. “Rory McCready.”

“McCready?” My words come out in a jumble. “But that’s—not—that’s one hell of a coincidence—”

“I think you know it’s not a coincidence,” Rory rumbles, his voice a deep gravel. “There’s a resemblance I know you’ve sensed in me. Besides, how many McCreadys have you met off the street?”

“None,” I admit. “Not once.”

“Not the most common of Irish names, is it?” Rory muses, rubbing his dark, peppered beard. “I’m sorry, Sarah. I wasn’t sure when I was going to tell you, if I was at all. Such an odd thing, standing in front of your great-grandchild, trying to tell them what you are, how you’re still alive.”

Robbed of any coherent thought, I stand there, staring at him. It’s unmistakable. Those bright eyes, the same crow’s feet at the corners, similar hair, even the same nose. I don’t know how I didn’t see it before, how alike he is to my father, except that such a possibility was never on my radar, so I wasn’t looking for it.

“You’re alive,” I say in astonishment. “And you’re one of them—same as Cillian and Leigh and all of them. Of course, you were there last night, I—”

“So I am.” Rory nods. “Was one of the first Mickey and Cillian recruited when they secured a foothold here in Boston.”

The room is suddenly uneven. “I think I need to sit down.”

“Don’t faint, now, I’d never forgive myself.” Rory moves instantly, pulling out a nearby chair and gently guiding me to it. “There you are, love. Worry not your pretty head,” he says quietly. “I’ll get you some water.”

I’m staring at the table in shock, trying to process this. My great-grandfather is alive. Not just alive—immortal. He returns to me with water and ice poured in a tall beer mug, setting a pitcher of it in the table center. He brings a chair out and sets it down opposite me and sits. “I know you’ve probably got more questions than an old boy like me can count.”

After guzzling down some water, I wipe my mouth on my sleeve and set my mug down. “Something like that.” Not wanting to be a nuisance, I try to rally my wits. “But how is this possible? I’ve heard your story a thousand times, when I was little, from my dad and my grandma. You died on the—”

“*Titanic*,” he finishes for me. “In a way, I did. Took the Oath with some of my last breaths of air as the ship sank.”

“That’s awful.” I peer at him quizzically. “What is it, the Oath you took? Are you saying that’s what changed you? How did you get out if the ship was sinking?” The more I talk, the faster my speech becomes, and it’s clear Rory is doing his best to keep up with my train of thought.

“It’s a secret, sacred thing,” Rory says, holding up his hand. “Slow down, love.” He barks a jolly laugh. “It’s a bargain made. It doesn’t always work, you know, or so I’m told. Honestly it’s still a miracle to me that I managed to escape it and make my way to the surface. It’s all a blur to me now. It’s actually ironic, if you think about it, as I had a hand in building the damned thing.”

His laugh is infectious, just like my dad’s.

“I’ve been here in Boston ever since I first landed on American shores,” he continues. “Watched my family immigrate and settle here.”

“But why didn’t you show yourself to them?”

“And tell them what, exactly?” He cocks a brow at me, his voice teasing. “That dear ol’ Da has a taste for blood? No, love. With my choice came sacrifices. They were well cared for, mind you, I made sure of that, but I had to do so from a distance.”

The question bursts out of me before I’ve even had a chance to think it through. “Did you know it was me when I came up to you? When I sang? Did you know my parents?”

“I did, yes.” The smile fades from Rory’s face and is replaced with something somber. He clasps his hands and leans forward. “I didn’t know them the way I might’ve liked to,” he answers. “But I knew who they were, when they’d come in, that they were my blood, and they were happy. When your father married your mother and you were born, well, I couldn’t keep away then. I saw them bring you home, perched in your tree by your front door. I’ve always made it a habit to check up on new arrivals of McCreadys in that way. You were such a wee girl. Thought you might fit in my hand if I held you.”

I smile bittersweetly and carefully continue. I need to know. “And . . . when they died?”

“Didn’t feel right watching their funeral as a bird, hiding on a branch,” he answers. “I attended in person, the way you see me now, though I made certain to keep my distance from you.”

That brings tears to my eyes.

“Don’t cry, sweet child,” he soothes, shifting awkwardly in his chair as he offers his hands. “God knows, I never know what to do when a lady cries.”

“I don’t mean to. It’s just—” The words come out strangled. “I thought I’d lost everything when I lost them. And now it turns out I didn’t. So on top of everything else—it’s a lot. But in the best way. Better than I ever imagined it could be.”

When I take his hands and gently squeeze, I pleasantly discover that he’s

warm, like Cillian was when he carried me. But warmer still in a different way. There's something affectionate and familial in his eyes when he looks at me. I find myself wishing I could've known him earlier, but I can't blame him for keeping his distance. It's not like he could just walk up to my front door and say, "Hi honey, I'm your vampiric great-grandpa."

Rory fetches a handkerchief from his front vest and offers it to me. It's even embroidered with his initials. "Well, dry those pretty eyes of yours. Rest assured, no harm'll ever come to you again. Not under my watch. I couldn't stomach the thought."

"I believe you." I accept the handkerchief and dab my eyes with it. "Now I wish it wasn't my first day. There's so much about you I want to know, and —"

"Now, now." He chuckles. "There's plenty of time for that. The rest of your life, in fact."

"Do vampires eat?" I ask softly. "I could make you dinner."

"You've gotten yourself a bit turned around, haven't you?" He scoffs. "You're my great-granddaughter. It's my responsibility to take care of, feed, and otherwise spoil you. And I plan to do just that. You can come to my place. I have a wee flat that isn't far from Castle Island. Granted, it's nothing fancy. Fancy's not my style, but even an old dog like me needs a place to hang his hat. And then I'm always here, you know. Most nights. Playing with the lads."

"I don't need fancy. Just being able to see you and talk to you and hear and learn everything about you and what came before and after—" I rub my eyes, laughing a little. "You're going to get tired of me and my questions really fast."

Rory leans forward, grinning as he whispers to me, "Tired of you, my sweet child? Never."

My heart is so full. I have distant family here in America and back in Ireland, but when my parents died, I felt alone, cut off from what mattered.

Now I have a lifeline, not only to my parents but to my origins, the very man who's partially responsible for me even being alive today. He's here. Sitting right in front of me.

"And you won't . . . go anywhere?"

"I'm assuming you mean death," Rory says with a twinkle in those eyes that have seen so much. "In which case, you ought to know—it'll take a lot more than anything you're imagining to bring down a big fellow like me." He pats his protruding stomach. "Made of strong stuff, I am. One of Our Lady's tougher soldiers, I don't mind saying so myself."

"Our Lady?" I ask curiously. "You mean, like, the Virgin Mary?"

"Ah." Rory shakes his head. "No. But that's a story best left for another time, I think." He gestures past me. "Sinéad's looking for you. Best be off now. I'm sure we'll get a chance to talk later in the night. I hope you'll sing again. And you'll stop by this weekend, aye?"

"Yes. I will," I say quickly, rising to my feet and beaming. "You can count on it."



The first half of the week flies by. Working at Mannock Tavern is nothing like any other job I've had, and not only because most of their patrons are local creatures of the night. There's no schedule. I just show up, and Leigh lets me work. Not only that, I make a killing in tips. I'm not rich by any stretch of the imagination, but I'll be able to afford my utility bills and groceries beyond instant noodles and sad PB&Js.

The more I work, the more familiar the faces at the Mannock are too. Oscar, Desmond, Fionn, and even Brody O'Neill are all there, all night, every night. Brody even builds up the courage to come speak to me on Wednesday night.

"Sorry for giving you a fright that night," he says, almost bashfully. "I

didn't mean you any harm, I promise. You startled me, is all, and you smelled so good, I—”

“It's forgotten,” I insist, much to his relief. “And I appreciate what you did when I was attacked. Coming to my rescue like that.”

Brody's tawny cheeks deepen with blush. He scuffs the floor with his shoe. “Well, I—it was nothing. Only doing what anyone decent would do.”

“Still, thank you. Is it okay if I call you Brody?”

“Yes, ma'am,” he says eagerly.

“Sarah,” I correct. “I gotta get back to my tables. We'll talk sometime soon, okay?”

He returns to the bar next to Fionn, a tall tree of a man with powerful arms that look like they could crush me with a single flex. Though he and Brody don't touch, occasionally when I glance their way, I sense a kind of magnetic pull between them both. Another time when I pass them with my tray piled with fresh food, I see Fionn's fingers brush subtly over Brody's hand before pulling away.

Now *that's* something I didn't expect, but I'm happy to see.

I keep flipping between being in the zone, working and earning my keep, and reminding myself just how incredible my surroundings are. I should be freaking out, all day, every day. I'm a waitress at what's essentially an Irish vampire saloon—it shouldn't feel real at all, yet I keep showing up every night that week, happy to make money without having to beg for auditions or skip meals.

And the food here—oh my god. The chefs in the back are fantastic. Even though it's an Irish pub, Irish food isn't always what's served, and when it is, it's usually on special. It isn't Michael's favorite, from what Leigh says. But other hearty pub foods, like beef stew, soda bread and fondue, nachos, and even the more British fish and chips are always on the menu.

Between being able to sample a little bit of everything and getting a free meal every shift I work, I'm going to need to be careful, or they'll have to

roll me out of here.

Cillian Darragh is often among the faces I see at the tavern. He disappears sometimes, and I don't see any sign of him for hours. When he returns, he always goes to Michael, and he always looks so dour.

But he frequently pauses to scan the tavern and find me. When our eyes meet, his serious expression softens for the briefest moment. I'm not sure if he's satisfied I haven't tried to run from this place, if he's content to know I'm here and safe, or if there's something else.

Even though I've been accepted in this strange and secret world, not everything is so plain to me. For one, nobody has any inclination to tell me how exactly they changed into vampires in the first place. I know it's not from a bite, but from an oath, but I don't know what the oath is, what it means. Oath to whom? Rory mentioned "Our Lady," but nobody seems keen on sharing who that is.

All I've garnered from everything I've overheard and seen is that whoever "she" is, she probably isn't a Catholic saint.

"So, what's the deal with Cillian?" I ask as I clean up with Sinéad after closing time on Wednesday. "What's his story?"

"Ha, how long do you have?" Sinéad answers wryly as she dries her hands with a shake of her head.

She and I have been working together a lot, and it didn't take long for us to hit it off at all. I can say with certainty that nobody has a handle on the tavern quite like she does, except maybe Michael. She's been kind and patient with me. She doesn't seem to struggle with her thirst at all, and like me she enjoys a good chat, but not so much that it steers into mindless or harmful gossip. All the regulars in the tavern know her by name, and they're always on their best behavior around her, polite and respectful. Sinéad herself never seems giddy or bubbly or silly, like one might expect a young woman in her early twenties to be. I think she's in her twenties, anyway. I wonder when she turned, but I don't feel comfortable enough to ask her quite yet.

“There’s a reason he’s the way he is, but that’s really all I can say,” Sinéad says. “His stories aren’t mine to share.”

“You seem to really care about him.” I’ve seen Sinéad bring Cillian food and drink without him even placing an order. She must know him incredibly well. I’ve caught myself wondering more than once if they’re involved in some way, and that always unsettled my stomach until I considered it thoroughly.

I don’t think that’s it. I’ve never seen them embrace, or touch each other’s hands with yearning, like I’ve caught Fionn and Brody doing from time to time. When they look at each other, there’s no intense staring, no underlying romantic affection like one might expect from lovers. Even when people are discreet, there are certainly tells, and waitressing has allowed me to perfect my people-watching skills.

It’s like Sinéad can read my thoughts, and she scrunches up her nose. “Care, yes, but nothing beyond that. He’s like a brother to me. And he can piss me off like one too.”

I can’t deny I’m a little relieved. I can definitely picture Cillian getting scolded by Sinéad like she’s chastised a few vampiric patrons when they imbibe too much and get a bit rambunctious. “Like when he wanted my memory erased?”

“Aye, that comes to mind.”

“I appreciate you speaking out for me.”

“It was nothing.” Sinéad gives me a faint smile. “Leigh spoke up for you too, after all, it wasn’t just me. We women have to stick up for each other.”

Busying myself with closing, I let my mind stray to the next few days. I check the watch on my wrist, something I’ve worn ever since Cezar gifted it to me. It’s just after three a.m., and I have to remind myself it’s not Wednesday anymore but Thursday morning. I intend to work tomorrow night—the tips are always better on Fridays. Saturday, I’m spending the day with Rory. I’ve been looking forward to it. I love hearing him sing with Brigid’s

Boys, and he smiles and winks at me sometimes while he performs. Occasionally, he pulls me up to sing with them. I'm still working to commit many of the songs to memory.

Contemplating just how much has happened since I returned to Boston, I remind myself to call Peter Blackwood soon. I've been busy immersing myself into this new world. Peter's human, and I won't be able to tell him anything about Cillian or the Morrigan Brotherhood, but I'm sure we'll hang out just fine without talk of vampires. Maybe I can convince him to have lunch with me today before I work. If not, I could always schedule something with him next week.

"I think I'll head home," I call to Michael as he comes out of the office, looking over the bar.

"I'll send one of the lads with you," Michael replies.

I'm not going to argue that, not after the attack. And this time, apparently, I get a two-for-one deal—Fionn Bradigan and Brody O'Neill both volunteer to drop me off, as it's on the way to their apartment.

I sit in the back of their Corolla, happy to be warm and toasty rather than walking in the December cold. "Thank you for doing this. I wasn't looking forward to hoofing it home. This is much better."

"It's not a problem," Fionn grunts from behind the wheel. "Not my first time defending a lady fair."

"A lady fair." I laugh. "Been called a lot of things, but not that."

"Don't mind him. He's just showing off, like." The affection in Brody's voice is unmistakable to me. "Happy to defend you from the freezing cold."

"Are you in the in the habit of guarding fair ladies for the Brotherhood?" I ask.

"Had to guard Leigh back in the day," Fionn answers, glancing in the rearview mirror. "And you're far easier than she was."

"I'll take that as a compliment," I muse.

"Good," Fionn answers, giving Brody a wink. "It is."

“Surprised you don’t have somebody to drive you home every night, though, Sarah,” Brody says mildly, looking over his shoulder as he talks to me.

“Oh? Why’s that?”

“It’s just—” He blushes. “You’re very pretty.”

My cheeks heat in embarrassment at the compliment. “You’re really sweet, thank you.”

I’m envious of the energy moving between them. It’s so natural. Like they were meant to be.

My mind flits to Cillian. My thoughts stray to him so often in quieter moments, and when I measure just how much it’s happened recently, I do my best to shut it down. It doesn’t matter how attractive or strong he is. The man has to be off limits, right? He’s a vampire and one wrong move from drinking my veins dry.

My arrival home is uneventful, though I do turn on a light and head upstairs to wave to Brody and Fionn and let them know I’m safe. They wave back, and their Corolla glides away, out of sight.

“Ugh, I want a boyfriend,” I whisper, gazing out my window long after they’re gone. Sighing heavily, I fall face-first into my bed and groan. It’s never been a priority of mine but seeing how cute the boys were in the car tonight, I’m reminded of just how single I am. Cillian comes to mind again, and this time, instead of fighting it or denying it, I sleepily let his vision remain, recounting all the times we exchanged a look or a nod. It’s been quiet at the Darragh house for the past few days, so he hasn’t been home. That’s fine by me. I can belt out songs in the shower.

I’m beginning to doze when I hear a knock on my door.

“The hell?” I grumble, forcing myself back up onto my aching feet and ambling down my stairs. I check the peephole first and blink in surprise, then pull open the door. “Cillian? What’s the matter?”

Cillian looks troubled. He takes one look at me and opens his mouth but

doesn't say a damn thing. Instead, he paces back and forth on my porch like an agitated cat.

Bewildered, I offer, "Do you . . . want to come in?"

"No!" he says a little too heatedly before he curbs his tone into one tinged with apology. "Sorry. No. That's not why I—" His exhale is one of exasperation, nearly a growl. "I'm not—I haven't done this in a very long time, you understand."

"Okay." I cross my arms. "Done what? Talked to someone at their front door?"

"No. That isn't what I mean."

"Well, help me out here. Because I have no idea what you're talking about."

Cillian paces a little more before he spits the words out, almost like he's angry at them. "I haven't made much of an effort to know anyone. In a normal sense. Outside of the Brotherhood. Much less a woman." After a moment, his taut shoulders slowly wind down. "Not since I lost someone very dear to me."

It doesn't take a detective to understand who he means. "Your wife?" I ask tentatively.

My guess seems to calm him somewhat. "It's been near sixty years. I don't know how to act *normal*, do things unrelated to vampirism and war. But I know I should try."

He swallows and locks eyes with me as the truth of it finally escapes his lips. "And I'd like to try. With you."

CHAPTER 6

Healing Wounds



Cillian

Michael is the poetic one. The one who always had a way with words and girls while we were growing up. He could charm his way out of a firing squad, make a lady blush in a matter of moments. He was always the one swarmed with feminine attention while I stood on the sidelines, wondering in frustration how the hell he managed it.

Me? It's amazing I can string two sentences together in front of a beautiful woman, standing here in front of Sarah on her porch like a fool. All the while struggling to harness that same hunger. In her presence, I'm little more than a drunkard, and she's the prettiest damned glass of wine I've ever seen.

"Sorry, I'm not sure I understand," Sarah says hesitantly.

"Oh, I think you do," I reply in exasperation as I bite back my need to drink from her luscious pale neck. That temptation is always there, beneath the surface, tantalizing me with a thousand justifications.

It would be different than Murdock. The bastard is destructive, murderous. But you could make it feel good. Use your venom. Sink your

fangs into her flesh and your cock into her sweet cunt. Make her scream your name.

And for the thousandth time, I restrain that beast inside me. *No.*

“I have an inkling, but I’d rather not assume. You’re the one who knocked on my door at an ungodly hour,” Sarah replies, and she’s got me there. “What does that even mean? You want lessons from me on how to be normal? How To Talk To People 101?”

“Dammit, Sarah, I want to call upon you,” I blurt.

“*Call upon me?* Cillian, are you asking me out on a date?”

I flex my fingers, readying myself for rejection. “Yes.” Everything is clearer now that it’s out in the open, and I drive on. “I must be honest. It’s not only the thirst that has made this so difficult for me. It’s—you’re—I’ve been stricken by you from the first moment.”

Sarah doesn’t appear disgusted by my words. If anything, she’s almost curious about me. Amused at my inability to talk smoothly and succinctly without becoming agitated. Her heartbeat quickens at the suggestion—music to my ears.

“You want to take me to dinner, but you’re a vampire, so . . . I’m the dinner.” A smile tugs at the corner of her mouth. “Sound right?”

Exasperated, I tilt my head back. “This isn’t a joke to me, Sarah.” I push past her words and how they tantalize the inner creature lurking beneath my skin because, oh, how he’d love to feast between her legs. I try not to think about her trembling thighs or the pleased cries I’d love to revel in.

“Oh yeah?” She leans against the door frame. “Prove it.”

Her ease only flusters me. Standing still is nearly impossible. “And how will I prove it?” I ask. “Is my request alone not enough? Shall I tell you how I can’t focus on barely anything in your presence? How when I hear you sing at the tavern, nothing else matters?”

Sarah’s eyes slowly widen, and I doubt the sudden pink in her cheeks is from the winter chill. That beautiful smile of hers keeps growing. “Take it

easy, Shakespeare, I was playing around. Thought it might calm you down. Talking to vampires is still pretty new to me.”

Frowning, I look away, inwardly resentful of my own emotions. I could be temperamental when I was human long ago, but ever since I’ve been a vampire, they’ve only amplified to a nearly unbearable degree. “Apologies. I—this is new to me too, in a way. I’m rusty.”

“I can tell, but you can rest easy. It’s not like I go on dates a lot.” Sarah cants her head, and I count the freckles on her cheeks, wondering how many constellations I might trace with them. I do my best to shake myself out of such fantasies. But Sarah makes me feel young and foolish, where recently I’ve only felt irrelevant and useless. “So is this your thirst talking, or you?”

It’s a question I don’t blame her for asking. “No. I’m asking you because you’re fearless. Because despite my protests and Rory’s, you seem to be here to stay. And you didn’t tolerate . . .” I try to search for the word.

“You being an ass?” Sarah volunteers.

“I was going to say my poor behavior.”

“That works too.” She pulls her thick dark hair to the side. “Since I’m not just a big glass of vampire lemonade to you, and because your cookies are little slices of heaven—my answer is yes.”

Confounded, I stand there with my jaw slack. “Yes?”

“Yes.” Sarah smiles, stepping back inside. “Think you could pick me up around five on Sunday? Gotta fit you in around my other date.”

An overwhelming wave of possession, like a tsunami crashing upon an unsuspecting shore, nearly causes the beast to come out full force. “Other date?” I manage to ask calmly without clenching my teeth, but my fangs are out. I must calm myself.

She isn’t mine.

Not yet.

“Yes. With Rory. Grandfather-granddaughter bonding time.” She rests her hand on her hip, flashing a shameless and unapologetic grin that lights

her up like a Christmas tree. “Should’ve seen your face, though.”

“Oh, good.” All the tension leaves my body, swept away in relief. “You think you’re right funny, don’t you? Teasing me.”

Laughing off the tension feels good, and Sarah does it with me. “I’m hilarious. You’ll find out soon enough.”

“That’s wonderful, though. I’m happy for you. That you’re able to connect with Rory. It’s a rare thing.”

“Thank you,” she answers. “So you’ll pick me up on Sunday?”

“Right. Sunday,” I agree, hardly believing my ears. Given this chance, I don’t intend to squander it—even if I’m not entirely sure what the hell I’m doing.

She watches me as I take a step off her porch. “Good night, Cillian.”

“Good night, Sarah.”



Sarah

When I wake up close to noon on Thursday, the first thing I do is amble downstairs to make myself coffee, because mornings are the worst things ever invented by mankind. Squinting and grumbling at the clock, I’m not myself until I have a cup of joe and a shower. Once I’m dressed and resemble a human being, I go into the kitchen and pick up the phone. It’s been a few days, and there’s a call I’ve been meaning to make.

After a few rings, Peter Blackwood answers. “Blackwood residence.”

So fancy. I get nervous because there’s that posh, elegant accent again, and here I am, feeling like I’m barely civilized at nearly one p.m. “Peter, hi! It’s Sarah. From the plane? Wanted to see if you settled in okay.”

“Sarah! I’m well and settled, thank you. I was just thinking about you this

morning,” he answers, sounding quite pleased to hear from me. “What about you? Reacclimating yourself to the Boston weather?”

“It’s taking me some time to get used to New England winters again,” I admit. “But I’ll be fine. I know this is short notice, but I thought I’d check and see if you wanted to grab lunch.”

“That sounds splendid. Have you a car? There’s this charming little Italian place in North End. Sergio’s?” he suggests. “We can meet, or I can pick you up around two o’clock.”

“If you don’t mind driving. I haven’t figured out my car situation yet,” I admit. “And two sounds great. See you then.” After hanging up, I pause, remembering something. Then I loudly call, “Okay, Cillian, I’m going upstairs to the bedroom. If you can hear me, go to your window, the one across from mine.”

I bound upstairs and head into the bedroom, going right for the window and opening the curtains. There he is, and he slowly opens his window. I do the same, sighing softly. “I forgot about the tie-on-the-door system.”

“It’s rather new to me as well. Worry not,” Cillian reassures me, resting his elbows on the windowsill. I mirror him. “If it’s any consolation, I started humming. Very loudly. And out of key.”

I can’t help but laugh. “Yeah? What did you hum?”

“An Irish rebel song, of course,” he replies. “The only proper response when you hear an Englishman.”

“His name is Peter, and he’s very nice,” I admonish, smirking. I think I see the slightest glint of jealousy in his eyes, but rather than let it bother me, I address it head on. “You’re not going to be one of those guys who stomps around saying *you’re not allowed to have male friends*, are you?”

“Women are outnumbered in the Brotherhood by quite a bit,” Cillian replies. “That would be silly, if not impossible.” He pauses, then adds, “So what does he do, this friend of yours?”

“He’s a businessman of some sort. I think. Dresses like one. You know,

he never told me precisely.” I ruffle my hair, shivering as a cold draft crawls in from the window. “I’ll find out, then I’ll tell you all about him tonight, if you like. Will I see you at the Mannock?”

“You will, but not until later,” Cillian says. His gaze is soft and threatens to capture me. Suddenly I’m wishing I’d moved our date up. “I’m still looking for Danny Murdock.”

“He’s still missing?” I ask, surprised. “I thought you boys could see and hear everything. Maybe he’s left town.”

“You may be right, but still. He needs to answer for what he’s done.”

“Looking to bust some kneecaps?”

“What kind of suitor would I be if I didn’t?” he replies. “Call the Mannock if you run into any trouble. Someone will pick up.”

Part of me wonders if that someone will be him. “Will do. See you tomorrow.” I close my window and lock it shut, shivering as I put on socks and a fluffy sweater. Now that I’m alone, I murmur to myself as I layer up for warmth, smiling giddily, “I have a *suitor*.” Then I remember Cillian can likely still hear me and scoff to myself. “Oh, goddammit, this is hard.”



Lunch with Peter goes by too quickly. He regales me with stories of some of his favorite hunts across the world. I’m envious of how far he’s traveled. He’s hunted in Ireland, Scotland, Britain, Wales, France, Germany, the Baltics, and much of Eastern Europe. I’m pleased when he tells me that he primarily hunts deer and the like and avoids exotic game. I don’t like the idea of Peter standing over an elephant or a lion. I’ve a soft spot for animals of all kinds, and clearly he does too, for he talks about hunting with great respect, rather than as a luxury sport or something to be done in excess, or an enjoyment of killing for the sake of it.

“Next season,” he tells me, “you’ll come and join me, perhaps? It’s not a

pretty business, but if you manage to get a buck or a decent-sized doe in your sights, you'll have plenty of good lean meat in your freezer to last you a long while. I'm a believer in not wasting any part of an animal."

"We'll see." I chuckle, cutting into my risotto. "I'm not a morning person."

I'm careful not to talk about Cillian or the Morrigan Brotherhood. I'm not ready yet. I don't trust myself not to blurt something out without meaning to, but when he asks about my job, I mention Mannoek Tavern.

"That's the little Irish pub on Fernhill, isn't it?" Peter muses. "I've never been there. Think they'd take one look at me and toss me out?"

"They're not that bad," I say with a laugh. "I promise. You'd be welcomed. You can always stop by, and I'll make sure you're treated well."

"I'm not that much of a drinker," Peter says. "But I'll see about it."

After lunch, Peter offers to drive me to the tavern for my shift, which I'm all too grateful for in this cold. As we glide through town, it occurs to me once more that aside from his stories about hunting, fishing, and the odd tale of people-watching through his travels, he only wanted to hear about me. I'm pretty sure I yammered on for ten minutes about poinsettias and how I've been meaning to dress up my house for the holiday, among other things, serious and mundane. It hardly seems fair. I did manage to finally get out of him that he has two sisters back in England, but that was all. Everything else, he said, was horridly boring, and he'd much rather live vicariously through his friends.

I'm curious if Cillian will be as hesitant to talk about himself on our date.

I invite Peter in, but he shakes his head. "I'd be a horrible buzzkill for a place like this," he says.

Is he really that uncomfortable around Irish folks? I know there's turmoil overseas, but Michael and Leigh have a very strict no-eating-people policy, according to Sinéad, and I can't see either of them allowing anyone to treat a potential customer poorly.

“Are you sure?” I ask. “It’s fun. I’ll probably sing tonight.”

“You’ll have to perform for me at another venue,” Peter says. “Don’t fret. I’m sure it’s a wonderful place. I simply have some work to do, burn the midnight oil.”

“Okay,” I say, not about to pressure the man and getting out of the car as he idles in front of the entrance. “Thanks for the ride. Call me some time.”

My first Friday night at the Mannock is more fun than I can ever recall having at a dance club or any other bar ever, and certainly not somewhere I worked. By late evening, after the dinner rush, Brigid’s Boys is in full swing. I’m pulled onto the stage, and I sing a few of the songs I know, having heard them played before. Drunk patrons sing long and loud with us, raising their cups. With Rory nearby, encouraging me, I feel seen and appreciated, like I’m just another musician. And that’s all I’ve ever wanted.



“This is it,” Rory says the next day as he unlocks the front door of his flat with a key and swings the door open for me. “This is home. Like I said, nothing fancy, but gives me a place to hang my hat.”

Stepping through the threshold, I have no idea what he’s talking about. This is by far the cutest apartment I’ve ever seen in my entire life. There are pictures of ships on the walls, neatly hung in an organized fashion. He clearly dusts, sweeps, mops. There’s nothing flung where it shouldn’t be. It reminds me of my great-grandmother’s house, though my memories of her and the place she lived are a bit blurry and more color than detail.

The building itself is old, and the hard floors creak beneath my feet after I take off my shoes, but it’s incredibly tidy. There’s one bedroom off to the side, in which I can see a large bed dutifully made. The bathroom is there too, with a blue shower curtain and porcelain tub. The curtains on the windows are all cast open to let light in.

“It’s beautiful,” I exclaim. “I love it. How long have you lived here?”

“Oh.” Rory scratches his beard. “Since ’65, I think. I typically move on every twenty to thirty years or so. Keeping a lease beyond that starts looking suspicious, depending on the landlord.”

I follow when he guides me to the living room, where he has a single television that looks like it’s seen better days, a record player, dozens of vinyl records all neatly stacked on a rack, an acoustic guitar, and a light blue couch.

“Sit down. I’ll make you some tea.”

“Thank you,” I say, content to look around. I notice a framed photograph on a side table next to the sofa of Rory and Sinéad standing with a young man with curly auburn hair. Behind them are rows of trees bursting with orange fruit.

The man in the center has a smile on its face, but it’s not as bright. He almost looks a little sad. “Who’s this?” I ask, holding up the photo and peering at it a little closer.

Rory glances over at me as he runs some water. “Ah, that’s young Eamon Callaghan.”

“Is he part of the Brotherhood? I haven’t seen him around the Mannock.”

“Ah, that’s a long story,” Rory says. “Eamon’s a good lad. He just got into a bit of trouble. Vampires, you see. Our emotions hit us harder than most. And Eamon made some poor choices. He’s . . .” Rory searches for the word. “He’s cooling off, I suppose you could say, back in Ireland. At a monastery called St. Leonard.”

“Sounds like he means a lot to you,” I say, gently setting the picture back on the table.

“He does,” Rory agrees. “Hopefully you’ll meet him one day.”

My attention is quickly diverted when I spot a familiar vinyl cover. “You have Elvis records!” I gasp in delight, getting up when I spot them. “So many oldies but goodies. Let’s see, Nat King Cole . . . Louis Armstrong . . .”

“Oh, aye, I enjoy American jazz and rock and roll quite a bit,” Rory says

as he puts the kettle on and lights the stove beneath it. “That’s one of the wonderful things about never growing old. I’ll never lose my hearing, for one, and there’s no shortage of new music to listen to. In fact, there’s very little I don’t like. From Mozart to the Jackson Five.”

I didn’t need another reason to adore my great-grandfather, but now I have one, anyway. “You know, I’ve been thinking. What if Brigid’s Boys did a sort of . . . theme night?”

“Oh?” Rory comes to sit with me. “What do you mean?”

“Imagine if all of you played rock and roll from the fifties one night. You could all wear sunglasses and whatnot.”

Rory begins to laugh. “Oh, aye, the lads would get quite a kick out of that. I don’t see why not, but you’d better be up there singing with us in one of them glittery dresses.”

“I could do that easily. You have no idea how willing I am to embarrass myself at any given time if it’s music related.”

“I’m glad you inherited a love for music, and a talent for it too,” Rory says softly, gazing at me. “Sorry, I don’t mean to stare. But you look so much like your father. Your mother too, but—it’s hard to believe, sometimes.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“That someone so beautiful came from me,” he replies. “And my wife. And my line, and . . . the Oath makes you sacrifice everything you know. When you take it, you can never come back from it. But being able to see you, your father, and his father before him grow into fine young men and women, see what you do with your lives, how you change the world for the better, just a little bit at a time.” He dabs the corner of his eye with a finger. “God is good.”

“God is good,” I agree. “Though I should probably chat with Him some time, I haven’t been to Confession or Mass in ages.”

“God understands,” Rory chuckles, composing himself.

“Is it God?” I ask after a minute. “Who you take the Oath to? Did He

make you a vampire somehow?”

Rory’s nostalgic smile fades and he shakes his head. “No, Sarah,” he admits somberly. “I’m an unnatural sort. There’s nothing for it. It’s the choice I made. But it wasn’t the Good Lord made me this way.”

“Nobody wants to tell me anything,” I say, hopeful that maybe he’ll confide in me. “Will you?”

Rory hesitates, pondering my question. Then he rises and shuffles over to a nearby bookshelf in a corner, pulling out a dusty volume with a plain green leather cover and embossed gold letters. He opens it and flips through the pages before using a ribbon to mark the book, then brings it to me.

“When you get home, if you’re so inclined.” His voice is hushed, and he sets the book gently in my lap. “Have a peek. But I shan’t tell ya. It’s a magick thing you’re asking. And certain things—well, they hear you if you talk about them. So you must have a care.”

Rory sounds almost fearful when he speaks, so I don’t press, simply nodding. “Thank you.”

“Now, then,” he says pleasantly, getting up to take the whistling kettle off the stove. “I’m thinking you’re a steak-and-potato kind of girl, after my own heart.”

“Anything you set in front of me, I promise, I’ll put it away.”

“Now, that’s the kind of appetite I expect from a proper McCready.” Rory laughs. “Tonight, we’ll have a feast, and plenty left over for you to take home. It’s time you had some decent cooking. And if you’re still hungry after that, there’s an apple pie and ice cream with your name on it.”

I can’t stop smiling. I’m filled with such joy, I’m worried I might cry. I’m not alone anymore. I’ve got family. Someone I can see every day, get advice from, whose stories I can listen to. I can bask in the kind of care I’ve been sorely missing and give it back in return.

Rory’s love has built a legacy. One of kindness, compassion, and ferocity that passed down from his son to my dad. The easiness, the cheer, the fair

voice when he sings, it's all so similar.

I never want to be parted from it.



Cillian

It isn't difficult for me to keep myself busy until Sunday arrives. Repairs on my house take precedence after Michael tells me to give up on Murdock and allow him to come slinking back when he's ready. Easier said than done, but I know better to argue with Michael about it. I've no shortage of money, and I've already completely replaced most of the piping and electric wiring with something more up to date. The cracking around the windows has been fully repaired. After bettering the insulation, it isn't quite as hellishly cold as it used to be, and the heat also works, billowing up through several vents in the floors.

I haven't much in the way of furniture. My living room and bedroom are rather bare. I don't sleep, so I don't require a bed, and as I spend most evenings at the tavern, I'm only here to work on the endless projects I need to complete in order to get the house in working order.

My great-niece deserves a sturdy roof over her head, one that will give her peace instead of a constant migraine.

On Sunday morning, I'm halfway up a ladder doing what I can to pin down a stray gutter that's come apart due to a heavy snow the month before. Sarah's door opens and shuts. When I twist round to glance over, I see her wearing a long-sleeve red dress covered in a pink-and-green floral pattern beneath her coat with a purse clutched beneath her arm. She looks elegant.

She smiles and waves as she adjusts a hat on her head. "Morning, neighbor."

“Mornin’,” I answer, hopping off my ladder. “Where you off to?”

“Church.” She’s almost shy in her answer. “It’s been ages since I’ve gone. It was important to my mom, so I figured I’d give it a shot. Maybe shock a priest in confession.”

“Which church?” I ask.

“St. Winifred. It’s where my parents’ funeral was held, and when I asked Rory for a recommendation on a Catholic church to attend, that was the first one he mentioned. Figured I’d give it a look-see.”

“Ah.” I smirk. Those druid-priests at the cathedral best not get any ideas about Sarah, or I’ll have to have a wee chat. They keep to their own, mostly, but a few met their wives outside the convent, the current archdruid among them. “Harder to shock the priests there. I wouldn’t worry.”

“You know them personally?” she asks in surprise. “Sorry, I just never thought of vampires as being very—” She struggles to find a word. “Churchy.”

“We’re not. Well, I’m not. Not really.”

“Were you, though? A Catholic, I mean?”

“I was, aye. Almost all of the Brotherhood were Catholics, actually. Rory holds on to his religious roots with a bit more determination than the rest of us, but even if I wanted to continue attending Mass, I can’t,” I explain softly. Her breath forms in soft silvery wisps in front of her face. I shouldn’t keep her outside long. “It’s holy ground.”

“So you’ll blow up or burn to ashes?”

“Burn. Lots of burning. I’ve never stuck around long enough to see what happens.”

She *tsks* sympathetically. “Well, I’ll try to put in a good word for you with the Big Man upstairs, if you like.”

“No need. He and I aren’t exactly on speaking terms.”

“Because you’re a vampire?”

“Something like that,” I answer, ignoring a painful pulse in my chest.

“Well, I’ll still give it a shot. Couldn’t hurt things.”

While I doubt any prayers on my behalf will do my soul any good, her intention is endearing. “You’re right, I suppose it couldn’t,” I reply appreciatively, unable to tear my gaze from her. “Is that a new dress?”

She shifts on her feet. “Ha, no. I look silly, right? Like I just stepped out of the Great Depression or something. I don’t own anything that really screams ‘respectable church lady,’ so I pulled this out of my mom’s closet.”

Whatever she’s screaming, it’s something I like. “It suits you more than you think.”

She smiles. “Thanks. Kinda like this new neighborly leaf of yours, by the way. Any nicer, and you could be completely normal.”

My thoughts are anything but neighborly right now. Carnal fantasies lurk beneath the surface of my smile as I wonder what she’s wearing beneath that dress.

“Well, now you’ve changed my mind. I’ll have to be a right bastard for our date tonight.” I sigh. “Have a reputation to maintain. Gone and ruined it.”

She smirks and swats my shoulder in passing. “See you tonight?”

“Tonight.” I nod, and there’s a swing in her hips when she walks, almost like she knows I’m watching as she walks away.



Picking up Sarah was more nerve-racking than I thought it’d be. I might’ve made some knee-jerk decisions today in a half-brained attempt to simultaneously give me an alternative form of transportation and impress her at the same time.

Her jaw is practically on the floor. “Wait. You just . . . went out and bought a Maserati Biturbo?”

I open the passenger door for her. The Maserati is brand-new and squeaky clean, and while the sun fades into the winter night, the streetlights cast quite

a gleam on its red chrome surface.

“Too much?” I ask uncertainly as I turn to look at the car. “I told them I wanted the best, and this is what they gave me.” I rub my neck. “Honestly don’t know much about automobiles.”

“Automobiles,” she repeats in amusement under her breath. “It’s very much the best, or one of the best, anyway. I think. I don’t know much about cars either. But *wow*.”

I arch my brow. “Why *wow*? Is it considered expensive?”

“Yes, Cillian.” She laughs at me, slinging her purse over her shoulder. “They’re very, *very* expensive. Just curious, but how can a vampire afford a car like this?”

“Prohibition,” I reply simply.

She lifts her brows at me. “Oh,” she says casually. “Prohibition, of course. Silly me—were you a kingpin or something?”

“Yes,” I reply naturally. “Well, sort of. Mickey was. I was his right hand. We moved liquor around the Eastern seaboard with the best of them. Or the worst, I suppose, depending on the way you look at it. Very lucrative business.”

Sarah regards me thoughtfully. “So, you’re like . . . a mobster?”

“I was, yes. Not anymore. But many men became rich overnight when alcohol was made illegal in those days.” I motion to the car. “Still want to ride with me, Sarah? Knowing I’m a criminal?”

She considers my words. “Just the booze, right? You weren’t moving around anything else?”

“What, like drugs and women?” I reply, flattening my tone with a *tsk*. “It’s a valid question, but no. I didn’t. That’s a very different kind of monster than I am.”

Satisfied with my response, she gently takes my hand when I offer it, and the small contact sends a delightful current through me with a pang of that same hunger. I control it as she settles into her seat.

“Prohibition was dumb, anyway.”

That makes me laugh. “Yes, it was. But it made us all plenty of money.”

“I suppose if you’re immortal and broke that’s pretty sad.”

“Indeed. If you meet a penniless vampire, be sure to run the other way. He’s certainly up to no good.” I get into the driver’s side, and we’re off. I steer one-handed, taking care on the winter city roads. “Do you like apple cider?”

“I love it.”

“Good. I know a place.”

As we drive, I pretend like I didn’t spend my past weekend searching every nook and cranny of Boston for places I thought she might like in between seeing to my house’s much-needed repairs. I haven’t stressed this much since I stormed the beaches of Sicily in the Second World War. The only good thing that comes from it is the distraction it gives me from my hunger.

It’s still there, lurking, an irksome companion of my own making that I can never be rid from. But it’s far more manageable at the moment than it has been.

“So, are you making progress on the house?” she asks.

“Little by little, aye.” I glance at her when I can, but mostly keep my eyes on the road. “Been a bit distracted recently.”

“Oh?” she asks wryly.

“A pretty neighbor moved in next door, you see. She’s keeping me fairly occupied.”

Sarah laughs. “Running around trying to keep me from getting killed, you mean?”

“I wasn’t going to put it like *that*,” I reply, smirking. “You said it, not me.”

“Well. All the same—thank you.”

“Think nothing of it. How was your time with Rory?”

“It was amazing. He’s such a good cook! He spoiled me rotten. I have so much food in my fridge now. We talked about music for hours and even listened to some—I didn’t want to leave.”

“He’s a good man.”

“He is.”

We sidle up next to a small café tucked in North Boston, its exterior lined with colorful, blinking Christmas lights. I wonder if I should be doing that too—getting into the spirit of things, making myself appear human instead of some grumpy old hermit averse to the outside world.

“I suppose we should get to know each other, right?” Sarah suggests. “Ease you into this?”

“That would be much appreciated.” I chuckle, parking the car.

“Like . . . favorite holiday, favorite color, favorite food?”

“Let me think.” I hum thoughtfully. “Christmas.”

“Always.”

“Green.”

“I’m a pink kinda girl, myself.”

“And favorite food?” I look over at her. “You.”

We stare at each other until Sarah loses the stand-off and snickers. “Oh, so funny.”

“I am hilarious,” I agree flatly, pausing when she opens the door. “Let me get that for you.”

“Ooh, such a gentleman.” She closes it again. “Please do. Remind me—what century are you from again? Might need to find a few more of you for some friends out West.”

“Sadly for them, there’s only one me.” I’ve already reached her side of the car before her gaze can hope to trace me. I open the door for her and extend my hand. “I was born in 1897, I think. Or 1896. Depends on who you asked, my mum or my dad. Nobody had birth certificates in those days.”

“Holy shit,” she says as she takes my hand and allows me to help her out.

“So you’re almost a century old.”

“Close to it,” I answer. “Though honestly, I haven’t been keeping track anymore. Doesn’t seem important when I look like this.”

“How old were you when you changed?”

“Um.” I blow out some air, trying to think. “Let’s see. In 1920, when I was twenty-three or twenty-four.”

“Eternal youth,” Sarah muses as I open the café door for her. “Sounds like every girl’s dream.”

“There’s a price for it, I assure you.”

“I want to hear more about that price.” As we both peer at the menu together, she adds, “Oh! And let me buy the drinks.”

I arch a brow. “Why?”

“Because you bought a car.” Sarah laughs. “That’s a big chunk of change. It’s the least I could do for a ride like that.”

I’d rather she not spend her money. I know she’s not in the best financial situation, while I’m practically swimming in money I’ve made over the course of several decades. Some of it is properly in banks under my legal name. And some of it is stuffed beneath my floorboards, courtesy of Prohibition and the Great Depression. That was just how we did things back then. I took two stacks out, unsure of where the night would lead, but better to be safe than sorry.

“Very well, but only the drinks,” I agree. “Anything and everything else is on me going forward.”

“Something tells me you’re not going to take no for an answer.”

“You’re figuring me out already.”

Sarah thinks on it before she smirks. “All right. You’re the boss.”



“Wait, so . . . all the priests at St. Winifred’s aren’t only priests, they’re also

like witches who do magick? And they all have secret families?”

Sitting still isn't something I've ever done well. After a failed attempt to tuck ourselves into a corner of the café, we're out and about on the Boston pavement, snow faintly falling over our heads. When her questions took a more supernatural turn, it seemed best to keep moving. Anyone overhearing us might assume we're talking about a book or some kind of television show.

“Exactly that,” I reply, admiring her as she takes a sip of her hot cider while we continue our walk. “You've got the gist of it.”

“But how do they do that without getting caught?” Sarah says, leaning in. “Without getting in trouble with the Pope or something?”

“Very carefully, I presume. Their magick, from what I've seen, is unmatched.”

“That's incredible. What kind of magick do they do?”

“Well, they don't tell me all the ins and outs of it and how to do it, you understand. They're a rather secretive bunch when it comes to the use of it. But they do things like heal, or hide things from the naked eye, or transport. They can flit back and forth from Ireland and other nations at the snap of a finger.”

“That's amazing. So they probably never have to buy a plane ticket ever. Now I'm going to be staring at them in Mass and wondering who they're married to. This is the juiciest gossip I've ever heard in my entire life,” Sarah muses, glancing at me. I realize I've probably been staring too hard and look away. “What about you? Do you have any magick?”

“Like casting spells?” I test my drink as well. It's finally cooled enough to where it won't burn my tongue. “No. We have a different kind of magick, I suppose, but it's not conjury or making something out of nothing with words or commands. It's innate. Part of who we are, now.”

“Okay.” Sarah lightly nudges me with her shoulder. “What's your magick, then?”

Warmed by our drinks, walking together outdoors doesn't seem to affect

her, and Sarah doesn't seem chilled in the slightest. There's a pretty pink hue in her cheeks and on her nose. We continue walking until we stop in front of a small outdoor ice rink, where a handful of people are skating, laughing, and talking.

When I hesitate to answer, Sarah comes to a stop with me, her smile fading. "Sorry, did I touch a nerve?"

"Not at all. It's just not the most useful these days," I answer. "When I touch people—or objects, sometimes—I can see things around them. Memories, history. It's not something I can control, and it isn't always reliable. It comes and goes."

"Like when I ran into you that night, and you caught me." Sarah tenses. "Did you . . . see mine?"

"Not on purpose," I assure her. "When you ran into me, I caught glimpses. It all happened so fast. I think I saw your parents. I understand you lost them. I'm sorry. It wasn't my intention."

Sarah exhales and nods, turning to watch the people skating. "They were taken from me so suddenly," she says after a moment. "In a matter of seconds, it seemed like everything was swept out from under me. All the safety and happiness I knew was gone. I was left reeling."

Pain creeps along my body, a familiar ache I've done everything in my power to combat through warfare and bloodshed. "I know what that's like."

"Really?" she asked softly. "Your parents too?"

"Yes. I lost my mother and father both to illness back in Dublin when I was young. Around the same time Mickey lost most of his family. We were neighbors and friends when we were lads."

"That's terrible," Sarah murmurs. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. They're in a better place now, so I'm told." I glance at her. "And so are yours."

"I know you're probably right, but it doesn't help take the pain away," Sarah says quietly. "It's still always there. Sometimes I wonder if it'll never

leave me.”

I wish I was a more optimistic person, but I am hardly an expert on moving on from anything. Instead, I offer gentle words of a different kind. “It won’t. It’ll always be there, I think. But someday, it won’t hurt as much as it did the first day, or the second. It becomes manageable.” I give her a little nudge, mimicking the one she gave me. “In time.”

She smiles appreciatively. “I feel a little less broken when you put it like that.”

“You are many things, Sarah McCready,” I reassure her. “But you are far from broken.”

Her eyes trail away from me to the ice rink. “Have you ever skated?” I follow her gaze to a small stand that reads “Rentals” with rows of ice skates on display.

“Not in some time. I doubt I’d be any good at it.”

“Good, I’m terrible too.” Sarah pulls my hand. “Then I want to learn more about what you can do. You know, besides drinking blood and being sexy.”

It seems like an easy way to make a fool of myself, something I’m not exactly keen on doing, but I can’t even protest as my heart and my mind instantly zero in on her words. *Did she just say I’m sexy?* “W-wait a minute.”

“Come on. You’re a big strong warrior, right? Takes a lot more than a girl and a pair of skates to scare the likes of you,” she teases.

Now it appears the reputation of my manhood is on the line. “All right. I’ll skate,” I say, nearly stumbling against her as we come to a halt in front of the winter-clad ice rink attendant and offering her cash for two pairs of skates. “If you fly.”

Sarah laughs, her skepticism plain. “Fly? How? You gonna turn into a birdie and carry me?” She’s not bothering to lower her voice, because who around us would know I can actually do the former?

“Maybe,” I answer as we scan the wall of skates and pick out our sizes.

Then comes putting them on, which I fumble through as best I can until they're secure on my feet. "What if I did?"

"That's not terrifying or anything." She chuckles. "I guess it's a bad time to tell you that heights make me nervous."

"Not the way I'm thinking," I answer, glancing at her as I rise to my feet, wobbling on the skates with what little dignity I have left. "Do you trust me?"

"I could ask you the same." Sarah is far more fearless, hopping over to the ice, wobbling a little as she skims across its glossy surface until she's certain she won't wipe out. She skates carefully to where I stand at the edge and holds out her hands. "C'mon. I won't let you fall. Or, you know, maybe we'll fall together."

I glide across the surface with her, and though I'm uncomfortable at first, it's easy to forget how unsteady I am when her hands are in mine. I can't remember the last time I held a woman's hand. Sinéad's, perhaps, when she was upset or angry about something, back when she and Eamon followed me all over Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. But that was different. That was comforting a sister.

Sarah is anything but that.

We fall into a rhythm with each other, moving slowly across the ice as I find my feet.

"See? You're a natural," Sarah says with a grin, one I unexpectedly return.

"I haven't done this in ages." I banish memories before they threaten to rise and mock me again, remind me of everything I lost. It's as though Sarah can read me as easily as I can read her with a simple touch.

"I don't mean to bring up bad memories."

"There's nothing bad about them," I reply, squeezing her hand. "Or you. I think we're both better off not walking on eggshells around each other at any rate."

"Easier said than done," Sarah teases. "Being a vampire means you're

kind of a powder keg, right? At least, that's what Rory said. Big emotions."

"He's right. But I'm a big boy, I'll handle it."

Sarah swings around in front of me, not letting go of my hands. "Here, try pushing me around."

"I can't guarantee we both won't die if I do that."

"Worth it!" Her sweet laughter makes it impossible to do anything but comply as I cautiously guide her around the ice.

"See? We're not dead. We're fine. Are you having fun, at least?"

To my own surprise, I am. Little normal mundane things are something I've rarely had a chance to enjoy. Time with her makes them anything but mundane. "I am. I'm not eating ice, so this is grand."

She chuckles. "Okay. We've done Sarah things. The cider, the skating, the walk. After this, you want to do a Cillian thing?"

"Depends. What do you consider a Cillian thing?"

"Come on." She gives me a look. "What girl meets a vampire and goes on only normal dates? I came here expecting to be wowed, swept off my feet, lost in your world. You're being awfully tame."

The beast inside me rouses. I have to pull him back. That was a challenge to him, and quite possibly me.

"Tame?" I repeat flatly.

"Yeah, that's right," Sarah says. "A little tame. I mean, buying an extremely badass car like it's nothing was a pretty cool start, but that can't be all. Afraid you'll break me?"

"As a matter of fact, yes, a little," I reply, returning her conspiratorial smile. "I'm not sure you could handle anything beyond tame."

"Try me."

I'm about ready to do exactly what she said. Sweep her up, show her just how wild and unpredictable I am quite capable of being. Damn these skates. I can hardly do so while keeping my balance. But before I can answer, I notice a flutter of speed in my peripheral vision. Frowning, I turn.

Desmond Moore stands there on the pavement, his somewhat shaggy blond hair tousled by the wind of his arrival. “Cillian.”

My mood sours instantly. “Wonderful,” I mutter.

“Isn’t that Desmond?” Sarah asks, surprised to see him.

“Yes, and he’s likely the bearer of bad news.”

Desmond can hear me and speaks calmly in return. “Murdock’s been found.”

I clench my jaw, anger building in my chest. “They’ve found the man who attacked you. I’m afraid our skating has to be cut short.”

“Oh.” Sarah’s disappointment isn’t lost on me. “Okay. I understand.”

She tries to skate away, but I grab her hand and pull her toward me, not caring if Desmond sees. I pull the Maserati keys from my pocket and place them in her palm.

“We’ll pick up where we left off later tonight. Will you meet me at St. Winifred in an hour?”

“The church? Why?”

“You wanted a Cillian thing. I’ll give you a Cillian thing. Trust me.” I squeeze her hand. “I’ll see you soon.”

She hesitates then nods. “Okay. But don’t stand me up, Darragh. I’ve clocked a lot of men for making a fool out of me. Hate to add you to the list.”

That actually makes me laugh, and I offer her salute. “Duly noted, McCready.”



“You said he’d been found,” I say, standing with Desmond over Murdock’s broken, mangled body lying in a South Boston alley. “You didn’t say anything about this.”

I won’t lie and pretend I wasn’t going to wail on Daniel Murdock the moment I caught him. After what he did to Sarah, ripping him apart is all I’ve

wanted to do.

Desmond crouches down to inspect the body. “Didn’t want to frighten the girl,” he answers, checking Murdock’s pockets. “Looks a bit haggard, but the blood on his lips suggests he’d recently fed when he died.”

“Who do you think is responsible?” I ask. “It couldn’t be Hecatēi.” The treaty we have with the Hecatēi—the Sicilian, Italian, and Greek vampires of New York sworn to their three-faced goddess of witchcraft—has withstood without failure for several decades. “They don’t leave bodies like this. They never leave any trace.”

“You’re right,” Desmond assents, eyes on Murdock as he continues to inspect him. “Not clean enough to be a Hecatēi killing. And they wouldn’t deposit him here. Whoever did this wanted him to be found. One of our lads, maybe?”

“No.” I glance up at the rooftops. There isn’t a crow to be seen; no sign of the Morrigan’s eyes and ears nearby. “She doesn’t allow killing within the ranks, and She isn’t here. If it was one of Hers, She would be listening. With a keen interest.”

“You’re probably right.” Desmond checks Murdock’s throat. “His oakwood pendant for walking in daylight. It’s missing. Taken. He’d burn into ash, come first light, if we hadn’t found him here.” He takes one of Murdock’s hands. “Oak splinters beneath his fingernails.”

“Torture.” I grimace, knowing that process far too well from the day or two I spent in British prisons during the Irish War for Independence, before Michael and our friends busted me out.

Desmond gently turns Murdock’s pale and lifeless body to the side. “If you look here, he’s been staked through the back to his heart with rowanwood.” With one harsh yank, Desmond pulls the stake out, its end sharp, pointed, and covered with blood.

Startled, I take the stake from him, and we both study it a moment. It isn’t crude or hastily cut into a stake. Every stroke to the point of it seems careful

and deliberate. I give it back to Desmond.

I try to think of someone, anyone, who could be responsible for a killing like this. The Hecatēi's leader, Ademaro Constantino, hates Boston and the Irish vampires in it. His consigliere, Carmine, an ancient vampire who's at least five hundred years old, hates us even more. I wouldn't put it past him to send assassins.

But Constantino's adopted son, Antonio Briganti, is far more level-headed than either of his elders. He has stemmed those tides of bloodshed, determined to keep order in his own way. Michael and Leigh trust him. He's a cunning sort. From what I know of him, he would sniff out any plans of subterfuge, especially after what happened back in 1970, when rogue Hecatēi entered our city under the misled guidance of young Eamon.

But he's still our enemy, one we'll eventually battle at the world's end when time no longer matters and the gods wage war.

Michael and Leigh trust Briganti and Constantino to conduct themselves with honor. But I don't trust any of them. Not a single one.

"A rogue killing, maybe?" I muse as Desmond rises from his crouch to stand beside me, our gazes still upon the corpse. "He wasn't exactly the subtle type, not even in Northern Ireland. "Not every vampire is content to remain beholden to the gods they serve. He surely made enemies."

"No," Desmond says somberly. "I don't think so." He motions to an object I overlooked, lying just inches from Murdock's limp hand.

A single white lily in full bloom, out of place in the wintery cold.

"'Twas a Lilyman did this." Desmond's voice is heavy, filled with concern, as though he's uttered a word more powerful than the Morrigan Herself.

"A Lilyman?" I repeat, skeptical. "That's not possible. Michael said their order was wiped out everywhere, ages ago."

"Eradicated here in America, perhaps, and in Ireland, but we struggled to track them on English shores. I doubt they were all found. It was hardly ages

ago, though. And all it takes is one,” Desmond replies. “Sean made it a point to hunt them down wherever there was sign of them when he was High King. No matter the country, the city, the place. Say what you will about my brother, but he didn’t tolerate the Order of the Lily, nor did he allow it to take root and fester.”

“Your brother serves only himself,” I reply sourly. “And he’s practically feral these days. Your words, Desmond. Not mine.”

“Be that as it may,” Desmond insists, frowning, “this was a Lilyman’s doing. Leaving that flower was no accident. You and Michael would do well to pay attention.”

I set my jaw. Sarah is waiting for me. I can’t deal with this right now. No, I don’t *want* to. For the first time in over sixty years, somebody is *waiting* for me to return. I can’t leave her, not today.

“I’ll inform Mickey,” I say quietly. “Get Aodhán down here with a few of the lads, have them clean it up.” Desmond’s about to walk away, but I touch his shoulder to stop him. “And don’t tell them about the lily. Not yet. We needn’t cause commotion before we’ve more information.”

Desmond grunts and shrugs off my hand before he changes in a swirl of ashen smoke and feathers, soaring into the night air and disappearing.



“You’re late,” Sarah says, rolling down the Maserati’s window and calling to me after I land in front of her, shifting out of my shape as a crow and straightening.

Shaking off the tickling remnants of my transformation, I revel in the way she stares at me in amazement. She wanted more Cillian things, and this seemed like the perfect opportunity to show off. Flight and the way I can change myself—the changing from man to crow, and back again—is something that doesn’t occur to me as odd now, having done it almost every

day for decades.

But she sees magick, her first taste of my abilities. “Holy shit. You’re like a prince right out of a fairy tale,” she mutters under her breath.

“I’m sorry I’m late,” I reply, glad she’s been keeping warm in the idling car parked against the curb in front of St. Winifred. “Not the way I wanted our first outing to go.”

“I’m getting the feeling it won’t be the last time,” she repeats, laughing softly as she turns the ignition off then gets out of the car. “I can’t believe this. This entire time, you’ve been able to fly, and you never told me? I’m almost mad.”

“Are you?” I close the distance between us.

“Yes, because that looks like so much more fun than ice skating,” Sarah says, biting her lip. “This is something I should get used to, isn’t it? You having to run off and take care of business? I know I’m new, and I’m still learning about the Brotherhood and everything that comes with being a part of it, but it seems like you’re pretty important to everyone.”

Her eyes say something else, something I’ve seen before in the face of my late wife. *Am I just getting in the way? Am I a distraction?* But I’m focused on her words, the way she implies getting used to anything when it comes to my duties, the unpredictability of my schedule in my service to Michael.

“Do you *want* to get used to it?” I ask, trying to quell the hope in my voice.

“I’m thinking about it,” Sarah replies coyly. “Maybe.”

In an instant, my emotions are aflame until I’m nearly overwhelmed by them. I don’t expect her to understand what it’s like. How being a soldier and a warrior can simultaneously mean loneliness while surrounded by others like me, yet I need to be near them. My brothers and sisters. It’s why I came back to Boston. Why I’m trying to let go of all the trouble in Ireland and set down roots. Call this place home.

But in order to do that, it needs to be more than a place. It needs to be something else.

Someone else.

I take her hands in mine and squeeze them. “Come with me.”

She follows where I lead her. “Where are we going?”

“You said you wanted to see more of my world. Let me show it to you.”

As we approach the tall bell tower that looms over St. Winifred’s grounds, I sweep her up into my arms like a bride, and she squeaks. It’s a large place, home to a majestic cathedral, a Catholic school, and an abbey where the nuns reside.

I leap up toward the window of the tower where the bells hang silently. She cries out in surprise and wraps her arms around my shoulders, clinging to me tightly with her eyes squinted shut.

When I’ve found my feet, I chuckle. “Open your eyes, Sarah.”

She does, gasping softly as I gently set her down on the walkway that circles the bell tower, far enough from the ledge where she won’t teeter and fall. Still, she grips my coat like a lifeline, staring out at the lights of Boston in wonder.

“This is beautiful.”

“It’s a bird’s-eye view. Something I see every night,” I explain, sitting on the ledge. She joins me. “Do you like it?”

“I do.” Much to my surprise, Sarah presses into my side. I instinctively wrap my arm around her. “You never told me you could leap tall buildings in a single bound. Like Superman.”

I stare at her blankly. “Is that what Superman does? Jump on things?”

She scoffs. “Oh, c’mon! You don’t know Superman? Those comics were all the rage back in the forties or something, weren’t they?”

“I was a bit preoccupied building the Brotherhood’s place here. Didn’t stop to pick up comic books or penny dreadfuls.” I pause. “Is this Superman good-looking?”

“Oh, god,” Sarah says, flashing a lopsided grin. “He’s more than good-looking. Can’t believe you haven’t even seen the movie. With Christopher Reeve? He’s so dreamy.”

“Can’t say I have.” A pulse of jealousy strikes me when she calls another man *dreamy*, and I move to quickly dampen it. This *Christopher Reeve* is clearly an actor, thus finding him and reminding him that Sarah is spoken for is likely unnecessary.

“Well then, we’re going to watch it sometime. You’re practically a superhero yourself, and a vampire on top of it, so you should know who your competition is.” She sniffs.

I laugh softly. “Competition?”

“That’s right.” Sarah’s smile brightens as she teases me.

“I suppose I will.” I appreciate her attempt at comparing me to a superhero, but deep down, I know. I nearly say it aloud—*I’m not a hero*. I’ve never been a hero. I’ve fought in enough wars to know what real heroes look like.

And heroes don’t last long in battles. So concerned with the lives of others, they’re the first in the line of fire and the easiest to kill. I could always spot the *hero* on the opposite side. The ones respected and loved by their comrades. I made certain to rip them apart, to ensure there was no returning from their injuries, to destroy the morale of my enemies.

Heroes never make it. They might get a plaque or a medal, but they leave behind widows, devastated families, gaping emptiness.

Heroes should stay at home and leave it to the rest of us.

I shake myself out of those cynical thoughts. I’ll let her think I’m a hero if it makes her happy. But I know myself. I know the things I’ve done, the mistakes I’ve made, and other things I’m still not sorry for.

“I hope I didn’t make you wait too long.”

“Can you tell me what happened?”

“I can,” I murmur, giving myself this moment, this time to memorize the

warmth being close to her brings me. “And I will. But not tonight. Tomorrow, in the sunlight. I don’t get many quiet moments like this, Sarah. I don’t get to steal time away just for me. But with you, I’d like to.”

She turns her head, gazing up at me, and I move. My lips find hers. I’m rusty, clumsy. I haven’t kissed a woman in so many years, and my neck and ears burn with embarrassment, worried I’m somehow going to fuck this up. But Sarah doesn’t laugh or complain. Instead, she cups my face, and her tongue slips between my lips to find mine, inviting, welcoming. Then her fingers are in my hair, and I pull her into my lap sideways, one of my hands on her arse, the other wrapped around her upper body.

When the kiss breaks, she’s breathless, and I’m embarrassed. “I-I’m sorry. I’m trying to be a gentleman.” I try to move my hand somewhere, anywhere else. “I told myself when we did this, I wouldn’t treat you like—”

“I know you’re a good man, Cillian,” Sarah breathes, moving my hand right back where it was. “But you don’t have to apologize for this. I want your hands on me.”

I want your hands on me. Dangerous words to say when the monster beneath my skin, always hungry, is already riled by the window I have down her blouse to appreciate the curves of her freckled, creamy breasts, what remains of her California tan line from her bathing suit, and wonder what it might be like to taste them. To taste her.

“If you wanted,” she whispers, “we could go to my place.” She nuzzles my nose as I bite back a growl nestled in my throat. That wonderful arse of hers is pressing into my groin, awakening my cock in my trousers. It’s now uncomfortably hard, straining, and my thoughts take a carnal turn.

Wondering what it would be like spread her legs, rip her hosiery, hilt myself into her awaiting cunt. How slippery, how tight she might be, if she wants me just as badly as I want her. I’d sell my soul to the Morrigan again just to feel her writhing beneath me.

Fucksake. I bite down, clenching my jaw, willing my fangs to retract

before Sarah sees them. I don't want to frighten her. *Calm down*. If I did as she requested, I'm not certain how long I'd last. And I *need* to last. I want to take my time with this. With her.

"I admire that you're a woman who knows her own mind," I murmur into her ear, causing her to shiver. "You have a fire in you, burning, that I haven't seen in a long time. But I think we ought to take things slow."

"Slow?" She kisses me again, so sensual and beckoning, as though she means to test my mettle right here and now. "You're probably the only man in the world that wants to do anything slow."

"All the more reason for me to do it." Our lips are so close. She brushes hers against mine, teasing.

She toys with the button of my collar, impatient. "You sure this is you being gentlemanly, and not you trying not to mess around with your friend's granddaughter?"

"Oh, Rory will probably have a go at kicking me in the pants later, regardless," I say wryly, pressing my forehead to hers. "That isn't why. You have no idea how badly I want you."

Her breath hitches. "Go on."

My hand slides along her leg as she rests sideways in my lap, up her thigh beneath her dress. She gasps softly, opening them slightly for me. And that's all the invitation I need, holding her snug against me and kissing her deeper than before. When I break away I'm rasping, starving for her. I shouldn't be playing with fire like this. I want to slow down, but allowing her to walk away from this night, thinking I'm immune to her kiss, her touch, the scent of her hair, is unfathomable to me.

"Vampiric emotions are heightened, Sarah. Larger . . ." I push my groin up against her arse so she can feel just how nigh-unbearably hard she's made me. "And far more difficult to contend with and control. I've thought of you in ways I've no business imagining you. And yet I can't stop. You make it impossible for me."

“You can have me, you know,” Sarah murmurs. “I’d let you. Happily.”

“I know you would.” I trace her inner thigh. “And I know what it is you want. But we have to go slow. For both our sakes.”

I slide my hand between her thighs, tracing her pussy through her panties. She reacts instantly, her hips almost instinctively arching and pushing back, grinding against my erection. It’s the most delectable torture I’ve endured.

“Is this going slow?” she asks, biting her lip.

“Yes.” I push her panties to the side. “Very.” My fingertips brush one side of her velvet folds while her chest rises and falls with quickened breaths. “Very.” Then I trace the other, enjoying just how soft she is beneath my touch. “Slow.”

Delving my finger between those lips, I find and circle her clitoris. She’s already wet for me and jolts and moans. The sound of her voice causes me to suck in a breath as I try to contain myself. She’s so fragile. One move too forceful, and I could injure her.

I wanted to be a gentleman with her. Prove to her that I’m far better than whatever shites she left behind in California. But her kisses are sweeter than any delicacy I’ve tasted, and the sounds she makes against my mouth have me tethered, growing ever closer to losing all control.

My finger glides south as my thumb takes its place over her clit and slips inside her. She stiffens. “Cillian,” she gasps.

She’s not as shy as I thought she might be. We’re technically exposed; even as we hide together inside the bell tower, there’s nothing to stifle this music to my predatory ears beyond my tongue inside her mouth. Her noise is in the open air, carrying.

If any of my Brethren happen to fly by, they’ll hear quite the symphony.

A second finger joins the first. I gaze into her eyes as her body jerks. I memorize the flush in her cheeks, inwardly triumphant that it’s my ministrations that have brought her to such near-bliss. When she rubs her palm against my cock, still buried uncomfortably in my trousers, I grit my

teeth.

“Put your arm around me, Sarah.”

“I want to please you too,” she protests, whimpering.

“Not tonight,” I answer softly, nibbling on her ear, then her neck when she tilts her head away to grant me access to it. My fangs trace her soft flesh.

So close . . . so hungry . . .

“Cillian, you’re going to make me come.”

Her words draw me out of nearly feeding upon her, her breath heightening. Gripping her dark hair and tugging it back, I bring her lips up to mine to stifle her cries of delight. Her legs quake, her hips and insides tremble as I keep her quiet.

Then she melts against me, catching her breath while I press my lips to her forehead, covered in faint sweat.

“Jesus Christ,” she whispers as she lies against me. “That’s the best fucking orgasm I’ve had in years.”

I take pride in that. “I’d give you another, but the hour is late. Any more, I might do something I’ll regret.”

She’s quiet for a moment. “Drink from me, you mean?”

I shut my eyes tightly, steadying that monstrous soldier I’ve kept locked away. “Yes.”

“I’m not scared of you, you know,” she whispers. “Never have been.”

“I’m well aware. But perhaps you should be.”

“I won’t. It’s naive or stupid, but the longer this goes on—I’m not scared of any of you.”

“You’re not stupid.” I tilt her chin up. “You’re brave. Very brave. Not afraid to tell me when I’m being a right bastard, you’ve made that plain.”

She sighs softly, tucking her head underneath my chin. “I feel like there’s still so much I don’t know,” she whispers. “So much to learn. About you. About all of this.”

I gently rub her back and close her legs, kissing her deeply. “You will,” I

promise her softly. “But not tonight. Come. I’ll take you home.”

CHAPTER 7

Dancing Maidens



Sarah

I'm not a morning person, so when I hear a very loud and distinct rapping on my door at ten thirty, I'm wondering who the hell is looking to get murdered by me at a time like this.

Okay, I know I should probably get up. Normal people probably start stirring right about now. But after these late nights serving at the Mannock and then our date last night, I slept like a baby after Cillian dropped me off and kissed me like I'm living a fairytale dream in front of my door.

It's never been harder to say good night to someone. I wanted to yank him in by his coat, keep kissing him, take him to bed with me, and ride him like he's never been ridden before. But the more I thought about it, maybe Cillian going slow isn't for my benefit.

Maybe he needs *me* to put the brakes on. Maybe it's left over from the time he came from and grew up in, but this doesn't feel like it's for my protection. If anything, it seems like it's for his. Like he's trying to draw me close and yet keep me at arm's length at the same time.

The hunger. That's got to be why he's holding off. If he and I just caved

and gave into passion, would he really be able to his fangs out of me? Would he be able to make love to me without spilling my blood?

I stare at the ceiling. Why does that possibility arouse me? That's got to be weird, right? Thinking about us locked in a naked embrace, his fangs deep in my throat as his hips rock against mine, thrusting his cock inside my pussy as deeply as it can go. Fuck, I need to stop thinking like this. I've always been a morning sex type of girl. Letting myself fantasize like this is getting me wet.

That's when I hear the knock again. *Goddammit*. Cillian was my first thought upon waking, so much I forgot why I woke up in the first place. Rubbing sleep from my eyes, I throw on a sweater and socks, hopping on one foot as I pull them on.

"One moment!"

Then in my attempt to rush down the stairs, I fall on my ass. Wincing, I grumble, "Ow. Wow, graceful, Sarah." Half hobbling, I open the door, trying not to think about how crazy my bedhead must look, or that I haven't put on any makeup yet. *Sorry, Cillian, guess you're getting the "real" morning look a little early—*

Except it isn't Cillian at all. It's Peter Blackwood. It takes my sleepy brain a moment to register. "Oh! Peter, hi."

He blinks at me in surprise. "Apologies," he says in his silky smooth British accent. "I suppose I am calling rather early."

I want to crawl into a hole and die. But as there are no holes nearby for me to disappear into, I scramble to pull my hair into a ponytail or something, anything, to get it to stop looking like some wild bird's nest. "No, it's—it's fine, I just wasn't expecting company."

To make matters worse, the man is perfectly dressed. His hair is combed beneath his flat cap, his face clean-shaven. And in his hands are crimson poinsettias, gorgeous Christmas flowers that were my mom's favorite this time of year.

“A housewarming gift,” he offers. “I figured you’d be settled in and wanted to pop by, see how you were faring.”

“That’s really sweet,” I say, taking the poinsettias gently and admiring them. “You remembered. I always love seeing these flowers around this time of year.”

That’s when it hits me. *Fuck*. Is Cillian home? I haven’t given him the *fuck off* signal.

Peter smiles and takes a step off my porch. “Perhaps I should call another time.”

“No! No, please.” I hold the door open. “Do you want to come in? If you can give me a few minutes, I’ll get dressed. I’d be happy to make you some tea, maybe?”

“Tea would be lovely,” he says as he enters. “Thank you.”

“How was the rest of your weekend?” I ask, leading him into the living room and opening the curtains up to lighten the place up, gesturing for him to sit down. “Not too busy with work, I hope?”

“Not any busier than usual,” he says. “How fares the job? Late nights, I suppose? I should’ve thought of that, but I thought I’d stop by and surprise you.”

“Well, I’m certainly surprised.”

“A pleasant surprise, I hope.”

“It is!” I set the flowers nicely on the coffee table, where they bring some color into a room I haven’t quite spruced up yet with my own flair. “I’ll be right back, okay? Make yourself at home.” I move into the kitchen and quickly put my kettle on the stove, turning the setting on high.

“Of course.” He nods, removing his hat. “Take your time.”

I wait until he’s out of sight, then take the stairs two at a time to rush into my bedroom. I brush ruthlessly through my tangled bed hair and putting it up in a ponytail before hopping into a pair of jeans and fixing my sweater. *There, no cleavage, looking good—*

“Is that your English friend?”

I grasp my chest like I’ve just stopped my heart from leaping out of it. He sits astride the windowsill of my now open window, letting a draft in. He enters, straightens, and shuts the window behind him.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” I whisper. “Yes, it’s Peter. Can’t you use the door?”

“I worried you might be in danger,” he replies.

The way his eyes flash from their normal soft brown to flickering crimson betray more than he’s letting on. I wasn’t born yesterday. Cillian isn’t just suspicious and looking out for me; there’s jealousy behind his gaze. He’s threatened.

“I’m not in danger. Peter is a very nice man.”

Cillian’s skepticism isn’t lost on me. “Uh-huh. Where did you meet this friend?”

“I met him on the plane coming here, if you’ve gotta know, nosypants.”

Cillian wrinkles his nose, skeptical. “And the flowers?”

“I thought you said you’d tune me out,” I hiss, folding my arms. “It’s just a housewarming gift.”

“He likes you, Sarah.”

“He does not!”

“I know when a man likes a woman, and he likes you.”

“Even if that’s true,” I insist, “it changes nothing. Just because he likes me doesn’t mean he gets me. Okay? I know you can’t control those souped-up vampire feelings you’ve got, but he’s my friend.”

Cillian draws in a deep breath and lets it out, flexing his fingers. “You’re certain you’re safe?”

“You have nothing to worry about. If I’m in danger, I’ll call for you.”

Cillian frowns at me, clenching his jaw. “All right,” he mutters, heading back to the window.

“Thank you,” I tell him, squinting. “Close the window on your way out,

please.”

Cillian does what I ask on the other side of the window. Loudly. Then in a burst of smoke and feathers, he’s crossed the short distance between his house and mine, flying as a crow through his own window.

“Feeling a bit theatrical today, are we?” I mutter under my breath.

I heard that, he mouths when he’s a man again, pointing to his ear.

Waving him off, I head back downstairs.

“So, how are you getting on in Norfolk?” I ask, glad I remember some things about him. “I was thinking about what we talked about at lunch. When is hunting season in Massachusetts? That’s in November or something, right? I think you missed it.”

“Not at all, and it depends on what you’re hunting,” Peter replies. “Obviously some of the larger prey I can’t touch until next year, but there’s waterfowl, and I make a mean goose.”

I rush into the kitchen when I hear the kettle whistle and pour him an instant breakfast tea blend, which is all I’ve got. “Can’t say I’ve ever tried goose.”

“It’s quite good. Wrap it in fresh bacon, smoke it over cherrywood, and it tastes divine.”

When I bring him the piping hot tea, still seeping in my mother’s porcelain teacup, he stares at it for a moment as if he isn’t sure what I’ve just given him, and then gently places it down on the coffee table, resting on its saucer. Giving sad instant tea to a proper British guy. No amount of cuteness will save me from that one.

“But you didn’t invite me in to hear me ramble about hunting,” he muses, turning his attention to me. “How are you, Sarah?”

I’ll let him gracefully forget his tea there while I try to forget I offered it to him. Peter’s voice is so silky smooth. This man has more elegance and charm in his pinky finger than I do in my entire body.

“I wondered if I might take you out to lunch again when you’re available

next? Or perhaps a proper dinner.”

Oh no. Was Cillian right? Peter’s got me on my toes and against the ropes. For any girl, Peter would be an absolute dream. He’s going to make some unsuspecting Boston sweetheart happy. Nauseatingly happy, with a pretty face like his.

But it won’t be me. The very thought of letting Cillian go, of entertaining another man instead of him? I can’t imagine it at all. It’s not just because he’s got some magic fingers and used them on me last night like he was playing the harp. No, I like him because he puts me first. The more time I’ve had to think about it, the more I know it’s true. All that stuff about getting my memory erased? He was trying to protect me. The world he lives in is obviously far more dangerous than anything I’ve experienced. Even though I’m one hundred percent on Leigh and Sinéad’s side and the decision was mine—and I’m glad they let it be mine—I can understand where he was coming from.

That, and his desire to take things slow. Even though I’m plenty impatient, there’s a sense of romance to it. He sees me as more than just someone to hook up with. There’s something more than sexual attraction there. I’d be an idiot not to see where it leads.

“See, the thing is,” I start slowly, trying to find the right words, “I met someone, and things are going pretty well. I don’t want to mess that up.”

“Ah.” Peter’s disappointment is plain, but it doesn’t linger. “It appears I’m too late.”

“Just a little bit,” I admit. “But I’d like to still be friends with you, if that’s okay.”

Peter’s eyes glint with humor in the morning light. “And this other fellow, he won’t mind?”

Oh, Cillian is probably pacing his floor, hearing this. But one date sure as hell doesn’t make him my husband or my boss. “He won’t. He trusts me.”

“Good,” Peter says. “I have no intention of doing anything untoward, I

promise you.” He rises from the couch. “The man in question—does he live nearby?”

I puzzle over the question. *How’d he know that?* “Wow, you’re good. Yeah, actually, he does. He lives next door.”

“Ah, well, that must be quite the convenience for you, I must say,” Peter says with amusement. “I noticed he poked out his head from his front door as you were letting me in. For a moment I was concerned about his interest in you. It seems my intuition was correct.”

“More than you know,” I reassure. “Cillian has been great, looking out for me.”

“Cillian.” The name drips from Peter’s mouth. Almost mocking, but not quite. “Figures, I’m to be outdone by an Irishman. Well, I won’t take any more of your time. I’ll call later this week for that lunch.”

“Sounds good. Maybe we could hang out together sometime, the three of us? I’d love to introduce you.”

“Of course, whenever you like. Should you need anything, don’t hesitate to reach out.”

“Thank you. That means a lot.”

If there’s a possibility for Cillian and Peter to be friends, I’m all for it. For the first time ever, I actually hope Cillian is listening to this. That it comforts him, knowing Peter’s taking my rejection off the chin, isn’t heartbroken, and seems keen on remaining friends anyway.

I go to the door and see Peter out, making sure to help him into his coat and everything. Can’t give him a date, but I can still be courteous. “I’ll see you later?”

“Of course.” He tips his hat to me once he’s on the sidewalk. “Take care.”

I watch him walk down the street from my door, making sure he doesn’t slip or fall on any of the slick patches of ice on my street, but the man is as graceful as a cat. Once he’s gone, there’s a gust of wind to my right side. Cillian stands next to me on the porch, his eyes completely crimson and

nearly feline, fixated on me.

Now alone, his voice is a low growl. “I don’t trust that man, Sarah.”

Despite the cold around us and the fact that we’re in open sight of every house nearby, his sudden and unexpected presence is enough to root me to the ground like a deer in front of a lion. I have to remind myself to breathe, that Cillian hasn’t hurt me. Not once. Not even when tempted to.

It’s probably foolish for a lamb to trust a wolf, but I do. And when I rest my hand on his chest, his churning gaze gives way, all that hungry red replaced with soft warm brown.

He can tell he frightened me. “I’m sorry.” He takes a step back, bowing his head. “Forgive me. I’m normally not so volatile. But—”

“Vampiric emotions?” I offer sympathetically. “I know you heard everything. Do you believe me now?”

“I never mistrusted you,” Cillian answers, and I know he’s sincere. “And you’re not a thing. You’re not mine to possess or control. It’s only . . .” He struggles to find the words.

“You don’t trust him,” I finish for him, repeating his words.

“Not as far as I can throw him.” Cillian frowns. “Though come to mention it, I suppose I could throw him to the moon, if I wanted.”

I laugh softly. “I get it. Well, sort of. Why, because of the flowers?”

“Yes,” Cillian answers without any shame whatsoever.

“So you’re jealous,” I conclude.

He scoffs. “I wasn’t jealous.” I give him a look, and he only becomes more defensive. “What? Are you mad? Me, jealous of a fucking Englishman?”

“That’s what it sounds like,” I say in a mild singsong voice.

“Cheeky.” He snorts. “Sounded to me like he was the jealous one. Bested by an Irishman. That’s basically what he said. Good thing he knows it.”

“Does he?” I ask, amused.

Cillian’s concern, all of his grumbling and mistrust, melts away when he

gives me the most handsome grin he's ever graced me with, all confidence and cockiness at once. "You're damn right. Threw his kind out of Ireland back in the day and would happily do it again."

"All right, easy, soldier." I laugh and go back into my house to fetch my coat and purse, then return to the porch. "You've made your point."

"Where are you going?" Cillian asks curiously.

"It's Monday. I'm off to the Mannock. Sinéad's probably there already. I want to help her with whatever she needs."

Cillian nods, happy with my answer. "I've some things to work on today at the house, but I'll be there this evening."

"I know." I lean up and kiss his mouth. It's such a natural, easy thing for me to do. He blinks and if I didn't know better, I'd say the man was blushing. I like that I have that effect on him. Very much. "I'll see you there."



I'm happy when I find Sinéad wiping down tables like I thought she might be. It's nearly noon, and even though the Mannock doesn't open until three o'clock, she's a familiar face I've come to associate with the place. She seems to be in good spirits, and a part of me wonders if maybe I might make them just a little better as I start putting chairs down on the floors.

"Hey, Sinéad," I call. "What do you think of English accents?"

Sinéad wrinkles her nose at me, laughing. "Are you mad? Asking me a question like that in a place like this?"

"Oh, the men aren't even here yet." I giggle. "C'mon. Hot or not?"

"Oof." Sinéad rests her hands on her hips after ruffling her orange curls. "Really depends. There are so many different dialects. Some of 'em I can't even hope to understand. Others aren't so bad." She studies me. "Why?"

"I have this friend who's British and very charming." I shrug innocently. "Thought I might introduce you."

“Why don’t you go out with him yourself?” Sinéad asks.

I mischievously lift my eyebrows, unable to bite back the grin on my face. “I had a date with a certain neighbor of mine.”

Sinéad’s eyes widen. “Wait—you and—?” She huffs. “That bastard hasn’t breathed a word to me!”

“It was only yesterday.” I laugh. “And it was only one date. It’s not like there’s a ring on my finger.”

“Still. That’s groundbreaking for him,” Sinéad says in astonishment. “I don’t think I’ve seen him with a single woman since I’ve known him, and he only turned twenty years before me.”

“Really? Not once?”

Sinéad shakes her head. She washes her hands in a sink in the back, then returns with her purse. Taking out a compact, she applies lip gloss, fussing over herself a bit. “No. And thanks for the offer to help me meet someone, but I’m actually going out for a few hours. I’ll be back in the time for opening, though.”

“Headed anywhere special?” That’s when I notice a few things. Sinéad’s always fashionable, but in her own classic style, not like the model runways of today, filled with bright neon colors and triangular shapes. When she’s at work, she typically ties up her ginger curls, but today they’re down. She’s wearing a little mascara and rouge, when from what I’ve seen, she doesn’t bother for the boys at the tavern, preferring to be completely natural.

“Is that . . .” I squint at the label on the tube of lip gloss. “Strawberry Kissing Potion?”

“What?” Sinéad scoffs, instantly on the defensive. “No. It’s just lip gloss.”

“*Flavored* lip gloss?” I grin devilishly at her. “Where are you going, Sinéad?”

“It *happens* to be flavored,” she huffs. “I like strawberry. And I’m going to see a friend.”

“Does this friend like strawberry too?” I tease.

Sinéad becomes flustered. “His name is Eamon, and I don’t think he even knows what lip gloss is.”

I’ve heard folks talking about Eamon. Rory mentioned him several times while we chatted at his apartment. He spoke with such affection, and yet sympathetically. “He’s the one at St. Leonard, isn’t he? Some kind of vampire jail, right?”

“Yes and no,” Sinéad replies. “It’s a peaceful place, oriented toward rehabilitation and calm rather than punishment. They tend sacred trees. For months, years, decades. Centuries, depending on the crime.”

“So he must’ve done something pretty bad?”

Sinéad nods. Seeing my questioning look, she sighs. “Back in 1970, Eamon ripped into people who he overheard talking about the problems in Northern Ireland in a way he didn’t like. And he conspired against Mickey to try to make Cillian the High King instead.”

My mouth drops. “Wow, that’s—”

“Before you judge him, we’re not like you,” Sinéad interjects. I’ve never seen her react so protectively about anything. “Cillian’s probably told you. Our emotions can run wild and overwhelm us if unchecked. Eamon did wrong. He knows it, and he’s paying his penance. But he’s a good man.”

“I believe you,” I say quickly. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to pry. I feel like I’ve barely scratched the surface of your world. Sometimes I think Rory and Cillian are still trying to deter me from it.”

Sinéad snorts. “Well, that’s not going to do you much good. Can’t properly keep you safe if you’re still in the dark about how some things work.” She hums. “When I get back, I’ll have a chat with Leigh. If the lads are going to try and keep secrets, the girls can let you in on them.”

“Have I told you how amazing you are?” I ask her.

She playfully flips her hair. “Don’t I know it. I’ll see you in a few, Sarah. Try to stay outta trouble while I’m gone?”

“No promises.” I wave to her as she leaves.



Leigh and Michael are so cute before opening, it's almost nauseating.

No one would ever guess they're some kind of vampiric royalty. They're both so down to earth about everything, not stuffy or self-important. Seeing them do mundane things, like sweeping or checking the stock of the bar makes it all the more unbelievable that I've stumbled upon this world to begin with.

Leigh is the sun, and Michael seems to revolve around her. When they move, there's a magnetism to them, where they always sense where the other is. They steal glances, give smiles, playfully tease and josh each other, share kisses. They remind me of my parents a little, the way they used to behave when they thought I wasn't looking.

A faint ache grabs my chest. I miss them.

When Sinéad returns, I play detective and notice she hasn't smeared her lip gloss. Or at least, it appears that way.

“Did you behave?”

“I'm always an angel, thank you very much.” But there's vibrance in her cheeks. Rory told me that happens soon after a vampire has fed on blood. The more sickly pale a vampire, the hungrier they are.

After the dinner rush, things quiet down. Well, as quiet as a tavern can be with Brigid's Boys playing. The music tonight is smooth, slow, less reels and jigs and more emotion pouring from their instruments. Rory ushers me up to sing a few songs, and I happily oblige. Desmond Moore even joins us, violin in hand. I've never heard anyone play so masterfully. There aren't any human patrons in the tavern tonight, so it's the first time I've been allowed to serve vampires directly.

“You're doing a great job, Sarah,” Oscar Haskins says as he handles the

bar, sliding a drink over to Aodhán Feeney, who sits alone on a stool.

“Thank you.” I smile at Aodhán. “Officer Feeney.”

“Aodhán is just fine,” he says, tapping the Boston police cap resting on the table. “How’re you doing, love?”

“Oh, fine.” I lean on the bar, happy to have a moment to chat. My feet are aching. “I’ve been meaning to ask you something. When you came to tell me about my parents. Was that because I’m Rory’s granddaughter?”

Aodhán nods. “I typically try to handle anything connected to any living family of all the members of the Brotherhood who reside in Boston. I make sure there’s nothing that might reveal us to the wrong people. Since you’re a relation, it fell under my umbrella. Same as when you called and asked for me when you spotted Brody that night. Even if you hadn’t, it still would’ve been me.”

“That must keep you busy.”

“Insanely so,” Aodhán agrees with gusto. “But in a few years, it’ll be some other poor sap’s job, and I’ll head somewhere else. Maybe South Bend, Indiana, or someplace where there are a few folks like us. Can’t stay in one role too long, you see, or people notice I’m not aging.”

That makes perfect sense to me. When I compare Aodhán to how he looked on my doorstep years ago, he hasn’t changed a bit. No gray hairs, no new wrinkles. He only lacks the shadowed expression of that horrible day. It’s nice to see him more comfortable, unburdened by his job. The Mannock seems to provide that for every vampire in a different way. “You must get questions about how you stay so young, huh?”

“Oh, all the time, aye.”

“Is there anything else I can get you?”

“Not at all. But I’m glad to see you here,” Aodhán replies. “Means the world to Rory, and the rest.”

It hits me then. This may all feel new to me, but I’ve been surrounded by this secret brotherhood my entire life. I’ve been on the verge of magic,

growing up, and I didn't know or expect any of it.

I help Sinéad clean up the dishes, and we chat throughout. What begins as small talk turns into something far more in-depth. I learn that she was an unwed mother back in Ireland and was hidden away with a cruel aunt. Not only did she nearly die from complications at birth, but they spirited her baby away.

"It's awful to think that people behaved that way not so long ago," I breathe. "I'm so sorry."

"Don't be," Sinéad says. "It's taken some time, but when I was finally able to see my son in England, full grown and with a family of his own, all the anger I carried washed away. Now I have a legacy. One I can watch over and protect. Sort of like Rory does."

"Do you wish you were there?"

"Sometimes," Sinéad admits. "But I don't think this place can operate without me."

I believe her. She knows the Mannock like the back of her hand, handles drinks, food, and all of her duties like an expert.

"But enough about that," she continues. "I'm excited, actually. It's almost seven o'clock. Tonight's going to be fun."

"Why?" I ask, puzzled. "What's tonight?"

No sooner have I asked the question than the doors to the Mannock burst open, and all thoughts of a slower evening fade. The music stops as an entire gaggle of women—at least twenty of them, if not more—pour into the pub.

I can't believe what I'm seeing. "A-are those nuns?" I ask, staring in surprise at their gray habits and green sashes. They crowd the tavern floor as Leigh tightly embraces one of the women.

"Not just any nuns." Sinéad grins, looking excited. "Druidwives."

Fionn, who usually stands near the entrance—in the tavern, he works as a kind of bouncer—closes the doors and locks it, then changes the sign from Open to Closed.

I'm further shocked when the women remove their habits and let down their hair. They're wearing earrings, necklaces—some kind of wooden charms, carved into trees, rest around their necks, along with raven pendants made of Connemara marble. I remember seeing that kind of gem. My mother wore a cross much like it.

Michael goes to greet them, gleeful. "Molly Shea. Been a minute. Congratulations are in order, I hear."

"So they are." Molly Shea, the woman Leigh embraced, has vibrant red-and-silver hair, gleaming beneath the low light. "My daughter, Moira, is to be wed."

"To my son," another nun pipes up in an Irish lilt, her hair styled in braids and black as pitch. "Christopher Bell."

Michael clears his throat, speaking loudly for all the tavern to hear. "We've a wedding to celebrate. Oscar, the drinks for our guests are on the house. Rory, if you please?"

Rory nods, turning to Brigid's Boys. "'Maid Behind the Bar,' lads," he directs. "Let's pick it up." He stomps his foot, and they begin playing anew, Desmond's fingers flying across his violin in accompaniment.

Leigh approaches Sinéad and me. "I'll help you handle the tables," she says with a smile. "Molly's a dear friend of ours. Sarah, I'll explain quickly. Druidwives are—"

I speak over the music excitedly, happy I finally know something. "Wives of the priests? Cillian told me."

"Well, that makes things easier, then, doesn't it?" She turns to Sinéad. "Michael's talking to the boys as we speak, but just in case, don't be afraid to keep them in line if you feel the need. We're not stealing any of these women away or making soldiers out of them tonight. We want to continue having a good rapport with our magical friends."

"Good, that can be Mickey's problem. I can't watch all of them at once, you know," Sinéad complains softly. "It's like trying to herd cats. Adding

pretty girls to the mix just makes them cats that are all cock and no brain.”

I tune out their banter, distracted by the new guests flitting around. When Cillian told me about the druids before, it felt like a fantasy, but seeing the druidwives really here in front of me has me fascinated by the Brotherhood even more. An entire abbey of secret Celtic witches? How was going back from Cillian’s world ever even a possibility for me?

Leigh catches me staring and sidles up next to me. “Amazing, isn’t it? This life, this world.”

“Witches, vampires,” I breathe, grinning. “Where do I sign up?”

Leigh laughs. “I’ll let you know. Go on, now. Our guests are thirsty!”

I have to remind myself I’m working tonight because with the lively tunes being played, the girlish laughter, singing, and talking, I feel like I’m one of the guests at a party. One hell of a bachelorette party, at that. Near the bar, Michael supervises like a hawk, because once the ale and the beer start flowing and everyone loosens up, some of these nuns start unabashedly flirting with Morrigan vampire men.

I even see one so bold as to down her drink and head to the bar, complimenting Oscar and making him blush from all her attention. He smiles and laughs and flirts in return, but overall, he minds his manners.

The bride-to-be in question is a darling if ever I’ve met one. She has luscious strawberry-blond curls and a pretty face that turns pink when she drinks. Her bright blue eyes shine with merriment, and she wears a crown of flowers. Listening to everyone talk, the wedding is going to take place on the twenty-second, just a couple of weeks away on the Winter Solstice.

“They follow both Christian and pagan calendars,” Sinéad explains as we hustle to gather trays of food for them, more fish and chips than I’ve ever seen anyone order. Any more, and we might run out of fish.

“So they worship both pagan gods and the Christian God?” I ask, puzzled.

“One pagan goddess, I think, more than the others. The . . . Morrigan.”

Sinéad has to force the name out and instantly combats a shudder.

“She’s the one?” I ask, avoiding saying Her name, since it seems to make Sinéad uncomfortable to even mention it. “Who everyone took the Oath to?”

“That’s right. Be careful not to say Her name, because She always listens when you do.”

“How do you know?” I say, entranced. “That She listens, I mean?”

“You feel it, like a prickle up your spine, and the hair on the back of your neck stands on end, like someone’s breathing cold air over you.” Sinéad shivers again. “Anyway, the druids never have to worry about it. They can worship both, and they don’t get burned if they try to enter a church, not like we do. It’s sort of a mystery how they manage it. But they make it work.”

“Can anyone call on Her and take the Oath?”

“Anyone can call, but She doesn’t always respond. She has to choose you, and She prefers warriors, I think. But I don’t know that anyone really knows how it works.”

This is the most excitement I’ve had since my date with Cillian. Trying to process this new information, I stay on my feet, moving swiftly back and forth and putting plates in front of every guest. I offer new mugs to Molly Shea and another mature druidwife named Charlotte Bell, who I assume due to their age and placement of seating are the ones in charge of this outing.

“I haven’t met you before,” Molly says as she accepts the drink happily. “Are you a new soldier?”

“Me? No, no, I’m just a waitress.”

“But you’re part of the Brotherhood, aren’t you?” Charlotte calls over the noise and the music.

“I suppose I am, sort of,” I answer, unsure. “I feel more like a visitor at the moment. I’m still learning.”

“She hasn’t taken the Oath yet,” Molly explains for me to Charlotte when her companion doesn’t quite hear me.

“Oh! That’s grand,” Charlotte actually seems excited. “I always love

helping new bloods take the Oath to Our Lady without all the upset of being near dead. She's terrifying enough as it is."

I've heard hushed talk of the Oath so many times but never in detail. I wish I could sit down and ask them more, but I have work to do.

Molly gently pats my arm. "Welcome to the fold, honey. It's about time they brought another lady into their ranks."

That's when I realize what she means.

She thinks I'm going to become a vampire.

My heart pounds, my stomach squeezing me from the inside. Not from dread or fear but exhilaration.

I've never even thought about that—becoming like them. Is that even a possibility for me? Why does such a thought excite me the way it does? I bring over more drinks to the bride-to-be where she sits with her friends, offering her a smile when she gives me one.

"You're so pretty!" she declares, her nose a bit rosy from drink. She giggles. "What's your name?"

"Sarah McCready," I reply. "And you?"

"Moira Shea," she answers, clearly on cloud nine. "Ever been to a druid party before?"

"Can't say I have." I set her mugs down, stifling soft laughter of my own. These girls are so funny. They look so innocent, but they're not strangers to getting plastered. A few of them are belting out songs with Brigid's Boys, and I'm pretty sure I see one of them trying to talk up a bemused Fionn Bradigan by the door.

Oh, that is so the wrong tree to bark up, even though that is one damned good-looking tree I'm sure womankind everywhere wouldn't mind climbing. I should probably save him in a minute.

"You're still human! That's so good. You should come to one," Moira insists. "They get *really* wild."

"Oh? How wild?"

Her friend next to her drapes across Moira's shoulders and giggles. "*Baby-making* wild."

Oh, wow. That's quite an invitation. I step back and nearly trip over myself, but I balance out and manage to preserve my dignity. "Oh, like, you make—but with other people arou—uh."

The women both smile up at me, almost like they're plotting together. I can barely imagine pregnancy, let alone trying to get pregnant at a party while I'm being watched. "I'm not sure that's for me. Uh, babies, I mean. I can barely pay my bills on time."

The bride's friend *tsks*. "I think the vampires are gonna get her."

"Aw," another girl pipes up. "They always get the good ones!"

I try to rein them in by offering refills, then make my escape to the bar. Oscar has a second man with him, to help fill the orders.

"Having fun?" I ask him.

"Oh, aye, loads," he says with a wink, and then I've got a full tray to deliver, yet again. "These druid girls are going to drink the tavern dry at this rate."

"Are you sure you're not on the menu?" He's been quite popular with the girls today.

"If I recall, I'm the vampire," Oscar replies wryly. "If anyone's doing the drinking, it's me." He nods behind me with a knowing smirk. "Cillian's here."

A prickle raises all the hairs on the back of my neck. Fending off a shiver, I turn to see him sitting alone at one of the tables farthest from the gathering of women. When our eyes meet, his stern countenance melts away, and he offers a subtle smile. I finish handing off everything on my tray before going to see him.

"Well, hey there." I can't help but flirt with him; the party tonight has me in high spirits. "You from outta town?"

"Oh, very much so," he quips. "Think you could show me around later?"

My heart somersaults in my chest that he's comfortable and relaxed enough to flirt and play along with me. I wondered if we'll ever get past this hunger of his that he has to keep on such a tight leash. For once, he actually seems at ease around me.

Laughing, I have to stop myself from finding an excuse to touch him. "With a face like yours? I'll take you anywhere."

"You'd better watch yourself," he replies. "Teasing me the way you are."

"Are you saying I'm in danger?"

"Maybe. I'm beginning to think you like it."

I do. So much. But I'm on the clock now, as much as I'd like to slip away somewhere and kiss him so hard he sees stars. The tavern, the party, all of it is affecting me. Slow isn't a word in my vocabulary at the moment. "Did you need anything to drink?"

"I'm drinking you in at present," Cillian answers. "Watching you walk around in those jeans is mesmerizing. Does wonders for morale."

"Oh, really?" I'm grateful the music is playing loud enough to cover our voices. Otherwise the cat would really be out of the bag, and I'm not sure Cillian is the kiss-and-tell type. He might want to play it discreet. Maybe I should stop flirting, for his sake.

It's as if Cillian can read my mind. He reaches out and takes my hand, pulling me near. "So the druid women are trying to steal you away from me, are they?"

"*Trying* to," I reply, playful. "Should I let them succeed?"

The crimson flash in Cillian's eyes is telling. He wants to say no, but he's restrained. "That depends on whether or not you want children."

This feels like a *really* heavy conversation to be having after one date, and in a pub, and I grapple with my discomfort, shifting in place. Maybe I shouldn't be surprised. Cillian doesn't seem like most guys I've dated, the sort who live as if there's no tomorrow and don't ask the big questions. Cillian has endless tomorrows. That unnerving sense in my gut fades away.

It's not the question that's bothering me. It's the fact that this is new territory—a man is being up front with me for once, right at the beginning, instead of wasting my time and pushing that subject off until later.

Cillian's right here. Mysterious, veiled, both exciting and terrifying all at once. A man who could kill another without effort. A man who would drink blood from me without a second thought if his desire outweighed his will. And now, he's giving me an out. Another chance to take a path that isn't him.

I get it. Less pain for both of us that way. I understand how he must be thinking.

He must read my face because he sighs. "That was too much, too serious, and too quick, wasn't it? Apologies. My mouth works faster than my mind at times."

"No, it's okay. Really," I tell him. "Honestly, I've always been on the fence. I've never felt called one way or the other. Hard to imagine taking care of a child when you're still trying to take care of yourself."

Cillian watches as tables are lifted and placed to the side, making room for the druid women to dance. They twirl and spin one another around to the music. Some of them tug vampires into dancing too, and the men, helpless against these pretty faces, can't say no. Even Michael rises to his feet with Leigh, and they join in the fray, looking smitten with each other like a pair of newlyweds.

"You'd fit in with them quite well," Cillian says. "They're lovely people. You'd be well cared for. I'm sure a priest would be happy to make a wife out of a woman like you."

"As fun as it sounds to deflower a priest, I prefer where I am," I say, resting a hand on his shoulder.

Cillian arches a brow. "And where is that?"

"With you," I answer. "You keep trying to deter me, Cillian. It won't work. I'm in this. I want to be in this. Being with all of you? That's all the magic I need."

“You’re sure about that?”

“Very sure.” I wish I could lower myself onto his lap, be affectionate, but with all the eyes and ears here, I hesitate.

Cillian doesn’t. Taking my hand, he slowly pulls me onto his lap. I’m astonished, then inwardly delighted as one of his arms curls around my thighs, almost possessive in the way he grips me. He wraps the other around my waist.

“Good,” he rumbles. When I lean into him, he whispers into my ear, “Because the thought of another man putting his hands upon you, having you the way I want to have you—I cannot bear it.”

A shiver runs down my body, awakening heat within me that pools between my legs. I want to hear more words like that from him. But Rory has noticed my seat on Cillian’s lap and is watching us carefully from where he plays. His expression fades from big smiles to something deliberately neutral. He regards me for a moment then looks away, his jovial nature returning like it never left. Maybe he’s not big on public displays of affection. I’ll be sure to chat with him later about it. Michael has even noticed now, double taking occasionally from where he dances with Leigh.

Yep. Cat’s definitely out of the bag now. I probably shouldn’t irritate my protective bear of a grandfather with too much hanky-panky. I may not be worried for me, but I’d rather not see Cillian get stuffed into a garbage bag and thrown into the dumpster.

“Does that mean you like me, Cillian Darragh?” I murmur.

“I like you very much.” Cillian gently rubs the small of my back. “I am a honeybee, drawn to your nectar. What choice have I?”

“That doesn’t sound romantic at all,” I admit, laughing sheepishly. “That you like me without a choice.”

Cillian shakes his head. “That’s my hunger. Without it, I would still be helpless against you. I promise.”

“You have a way with words.”

“Try hanging around Mickey for near a hundred years. You learn a few things here and there.” Cillian’s thumb subtly traces my thigh.

“Don’t suppose we could go somewhere private?” I ask. “Where I could show you just how much I like you?”

“Not unless you want me to be a very dead man.” Cillian’s face lights up with a mischievous grin. “Rory could murder an angel with the look he’s giving me. Best not detract from the festivities too much.”

“You’re right,” I say, reluctantly getting up. “I’m sure drinks are running low.”

Cillian allows me to slip away, but then grips my hand and gently pulls me back. “Let me see you again,” he whispers. “Tonight.”

My heart leaps, though I do my best to hide it. “Your place or mine?”

“Either. Say yes.”

“Yes,” I breathe, and he lets me go. My feet are lighter on the floor. Focusing on anything beyond getting the Mannock’s magical guests more beer is difficult because my thoughts are far away, imagining what tonight may bring. I’m not going to push for anything. It’s nice to have a man set the pace a bit, after dealing with propositions from surfer boys and self-proclaimed rock stars, who would never say anything like *I’m helpless against you*.

Shit. Am I weak in the knees right now? Maybe a little bit.

This is nothing like I ever imagined it’d be. Before the Morrigan Brotherhood, before Mannock Tavern, when I thought of vampires, I thought of cold, dreary evil. But everything about the people around me is colorful and full of life, and I can’t imagine any of them being *evil* at all. They’ve got an entire pub full of women, and they aren’t pouncing on them and tearing them apart. There’s honor, nobility, and respect. Am I being naive? Many of them are veterans, but even I know there’s no such thing as “good guys” and “bad guys” in war. Several more have been around in Boston since Prohibition, which nixes that “good guy” possibility.

But life here isn't heroes and fairytales. It's real. It exists beneath the surface. And knowing that doesn't worry me or make me feel afraid. It comforts me. I lived my whole life here with my parents. I have a great-grandfather who knew precisely who I was and where I lived and kept tabs on me; a distant yet watchful protector. Cillian Darragh had a house right next to me, even though I never saw him, never suspected. Rory, Cillian, Aodhán—they were just a hair's breadth away from me. Taking a step into their world almost seems natural.

Maybe this is what I was meant to do my whole life. I just couldn't do it until I was older. Until I was a full-grown woman, ready to understand it. Maybe I was *meant* to be here.

Okay, whoa, easy, Sarah. Since when do I believe in fate? That is *so* not me. I go on one date with a vampire, and now I'm second-guessing my whole life? What has gotten into me?

Magick.

That is what's gotten into me. Like a child discovering fairies dancing around a fairy ring, or a reporter finding out the man she's been working with the whole time is a superhero from outer space. The secret I carry, being here among these people, has brought me to life in a way I can't describe. I never want to go back. And if anyone ever tries to make me, I'll bite, scratch, and claw my way right back to this tavern and the brotherhood operating under its roof.

"He can't stop looking at you," Sinéad whispers to me as we stand together and rest, watching the druid women wheel around each other in circles, light on their feet and beaming bright smiles as they continue their celebration.

I glance at Cillian and catch his gaze as speaks in hushed tones with Michael. I have no idea what they're discussing. Me, perhaps, but I'm not convinced.

I'm fairly certain the High King of vampires has better things to do than

gossip about a girlfriend. If that's what I am. Just thinking about it makes my heart skip a beat.

A girlfriend. A *vampire's* girlfriend. This is crazy. Why does it feel so completely sane?

"Probably because he wants to drink me like a nightcap, by his own admission," I reply.

Sinéad laughs. "A fair assumption, but I saw you both before. I meant what I said—Cillian has *never* been this way. With anyone. You're special, Sarah. I suspected you might be."

It's humbling to hear something like that from Sinéad, who is by far one of the most interesting women I've ever met.

"I'm really, really not," I insist. "Just ask all the other thousands of failed singers in California."

"That isn't what I mean. And I doubt that's what he sees." Sinéad nudges me with her shoulder. "He's a right pain in the ass, though. I hope you can handle him." Then she laughs.

"What's funny?" I ask.

She shakes her head, grinning. "He heard me. Come on, let's start cleaning up these tables." She and I load our arms full of dirtied plates and make our way to the kitchen.

The tavern's doors fly open, breaking the locks.

The music grinds to a halt in discord. Gusts of cold winter wind fill the air as a young man staggers inside, his clothing singed and bloodied. His wild auburn hair is mussed and tangled, his bright eyes as wide as they can go.

Sinéad drops her entire pile of dishes, which clatter and crash on the floor, some of them shattering in pieces. "Eamon," she gasps in shock.

It's him—the young man from the photo in Rory's living room, Sinéad's dear friend whom she often goes to visit. The one I've heard everyone talk about, in one way or another. But what's he doing here? The blood on his clothes causes my stomach to tighten.

Is it his, or someone else's?

Eamon looks straight at her, fighting to keep his balance. Michael and Cillian are up on their feet, Michael swiftly closing the distance between them.

“Jesus Christ, Eamon, what happened to you? Are you all right?” Michael checks Eamon for wounds.

Eamon opens his mouth, but his words come out garbled, like he isn't sure where he is or he's temporarily lost his wits.

Michael calls to the bartender, who's already scampering off. “Fetch some blood for him. Quickly!”

“Speak up, lad, what is it? What's wrong?” Cillian urges as he swiftly joins them.

Eamon doesn't answer right away, his head swiveling.

Rory casts aside his instrument and frets, pushing Eamon's messy hair from his sooty face. “Where are you hurt, lad?” he asks soothingly. “Easy, now. You're safe. Tell us what's happened.”

“St. Leonard.” Eamon's voice is strained, like he's on the cusp of losing it entirely. “It's been burned to the ground.”

CHAPTER 8

Innocent Blood



Cillian

The Cathedral of St. Winifred is in an uproar.

I didn't even have time to speak with Sarah at length, telling her instead to go home and stay there until she's heard from me. Our response was immediate. Michael sent Rory and Fionn to quickly gather the most mature of our numbers, those who can handle blood and injury without succumbing to hunger, while ordering the rest to keep a close eye on the tavern and the city at large.

I land alongside Michael, Sinéad, and Leigh. Desmond Moore and Oscar Haskins are behind us with Brigid's Boys by several minutes, intent upon returning the frightened and worried druid wives safely to cathedral grounds. Despite his disheveled appearance, Eamon insisted on bringing us straight away rather than being treated for any of his wounds. He's nearly burned, and slivers of oakwood haven't yet been removed from his chest and arms.

None of us are able to enter the cathedral itself. It's considered holy ground, and it'll burn us badly if we try. Instead, Eamon takes us to the red brick abbey. It overlooks a courtyard that bursts with flowers during the

spring. In the bleak of winter, it's quiet, serene, and covered with snow.

Within the abbey ring tortured cries and desolate sobs. I follow Eamon at high speed as he rushes through the doors.

"They're in here," he calls in earnest. "Hurry!"

Leigh keeps up with Michael and me without effort, but we stop short in our tracks. Half a dozen priests, normally barred from the abbey where the nuns live and sleep, are overwhelmed with frightened innocents, women, and children in the infirmary wing. Some of them suffer burns. Others, wounds from close combat.

I can barely believe my eyes. One has a horrid slash across her nose. And is that a crossbow bolt embedded in a nun's shoulder blade?

"Sweet Jesus," Michael whispers under his breath.

Catching sight of Father Joseph Brown as he kneels in front of three youngsters wailing for their missing mother, I make my way to him.

"Joe," I utter, and my presence startles the little ones. They can't be more than five years old. One can barely walk. "What's happened?"

"They're druidwives from St. Leonard. They came pouring through the portal in the catacombs with their children," he says, his cassock sleeves rolled up beyond his elbows and stained red. "It's sheer luck and the grace of God that they made it this far. Not a single man among them. It was a young boy who cast the spell to bring them here, and he was twelve. Twelve! In complete shock after watching his mother and father cut down in cold blood." His umber hands shake as he washes them in a nearby sink.

"St. Leonard," I urge him. "Is it really—"

"I can't say," Joe answers. "Tommie's seeing to a few of the girls. He might know. But we need the women back from the tavern. Some of these injuries are too great, and I'm only one healer."

"They're on their way already," I promise, leaving him to deal with the burden of treating the injured. There are so many. Leigh is already diving into assist, using her own abilities to tend to a pair of pregnant mothers and the

wee ones clinging to them.

“Where’s Tommie?” I ask her.

“With Michael,” she answers, troubled and fighting to maintain a veneer of calm. “Down the hall.” She focuses on one of the young women, kneeling down. Instinctively, the druidwife shrinks from her, gripping her swollen belly and weeping. “There now, I’m not going to hurt you. We’re just going to take some of these cuts and bruises away, okay?”

Sinéad and I exchanged worried looks. “What should I do?” she asks helplessly. “I’m not a healer, Cillian.”

“Help Joe,” I answer. “He’s overwhelmed. He could use you—”

“Eamon!” One of the very pregnant druid-wives, her habit sullied with dirt and soot, leaps to her feet and rushes to him. He stands there dumbfounded as she throws her arms around his neck, sobbing.

“Thank God you’re safe,” the girl blubbers into his shoulder. “I was so worried.”

Taken aback and somewhat unbalanced, Eamon nearly stumbles. Unsure of what to do with his hands, he gently pats her back.

“I’m fine, Aine, really,” he answers awkwardly. “Don’t cry. You’ll be grand, I promise.”

Sinéad’s feet are glued to the floor, watching their exchange, her shoulders taut.

This is a distraction we can’t afford at present. “Sinéad,” I bark in stern command. “Help Joe. Now.”

She snaps out of it, tearing her eyes away from Eamon and this girl neither of us know, before turning around and darting down the corridor, ginger curls billowing behind her.

“Fuck sake,” I mutter, weaving through this mess of druidfolk.

“You should let us investigate.”

I follow the sound of Michael’s voice. My High King and Thomas Coffey—the bishop of St. Winifred, as well as the community’s archdruid—are

engaged in a heated argument.

“You’ve got an entire monastery of people to look after,” Michael says. “We’re meant for battle. This is what we do.”

“My father resides there, Mickey,” Tommie says. “My mother too, and she’s not here. You’re not going to keep me from looking into this myself. You’re not the only one capable of fighting.”

“We don’t even know what we’re fighting against, Tommie!” Michael’s voice rises. “And going in blindly might cost more lives. If you’d only listen —”

“I’m going with or without you, Mickey, and that’s the end of it,” Tommie retorts. “Either meet me in the catacombs in ten minutes or don’t.” He then slowly sighs, forcing the breath out with all his self-control. He glances at me. “I’m sorry, both of you. But this is a druid affair. It falls upon me, and I can’t send you in my stead. I should be thanking you as it is.”

“Why?” Michael asks.

“All of the people here,” Tommie elaborates. “The women and children who managed to escape did so because of Eamon. He fought off their attackers and saved them, at great risk to his own life. Many of the women have attested to it. The ones not too shaken to speak, at least.”

Michael folds his arms as he listens in consternation, but I don’t need to hear any more. I return to Eamon, finding him guiding the girl Aine carefully into a chair like she were made of glass.

“Eamon.” I beckon him, and he’s at my side in an instant. “Tell me what happened. What you saw. Who attacked? Who were they?”

Troubled, Eamon shakes his head. “I’m going to sound fucking mad, but . . . I don’t know. They used the shadows.”

“How many were there?” I ask, frowning.

“I couldn’t tell you.” Eamon grits his teeth in frustration, staring at the ground. “I should be able to see everything in the dark. Everything. We all can, right? I could see shapes and movement but I couldn’t see *them*. It was

like they were hidden from me, somehow.”

“And the druids saw nothing either?”

“That’s the thing,” Eamon says. “The St. Leonard druids could. They did. But I couldn’t.”

“It’s a miracle you escaped at all.”

“I was the only one who did.” Eamon lowers his head, almost as though he’s ashamed. “There were others tending trees, Cillian. Like me. And they couldn’t see them either. They were . . . ” He chokes on his words, and I’m reminded of just how young he looks, even when he’s lived a lifetime just as much as I have. “They killed them all. Killed every last Morrigan vampire. Right in front of me. Nearly got me too.”

“There was nothing you could’ve done. But you saved the next generation of St. Leonard. Bishop Coffey says we’re going back there. He’s bringing other druids, and Mickey wants us with him.”

Eamon flinches. “I don’t think it’s a good idea,” he mutters. “If we can’t see them, then—”

“We’ll have magic on our side, and nobody’s being taken by surprise,” I reply. “I won’t ask you to come along.”

“No!” Eamon protests, recovering quickly and as adamant as ever. “I’m no coward. And it’s better that I join you, anyway.”

“You’re certain?”

“I’m not going to be left behind,” he replies. “Not this time.”

I clap his back. “That’s my lad. Let’s go.”

“Cillian!” Sinéad calls as we walk together toward the exit to the courtyard. “Where the hell are you going?”

“To St. Leonard,” I reply. “You stay here. These women need your help.”

“It isn’t safe for you, Sinéad,” Eamon agrees when she bunches her shoulders, aghast. “The Brotherhood can’t spare you.”

She scoffs. “So I’m to be considered a warrior and an equal until it’s time to actually fight?” she demands. “Is that the way it is?”

“Cillian and Eamon are right.” Michael steps in, Tommie at his side. “St. Winifred is vulnerable to attack, and I need sharp senses that’ve seen combat. That means I need you here, Sinéad. Protecting them, so they can focus on aiding their wounded.”

Sinéad falls silent. She doesn’t like it, but she accepts it, growling, “Fine. But you all better come back here in one piece, or so help me.”

Standing next to Sinéad, Leigh reaches for Michael, who pauses long enough to take her hand. “Your skills are needed here,” he says. “And we shouldn’t face the unknown together and risk both our lives at the same time. If anything happens—”

“I know,” Leigh says softly. “I’ll watch over them. You be safe. Sinéad’s right—we need you. All of you. I’d prefer you shoot first and ask questions later.”

“We will. The lads are all outside at the ready. Have them secure the cathedral grounds. They need to be watchful.”

Leigh exhales and nods. “Okay,” she says, though she doesn’t sound happy about it. “Go, then. Hurry. I’ve got things here.”

Sinéad turns on her heel and heads back toward the infirmary.

Michael turns to me. “Cillian.”

“Yes, Mickey.”

“Get Rory McCready and Desmond Moore. They’re to come with us. Go with Leigh. Ensure that Aodhán, Oscar, Fionn, and the rest of the lads know they’re to guard this place with their lives. No doubt the druids will be bolstering their defenses when they can. They’re to make sure they’re well protected as they do so. Remind Fionn that Leigh’s safety remains his priority, first and foremost, above all else. Meet me in the catacombs once you’re ready.”

“Understood.” Fleet of foot, I all but fly through the abbey and out the door to seek out the others.

Once upon a time, I was the commander, the man barking orders. I know

war better than any among the Phantom Queen's numbers, even though I'm not counted among Her eldest warriors.

But Michael has a kinder heart than me. He always has. He lacks the rage and the impulse. It makes him a better leader. I'm glad he took up the mantle—and, oddly enough, I'm grateful Leigh carries it with him.

No doubt it's heavy upon their shoulders now.



Michael, Eamon, Desmond, Rory, and I hardly look like an army, but the five of us alone are enough to wipe out an entire battalion of mortal men, with the dark and our wits as our allies.

“Be ready,” Michael warns as we step through Thomas Coffey's portal into St. Leonard's prayer chapel. All the hairs on my body stand on end.

We're met with absolute silence, and the eternal warmth of the hidden monastery's interior—a continuous spell kept on by the druids to keep their oak and rowan trees alive and flourishing—is absent. The cold air stinks of smoke. My breath wisps in front of my face. I'm reminded of Korea; how eerie and silent it could be before an enemy attack.

Michael is on edge as the druids spread out, Tommie and two of his priests taking the lead. Uttering a spell in Gaeilge together, they light our way as we head silently toward the courtyard. My vampiric instinct is alive within me, checking every corner, listening for any sound that might betray an ambush. Yet, nothing comes.

“Bleedin' Christ,” Michael whispers as we pass the courtyard.

The rowan trees are smoldering embers, leaves withered away and wood snapping. Beneath their branches lay the staked and decapitated bodies of several of our brethren, those sent here for breaking the laws of the Brotherhood. Cautiously, I head into the grove and check them, Eamon behind me. His sadness is as palpable as the ash drifting to the ground from

the burning trees, all rank with the stench of petrol.

“Patrick was going to rejoin the Brotherhood in less than a year. He talked about it every day. I used to tell him to piss off, stop rubbing it in my face. Now he’ll never—”

“Oi. There was nothing you could’ve done. Nothing. Understand?” Eamon’s lip quivers, and he nods as I urge him on. “Let’s get to the bottom of this.”

“Cillian,” Michael says. “Can you sense what happened here? Place your hand on one of the fallen?”

I kneel down over Patrick’s cleanly severed head, gently placing my palm on his forehead. “Dead too long,” I mutter. “I can’t see a thing.”

Michael’s eyes light up with another idea. “What about Eamon?”

“I can try.” Over the years, I’ve already seen bits and pieces of Eamon’s history from touching his shoulder or the occasional jostle. I’ve witnessed his time as a rebel in the Easter Rising and his cold execution by soldiers in the streets of Cork City, to his frenzied attacks upon too-political civilians when they spoke their piece about what is occurring back home.

Eamon nods his permission and stills as I place my hand on him, the others surrounding us with their backs turned in. My body goes taut like a wire. I clench my teeth as I try to slow down and make sense of the attack on St. Leonard, but it’s just a flash, a passing memory. I feel Eamon’s confusion, how distraught he was when he saw priests falling to gleaming swords, held by enemies he couldn’t see. I do what I can to focus on them, but they aren’t even shadows. A barely noticeable shimmer in the air, almost like a mirage.

That’s all there is. He couldn’t make sense of the onslaught, so the protection of the women and their children, leading them into the thick woods of Tullymore away from the slaughter, became his objective. Fear permeates from him. Not for himself, but for druidfolk. A fear of failing them.

I let him go and shake my head when Michael peers at me searchingly. The lad’s a hero, if nothing else.

Bishop Coffey fixates on a large plume of smoke pouring into the air. “The Great Oak,” he cries in dismay. “They’ve burned the Morrigan’s most sacred tree!”

Anger sears through me. First the slaughter of our friends, and now this? But before I can formulate a plan to strategically approach and clear the area, he and the other two druids take off running in that direction.

“Wait! We don’t know if they’re still here!” Michael calls after them, but they ignore him. He snarls and looks to Desmond and Rory. “Fucksake. Go after them. Quickly.”

Desmond and Rory take no time in catching up to them, their footfalls echoing through the now empty monastery grounds. Michael and Eamon remain with me, continuing cautiously through the groves. I hear them speak of checking of survivors, but I know there isn’t much point. We’d be able to hear heartbeats. Shallow breaths.

Aside from the crackling of flames, we hear nothing.

I’m careful where I step. The druids have all been murdered, and the evidence of overkill is clearly nauseating to Eamon, who has to take a moment to steady himself. None of the strikes I see were meant to deliver swift deaths. I’ve seen it before at war—many times, regardless of loyalty to country or code, when an enemy is hated enough to merit it.

From what I can garner, the druids were taken out first. Then their killers went for the vampires in the rowan grove.

Not all the nuns were fortunate to escape with Eamon. Several are scattered lifeless in the corridors, their crumpled habits hiding their bodies. I take the time to inspect one such innocent. She lies on her back, her belly lightly swollen, in the early months of her pregnancy. Two cross bolts protrude from her heart and shoulder. Her glazed eyes stare up at nothing.

“I’m sorry,” I say as I carefully lift up her skirts to check beneath them. No bruising on her thighs or hips. These attackers weren’t interested in violating the druidwives.

They meant to wipe them out.

That's when I see a white lily in her limp hand, bright against her ashen skin. Sighing softly, I take it into my hand, then instantly drop it with a hiss. I stare at my fingertips as they smoke and turn red like I've just grabbed hot coals. *Were the flowers sprinkled with holy water?* Only sacred Christian places and items can cause me to burn like this. Dread sweeps over me as I rise to my feet, Desmond's warning fresh in my mind.

'Twas a Lilyman did this.

Could it truly be?

Surveying the damage is a long process. I'm constantly listening for anything that might give away an attack, but the eerie silence remains.

I pause when I find another nun, her body protecting the remains of her child, both struck by cross bolts. Lilies have been laid in their open palms, freshly bloomed. I take care not to touch them.

I'm seized with memories I'd rather forget. Of Irish women terrorized by men while their countryside houses are set aflame by English mercenaries, their children wailing as their mothers were beaten and their hair was sheared.

How filled with rage I was, barely twenty years, ready to slaughter every British soldier I could get my hands on, and those treasonous enough to harbor them. How I felt no guilt or shame when landowners wept while we dragged them out of their homes, executed their patriarchs and burned their fine estates.

How I paid for my sins with the blood of my wife, discovering her when it was too late.

Finding the others at the base of the Great Oak, I hear weeping again. Tommie's eyes are wet with tears, and he's holding himself together as best he can. Were I him, I could not.

His father's body hangs from the Morrigan's most sacred tree, unclothed and nailed by his hands and feet, his body charred and the air around us thick

with the stench of burning human flesh.

Thomas Darmody, Archdruid of Ireland, is dead.

Guilt and bleakness are all I know in that moment. *How could we let this happen?* It's rare I'm shocked by bloodshed, but this—I never expected this.

“Come away, my friend,” one of Tommie’s druids whispers hurriedly. “Protection spells have been stripped. We must restore them to hide this destruction, else the mundane might find this place.”

The faces of my brothers are all twisted with shock and anger, save Desmond Moore. The wind blows his shaggy blond hair from his pale face as he stares up into the slain druid’s eyes, his mouth a dour, thin line as he speaks with Michael.

“You were right,” I say softly to Desmond, joining them. “I found more lilies, like the one we found near Murdock’s body.”

Desmond nods somberly. “The Order of the Lily has been restored, beyond any doubt.”

How foolish I’ve been, partaking in conflicts between Irish Catholic and Irish Protestant, worried about car bombs and British rule, when I should’ve been hunting these, our enemies, those who would cull our allies like unwanted pests or tainted livestock.

Michael is shaken by the same thoughts, his haunted gaze lifting to the burning tree. His narrowed scarlet eyes scan the Great Oak’s lower limbs and branches, all cut before it was set aflame.

Every part of this tree taken by the enemy are being forged into weapons to kill us.

“He taunted me,” Michael whispers. “I thought he mocked me, but it was a warning. I didn’t listen.”

“What are you talking about?” I ask.

“*Flowers will seal your fate.*” Michael’s voice is faint, far away. “That’s what Sean Moore said to me when we ended his reign in Boston, and I was crowned High King. We sentenced him to tend trees. He anticipated this. He

knew I would be caught unawares.” He stares at the elder druid’s crucified body. “This is my fault.”

“No,” Desmond interjects. “My brother is often cryptic on purpose for his own amusement. It’s all a game to him. He should’ve told you more about the Lilymen, but his defeat made him spiteful.”

“These deaths aren’t on your hands, Mickey,” I say adamantly. “The blame lies with the murderers alone.”

Our discussion ends abruptly, pierced by the sharp squalling of an infant. I swivel, startled by the eeriness of it in the silence of the abbey.

“Where is it coming from?” Michael squints, trying to pinpoint its location.

“We have to find it!” Eamon perks up, looking around wildly.

“It may be a trap,” Desmond adds in a dark and untrusting tone.

But Eamon doesn’t listen. He bolts, his body a blur as he moves.

“Wait, Eamon!” I call, surging after him into the abbey, weaving around corridors to the women’s wing. “We don’t know if it’s real—”

But the baby continues crying, growing louder and louder in my ears, awakening something older than the monster in me, something I thought I killed a long time ago, a primal and paternal need to locate the source of this innocent and vulnerable sound.

I’ve seen so many die. So many lives destroyed, from those who brought it upon themselves to those who didn’t deserve their ends. If there is a child alive in this place, I cannot leave it.

And the beast harbored within my heart, my veins, my very being, agrees.

The infant’s cries stop completely without warning, much to my consternation. Eamon slows, and I catch up to him as he turns into a common area, where embers in a stone fireplace glow. Sofas and chairs are all vacant.

“It was here,” he whispers. “It came from here, I swear.”

An elderly nun lies in the corner, her upper body hidden behind a brown chair. Tentative, I weave around it and frown, exhaling.

“It’s Abbess Coffey,” I murmur, kneeling over Tommie’s mother. A white lily is draped over her abdomen.

Eamon’s voice is quiet, yet strained. “She never hurt a soul. She was strict but always kind.”

I rise to my feet and walk to the center of the room, trying to make sense of what we heard, when something creaks beneath the rug under my feet.

“Wait,” I say in alarm. I turn to Eamon. “Throw the chairs off!”

He works with me to remove the furniture in the center of the room. We fling them aside without effort, and they smash against the stone walls. I motion for Eamon to take the other end of the old rug, and we pull it backward.

A pair of thatched wooden trap doors, as long and as wide as a man, betray a cellar. Crouching together, Eamon and I grab one each and pull them back. We’re met with shouts of surprises and frightened whimpers of dismay, peering down into the terrified faces of at least a dozen druidwives, their children, and two acolytes dressed in gray-and-green robes whose hands are alight with magick, ready to point it at us.

“Stand down,” I say swiftly to the acolytes, who are only boys. Sixteen, seventeen years old, at most. “We’re here with the High King and the archdruid.”

“Our Lady’s warriors,” says one of the boys, his bony shoulders slumping in relief. Guilt wracks his features, and he looks like he might burst into tears. “We tried to tell the abbess to hide with the women, but she said we had to stay with them and use spells to cover the cries of the wee ones. Th-they came and—she sacrificed herself, for us.”

“I thought we were dead,” the other lad admits, too shocked to shed any tears. “I couldn’t keep up the spell any longer. I fumbled it. I thought they’d hear the baby and come back.”

“They’re gone,” I assure him as Eamon beckons them all out of their hiding place. “Let’s get you to Bishop Coffey and the others. They’ll get you

to St. Winifred safely.”

Straightening, I look at Eamon, who has masked all of his emotions to focus on the moment. It was something I taught him, when dealing with innocent people caught in the middle of an unforgiving war.

It strikes me then. He’s no longer the boy I knew, eager to prove himself. He’s truly a man.

Guarding the druidfolk through the abbey, wary at every corner, I’m relieved to reunite with Michael. A shadow is cast over his face.

“We need all of our people returned to Boston,” he says in a low voice to me and Rory. “Every single vampire in America needs to be here, within the city. The longer they remain alone, the larger the risk they’ll be hunted down. We’re vulnerable when we’re isolated.”

“I’ll send the lads out,” Rory agrees. “It’ll take them a week or so, but they’ll get it done.” He looks to me. “You keep Sarah safe while I’m gone. If anything happens to her—”

“Nothing will happen to Sarah,” I answer, though beneath my own mask of calm, I’m fiercely adamant, honored Rory has entrusted me with the safety of his own, and all the more determined to see it done. “I promise.”



My feet lead me mindlessly to Sarah’s front door. It’s something like three in the morning, but my thoughts are torturing me, my muscles taut with worry. I’m relieved when I hear her footsteps down the stairs.

She swiftly opens the door, surprised. “Cillian. Is everything okay?”

My tongue is heavy in my mouth. I’m not sure where to begin, or why I’m here. “Apologies. I . . . should’ve let you sleep.”

“I wasn’t sleeping,” she admits. “I’ve been awake.” She studies me, concern plain upon her face. She reaches for my coat. “It’s freezing. Come inside.”

Haunted by the images I've seen tonight, I feel small, helpless, even in her presence. She takes my coat and sees speckles of blood on my sleeve, frowning. "Cillian, are you hurt?"

"No," I answer hesitantly. "And . . . yes. It isn't my blood. The things I saw tonight, I—" The words pour out of me swiftly, like I've no control over them. "I wish I could tell you everything, but I'm not sure if I should. Rory likely would tell me not to, but I . . ."

Sarah takes my hands. "Cillian, you can talk to me about anything. I don't really know what you're talking about, but I'm willing and ready to listen. I hope you know that."

Her words fill me with hope and dread, all at once. Hope that I can confide in her. Dread because knowing me and everything I've done is a burden I can hardly bear myself. "I fear you won't look at me the same."

"You're a vampire," she replies, offering a reassuring smile. I wish I could return it, but after tonight, I'm not sure what there is for me to smile about. "I'm not sure there's much more that could shock me. Do you want to sit down? I'll make you some tea."

I nod faintly and allow her to lead me to her living room. Soon, two cups of caffeinated Earl Grey cool on the coffee table as she comes to sit next to me, slipping her slender hand into mine.

"I don't know where to start," I admit, staring at the dark, steaming liquid.

"The beginning is usually a good place." Sarah wraps her arm around me and traces gentle shapes upon my back. "But you don't have to tell me anything if you're not ready."

I take her in. She wears soft red plaid pajamas and a pair of fuzzy socks to protect her feet from the cold wood floor. Her dark hair is swept lazily over one shoulder, and her face is free of the makeup she wore earlier. All of this only makes me yearn for her all the more. Sarah in her natural state is more beautiful to me than any vision upon this earth, and I alone get to enjoy it, a

welcome distraction from all the death and devastation I've faced today.

I've always been a fortress, determined to remain guarded and strong, insistent on letting no one past my borders. Letting walls down is an effort, and forcing myself to speak isn't easy.

"Has anyone already told you anything? About me?"

"I know Sinéad and Mickey have known you a long time," she answers. "And you told me when and where you were born. I know about the Oath and who you take it to, and the druids." She motions to a book of Irish fairy tales and folklore. "But that's all. I haven't wanted to pry."

"Pry away," I implore her. "Else I'll say everything at once. I'm not good at this."

"Okay." Sarah thinks for a moment. "I'd like to know about you. Your family. What your parents were like?"

"I was born in Dublin," I reply. "My family was very poor. We lived in the slums with another family, the Sullivans. My father made shoes, and my mother stayed at home with my younger siblings."

"How many did you have? Siblings, I mean."

"Five. Though most died of sickness after my mother passed away. Only one brother made it past the age of fifteen. My niece and her children are descended from him."

"I'm so sorry." Sarah squeezes my hand lightly. "That must've been so hard, losing them all."

"It was. I was a very angry person early on." I lean my head down to press against hers, breathing in her scent. I can't explain it, but Sarah grounds me. Even the hunger seems manageable at the moment, my mind lost in days long gone. "Mickey tempered me in that way. He was always cheery. It could be the worst day in the entire world, and he always knew how to find the sun amid the rain. I probably shouldn't have allowed him to follow me around the way he did, driven him off. But I had to feed my brother and see that he made his way through school. Mickey was all I had."

“Inseparable pals,” Sarah remarks, smiling. “That’s kind of cute, actually.”

“Maybe, except there was nothing cute about the two of us. We were trouble. When the Great War came knocking on Ireland’s door, I saw a chance to make some real money. When the Germans invaded Belgium, I was furious. Same with all the other Catholics in the country. I enlisted, and Mickey followed me.”

“You were in World War One?” Sarah asks, eyes widening.

“My first war,” I say ruefully. “The worst war I’ve seen, and I’ve been in many.”

“What was it like?”

Echoes of shouts across the trenches, shells exploding around me, festering diseases, the smell of rotting horseflesh and mud caked across my uniform as I clung to my rifle and my steel hat, shivering in the dark alongside Michael, overwhelm me before I can push them away.

I exhale. “I’d rather not tell you,” I murmur, centering again in the moment, reminding myself that I’ve a rare moment of quiet and tenderness, here, in front of me. “Some things are too horrible to put into words.”

Sarah surprises me when she slips onto my lap. I hold my arms away to let her get situated, then wrap them around her when she’s settled. Her closeness and kindness anchor me. “It’s okay, Cillian. You don’t have to.”

I’m flooded with warmth and relief when she wraps her arms around me, squeezing me tightly. I’ve been deprived of a woman’s embrace for so long, I didn’t realize just how badly I missed it.

“You were in wars after that?”

“Mm. In our war for independence. We fought for Irish freedom, Mickey and I,” I mutter. “And that’s when I became this.”

Sarah gently brushes her fingers through my hair. “How?”

“Cold night in December. Ambushed and shot by Black and Tans. We escaped into a nearby bog. It was pitch black, and I was bleeding from

multiple wounds. The only reason I was still alive was adrenaline, I suppose. Mickey was worse than me, and I was panicking. I'd lost nearly everyone in my life, Sarah. He was like a brother to me. I couldn't lose him, too, so . . . I called for Her."

"Her." Sarah shivers against me. "You mean the Morrigan?"

"Don't say Her name," I hiss, hugging her all the tighter to me. "She listens when you speak Her name aloud, and I'd rather She not fixate upon you too strongly."

"Fixate upon me?" Sarah asks, skeptical. "What would She want with me? I'm just a waitress."

"You're far more than that," I protest. "You're fiery, you're outspoken, you're strong. All things She loves."

"Should I be flattered or worried?"

"Both."

"I want to make sure I understand," Sarah says tentatively. "You called for . . . *Her*. And She turned you into what you are?"

"It's a very, very old Irish legend," I reply. "One my mother told me growing up. *She* is a goddess of life and death, you see. Of maidens and warriors. If you're a warrior and death is near, call for her. She might save you. I always thought it was just a story, of course. Just like everyone else, and most would never try it, playing with things beyond our understanding. But it was real. She came. But to be rescued by a pagan goddess is never free."

"You mean, you didn't have a choice?"

"Oh, I did." I gaze into Sarah's eyes. "Die alongside my friend in a bog, bleeding and frightened. Or bend the knee, swear the Oath, and become Her warrior immortal."

"Doesn't sound like much of a choice to me," Sarah says quietly. "Death or something unknown."

"I chose the unknown," I admit. "I was frightened, and She knew it, but it

was either that or lose Mickey and myself. When I returned from Her world, my wounds were healed. I was no longer injured. Just cold and wet. And hungry.”

I clench my jaw, overly aware of my fangs and willing them to remain hidden. “So hungry. I couldn’t understand why. Mickey had taken the Oath with me, and we wandered that night for a long while until we found a farmstead. And we . . .” Faltering as I remember the cries of the elderly farmer and his wife as we slaughtered them, I squeeze my eyes shut. “That’s just one of many sins that can never be forgiven.”

Sarah’s gentle touch is what brings me back to the here and now. “My mom was a devout Catholic,” she says softly, touching my face. “She’d say we all sin.”

“Yes, but—it’s—” I struggle to speak. It’s been a long time since I ambled into a church, let alone voluntarily. I attended Mass on threat of certain death. “My mother was the same way, but it’s different.”

“How?”

“I don’t think you’ve ever killed anyone, Sarah,” I muse, gazing at her. “And I’ve killed many. Far too many. And I’ll kill more. It’s . . . I’m Her soldier, tasked with destroying Her enemies. There’ll always be blood on my hands. And what’s more, I enjoy it.” I look down. “I revel in it, though I know it’s wrong.”

Sarah doesn’t move from my lap, staying pressed against me. I slip my hand down her back to her ass, gently cupping her. I don’t deserve this. After all I’ve done, I don’t deserve this brief respite, a measure of peace to call my own in the form of a magnificent woman like her. Were I still human, I should be locked away.

Were I still human, I should be dead and in hell.

“Is that what you were doing tonight?” she asks softly. “Hunting Her enemies?”

“I wish that were the case,” I admit.

“Where is St. Leonard?” Sarah asks.

“It’s hidden away in the forests of Tullymore in County Down.” I caress her curves as I speak. “It’s a sacred place to Her, and druids have tended Her trees there for over a thousand years. Our kind are sent there to redeem and rehabilitate themselves, if they’ve committed a crime against the Brotherhood.”

Sarah is perplexed. “And Eamon said it was burned to the ground. All of it?”

Troubled, I nod. “Only walls and silence remain. Druids and their wives and even children were murdered. They would’ve all died, if it weren’t for young Eamon.”

“Who could do that?” Sarah demands. “Who could just slaughter an entire monastery of innocent people?”

“The Order of the Lily,” I answer. “It’s the only explanation. We found what I guess you could call their calling card on some of the bodies of the women. They left white lilies in their hands.”

“I don’t understand,” Sarah mutters, confused. “Who are they?”

“Does the name Oliver Cromwell mean anything to you?” I ask.

Sarah squints and shakes her head. “No, sorry.”

“He was a bastard, lived back in the seventeenth century. He meant to break the spirits of the Irish people when they rebelled against English rule in 1641. He slaughtered innocents, Catholic priests, even nuns. Burned people alive in churches. Captured Irish and sent them by the tens of thousands to work on plantations.”

“Why would he do that?” Sarah whispers, horrified.

“He was like your Puritans, determined to destroy any and all Catholics he could get his hands on. And that’s where the Order of the Lily stems from. It was long before my time, but the Brotherhood was already in Ireland. Though it was less of a brotherhood and more of a thinly stretched alliance of loners, keeping to themselves and feeding in secret. But after he burned

Wexford to the ground and allowed his soldiers to kill indiscriminately, rebel and civilian alike, there were those who'd had enough. One in particular."

"Who?" Sarah asks, tracing circles on my chest.

"Cezar Monte Vigil," I answer. "Your friend in California. Vera's husband. We call him the Spaniard."

"Cezar?" Sarah says. "The watchmaker? I thought—maybe he was magic, like the druids. I didn't think he could possibly be. He isn't Irish. Neither is Vera. He's very sweet, very kind—"

"And very much a vampire," I say with a sly smirk. "You don't need to be from Ireland to be one of us. She's been known to take the odd one in. Leigh's American, after all, and she's the High Queen now."

Sarah falls silent, looking away with wide eyes. "Vera's one too?"

"Yes. She comes from Florida, I think. Daughter of a fire-and-brimstone preacher during the early twenties, I believe."

"But why aren't they here with all of you?" she asks. "Why be all the way out there?"

"Cezar likes California," I explain. "Southern California, and that's where they've settled. It's not a bad thing to have some eyes out that way, on the West Coast. Clearly, something about them drew you near. And now here you are." I tuck her hair behind her ear.

It takes a moment for that to sink in. Dumbfounded, Sarah remembers herself and drives on. "S-so wait, he's—" I can see her mind churning behind those pretty eyes. "Over three hundred years old?"

"Older," I say. "Old enough to have been present at the Siege of Kinsale in 1601. He was a knight, sailed from Spain to assist Ireland in the uprising against England. Spain was Catholic too, you see, and held no love for the English. Cezar became friends with the Irish, enough that they told him the legend of Our Lady. He fought bravely on our behalf and fell. He took the Oath in his dying moments on that battlefield and remained in Ireland ever after."

“Cezar is a very . . .” I search for the proper terms. “Poetic and well-spoken man, but he’s not a liar. And to hear him tell it, he saw the smoke from Wexford miles away and flew overhead, witnessing some of the atrocities with his own eyes. Filled with anger, he gathered a handful of others like himself, and they began hunting Cromwell and his men as they marched across Ireland.”

Taken with the story, Sarah exhales. “What did they do?”

“On a moonless night, as Cromwell marched with a detachment through the Irish countryside, Cezar and his companions attacked. Five men, ripping through his ranks like a full battalion, tearing them apart like rabid wolves, killing many of them instantly. The Cromwellians tried to defend themselves, but they moved so swiftly, they could barely be seen by the naked eye. They set fire to their supplies, and then Cezar faced the man himself.”

“Did he kill him? Cromwell?” Sarah asks, almost hopeful.

“No,” I reply. “Killing him was never the purpose of the attack. England would just send another zealot to take his place. Such was their way. It was to make him feel terror, the very same he had inflicted on countless Irish citizens. Surrounded by the dead bodies of his men, his food and weaponry in flames, Cromwell saw Cezar impaled through the heart with a sword, yet he still moved, still walked, unhindered by the blade, tearing it out of his body like it were little more than a splinter. And then he was gone. They disappeared into the darkness, leaving the bastard alone with his detachment of dead men and only the howls of hungry wolves to comfort him.”

“Cezar is a badass,” Sarah whispers.

I burst into laughter, hugging her tightly to me. “So you would think.” I sigh softly. “But Cezar’s display of power had the opposite effect. He sent for the church’s best witch hunters—men with a penchant for savagery who enjoyed tormenting and burning women accused of consorting with the Devil. He never forgot the so-called Catholic demons in Ireland, the ones who’d snapped his soldiers’ necks and backs like kindling, biting into their

necks and drinking their blood, eviscerating and garroting them through their armor. And he founded the Order of the Lily with his dying breath. His successors swore to hunt down any and all immortals that serve a god other than their own.”

“Jesus Christ,” Sarah whispers, cuddling into my arms. “What an asshole. Did they succeed? I know Cezar is safe, but—the others with him?”

“For two hundred years, they combed Ireland’s countryside, forests, and bogs. They secretly moved through towns and cities, searching for any sign of them. They learned about Our Lady, Her sacred trees. How to use them against us, how to kill. Cezar, with all his strength and intellect, narrowly escaped the Lilymen. He managed to sail to America in the early 1700s. It wasn’t until the 1800s that the Order’s numbers began to dwindle, and they were either destroyed or forced into hiding.”

“Why?” Sarah asks, reaching for her now cold tea on the coffee table. She tastes it, makes a face, and sets it aside.

“Sean Moore,” I answer grimly. “The High King before Michael. He made it a point to hunt the Lilymen as fervently and as harshly as they’d hunted us. They feared him. He personally drove them from American shores, and then had his best men viciously tail them through Ireland and the United Kingdom. For this, we all thought they were extinct.” I shake my head with a sigh. “We should’ve verified.”

“I didn’t know there was a king before Mickey,” Sarah admits, resting her head against my shoulder. “Is he related to Desmond?”

“He is, aye. Desmond’s twin brother.”

“What’s he like?”

“Untrustworthy,” I answer flatly. “He may have handled the Order of the Lily, but his rule left much to be desired. Mickey and I served him for a time when we first immigrated to America and made our way to Boston. But he was hedonistic, too concerned with pleasures. He was also foul-tempered, not one to forgive or show mercy over small slights and mishaps if he was in a

mood.”

“What happened to him?”

“He made a big mistake,” I say, rueful and nearly smiling. “He tried to kill me.”

“What? Why?” Sarah asks, bewildered.

“I can be—” I search for the proper word. “Difficult.”

“Oh,” Sarah says, amused and refraining from laughter. “*Difficult.*”

“I know I’m no peach, but the attempt on my life wasn’t something Mickey couldn’t forgive. So Mickey overthrew Sean. An impossible task, really. The older a vampire is, the more powerful they are. Sean had many decades over the both of us. It was a long and arduous battle, and we won, but only just. Sean nearly slaughtered us both.”

“Then Mickey became king?” Sarah muses.

“Well, no,” I admit. “For my bloodlust and soldierly ability, Our Lady came to me in a dream. She offered me the crown first. I declined.”

“Why?”

“Kings are for a great many nations, but not the Irish anymore. Not after centuries of oppression under the British monarchy,” I reply, squeezing her tightly to me. “High King Cillian sounded foreign and ridiculous, and I’m not the man Mickey is. I can lead soldiers into battle, sure, but when there isn’t a war to fight, I don’t know what to do with myself half the time. He has the patience and the mind to handle it all without falling short.”

I refrain from mentioning the guilt Michael has carried since we returned from the cathedral. My words were hardly a comfort. With Leigh’s help, if he’s confiding in her now the way I’ve confided in Sarah, perhaps her compassion will convince him that we *all* thought the Lilymen were gone.

All but Sean. *Damn him.*

“You look tired,” Sarah whispers, gazing up at me. “Do vampires sleep?”

“We can, though we rarely need it.”

“Well, I think you need it.” Sarah slips out of my grasp and rises to her

feet, offering her hand.

I hesitate. She looks so beautiful, so innocent and perfect, untouched and unhindered by the knowledge of my sins and short-comings. I shouldn't stay here. I should wander home, remain alone, the way I always have. Keep my distance, despite every bone in my body, every ounce of me, yearns to remain here with her. I've swiftly and alarmingly become so attached to this fiery woman.

"Stay the night with me." Sarah's faint smile, sweet and unassuming, is enough to enrapture me. Her command is laced with affection.

"I shouldn't," I reply, even as I take her hand and stand up. "Sarah . . . we're playing with fire, you and me. And perhaps it's best we—"

She silences me with a kiss, slow and tender. The taste of her lips alone weakens my resolve, and like I was when I stood before the Goddess, I am rendered helpless. Fire moves through my body, awakening my hunger with a vengeance, and I pull away, gritting my teeth to harness it.

"Stay with me," Sarah repeats.

My voice comes out as a low growl. I want to. I don't just need rest; I need *her*. "I can't."

"You can. I'm not afraid of you," Sarah whispers, leaning her forehead against mine. "Stay."

CHAPTER 9

Smoldering Flames



Sarah

He's not a monster. Not to me.

Maybe Cillian hasn't told me every story there is to tell, and a man like him has oceans of secrets deep enough to drown in. From everything he's shared with me tonight plus other things here and there I've managed to piece together, he's a killer. Maybe even a murderer.

He was a soldier before he turned, and from what I've gathered, he was still a soldier after. A warrior, a veteran, a harbinger. Death is intertwined with Cillian; they go hand and hand. He's brought down hell on so many people, he's probably lost count. Men like him killed a lot more to protect secrets, businesses. No doubt, Cillian would kill again to protect his Brotherhood and the people he loves.

A wise woman might take that as a giant red flag.

I can't believe I'm saying this, but I don't care. I've dated the "peaceful" guys. The guys who've never thrown a punch their entire lives; the ones who try to talk their way out of conflict. There's merit to it, sure, but they'd fold in an instant in a real fight. Cillian might mean danger, but his strength and

ability to do the worst thing any person can do to another human being also means protection. Safety. And a primal part of me wants that. Needs that.

He would never hurt me.

Besides, to pass judgment on him would be to pass judgment on the others. Rory, Leigh, Sinéad. Even Michael. There's no way they've *all* been utilizing a blood-bank system the entire time they've existed as vampires. They had to feed. And sometimes, they maybe had to kill. That's what they are; it's survival. I admire how they pulled themselves out of what they perceived as barbarism and created a more noble alternative to ensure innocent people don't get hurt anymore.

How can I judge him for being what he was made to be by a goddess I can't even fathom? Just speaking Her name, listening to tales about Her, made my skin crawl. Not just knowing that was how Cillian turned into what he is—a vampire, deadly and hungry—but knowing that such a being isn't just make believe.

She's real. So very real. And with how hushed his tone was, it's clear that even Cillian fears Her. But I don't want Cillian to fear tonight. He may not be king, but it's clear there's a burden of command. People respect him, look up to him, listen to what he has to say.

No more burdens tonight.

Wordlessly, I lead him up to the master bedroom. He follows me, his hand in mine. I shut the door behind us and close the distance between us again, holding his gaze while I slowly unbutton his vest then the dark blue shirt underneath it.

Cillian is torn, his desire at odds with that old-fashioned honor of his that both enchants and irritates me. I don't want him to be a gentleman right now. Not when we're alone together like this.

He grasps my hands when I attempt to pull his shirt out from the waistband of his pants. "Sarah . . ."

He gave me the most amazing orgasm up there in that bell tower. It was

the perfect mixture of a place we shouldn't have been, doing something we shouldn't have done, with a supernatural man who shouldn't exist. A perfect explosive cocktail that put stars in my vision. Doing something like this has been on my mind ever since.

I won't hear talk of stopping now. Not when I can see the lust plain within his face, likely mirroring mine because there's no way in hell I'm hiding from this.

"You pleased me the other night. Let me return the favor, Cillian. Please."

His breath is hot when I offer another kiss, taking his lower lip between my teeth and gently tugging, imploring. His resolve melts away, and he weaves his hands into my hair, tugging me deeper as our mouths collide. He tastes metallic—he's recently fed, and his tongue chases mine. I finish pulling his shirt free and loosen his belt, guiding him to sit on my bed.

There's so much I want to do with him. *To him.* But . . . slow. *Slow.* Fuck, I'm starting to hate that word. I want to strip us both naked, push him down onto the bed, and ride him until dawn. Fuck honor, fuck chivalry, fuck everything. I want a man like him inside me. A real man. A man who's fierce and loyal and dangerous. A man capable of brutally destroying his enemies but who's gentle and loving with a woman.

Slow, Sarah. Slow. Okay. I can do this. I can show *some* restraint, right? There's fun in that. If Cillian wants us to take our time, then that's what he'll get.

Except I'm going to make it my mission to drive him absolutely insane until he can't take it anymore and *has* to give in. I'm no blushing maiden. I know what I'm doing.

Game on, Darragh.

I spread his legs and sink to my knees. As I tie my dark hair into a ponytail, Cillian's eyes widen. A smile tugs at the corner of his mouth.

He knows where this is going. *Good.*

I unbutton his pants, then slowly lower the zipper. My hand grazes the straining bulge between his legs, causing him to suck in breath between his teeth.

“Sarah,” Cillian warns. “Be careful. I can’t—” His soft, brown eyes flicker with crimson and gold. “I can’t promise I can control myself when you—”

His words die on his tongue as I withdraw my hand to shed my top. I’m not wearing anything underneath. Cillian’s gaze darts to my breasts and remains there, swallowing. His mouth slackens as I inch closer to the edge of the bed, resting between his legs on my knees.

“When I what?” I murmur, reveling in just how much control I have over him at this exact moment. He’s dangerous and deadly. A soldier, a rebel; the king’s right hand in Boston’s supernatural underworld.

And he’s all mine, right here, right now, bewitched by my bare flesh.

Sarah, 1. Cillian, 0.

My nipples are already stiff from the open air, and by the way he’s staring, drinking me in, he enjoys the view. I guide his hand to fondle one, and that seems to snap him out of his reverie. I want to ask him how long it’s been since he’s seen a woman. Been intimate with a woman. Sixty years, isn’t that what he said? But now isn’t the time. If I bring up memories of *her*—the woman he lost who I know so little about—the moment will be over.

Whoever she was, I hope she knows I mean to take care of him.

I draw Cillian’s erect cock out from his pants, and my breath hitches. Precum already beads on his tip, glistening in the low light of the room. He’s uncut and all natural, and *big*. Bigger than a man of his stature has any business being.

He must catch the surprise on my face because he laughs softly. “Scaring you now, Sarah?” he teases.

I compose myself quickly, all the more determined. “I don’t scare easy,” I reply, wrapping my fingers around his base and giving his dick one long slow

stroke.

The response is immediate. Cillian leans back on his hands to steady himself as he groans. “Fuck. Sarah . . . don’t . . . do that.”

I give him one more, steady and firm, loving the way he gets harder in my hand. “Why not?”

“Because,” he rasps, “I wouldn’t be able to live with the shame.”

“Shame?” I press, spreading his precum beneath his tip teasingly. He nearly shudders. “You know there’s no shame in enjoying each other, right?”

“It’s not that.” He steadies his breathing. “It’s—I haven’t done this since—you know.”

I pause in surprise. “Since you were married? Really? Not even on deployments? Not even one-night stands?”

“I’ve only ever known two women intimately.” Cillian bites back another groan as I give him one more stroke for good measure. Fuck, I love how sensitive he is to my touch.

“Your wife . . .” I offer cautiously.

He anchors me with his now very crimson eyes. “And you.”

I’m stunned silent. What do I even say to that? I’ve done my share of experimenting, though I haven’t given everything up to every guy who I thought struck my fancy. But hell, it’s definitely a higher number than two. And fuck, why is that so adorable? So sweet?

Maybe I’m more old-fashioned than I thought I was. *Holy shit*. I’ve literally got this man by his gorgeous cock, and he’s admitting to me he’s never let anyone this close beyond me and the sweetheart he married. How many men can say that? All the men I used to go out with had a more notch-in-the-belt mentality. Aside from my own father—who I silently figured was some kind of rare unicorn in that sense—I didn’t think men like Cillian still existed.

That rouses something in me I didn’t know I was capable of. It’s almost like he’s waited for me. Who does that? Literally no one. Not anymore.

Maybe some women would be turned off by that, but not me. I'm a goddamn sucker for it.

I begin a steady rhythm with my hand, stroking him from base to tip and back, admiring the way he squints his eyes shut and rolls his head back slightly in response. "That's really beautiful, Cillian. I'm honored."

"Sarah, if you don't take your hand off me—" He sounds frustrated, like he's already fighting a losing battle, and I've only just begun. "I'm going to come all over those beautiful fucking tits of yours."

His words send a shot of flaming heat to my core. Just touching him like this is making me wet. For someone so gentlemanly, he's clearly picked up a few things in the past few decades—whether from just hanging around other vampires in the Brotherhood or what, I'm not sure. I don't care. He's the perfect mixture of gallant and sexiness.

"If I told you I love it when you talk like that," I whisper, "would you hold it against me?"

I give him a moment to recover himself, slowing my strokes. Cillian reaches out and cups my face, brushing his thumb over my lips. "The only thing I hold against you is your time spent away in California," he teases.

"Oh?" I lean into his touch. "Why's that?"

"Because I could've met you years ago," he rumbles, and I'm suddenly lighter, my heart quickening in my chest. "And I'll not waste another moment of my life without you in it."

It's a good thing I'm on my knees already. They'd buckle. My cheeks burn as I lean forward and press my lips to his cock head then flick my tongue underneath his tip. "Then let's not waste any more time."

Cillian watches, entranced, as I slowly take him into my mouth, inch by inch, until I can't anymore. His cock muffles a soft moan in my throat, overtaken by the masculine taste and the musky scent of him. The way he groans my name makes my pussy ache.

"Sarah. Oh, fuck . . ."

I keep grip his base and slide back, teasing his tip with my tongue. It's been a while since I've done something like this. Finding a rhythm, my head bobs up and down as I take him as far as I can and then withdraw, over and over again. He tenses to stave off exploding in my mouth, which only goads me on. He likes it. He wants more.

Cillian pants. "Fuck, Sarah, you're driving me mad." He grips my ponytail, and his hips buck, driving him farther into my mouth. "Yes, like that. Take it just like that . . ."

He wasn't lying when he said he was close. He's harder now, like he's made of stone and veins. I let him go and begin stroking him harder, faster.

"You like my tits?" I bait him.

"Fuck, Sarah." He's breathless, his muscles taut, resisting surrender. His cock is wet from my mouth, my strokes audible. "You fucking little minx, you know I do."

"Come all over me, Cillian." My voice is low, sensual, commanding. "Come on my tits."

His knuckles are white, gripping the blankets on my bed like he's holding on for dear life, bright scarlet eyes on me. *Those eyes.* My heart skips—from fear, exhilaration, all of the above. Is he going to pounce on me? Sink his fangs into my neck? Drink my blood?

The very thought of being claimed in every way by this man is doing things to me. I'm soaked.

He's on the verge as I continue pumping his slippery cock. His breath ragged, he grits his teeth. "Sarah—fuck—" He roars as he explodes, pulsing in my hand, and I nearly squeak in surprise. He paints my chest with his seed, and it's a lot more than I expected.

And I mean *a lot*. This poor man must've been so backed up. Is he that old-fashioned he can't even be bothered to masturbate for some relief? And here I am, getting myself off every night to make sure I'm relaxed and happy before I conk out.

But at the same time, goddamn. I'm the first woman to do this to him in God knows how long. And after an explosion that big? It feels fucking *amazing* being able to return the favor and blow his mind right back.

Now we're even.

The tautness in Cillian's muscles begins to ebb as his dick softens in my hand. He stares at me in awe.

Filled with triumph—and covered in it too—I can't help but flash a grin. “What?”

“I—wish I could find the words,” Cillian answers. “I never had the gift of poetry, could never compose songs or symphonies.”

“Good. I don't exactly have a sparkling track record with musical guys. Ask my old producer.” I rise to my feet, felling like I'm the queen of the world, in control of my life and everything in it. Empowered. I've stunned him good, and I'm reveling in it. “I'll be right back.”

Cleaning myself up is a process. Maybe I could've pulled him into a shower with me. But it's late, and all the excitement of holding him in my hands, making him burst, is finally beginning to wear off, replaced with weariness. I'm still wet between my legs, but it'll be dawn soon. I don't have the fucking energy to do anything about it.

Slow, I remind myself. That's okay. Another time, another day. I've discovered enough to write a book on Cillian Darragh tonight, but that's not all there is. There's more to him. And I can't wait to find out what.

I return and find him exactly where I left him. His head lifts when I enter the room, the soft warmth of his brown eyes now returned. He swallows, his gaze straying to my still bare breasts.

“I hope you know this wasn't my intent when I came here tonight.”

“I know it wasn't.” I take his hand. “I'm glad we did it anyway.” I don't ask for permission or try to convince him with words. I guide him to lie down with me and cast the blankets over us both pulling him in close. “I'm just glad you were there when I opened the door.”

Cillian puts his arms around me. When he embraces me tightly, I'm surrounded by his warmth, his smell. I've never experienced this, lying with a man and being so enchanted by the way his chest feels under my fingers. He buries his nose in my hair and softly breathes me in, saying nothing. And yet his silence is literally everything.

"I meant to ask you to reconsider." His chest rumbles beneath my touch. "That you should ask Mickey to take away your memory, replace it with safer things, happier things. But I can't. It's been such a short time, but I'm in over my head. And the thought of seeing you next door when you can't even recall my name . . ." His words are pained.

Admiring the light curls that dust his pecs, I gently hush him. "Not going to happen." He's so pale against my California tan, but I trace his abdomen and find scores of powerful corded muscle. He hides all of this beneath his wool coats and his long sleeves? Incredible.

Cillian may not be a mind reader, but he guesses my inner thoughts easily enough. "Enjoying yourself?"

"You have no idea how good this feels, being with you," I reply. "You don't get it, Cillian. I've never had a connection like this. With anyone. I'm not going to run off or throw it away. I want to see where this goes. Don't you?"

"I do." He tilts my chin up, bringing my attention away from his bare chest. "But you must promise me something."

"What's that?"

His thumb brushes over my cheek. "If it's dangerous, you'll listen to me. Like you did tonight, staying behind. Murdock attacked and nearly killed you. It might seem surreal or long ago, but that's what happens when you spend your time among people like us. Earth-shattering things become small. Small things become overwhelming."

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"Vampire emotion. The legend of the Goddess. I know how charming the

Mannock can seem. It's deliberate—meant to lull you into a sense of security when there is none. There'll never be any true safety for you among our numbers. We don't keep human friends for long. Those friends either turn, forget, or they're lost."

"That seems a little over the top," I reply, arching a brow. "You'd never hurt me. Neither would Sinéad, Mickey, Leigh. And Rory—"

"Yes, there are exceptions," Cillian agrees, albeit reluctantly. "But we've all been tested by our hunger over the years. Our numbers are growing. New vampires will not be able to resist themselves around you, not without constant supervision. You have to recognize that we're not human anymore, Sarah. It is in our very nature to prey upon you. You mustn't forget that. Ever."

Prey. A chill runs through me, obvious to him, and he holds me tighter still, his hands caressing my bare back as we lie chest to chest.

"Okay," I breathe as that sinks in. I've been willing, I've been trusting. Maybe because of Rory being my great-grandfather, or maybe because this is the first time I haven't felt alone in, I don't know, years. "I'll admit, I could be more careful in that regard. I'll make sure I don't get too chummy with everyone who shows their face at the tavern, but you have to promise me something too."

"Are you bargaining with me?" Cillian chuckles.

"Yeah, you could say that."

"You know in most Irish fairy tales making bargains with immortal creatures isn't exactly recommended?"

"This one is," I say, pressing onward. "You have to promise to let me in. Not all at once. I know I don't deserve to know everything, understand everything, and I get that there's a lot to your world I haven't experienced yet. But Cillian, by your own admission, you've been on your own and haven't let anyone near you for a very long time. And if this is going to work, you can't close yourself off to me. Even if you think it's to protect me."

He rests his forehead against mine. “That is a large request.”

“I know,” I say softly. “And I know it’s only been a couple of weeks, and it’s insane how fast this is moving, even if we are trying to slow it down. But you don’t strike me as a man who spends years trying to figure out whether he wants something to work or not. You’re all in. You know, with normal guys that used to scare the shit out of me? Not you. So let’s keep going. Let’s do this. But together.”

“It seems like neither of us are poets,” Cillian teases.

I answer by harmlessly bopping his chest with my fist, huffing. “I’m serious, Darragh.”

He laughs. “I know you are. And you’re all the more beautiful for it, McCready.”

Before I can ask him what the hell that even means, his lips claim mine. All thoughts about what he is, what I am, what this could be, drift away, replaced with the intoxicating taste of his tongue and his hands sliding down my back to my rear to cup me.

Cillian reluctantly pulls away. “I should go,” he whispers, nuzzling me. “You took a lot out of me. Literally. And I need to feed.”

My grip on him tightens. “Don’t go.”

“Sarah.” His voice is almost a thick purr in my ear. “Know that I want to, with every fiber of my being. So overwhelming is your hold upon me.”

I swallow, rallying my wits. “Feed from me.”

Shocked, he pulls away. “Sarah.” He frowns. “That’s not funny.”

“It’s not a joke,” I insist. “Look, I’m not fond of needles, but I just don’t look at them during blood draws. This is the same thing, right? Couple of needles. I just won’t see you drinking because it’ll be from my neck.”

He scoffs. “It’s not that simple.” He sits up.

I follow, perplexed. *Is he angry with me?* I reach for him. “Cillian, come on. I want to.”

“No,” he snaps, his voice a sharp bark like he’s speaking to someone

under his command who's being insubordinate. There's a flash of red in his eyes. I quickly withdraw my hand as he exhales slowly, deeply. "Sarah, I've told you about my hunger."

"And I want to satiate it," I say, scowling and sticking to my guns. "You better watch it. I'm not one of your soldiers. You don't get to talk to me like that."

"Sorry, it's—give me a moment—" Cillian speaks through clenched teeth and restrains himself. "It's—very—sweet that you're offering yourself to me, but you don't understand how I used to feed. It's taken decades for me to learn how to drink blood directly from a source without killing them, but none of them have had the effect on me you have. *None*. If I taste your essence on my tongue, I might lose control."

"I'm not scared of you, Cillian," I reply, my tone sharper. "I've told you this."

"You should be!" he exclaims. "With every inch and every ounce of you, you should be. Fucksake, Sarah, why can't you understand I'm trying to protect you?"

My heart pounds. Hopes dashed for the evening, I compose myself and nod, getting up and reaching for my pajama top to cover myself quickly. "Okay, Cillian."

The calm acceptance of my tone snaps him instantly out of his ire. He stares at me in confusion as I dress then stand near my door. "Sarah."

"Thank you for coming over tonight," I continue, clasping my hands in front of me. My mother never tolerated my father raising his voice at her, but she never engaged or returned fire. Not like that. Don't get me wrong; we were plenty loud, all of us. But that loudness was always pointed outward at other people deserving of a kick in the pants, and never at one another.

Puzzled, Cillian takes a step toward me, but I answer by taking a step back. That makes him stop, his stature stiff and somewhat awkward.

"I suppose I'll see you tomorrow," I say. "At the tavern."

The hint is taken. “Sarah.” His voice is low, sincere, and nearly apologetic. “You must understand this is for the best. For your own safety. I can’t risk you. Never you.”

I have plenty to say to that. But he doesn’t get to hear it. Not tonight. “Sure. Good night.”

He doesn’t move at first, but then he’s in front of me. I don’t move. I don’t look up into his face. I stare forward, to the side, at nothing.

He waits a moment, then he sighs, relenting. “Good night.”

When he leaves my room, I hear his footsteps making their way to my front door, and the way it creaks when it opens and shuts. I close my eyes and exhale. I shouldn’t have pressed, perhaps, as hard as I did. As a woman, I understand when no means no, and that’s the end of it.

But where he has his limits, I have mine too. I won’t ask him to feed from me again. But I won’t be shouted at either. In truth, I became just as angry as he did. And I’m a little hurt too.

The night was going so well. I was enamored with his body, the way he spoke my name, the sounds he made. I didn’t want to be parted from him.

But now it seems we both need space. So, space is what we’ll get. Maybe this is why Cillian wanted slow. Maybe from now on, I should try harder to be patient.

I crawl back into bed and refuse to give into the desire to shed a couple tears. If I do that, he and his dumb vampire ears will probably hear it. And I don’t want to give him the satisfaction if there’s any to be had.

It takes me a little while, and dawn is already creeping over the horizon. At last, I fall asleep.



After sleeping like a rock, it’s half past one when I wake up. Groaning, I go about my so-called morning routine, washing up and readying myself for the

day. A good night of rest and some distance has me thinking clearly. No, he shouldn't have shouted, but I was being stubborn too. I'll have to talk to Cillian when I can if I get a chance. With last night's attack and the re-emergence of the Lilymen, that might not be possible.

But I'm not going to let it all ruin my day. Crying and moping around about men isn't something that's on my itinerary anymore. Dressing for the cold—which is going to be especially bad today, says the radio morning show I'm listening to as I style my hair—I realize that Christmas is only two weeks away.

Damn. I've been so caught up with everything supernatural that I've stumbled on to, time has had no grasp on me. It's just flown by. What *am* I going to do for my first Christmas back home?

Sudden sorrow fills me. Christmases were always a big deal at my house. My mom went bananas about decorations and insisted on my dad hanging lights outside. She also took me along to choose the best Christmas tree, and we'd put it up right in the front living room window, all dressed up with tinsel and ornaments for everyone to see.

I was thinking of going to the Mannock today, but after what's happened, I don't think it'll be open and operating tonight. An entire monastery of druids, killed? It saddens me, thinking about fine people like Moira Shea and her friends and family possibly getting hurt. Nobody'll be in the mood for drinks and merriment. I give Leigh a quick call just to be sure, but I get her answering machine.

I think it's safe to say I'm on my own today. For now, at least. And perhaps it's best that I don't get underfoot.

I can only control so many things in my life. So what can I do right now, this minute? I can preserve a family tradition, at least until I track down Leigh or Cillian or someone and see if I can help, somehow. I'll pick up a Christmas tree. If I leave it to the last minute, I'll be stuck with some sad, withered Charlie Brown version. Resolved, I slip on my coat. First order of

business today is Operation Christmas.

By the time I've gone to a nearby nursery, picked out my tree, and had it delivered to me same-day, it's nearly four. I don't see any sign of life in Cillian's house. After the attack last night, I'd be shocked if he was home. I focus instead on getting everything the way I want it. I pull out Mom and Dad's old decorations from the boxes marked "Christmas" in the basement. I recognize every ornament I bring out and hang up. Some of them are made of paper, or clay, or glitter, little projects I made for my family as a child that my mom cherished and refused to throw away.

When the tree is up in all its glory, wound with blinking colored lights and silvery tinsel with a star set on its very top, I sigh in satisfaction. "There we go, Mom. You'd love it."

There won't be much in the way of gifts under the tree this year, not when I've only just begun starting over. Tips have been good at the Mannock—really good, actually; better than any waitressing gig I could get anywhere else. It's like all the vampires are loaded or something. But I guess that makes sense. If I were a supernatural creature for hundreds of years and was still broke, that'd be a little pathetic, wouldn't it? What was it Cillian said? *If you ever meet a penniless vampire, run the other way.*

Cillian's warnings ring true in my head. I should be careful.

And maybe I should be more careful, specifically with him. Offering myself up for him to drink was probably thoughtless, regardless of my good intentions.

Did he really used to rip people apart when he fed? I shudder, remembering the way his eyes can change color from normal brown to red with slitted pupils, dangerous and near feline.

After I've put up all the family decor, I've got nothing else to do to keep my hands busy. I give Leigh a call again, but nobody answers. I consider calling Peter, seeing how he's doing, but I don't want to ask him to hang out and then be distracted, wondering how everyone is, what they're doing.

There's one place they might be. Arming myself with the heaviest winter coat in my mom's closet and a stubborn determination, I resolve to go to St. Winifred's Cathedral. I may not understand everything yet, but that must be where everyone is. Where there's work to be done.

Because it's damn cold today, I call for a cab. After I'm dropped off, I make my way to the cathedral and find the doors locked. That's when a shadow passes above me—a large crow soaring overhead.

“Hey!” I call, but it doesn't stop. I can't tell if it didn't hear me, or if it's just ignoring me. Now I'm wondering which of the boys it is. Maybe it isn't even a boy; maybe it's Leigh or Sinéad.

Following the direction the crow flew, I make out several voices talking over one another at once. Michael Kelly barks out orders like a commander about to send his men into battle.

“Desmond, you're going to take ten to St. Damian in Wales. Pick wisely. Meet with Gareth. He knows the area. He'll defer to your wisdom. Fionn, I want you in Scotland with twenty at St. Teneu. Oscar, you'll go to St. Ethel with thirty, at least. They'll need as many eyes and ears as we can spare.”

“What about the new cathedral in South Bend?” Desmond asks.

Michael answers, “We don't need anyone running off to Indiana right now. Tony Briganti's watching the place viciously. It's too close to Chicago for his liking, and he's made it plain the Hecatēi are not friends to the Order, nor will they ever be.”

“And Cezar? Is he coming here?”

“Not yet. Cezar has already alerted our brothers on the West Coast. They're on their way to St. Ketari.”

“What about Koi? Will he help us?” Fionn asks.

“Koi isn't a friend to druids, but he likes Lilymen even less,” Desmond replies gravely. “He prefers to work with the vampires in New Orleans.”

There's something about the way Desmond says New Orleans in his dry lilt that seems more knowing, almost like an unspoken *I told you so*.

Michael's patience doesn't seem equipped to handle it. "Christ on a bike, I heard you the first hundred times. Yes, I know. New Orleans. Cillian, address the men."

"Yes, Mickey."

I slowly plod toward a gathering so large it fills the entire church courtyard. I've never seen so many vampires in one place. How is it they can come together like this and literally nobody sees them? A few passersby, coats turned up to ward off the cold, stare at me quizzically as they continue along their route while I smile sheepishly and wave. It's like they're completely oblivious. There must be druid magic around me I can't see.

Cillian stands up on a fountain's ledge to address everyone. He's dressed for the cold, but his long coat is open, his tie loosened. I take a breath. His gaze lifts, and he catches sight of me. There's an unmistakable ferocity burning in his face, a righteous anger that's new and exhilarating to me.

Our disagreement the night before is forgotten in that moment. Gripping the scarf draped around my shoulders, I nod.

He nods back, then speaks with a commander's air. "Listen here, lads. There are those of you old enough to remember the Order of the Lily, and there are others who may think they're little more than a legend long gone. Either way, they're back, and their attack on St. Leonard was to send a message. They've stripped down and burned the druids' sacred trees. They're armed with stakes of oak and rowan. They know our strengths and our weaknesses, and they mean to end us all." He scans the hundreds of faces. "Like Cromwell meant to wipe us all out."

"Like the British!" another calls, his words cutting. I don't recognize him, but the others seem to. "And the Great Hunger!"

His addition to Cillian's words creates an ardent clamor of men women shouting in angry agreement.

Cillian raises his hand to calm them all. "There'll be plenty of opportunities to put that rage to good use!" he bellows. "For now, the

protection and preservation of every druid haven is paramount. Do not tarry. Go on, lads! Get on!”

The vampires disperse, all of them crowding around Desmond and Fionn, talking over each other to ensure they’re picked for the mission. Several are chattering at Cillian too. It doesn’t feel right to insert myself here, in matters that are so far over my head they might as well shoot straight to the moon.

So I look for Leigh, but when I approach her at the top of the pavement stairs in front of the abbey, I find her in deep conversation with Michael.

“I wish I could go with you to Nigeria.”

“I know. I wish you could, as well.” Michael’s voice is softer, loving. “You’re the only one I can trust to this task. Who can make this work. You’re the only one he’ll listen to.”

“And if he doesn’t?” Leigh asks.

“Cillian, Rory, and Eamon are going with you. Cillian ought to make him listen, at least.”

Leigh’s face twists into annoyed skepticism. “Are you sure about that?”

“I know things aren’t sorted between you. But if you remember, you didn’t like Fionn much, and look at how that’s improved.”

Leigh turns to me and smiles. “Sarah, you’re here. Good. I thought of calling you, but it’s been overwhelming here.”

Sheepish, I motion around me at nothing. “Mannock was closed, and I wanted to help. I was worried I’d get in the way, but I thought I’d check.”

Leigh offers a soft smile, a stark contrast to her sharp green eyes. “Oh, you’ll help plenty. For now, head into the abbey. See if Sinéad needs any assistance with the druidfolk.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I clip quickly, eager to get out of the cold I’ve been desperately trying to ignore. I bob and weave through vampires, brushing past Cillian almost by accident as he walks.

“Sarah,” he begins, turning to follow me. I wish I could stop, but I’d be in the way of so many people. It’s better to keep moving. “I didn’t expect to see

you here.”

“It didn’t feel right, staying home.” I wish I could stop everything and pull him to the side, tell him last night was silly. “Leigh asked me to help Sinéad. Can I find you later?”

There’s no shielding the hope in my voice, and it seems to reassure Cillian. He nods, expression softer than it was when he addressed the Brotherhood. “Of course. We’ll talk soon.”

I can almost feel his eyes on my back as I hurry through the courtyard and up the abbey stairs, then disappear into the entrance to the nuns’ dormitories within.



These halls and corridors are vaguely familiar. I visited them once or twice while attending school trips to St. Winifred in my youth. The nuns were always so strict about what we could and couldn’t see, leading us about the grounds and watching us like hawks.

Of course, that makes sense now. Couldn’t have young eyes accidentally witnessing magick being cast by a druid. I’m in awe of how seamlessly they’ve melded into mundane life, to where normal kids like me could walk all around these cathedral grounds, go to school and Mass, and never know the priests were more than mere clergy, and the women who donned gray habits were mothers as well as nuns.

These secrets all around me keep on giving. I’m lucky to be included in just some of them.

Ever since Cillian talked about what happened at St. Leonard—where so many innocents were murdered—there’s been a little pit in my stomach, gnawing at my insides. Sometimes, there’s a price to pay for secrets.

And sometimes, that price is your life.

Will I be willing to pay it if Lilymen find me?

That's when it hits me. Why Cillian was so insistent I listen to him without question if ever I'm in danger. Why he frets. Why he won't drink from me.

In a short time, I've become a chip in his otherwise impenetrable armor.

Stop thinking about that. I push such considerations aside. *Don't worry about what could happen. Worry about the here and now.*

Children rush past me as I walk through the corridors, peering at me curiously.

"You lost, ma'am?" a young boy asks, sounding decidedly from Boston.

"I'm looking for Sinéad," I reply. "Can you point me in the right direction?"

"Depends," he says. "Which Sinéad? Several girls are called that around here."

"She's a grown-up. Her last name is O'Donovan."

"Oh! The lady vampire," the boy says without so much as blinking, like it's second nature. "Miss O'Donovan's in the kitchen, cleaning up with Mr. Callaghan." The boy points down the hallway I've been following. "Keep going and take a left. You'll see the stairs leading up to the nuns' private chapel. The kitchen will be on the right."

"Thank you."

"No problem!" He puffs out his little chest, gives me a final nod, then pulls his friends along.

I find the kitchen easily enough. A meal has just been served, and there are still some scattered nuns and young ones sitting together at tables, many of them dour-faced and huddled together.

Survivors, I think sadly, and my heart aches for them. I know well what it's like to lose someone too early and without warning, but these women have lost husbands, friends, maybe even their own children. I can't claim to know what any of that feels like at all. I wish there was something, anything I could do.

Actions are better than thoughts, faith, or sympathy. Sinéad will know how to put me to use.

I can hear the clattering of dishes in the kitchen along with hushed voices.

“That’s what you’re sore at me for?” a young man asks in a very Irish accent, sounding confused. “She’s pregnant and about ready to pop with a druid’s baby. A *druid’s*. Not mine.”

“It’s just—the way she threw herself at you, like you were a pile of buried treasure.” That is most definitely Sinéad, and she doesn’t sound happy.

“I don’t know what you’re on about.”

That must be Eamon. The one who burst into the tavern the other night, announcing St. Leonard had fallen. He sounds less strangled and breathless now, but this is him. Sinéad’s friend. The one she put on strawberry lip gloss and a smile for, and visited when she could.

“She was good and married. She was kind to me, is all, and I was kind to her. She has no one now. I’d think you’d understand that and have a little compassion.”

Uh-oh. I was about to go in, but this doesn’t sound like just another conversation. This is just a few steps away from becoming a spat. I’m not normally an eavesdropper, but what am I supposed to do with myself except stand here now?

“I’m sympathetic. Of course I am.” Sinéad’s words are touched with warning. She’s not in a good mood. “I just prefer compassion keep a proper distance away from you.”

“That’s rich, coming from you.” Eamon’s laugh is bitter. “You’ve a lot of nerve to lecture me about a girl only giving me hug, and for nothing more than a good cry.”

“She looks at you different,” Sinéad insists. “It’s not right.”

Helpless, I wonder if I should go back outside.

“So what if she does?” Eamon replies. “That ship sailed, didn’t it? If another woman finds me to be everything you don’t, I don’t think it’s rightly

any of your business anymore, is it?”

Okay, this is getting bad. Time to swoop in, for Sinéad’s sake if nothing else. I don’t know that I’m on anyone’s side, but I at least know her. And this conversation isn’t going anywhere on her behalf. I swing open the door, probably a little more dramatically than I need to. I make sure I don’t appear like I was just listening in on what I’m sure is now definitely a quarrel between—well, whatever they are, which is complicated.

“Sinéad,” I say with a bright smile. “I’m here to help. Leigh sent me to you to see what I can do for the people here?”

They were so involved in their argument I must’ve really snuck up on them. Me, sneaking up on vampires. I’m a little proud of myself for that.

Sinéad jumps a little. The man next to her is so tense, the plate in his hands breaks in two straight down the middle. He’s slighter than Cillian or Michael, and a bit on the leaner side. But he stands with his shoulders square and his chin high with pride, up to his elbows in suds.

Realizing he’s broken the plate, he sets it to the side with a grunt and wipes his hands on an apron damp with sink water.

Sinéad exhales. “Sarah.” Annoyed—whether with me or with him, I’m not sure—she gestures between us. “Eamon, this is Sarah McCready, Rory’s great-grand. Sarah, this is Eamon Callaghan.”

“Eamon.” Time to do my best to break this crazy half-angry, half-sexual tension I’ve walked right into. I offer my hand. “I’ve heard so much about you. Good things. From Rory, and all the rest.”

Taken off guard, Eamon stares down at my hand and slowly shakes it. “Another McCready,” he says, recovering. “Didn’t think I’d hear that name in our ranks again.”

My cheeks color at being counted *in the ranks*. I take a few seconds to commit Eamon’s face to memory, now that he isn’t desperately in a hurry or ragged from fending off only God knows how many Lilymen. He’s pretty cute. I like his short auburn curls, a bit disheveled atop his head from what I

assume is a long day of work and taking a cap off and putting it on again throughout the day. His nose is just a little too big for his face, but not so enormous to make him the subject of endless ridicule. At first glance, he has kind eyes, and he looks young and trustworthy. But there's something about him, like he's trying to get a read on me already.

"I'm not sure about being in the ranks yet," I say as he shakes my hand. "Only stumbled upon this world of yours a couple weeks ago. But give it time."

That surprises him all the more. "They didn't erase your memory. They must really trust you."

"Well, as much as any of you can trust a human, right?" I offer, a little embarrassed by his assumption. "I'm hardly a walking vampire encyclopedia, but I'm getting there. Cillian and I had a long talk last night, and—"

That seems to snap Sinéad instantly out of her sour mood, her frown instantly replaced with such excitement, I might just get whiplash. "The Oath! He told you about it?" She darts close to us both, looking to me hopefully. "Are you going to take it?"

"Me?" I nearly squeak. "Take the Oath? You realize I'm a failed singer, right? Waiting tables and carrying a tune are pretty much my only talents. Well, unless you need me to punch a lecher out. I guess I'm good at that too."

Sinéad scoffs. "You're being modest now. Besides, plenty of us came from poorer backgrounds."

"Some of us literally almost died from poorer backgrounds," Eamon reasons. "You know Desmond Moore and his brother barely survived the Great Hunger."

"You're talking about the Irish Potato Famine, right?" I ask tentatively, a bit shaky on all my history. I was a decent enough student, but when it came to history class, I preferred daydreaming about David Cassidy and John Travolta and barely scraped by with a C.

Eamon nods. "The very same."

“Anyway,” Sinéad cuts in, still sounding a little irritated with Eamon, like she’s somewhere between pretending he isn’t there and giving him the brush-off to get under his skin. “I hope you’ll think about it. Our Lady wants more women in the ranks. The lads are lost without the likes of us.”

Eamon looks about ready to argue with that point, but Sinéad doesn’t let him get a word in. Instead, she hands me a dish towel. “I’m going to check on some of the wounded in the infirmary, see if they need us to bring them any food. I’ll be back.” She sashays away with confidence, leaving Eamon and me alone.

With a long sigh, Eamon returns to the task of washing dishes. Sensing his agitation, I dry what he’s already finished. “Don’t worry. She really cares about you.”

His shoulders go stiff as he glances at me. He sounds almost weary. “Know her that well, do you, after just a few weeks? Tell me your secrets, because I’m still trying to figure her out, what’s up from down.”

I shake my head. “I won’t say that. But I will say she wore lip gloss on her last visit to see you.”

Eamon looks at me blankly. “Lip gloss?”

“Mm-hmm,” I say in a singsong tone. “*Flavored* lip gloss.”

Eamon is trying his best. “Wait, so . . . flavored lipstick?”

“Uh-huh.” I dry a few plates and carefully stack them. “Strawberry, I think.”

It’s like I’m speaking another language. When it’s clear he’s not quite latching on, I elaborate. “You know, the sort you don’t wear unless you’re planning on kissing someone.”

That renders Eamon silent. His washing resumes. Even though he stays quiet, I can’t help but notice a change in the corner of my eye. He stands just a little taller, with the hint of a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

“Eamon?” I say after a little while.

“Hmm?” He looks up at me curiously.

“Did you . . . ” I hesitate, and then drive onward. “Did you really participate in the Easter Rising?”

Puzzled, he tilts his head, bird-like. “I did, yes. Why?”

“I think that’s really rad,” I tell him. “What you did. Standing up for what’s right, for your country and all. I don’t know many guys brave enough to do that. And what you did for the druids here? That was amazing.”

Appreciative, he smiles and nods. “Thank you. I’m sure you’re . . . rad . . . too.”

“Getting caught up on the trending lingo?” I tease.

“Trying to,” Eamon admits. “A lot changes when you’re gone for a decade. Everything’s . . . neon now.”

That makes me laugh. “You’ll get used to it.”



As we work, my conversation with Eamon slowly shifts focus and before I know it, we’re talking about Cillian. He didn’t know Cillian as a human. To hear him tell it, both Cillian and Michael discovered him terrorizing farmsteads in a small Irish village and took him in. Together, the three of them struggled to master their bloodlust as they continued the fight against the British and their hired mercenaries, outwitting them at every turn, and occasionally taking out and feasting on a few patrols who were looking for retribution and eager to take out their frustrations on innocent people.

But then, he talks about a treaty. The one that ultimately left Ireland still divided. Michael supported it because it was one step closer to freedom. Cillian and Eamon refused and became rebels once again, fighting for unification against their own people.

I take a page out of my mother’s book when my dad was arguing politics with their friends over cigars and brandy and keep my mouth shut. Not that a woman can’t have an opinion, because my mom definitely did, and then

some, but some subjects she didn't have any lived experience in, so she talked little and listened more. That's how I feel, listening to Eamon.

"But you're all friends now, right? So everything's good?"

"I don't know about good, but it's better," Eamon assents. "Between us and Michael, anyway. Not exactly better for the country right now. But I assume you know something about that."

I'm no fool. I watch my share of the news. "Not firsthand, no, but I'm aware. I'm sorry about all of that. It must've been hard, hearing about it while you were in St. Leonard. I know how important home is when you're far away from it."

Eamon's smile is bittersweet. "It was hard, aye, but . . . I don't know. I think I needed that time away." He finishes scrubbing the last plate and sets it aside with a satisfied breath. "Mickey was always right. It's not our fight anymore. I've learned to accept that." He motions to the piles of clean dishes surrounding us. "Sinéad never came back. Must not have needed to send anything down to the infirmary."

"Guess not," I agree. Listening to Eamon's stories has been so interesting I've lost track of time. "So is this it for you? I mean, are you free now?"

"I don't really know," Eamon admits. "I was judged by a . . . I guess you'd call them a jury of vampires, when I did what I did. Mickey's the High King, and he can make final decisions on everything, technically, but he doesn't like to run things that way. Always said it made him feel like a dictator."

"Well, I hope things work out for you."

"Thanks." Eamon gives me a half-hearted smile. "Why don't you head home? It'll get dark soon."

"Nah." I tie my hair back. "These kids and moms need help, right? I'm gonna see if there's anything I can do."

Eamon nods. "If you can't find Leigh or Sinéad, try talking to Molly Shea. She'll give you plenty to do, I'm sure."

“Thanks. I’ll do that.”

Really, I want a little time to myself. I feel like a kid at an arcade much too big for me. Sinéad’s question of *if I’m going to take the Oath* plays a little game of pinball in my head. I didn’t really know what it was until last night, although I’d heard plenty of hushed talk about it from vampiric patrons at the Mannoek, like it’s something secret and sacred. And I guess it really is.

Rory is—well, I can’t call him my ancestor. That makes him seem old and revered but also dead. He’s very much alive, and he’s family. He took the Oath, and even knew who I was and watched over me. Then there’s Cillian. I can’t stand here and pretend we aren’t entangled beyond any chance of going back, even if we’ve had our misunderstandings.

I’ll have to take the Oath. Eventually. I’ll have to become one of them if I want this to go somewhere. I told him I want to see where this leads, but there’s no question of where—except me becoming a vampire too. It scares me just how *unscared* I am of that possibility.

Me, a souped-up vampire with what I can only describe as superhero strength. *Me*.

I’m in my twenties. Cillian’s age when he turned, more or less. When will I take the Oath? Next year? In the next five years? I don’t want to wait until I’m Rory’s age. That’s out of the question if Cillian and I are—

Whoa, slow down, Sarah. “Jesus Christ,” I mutter to myself, rubbing my head. All this thinking and over-thinking is giving me one hell of a headache. I don’t know what the future holds. Cillian and I got off on the wrong foot, then we started on the right foot and despite both of our attempts to be normal about this, how does one be normal with a vampire?

Maybe that’s it. I don’t want normal. At one point I wanted to be an musician, dreaming of a lavish lifestyle and escaping the mundane. But now I realize I was always able to do that in my old Boston backyard. Because the supernatural and extraordinary owned the creepy old house right next door.

So the answer is yes. I’m going to take the Oath. I don’t know when, or

where, or how I'm going to even begin to tell Cillian that I've decided on it. I'm not ready to become an immortal warrior of an ancient and pagan goddess, not yet.

Someday. Yes. Someday I will. I'll talk to Leigh and Sinéad. They'll help me, I'm sure. Cillian will try to be noble and honorable and stop me, probably, but he won't be able to talk me out of it or do anything to stop it.

Now that I've thought through that, there's work to do. I roll up my sleeves, and wander through the abbey, intent upon finding Molly Shea.

CHAPTER 10

Secret Meetings



Cillian

The others are gone, and I'm to give instruction to Aodhán Feeney, left with the somber charge to defend St. Winifred from any surprise attacks from the Order of the Lily. These holy grounds have become a stronghold, with my brothers and sisters watchful on every corner, from every angle, instructed not to leave their post until they are relieved by another.

Though Thomas Coffey and his American druids have powerful spells to protect this place, we cannot be too careful. St. Leonard, too, had spells to guard their most sacred places from those that would harm them, and they were overturned. Though by what magic, I cannot fathom. It's too dark a thought for me. Not even the Hecatēi witches could hope to break those barriers. The faces of the fallen and the white lilies in their hands still haunt me, unsettling additions to the thousand other souls I snuffed out with my own hands and fangs in five different wars.

But even with so much death hanging over me like a storm whose rains will never cease, my head isn't all there. Not after seeing Sarah march into the abbey like she was on her way to battle. In her presence, the clouds broke

apart, and the gray became colorful, a streak of sunlight in an ever present darkness.

She's still angry with me, I suppose, and she's every right to be. I shouldn't have spoken to her the way I did. I mean to apologize once I have a moment to do it.

But just when I've finished briefing Aodhán and the others, I'm brought into another discussion with the druids. Tommie is understandably compromised. He's lost his parents in the most grotesque of ways, and vengeance has its roots latched deep in him. I see it plain as day. But my words are lost upon his ears, and the ears of the others, all raring and ready to spill blood and bring the druids of St. Leonard some justice.

I can't blame them. I could not be reasoned with many times before. Who am I to caution patience and care? Were they my parents, I'd be on the hunt, and I would not stop.

It's a feeling I know all too well, and I wish I didn't.

When I'm certain our defenses are strong, I'm weary. I'm about to leave and head for the Mannock when Sinéad stops me, offering me a mug. The scent of blood is strong within it.

"The druidwives created a little blood bank in the infirmary," she informs me as I sip from it, nodding gratefully at her. "For the wounded, of course, but for us too. They're scared. They'd rather us not leave to restock, and they'll donate in rotation, so they don't hurt themselves in the process."

"That's generous of them," I reply. "Thank you, Sinéad, for being as helpful as you have been. With everything. Sometimes I think I'd go right mad if it weren't for you."

"You would, aye," Sinéad agrees with a soft scoff. "And so would everyone else. Be good if the lot of you wouldn't forget it."

"How's Eamon getting on?"

"He's fine, as he can be. Fully healed physically, but what happened . . . that'll take more time."

“I understand.”

Sinéad sighs softly, her breath a puff of air as snow begins to fall, lazily drifting from an overcast sky. “You’re an eejit, you know.”

I arch my brow. “Why? What did I do to Leigh now?”

“Not Leigh,” Sinéad huffs. “*Sarah*, you daft cabbage.”

“Complain about me, did she?” I mutter. “Suppose I deserve that.”

“She didn’t say a word. But you wear it on your face when you’re thinking something foolish, and you’d better not throw her away.”

“I think you’re mistaking me for Sean Moore,” I say, a little offended. “I’m not in the habit of tossing women anywhere.”

“I’m not mistaking you for anyone.” Sinéad’s tone is motherly, something she’s perfected, being friends with Leigh for the better part of a decade, though I remember her doing it plenty to me and Eamon before she came to Boston. “You’ve always been like an older brother to me, Cillian, and I respect you. I’d follow you to death. You know that. And someday, maybe I will. But you’ve been miserable ever since I’ve known you.”

“Miserable?” I repeat, frowning. “That seems a bit overstated.”

“Miserable,” Sinéad answers stubbornly. “Until she came walking into the pub. She lights you up like a Christmas parade.”

“Never been one for parades,” I muse. “Bit noisy for my liking.”

Sinéad snorts. “Be cheeky all you want. It’s true.” She takes the empty cup from my hands. “Don’t fuck this up.”

That’s the last thing I ever want to do. I’m not happy about what happened last night. The way I spoke her, it wasn’t right. My inability to control my emotion at times isn’t her fault. I’ve been meaning to apologize, but one thing after another continues to carry me away from her.

“I’m not going to,” I tell Sinéad, meaning every word.



Hours pass. At least, I think they do. The passage of time is harder for me to measure when I'm aiding Michael and Leigh in managing the Brotherhood. I'm exhausted from another meeting between myself, Coffey, and Eamon, all arguing over whether or not it's ethical to erase the memories of the children who witnessed the deaths of their loved ones. I understand Eamon's ability as well as his sympathy for the little ones, but some hurts cannot be undone.

I know from experience, else I would've had him alter my mind and rob me of my grief long ago.

When I pass a clock, I take note. It's nearly three a.m. Weary as I am, I remain nocturnal. I'm wide awake even after the tasks, discussions, and endeavors I've taken on today, and have little need for sleep.

Sarah McCready, however, is still very human. I set out to find her in the abbey if she is still here, listening intently for her voice. My ears catch her gentle humming. I recognize the tune as an old Irish lullaby. The song has changed little over the years. It was one my own mother knew, and a favorite of my sister's.

In the infirmary, a door remains ajar, a soft light glowing inside. That's where I see her, sitting on the edge of a bed where a pair of brothers rest snuggled beneath blankets. The wee boys can't be more than three and five years old, and when she brushes her fingers through their dark hair, their eyes begin to droop.

All her light comes shining back to me. I watch her in silent wonder as she tucks them in. I don't know how she does it. I'm reminded of the women in my life I loved most, of whom I've been bereft for so many years I've almost forgotten their faces. But in that pain, that reminiscence, around Sarah there's also peace. I can think on them without succumbing to despair, isolation, and anger.

My mother would've liked her. She would've praised Sarah's wit and fire and told her not to be afraid of smacking me over the head with a broom if I didn't listen to sense.

Helena would've liked her too.

The stray thought makes me start, but there it is. My late wife would've more than approved. Her spirit would've been right there next to Sinéad, brandishing a rolling pin. I've never been able to consider her like that before. Encouraging me to move on.

To find joy in someone else.

“Cillian?”

My name is a whisper as Sarah comes to me, gently shutting the children's door behind her.

“It's late,” I answer, not sure where to begin apologizing for being a dick the night before beyond “I'm sorry.” It doesn't feel like it's enough. “Let me get you home.”

“No, it's okay,” Sarah insists softly. “The nuns were kind enough to lend me a room for the night. That way I can help out with the children tomorrow morning, maybe make breakfast. I thought I'd be in the way, but I guess normal is what everyone needs right now. As close as they can get to it, anyway.”

“Normal” used to be a bitter curse word for me. Nothing about my existence, my age, my abilities, or my life as it is now, today, is normal. And yet here Sarah is, keeping everyone's feet on the ground in a world that would otherwise devour us, overcome by emotions we can barely control and enemies we cannot see.

Don't fuck this up.

“Let me walk you to your room then,” I offer. “I'm headed to New Orleans to take care of some business tomorrow. I can't leave things the way they are now. I'd like to speak with you.”

I keep my voice low so I don't disturb any of the slumbering wounded, orphaned, or widowed. Though most couldn't hope to sleep under such circumstances, the druids have a rare mercy in their spells. Even now, a young druid, barely a man, is practicing his spell-weaving in the corridor.

Gentle lights like fireflies dance in front of every door as he helps them slumber and stave off their nightmares. He continues his soft incantation, too focused upon his task to take any notice of us.

“Sure,” Sarah says, a faint smile on her lips. “It’s this way.”

It’s a long walk to the abbey convent, where the single women sleep. I’m grateful for these quiet moments. Stolen time, with a woman I don’t think I deserve. Not after all the chaos and death I’ve wrought. Now it appears those days of mine, though long from over, are soon within my future yet again. Peace seems always an eternal lie. Even though Michael and Leigh have found a small sliver of it to call their own, it ever seems out of reach for me.

“I was out of line last night.” I slip my hands into my pockets as we walk. “I can’t tell you how sorry I am.”

“I shouldn’t have pressed when you weren’t ready,” Sarah says. “I’ll accept your apology if you accept mine.”

Her arm threads around my elbow, and I gaze at her in quiet surprise. “Just like that? An Irish woman would give me what for, and then some.”

“I can’t promise I won’t give you that another time,” she replies. “I’m hardly perfect. I just—I don’t know. All of this makes you think about how short and fragile life can be. I’d rather not spend the rest of mine angry or sad. Not anymore than I have to.”

She gives me a gentle squeeze, continuing, “I met Eamon today. He’s a cute kid. I hope he and Sinéad can figure out . . . whatever that is.”

“Best not to insert ourselves in it too deeply,” I say, softly nudging her shoulder. “Leigh made that mistake once, or so I’m told.”

“Really? How?”

“Pushed Eamon to confess his feelings when Sinéad wasn’t ready to hear it. Created quite a mess, but it all seems to be water under the bridge now.”

Sarah nudges me back before her hand rests on my forearm. I cover it with my own, my heart lifting. The burden of the next few days, and the task Michael has set me to, seems that much more manageable knowing she’ll be

safe here, at least for the night.

“Speaking of Leigh,” she says. “She doesn’t seem to like you much. Why is that? You don’t have to tell me, but since you and I are seeing each other, I thought I should probably know. Make sure I don’t say or do the wrong thing, in front a queen of vampires.”

I grimace sheepishly. “Ah. Well. My fault, really. I sort of . . . Well, I ruined their wedding.”

“You crashed it?” Sarah asks, lifting her brows. “What, like, got too drunk and gave a bad best man speech, or—”

“If only. She’d likely forgive me then,” I mutter. “No, I was in a foul mood, and my attempts at helping stem the tide of killings and bombings in Northern Ireland were failing, day by day. It was all too much. First, I helped one side, then when I saw they were out of control, I tried to balance it, and it only got worse, as only it could.”

“I’m sorry.” Sarah squeezes my arm softly. “So what happened?”

“I went to Mickey personally for help, forgetting what day it was, and seeing them binding their hands, just—” I exhale. “I lost my temper, caused a scene, dampened their celebration.”

Sarah looks slightly mortified. “What kind of a scene?”

I bare my teeth to harness an embarrassed groan. “Fisticuffs.”

“With?”

“Oh, the groom.” I sigh. “Only my best friend in the world. Who else?”

I still remember that moment clearly.



May, 1971

I arrived at the celebration late, covered in soot, my clothes singed. Being up

against the wall of a pub just as a bomb had gone off and obliterated everyone and everything inside had rattled me to my wit's end. Michael and Leigh had already spoken their vows, their hands bound together. Everyone was drinking and dancing reels, lost in the merriment of the evening, oblivious of what had occurred in Belfast. What I had witnessed.

Oblivious, and in my mind, uncaring. Willfully ignorant. At least, that's what I told myself at the time. It was also envy that Michael could be so happy when I wasn't. Something snapped in me.

I stormed up to Michael as he danced with Leigh. He wore a flower on his lapel and joy on his face. Furious, I pushed him away from his wife as they danced, breaking the chain of wedding guests. The music came to a discordant halt.

Michael didn't topple, but he stepped back, incredulous. "Cillian? You made it! What's—" He scanned my singed coat and my dusted sleeves. "Sweet Jesus, are you all right?"

"How could you do this?" I demanded. "How could you be so selfish?"

"What's going on?" Leigh asked.

It was the first time I'd ever seen her, her head graced with a little crown of pink flowers and ivy. I should've backed down then, but I didn't. I barreled on.

"Getting married now, when our people are dying?" I demanded. "What gives you the right? You should be in Belfast with me, putting our enemies down once and for all. Instead, you're here."

The confusion in Michael's face faded to anger as I spoke, and he stepped forward, our faces inches apart as he pointed at my chest. "We're not doing this now," he warned. "*Not. Now.*"

Leigh reached for Michael's sleeve, squeezing gently as she stepped next to him and offered her free hand to me. "Cillian. I've heard a lot about you. It's nice to finally meet you."

Her voice was soft, forgiving, as though she meant to soothe me.

Obstinate, I stared down at her hand and refused to touch her, angered all the more. An American. As though she could ever understand.

“Go over to the lads and get yourself something to eat and drink,” Michael muttered as everyone watched us. “And let it be. That’s an order. We’ll talk later.” He turned around, motioning for the dance to continue.

I shoved him hard in the back.

He staggered and caught himself before he fell, then whirled on me with a snarl and shoved me back. “You self-righteous bastard—”

I cuffed him across the jaw, and it all came back with a vengeance—our rivalry across the years amid our friendship, the way we fought each other time and again after the War of Independence, how he supported that fucking treaty, and how that bomb would’ve surely never gone off if he’d fought against it instead.

We struggled on the floor. He punched me once, twice, three times, before I got another strike in. Leigh cried out, demanding we stop, and it wasn’t until several of the lads pried us apart that our fight ended.

“Go back to Belfast and stay there,” Michael shouted as Desmond, Fionn, and Rory held him fast. “I don’t want to see your face again. Never again, until you get your head out of your arse!”

“Cillian, you great shite!” Sinéad gripped me hard with Oscar and Aodhán. “What’ve you done?”

Tears clouded Leigh’s eyes as she stared at me. Then they churned with anger, flashing red, and she picked up her simple ivory wedding dress and turned on her heel, retreating from the party.

Michael shrugged off the boys and called after her, “Leigh, wait!” He glowered at me, growling, “Goddamn you, Cillian, and everything to do with you.” He ran after her.

Sinéad and the others let me go. She scowled. “Fucking eejit, that’s what you are.”

Her words settled within my gut. I knew it was wrong, but I didn’t want

to admit it, even as I had the entire Brotherhood staring me down in the following silence, taunted by their soft whispers and the disapproving shakes of their heads.

“I think it’s best you fuck off now, mate,” Oscar whispered to me, sympathy muted by judgment.

“Leave,” Fionn agreed, looking as though he wanted to murder me for Leigh’s sake. “Before you make things any worse.”

I did what I was told.



“I returned to Belfast that evening and didn’t dare show my face in Boston again for years,” I tell Sarah.

“Cillian, that’s awful.”

“I know. I’m ashamed of how I acted, and I could see it in Leigh’s face, how badly I hurt and angered her. Mickey’s known me for ages. It took him a year or two, but he came round. She’s another story. I’ve tried to smooth things over, but Leigh needs more time.”

“Just so you know,” Sarah says, lightly bumping me with her hip. “If you try that shit at any of my friends’ weddings, vampire or not, it’ll be me punching your lights out.”

That makes me laugh. “Yes, ma’am. Understood, ma’am,” I clip in a soldierly way, even offering her a salute, glad when she laughs again.

The hall she’s staying in is closed off from the rest of the abbey behind a locked door. A mature nun stands guard with her arms folded at our approach.

“Only she’s allowed in here,” she says in a very stern Derry lilt. “You go on and get back to wherever it is you belong.”

It’s been a long time since I’ve been scolded like this, and I know better than to go up against a nun. I don’t think there’s a man in the Brotherhood

brave enough for that.

“Really?” Sarah asks in surprise. “Even if I’m not a nun?”

“Is there a ring on your finger?” she asks in a tone that suggests we’ve got potatoes growing out of our ears. Sarah’s cheeks color slightly.

I answer quickly in her defense. “No, of course not, but—”

“This house serves the Morrigan and the Christ-God both,” replies the nun. “And Christ says there shan’t be any jaggung unless you’re wed. Now go on, lad. Off with you.”

“Guess that’s me told, then,” I say quietly. “If I could have a moment to say good night?”

She scolds me with her mistrustful stare. “If sayin’ is all you’re doing.”

Sarah follows me willingly when I guide her away. “What’s jaggung?” she hisses.

By the way she’s giggling under her breath, she already knows. “Something I’m not allowed to do to you in this place.” Sighing, I take her hands in mine, hugging them to my chest. She’s so warm, even now. Her light, her heat, the way her soft blue eyes catch glimpses of moonlight glowing through the rows of glass windows in the common area we’re lingering in.

I’m a man doomed to hell for sins I can’t begin to list. And Sarah McCready is the closest to heaven I’ve ever been.

“When you asked me to drink from you, it . . . ” I don’t like admitting this, but I force myself to anyway. “It frightened me. In a way I haven’t been in a very long time. The thought of causing you harm, hurting you, or being responsible for . . . ”

“You don’t have to explain yourself,” she interjects sweetly, freeing one hand to touch my face. “It was dumb. I’ve only ever seen those things in corny monster movies. I didn’t understand it.”

“I want to,” I insist. “Because once I had time to think, it’s possible that’s the only way I can defeat this hunger I feel when I’m around you. Drinking

your blood.”

“What do you mean?”

“Sarah.” I lean down and press my forehead to hers. “Your blood has been calling to me ever since I’ve met you. The longer I’m with you, the more I understand that staying away from you isn’t possible. That call—I won’t always be able to resist it. I just want to make sure it happens in a way that doesn’t threaten your life.”

Sarah’s eyes flicker, brightening as she searches my gaze. “What if you could drink my blood without drinking from me? What if we . . . worked up to you drinking from me directly, but we start small so we didn’t trigger anything scary?”

“How?” That’s when it hits me. “The druid’s blood bank.”

“I could donate tomorrow morning,” she says.

“It could be dangerous.” I’m surprised, but quite taken by Sarah’s clever suggestion. It never occurred to me before. The hunger within me rouses, tantalized by the possibility of finally tasting her, how delicious she must be.

“Or brilliant,” Sarah replies.

“That it certainly is.” I draw her closer to me, her body pressed into mine. That damned nun is still over there by the door, watching us suspiciously. “You never cease to amaze me, McCready.”

Her heartbeat quickens in her chest, music to my ears, and I relish the color in those pretty cheeks. “Get used to it, Darragh.”

I could conquer the world with nothing but my hands, my fangs, and her words to bolster me. I don’t want to say good night or leave her alone, but it’s clear she needs to sleep. Cupping her face, I pull her into a kiss, tender and slow, trying to memorize the softness of her lips, the scent of her breath. Her arms wind around my waist.

“Remember when you climbed through my window?” she whispers.

“Of course,” I mumble. “I remember that Peter fellow nosing around your house too.”

“If I open mine, think you could sneak in?”

“I do believe that’s against the rules,” I tease. “No jaggging.”

“Shh.” She chuckles. “Meet me in five.”

Sarah has my full and utmost attention, mind and body. Sneaking around with girls was Michael’s forte when we were young, not mine. Sarah’s proposition has me curious and hopeful for more of what occurred between us the night before. Willing down my cock—*easy, not yet*—I let her go, and I do my best to appear innocent as she walks away.

The nun doesn’t buy it. She huffs. “Well? No point sticking around. Off with you.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I clip. “Sorry, ma’am.”

It’s difficult not to hastily head off, but that would be suspicious too. Instead I take my time, hands shoved in my pockets as I make my way out of the abbey. The moment the cold winter air hits my face, I will myself from man to crow in a swirl of mist. I fluff up my feathers and hop from one little foot to the other in the snow before taking flight toward the convent.

Landing on the roof, I peer down at all the nuns’ windows until I find one that’s cracked open. I perk up *It must be hers*. It’s too cold for anyone to willingly let in a draft. Diving down and banking with my wings outspread, I stretch out my talons toward the windowsill. Flapping my wings, I don’t make a graceful landing. The window only opens partially and vertically.

Sarah wrestles with it. “Oh my god,” she mutters, using her shoulder to contend with a rusty hinge. “These fucking—stupid—anti-sex—windows!” She jams it open wider for me, and I try to hop through, only to squawk when I’m caught between the edge and the glass.

I’m stuck.

Sarah laughs. “Jesus Christ, why are you so big? You couldn’t change into a sparrow or something small?”

A sparrow? What does she take me for? I fluff my feathers in indignation and caw loudly at her in protest.

She shushes me. “You’re going to wake up the entire dormitory. Hang on.” She gently puts her hands in front of my chest and behind me, carefully folds my wings in the proper direction, and pulls me through.

I wiggle from her grasp and land on the ground, changing back to normal in a mist of shadow and black feathers.

“A sparrow,” I mutter, dusting myself off. “Really.”

After closing the window, Sarah collides against me. I just barely catch her, staggering back slightly and hugging her tightly to me.

“You’re so cute as a bird.” She giggles into my chest, nuzzling me. In that short span of minutes when we were apart, she changed into a long, flannel nightgown. “Getting stuck in a girl’s window.”

“If you tell anyone, I’ll deny it,” I reply.

“Your secret’s safe with me. How is it your clothes stay on, anyway? When you change.”

“Druid conjury.” I motion to the wooden raven pendant around my neck. “It’s how sunlight doesn’t burn me, and how everything on my person stays intact when I change forms. Damn nuisance, otherwise, if you ask me.”

She loosens the cuffs of my shirt and the buttons of my collar, pulling me into the bed. “Well, you don’t need them tonight if you don’t want them. C’mere.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I wrap my arms around her and press her close, burying my face in her beautiful dark hair. Breathing in her scent, I feel her tugging my shirt out of my trousers. Chuckling, I lean back. “What’re you doing?”

“Nothing . . .” Sarah’s voice is too innocent, and it doesn’t match her mischievous smile. “Just warming up.”

Her hands are ice when she slips them beneath my clothes. She looks at me in surprise. “I thought for sure you’d yelp or dance around.”

“I told you, cold doesn’t bother me.” She’s feeling around my abdomen a little more than what could be interpreted as innocent. “Oh, you little minx.” I take her by her wrists and pin her beneath me on the bed, roused by the soft

gasp that escapes her lips.

We stare into each other's eyes, frozen for a moment as our play teeters on the precipice of something more. Her chest rises and falls. The hunger within me rouses; the predator's awake, reminding me how long it's been since I've fed from someone straight from the source. That the venom in my fangs makes her more susceptible to every touch, no matter how small.

That I could sink my cock into her depths and claim the woman I want so desperately to be mine.

No. I fight that desire desperately, gritting my teeth. *No. Not yet.*

"Cillian?" Sarah whispers, her smile fading to concern. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." I let her wrists go, brushing her hair from her face and nuzzling her cheek. "Christ, woman, the things you do to me."

Her hands trail to my chest. "I want to . . . you know." Her breath teases my ear as I fight to keep my lips from her neck. If I kiss her there, I'll bite her. I'll drink from her. My fangs grow, elongating with the anticipation of feeding, drinking from her in the way I so desperately wish to. I run my tongue over one, tasting faint bitterness of my venom.

Wait, I implore my instincts, holding back what feels like an entire ocean with one little dam. *Just wait. Wait until morning.*

"I know you do." My voice strained. "So do I. And we will."

"Will we?" Worry tinges Sarah's voice.

I hold myself up on my elbows to better distribute my weight on top of her, not wishing to crush her beneath me. "We will," I promise, adamant. "I just need to make certain I can stay in control. That I won't harm you."

"You won't."

"I adore that you trust me so fully," I admit, gazing down at her. "But I don't trust myself. And I need to."

There's disappointment in her eyes. I knew what this invitation meant, and I half thought I'd give in. But I can't take it, seeing her shoulders sag.

Groaning softly to myself, I pepper her lips with kisses. “Sarah, I swear to you. I will make it worth all the waiting you’ve done.”

“I’m fine, I promise,” she says. That puts me on alert, and I stiffen. Plenty of men have warned me about *fine*. I’ve been subject to *fine* several times myself. As though sensing my wariness, Sarah laughs. “I mean it! I’m really okay. It’s what I get for falling for a man born in another century.”

I home in on her words like a missile. “What did you say?” My tone is soft, because I couldn’t have heard that right, and yet my hearing is sharper than anyone’s.

Sarah seems to realize what she said aloud, and she shifts beneath me. “I think I’m falling for you.” She avoids my eyes. “I know it’s crazy and way too fast, but—”

“No,” I interject, touching her face, kissing her as deeply as I can. “It isn’t crazy. It isn’t fast. With our kind, there is no fast or slow or crazy or not crazy. It just is. And my heart has belonged to you ever since you came barreling out of that house and nearly bowled me over into the snow.”

She returns my kiss with fervor, and when it breaks, she buries her face in my shoulder, soft laughter muted. “Oh, thank God.”

I don’t know who to thank. God? The Morrigan? Fate? The heavens? Sheer dumb luck? But I see it now. Like her name and her soul are etched in the marrow of my bones.

“Well, if we’re going to behave,” Sarah says, nuzzling into my cheek with her forehead. “Do you mind if I ask you something?”

“Anything.”

“Will you tell me about her?” she asks softly. “About your wife?”

I exhale slowly and gently slip off of her, then sit up and pull her to me. “Of course. Come here,” I whisper, helping her get situated in my lap and resting my chin atop her head for a moment as I try to gather my thoughts, my memories. I trace shapes against her back, listening to her heartbeat. “I’ll tell you anything you want to know, so long as you understand it was a long

time ago, and it doesn't diminish how I feel about you."

Reassured, Sarah leans her head gently into my neck. "What was her name?"

"Helena," I answer, squeezing her slightly as pain grips my chest. It's been so long since I've uttered anything about her aloud. Only Michael and Eamon knew who she was, the only members of the Brotherhood who saw her, spoke with her. I've built so many defenses against the very mention of her. I fought in wars to try to forget her. But she remained with me, and still does.

"When did you meet her?"

"I was eighteen. She was seventeen. It was . . . 1915, I think, when I came back on a rare leave, from the War." Old emotions billow up from where I usually keep them locked away. The nostalgia surrounding her hurts but doesn't cut as deeply as it once did.

"A man in uniform. No wonder she liked you," Sarah teases. "Go on."

I don't know how, but this feels good, finally putting my thoughts and feelings to words. "She was my first love. Daughter of a well-off businessman," I add somewhat ruefully. "As you can imagine, he was furious that a poor fellow had come sniffing around her skirts."

"Oh, so you were a bad boy. Gonna take her with you to hell and all that, I'll bet."

"Absolutely," I agree, amazed I can smile about it. "And Helena was worth it. She wrote to me every day, during the war. I lived and breathed her letters. She kept me alive."

The excitement of every man when the postman came, and how they swarmed the messengers filled with hope there'd be something waiting for them, is something I remember well. And it always seemed there was always one, if not several, for me.

"When I returned, we eloped. We were social pariahs a bit, what with her marrying below her class, but we had Mickey, and we managed. We got a

little cottage in the country outside Dublin. I thought I'd try my hand at farming and the peaceful life."

My hands were certainly already hard and calloused enough for farm work. I was proud of that little garden, the first seedlings sprouting from my crops. I was so determined to prove I was worthy of her. That I wasn't nothing or a nobody.

Sighing, I glance down at Sarah. Her eyes are drooping. "Should I put you to bed?" I press my lips to her brow.

"No," she says quietly. "Keep going."

"Well, peace wasn't for me, clearly. I joined up with the Cause, fought for Ireland's independence from Britain. I was good at killing by then. Hadn't even turned yet. I killed my share of Jerrys, but killing British soldiers, Black and Tans, was easier somehow. Felt more justified. It was personal. They were invaders, usurpers. I was angry, same as every other hotblooded Irishman in those days."

I brush my hand through Sarah's hair. "Mickey was the one who somehow held on to his humanity throughout that time. I was all too eager to cast out landowners from their fine and luxurious manors, watch them and their families weep as we set their homes ablaze in retribution for the poor farmsteads their beloved empire had brought to ruin. But as they say, those who live by the sword . . ."

Sarah gazes at me. "And Helena?"

The ash, soot, and smoke in the air that night invades my nose. The way my stomach dropped, my body chilled all the way to the bone, all return to me in a flood of grief. Michael called for me to wait as I rushed forward, reckless, panicked, shouting her name and dreading the silence that followed.

I grip Sarah like she's all that's keeping me here, safe and far away from it all, able to finally speak of it without flying into a rage or breaking down and weeping.

"She died the night I turned. I returned to a shell of a house. Smoke was

still billowing from the roof. They'd barricaded her inside. She died alone and frightened." My voice breaks. "I was too obsessed with slaking my thirst. I should've been there. I could've stopped them. I might've saved her—"

"Cillian." Sarah's arms slip around my neck. She pulls my face slowly to her shoulder. I cling to her like she's the only person left alive in the world, unwilling to let her go.

Michael's shouts to me as I ripped the door off its hinges still remain with me. He knew same as me what we would find, and he wanted to spare me somehow when it wasn't possible. Helena's ashen body, her pretty blond hair burned away, lying still upon our floor as I rocked her and begged her to wake remains branded on my very being.

I begged the Morrigan to let her live and to take me instead.

But my prayers fell on deaf ears. Helena was already gone, and neither God nor Goddess heard me.

Sarah guides me to lie down with her. I hide my face against her chest. How long has it been since I wept? Everything, all of it, is crashing down on me.

"I'm sorry. I haven't spoken of this in—"

"Don't be sorry." Sarah's fingers weave through my hair. "I know. I understand."

She does. She might be the only person who knows what it's like. Robbed of her parents, who were murdered by a man driving drunk in the middle of the night. Her pain echoes mine. In between my own grief, my own rage, I allow my ability to take hold and invite her own experiences into me, willing them to flow through me. I hear her cries as Aodhán breaks the news to her. I feel her desolation, how aimless she felt as she remained long after the funeral, unable to tear herself away from her parents' resting place. How lost we both were.

It would be another orphan who could understand.

Composing myself, I'm content to simply be held and to hold her,

shutting my eyes as her touches send comforting tingles over my head, down my spine, to the very tips of my toes. I haven't slept in years, and yet now my eyes are drooping as happier echoes play in my mind. I hear Helena's laughter, Sarah's wit, my mother's scolding. They block out the blood, the cries of dying men, the shelling of artillery, the sobs of Helena's mother, and the hatred in her father's voice when I brought her body to them to be buried.

The heavens gifted several exceptional women to me throughout my life. I've lost all but a sister in Sinéad, and now, Sarah. The doubt and sorrow I've carried with me from Ireland to Boston and back again seem lighter, but with it comes a determination I can't shake from.

The Lilymen will kill Sarah if they're given the chance. Any mortal who befriends or becomes involved with a Morrigan vampire has the potential to become what we are. And they mean to cull our numbers. It won't matter to them if she's innocent, if she's human. Just knowing me will taint her in their eyes.

I won't let them take her. I won't allow it.

I bare my teeth in a silent growl, withdrawing gently from Sarah when I hear her soft breathing. She's fallen asleep. Enamored, I gaze upon her slumbering form and tuck her hair behind her ear.

"I won't lose you," I swear to her under my breath, admiring her beauty and stillness. "Never you. I promise."



I'm practically a madman, patrolling St. Winifred until dawn, alternating between flying over the grounds and perching upon the highest cross of the cathedral as a crow and watching the sunrise. My protective instinct, which was already strong as a human, is almost out of control. I have so much energy to expend. My only thought is Sarah, sleeping safely inside.

God, how I wanted to stay with her, hold her until she woke. But I

couldn't keep still. The thought of our enemies prowling just beyond the druid barrier spells was too much for me, and I found myself suspicious of every sound, every creak of the old walls, the vents, the dripping of a faucet in a communal bathroom. I thought sneaking out of the nuns' dormitory would be no easy task, but I was happy to find the elderly woman guarding the door had dozed off.

As the cathedral and its religious denizens begin to wake and move about with the coming morning, I spot Leigh near the abbey entrance dressed in a long black coat, on her way to the makeshift blood bank. After surveying the grounds and the withered, slumbering garden covered in snow, I soar down toward her and land in front of the steps.

"Cillian," she greets, peering at me. "Is there something you need?"

"I'd like to talk to you."

Leigh pauses, folding her arms tentatively over her chest. "All right. I'm listening."

It all comes out at once as I take a step toward her. "Leigh, I was foolish, and angry, and—I had no right, ruining what was meant to be the happiest day of your life. I was blinded by rage, by grief. I know I spoke out about the trouble overseas, but that wasn't why I did it, and I realize that now."

Leigh studies me thoughtfully. "Then why did you?"

I hesitate. It's important I speak, but she and I have been at odds for so long, part of me doesn't want to bother, thinking it won't make any difference.

But recalling Sarah's face when I told her what I'd done confirms it for me. I can't let this rest anymore. I need to take accountability. I may not be king, but I won't be a good leader or a good commander in any battle if I can't at least have integrity.

"Because you were marrying my dearest friend," I reply. "And his joy was everywhere, all around me. I felt suffocated by it. I resented and envied both of you, seeing him finally happy when I thought I couldn't be."

Leigh's silence stretches a long while, her sage green eyes intent upon me. She didn't expect an apology from me, not a real one. She exhales slowly. "You know I was a widow too?"

I bow my head. "I might've heard something about that, yes. He was killed in Vietnam?"

"Yes," Leigh replies. "I thought my life was over for two years, and I pushed everyone away. Including Michael. I thought the world had it out for me. But coming back into each other's lives, discovering who he really was . . . It was like I was meant to be someone else. Something else. Something far better than the woman I used to be."

Pensive, Leigh looks over the gardens. "*From the moment you were pulled from the womb, from your first cry, you were Mine.* That's what She told me when I passed Her trials, took the Oath, and became like you. It was Michael I was always intended for. Sometimes I wonder what it would've been like if I'd met him first, but that's not how life works."

I too wondered for many years if my wife died because I was never meant to have her. That it was punishment somehow for my impertinence, calling upon the Morrigan instead of accepting my fate and dying in that bog. Leigh's putting to words my own doubts and imaginings, my own guilt I've battled time and again.

It's good to know I'm not the only one.

"There's no real point in thinking about that, is there?" I ask. This is the first time in the twelve years she's been among our ranks where I've felt kindred to her. What a waste of time. Our bonds might've been stronger had I not had my head so far up my ass. "We loved who we loved. And we made our choices."

"We did," Leigh agrees. "But I was given a second chance. And that's why I was pissed as all hell at you, Cillian. Not because you made a ruckus on our wedding day, but because I thought of all people, *you* would be happiest for me, because you know what it feels like." She rubs her cheek.

“Practically living as a corpse, going through the motions, getting your heart ripped out, and being told by everyone you still have to find a way to breathe. To move on, even when you’re not ready.”

If at all possible, I’m more ashamed than before, bowing my head before her. “I didn’t know. I’m sorry, Leigh. I’m a damned fool at times.”

“You are,” Leigh says, but when I lift my gaze, she offers me a lopsided smile. “But I’m stubborn and ‘a right fucking pain in the arse.’” A rather accurate brogue comes out of her then, and I know she got it from my friend. “Michael will tell you.”

I have to say, I’m impressed. “So . . . we’re all right then, you and me?”

“Yeah,” Leigh says after a moment of thought. “I guess we are.”

She’s about to walk past me when I turn toward her again. “How’d you do it? Forget all your pain, forget about John, move on.”

“I didn’t,” Leigh replies, reaching out and touching my shoulder. “I will always love John, just like you’ll always love Helena.” I’ve never spoken my wife’s name to her, but I’m honored that she knows it, to hear her speak it. “I’ll always carry him with me, wherever I go, for as long as I live, and so will you. The pain subsides, though. Eventually.”

“Thank you, Leigh.”

“You’re welcome,” she says. “Is this a bad time for me to ask what your plans are?”

“My plans?” I ask, puzzled. “Thought I was going with you.”

“Not *those* plans,” Leigh answers. “I meant for Sarah. Are you going to talk to her about taking the Oath?”

A chill runs through my body, like the Morrigan heard us call for Her, even though neither of us spoke Her name. She’s so very close to us right now, among the soft snowfall and the winter cold. I can almost sense Her behind me, reaching for my back.

“I don’t know,” I mutter. “I’ve been trying not to think about it.”

Leigh peers at me. “You’ve singlehandedly brought dozens, if not

hundreds, into the fold. You mean to tell me you haven't considered it? Even a little?"

"Of course I've considered it."

Inevitably, Sarah will age. She is mortal, and she will die. Ice grips my heart. If she doesn't take the Oath, I will most definitely lose her—one way or another. Time is an enemy no mortal can defeat. Only the Goddess has found a way. And She demands sacrifice and bloodshed in return for Her secrets.

"You said it must be her choice," I manage, unable to bring these fears of mine out into the open. "You were right. I cannot prevent her. We haven't talked about it. Not yet. We've barely discussed what we are. To ask her to forsake Heaven and become immortal . . . She needs more time. With us. With me."

"I understand," Leigh agrees, and by the way she smiles, I know she's sympathetic. "But we can't wait too long. Michael told me once he was a dangerous friend to have. I know you understand why."

"I do," I reply softly. I lost Helena to fire and spent decades channeling my grief into fury, letting it fuel me through every charge in every battle. I've only been able to disentangle myself from it recently. What took Leigh two years to grapple with took me sixty.

Vampiric emotions are unpredictable and lasting. What might take a human days, months, or years to get through can take us entire centuries.

If Sarah rejects the Morrigan, refuses to take the Oath, and lives a mortal life—can I survive without her?



The temporary blood bank is set up in the priest's office building, away from the infirmary and far from the wounded and weak to help our younger vampires avoid temptation. Nurses overseen by the infirmary druidwife,

Charlotte Bell, are already hard at work gathering blood from their many volunteers.

One of the younger lads, perhaps sixteen or seventeen and a druidic student, muses as crimson flows through a plastic tube and fills a blood bag, “So if they drink druid blood, do they gain our powers? Can they cast spells?”

“If only,” Charlotte answers, removing the needle from his arm and covering it with gauze. “Then those Lilymen would think twice, wouldn’t they?” Her dark brown eyes flit up from her work, gaze finding me. “Ah! Cillian.” She motions for me to continue on. “Sarah’s in that room just there. She’s donating now.”

I perk up instantly. I hadn’t been listening for Sarah to wake, and she’s already here. I haven’t forgotten about her suggestion last night. Playing down how much I’m looking forward to this is difficult; I’ve suddenly more energy than a child bounding down the stairs on Christmas morning.

Will I really, *finally*, get to taste her?

“Thank you.” Weaving through nuns and their patients, I slip into the bishop’s office, where his furniture has been cleared around to make room for several more seats and blood donation stations.

I’m astonished to find Brody O’Neill sitting next to her, chatting away as though he has not a care in the world. Perhaps it has something to do with the fact he’s sipping on blood in a bag through a straw like a cocktail, well-fed and pacified. He used to be so nervous around her, skittish and uncertain, frightened he might attack her.

“I drank almost everyone on that plane,” I overhear him telling Sarah. “They called it a freak accident. Sometimes I still think about it, and I thought I’d never forgive myself, but Fionn and Cillian—they’ve been looking out for me since I arrived. Don’t know what I’d do without them.”

“Fionn seems like a great guy,” Sarah reassures. “And Cillian is the very best of men.”

The best of men. My chest swells at her praise, even though it's undeserved. What have I done for her to consider me the best? If anything, my time with her has been a series of small accidents. Running into her on my walk home, seeing her at the tavern, rescuing her from Murdock. Really, I'm lucky she gives me the time of day after all the shenanigans the lads and I have put her through.

"He is," Brody says happily. There's a glow to his face from the fresh liquid he's currently guzzling. He tries to talk with his mouth full. "I'm glad—you think so! He seems—quite taken—with you too."

"Easy there." Sarah laughs. "You're going to drain that in two seconds. That can't be good. Can vampires get drunk?"

"Off blood? No," Brody says. "We can get stomachaches if we drink too much of it. Put ourselves in a stupor. We get sluggish if we're overloaded. If we want to get absolutely banjaxed, we have to drink alcohol, same as anybody else. We have to drink a lot more of it than you, though, to get there—oh! Cillian!" Brody waves, getting up. "Didn't see you there. Sarah was kind enough to keep me company. Fionn's away, you know?"

"I can see that," I reply, amused. It's good he's actively working on being near mortals. "Don't let me interrupt."

"Oh no, I should be off, anyway," Brody insists, his nervous nature returning when his blood bag is drained. "I'll take watch so another lad can come and drink his fill."

His caution is admirable. Unless he has a blood source, he doesn't feel comfortable among so many humans. I respect his self-awareness. "All right. Off with ye, then. Send over Aodhán if he hasn't eaten yet."

"Will do." He waves at Sarah. "Bye!"

"Bye." Sarah chuckles, waving back as he leaves with a bit of a skip in his step. "He's so cute."

"He likes you," I say, sitting down next to her and glancing at her blood, still being collected. My thirst is near unbearable, being able to see it in front

of me. But I grip my fists tight and bear it.

“Well, not like he likes Fionn, if that’s what you mean,” Sarah says dryly. “I don’t think you have to worry.”

“Oh, I know he’s—how do you Americans say it?” I click my tongue. “Something to do with baseball. Ah—he bats for a different team.”

Sarah giggles. “Something like that. If there aren’t different teams, how can you play?”

“Too right,” I agree. “He’s a good lad. And a good judge of character if he’s taken to you.”

The blood bag, filling almost agonizingly slow to my vampiric sense, keeps drawing my attention. Sarah says something to me but I don’t quite hear her. Snapping out of it, I look at her. “Hmm? What? Sorry, I—what did you say, love?”

“Oh, you’ve got it bad,” she teases, glancing at my clenched fists, and calls for one of the nuns. They quickly pull the needle from her and wrap her up. The scent of her blood, even stifled by gauze, is enough to make me question my sanity.

“Can you give it to him directly?” she whispers to the habit-clad sister.

“Of course. Let me just get it ready. Give me one moment,” she replies.

A moment, a minute. It doesn’t matter. It feels like eternity. Calm. I must remain calm. I remind myself that I defeated my impulses near forty years ago. I’ve only succumbed to the frenzy a handful of times, and only ever in the dark of night in the midst of a bloody battle. Never at peace in the daylight.

Then the nurse returns with a large mug and places it into my hands. The warmth of Sarah’s fresh blood seeps through the ceramic against my palms. I lift it to my lips and drink. Time slows as I revel in the sweetness of her taste, something I can’t compare to anything else. Wine, liquor, water—it’s all of these things to me and yet none of them. Before, I was almost sluggish. Now, I’m filled with energy. Life.

All weariness is banished from my being. I am whole, strong, nigh invincible. All fears, worries, and concerns flee from me. I am only here, now, in this moment as every one of my senses prickles to life. I can hear every voice in the abbey, the prayers in the cathedral, the laughter of druid children as they play games. Her blood courses through my veins, renewing every organ, pulsing through my heart, causing it to thunder in my chest like a war drum.

More than this, the monster beneath my skin is in tune with me in a way it's never been. Not pressing against the surface, making demands, whispering temptations, but whole within me. We are no longer two facets of the same soul. He is me, I am him, we are one—brought together as I slake my thirst.

Sarah.

I shouldn't have drunk this here. I'm euphoric. My hunger will remain sated for a time, but I know it's not enough. It will never be enough. I want more. I *need* more of Sarah. I'm helpless against it, then. She has turned me—mind, body, and soul—into a bloodlush. I am hers. Enraptured, captivated, addicted.

I feel as though I could conquer the Order of the Lily myself.

“Cillian?” Sarah's voice brings me out of what was turning into a haze. Her laughter is soft. “That good, huh? Will that tide you over for now?”

I'm not yet myself. I've seen glimpses of my face in mirrors shortly after feeding from a person. No doubt, my eyes are pure red, flecked with gold, no longer human.

I want more.

I set my cup haphazardly on a table and rise. It's not simple, finding my balance. I need to take a page out of Brody's book and excuse myself, get away from her while I compose myself. “Yes. I just need a moment.”

“Cillian?” Sarah almost gets up and follows me, only to be scolded by the nun overseeing her for getting up too quickly after donating.

I amble into the corridor and reach for the wall, steadying myself and fighting through a brief moment of panic. That was a mistake. I shouldn't have done that. Like tasting Irish whiskey for the first time, or smoking my first cigarette in the trenches, I know I'm beyond hope now.

I might as well have sampled nectar from a goddess. It's the same thing. I'm ruined. Completely and utterly held captive, and there will be no freeing me. Nothing now will ever replace Sarah's taste upon my tongue.

"You all right there, big guy?" Leigh stands next to me, arms folded as she peeks over my arm.

"I shouldn't have," I mutter. "I won't be able to drink from anyone else, now. Not until she turns. If she even chooses to."

"Well, that complicates things a little."

"What're you talking about?"

"We'll have to bring her with us to New Orleans." Leigh sighs softly. "I can't spare you, not if things don't go well. This matter won't solve itself."

"That isn't necessary. I'll be fine."

Sarah rushes over to me, completely ignoring the nurse's insistence that she come back and sit down. "Are you okay?" she asks, worry darkening her features. "I'm so sorry. I—I really thought it'd be a good start."

"Oh, it was the start of something, all right." Leigh smiles. "You've gone and turned Cillian into a bloodlush. Well done."

"Don't make fun of her, Leigh," I rasp. "She didn't know."

"I'm not making fun, I promise. I'm actually impressed," Leigh replies. "That never even happened between Michael and me before I turned."

"Sorry, a blood what?" Sarah asks, puzzled.

"It means your blood tastes so damn good, he'll never be able to drink anyone else's," Leigh explains. "Figure of vampire speech."

"Pay her no mind," I grunt, forcing myself to think straight. I turn to face them both. "I'm not that far gone." It's a bold-faced lie to myself. "And I'll have to make do, anyway."

“Are you going to New Orleans already?” Sarah asks.

“It seems we cannot wait.” My voice is throaty, so I clear it.

“What’s there? In New Orleans, I mean?” Sarah looks at Leigh, intrigued. “I heard Mickey talk about it, but it didn’t seem right for me to ask about it.”

“We’ve got an . . .” Leigh hesitates. “Old friend to see. About helping us with this Lily problem.”

“How long will you be gone?” Sarah asks.

“I’m not sure,” I reply. “Depends on his mood.”

“Hopefully, like Cillian here, he’ll be well-sated when we drop in,” Leigh answers. “He’s admittedly not fond of the lads, but he likes me, so hopefully that’ll be enough to cancel it out. Sarah, will you come along?”

“Me?” Sarah asks. “How can I help?”

“Cillian went and got himself hooked on you. And if he needs to feed—”

“No,” I interject. “I’ll be fine. She needs to stay here, where it’s safe.”

Leigh doesn’t press, but she’s not the one I’m worried about now. I can see the decision forming in Sarah’s mind before she says it aloud.

“Sarah,” I warn. “No. No, no. Absolutely not. Out of the question.”

“Sorry, but last I checked, you turned down the crown of telling people what to do,” she replies, jutting out a hip before looking directly at Leigh. “Consider me your friendly tag-along blood bank. Of course I’ll come with you.”

CHAPTER 11

Neutral Hospitality



Sarah

I rest my hands on my hips, defiantly staring right back at Cillian. The supernatural crimson of his eyes has dimmed, slowly returning to brown. But, oh, he's got that look on his face. The look that would be adorable if it wasn't so infuriating, where he's trying to protect me from myself.

Leigh is already anticipating Cillian's noble streak. The moment he starts getting agitated and concerned for my safety, she helps me shut it down.

"Look, I get it," Leigh says. "Neither of us wants her to get hurt, but the best way to protect her is to keep her near you, not push her away. Besides, I don't know how long this is going to take, and I need you and the boys at one hundred percent strength, just in case. So if it's her blood that's doing it for you, and she sticks with us, she'll be fine."

I nod appreciatively. "Thank you, Leigh—"

"No! Don't thank her," Cillian interjects, frowning as we both follow Leigh when she begins walking away. "No thank you, Leigh. Did you forget the part where we're going to find Sean fucking Moore—the man whose crown we *usurped*, by the way—and he has an infinite taste for women?"

Especially women who are spoken for by members of the Brotherhood?”

“Oh, now you’re being dramatic. He doesn’t have a taste for taken women,” Leigh answers sagely, sighing. “He has a taste for getting under people’s skin, and you and Michael let him. All too easily.”

“And you don’t take him seriously, Leigh. Just because he favors you doesn’t mean he isn’t dangerous. He’s older than all of us, even Rory. Did I mention that?”

“I’m well aware.”

“He was imprisoned after we took the crown from him, and he escaped St. Leonard. The only one of us ever able to do it! Because he *seduced* a *nun*.”

“Pretty sure I read a book like that once,” Leigh replies, nonplussed. “We’re going to talk to someone, Cillian. We’re not marching into battle. It won’t be that bad.”

I fall into stride with them, struggling to keep up. It’s still morning, I’ve donated blood and guzzled orange juice, but damn, I could use a coffee.

“So . . . should I pack?” I ask.

Leigh smiles at me and nods. “A change of clothes, maybe. All goes well, it’ll be in and out. We don’t want to trespass for too long on the hospitality of the Orleans folk.”

“Trespassing?” I arch a brow. “Can’t you just go there?”

“Yes and no,” Leigh replies. “New Orleans is a bit of a . . . Well, any vampire can meander on over there, yes, whether they’re one of ours, one of the Hecatēi, or something else. But you don’t go there without showing your gratitude to the Desrosiers. And you don’t start fights. No matter what. It’s neutral territory.”

“Who are they, the Desrosiers?”

“Well, you’ve learned there are Irish vampires, and you’ve probably gathered there are Italian vampires too,” Leigh replies. “Just like every culture has its own pantheon, every culture likely too has its own kind of

vampiric warrior.”

“The Desrosiers are Creole, a mix of French and African ancestry,” Cillian elaborates. “They’re a very old and powerful vampire family. Been around since the 1700s. Maybe even before then.”

“And the older the vampire,” I muse, “the stronger they are, so . . .”

“Yes. Their matriarch could squash any one of us like a bug,” Cillian says darkly.

“We’re allied with our druids,” Leigh says. “The Hecatēi have witches, and it’s only natural they have their own version.”

Cillian isn’t so at ease. “Except we’ve got no idea who they serve. It could be a god, a goddess, both, or maybe more.”

“Couldn’t you just ask?”

“You can ask,” Leigh replies. “But from what Michael says, they probably won’t tell you.”

“Mickey only has one order for us regarding the Desrosiers: *don’t piss them off*. Don’t even know why. They’re not exactly open books,” Cillian says warily.

“And they don’t have to be,” Leigh adds. “So we won’t insult them, and we’ll pay our respects. If Sean has lived there these last ten years in relative peace without offending them, we’ll be fine.”

“So you do agree.” Cillian latches on to her words quickly. “He’s trouble.”

“Oh, he’s always been trouble,” Leigh assents. “But we could use his kind of trouble about now.” She glances at me. “You’re not afraid of a little flirtation, are you?”

“Flirting, I can handle,” I reply. “Touching gets a knuckle sandwich.”

Leigh’s grin is one of mischief. “Attagirl.”



Understandably, I'm not allowed to go home by my lonesome. Cillian isn't the only one to tag along with me, much to his chagrin.

"I'm fully capable of keeping her safe, Rory," he grumbles.

"I know ye are," Rory answers. "But with these Lilymen God knows where, one vampire isn't enough. Queen's orders. We move in numbers or not at all. Besides." His eyes twinkle with amusement. "She was my granddaughter before she was your sweetheart."

I don't think I've ever seen Cillian flustered before. It's almost cute. We haven't exactly been secretive. That was the last of my concerns, anyway.

Eamon is with us too, though he mostly keeps quiet, his gaze constantly scanning our surroundings as I unlock my front door and invite them in. They're unfazed by the cold. Their coats are all for show, really. They quickly shed them and hang them on the coat rack with their hats, tapping the snow off their feet onto the rug.

So civilized, I muse. But what else can I expect from a trio of turn-of-the-century gentlemen?

Forgoing cumbersome luggage, I choose to stuff a backpack with clothes enough to last me two days. Cillian follows me curiously about my room as Rory and Eamon peer around the first floor.

"Cozy." Rory whistles, his voice faded through the hardwood floors. "Always wondered what it was like in here. Only ever saw it from the outside, perched over in that tree."

"I'm still not sure about this, Sarah," Cillian says. "You could remain at the cathedral. Or I could speak to Leigh and have Rory or Eamon remind behind with you, at home. They'd keep you safe without a doubt. I trust them both implicitly."

"Let me get this straight. You want to leave me here with my grandfather and a semi-escaped convict?"

"You realize we can hear you," Eamon calls from downstairs. "Real fucking clearly, like."

“Sorry! I meant it with respect,” I call back, slinging near-full pack over my shoulder. “I don’t need a babysitter. I need to contribute. And you heard what Leigh said—you *need* my blood now. I can’t leave you high and dry.”

“You’ve contributed plenty,” Cillian insists. “With your presence alone.”

I give him a look. “To what, exactly?”

“Morale,” he offers quickly.

I shake my head. “Come on, Cillian, we’ve got work to do.”

He takes my arm and gently pulls me back. “Listen to me carefully,” he murmurs, his gaze piercing. His shoulders sag as he relents, only somewhat. “Leigh may be right, and staying with me may be the best thing for both of us. But we’re going to a dangerous place for you. Human life means very little to Sean Moore and even less to the Desrosiers. You accompanying us means you’ll instantly have attention. Whether good or bad, I don’t know. They’ll want to know why you’re *special*, why you’ve been clued in.”

“I’m not special,” I reply wryly. “Cezar just happened to think I was the bee’s knees, one of your vampires nearly ate me one night on a whim, and it so happens the Morrigan is hard up for girls.”

“Don’t say Her name,” Cillian hisses through his teeth, exasperated. “Why can’t you take this seriously?”

“I do, but I’m not going to sit around and be treated with kid gloves waiting for something bad to happen.” I rest my hand on his forearm. “Bad can hit you walking out your front door. I didn’t fear the world I came from, Cillian. I won’t fear yours either. You said you wanted me to listen to you, and I’d stay behind if it meant certain death or something, but after everything you’ve told me, we know that being left behind doesn’t offer any guarantees of safety either.”

My words sink in. He’s pensive, reluctant but listening. “There are no blood banks there,” he warns. “No civilized way of gathering and drinking what we need.”

“Well, guess we’re about to get a lot more acquainted than we already

are, then, because you're the only one putting your mouth on me," I answer.

"It's too soon," Cillian mutters uneasily. "The effect your blood has on me—"

"You won't hurt me," I insist. "We'll worry about it later. And if they want to know why I'm special, tell them I'm yours and to keep their grubby paws off."

That gets him to crack a smile at the very least. "All right," he agrees. "But promise to stay near me. The Desrosiers are a mysterious lot, and their magic is *very* powerful. It'll be best—"

"Listen, you and I might've gotten off on the wrong foot." I motion between us. "But I happen to be a fucking delight to be around."



I thought we were going to take a plane to New Orleans. Turns out, there's an entire underground system beneath St. Winifred where the druids can teleport anyone anywhere with an incantation. It's the most incredible thing I've ever heard of, right up there with vampires being able to turn into birds and fly.

Descending from the prayer chapel into their catacombs is like entering another world. The walls are painted with vast, elaborate knotted murals of saints, ravens, and ancient holy men. I swear some of the paintings actually move, like they're alive somehow. It's overwhelming, almost like stepping through time or peering up at the Sistine Chapel. I could've lingered and spent hours admiring them all, but Cillian takes my hand and coaxes me to continue with him, behind Leigh and Father Joe Brown, who lead us along with lanterns in their hands. Torch brackets lay snuffed out, their ends burnt and void of warmth.

"I'm sorry we couldn't attend the funeral of the archdruid," Leigh laments softly, walking alongside Joe. "But this couldn't wait."

"Tommie's grieving, but believe me when I say he understands," Joe

replies. “The faster we move, the less chance of lives lost.”

“Have you heard anything from the others?” Cillian asks.

“There’s been an attack on St. Kateri,” Joe rumbles. “We received word not an hour ago. We were ready, of course, and they were driven off. Didn’t expect us to have our defenses up, and to have vampires waiting in our midst. Only two of Our Lady’s soldiers were slain, the Lilymen suffered in greater numbers, but I’m not sure how many. Cezar means to chase them down, across the country if he has to.”

“The Spaniard should drive them into the sea,” Rory remarks with a soft scoff. “Now that would be poetic.”

The air sparks to life around Joe’s hands. He weaves them in a circle through, leaving a trail of light in their wake. Then he pushes forward, and wind engulfs us all for one brief moment, like the hall around us just took a long breath.

The cloverleaf archway waiting in the cold dark in front of us bursts to life with the billowing promise of somewhere far away. Lights and mist swirl to form a door to a new world waiting on the other side—a bright afternoon, narrow streets, and square brick buildings with elegant, stacked verandas lined with rails and flowers.

“This side alley leads out to Royal Street and St. Peter in the French Quarter,” Joe instructs. “The invisibility spell I’ve cast over all of you will only last about a minute. I’m sorry I can’t make it last any longer than that, but I can’t maintain it unless I’m there with you. This is only to shield you from the eyes of the mundane while you transport. The moment it fades, their witches will sense you. Put yourself in plain sight by then and head for the Desrosier Hotel. No sudden movements. I can’t stress enough how easily their witches can kill you before you even see them.”

“Duly noted,” Leigh mumbles, gazing at the bustling Louisiana city through the portal.

Eamon rolls his shoulders. “No pressure or anything.”

The druid's words make me nervous. Invisible? Will I be invisible to myself as well as others? What if I can't see what I'm doing or where I'm going, and I run into something? What if I anger a witch I can't see, and they kill me anyway?

Easy, Sarah. I steady my breathing, resting my hand over my broiling stomach. *You wanted this, remember? We're brave. We are so brave.*

"The hotel's just down the road. Big and yellow. You can't miss it," Joe instructs, hands still outstretched. "I'll reopen this door in forty-eight hours."

"Just in time for Christmas," I say as we bring up the rear, taking Cillian's hand.

He glances down at me, and I can see the uncertainty churning behind his dark eyes. "Stay near me."

I squeeze gently. "I will."

"Ready, Rory?" Leigh asks.

"A running start might make you a little less queasy on the other side, if it's your first time," Joe suggests. "And—go."

Leigh launches forward, rushing so fast toward the druid's door that her body is a blur, Rory and Eamon springing after her.

"Ready?" Cillian glances at me.

It's odd, but this is almost fun. I'm excited. "Ready."

Cillian nods at me with a slight smile. "Run."

I take one steadying breath and charge for the portal. Cillian's faster than me—he's a vampire; he can outrun and outgun just about anyone—but he still keeps pace behind me.

With one long leap, I leave the Hall of Druids and Boston behind me.



When I land, I'm in Louisiana. And holy shit, that magical portal looked cool, but it does not feel good. I stumble and fall forward, right into Eamon's

back. He staggers, keeping his balance and turning to help me stay upright.

“Steady on,” he says. “You all right, Sarah?”

Cillian lands behind me as I bend over, clutching my stomach. The world around me is spinning, and my stomach rebels. “Sure, I’m fine,” I lie, covering my mouth as I taste the orange juice I drank after donating blood coming back up. “Nope—”

Cillian grabs me by my shoulders and zooms me over to a nearby city garbage can, which doesn’t help my stomach settle at all. I grab the edges and hurl out my stomach contents, hearing his low voice behind me. There’s a soft tug as he holds my hair back.

“Easy now,” he coaxes. “Let it out.”

“I thought he said a running start would make me *less* queasy,” I groan as I straighten, stars fading out of my vision. “That was like . . . riding ten rollercoasters in one second.”

“Leigh,” Cillian mutters. “Can you help her?”

“Sorry, my ability is for things like cuts, bruises, broken bones,” Leigh says. “I can’t cure cancer or even nausea. By the time I tried, she’d have it all out regardless.” She pats my back, offering me a tissue to wipe my mouth. “You did great. First time I went through one I nearly fainted—and I was a vampire already.”

Rory gazes down at a pocket-watch. “Spell fading in ten seconds. They’ll sense us soon.”

People walk around us, unaware of our presence, all wearing light jackets and going about their business. I’m instantly stricken with just how gorgeous all these brick buildings are. It’s not anywhere as cold here as it was in Boston. I almost feel overdressed, my long sleeves and winter coat no longer seeming necessary. The cool air is thick with the smell of antiquity—like old books, wood, buildings, metal—and I can hear faint jazz being played nearby in a local bar.

We shuffle into a deserted alley. Leigh says it’ll be weird for us to come

out of there together into plain view, but it's better than just popping out of thin air on a major street.

Eamon wrinkles his nose, scanning our surroundings. "Ugh. I can smell Bourbon Street from here."

"Well, that isn't where we're going," Leigh tells him. "So your nose can rest easy."

"Spell should be gone now," Rory warns, slipping his pocket-watch back into his vest as he rolls up his white sleeves. "They'll be watching us closely."

Leigh turns from right to left. "Let me get my bearings. I've never been here before. Ah!" She smiles at me. "Joe said Desrosier Hotel should be this way. Come along. Act like everything is fine—because it is—and we shouldn't have any trouble at all." She takes the lead, Eamon and Rory falling in and flanking either side of her protectively. Cillian and I follow. I grip his hand tightly.

"Are you all right?" he whispers.

"I'm fine." I glance up when I see movement in my peripheral vision, a shadow upon the rooftops. "Are they . . ."

"Watching us? Yes," Cillian answers. "And they can hear us quite well too."

"Who are they?"

"No one knows." Cillian pulls me closer to him. "To any of us living a life beyond humanity, they call them the Watchers."

"That's not creepy or anything," I mutter.

Cillian smirks. "Think of them like supernatural policeman. Many of our kind come here to sink their teeth into *local cuisine*."

"Local cuisine," I remark dryly, giving him a look. "Is that any way to talk about—"

"If you're going to be around us, you got to learn to stomach the kind of talk you'll hear," Cillian answers. "We're not you anymore, Sarah. We're

different. We're separate. Many vampires believe the sentiments of humans don't matter."

I arch a brow. "Is that your way of saying you're better?"

Cillian gives me a squeeze. "Depends on who you ask. And if you ask the Desrosiers, yes. We most definitely are. So let's leave the faux moral high ground behind for now. It's not going to do anybody any favors today."



With all the talk about the Desrosiers, I'm not sure what I expected when we arrive at our destination. But it's definitely not this.

The Desrosier Hotel is badly damaged on the outside, sad gray paint peeling away and hanging off the facade. It's ancient, by the looks of it. At least a hundred years old, if not more. The eaves, lacking functional gutters, are crooked and warped from decades of water damage. All the windows are boarded up, and there are several condemned signs posted all about the property.

"This is it?" I whisper in disbelief as we follow Leigh toward what was once a grand entry with metal pillars. "It looks like the city is about to tear it down."

Eamon glances over his shoulder at me, shooting me a look like I've just tried speaking another language. "What the hell are you talking about? The place is glorious!"

"It's not her fault, lad. She's seeing exactly whatever the Desrosiers want her to see," Rory explains, looking at me. "You've mortal eyes, yet. Don't worry, it'll all make sense in a minute, I hope."

At our approach, the doors open with a shuddering creak. A man with curly black hair and narrow shoulders steps into view, wearing a sharp black suit with tails in the back, a high collar, and a fine silk bowtie spun from gold.

“The Desrosiers welcome you! My name is Pierre. You honor us with your presence, Your Majesty,” he says, giving a low, reverent bow to Leigh. “Lady Zephyrine especially looks forward to your company.”

“We’re honored to be here,” Leigh replies pleasantly, and the man gives her a bright white smile in response. “I hope our dropping in wasn’t too sudden.”

“Not at all,” Pierre informs her. “We’ve heard tell of St. Leonard. Dreadful business. You have our deepest condolences. If you would follow me, I will show you to your rooms.”

Reluctant, I sweep my eyes over the condemned building, wondering if there’s really some sort of magic that’s hiding it from me, or if vampires just can’t see how much of a dump it is. *Are we really going to sleep here?*

“I had hoped to speak to Lady Zephyrine as quickly as possible,” Leigh remarks softly. “Is she available?”

“She’s tied up at present with another matter, but she’ll see to you as swiftly as she can,” the butler replies.

It’s then that Pierre notices me—and I get a good look at his eyes, bright like liquid gold. Is he a vampire, or something else? I’ve seen gold flecks in Cillian’s eyes, but they were crimson. Pierre’s seem far more catlike. Nervously, I offer him the best polite smile I can, but he doesn’t return it, all his warmth fading away to guarded neutrality.

“We do not usually allow pets within the hotel,” he says, “that haven’t been personally vetted by the Desrosiers’ staff.”

My mouth drops open, and I have to clamp it shut before I say something and mess this all up for everyone. *A pet?* Is that what vampires here consider people? I suppose Cillian tried to warn me, but he doesn’t seem to like it much either, and I’m reassured by the low growl building in his chest.

“Easy, lad,” Rory rumbles.

Cillian’s fangs flash as Leigh speaks. “She belongs to my associate—”

“She’s mine. My woman,” Cillian cuts in, arms possessively winding

around me. I lean into him, wondering if it was a good idea to come along, after all. I don't feel welcome in the slightest, but his embrace anchors me and helps me stand firm in the presence of this stranger who sees a toy instead of a person.

Pierre's eyes burn when he looks at me, like he means to read my very soul.

Cillian continues, his voice firm. "Only her blood will slake my thirst."

"And she'll be one of us soon enough," Leigh adds.

"I see." He looks away from me and offers Leigh the same respect he previously gave while I continue grappling with the fact I was referred to as a pet. If this man weren't a vampire, and someone related to a formidable family I've been reminded multiple times we shouldn't be fucking with? Oh, we'd have words.

"I will inform my lady," he says loftily, then hesitates. "Ah. I suppose. Step forward, little one."

Cillian's grip loosens on me as he reluctantly lets me go. *Little one*, he says. I know I'm not the tallest person, but I'm not little. At Leigh's calm motion to me to step forward, I cautiously comply, unsure of what he wants from me.

Pierre still stares at me like he knows all my secrets and then some, beckoning me to him. Rallying my courage—I'm not afraid of vampires, right? I've only been hanging out with an entire tavern full of them all month—I stand in front of him.

"Your eyes are closed." His voice is smooth, like warm liquor down the throat. "Open them."

I'm about to ask what he means, since my eyes *are* open. Then he blows into my face, and I hear winds through the trees, in my hair. I smell saltwater and iron, taste sweet beignets melting in my mouth, and the dilapidated hotel all but disappears, its destroyed exterior melting away with a single pulse, like a heartbeat.

And oh, God—what I see instead renders me completely rooted to the ground.

The hotel entrance in front of me isn't a condemned and shuttered eyesore anymore. It's vibrant, with freshly painted sunshine-yellow walls, white shutters, and clear shining windows with checkered white windowpanes. Elegant French rails and pillars don't show an ounce of rust. On either side of the doors are red, orange, and white flowers, the air sweet with their fragrance. I hear fast, upbeat jazz from inside, like I'm about to step into a swinging speakeasy club against my parents' wishes.

Pierre wears a knowing grin. "Like what you see?"

"How?" I stammer.

"Some secrets are not for you." He *tsks*, and swings the door open for us. "We bid you welcome, Morrigan guests, to the Desrosier Hotel."



The hotel's interior is as gorgeous and refined as its exterior. Beneath my feet is a shining hard floor covered in fine French patterns of gold and ivory. Supernatural patrons of all races gather and converse in the grand parlor, arranged with luxurious furniture. A hotel receptionist behind an antique mahogany desk speaks warmly with a lovesick pair, checking them into their room. A sign points the way to a bar, where jazz continues in full swing.

One vampire woman with golden eyes breezes past us, her glittering black flapper dress swishing around her hips. Her cheeks glow, she has black curls for miles. She stares back at me curiously and flashes a glimpse of her pearly fangs before continuing on her way. I'm not sure if that was her being friendly or threatening me. After the pet remark earlier, and from what I know of how and when I've seen Cillian's fangs in his mouth, I'm leaning toward *not* friendly.

It's not the dress that's caught Eamon's attention as she passes, his gaze

fixated upon her ass. I give him a nudge, snapping him out of it.

He shrugs, all too innocently. “What?”

“This way, please,” Pierre instructs with a confident stride, bringing us to a fancy elevator and pulling apart its bronze scissor gate.

As we all pile in together, he smiles and pulls a lever to bring us to the top floor—the penthouse suite. “Lady Zephyrine insisted. Only the best for our visiting Irish royalty.”

“Lady Zephyrine is too kind,” Leigh answers, well-spoken and polite. I don’t think I’ve ever seen her behave so regally before.

When Pierre opens the gates, we’re greeted with a large room clearly reserved for large parties of an important kind. There are pool tables, a full bar, plenty of places to lounge, a glimmering chandelier above our heads that probably costs more than my house, and a bubbling hot tub built into the marble floor.

And a bed that could fit many more than two people, if someone of consequence and high stature was feeling especially ambitious.

“Please help yourselves. Should your human grow hungry, you may call room service, and the chefs will send something up,” Pierre says with a small gesture to the rows of fine bottles upon the bar’s shelves. “Make yourselves comfortable while you wait.”

“Thank you, Pierre,” Leigh says for us as we’re all ogling the place. “Your lady’s hospitality is unmatched anywhere in the world.”

If Pierre were a peacock, he’d ruffle his feathers in delight, his chest puffing out with unmistakable pride. “I will give her your compliments.” He bows. “Ring the bell should you need a meal sent up.”

With that, he turns on his heel and descends in the same elevator, out of sight. I look around, puzzled. “And a meal is?”

“Humans,” Rory grunts.

“We’ll have to feed before we leave here, you know,” Eamon points out, appearing somewhat apprehensive. “And not in the usual way.”

Actually . . . you know. From a person. Won't Mickey be unhappy we're breaking the rules?"

"No," Leigh says. "Those are the rules in Boston, and Michael knows not everyone feeds the way we do. We shan't offend our guests by refusing to partake in their expected way, should we need to."

"How do you feed from humans anyway?" I ask, and when they stare at me, seeming puzzled by my question, I elaborate. "When I was attacked, it hurt. A lot. How do vampires keep their secrets if they're feeding from real people all the time? Wouldn't regular folks hear screaming, call the police, notice if people start disappearing a lot?"

"Our bites produce a non-lethal venom, meant to calm someone into submission," Cillian explains. "It's something we have to control, and new vampires often don't understand how to administer it in the first bite. They're too ravenous and impulsive."

"I remember those days," Eamon pipes up, sighing almost nostalgically. "Never had a girl complain of being fed upon, not once, when I got the hang of it."

"Just girls?" I ask. "You didn't feed on men?"

"No." Eamon wrinkles up his face. "Not unless I absolutely had to. Why would I do that?"

Confused by his reaction, I look at Cillian, who laughs softly and begins to explain. "What he means is, the venom typically also causes people to—"

"Oi, that's enough of that, now," Rory warns. "Not proper talk to be having at a time or a place like this."

I look up questioningly at Cillian again, and he gives me a subtle wink.

Eamon's gaze is fixated on the pool table. "Well! Who knows how long we'll be waiting. Might as well do something to pass the time. Rory, fancy a game of billiards?"

"Why not?" Rory shrugs, fetching two pool cues and casting one to Eamon, which he catches expertly. "What about you, Cillian?"

“Haven’t played that in ages,” he says, shaking his head. “Someone has to keep their eyes open.” His arm loosens from my waist, and he lets me go.

He’s about to pull away from me, but I pull him back and plant a kiss against his lips, slow and sweet. When it breaks, he looks pleasantly surprised and clears his throat. “What was that for?”

“Defending my honor earlier,” I reply, enjoying how bashful he gets in front of others. “Thank you.”

Eamon grins shamelessly at us while Rory simply shakes his head, mumbling something to himself while readying the billiard balls.

“I’ll be on the balcony,” Cillian says.

“Sure thing.” I watch him walk away before checking out the bar and seeing what I can find. Since I donated blood earlier this morning, I decide to play it safe. Liquor isn’t on my menu. I fill a glass with water and ice and guzzle it like I just ran a marathon, then munch on a small bag of pretzels I find in the cabinet. I’ll try the fancy room service later when I’m sure my stomach can take it.

“Do they have rum and Coke?” Leigh asks.

“Looks like it. Want one?”

“Yes, please. If you don’t mind.”

“Sure! No problem.” I bring Leigh her drink, sitting down with her on a loveseat in the corner that overlooks the room. “You seem like you’re right at home in this kind of life.”

“I was, once upon a time,” she replies, accepting the drink appreciatively and sipping. “I was from old Boston money. Had a pony growing up and everything. Still love horses to this day. Though convincing Michael to ride them willingly is a hopeless endeavor.”

“Threw it all away for love?”

She laughs softly. “Something like that. I like making my own way. My choices were never perfect, but they got me here.”

I lower my voice a little. “Do you think maybe you and I could talk

sometime about what you said before? About . . . the Oath? And me?"

Eamon and Rory's conversation instantly dies, and they look right at me like I've just uttered the most unimaginable curse word. Cillian, who was peering out at the streets of the French Quarter, looks through the glass at me too.

Awkwardly realizing my mistake, I try to recover. "Oh, come on, yes, fine. I forgot you all have super hearing. Mind your business!"

Amused, Leigh gently pats my hand and nods. "Yes. When all this Lilymen business is settled, and everything's set to right as best as it may be, you and I can chat. Does that sound fair?"

"Yeah." I'm relieved she isn't going to try to talk me out of it. "Thank you, Leigh."

Hours pass without any sign of anyone at all. Pool can only interest vampires, it seems, for so long. Eamon drapes himself over a couch, staring dully at the ceiling while tossing a pool ball up and down in the air. Cillian all but paces a rut into the floor, while Rory is so bored, he dozes in a fancy blue chair. And he doesn't even need to sleep.

"There's not even a telly in here," Eamon grumbles.

"You watch TV?" I ask.

"Well, not in thirteen years," he replies. "I'd like to see what's changed."

"I'm not the best person to ask for that," I admit. "When I watch TV, I usually stick to *M*A*S*H*."

Eamon stares at me blankly. "What's that?"

A pair of double doors on the far side of the suite open inward by bellhops. Rory wakes and Eamon quickly stands, while Leigh motions for me to remain seated and rises elegantly to her feet.

A woman glides into view wearing a soft blue gown that belongs in a club or on a red carpet, accentuating her full figure. She's taller than Leigh. Her warm brown skin seems to glow, and her naturally black hair rests on either side of her shoulders in beautiful ringlet curls. She lifts her chin and

squares her shoulders with pride as she stands in the center of the room.

It's her bourbon-gold eyes, like Pierre's, that capture my attention. When she looks at me, I'm not cold with fear but warm and flushed. I can't explain it, but I've never felt as small as I do now, being in her presence, which isn't like me at all. How many centuries has she lived? How long has she ruled over New Orleans like a queen? How is it she strikes so much fear into the hearts of others that she can keep peace between so many without so much as lifting a finger?

I can't be sure if I've fallen under a silent enchantment, or if I'm only imagining things. All I know is she could command me to do anything she wanted without a word, and I'd do it in a heartbeat because I've never seen a more stunning woman in all my life.

"Lady Desrosier." Leigh moves to greet her. "Thank you for agreeing to see me on such short notice."

"Please, call me Zephyrine." Her deep Southern voice is honeyed, confident, and wholly in command. "It is my pleasure. I've never actually had the honor of making the acquaintance of High Queen Leigh Kelly of the Morrigan Brotherhood. I was very eager to meet you, Your Majesty."

"Something I should have remedied long ago," Leigh says with some embarrassment at Zephyrine's drawing out of her title. "And please, Leigh is just fine. I'm not keen on that title."

"Why not? You should be. It is yours," Zephyrine asserts, a faint smile tugging at her lips. "This world has been ruled by weak and frivolous men for far too long, Leigh. If I may offer advice from one woman to another—never shy from a title you have rightfully earned, and be sure there are consequences should anyone forget it."

I kinda like the way Zephyrine looks at things.

"I'll keep that in mind," Leigh replies. "Thank you."

Zephyrine moves as though she owns everyone in this room. She regards the men with mild curiosity as she circles them. "You brought warriors with

you.”

“Yes. This is Cillian Darragh. One of our best fighters,” Leigh says.

Cillian is only taller than Zephyrine by about an inch. She gazes up into his eyes as he stands perfectly still like a soldier, unbothered by her inspection. “So young.” She *tsks*, passing Eamon, who blushes and shuffles in place. “All so very young.”

Then she spots Rory. “But you . . .” She admires him openly, her smile growing. She carries herself with such elegance, even the gentle way she tilts her head betrays her magnificence. “You’re a man who’s seen his share, aren’t you?”

“I’d like to think I’ve learned a few things in my day, Lady Desrosier,” Rory answers bashfully. “But I’m sure there’s always more.”

Her laughter is soft and musical. “And you are?”

“Rory McCready, ma’am.” He quickly takes off his hat. I don’t think I’ve ever seen his ears so pink. Suddenly, I realize my great-grandfather is blushing, not because he’s embarrassed. There’s a glint in his eye. He’s enjoying this banter.

Oh my god. She’s flirting with my grandpa.

“Would you dine with me this evening, Mr. McCready?” Zephyrine asks softly, offering her hand to him. “I would very much like to learn more about you.”

I wouldn’t object—it might feel a little weird to me, but at the same time, damn right, Rory’s a handsome man, and he deserves any and all female attention he gets. But even if I did have a problem with it, I don’t think I could if I tried. For whatever reason, my body feels so heavy. Sluggish. Even turning my head is an effort.

Rory brushes his thumb over her hand before lifting it to his mouth and kissing it. “Say the word, and I am yours.”

That greatly pleases her, her white smile so stunning even my breath catches. I’m not sure whether to be impressed or a little grossed out. Don’t

get me wrong, I've always thought of my great-grandfather as a very handsome man. I don't exactly know his age when he turned. Late forties, early fifties, maybe. His beard is salt-and-pepper, and there are streaks of silver in his hair. But that definitely doesn't bother Zephyrine. They gaze into each other's eyes intently.

I'm impressed. We're here on a mission, sure, but if part of that mission means Rory gets to have some alone time with a formidable woman like her? I'm all for it.

Now, if only I could move.

That's when she turns her attention to me, her smile fading to something else. Something dangerous. My heart pounds as she moves to the couch I've been sitting on like a rock.

"I see you brought your own refreshments," she remarks. Her tone is light and merry, but when she takes my hand, her soft touch sends a chill through my body.

I'm in danger. A deer in the headlights. Why can't I move? Why can't I speak? Even my tongue is tied. I don't know what I would say if I could use it.

Behind her, Cillian bristles, clenching his fists tightly and nearly stepping forward. Eamon is the one who grabs him by his shoulder and urgently shakes his head.

Zephyrine brushes my dark hair behind my ear, causing a pleasant tingle to crawl along my head. I nearly lean into her hand. "Such a pretty little thing you are," she murmurs. "And how sweet is your blood, I wonder? Are you like honey?"

Uncertain on how to answer her, I can only stare. *Is this magic? Why am I so captivated?*

"This is my great-granddaughter, Sarah," Rory explains, calmer than any of us must feel right now. "She's considering joining our ranks in the near future."

“Is she?” Zephyrine cooed, caressing my cheek. Dazzled by her focus upon me, I can only smile when she speaks, soaking in every sweet word. “But of course. Such an exquisite addition to your fold. I cannot lie and say I would not be tempted to make her immortal myself.”

Jealousy flashes across Cillian’s face. There’s a deepening crinkle in his brow, and as Zephyrine continues, it seems as though his anger is pulling apart at every seam. He finally bursts. “You can’t have her.”

“Cillian,” Leigh hisses, but it’s too late.

Zephyrine blinks and rises to her full height. A foreign pulse of energy quakes through my body, swift and light. Suddenly, my mouth is freed, but I still feel heavy like I can’t move. I rub my jaw self-consciously then try to speak. My voice comes out like a squeak, and I cough.

But she isn’t listening to me. In a flash of speed, she’s nose-to-nose with Cillian. The curtains around the windows billow. I swear I hear whispers from the walls.

“And who are you to come into my domain, as young and as weak as you are, telling me what I can and cannot have?” Her voice is low and sharp as a blade.

Cillian is rendered stiff as a board, jaw clenched. His breathing becomes ragged, painful, like he’s straining against some invisible pull.

“Don’t hurt him, Lady Desrosier!” I plead helplessly, still rooted to my place by threads I cannot see. But still she pushes, pulls. I’m rendered immobile and filled with fear. She’s close to breaking him, and she’s not even lifted a finger. How is she doing this?

“He’s spoken out of turn,” Rory offers in calmer defense. “You’re right, of course. He’s foolish and young. He carries a great deal of love for the girl. You remember how overwhelming those emotions can be, I’m sure, when you were newly turned. The jealousy. The need to possess. The passion.”

At the mention of passion, whatever invisible grip she has on Cillian loosens. He exhales like he’s been choked, staggering in place until Eamon

steadies him. I thank every saint I can think of for Rory. I don't think we'd be faring nearly as well in this meeting if he weren't here with us.

"I remember those days quite well." All semblance of polite hospitality gone, Zephyrine turns to Leigh. "What is the reason for your visit?"

"We're looking for Sean Moore," Leigh explains. "We understand he's been living in your city for some time. We thought you might know his whereabouts—and we didn't want to attempt to move through New Orleans without your consent."

Ire floods Zephyrine's face at the very mention of Sean Moore. She purses her lips. "Ah, yes. The blond wastrel. Good of you to finally come and collect him. He is taking quite a toll upon my bloodstock," she says in disdain. "And he brought no tribute to pay me for it. Typically, those who come into my city seek our blessing with gifts before taking advantage of our generosity."

It hits me, lightning fast. *Oh, shit.* Does she think *I'm* the gift?

Taken off guard, Leigh struggles to find words. "Apologies, Lady Zephyrine." As sincere as her words are, she refuses to bow her head. She speaks calmly and with poise. "Whatever I can give you in return for his oversight, please allow me to make it right."

Quelled by her words, Zephyrine considers in silence for a moment before glancing at me. "Her blood." She motions to me. "Virgin blood is a delicacy. I haven't had the opportunity to taste it in some time. Has she been tasted before?"

My blood runs cold.

Leigh hesitates, unsure how to proceed. We exchange glances. I wonder if she's asking herself the same running through my head—if I'm to be the tribute.

Am I a considered a virgin in this way? Cillian drank from me, though not directly. Daniel Murdock attacked me, sank his teeth into my neck once, but it was healed. So does that still make me whatever Zephyrine is saying I

am?

I have so many questions, my own fear holding me hostage. Whatever the answer is, I don't want to be fed upon by Zephyrine, or be left in her thrall again. How do I get out of this?

Cillian steps forward. "No! I won't allow it. And you're too late, besides. I've tasted her," he declares, unashamed.

Eamon hisses in exasperation. "Shut your face. She's going to choke you again!"

Zephyrine is unfazed by Cillian's temper this time, turning to him with a self-assured smile. "But have you done so from the source?" she asks. "You Morrigan vampires are an odd bunch, with your blood banks and your need to be somehow nobler than the rest of us. Denying your basest instincts like it makes you better. Have you really drunk from her neck? Where you were always meant to?"

She doesn't fear saying the Morrigan's name at all. I wonder if the Morrigan can hear Her name spoken by vampires who don't worship Her. Rory and Eamon flinch at Her mention. Cillian only clenches his jaw.

"I assure you, we don't think ourselves better," Rory says, recovering quickly. "We've simply implemented a way of life that reminds our people of the place we came from and provides a semblance of the freedom we fought so hard to attain."

Zephyrine's hardened features soften. She waves her hand at me, and whatever invisible chains that have held me slip away. I lurch forward, my heart beating wildly, and shakily rise to my feet. Cillian rushes to me and pulls me possessively into his arms.

"I mean you no ill will, Chosen of the Morrigan," Zephyrine said. "But Moore has quite overstayed his welcome. You can find him on the hotel's third floor. Suite 17C. And do try to mind your manners while you're here. Mr. McCready, if you would care to join me?"

To his credit, Rory has handled himself better than anyone here. He's

graceful, poised, and ever the gentleman, even as he exchanges a look with me that bids me caution.

“I am at your disposal,” he answers, offering his arm.

Satisfied, Zephyrine glides away as swiftly as she came with Rory in tow. I don’t hear a single one of her footsteps next to his. The doors swing shut behind them.

Cold sweeps over me, and I shiver.

“So . . .” Eamon musses his hair, shifting awkwardly. “Does that mean Lady Zephyrine’s still going to feed from Sarah?”

“I told you, Leigh. I knew it,” Cillian seethes. “We should never have brought Sarah here.”

“I disagree,” Leigh replies, pensive and a little more relaxed now that Zephyrine is gone. “She was the perfect distraction. If she hadn’t come along, I think the Desrosiers might’ve taken our arrival as a slight, with nothing to show for it.”

“What’re you talking about?” Cillian demands.

“I gave my blood to cement peace once, between us and the Hecatēi. I think Lady Zephyrine lost interest in Sarah in the end. I can’t be sure, but it might’ve been the only way to smooth things over.”

I draw in a deep breath, steadying myself. “If you need me to, I’ll do it.”

Perplexed, Cillian draws back. “Sarah, you can’t—”

“I have to. It’s for the good of everyone. And unlike all of you, I can’t fight my way out of here if things go badly,” I reply. “So let’s not have them go badly at all. It’s a little blood. I’ll be fine.”

“As fun as it is to be in this pickle with the lot of you,” Eamon says, then clears his throat, glancing about. “I want to get home. The sooner, the better. Can we get this fucking over with?”

“Right.” Leigh exhales. “Here goes nothing.”



As we stand in front of the ivory door beneath the golden numbers and letters marking it 17C, it's blatantly obvious not a single one of us are keen on actually going in.

I suspect it's because neither Cillian nor Eamon really like Sean Moore. I've only heard bits and pieces about him here and there, but nobody seems to trust him.

Only Leigh seems ready and willing to vouch for him—and even she's reluctant. Not just because of whatever loaded history comes along with this guy, but because of the very audible moans and cries of pleasure of two separate women that even I can hear just fine.

“Oh, for fuck's sake.” Muttering in annoyance, Leigh reaches for the doorknob and twists. I'm about to follow her, but Cillian holds me back.

“Let's give her a minute to do her thing,” he mutters.

Leigh strides into the room like an angry parent, all regality and grace. She could almost rival Lady Zephyrine. But there's that Boston side of her she can't hide, and it comes out hard in her voice as the women in question shriek in surprise.

“Out, both of you,” Leigh barks. “Now.”

Two startled women, sporting fresh puncture wounds and trickles of blood down their necks, flee past us in a flurry of bedsheets and disheveled hair.

“What the fucking hell, Leigh?” I hear a man counter, sounding quite put off. “I wasn't nearly done!”

“You're done now. I'm here with to speak with you. Put that snake away and put some fucking pants on,” Leigh commands, now definitely sounding more mother than vampire queen. “Boys. Sarah. Inside.”

Eamon is extra quick to obey, hurrying after her.

Cillian hangs behind. “Sean is a notorious trickster not to be trusted, whatever he says,” he whispers to me. “Be careful.”

I take his hand, and he brings me inside.

This hotel room isn't like the suite we were kept in. It looks rather lived in, with clothes draped on chairs and scattered about the floor. There's an open bottle of wine and half-drunk glasses. Sex hangs heavily in the air.

But that's when I see him. His back is turned to us, ass bare and head bowed, in no hurry to do Leigh any favors as he slowly pulls his trousers up and belts them with a heavy sigh. He's quite pale, except for a few freckles that dust his shoulders.

"No fun," he mutters. "No fun at all."

When he turns, I get a look at his face—and I'm shocked by what I see. He looks just like Desmond Moore. They're not just brothers.

Twins, I think in surprise. Identical twins.

Only a fool would try to pretend the Moore brothers aren't good-looking, but Sean is almost sinfully gorgeous. His hair is shorter than Desmond's shaggy platinum mane. Strands hang in his piercing blue eyes. And where I remember Desmond being on the verge of husky with broad shoulders, Sean is somewhat leaner, like he didn't quite get enough to eat growing up and has finally filled out, but only just.

Still shirtless, Sean lets forth another heavy sigh and heads to where he left his wine, forgoing the glass and drinking straight from the bottle instead. "To what do I owe the visit, Your Majesty?" he says a little too cheerily. "Forgot my manners. Shall I curtsy?"

"Cute." Leigh is unfazed by his needling. "What're you doing here?"

"Oh, New Orleans has all kinds of distractions for a hot-blooded man like myself." Sean catches sight of me and winks. Involuntarily, heat creeps into my face. "Need something to keep busy these days."

"Does that include trespassing for too long on the Desrosiers' good will?" Leigh remarks.

"Not at all," Sean replies. Every word that exits his mouth drips mischief. "They adore me." When Leigh looks unconvinced, he drives on. "Besides, it's far better than New England in the winter. Always preferred warmer

weather. The better question is, how did you know I was here?"

"I assumed it was the only city in America you haven't been chased from," Leigh quips dryly. When Sean gives her a skeptical look, she sighs. "Your brother had a suspicion."

"Ah, yes. Good ol' Des. Mr. Law and Order. Can always rely on him for a trusty stab in the back." He still sounds chipper, but his words are sharper at the mention of his brother. That's when he fixates upon Cillian. "And you brought your attack dog. How grand. Here for round two, Darragh, or to apologize? I think you'll find I've grown stronger since last we had it out."

"We aren't here to bicker," Cillian retorts. "And I'll apologize for nothing. You were a lousy king."

Sean flashes a foxlike smile when he notices Eamon, glowering at him and standing stiffly at Leigh's side with his arms folded. "Aw, you brought the wee lad along with you too, Leigh. But I thought he was thrown away to St. Leonard with the key for all the killin' he done back in . . . oh, what was it? Nigh over a decade now? I don't really keep track of the years anymore."

Eamon tenses as Sean walks over to him. He's a little taller than both men by a couple inches. Sean grins and ruffles his hair. "Won over your redhead yet, boyo?"

"Don't touch me," Eamon hisses, mussing his curly auburn hair back to its proper place.

"Aw, you're not still sore about our little brawl on the boat, are you?" Sean *tsks*. "'Twas nothing personal, lad. Just had to get you mad enough to make mistakes, that's all. At any rate, seems like you're out of the slammer, doesn't it?"

"I'm not out," Eamon answers, his hackles up. His eyes flash crimson and gold, slitting narrowly.

"Looks like you are to me. Took a page out of my book, did ya?" Sean muses. "Which little nun did you manage to sweet talk into freedom?"

"St. Leonard is destroyed," Cillian interrupts abruptly. "Burned to the

ground. All the druids slaughtered by the Order of the Lily.”

Rendered silent, Sean lifts a single brow. Several moments pass in silence. Then he smiles, his too-silky tenor a rumble in his throat, light and lackadaisical. “What a shame.” He yawns, sitting down and stretching out on his bed. “Sounds like you’ve got quite a problem on your hands, then.”

Cillian looks about ready to start at him, but Leigh stops him with a glare. “Eamon, Cillian, outside,” she says quietly. “Now, please.”

“But—”

“Now,” she insists, and they both begrudgingly obey.

Cillian’s fingers slip away from mine, and the door shuts louder than it needs to. Without him next to me, I suddenly feel vulnerable, naked, without a shield.

Sean’s blue eyes are on me, burning, the smirk tugging at his lips somewhere between gratified and inquisitive. The hairs on the back of my neck prickle the longer he gazes at me.

“I don’t know this one,” he remarks. “Do I?”

“She’s Rory’s great-granddaughter,” Leigh warns. “So behave.”

I rally my courage and approach the bed, hand outstretched. “Sarah McCready. Nice to meet you.”

He doesn’t accept my hand, seeming amused I offered it. “I’m sure it is.” He crosses his ankles instead, looking to Leigh. “What’re you really doing here, Leigh?”

“I need your help,” Leigh says. “You know more about the Order of the Lily than anyone else.”

“I warned that stubborn arse of a husband you married,” Sean replies in a musical tone. “Long before you were a twinkle in your father’s eyes, my queen. I told him, ‘Flowers will seal your fate.’ He sat on his laurels, let their roots grow big and strong—”

“Michael admits he should’ve listened to you more closely,” Leigh replies. “If a warning it actually was.”

Sean shrugs. “Funny, how the tables turn.”

“Sean, nearly every druid at St. Leonard was slaughtered. And so were all of the vampires tending trees,” Leigh says. “I know you care more than you let on.”

“You’re mistaken.” Sean leans forward with an *I-told-you-so* smile. “The beauty of being on my own, Leigh, is I don’t have to care about any of your brotherly problems. When I was king, the Lilymen didn’t dare venture onto Irish or American shores. I had those sadistic, puritanical cunts on the run. Always. Never let them settle. Never let them make more wee Lilymen to take after their Catholic-hating fathers. And I was ready to take them on in England too. Their native soil. But I lost the crown, and here we are.”

“So Tommie Coffey, Molly Shea, the druids, their children—they mean nothing to you?”

Sean’s fangs gleam from his recent feeding as he glances between me and Leigh. I can’t get a read on him, whether he’s mocking for the sake of it, or if it’s just for show. The idea of a man like this being in charge of the Brotherhood instead of Michael is unimaginable to me. It must’ve been a welcome change for many.

“Not a fucking thing,” he says, his eyes glowing. “All this trouble is your lover boy’s doing. Well, him and his friend out there. Not mine. So why would I lift a finger to help any of you?”

Leigh sets her jaw. “You saved my life once.”

“Did I?” Sean cants his head, almost like a bird. “Or was I merely in the area?”

“Sean—”

“I’m not part of your adorable little club, remember?” Sean laughs, as jovial as can be. “I serve the Morrigan in my own way.” Unlike the others, he doesn’t seem to shy away from speaking her name. He doesn’t even flinch, but he doesn’t seem to bother Leigh either. Then again, have I ever seen her flinch at the mention of the Goddess? “Always have. And She knows it. You

may lead our armies to victory for Her at the end of days alongside your merry little man, Leigh Kelly. And when that day comes, I'll follow you to death." He rests his wine bottle on his stomach, gripping its neck. His voice lowers. "But that day is far away. Until then, I don't answer to Mickey. Or you."

His eyes find mine again, twinkling. "Now, you're more than welcome to stay, the both of yas, if you'd like to take the place of those pretty hens you chased away with all your clucking."

Leigh grimaces in response.

"No, thanks, I'll pass," I say dryly.

"You sure?" He smirks. "Perhaps I could convince you. I'm a lot more fun than that broody bugger you were clutching hands with. Gonna need a lot of elbow grease to remove the stick up that's one arse."

"Try it," I retort. "We'll see how those sharp teeth of yours hold up against a right hook."

He bursts into hearty laughter. "Oh, I like her. A proper Irish temper." He waves a hand dismissively, picking up a gray newsboy cap and placing it over his head, like he means to tune us out and take a nap. "Now, if you don't mind . . ."



"Well, that was a fucking waste of time," Cillian mutters as we reconvene in the corridor. He seems relieved I'm safe as he wraps his arms around me, and I'm enveloped in his warmth, his promise of strength. "I warned Mickey nothing would come of it."

"We had to try," Leigh says.

Cillian rubs my shoulder. "I know you've a soft spot for him, Leigh, considering all that happened to you before you turned. But Sean Moore has never served anyone but himself. No matter who they are."

Leigh sighs heavily and looks at Eamon. “I’m going downstairs for a drink. You coming?”

“I won’t say no to that,” Eamon mutters.

“Cillian? Sarah?”

“I think I’ll head upstairs,” I admit. “As exciting as it is to be surrounded by hungry vampires all the time, I think I’ll stick with the ones I know and sit this one out. But you all go ahead.”

“I’m staying with her,” Cillian says, clapping Eamon’s shoulder. “Keep Leigh safe.”

“You can count on me,” Eamon clips, nodding with determination like a soldier being given a mission. Leigh wraps her arm around Eamon and gives him an appreciative side-hug as they make their way to the stairs.

I swallow, trying to ignore the nervous knots in my stomach. What will the night bring? Me, alone with a lady vampire easily older than most of the Morrigan Brotherhood I’ve met put together?

I gasp in surprise when Cillian sweeps me right off my feet, carrying me like a bride toward the old-fashioned elevators that lead right back up to the suite.

“I’ll not let her drink from you,” he growls as we’re lifted to our original suite. “I’ll rip apart anyone who tries to touch you.”

“It’s okay,” I offer, lying through my teeth. “I’m not scared.”

Cillian looks directly into my eyes, as serious as he’s ever been.

“Okay, maybe I’m a little nervous, but I’ll be fine. It’s just a little blood, right? Not like she’ll drink me dry until I’m a husk or anything.”

Cillian’s stern countenance softens. He sighs, carrying me past the pool table and setting me down on my feet. “Zephyrine is a great many things, from what I hear. A callous murderess isn’t one of them.”

I rub my arm, staring out the windows that open to a balcony lined with orange and red flowers overlooking the city. In an hour or two the sun will set, and I’ll have to contend with my nerves some other way. Even if I am up

against powers I can't fathom, I can't allow myself to quake or shiver if I can help it.

It's what everyone expects of me—to cower. When I was busting my ass trying to be a singer, I performed in front of dozens of people. No matter how anxious I became, I had to push through. Girls who were too meek, too nice, either didn't get the good songs or ended up on the producer's couch in the back of the studio. I wasn't about to cave to the latter, so I brought some of my old Boston tough with me, hoping it might charm someone.

It didn't. But here I am again, in a place where everyone expects me to be frightened of this world I dove into headfirst.

No matter how powerful, mysterious, and stunning the Desrosiers are, I won't give them the satisfaction either.

“What's it like?” I ask quietly, leaning against a window ledge. “Getting bitten?”

“I wish I could tell you,” Cillian replies with a rueful smile. “I've only ever been bitten by bullets.”

My feet carry me to him without truly thinking. It's become the most natural thing to me, being near him. Cillian is safety and sense, comfort and passion. “It must've shocked you when I asked Leigh about the Oath.”

“Shocked, no,” Cillian admits. “I figured you were curious. But it's a big decision.”

“I know. But I think I've already made up my mind.”

He isn't as surprised as I thought he'd be. Thoughtful and quiet, but not shocked or upset. He lowers his forehead to mine as his arm winds around my waist. “You ought to think on it more,” he says. “You've seen the chaos. The danger. Even when we're at rest, we're never truly at peace.”

“I know. And it's probably strange, but Cillian, you're all I have. You, Rory, Leigh, Sinéad—hell, I'm starting to like Eamon too. Growing old and frail while you all stay the same . . .” I nibble on my lower lip. There's pain in his gaze, like he's imagining it too. “Could you really watch me fade away

like that?”

He exhales slowly, reluctant to answer. “No. I can’t,” he finally says, like the words are plucked out from behind his teeth despite his best efforts, as though he’s ashamed of himself. “I thought I could. But with every new day, every second of every minute I spend with you . . .”

He stares out at the city with me. “Everything about you, Sarah—who are you, the sound of your voice, the way you look at me, your courage in the face of chaos—you’re etched into my very bones, like a song or a poem upon paper.” He exhales. “The very thought of being without you robs me of my senses.”

My heart thunders like a storm at his words.

Cillian shuts his eyes, flexing his fist. “I’ve had to bury someone I loved. To even consider having to do so again, I cannot think, I cannot breathe, I cannot—” He chokes on the words. “I cannot speak. I can’t do it again. Your hold on me is greater than that of anyone I’ve ever known. Even greater than the Goddess Herself.”

“Cillian,” I whisper in astonishment. “Won’t She get angry, hearing you say that?”

His laughter is sweet in my ears. “No. This is how She operates. Drawing you to me must be exactly what She wants. Why She came to me in dreams, and the druids in whispers. She wants more women in our numbers. To hear Leigh tell it, She wants us in pairs, for balance.” His soft brown eyes are vulnerable, and I’m so easily lost in them. “To live without love for a millennium, waiting for a battle when the world is at an end . . . that is a very lonely life, Sarah. And I thought it was mine.” He lifts my hand and brushes his lips softly over every fingertip. “Until I met you.”

My knees are weak as I lean up to kiss him, but before I can, the far doors swing open. Pierre steps in with a smile and a bow.

“Good evening. Lady Zephyrine will not require your blood tonight, young miss. She happily invites you to indulge in whatever your heart desires

within these walls.”

“Wait—really? W-what changed her mind?” I’m glad I don’t have to play sacrificial lamb, but curiosity gets the better of me. I haven’t seen Rory all evening. “Is everything all right?”

“More than all right.” Pierre’s eyes twinkle with subtle merriment. “She is currently . . . *indisposed* with her present company.” He bows. “Ring should you require any assistance.”

Cillian and I hold each other in shock. His eyes are wider than I’ve ever seen them. “I’ll be damned,” he mutters. “I didn’t know old McCready had it in him.”

“You think he—” I motion. “And her—do you think they—”

“Oh, absolutely.” Cillian whistles. “Guess we owe him one.”

I swat his chest. He snaps out of it with some laughter, catching my hands and pulling me close. Enraptured by Cillian’s words, his piercing eyes, I’ve never been more relieved or more enchanted than I am tonight with the warm Southern air and the faint music wafting from the windows on the first floor.

“Stay with me tonight,” I murmur, leaning into his hand as he traces my jaw, tucking my hair behind my ear.

Cillian’s voice is low in my ear, sending lightning strikes through me. Heat pools between my legs.

“I promise you—tonight, I’m not going anywhere.”

CHAPTER 12

Claiming Fate



Cillian

I can no longer resist the vision in front of me.

In such a short time, Sarah has become everything to me. Everything. And now, overwhelmed by the taste of her mouth as my tongue chases hers, feeling her slender hands press against my chest, I can't stand it anymore. My restraint has been balancing on a knife's edge, holding on by a single fray.

Anger has always come easily to me. But when Zephyrine Desrosier thought to take Sarah from me, put her mouth upon her, all that remained of me was fury. I wanted to dash across the room and rip her heart from her chest, though all sense and logic forbade it.

Zephyrine would have killed me. In an instant. The neutrality between her old and formidable family and ours would have dissolved, and Sarah . . . Only God knows what would have happened to Sarah, Leigh, and the others. I need to rein in my temper, show common sense, stop reacting on impulse.

But how can I when the woman I care about more than life, more than blood, more than my past and future together, is threatened by such power? If

it weren't for Rory— I can't even think of it. He's the hero of the day, not me.

Now, all there is in front of me is Sarah, alone in an empty room and cast from all my bindings. I wanted to go slow, take my time, but what time is there to take when everything can go up in flames tomorrow?

Fuck slow and these old-fashioned sensibilities. I'm such a fool, unsure of what to do and how to do it, how to even begin expressing myself to her. She's cast a spell upon me, one that no witch or druid can undo. Her heartbeat is the incantation, soft and quick within her chest.

I can feel her fingers unfastening my shirt buttons, and I catch her wrists.

"Please, Cillian," she whimpers against my lips. "I can't wait anymore. When you say things like that, I—"

"I know." My breath is already ragged. "I know more than you know." Letting her go, I focus on undressing her instead, one button after the other, revealing the flawless flesh hiding beneath her shirt. I swallow when I catch sight of her bra, made of some kind of sheer black lace.

Goddess, what this woman is doing to me?

Shedding her clothes, I stare helplessly at the intoxicating woman in front of me, reaching out and brushing my fingers against her bare skin. She shivers at my touch and leans up to kiss me again. Holding back a growl, I pick her up and carry her to the bed, then gently lay her on her back.

She laughs softly. "You're wearing too many clothes."

I cast aside my vest that she partially unfastened and make quick work of the shirt beneath it. Her eyes brighten when she sees me in a similar state, though I keep my belt and trousers on for now, even as my cock strains against its confines. It doesn't escape Sarah's notice. As I crawl on top of her, she palms me through my pants.

"Already so hard," she murmurs. "Guess your little soldier likes me."

"Little soldier?" I repeat with some amusement.

"It fits, doesn't it?"

“Indeed it does.” I lean down and kiss her, biting back a groan as she continues to tease me. “Quite eager to charge into battle.”

She reaches for my belt. “Shall we let him out, then, to do what he does best?”

I adore how she can make me laugh. How long has it been since I’ve had such a connection? Felt so easy in someone’s presence? I intercept her hand instead, kissing her soft palm.

“He can wait until the whistle blows,” I rumble. “There’s something I have to do first.”

Settling on top of her, I lose myself to Sarah’s eager kisses, my thoughts all enveloped with her. Her scent surrounds me. The desire for her blood that I’ve held at bay ceases its endless assault against my senses, replaced with something far more carnal.

I trail my lips to her neck, though dangerous it remains. I don’t linger, planting wet kisses in my wake as I trace her collarbone. Her bra remains between me and her luscious breasts. I yearn to see them, slipping my hands beneath her and fumbling with the clasp until it breaks free.

Sarah smiles knowingly and slips her straps off her shoulders, then tosses the garment to the floor.

“My God.” All other words escape me. I’ve seen them before, when Sarah used her mouth upon me, but still she robs me of my mind. Leaning down, I take one of her stiff pink nipples into my mouth, tracing her areola with my tongue and gently tugging with my teeth.

She arches her back. “Cillian . . . ”

I taste the other, sucking until I’m satisfied, emboldened by the noise she makes. This place isn’t exactly private, despite the room being abandoned. The entire hotel is filled with people like me, with ears that can hear things from miles off. Anyone could guess at what we’re up to. Normally that would be at odds with my sensibilities, which have been described as *old-fashioned*. I don’t care anymore.

Let them hear what I'm about to do to this woman who holds my heart and my hunger captive.

Kissing my way to her stomach, Sarah tenses beneath me when I peel her matching black panties off her hips. She props herself up on her elbows, eyes wide in surprise. I lick along her inner thigh in one long stroke for good measure, intoxicated by the smell of her as I spread her legs wide. She's all natural, unshaven, pretty raven curls atop her mound. Her pussy blossoms, glistening with wetness in the low light.

I lower my head between her thighs and give her one long slow lick, from the entrance of her cunt to her clit. Sarah gasps and weaves her fingers into my hair, impatiently pressing my face into her. Muffling the delighted hum in my throat, I greedily swirl my tongue around her clit, allowing her some control as she grinds against me.

"Oh, fuck yes," she pants. "Jesus Christ, Cillian, where the fuck have you been my entire fucking life?"

I lick faster, two of my fingers pushing into her, pumping in and out of her as I feast upon her pussy like a man starving. Right next door—that's where I was with little idea that this was where I was destined to be, with my face buried between the legs of this exhilarating woman. The world around me fades, the entirety of my focus upon how she tastes and moves against my tongue, how my fingers are knuckle-deep in her.

It takes time. I harken to her reactions, learning what she likes, what way excites her more. The reward is well worth the wait. Her thighs tighten around my head, trembling. "Fuck, Cillian, I'm going to come."

I can't answer her with words. I only continue what I'm doing harder, faster, determined to bring her to the cusp of pleasure. She cries out my name and bucks her hips, and I relish in the taste of her release, lapping her up. She tries to wiggle away from me, but I hold her tightly in place, not yet sated.

There's only one thing in the world that tastes better than this. And I'm not sure I can resist it any longer.



Sarah

My vision is spinning, exploding with stars. Pleasure floods through me. My toes curl. And all I can think of beyond this hot wet heat taking over my body is how magical Cillian's mouth is.

I always figured that when the time came, Cillian would be a gentleman in the bedroom. Generous, definitely, perhaps even eager to prove himself after nearly sixty years without any practice, but this? I didn't expect *this*. It's mind-blowing to me that a turn-of-the-century man could know how to eat me out like a fucking expert, but he proved me wrong, and oh god, I love it.

My clit reacts to every brush of his tongue, and I whimper, trying to escape. It's so sensitive, and I don't think I can take anymore. "W-wait—"

But he keeps going, and if he doesn't stop I'm going to scream. I reach for a pillow to cover my face in vain. I can barely focus on anything besides the pleasure rippling through my body.

"Cillian!" I cry out as another orgasm tears through me, tightening my thighs around his face like a vise as a stream of curse words spill out of my mouth. "Oh, fuck!"

When he finally releases me, there's triumph in his eyes. His beard glistens with my arousal, and he wipes his mouth. "That was divine." He crawls up over me. I taste myself on his lips.

"Surprised you weren't worried I'd crush your head," I whisper.

"That's a hell of a way to die." His laughter is smooth, rumbling in his chest. "And I'd do it happily, but it doesn't quite work that way. Though you're welcome to try."

Everything about this moment feels like magic. Like I've fallen under a spell I don't want to wake from. Still reeling from the orgasms he's given me

—two from his mouth alone. Two!—all I can think of is how I don't want this to end. I want for us to be the only two people in all the world right now, him and me. No more interruptions, no more Order of the Lily, no more guilt for him to carry around on his shoulders.

He rests his chin between my breasts and then distracts himself by kissing and licking them in every and any way he likes. Fuck, that tongue alone is going to drive me mad. I can't decide if it's his touch or his mouth that makes me insane, or if it's the words he spoke just before Pierre came through the door, words I'm rewinding and playing over and over again like a favorite cassette.

I've had to bury someone I loved. To even consider having to do so again, I cannot think, I cannot breathe—

His voice, the way he spoke, rooted me in place. I don't know if he meant to say it that way. Maybe I'm reading too much into it, but . . . is that what he meant?

Does Cillian *love* me?

His kisses smolder across my skin. Every part of me is awake, sensitive, like I'm tuned in to him, and him alone. His fangs are out on display, and yet he hasn't pricked or slashed me. Every caress is so careful, but as he grazes them softly over my body, I have to know what it's like. For him, and for me.

"Cillian," I breathe, taking a risk and not caring where it leads. "Will you drink from me?"

He lifts himself up slowly. His brown eyes flash red, his expression a mixture of reluctance and need.

"You won't hurt me," I insist, reaching for him. "I trust you, Cillian. I do. Please . . . I want to feel it. What it's like."

He grits his teeth. I can see his fangs, elongated, sharp. Deadly. "If I do that, it will ruin you. All others for you. And me."

"That better be a promise," I breathe.

We're on the precipice. Cillian's lust is plain, shining in his face, his

gaze, the way he bares his teeth like he's holding back an entire army within himself. When he speaks, my flesh prickles. It's both him and not him, deeper and more guttural.

Monstrous.

My heart storms in my chest, moments from facing the part of him he's fought so hard to hide from me.

His breath is slightly ragged, voice a low hiss. Warning, yet beckoning. "Be. Certain."

"I'm certain." I trace his face, his hair. Everything about him is dangerous, in this moment, and yet I've never been more captivated.

Narrowed eyes regard me, gold flecks shining bright among deep crimson irises, like I've awakened a slumbering monster. Cillian told me about the beast inside, how he can't always control it, but here it is now, in front of me.

The vampire and the man both.

I'm not sure where my bravery comes from, but it's there. I'm even more determined to experience this with him. The monster hasn't attacked me and made me his meal. I'm not in danger. At least, not in the way he suspected.

Cillian's hunger is unmistakable—but so is his lust. I want to know that it sees me too. "If anyone were to drink from me, it should be you. Only you, Cillian," I whisper. "Take me. Please."

His resolve snaps like frayed rope. His fingers thread into my hair and pull, drawing my head back and revealing my neck to him. His warm breath caresses me above my shoulder. I tremble beneath him. From fear, from excitement. Everything blends together as one.

"You. Are. Mine." Cillian's words render me immobile, renewing the aching need between my legs.

Then his fangs pierce me, robbing me of the wind in my lungs in a brief second of pain.

It's jarring yet fleeting. Was *this* what he worried about? I can't believe it. It's not bad. I bite my lip, my arm wrapping around him as he begins to drink

deeply from me. His body shudders above me with a muffled groan as I slip a hand down to cup his cock, still trapped in his pants.

Then warmth fills me from where he's bitten, spreading across my body. My vision blurs, then sharpens. My breathing steadies, and every brush of his lips against my flesh as he draws my blood into his mouth causes a fresh wave of euphoria to pulse through me to the very tips of my toes. The lights glowing outside the window of our room spin in my vision. The pain is gone, my mind feels fuzzy, almost like I'm tipsy, and a soft giggle escapes my lips when his tongue flicks the flesh beneath his sunken fangs. For a moment, it tickles. Just a little.

An ache returns, settling between my legs. I've already come, but it's like I haven't. My pussy throbs, aching for more than what I've already been given. I want his cock inside me, filling me.

What is happening to me? That heat keeps building, building. Can I orgasm from his mouth on my neck alone? My fingertips tingle. The room teeters back and forth.

"Cillian," I whimper, squeezing his cock in my palm.

The sound of his name breaks whatever reverie I lost him to. He pulls away from my neck like he's been scalded. He snarls, as deep and as ominous as a bear or a lion whose meal has been interrupted. He doesn't sound like Cillian in that moment. My breath hitches.

His slitted pupils dilate when his gaze meets mine. He bares his teeth at me, and I'm frozen. But not with fear, not while I'm floating like this. My limbs are lightweight, like Cillian is the only one holding me down.

Is this him? I reach out to touch his face, admiring this bestial side of Cillian like I'm standing in a dream and not living reality. *Is this the creature he was so worried about?*

There's a moment of stillness, tension between us. Then I brush my knuckles against his cheek, and he leans into my touch with a loud hiss through his teeth.

“You are mine,” he rasps, his breath ragged. “And I am yours, Sarah. Tell me what you want. *Beg* me for it.”

His words might undo me right here and now. He rubs my hardened nipple between his finger and thumb, causing me to gasp.

“I want you to fuck me,” I whisper.

“Louder,” he growls.

“Fuck me, Cillian. Please.”

Cillian holds himself up on one hand while the other unbuckles his belt and pulls it from its loops, sending it clattering to the floor. Then he curls his hand around my throat, just below my jaw, and squeezes.

Moaning, I arch into it. I never imagined it could be like this.

The gentleman is gone. The vampire remains.

And I adore this ravenous monster Cillian is so determined to hate.



Cillian

The dam has broken. I can no longer contain the monster inside me. Such discipline is no longer a possibility. Not when Sarah’s crimson life force is flowing through my body and bringing my senses to an intensity I’ve never experienced.

Every inch of me is amplified. The music playing downstairs in the hotel bar where a jazz band is in full swing can’t blot out the conversation Leigh and Eamon are having—about us. They can hear Sarah, the noise she’s making in response to my touch, my tongue, feeding upon her.

At least someone’s getting something out of this trip, Leigh remarks, and I can’t help but grin at my own fortune.

Yes. In one way, New Orleans isn’t for naught.

As I remove my trousers, the world around me spins like I'm a human again, banjaxed in a pub with my friends. The glow of the room around us is softened, blurred. Sarah's naked body beneath me is all there is, all that matters.

My venom courses through her. The way she squirms, writhes, begging me with those beckoning lips left plump and bruised by my kiss.

I'm ravenous for her yet satiated in a way I can't describe. I was so worried I would lose all control that I'd rip her apart the way I'm known for in enemy camps or upon the battlefield. I was wrong to fight this for as long as I have. My vampiric nature is just as enchanted by her presence, her taste, and smell as the part of me that remains immortally human.

She trusted me, and she was right. Above all others, in all the world, I'm incapable of harming Sarah McCready. It's as foreign to me as another language, as the notion of peace was when I returned to Boston. I could never hurt her. Even when I drink from her, I'm aware of her limits. The hunger within me rages, but nursing her blood from her puncture wounds, I'm astonished by how gentle, how intimate this is.

And her blood. *Fuck*, it is exquisite. Sweeter than wine or honey, better than anything we could hope to serve at the Mannoek. I could live off of her like a bird from nectar for the rest of my days and never need anything or anyone else.

I am lost. She has defeated me, body and soul, hunger and vice. For the first time, I no longer fear a life without war and death, the very things I was created for. I understand what Michael seeks when he's with his wife.

I could spend all eternity, until the end of the world, with Sarah and regret nothing.

Fetching out my cock at last, it bounces free when I shed my underwear and reposition myself between her open legs. I lean down, dragging my nose across her collarbone, her breasts. Even simply brushing a hand over Sarah's body makes her quake with need, enraptured by my venom scoring through

her.

“No going back after this,” I growl as I align myself to her pussy, teasing her glistening folds with my tip. “Once we are made one, Sarah, you are mine. Mine, always. There will be no reasoning with me.”

She gazes at me with wide eyes, nibbling on her lower lip and whimpering as I continue with possessive vehemence, “I will not share you with another, man or woman. No one will touch you, not so long as I draw breath.”

“Jesus Christ, Cillian,” Sarah whispers. “You’re driving me insane.” She moves her hips, pushing against my cock. “Please . . .”

“Say you’re mine,” I command. “Say it, Sarah.”

She meets my eyes. There’s no fear, no uncertainty, only desire and affection in a way I haven’t experienced in some time. She holds me just as captive as I have her.

“I’m yours.” Her voice is hushed.

Then with one long slow stroke, I hilt my throbbing cock into her pussy.

Sarah goes taut beneath me. I suck in a long breath as I freeze. She’s tight, wet, her walls snug around me. Nothing compares to this. I’m sheathed deep inside her, and my mind goes blank for a moment, amazed at just how well she fits me.

Like she was always meant to be mine.

“More,” Sarah breathes, and when she squirms I have to clench my jaw and steady myself before I explode, then and there.

“Wait,” I rasp. I won’t forgive myself if this is short-lived. I need to prolong it as much as possible. “Give me a moment.”

Sarah stills, reaching for me and pulling me down into a heated kiss that leaves us both breathless, her tongue chasing mine, imploring me. Then as if sensing my hunger suddenly flaring anew, she trails her hand just above her nipple.

I lean down, sinking my fangs into the soft, supple swell of her breast.

She weaves her fingers into my hair, gripping me as I drink deep once, twice, three times before pulling away.

Droplets of blood gather from the punctures. I lap them away greedily with my tongue. I risk another slow stroke, groaning when I feel her pulse around me.

Her silken voice is filled with need. “I-it’s so sensitive.”

My determination only increases with her movements, how she’s both brave and delicate beneath me, able to take me at full mast when I’m at my strongest after freshly feeding. Has any other man been able to provide her with pleasure like this?

Possessiveness overwhelms me.

Another thrust, and she’s trembling. “What is happening? I-it’s never felt this good—”

“My venom, love.” I take her lower lip between my teeth. “It’s meant to.”

Reassured that I’m not going to explode inside her, I rock my hips. Slow at first, relishing every single inch, I sink into her velvet cunt, driving myself all the way in and pulling myself out.

Sarah mewls. “Fuck me, Cillian, or I swear to God, I’ll flip you over and fuck you the way I want to instead.”

A smirk tugs at the corner of my mouth as I come to a complete halt, halfway hilted. “What was that?”

She wiggles beneath me impatiently, trying to push me in deeper. I hold her legs open, keeping her precisely where I want her. She’s exasperated, but her soft laughter rings in my ears.

“Cillian, you asshole!”

A victorious chuckle rumbles deep in my chest. “Tell me what you need.”

“I’m not made of glass, I promise.” She gazes defiantly into my eyes from beneath her lashes. “Fuck me like I know you want to and don’t stop. I need you.”

“You need me?” I repeat as I piston deep into her and grind my hips

against her until she moans.

“Yes. Fuck, yes,” she pants. “Just like that.”

And when I find a rhythm, her breathless moans turn to wanton cries.



Sarah

The room glows around me as each of Cillian’s hard thrusts resonate through me to my very core. I’m so wet I can hear our bodies colliding, flesh upon flesh, and it only serves to increase the ache inside me, building to a near immeasurable level.

I’m going to burst. It’s never felt this good. Especially missionary like this. I’m used to lying still, being flopped around on like a fish out of water and waiting for it to be over. Cillian’s cock driving into me is like a lightning strike of pleasure, every single time, without fail.

I’m not usually this loud. I’ve never just given away noise like this for free, but Cillian knows what he’s doing. He works for it. Every moan, every pant, every cry is so well-earned. Is it really because of his venom, or because it’s Cillian, or both? I don’t know, and I don’t care. I need more of this. I’m like an addict experiencing my first high.

So close. I’m so close, I can barely stand it. I’m nearly there when Cillian stops and pulls out of me. Without his cock scorching inside me, all but branding me, it’s enough to drive me mad.

“Don’t,” I plea. “Don’t stop now.”

Cillian’s eyes, deep crimson, have me transfixed. He bares his teeth like he means to drink me dry. But instead of burying his fangs into me, he flips me onto my belly, his breath on my neck as he props up my hips.

“You’re going to come for me until you can’t anymore.” His voice in my

ear sends a delightful shiver racing down my body. “I’m going to make certain of it.”

When he enters me again the gentleness is gone, replaced with rough and primal need. I stiffen beneath him as he pins me, my back beneath his chest, and gasp when his broad hand delves underneath me and finds my clit with ease.

Slow is a word we’ve now forgotten—and to my delight, Cillian is just as loud as I am. Whenever he withdraws and slams back into me, pumping me so deep it leaves me dizzy, he lets forth a low carnal groan, titillating me.

“Sarah . . . fuck, it’s taking everything in me not to come inside you . . . ”

The very thought of being filled with him is almost enough to send me over the edge. I push my ass back into his hips, squirming as his fingers quicken, swirling and teasing my swollen clit. Just a little more, and I’ll lose it.

And I want to take him with me when it happens.

“Come inside me,” I gasp as he pushes harder, faster. His hand comes to rest beneath my jaw, holding my head up as he continues pummeling into me. I’ve never allowed any man to do that, not once. I’ve always been overly cautious, on the Pill and making partners wear condoms.

My thighs tremble. Oh god. I didn’t even think about that, so drunk on this feeling of Cillian’s venom coursing through my veins, making me feel things I’ve never felt. He’s raw inside me, but nothing feels righter than this. Fuck. Could he get me pregnant if I *wasn’t* on birth control?

Do I care right now?

“Fill me, Cillian, please,” I moan. “I want your cum deep inside me.”

He squeezes my throat with just the slightest pressure, enough to make me feel powerless in the best of ways. Fuck, this man makes me weak in the knees, the hips, everywhere. The pleasure, tinted with the pain of deep penetration, is so good I could cry.

“Not until you come for me, Sarah,” he pants, nipping at my ear as he

rides me. He must know I'm close. He doubles down with his fingers, flicking and swirling until my toes curl up from the bed. It's building with in me, so strong I'm afraid of what might happen when I let go.

And in that moment, I surrender, shuddering beneath him with a wild cry, the blankets beneath us balled in my fists as I white-knuckle through an explosion of heat from my core. I'm about ready to give up completely, fall limp in a wet mess of addled thoughts, try to catch my breath, but Cillian doesn't stop.

"Give me one more," he hisses. "Just one more, Sarah. I need to feel it."

"Cillian, if you don't stop, I'll scream—"

"Scream," he snarls. "Let the entire fucking city know who you belong to."

"Cillian!" I can't breathe, can't think, as Cillian's fingers move from my throat to inside my open mouth as a second orgasm quickly takes the place of the first, wracking through my body. I close my lips around his fingers, suckling them.

"Oh, fuck!" Cillian loses his rhythm and pushes deep, overcome. His seed floods my pussy as my walls pulse around him, tantalizing me.

It should be over. I shouldn't want more, to keep going, but fuck, this man is turning me into some kind of nympho. I don't know where the venom ends and my own libido begins.

An immortal man, a *vampire*, made me come all over his cock, and then filled my pussy to the brim. It's spilling out of me even now, and I've never felt so marked, so thoroughly claimed.

Like I truly belong to someone.

Cillian's lips trail over my shoulder blades, the back of my neck with a tenderness he hasn't yet shown. He hasn't yet withdrawn, and I'm not sure I want him to. I don't want tonight to end, not when I've no idea what tomorrow will bring.

"You are magnificent, Sarah," he murmurs, gently pulling my disheveled

dark hair to the side and nuzzling my neck. “So beautiful. So wet. Fuck, I cannot bear it, what you’ve done for me.” He nibbles on my shoulder. “It’s not enough. It’ll never be enough.”

When he reluctantly withdraws and guides me to lay on my side so we can properly see each other, I see his cock coated with remnants of his own seed. *So much.*

“You’re still hard,” I marvel softly.

“Your blood is in my veins,” Cillian murmurs. “And I am not yet satiated. But you require water.”

He’s not wrong. I’m lightheaded, like I’ve had a little too much to drink.

“Water sounds good,” I murmur. “But then I want more of you. All of you.”

“You shall have me,” Cillian reassures me, and then laughs softly as he goes to pour me a drink from the bar.

“What is it?” I ask, lying there and trying to collect my wits, but all I can think about is how nice his ass was when he was walking away.

“Eamon’s commentary,” Cillian admits, bringing me a glass. “He says you’re louder than Leigh.”

Embarrassed, I accept the water and guzzle it like I’m dying of thirst before handing the glass back. “How does he know what Leigh sounds like?”

“Mickey gets a bit frisky at the Mannoock at times.”

Unafraid, Cillian strides in front of the open windows, quite comfortable as he is. “When you’re one of us and you have a girl—it’s hard to keep certain things secret.”

“So everybody in the hotel knows you just fucked the hell out of me?”

“They do, aye.” Cillian’s eyes shine when he looks at me. “Though I’d call it heaven instead. And I’m not finished with you. Not yet.”



Cillian

Hours pass, and I spend most of them inside her. We fuck on every surface in the room, from the bar to the couch and back to the bed. Eventually, it breaks beneath us with a loud crack that sends Sarah scrambling off the side, laughing heartily while she cradles her stomach when she realizes what happened. I pull her right back to me and she straddles me without fear, taking control and riding me with such ferocity it's a wonder we don't crash into the floor beneath us.

I even press her up against the windows, her gorgeous tits flashing the street as I rail into her. Giving in mindlessly to my emotions, I'm smitten with her and the way she moves, feels, sounds when she's entangled with and pressed into me. Of course, nobody can see us, else I wouldn't dream of it—I'm still a fucking gentleman. Mostly. Sometimes. But it's enough to make her forget just how many times she's come with my cock sheathed inside her, and the unapologetic mess we've made of our accommodations.

By the time midnight has come and gone, Sarah's body is tangled in ivory bedsheets stained with her blood. Her body bears the mark of my fangs on her throat, breast, and thigh. She sleeps deeply, no longer able to keep her eyes open, and I lie next to her, replaying every moment we spent together over and over again in my head, the taste and touch of her engrained into my memory where it will never fade.

I can't be without her. The very thought wounds me in a way far deeper than any grief I've already sustained. I don't understand how it is I've become so lost, how I've fallen so hard and so quickly. I feel like Icarus plummeting to the earth, so scorched by her beauty, her spirit, and the room around us pales, turning gray when I think of what my existence might be like without her.

That's when it seizes me, a realization I'll never shake, not if I live for

centuries or thousands of years from now.

I love her.

To be without Sarah is to be without breath, sunlight, blood. To try to exist in this bleak and war-torn world without her light shining in my life—if that's in fact what I can call it—would be futile. My heart combats my head as I try to cling to sense and reason, as though it's forgotten how painful love can be when it's taken away, already shattered once by grief and hardened by the callous death and destruction of war.

I've seen too many things. Done far too many things. Many of them I regret, and the ones I don't, I should, because that part of me knows they were wrong. Yet, I stubbornly cling to my own pride and sense of justice that doesn't coalesce with the way I was raised, the man I was supposed to be before I lay dying in that bog, calling for a goddess I'd only heard of in stories.

I don't deserve her. I should be ancient, weathered, and shriveled up, alone in a rocking chair in a rundown old cottage back in Ireland, reliving my glory days with what friends of mine remain, reminiscing about how we brought about Irish independence and lament the troubles to the north.

Instead, I'm forever young, lying here in bed with a beautiful woman who, by all accounts, shouldn't even know I exist.

Maybe I deserve far worse than this, a fate worse than death for the pain I've wrought upon others, the lives I've taken. But it's Sarah's presence here next to me that redeems me. When I am with her, I feel new, no longer stretched thin and burdened with the fatigue of hundreds of battles fought. When I'm with her, I no longer hear the shelling of distant German artillery, the smattering of bullets, the choking and stinging of gas flourishing over trenches.

Even the horrors of St. Leonard seem far away when I lie next to her.

I love her.

What is happening to me?

“Cillian?” Eamon’s soft voice drifts through the door.

“One moment,” I whisper, slipping back into my clothes one piece at a time before I open the door.

He squints. “How can you shag at a time like this?”

It’s all I can do not to cuff him over the head, but Eamon’s not my kid brother. He’s a loyal friend. And something in his eyes is troubling him; I see it.

“Same reason you would, I imagine,” I mutter, gesturing for Eamon to enter. I’m not about to leave Sarah alone in a place like this, no matter how many Desrosiers are keeping the city in check. With Sean Moore in the vicinity, anything is possible.

I catch Eamon curiously peeking toward Sarah’s slumbering form on the bed. I don’t even have to scold him. He averts his eyes, his ears pink as we step out onto the balcony.

“What is it?” I ask him.

“It’s just—” Eamon swallows. “I’ve seen battle before. You know? Maybe I didn’t serve in the War, like you did, but I fought the Black and Tans with you and Mickey, and again next to you, against that damned treaty.” He stares down at the road, leaning his elbows on the elegant black French railing. “We saw some horrible things, what the British did. But . . . I’ve never seen anything like what those Lilymen wrought on St. Leonard. Whenever there’s a moment of quiet, whenever I’m not distracted by something else, it—it gnaws at me.”

With a soft sigh, I rest my hand on his shoulder. “I wish I didn’t know what you’re going through, but I do.” I stare out into the night sky, the horizon beginning to glisten orange with the promise of dawn over New Orleans’s many rooftops. This is the first time in a while I almost feel like I belong among the scenery, a relic from another age.

“What do I do?” Eamon laments. “I couldn’t save them all. I used to hate that I was there, far away from all of you. Resent that I was left behind.

Worried I'd be forgotten. But I can't hate that I was there now. If I wasn't . . . ”

“They would've all died,” I muse. “Almost like divine providence.”

Eamon nods. “I couldn't talk to Leigh about it. I tried, and it was no use. Mickey's gone, and Rory was in America. He didn't fight for the Cause like we did. It's like nobody understands. And then . . . ” He clutches his hands together tightly, rubbing one thumb over the over, like he's fending off an itch. “You and Sarah. I'm not handling it well.”

I arch a brow. “Sorry—is Sarah something to you?”

“No!” Eamon scoffs. “Not anything. I mean, she's a nice girl, and I'm glad she's going to join us, hopefully someday, right? It's—it's these damned vampire emotions.” He frowns, staring down at nothing in particular. “It pisses me off. We've only five years difference between us. We didn't take that Oath all that far apart in age. Remember those days, when it was just the three of us back home?”

“I do,” I agree. “Fondly. We've forged bonds nothing and no one can break, and I'm not ashamed to say it.”

“Then Mickey found Leigh, and I was so—so happy for him. He was exhausted all the time, overwhelmed with leading all of us eejits, being pulled this way and that. Leigh's kind. She's not even angry with me about what I did, with my sorry kidnapping attempt. She understands, and she's been so good for him. For all of us. I thought that would be it for a while.” Eamon sighs. “But then, you found Sarah. And I . . . ”

That's when I understand. “You don't want to be left behind.”

“Not left behind,” Eamon says in exasperation. “I didn't want to be the only one alone. And now I am. I'm worried I always will be because even if I'm not the youngest, I sure as hell look like it, taking the Oath.”

“Well, there's nothing for that. You got shot in the Rising,” I reply. “Couldn't exactly lie there bleeding in the street and wait for twenty, now, could you?”

Eamon ruffles his wild auburn hair. “You must think I’m thick as a brick, worrying about that with all of this bad happening all around us.”

“No. If there’s one thing I’ve learned, it’s life doesn’t line our troubles up in a row and let one problem finish before another begins,” I answer. “It’s all at once, and often.” I scratch my beard in thought. “What about Sinéad?”

Eamon snorts. “She’s cheesed at me.” He rests his head on his palm. “A little pregnant nun cries into my shoulder, and I get in trouble for it. I’ll never understand girls.”

That makes me laugh, which manages to get a smile out of him at least. Then he laughs with me.

“Well, you can always talk with me. I can’t say I’ll know what to do. I don’t know shite when it comes to women, but . . . I can listen. Whatever the subject.” I pause. “Where is Leigh, anyway?”

“She’s with Rory.” Eamon’s face splits into an impish grin. “Zephyrine worked him so hard, he said he could drain the Atlantic.”

CHAPTER 13

Bitter Rivals



Sarah

I've never woken up after a night of sex with any expectations, but I am not ready for Cillian's earth-brown eyes gazing intensely into mine, filled with familiar desires and an affection that makes my very sore body seem lighter.

"I passed out, didn't I?" I murmur sleepily, rubbing an eye. "Didn't mean to."

"You needed it," Cillian murmurs, brushing my hair out of my face. "I tried to restrain myself, but being with you . . . I'm sorry, I couldn't hold back any longer."

"You've got to be the only man in the world who's apologized for making a woman orgasm over and over again in the course of a single night." I can't escape those eyes. He has me rooted in place, naked and aching and satiated all at once. "I'm not sorry at all."

"Good." Cillian presses his lips softly to my forehead before pulling away and grinning. "Because I'd like to do that again."

I giggle into the pillow. "So would I."

You'd think I've been running a marathon, the way my heart's racing,

being this close to him. I've never had an excitement linger this long. If anything, every attempt at sex with anyone else before this was just one major fucking disappointment after the other. I don't even know why I bothered in the past.

Cillian's ruined every man in the world for me, even the ones who came before. How can I go back to anything less than this? Anyone less than him?

That's when I realize I've never had a man before. A real one, a warrior, a soldier who's fought for what he believed was right. Vicious, righteous, powerful. Even if Cillian weren't immortal, he's more man than I've ever had to handle. Gentle and dangerous. Reckless and disciplined. Guarded and passionate.

Holy shit, Sarah. What am I saying?

Am I in love with Cillian Darragh?

That's crazy. We've only known each other—fuck, I can't do math right now! A few weeks? Not even a month, it's not Christmas yet. For a man who told me he wanted to take his time, we're racing around the earth right now with this pace, but I don't want it to stop.

The possibility of love never seemed real for me. I had hopes of finding my Prince Charming plenty when I was young, same as most of my friends, but it faded when my parents passed. There was nothing like this in California, nothing that promised not only a lifetime of affection, respect, and intimacy, but an eternity of all three.

“Are you all right?” Cillian's voice brings me back to reality.

Swallowing down those questions is easier said than done, but I'm scared to ask, to take that step. Logically, Cillian of all people isn't going to scare easy. Hell, he said as much that he's serious. All in. But I don't want to ruin the moment. There's too much at stake right now for him. For the others.

A monastery was burned down. People were murdered. Crazy vampire hunters on the loose, wanting to kill the man I care about and all of my friends who have gone out of their way not only to make me feel welcome

but like I'm one of their own without so much as a thank-you in return.

I've never had that either. Not ever.

For now, I need to stay focused. I need to be strong for them, the way they've been for me.

"I'm fine," I answer, slowly sitting up. Fuck. Everything hurts, but in a good way. When Cillian doesn't look convinced, I gently shove his shoulder. "Seriously. I'm great, don't worry." To drive the point home, I lean over to steal a long tender kiss from him.

That seems to throw him off the scent. For now, anyway.

He brings me my clothes, which he took the time to neatly fold in a pile for me. "We'll be leaving shortly. With our tail between our legs, unfortunately, but there's nothing for it."

"At least we tried, right?" I agree as he goes to the bar to pour me a tall glass of water. I've rarely had a man want to stick around after a night in the sack, and here he is, taking care of me. I don't have to ask for anything; he just knows and does it. Maybe it's because he was married before, but goddamn. I know plenty of women married to men who aren't much more than children. They can barely wipe their own asses, if that.

They really don't make men like him anymore, do they?

I'm about to wiggle out from under the bedsheets and get dressed when a sleek black cat slinks along the floor and hops into my lap, purring loudly. I jump, startled, but then begin petting it.

"Well, hey, there, kitty cat, where'd you come from?" It snuggles against me and happily butts its head against my hand. "Must be the Desrosiers' mouser. Even big strong vampires need to keep out the rats, huh?"

"Sarah."

I look up in alarm. Cillian's voice isn't light or sweet or affectionate anymore. It's hard, cutting, and dangerous. He's strung tight, his shoulders square and fingers taut, flexing into fists.

"You insolent bastard," he snarls. "Get the fuck off her before I rip out

your throat.”

Blanching at his words, I scoff. “Are you seriously threatening a cat?”

“No, love, he’s threatening me,” a familiar voice croons.

I look down. The cat is gone.

In its place, Sean Moore lies languidly with his head and shoulders in my lap, the most untrustworthy grin plastered across his pale face, blue eyes dancing with mischief as he rests his head on his hand.

He smirks. “Well, hello.”

“Get off me!” I tumble off the bed, keeping the sheets tucked tight around my body as he sits up and stretches. Cillian looks about ready to launch himself at Sean, his eyes churning red and thinning into slits. He bares his fangs.

“Oh, now you’re just hurting my feelings.” Sean pretends to pout, appearing quite at ease where he is. “Don’t make it seem like you find me so repulsive. I saw your eyes wandering the night before.” He winks. “Not that I blame you. You aren’t the first woman to think about it, and you won’t be the last.”

“Don’t talk to her!” Cillian bellows, taking a step forward. “Don’t even breathe the same air as her!”

“You know, I might be going out on a limb here, but you seem to be a tad on the jealous side to me. I mean, come on, that’s just basic science, mate. Isn’t a magick out there that can separate our air, now, is there?” He clicks his tongue, undaunted by Cillian’s fury. “And everyone said you were sensible. Some things don’t change, do they, Darragh old boy?”

“What do you want, Sean?” I cut in. The last thing anyone needs is for these two to start fighting. If Leigh were here, she’d put a stop to it.

“My good American lady, wouldn’t you know it? I’ve had a change of heart,” he declares with a theatrical wave of his hand, taking off his cap and bowing his head at me.

“A change of heart.” Cillian isn’t convinced.

“So I have, aye,” Sean replies. “Turns out Leigh got it right. I have a bit of a soft spot for the druids and their wee babbies.”

Cillian squints. “No, you don’t.”

“You’re right,” Sean says. “I don’t. But I’ve decided to help, anyway.”

“Why?” I ask.

Sean is about to open his mouth, but Cillian interjects. “You fucking liar. You never do anything for free.”

“Will you shut your face?” Sean scolds in a taunting voice, sniffing. “Your fair maiden asked me, not you, you cabbage.” He peers at me, flashing his teeth. “I will offer my wisdom, my assistance, and yes, even my own two fighting hands, in return for an official pardon.”

“A pardon?” I ask, puzzled.

Cillian fumes, his jaw set. “He wants to join the Brotherhood.”

“Smart lad.” Sean leans back on the bed, motioning to Cillian with a nod as though to say, *ta-da*. “Your brooding little suitor got it right, so he did.”

A raven lands on the balcony, then bursts into a swirl of fog and black feathers. Eamon slips into the room. “Good morning! Rory’s saying his goodbyes to Zephyrine,” he informs, appearing satiated from a recent feeding. He rubs his eyes, yawns, and stretches. “The Desrosiers really know how to cook. They gave me a four-course meal and it knocked me out something fierce. I tell yas, something about this place. It’s the first time I’ve ever felt tired enough to doze off and rest since—”

Eamon stops, fully alert and legs planted apart when he spots Sean. If he were a cat, he’d be puffing up his fur, trying to make himself look bigger. “The fuck is *he* doing here?” he demands.

“He’s trying to worm his way back into the Brotherhood,” Cillian growls. “That’s what he’s doing.”

Eamon bristles at the very suggestion, a vicious snarl aimed in Sean’s direction. “Over my dead body!”

“Only if absolutely necessary, boyo,” Sean replies, smirking. “I seem to

recall kicking your arse to kingdom come one night on a boat.”

Cillian returns to my side and protectively wraps his arms around me, growling as he tightens the sheets around my body, pulling here and there to make sure I’m fully covered from Sean’s eyes.

“I’m sorry,” he grumbles into my ear, annoyed as Sean and Eamon argue back and forth. “You deserve some privacy.”

“And I remember staking you for it,” Eamon retorts. “Shall we have a go again? I’ve learned a few things since that day.”

“You have, have you?” Sean taunts. “Trimming bushes and plucking flowers at St. Leonard won’t give you an edge against the likes of me, wee man.”

I can’t say for certain what happened between these two beyond surmising they’ve had quite the battle before, but where Sean seems entertained by their exchange, Eamon nearly charges.

The elevator gate opens, and Leigh stalks into the room. “That’s enough. All of you.” She blinks when she sees me. “Sarah? They didn’t even have the decency to let you dress before running their mouths?”

I’ve been clinging to the sheet around my body like a lifeline. “Doesn’t look that way.”

Leigh scowls. “Out. All of you! Get out,” she orders. “Or I’ll drag you all out by your ears.”

“I didn’t do anything!” Eamon protests as he trundles out. Sean gets up and stretches languidly before sauntering after him.

Cillian lingers, but Leigh points a very sharp glare in his direction. “You too,” she commands.

“But I—”

“I don’t care if she’s your lover, your wife, or the Goddess Herself, you will remove yourself from this room, Cillian Darragh.” She nods toward the elevators. “Keep an eye on those two. Rory’s waiting downstairs.”

Cillian sighs. “My queen,” he grumbles then obeys, giving me a slightly

softened glance before heading out.

Once they've all gone, Leigh sighs and turns to me. "I'm sorry, Sarah. I was on the phone with my husband. Sean approached me with his proposal, and I'm surprised to say Michael agreed. *The enemy of my enemy is my friend*, so he said." She brushes a hand through her hair. "Funny how we can figure out portals to other cities, other countries, with the help of the druids, but talking long distance is still limited to a phone call or a telegram if I really want to get old-fashioned with it." She spots my clothes and hands them to me, her eyes flitting over the marks from Cillian's feeding.

I brush my hand gingerly over the one on my neck. "I guess it's not a secret that we, um . . ."

"I know. I heard." Leigh smiles at me, which only heats my cheeks more.

I wouldn't normally be this bashful. I'd talk shit with my girlfriends back in the day easily about each and every juicy detail. But here and now, I'm suddenly hyper-aware of Leigh's authority. Cillian, Eamon, and Sean could've had it out right there and then, created all sorts of havoc. Leigh managed to squash all of that masculine bravado with a single command, and it speaks volumes. But here she is, looking after me.

"Michael gave me a few marks like that before I took the Oath. Get dressed, then I'll take care of them." She turns to give me privacy.

My arms and my legs feel like spaghetti noodles as I put on my pants. Cillian did a real number on me, but fuck, I love it. I try to focus. My sexual appetite needs to simmer down a bit. There are bigger things at play here, and I need to do my part.

"Leigh?" I pull my shirt over my head. "About the Oath. I know we said we wouldn't really broach the subject until later, but I just have to know. Was it worth it? And . . . do you regret it?"

Leigh's back is still turned. "It was worth it. Every second of every minute of every day," she says quietly, almost wistful. "And I regret nothing. I belong with Michael, and he belongs with me."

“But—there’s more to it than that, right?” I ask. “You can look now.”

She turns and comes to stand in front of me. She grazes her hand over the puncture marks left by Cillian. I watch in a mirror as they disappear before my very eyes. No sparkling magic, no feathers, no mist—just a gentle, comforting warmth and they’re gone, like she wiped them away.

“I mean, if the Morrigan is all about war and everything, how can She care whether or not Her soldiers have lovers or families?”

Leigh doesn’t flinch at the name. Of all of them, she seems the least afraid. “The Morrigan isn’t just a goddess of war and death. She’s a goddess of maidens, of mothers. She’s there from birth when we’re girls. When we become women. When we marry, and when we’re old.” She hums, pensive. “And She understands men can’t operate without us. No matter how strong or intelligent they may be.”

I kinda love the sound of that. “You think so?”

“I know so.” Leigh offers a reassuring smile. “How many times has the world nearly burned down to the ground because of a woman in charge?”

I hesitate. “I can’t think of any.”

“Exactly.” Leigh smirks. “Now, come on. Let’s not give the boys downstairs any chances to start fires.”



The entire Desrosier family is there to see us off, and I’m surprised at just how many there are. At least a dozen—all grown, mature individuals who give an aura of nobility that not even Leigh and Michael could hope to replicate. I feel like I’m in the presence of royalty when they see us off, all watching us carefully at the hotel’s grand entrance.

“You’ll have to visit again,” Lady Zephyrine coos as Rory lifts her knuckles to his lips, kissing them sweetly. “There’s so much more I believe we could discover about each other.”

I don't know what to contend with. The fact that my great-grandfather still has some serious game, or that all of the vampires—except Sean Moore, who couldn't look more pleased with himself at the moment—are doing everything they can to avoid directly looking at the rather romantic exchange.

“You and I both know that you, my dear,” Rory rumbles, “are too much woman for just one man.”

Zephyrine's musical laughter rings through the air. “You are charming,” she declares. Her beautifully deep Southern Louisiana drawl sounds like it's from another age, something nobody in New Orleans today could quite hope to replicate. “Don't be a stranger, Mr. McCready.”

“Until next time, Lady Desrosier,” he answers, bowing and placing his cap upon his head before turning around to join us.

Our journey through the city is uncomfortably quiet. Leigh takes the lead, Sean in step beside her like it's the most natural thing in the world for him to be counted among them, his strides long and confident, chin up high. Eamon and Rory walk behind them, and then Cillian and me.

I take the opportunity to wrap my arms around his elbow, whispering, “Glad we're going home.”

“Me too,” he agrees with a soft sigh.

Eamon clears his throat. “So—you and Lady Desrosier, huh?”

“A gentleman never tells,” Rory answers smoothly. He glances over his shoulder at Cillian, looking a little sterner than usual. “Though I'll be having words with you later.”

I cover my mouth, honestly a little more than mortified at the thought of any grandparent hearing me lost in the throes of passion. My grandmother might've cheered me on—she was that kind of woman—but Rory?

I give Cillian an apologetic look. “Think I got you into trouble.”

“Oh, is that what it was?” he murmurs. “Worth it.”

I don't know how the druids know where we are, but we stumble across a shimmering portal of light and color, leading back into their ancient hall of

murals beneath the prayer chapel. One after the other, we go through. I take the running start after steeling myself, and I'm relieved my stomach handles it far better this time.

Sean lets forth a dramatic sigh. "Been a long while since I've smelled the musty paint of this place."

The hall doesn't smell like that at all. More like a fresh field of grass, or the wind coursing through wildflowers, and earth. But I get the feeling this man likes to get under people's skin. Joe Brown seems immune to it, greeting us all with a somber expression.

"The Lilymen attacked St. Damian," he tells Leigh. "In larger numbers than St. Kateri. They're aware the jig is up, it seems."

My heart sinks. *More people dead?* But Joe spots my worried expression and offers his best, albeit weary, smile. "Fortunately, numbers didn't do them any good. Not with Desmond and his lads lying in wait."

"Ah, yes," Sean says dryly. "Good ol' Des. Was never one to turn up his nose at a proper ambush."

"Has there been any sign of them here?" Leigh asks.

"Not a one that we've seen," Joe says. "Aodhán has done well, watching over matters in Boston. Constant patrols, keeping near the cathedral. We're in his debt."

"Michael will be returning soon with the others," Leigh replies. "Nigeria has no need of any further fortifications—their druids are some of the most skilled magickers he's ever seen. And their monastery is more fortress than abbey. Archdruid Adeoye has sent them home."

"Surprising that you managed to convince Mr. Moore to return," Joe says, though he sounds less than thrilled. "Welcome back to Boston, Sean."

"Thank you, Joe. Nice to finally have a warm welcome," Sean replies, clapping his shoulder a little too hard. Joe dusts himself off where the vampire's hand was after being let go. "I'll take a look around, then, shall I? Get reacquainted with my city."

Cillian's arm tenses beneath mine. I don't have to read minds to know that he doesn't agree with Leigh's decision.

Joe watches Sean walk toward the stone staircase with all the swagger befitting a man who was once called king.

Unimpressed, he mutters to us as we pass, "I'll let the others know to hide their daughters."



Having returned safely to St. Winifred, I know my time with Cillian is limited. He's itching to have it out with Leigh about Sean's return and has to check in with the others, make sure everyone is on the same page, operating as one blood-fueled machine, as he calls it.

Standing together in the primary common room in the abbey, he steals a heated kiss from me. "Shall I sneak into your room again tonight?"

"Could you sneak into my room at home?" I don't know why I'm whispering. Literally every vampire in the vicinity can probably hear us, even if they're being polite and pretending they don't. An old habit, I guess. "St. Winifred isn't bad, but I miss my own bed."

"That can be arranged, I think, since Mickey's coming home," Cillian replies with a heavy sigh. "I'm sorry. Coming back to Boston was meant to be peaceful. Instead, I'm on the warpath again."

"I understand," I promise, resting my hand on his chest, scanning the room briefly. Lacking new directives, the vampires mill about and chat with one another, appearing eager for their king to return with news. "You're a soldier. Duty, honor, all that jazz. Don't worry about it. It's what you do. I'll always be here after."

Sean scoffs and laughs behind us, though at what I can't say for certain. He stands separate from the others, either oblivious or uncaring when several mistrustful glances are cast his way. He smiles and says hello to a pair of

druidwives, who quickly pass him.

“I know, but I still don’t like it,” Cillian admits, acting as though he’s ignoring Sean, though there’s a vein in his forehead that seems a little bigger than it was before. “It always seems to take me away from you. And with you is the one place I want to be most of all.”

For someone who claims he isn’t a poet, he sure knows how to lay on the sweetness. I could get used to this side of him.

“You’ll have to make it up to me, then, when you come over tonight,” I tease.

That seems to brighten his spirits. He leans into me and nuzzles his forehead to mine. “Oh, I shall. Don’t worry about that. But I’ll need someone to take you home. Make sure you’re sa—”

“I humbly volunteer,” Sean says with a flourishing bow. “I’ll bring the sweet young lady safely home to her abode.”

Cillian doesn’t even get a chance to say a word. Eamon cuts in, vehement. “Oi, absolutely not. *I’ll* take her, Cillian. Pay no attention to that rotten bastard, Sarah. He’d charm the habit off a nun before she even knew it.”

“Oh, fuck off, that was one time,” Sean replies, shameless. “And she didn’t complain once.”

Cillian looks positively murderous.

Rory pats Eamon’s shoulder. “You’re a good lad, but she’s my granddaughter. I’ll take her myself. Besides, sounds like you’ve some fences to mend.”

“Don’t remind me,” Eamon grumbles.

“I’ll be fine,” I tell Cillian, kissing his nose to ease the tension. “Go on.”



Lazy snow drifts in the air, and my breath swirls in front of my face while I

turn up the lapels of my coat. Rory holds an easy gait next to me, appearing quite content, all things considered. But there's an elephant in the room I should probably address.

"Sorry if you heard things you never wanted to hear in New Orleans." Just saying it aloud makes me want to melt into the pavement, but there's a silence between us I can't stand as we walk along.

Rory smirks. "Don't fret that pretty head of yours. I didn't hear a damned thing. I think Zephyrine's room was enchanted in that way. Thank God. I'd have to peel my ears right off my head. Just wanted to make the lad sweat, is all."

Relief sweeps over me. "I guess you were pretty busy yourself."

"Oh, fantastically busy," Rory agrees. "Not sure I can feel my legs at the moment, but that should wear off in a few days."

I can't help but giggle at that, covering my mouth. "Ugh, no, don't tell me that! Gross."

"Beg pardon, I'm not gross," he teases, grinning. "You think it all just falls off after a certain age, do ye? I'll have you know it still works long after, and I haven't received a complaint yet. Thank you *very* much."

I playfully shove him. "Stop, I can't hear it! You're my sweet innocent great-grandpa. In my head, you're still a virgin."

He snorts. "And how do you figure that, when you exist?"

"Easy. The stork brought me."

He laughs. "Sorry to disappoint you, but life for your parents and your grandparents—and romance too—doesn't disappear in a puff of smoke when you're born." He rubs his nose.

"I know." I wrap my arm around his and pull him in for an affectionate squeeze. Boston's coming alive with the morning. School must be out for the holiday at last. Kids are building snowmen, dragging one another around on sleds, and enjoying themselves. "My parents were always in love. I never thought I'd ever find anything like that. But Cillian . . ."

Rory's eyes twinkle. "Are you telling me you love him?"

"Oh, geez." Flustered, I give him an apologetic squint. "If I was supposed to consult you first, Gramps—sorry. I'm in it now."

He chuckles, shaking his head. "Cillian has always been a fiercely loyal man. When he's in, he's all in. You see it every day when he interacts with Mickey, with Leigh. He and the queen may not get along, but he respects her. He'd never undermine her. And he and Mickey have gotten into their share of rows, but they remain dedicated friends. More like brothers."

"You all seem to really respect him."

"I respect his dedication, sure. Not sure how I feel about him deflowering my great-granddaughter, but that's his problem, not yours."

"Sorry to break it to you, but he didn't deflower anything."

"Still, it's the principle of the matter." Rory sniffs playfully, making me giggle. "I've never gotten to have *the talk* with an interested young man. If I don't do it now and scare him a little, I may never get the chance." He pats my hand. "But I knew when I saw him staring at you at the Mannock like you'd descended from heaven in front of him that it wouldn't be long."

That makes my heart flutter a little. "He did that? I was too busy being pissed at him to notice."

"Completely smitten, from day one."

Pensive, I look at him. "Does it bother you? Me asking about the Oath and everything?"

"Yes and no," Rory admits with a long sigh. "You're a woman grown, it's your decision. I just hope they're honest about what you're giving up. You won't be able to have children, you'll have to grapple with an ever-present hunger for a good ten, twenty years, depending on how well you take to it. And your emotions—if Cillian does anything to piss you off now, imagine it amplified by a hundred. We're explosive creatures, especially at the beginning."

"I never really thought about the kids thing," I say. "But it's been hard,

picturing being a mom after Mom died. If I did it, I'd want my parents involved. They're gone. So that dream sort of died with them, you know?"

Rory frowns, hesitant.

"Sorry, was that the wrong answer?" I ask. "I guess it can't be easy, talking about the end of your line."

His features soften. "Oh, you aren't the end, sweet child. There are several McCreadys back home. They'll make plenty more of us, don't you worry." He chuckles and pats my back when we arrive at my house. "I'm only saddened I couldn't do anything to spare you from that hurt."

"It wasn't your fault." I lead him up to my front door and unlock it, motioning him in. "Come on. I'll make you some tea. You can rest those numb legs of yours."

"You're a cheeky little thing, aren't you?" Rory mutters, chuckling as I grin. "Very well. Tea will do me just fine."

After putting the kettle on and turning on the radio in the living room to some Christmas tunes, I flop onto the couch while Rory admires the Christmas tree I put up.

"There're no presents beneath it," he laments.

"Yeah," I say with a sad frown. "With everything going on I haven't really had a chance to go shopping. Don't have enough time to do all the cute stuff, like knitting scarves and hats and mittens."

"You know how to knit?"

"Sure. Mom taught me. If she were alive today every single vampire in your Brotherhood would have matching hats and gloves, the whole shebang. Wouldn't let a single one of you wander outside without them." I smile at the thought of my mom decking out an entire secret brotherhood of deadly supernatural creatures like they were puppies instead. Leave it to her, she'd do it.

"But, um." I glance at Rory. "If you don't have any place to be for Christmas, maybe you could come over?"

Surprised, Rory sits up a little. “You sure you wouldn’t rather spend it with your new man?”

“I’d love to see Cillian at Christmas,” I reply. “But you’re family, and it’s been way too long since I’ve had one of those to celebrate anything with.”

Beaming, Rory nods. He almost seems embarrassed. “I’d be honored, Sarah. I’ll be here.”

Rising to my feet, it’s hard to keep all this energy I’ve got inside me. I’m actually excited. “Okay, great! This is going to be fun, I promise. I know I don’t have presents, but we could play games, watch TV, talk. We’ve got all the time in the world together now, right?”

“We do,” Rory agrees with a chuckle. “Though you’ll need to ensure Cillian spends his Christmas here too. I plan on giving the lad a hard time, but, you know, I think he needs a proper holiday with someone to call his own, more than anyone else I know.”

“Losing his wife, you mean?” I offer quietly.

“December is the hardest time of year for him for that reason, aye,” Rory agrees. “I’m glad he’s spoken to you of his troubles. I wasn’t sure how you’d feel after learning all of that.”

Puzzled, I sit down next to him. “What do you mean? After learning he’s a widower?” I brush my hair behind one ear. “Don’t worry, Gramps. I know he’ll always love her. That’s normal, and it doesn’t bother me. I’d never try to erase her from him.”

Rory blinks at me then shakes his head. “Right. Of course. Was silly for me to be worried.”

I wasn’t born yesterday. “That wasn’t what you meant, was it?” I ask softly. “There’s something else too. Something I don’t know. Isn’t there?”

Wincing slightly, Rory shifts where he sits. “I shouldn’t have said anything at all. It’s not my place. He’ll talk to you about it when he’s good and ready, and not before.”

The kettle starts going off on my stove, much to Rory’s relief. I give him

a narrow-eyed look. “Saved in the nick of time, but you’re not off the hook, buster. I’m going to make your tea, and then you’re going to spill it. Got it?”

“Sarah, that’s not—”

“Got it?” I press.

Rory sighs. “Sarah—”

“Non-negotiable,” I call over my shoulder as I head to the kitchen and pour boiling hot water over a little satchel of Earl Grey, my mind racing.

Of course, it shouldn’t surprise me that there’s more to Cillian I haven’t discovered yet. I’m not entitled to his entire life. Nobody can hope to know anyone thoroughly after just a month, no matter how much time you spend with them. Losing Helena must’ve destroyed him at the time—why would he want to dredge up every detail regarding his loss with me?

But whatever it is, it’s big enough that Rory thinks it may change my mind. I told Cillian he didn’t have to share it all with me. After all, how could he? He could barely utter a word about the Great War and the part he played in it. To dredge up those memories, cause him pain? I can’t think of a woman in her right mind who’d urge any man to share those things with her, or anyone outside of a priest in confession.

Maybe that makes me unrighteous. Maybe I ought to be concerned with everything Cillian has said and done over the past century. But the thought of holding myself up over him, like I’m somehow better, leaves a bad taste in my mouth. Who am I to judge? In the end, isn’t that between Cillian and whatever god or goddess he answers to?

Would I be strong enough to look past it all and stay?

Exhaling, I bring Rory the piping hot cup of tea and a small plate of cookies that I admittedly fetched out of a bag. “Sorry, I didn’t make these myself. It’s not blood, but . . .”

“My dear girl, I will never say no to food put in front of me.” Rory pats his extended belly. “I remember harsher times when any food was good food, so long as it nourished you enough to make it to the next morning. And since

nothing I eat can really kill me these days . . . ” He takes a bite and makes an appreciative noise.

“About Cillian,” I begin as Rory sips his tea. “Look, I know I’m new to the idea of soldiering. I’m a waitress. A singer. Most I’ve ever done is thrown a punch. But whatever he’s done . . . isn’t it possible that a man can change, be better than what he was? Isn’t that what all soldiers do when they come back from war? Try to atone by living better than they did?”

Rory’s blue eyes are gentle, sweet, and commiserating.

I continue. “I know that sounded naive. But I don’t think I can let this go. I know you wanted a tranquil existence for me. Marriage, kids, white picket fence. But that’s not me.” I motion to the door. “The more time I spend with you all, the more I feel like I was living a life asleep. That I’m meant for something more. Something better. I don’t want to be aimless. And when I’m with Cillian I feel like I’m pointed in a direction that feels right. Not wrong.”

“Oh, my sweet child.” Rory sets his tea down and takes my hand. “Us sorry bunch of old men don’t deserve the kind of light and fire you bring.”

“You talk about yourself like you’re a murderer,” I say in bewilderment. “You built ships. You built the *Titanic*.”

“I did, aye,” Rory says. “And then I came over here, I joined up with the lads, and I killed plenty. Liquor was illegal, and we became rich from it. I ripped agents apart, Feds, other men who fancied themselves leaders in an underworld they couldn’t fathom. I’m guilty of a great many things, just like Cillian and the rest. But the thing you need to understand, Sarah, is you might make him better, but you can’t change him or his past. War will always be his way. It’s all he knows. It’s what he’s good at. He ensures we are strong.”

“What’re you saying?” I whisper.

“I’m saying the lad doesn’t belong here in Boston, love,” Rory says softly. “He’ll do his best, but wanderlust will get the better of him.”

The possibility never occurred to me. I sit in shock. “You think he’ll grow tired of it all and leave me.”

“Maybe,” Rory says reluctantly. “And if he does, will you be able to let him go? If you take the Oath, become as we are, our emotions can’t be washed away. Grudges linger far past their use, and resentment is a dangerous thing.”

My stomach sinks, and it’s like Rory can sense it. He lifts my chin. “You need to be prepared either way. So make certain this is what you want—for *you*. Not for him or anyone else.”

His wisdom is something I can appreciate, but God, I wish I hadn’t heard it. My feet, light as clouds, are on solid ground again. I open my mouth to respond, but there’s a knock on my door. “Sorry, hang on.”

I get up to answer it, peering through the peep hole. I’m surprised to see Peter Blackwood standing there, heavy winter coat draped across his shoulders and waiting patiently.

“Oh.” I slowly swing my door open. Now isn’t the best time, not with everything we’ve been talking about. “Peter, I wasn’t expecting you.”

Peter Blackwood removes his hat with a charming smile. “I beg your pardon for stopping by like this, but I’ve called a few times and received no answer. I wanted to make sure you were all right.”

“I’m fine, I just haven’t been home much,” I say. “Work at the tavern has kept me busy.”

“Well, don’t I feel silly,” Peter remarks apologetically. “I’ll stop by another time. Call me when you’re free, if you like.”

He’s about to turn away, but I stop him. “Wait. You came all this way. Do you want to come in?”

“I wouldn’t want to impose.”

“You’re not imposing,” I reply. I don’t want to put him off. It’s good to see him, and maybe I could use the distraction, use it to give me time to process Rory’s warning. “My great-grandfather is having tea inside, if you’d like to join us.”

Peter’s eyes brighten with subtle curiosity. “Is he? Well. If you’re

certain.”

I step aside as he walks in. Rory rises from the sofa. “Gramps, this is Peter Blackwood. He’s a friend of mine.”

Rory peers at Peter curiously, blue eyes squinted. It reminds me of when he sizes up Cillian sometimes. I’ll have to reassure him, like I did with Cillian, that Peter is not a suitor for my hand or anything. “Pleasure to meet you.”

“Peter, this is Rory McCready,” I say pleasantly.

“Charmed,” Peter says, keeping his distance.

“You can take your shoes off if you like. Go ahead and sit down. I’ll make you some tea.”

I hurry into the kitchen, fleeing my own thoughts and Rory’s solemn prophecy. I curse myself as I pour another cup, dousing another a tea bag in hot water. *What am I doing? Did I let myself fall too quickly? Am I being foolish, too trusting?*

My emotions war within me. No. I didn’t imagine anything Cillian did, anything he said. *He cares for me. He has to. Rory’s just being protective. That’s what this is. He’d never leave me. But . . .*

What if Rory’s right?

“Here you are,” I say in the lightest, cheeriest tone I can muster as I return to the living room, determined to fake it until I make it in front of present company.

The cup in my hand clatters to the floor, spilling tea all around my feet, droplets hot on my socks and jeans.

Peter stands to the side of my sofa with Rory’s wooden raven medallion dangling from his hand. His words are sharper than his eyes. They look soft, almost tired, like he wishes he didn’t have to say them. “Don’t scream, Sarah. It’ll be worse for you if you do.”

Behind him, Rory lies on the floor beneath a mesh metal fishing net, groaning and writhing as his body smokes from the light streaming into the

window. Two men dressed in long coats and dark hats hover over him, carrying wooden spears they've poised, ready to jab into his chest, his back.

I cry out in panic. "Stop. Stop! Please don't hurt him!"

"Will the sun or the net infused with holy water eat him away first, I wonder?" one of the strangers remarks, dark eyes gleaming when he looks at me, mocking. "Shall we find out?"

Peter holds me back when I try to run to Rory. "I tried, Sarah. I gave you so many hints, so many opportunities to avoid this, and you missed every single one. A hunter. In the midst of winter. Really, did these Irish simpletons teach you nothing? Or were you just a toy for them to feed from?"

My mind whirls. I don't know who these people are. But then I see a white lily on the side table near my couch, and I know.

The Lilymen.

Rory is in so much pain, and the noise he is making churns my stomach, makes me nauseated, dizzy. I've never smelt burning flesh. I can't take it.

"A few more moments, and he'll burst into flame," the second hunter muses.

"What do you want?" Desperate, I try to pull away from Peter, but his hold on me remains firm. "I'll give you anything! Please!" I try to think of why else they might be here, why they've come to my house in particular. Were they watching me? Was *Peter* watching me? "L-let him go! He's just a musician! He's done nothing!"

"He's done far from nothing, from his own mouth. A killer of federal officers, mobsters, a purveyor of illegal substances." Peter *tsks*.

"You don't want him," I insist, on the verge of tears. "You want the High King, don't you? The one who leads them all? That's who you're looking for, isn't it? To cut the head from the snake?"

Peter's mouth turns into a furious thin line. "You know where Michael Kelly is?"

"Don't, Sarah," Rory moans, even as he burns.

I can see the marks on his skin, sunlight eating away at him. I'm going to lose him. I have to think fast. *Think very, very fast.*

So I do the only thing I can do.

I lie.

"You think Michael Kelly is the king?" I whisper. "How stupid are you all? Really? You've been in the city, doing what? Gathering information? Spying on me?" My heart pounds in my ears. "Hunting for the wrong man?"

"What are you talking about?" One of the hunters storms forward, in front of Peter.

And Peter Blackwood relents. He isn't the one in charge here.

I swallow and pray for forgiveness, trying to stall my own trembling, appearing as defiant as I can be, ignoring the sound of Rory's agony, the scent that burns my nose.

"Michael Kelly isn't their leader, you idiots," I taunt right back.

"She's lying," hisses one of the hunters. "She must be."

Peter stares at me, measuring me. I can see the skepticism. He doesn't believe me. But he doesn't correct me or try to challenge me. He says nothing at all.

"She's fibbing, isn't she?" a hunter demands, looking to Peter. "You can tell, can't you? Is she telling the truth?"

Peter rubs his mouth, gazing at me and canting his head. He doesn't reply.

"I'm not lying," I insist. "Of course they want you to think it's Michael Kelly, but it isn't. You played right into what they wanted. And you think *I'm* foolish? Some Lilymen you are."

The hunter I don't know grabs me by the scruff of my sweater. "Oh really? If it ain't Michael Kelly, then who is it?" he snarls.

I stare back at him, my fear replaced with hatred. "Cillian Darragh," I reply under my breath. "The High King of the Morrigan Brotherhood is Cillian Darragh."

CHAPTER 14

Ancient Enemies



Cillian

“I don’t want this fucker walking around our city again, scot-free, doing what he likes.” My conviction pours out of me with vehemence. “What more is there to understand? You may think you know him somehow, Leigh, that you can control him, but you can’t, and you don’t. You weren’t there. You didn’t see the kind of havoc he caused back in the twenties. Even before then.”

Leigh is at the end of her patience with me, what with how she pinches the bridge of her nose and rubs the corners of her eyes. Utilizing the priest’s house for our conversation, I’m grateful for their spells. Unlike other places, we can’t be heard in here, and a semblance of privacy remains. I can be candid.

“I understand your concern, Cillian—”

“Do you?” Somehow, I’m not sure I believe her. “He tried to kill me back in the day. Do you really understand?”

“Okay,” Leigh amends with a sigh. “I don’t understand. But this is what we need right now. Nobody knows how to hunt and fight the Order of the Lily better than Sean does. Joining us is a small price to pay for that

knowledge.”

“A small pri—” I have to take care not to raise my voice, though restraint is difficult. “Do you know what kind of trouble he’ll bring to our front doorstep? I don’t trust that man a lick. No one does.”

“All the more reason to keep him close so we can keep an eye on him,” Leigh counters. “Our Lady chose him just as She chose you, Cillian. You have to remember that.”

I hate that she’s right. “And Mickey is just fine and dandy with him traipsing around Boston, is he?”

“Michael agrees with me,” Leigh replies, her tone on the verge of becoming pointed. “It was his idea in the first place, remember? And if he can let the past stay in the past, so can you. Let it go, Cillian. Don’t make me command you to do it, please. I’m just as tired as everyone else. And I need to feed. I haven’t had any blood since we left to find him.”

That surprises me. “None at all? Not even at the jazz club?”

“I’ve never drunk from a person,” Leigh replies, looking somewhat disgusted. “Do you know how uncomfortable that is for me, sinking my teeth into a complete stranger? I prefer the way we do things here, thanks.”

“Yes, but you’re still young, Leigh.” I arch a brow. “You’ve only just passed your tenth year. You should be crazed with thirst by now.”

“What can I say?” Leigh replies. “I have my moments of weakness, but overall I’m just plain stubborn.”

“I noticed.” I hesitate. “Do you think it’ll be the same for Sarah? When she . . .”

“Maybe. I hope so. It seems like women handle it better than men early on.” That piques Leigh’s interest. “You’ve made your peace with it?” She folds her arms over her chest. “That’s a surprise, after all the fuss you made when she first found out.”

“Perhaps I’ve come around to it,” I admit, though I don’t like to. “You were right, you and Sinéad. The Phantom Queen made it plain years ago She

wants more of you to bolster Her ranks. Sarah is—she’s never killed anybody, but she has a fire, a spirit. I know she’d be readily accepted. It’s just . . .”

“Helena?” Leigh finishes for me with a little nod.

I lower my gaze. “Bringing women in when I couldn’t reach her in time, seeing the lads pair up with the ones I did manage to save, one by one . . . I couldn’t stomach it. I could barely stomach you when Mickey told me the news. Didn’t seem fair. Everyone happy around me in this immortality, like it’s something to celebrate, and then . . . me.”

“I know. I get it,” Leigh murmurs. “I hated being around my friends, all happily married and raising babies when I’d lost John. Felt like salt in the wound. I imagine that wound lasted a hell of a lot longer for you.”

“I thought it’d never go away. I know it won’t, but then Sarah—” My body constricts, like the very possibility might snuff me out, rob the breath from my lungs, kill me in place. “She’s become a part of me, and being without her, losing her? I can’t—”

“You can’t, and you shouldn’t.”

Leigh and I both turn as Michael enters the room, removing his cap with a determined smile. He flashes a grin at his astonished wife. “Got back a little early. Miss me, love?”

Leigh collides with him, and he hugs her tightly before setting his eyes upon me. “You’ve been miserable a long time, brother,” he muses. “But the storm’s lifting. About time that shadow hanging over you disappeared. And if Sarah feels pulled to take the Oath, we’ll accept her. Happily. Between you and Rory, you could both use a little light in your life, eh?”

Bolstered by his words, I manage to smile. It’s a foreign feeling, this sense of hope. Of potential happiness. In a way, I’m unsettled by it. The last time I felt anything close to this, I lost it all. The ground was ripped out from underneath my feet. My heart shattered, compassion evaporating and leaving nothing but hatred and resentment.

But now there's someone waiting for me. Someone I can call mine. Perhaps I'll finally discover a way to be content. To stay rooted to one place instead of following my impulses all around the world, hunting battlefields in strange lands for tougher, nobler, braver souls than mine to bring into the Morrigan's arms.

If Leigh and Michael are right. If bringing Sean into our fold doesn't shoot us in the foot. If we can dismantle the Order of the Lily and drive them back into hiding, if not complete extinction.

If we can do that, maybe then I can convince myself I deserve something good. I can celebrate a holiday I've all but forgotten. I can explore a new life. I can live with myself. With Sarah.

"You'd better be right about Sean, Mickey," I mutter.

"I knew you'd have reservations," Michael replies. "But better he be useful and on our side than left to his own devices."

"You both talk about him like he's wild." Leigh snorts. "Sean Moore is far cleverer than I think either of you realize. Let's give him a chance. Let bygones be bygones."

Michael *tsks*. "You just have a soft spot for the old man."

"I do," Leigh agrees, patting his chest. "I'm off to see Molly Shea. Behave." She points at both of us and heads off.

I scoff. "When do I not?"

"That was more at me than at you." Michael smirks. "I have good news."

"What's that?"

"Cezar's coming. He should arrive—" Michael hums thoughtfully. "Tomorrow?"

I whistle. "Like stirring up a hornet's nest, if there is one. Do you think there are Lilymen here?"

"I don't doubt it one bit. But they won't be expecting Sean. Or Cezar." Michael's jovial good-nature fades to something more dangerous. "Allowing them any foothold at all was a mistake I won't make again."



It's been fifty years since I've seen the Moore brothers in the same room, let alone the same city. Even though they're within several feet of each other, neither of them acknowledges the other at all. They are mirrors—identical faces, identical heights—and yet they couldn't be more different.

Desmond is large, broad. He looks well-fed, powerful, with his shaggy blond hair and beard lending him a somewhat rugged appearance, like a man who belongs on a frontier homestead instead of the city.

Sean has more youth in his eyes and expression than his weary brother, lending all the more to the ever-present mischief found there. But to my alarm, that foxlike smile and knowing glint in his eyes is absent, replaced with something darker. More wicked.

Hatred. I've seen it before in the eyes of my enemies. And in the mirror.

"All finished gabbing about me, have you?" Sean says to me cheerily as druids and vampires begin to gather in St. Winifred's common area. "Wouldn't you know it, we've had a stroke of luck this morning."

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"Aodhán was patrolling the area near St. Winifred with Oscar Haskins," Michael explains to me, keeping his voice low. "We caught one. A Lilyman."

Bloodlust surges in me, but I hold back. "Did you question him?" My voice is low, void of any empathy. "Where is he? I'll have him squealing before the night is up."

"That's the thing, isn't it?" Sean sighs laboriously. "All this authority, and none of you know what to properly do with a Lilyman."

"All right. Fine." I grow impatient with Sean's crowing. "What do you do with a Lilyman, Sean?"

"Kind of you to ask," Sean says, as though it's a bright spring day and there's not a thing wrong in the world. I can't decide if he really is that chipper, or if it's just another one of his games. A way to lure us into comfort

and security before he stabs us in the back. It's not like we didn't do the same once. "A Lilyman never talks."

"I'll change that, and quickly," I retort.

"He doesn't talk because he's already dead," Sean replies, smug when he sees the astonishment on my face. "A Lilyman never allows himself to be captured. They're more paranoid than you or me. Carry capsules about with acid in their mouths these days, it seems. Back in mine, they'd travel in pairs. If one was caught, the other would shoot him, and then himself. Suppose this way is cleaner."

"So what does that mean for us?"

"It means he had a partner," Michael muses. "Did he survive?"

"He did, aye, and he fled north into the woods," Desmond says, ignoring his brother's presence. Sean similarly refuses to look at him. The smile that crosses his face is mocking, fueled by resentment. "Lilymen don't like to operate with a haven in the city. They know we have excellent hearing, and druids can sense their spells."

"They use spells?" Michael asks in surprise.

"Oh, aye," Sean says, nodding. "First thing to learn about the Lilymen—they're Christ-lovers. Puritans, and zealous ones at that. Isn't nothing in this world they love more than Jesus and killing those they believe have wronged God. Their second love is the Devil himself."

"You mean Satan?" I ask, skeptical. "Devil worshippers?"

"Almost." Desmond's somber tone is far different than his brother's, deep and level. "It's a deity they've made a pact with, but we're not sure which. They justify it as an evil to wipe out evil, and view it as a tool, not a belief."

"So their entire order is based on a kind of hypocrisy?" I ask, bewildered.

"With their witchcraft, yes. But they also use the weapons of priests. Holy water, crucifixes, salt, the Bible. And stakes, spears, and arrows of oak and rowanwood," Desmond continues.

That doesn't bode well for us. I grimace. Holy water burns us just as well

as sunlight without the wooden pendants around our neck. “Will they suspect an attack?”

“Hard to say.” Sean sniffs. “This is a new generation. They took St. Leonard because they had surprise on their side. I’ve yet to see if they’re made of the same stuff as the Lilymen who came before them.”

“They likely have a compound out there, a cabin of some kind outside of the city,” Desmond cuts in. “It’s a lot of land to cover, but if we put together a large group and take to the skies after nightfall, we can likely try and narrow down their safehouse.”

“We’ll bide our time until Cezar arrives. Between you two boys and the Spaniard, we’ll have just as many guns as they do. Well done, lads,” Michael says quietly. “And thank you—for coming here, for being a part of this. I know we’ve had our differences.”

“Water under the bridge, Mickey boy,” Sean says, a little too forgiving. I don’t trust it, but by the look Michael shoots me, there’s nothing I can do about it. “You’re the king now, the king with a queen. That was something I never accomplished in my time. We all know who wears the crown round here.” His voice lowers, jeering. “Don’t we, Des?”

Desmond only grunts, avoiding the burn of his brother’s gaze.

In all my time in America, that’s the one mystery I’ve never cracked—why Desmond and Sean hate each other so. Oh, they’ll defend each other from outside forces. Nobody gets to lay a hand on Sean unless it’s Desmond, and vice versa. We learned that the hard way when we brought Sean down and drove him out of Boston during the final years of Prohibition.

Dealing with Desmond and the force he brings isn’t something I want to experience again. If it weren’t for Cezar, Michael and I would likely both be goners.

But there’s some kind of unspoken code of brotherhood between them, a loyalty they both uphold, despite their disdain.

Whatever it is, they’ll never talk about it. And we’ve learned to never ask.



After coordinating with Thomas Coffey and his druids when they insist on acting as part of our offensive, as we expected, I steal away for a few moments when I recognize familiar pangs of hunger. Sarah's away at home under Rory's watch, and it's her blood I crave.

I grit my teeth. She's truly turned me into a bloodlush. I could take flight, go and see her quickly, and return—but no, how can I? She's not a vending machine I can visit when I have need of her. No, when I go to see Sarah, I plan to stay.

I head into the abbey. When a nun passes me, I pause to ask, "Have you seen Eamon?" I can hear his voice but I can't quite pinpoint it. St. Winifred is so large.

"Mr. Callaghan is in the infirmary helping Ms. Bell and Miss O'Donovan with a few things," she informs me with a kindly smile.

"Thank you."

When I find Eamon he's being rather domestic, something I haven't really ever seen him do. I'm used to him having a rifle in his hand and zealous determination in his eyes. Instead he's dutifully changing bedding in the infirmary rooms, one by one, his sleeves rolled up past his elbows, shirt wrinkled by his leather suspenders and discolored at his waist from what looks like dishwater.

He's content. Quiet, save for the tune he's humming under his breath, one of his favorite rebel ditties from long ago. He tucks and folds the sheets with a tidiness I don't expect. Did he learn that at St. Leonard? Funny how something as simple as making a bed can make a boy look just a little more like a man.

"Never thought you to be concerned with cleanliness."

Eamon straightens with a somewhat shy smile. "The nuns knocked quite a few things into me when I was tending trees. Some days I was bored,

dressing bark and plucking fruit. Other days, it felt like a proper military. Had a room I had to keep spotless.”

“Those nuns were sterner than any sergeant, I suppose,” I tease.

“Scared the bejesus out of me many a time.” Eamon chuckles, but his smile fades swiftly.

“What is it?” I ask.

“I still can’t believe they’re gone. Every day I think maybe I imagined it. Fell asleep beneath the great oak tree when it was my turn to tend it and haven’t woken up,” Eamon admits. “But I know it isn’t. I’m in Boston, and . . . they’re dead.”

“Give yourself time to come to terms with it,” I reassure him, touching his shoulder. “You’re stronger than anyone knows. However long it takes when you’re ready. There’ll be a reckoning.”

“Do you think Mickey will pardon me?” Eamon asks.

“I wish I could say for certain. After all you’ve done, I hope so,” I reply. “Know I’ll be vouching for you. You’re a right hero, and I’ll fight with anyone who says otherwise.”

Eamon’s smile is rueful. “Thanks, Cillian.” He clears his throat, looking around. “I know I haven’t known you nearly as long as Mickey has, but there are times— Well, I hope you know I see you as . . . ”

“We’re brothers,” I reassure him, clapping both shoulders and giving them a bolstering shake. “Mickey and I were opponents for a short time, but you? You were always by my side. Always. I’ll never forget that, not for as long as I live and breathe.”

“If you can call this living and breathing,” Eamon huffs, but there’s emotion shining in his eyes. “Thank you, Cillian. I’ll not let you down. When you go to fight the Order of the Lily, I’m coming too. I’m going to make them pay for what they did. Each and every single one.”

He’s as raring for a fight as I am. “That you will, lad, you and I both.”

“Eamon?”

We both turn. Sinéad lingers by the doorway.

I hesitate then look to him. “I’ll let you get back to it.” I excuse myself, sensing their wish to be alone.

I hear their conversation behind me. Sinéad’s voice is soft, chock full of regret. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry I acted the way I did, when you were just doing your best to help. She didn’t do anything wrong. I just—reacted, and I don’t know why, I—”

Eamon hushes her. “Sinéad, it’s all right, no harm done! Please don’t cry. I turn into a right proper mess when I see you crying . . .”

Their voices growing dim the farther I go in my attempt to give them the privacy they so desperately need. When are they going to finally give in to the current I’ve sensed traveling between them? It’s been this way for decades.

Then again, when you have an eternity to kill, what’s the rush?

Thinking of eternity inevitably leads my thoughts back to Sarah. I hate to disappoint her tonight, but I don’t have the luxury of taking another rest like the time we stole together in New Orleans. Our enemies have infiltrated our city; they’ve made camp on our land. I wonder if this is how my ancestors felt when they were beset by the Vikings, by the English landing upon their shores.

The comparison angers me. Will there ever be a time when there aren’t enemies at our doorstep, intent upon killing us all? When I was a boy, it started with landlords, squeezing my already near-destitute mother of every pence she had. Then it was the German war machine in the trenches with rifles, mustard gas and booby traps. Then came the British yet again with their supporters, their savage mercenaries. And then again, my own people.

My own brother.

Seeking war out on my own, I fought the Sicilians, the mob, the federal government in Boston. When the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor and threw us headfirst into war again, I stormed the beaches in Italy, battled some of the

Hecatēi in their own ancestral lands, then the Wehrmacht and the SS. I came to blows against China and the Soviet Union in Korea.

I know, deep down, it'll never end. I may never pick up another rifle, pretend to be a bright-eyed soldier the way I did in past conflicts. But there will always be something. Something to draw me away, whether it be Lilymen or whatever else.

I am a warrior. Molded for battle.

This is what I'm made for.

I can only hope Sarah will remain patient with me. I should probably call in case she's waiting up.

When I reach the abbess's office, I knock. Hearing no response, I peer inside. Molly and Leigh must've gone elsewhere to discuss things or have long since separated to take care of their own business. I approach the desk and take the phone off the receiver, then spin the rotating dialer around and listen to the ringing on the other end.

No one answers at Sarah's home.

Perhaps she's asleep. I suppose I *did* wear her out. But Rory's there with her, isn't he? I try again, then a third time, but the ringing goes on and on, unanswered.

The skin on the back of my neck prickles. *Something is wrong.*

"Eamon," I call. In a moment, he's there next to me in a rush of wind.

"What is it?" Eamon asks, frowning. "What's the matter?"

"I can't get a hold of Sarah. Or Rory," I mutter, striding through the abbey with Eamon close at my side. "It might be nothing. Or it might be something."

"Well, you shouldn't go alone," Eamon says, easily keeping up with me. "I'll come along for safety's sake."

"I heard what you said." Sinéad breezes through the corridors and swiftly catches up to us, flanking my other side. "And I'm coming with you."

I spot Fionn and Brody chatting together in the gardens, their discussion

hushed and surrounding the Order of the Lily.

“Tell Mickey I’m off to Sarah’s,” I call to Fionn when he curiously peers at me.

“Everythin’ all right?” Fionn asks, furrowing his brow.

“I don’t know. Rory’s not answering, and neither is she.”

“What’s all the hubbub about?” Sean sidles up alongside Sinéad, who takes a step away from him and gives him a sharp look. He scoffs at her.

“Take it easy, love, I won’t bite unless you ask me to.”

“You can bite yourself and go to hell,” Sinéad retorts. “This doesn’t concern the likes of you.”

“Sure, it does. One of our own is missing, and I remember Rory’s service to me fondly, in my more regal years,” Sean replies with a sniff. “I’ll come along.”

“So will we,” Brody says with urgency, stepping forward with Fionn. “Sarah’s one of us. She always has been.”

I’m overwhelmed by the passion of the people surrounding me. Eamon, though he doesn’t know Sarah well, trusts me implicitly, the most loyal brother-in-arms a man could ask for. Sinéad, too, like a little sister to me, fierce in the defense of her friend. Fionn may be one of Leigh’s staunchest supporters and has butted heads with me a few times in the past, but he understands the importance of bonding with another. Even now, he holds Brody’s hand tightly.

I won’t count Sean Moore among any of them, too driven by serving himself above others. But if he’s to become part of the Brotherhood, perhaps this is a start.

“It could be nothing,” I say again.

“What does your gut tell you?” Sinéad asks.

I’m strung tight, my heart in my stomach. “That it’s not nothing.”

“Then we go and make sure,” she replies. “We’re with you, Cillian, until the end.”

“Thank you.” I nod, emotion thick in my voice. “All of you. Let’s go. Now.”



Even in the sunlight, the day is bitterly cold as we soar over the city together with our wings outstretched, buffeting the winter air beneath our feathers. Sarah’s house is closer to the tavern than the cathedral, but it still doesn’t take us long to arrive. Ten minutes. But it seems like an eternity to me, moving as swiftly as this form will allow. On either side of me are Eamon and Sinéad, with Sean bringing up our rear.

In broad daylight, I can’t exactly nosedive onto her porch and transform back into myself. There are people about outside, children ignoring the calls of their parents to come in and warm up as they enjoy the snow and the freedom from school. Instead, I land in Sarah’s backyard, my raven form shedding away in swirls of gray mist and feathers. The others land with their talons outstretched next to me. A rusted set of swings from her childhood drift lazily on nearby, covered in snow.

All I hear is a radio inside softly playing Christmas music.

“You were right,” Eamon murmurs. “There’s nobody here.”

“Nobody you can sense, anyway,” Sean warns under his breath. “Don’t be so trusting of your eyes and ears when there are Lilymen nearby.”

Testing the doorknob and finding it unlatched, I swing the back door open, stepping cautiously into the kitchen. A tea kettle rests on the counter, a cupboard’s left open, and a porcelain teacup is broken on the floor in the living room.

A low pained moan makes me forget all caution. I surge forward with the others, stiffening when I see Rory on the floor with Sarah’s curtains partially drawn, caught beneath a fishing net. His body is horribly burnt, and wisps of smoke still emanate from him.

Eamon rushes to him with a wild cry of dismay. “Rory!”

“Eamon, wait—” I try to warn, but it’s too late. Eamon reaches for the fishing net only to withdraw his hands sharply with a yelp, his palms bright red and burning. “It’s doused in holy water!”

Teary-eyed and determined, Eamon grabs the net again and tugs. “I—don’t—care!”

I rush to help him, gritting my teeth through the searing pain, and we finally pull it off Rory and cast it to the side. He’s delirious in his agony, barely able to hold himself up. Together, Eamon and I drag him out of the sunlight.

Stricken, Sinéad takes a step back. “I’m going to get Leigh and the druids,” she declares, rushing out the back door and taking flight.

“They took—Sarah, they took her,” Rory rasps. “Took us both by surprise . . .”

“Who did?”

“The hunters.” Rory teeters. “The Lilymen—took my pendant and burned it. Took her and left.” His groan turns into a twisted sob. “My granddaughter.”

A monstrous fury inside me takes hold, and it’s all I can do not to react, tear something, anything apart. “Where?” I demand, unable to quell my rising tone, the desire to shout. “Where is she? Where did they take her?”

“I don’t know,” Rory chokes. “I don’t know.”

“It’s okay,” Eamon urges Rory, helping him stay upright. “Sinéad’s gone to get help. Leigh and the healers will be here soon. You’re going to be grand. You’re all right—”

“Where, Rory?” I roar. “You must’ve heard *something!*”

Eamon snarls at me, eyes flashing red. “He doesn’t know, and he nearly died, for Christ’s sake, Cillian. Calm yourself!”

I pace back and forth across the hardwood floor like a caged tiger, my thoughts all crashing together, trying to make sense of what to do. I can sense

Sarah all around her home, along with the faint scent of strangers—leather, pine, and a too-clean scent that betrays men concerned with appearances. One seems familiar, but I can't place it.

I'm going to lose my mind. Go mad if I don't find her. Fuck me and everything I thought I stood for—what was I doing? Allowing her to get close to me, to the others, when I *knew* it wouldn't end well.

But Eamon's right. Exhaling, I force myself to bow my head, lower myself to the ground and grip his shoulder. "I'm sorry," I breathe. "I'm sorry, Rory."

"How many, old boy?" Sean crouches down to the same level as Rory, his voice soft. "I know it hurts, but try to think."

"Three," Rory whispers. "She . . . knew one."

"Did you catch his name, by any chance?" Sean presses.

"Peter," Rory manages to say. "Blackwood. Peter . . . Blackwood."

I *know* that name.

I whirl to face the others, anchored still, remembering the man who would sometimes call on Sarah, talk with her in her house, even meet up with her for coffee or lunch. It was hard to tether my jealousy, as I didn't want to share even a moment of Sarah's time with another man, whether he be a friend or one who desired something more.

And I think he wanted more. I always suspected it.

But it's the surprise on Sean's face that I don't anticipate. He slowly rises to his feet, muttering to himself and ruffling his blond hair. "Fuck."

"What is it?" I demand.

Sean meets my gaze, no longer jolly or playful. His dour face could outdo his brother's. "Peter Blackwood is a problem. I didn't realize he was the one who came to town. *Fuck*. And the lot of you have been letting him walk freely about Boston—and into your woman's home, no less—without even knowing so much as who he is or what he looks like." He shakes his head. "This is worse than I thought."

“What do you mean?” I ask, but Sean doesn’t answer. I close the distance between us, teeth bared. “I’ve had enough of your secrets, Sean. Tell me. What do you mean?”

“I’ve known of Peter Blackwood since I took the Oath, Darragh,” Sean replies, his nose wrinkled in his own brand of disdain. “And he’s not just a hunter.”

Sean’s words hits me like an arrow between the eyes.

“He’s a Morrigan vampire.”

CHAPTER 15

Suffering Hands



Sarah

My head is pounding when I open my eyes. A cement floor spins beneath my feet as my vision swims, and my limbs feel like dead weight, sluggish and heavy.

Where am I?

Trying to make sense of my bearings, it's difficult in the dark. There's only a single window where light from the fading day streams in, playing upon my face where I'm draped against the wall.

With a soft groan, I look up. My aching wrists are bound in uncomfortable wooden shackles that dig into my skin. I may have been hanging here for hours for how much this hurts. I do my best to move and take some of the weight off my arms. They're numb from being held up for so long. When I shift my legs, I'm met with the sound of grating metal. My ankles are bound too.

"Fuck," I whisper, then call into the shadowy room around me, "Hello? Is anyone there? Help!"

"Save your voice, Sarah."

I jump with fright when I hear Peter Blackwood in the dark amid the occasional clinking of chains. Then he leans forward, and as my eyes grow accustomed to the lack of light, I can make out his silhouette, seated on the ground.

“Where’s Rory?” I demand. “What did you do with him?”

I can’t remember what happened after I named Cillian as High King. One minute I was awake, and the next I wasn’t, the world fading to gray around me. I see flashes in my mind of trees covered in snow above my head, an ever-white sky, the cold nip of flakes against my skin, and the crunching of boots beneath me. Someone was carrying me somewhere.

“Relax,” Peter mutters. “Vampires can’t die from being doused in holy water. It’s a form of torture, nothing more. That net’ll dig into him, and he won’t be able to escape, but he’ll survive. The sunlight is the true danger.”

Anger courses through me. I rattle my bindings. “You—fucking—monster!” I spit. “How could you? I thought you were my friend, and you enter my house, treating my great-grandfather worse than a rabid dog!”

“It was either that, or let the hunters kill him,” Peter replies dryly in his posh accent. Once it was charming. Now it needles me, reminding me of just how stupid I was to trust him. “Which would you have preferred?”

“Let me out,” I demand. “Or you’re going to really get it.”

Peter’s laughter is bitter, empty. “If only that were an option.” He leans as far as he can into the light.

I gasp. There’s some kind of wooden contraption around his neck, one that looks almost medieval, made of oak with a clasp to one side. That’s when I spot oaken bindings around his wrists and ankles. Unlike my bindings, they look like they’re burning him, his flesh black and singed where the wood touches his skin.

“If you haven’t noticed, I’m not really here on holiday.” His eyes are crimson, pupils slitted, and fixated wearily on me.

“I don’t understand,” I whisper, staring at him in shock.

“You’re . . . you’re a vampire, too?”

“I am,” he replies, far calmer than me.

“That’s not possible. Cillian would’ve been able to tell.”

“It’s called a glamor, my dear,” he replies. “It’s a kind of magic deterrent that makes it difficult for vampires to sense our presence. It’s a Lilyman specialty, how we nearly drove them out of Ireland, England.”

“Why?” I ask, incredulous. “Why would you betray your own kind?”

“I don’t *have* a kind,” he retorts, his eyes glowing gold in the shadows. “Do I sound like a filthy Irish pagan to you, singing and dancing and drinking my years away in a tavern?”

I swallow, staring defiantly back at him. “They’re not filthy, Peter.”

Peter scoffs and shakes his head, looking away. I test my bindings. They don’t burn me like they do him. They’re just uncomfortably tight.

“So all those things you said to me, the time we spent together—you were just working me, like some kind of undercover agent? Trying to get close to me, to get information on Cillian’s whereabouts, and the others?”

“Ding-ding-ding,” he replies, monotone and sarcastic. “We have a winner. Aren’t you bright?”

“But why?”

“Don’t be daft,” he says. “You know why. I had a job to do, and you made it easy.”

“I still don’t understand how you could do it. They have you in chains, and you’re doing their dirty work for them. Yet you hunt them? Like animals?” Anger and frustration lace my words. “You kill innocents, women and children, in monasteries?”

“I had nothing to do with that!” he interjects heatedly, his fangs showing when he speaks. “I’ve never once raised a hand against woman or child. I was here in Boston when that happened.”

I study him from a distance. Peter is sullen, resigned, except when he’s arguing with me. “You didn’t agree with that,” I whisper, “did you?”

“Course I didn’t,” Peter replies, staring at the ground. “I never did. I never wanted that, nor to be a part of this. But you can’t escape when your past comes calling. And killing pagan vampires is what I know. It’s what I’m good at.”

“The Order of the Lily uses you? Like a tool?” I ask.

“I have no choice,” he answers. “And I wouldn’t be worried about me at the moment.” He looks around and shifts uncomfortably in the contraption around his neck. “Why did you do it?”

“What?”

“Why’d you lie?” he whispers. “About Cillian? I know he’s not the High King. I’ve been watching the Brotherhood for months. And I know you two are more than mere neighbors. Why did you lie and put him in harm’s way?”

I swallow, unsure of how to answer at first, flexing and rolling my wrists, which pop uncomfortably.

Because he can handle it, I nearly say. Because I know him. I know the way he likes to operate, and he wouldn’t want to put Michael and Leigh in harm’s way. He’d redirect danger to himself, lead it away from the people he loves. He’d be here now in these chains if he could help it, to spare me.

But I can’t admit to anything, paranoid the Lilymen might be listening. Peter knows I’m full of it. But he didn’t say anything to those hunters when I declared Cillian’s name back at my house, when he could’ve confirmed I was lying. He deliberately held back his reservations. Almost like a silent form of defiance. His loyalty isn’t with them completely. Not over me, it seems.

Still, I remain cautious. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I reply. “I’m telling the truth.”

Peter tilts his head like an owl, staring through me. “I hope that bravado of yours lasts, Sarah,” he murmurs. “I really do. Know that I never intended to bring you harm. You’re a good woman. You don’t deserve what you’re getting.”

My heart sinks into my gut. I’m afraid to ask what he thinks I’m getting.

The Order of the Lily had no qualms slaughtering the nuns and children at St. Leonard. Is the same in store for me? Are they really going to kill me?

I could call for the Morrigan, I think desperately. Ask Her for help.

“Morrigan,” I murmur softly under my breath. “If You’re there . . .”

“Don’t bother. This basement is goddess-proof. You can cry out the Morrigan’s name, call to Her, beg and plead, and She won’t hear you. These walls are soaked in holy water and covered in holy Christian symbols that eyes like yours won’t see.”

I exhale. *So much for that plan.* “Don’t pretend like you cared about me.”

“It’s not pretending if it’s true,” Peter answers. “I may have fibbed a little about desiring you romantically—you’re far too young for the likes of me—but I enjoyed our talks.”

“Too young for you?” I peer at him. “We’ll pretend I’m curious and not pissed at you for a second. How old are you supposed to be, exactly?”

“I was thirty-two when I accompanied Cromwell in his vendetta across Ireland,” Peter replies, and when he sees my eyes widen, he smiles ruefully. “That’s right. I make your little Irish vampires look like infants, don’t I?”

Now that he isn’t dressed in a fine suit, smoking cigarettes in first class, or enjoying a lunch with me, I can see the age behind his eyes, in his face. His brow and the corners of his eyes are worn. I never thought to ask him how old he was before, but I figured close to forty, maybe a little older. It never mattered to me. A friend is a friend. But back then, surely someone in their thirties was considered middle-aged, rather than still in their prime. I try to do the math in my head. He’s at least three hundred and fifty years old.

Older than Cillian, Michael, Rory. Older than the Moore brothers too.

“If you’re so ancient and wise,” I reply, “tell me why you’re not on our side.”

“Nobody’s ever been on my side,” Peter says. “So why should I be on yours?”

Determined to help him see sense, I open my mouth to argue. Then the

door at the far end of the cellar opens with a long, unsettling creak.

Three men step into view, wearing long elegant white robes and gold sashes around their waists, heavy crucifixes slung around their necks. I recognize the younger two as the men who were in my house before, torturing Rory with that net doused in holy water. They wear white hats that are nearly berets but not quite, pinned with white lilies. If I didn't know any better, I might've mistaken them for priests. But they're armed with crossbows, long oakwood spears carved with deadly iron hooks, and holsters fitted with pistols that look as though they come from another age.

"Sarah McCready," the eldest of these three rumbles in a voice worn from speaking too much. He's easily in his fifties or sixties with bright white hair, neatly combed and pulled out of his face. In this place, faced with him and two other hunters, it no longer feels like I'm in my own era. It's like I've gone back to medieval times, and that disconcerts me because that time was shit for women.

And I have a feeling this is about to turn into a nightmare.

"Have you anything to say for yourself, Miss McCready?" the man asks. He's British, like Peter. Well-spoken, well-educated.

"Let me go, or you'll be sorry," I snap, wondering where the hell this guy gets off chastising me like a child. "How's that?"

He doesn't think I'm funny. No smile. His mouth barely twitches in a frown. "Where is Cillian Darragh?"

"At the intersection of Fuck You and Shove It Up Your Ass," I retort.

"If I have to ask again, it won't be pleasant for you," he replies. "Do you know who I am?"

"You're a Lilyman," I reply. "Synonymous with murderer."

One of his associates storms over to me and backhands me so hard stars swim in my vision. "Fenian whore."

My head lolls forward as I try to focus on the spinning floor. "Now there's a real man," I mumble under my breath, sarcasm dripping from my

every word. My face stings from where he struck me. “Kidnapping a woman, slapping her around. Cromwell would be so proud. Oh, and work on your insults. I’m like, fourth generation here. I don’t know what the hell a *Fenian* is.”

The man lifts his hand to hit me again.

“That’s enough, Mr. Edevane,” says the one in charge, unfazed by my baiting. His expression is stone, but there’s fire behind his eyes. Loathing. “What is your relationship with the High King?”

I have to remind myself he means Cillian. “Barely know the guy.”

“You’ve been spotted in his company often.”

“If you already know, then why are you asking?”

The man’s eyes are hard, like there’s little in the way of humanity behind them. But—no, it’s there. I can see him getting irritable with me behind his chilly veneer. It shouldn’t surprise me. Humanity doesn’t always equate to kindness or compassion or the ability to have a civil conversation.

This man views *me* as subhuman. Inferior to him. Maybe I should watch my mouth, but I’m too pissed off to try to reason with anyone.

“You will tell us where he is, or you will pay for your silence in blood.”

My body suddenly feels cold. He’s not bluffing. He means every word.

“She’s not his keeper, William,” Peter pipes up, sounding calm, almost respectful, but urgent. “She’s telling the truth. I can tell.”

Peter sells his bold-faced lie well, and I don’t let it show on my face that it affects me, the way he’s trying to help me somehow. Despite all this, he’s on my side. Regardless, it doesn’t help.

“When I want the opinion of you, dog, I’ll ask for it,” William says curtly.

Peter clenches his jaw and lowers his head. I wish I was out of these chains. I don’t have weapons, or fangs, but God, I want to rip into them for treating Peter this way. “Don’t talk to him like that!”

They ignore my demand for respect. “You will tell us everything, Sarah

McCready.” He motions to his companions. “Take her to the chair.”

Edevane unclasps my bindings, and I take the opportunity to struggle. I hit him in the nose, getting him back for when he slapped me, and when William calls for assistance, two more men swiftly join the other two to stop me. I do all I can—biting and clawing until I’m painfully restrained by the four of them.

“Let me go!” I snarl, wiggling then making myself limp so they have to drag my feet across the cold floor. “Let me go, you fuckers!”

“Don’t fight them, Sarah! Please! Give them what they want!” Peter calls, his voice faint as the door shuts. Almost like he has concern for me and my welfare, but I don’t know who to trust anymore.



Minutes feel like years. Sounds, words, have no meaning. My eyes play tricks on me. Something lingers in the shadows beyond my peripheral vision, but I don’t know what it is.

My voice is gone, and I’m delirious with pain.

I can’t recount everything the Lilymen did to me. I don’t want to think about it or replay it in my head. I was scared they might violate me the more I refused to talk, but those men aren’t interested in what’s between my legs. Their crusade transcends lust, and that was my only comfort.

Body trembling, they drag me like a ragdoll back to the cellar, roughly and without any care. They chain me up again and leave me to hang there as I struggle to stay conscious.

“Sarah.” Peter’s voice is near, and yet so far away, muted in my ears. “Look at me. Sarah!”

I can’t look anywhere. I can’t focus on anything long enough. Everything is blurred shadows.

“Oh, god,” Peter murmurs. “Your fingers . . . ”

Fingers? That's right. They interrogated me. Went for my nails first.

I try to swallow, but my mouth is dry from screaming. I stare at my bloodied fingertips and manage a small whimper. “I didn’t—I didn’t tell them anything.”

They wanted to know all the names of every person in the Brotherhood. Their locations. The locations of monasteries like St. Leonard, St. Kateri, and St. Damian and others I can’t exactly remember. They wanted Cezar. They must have asked me about him a hundred times, and they grew angry when I wouldn’t say where he was. They even asked about Hecatēi and other things, words I didn’t recognize and don’t know how to spell, so I didn’t know what they were talking about.

But what chilled me most was their specific demands about the female vampires. Finding their “nests,” they called it. To kill them first, probably. Anger the men so that they make mistakes. And I didn’t say a single word.

I only screamed.

Peter’s voice is clearer now. I can focus on it instead of lapsing into nothing. He exhales. “If you’d only tell them, they’d set you free. You’re not like me. If you convince them you’re capable of being saved, if you repent, they might take you home.”

He doesn’t believe his words even as he speaks them. Even if it were the truth, I could never betray the Brotherhood. Their faces are all permanently etched in my memory—Cillian, Rory, Sinéad, Leigh, Michael, Brody, Eamon, Brigid’s Boys, Mannoek Tavern. How could I let them down?

All I did was scream. Scream myself hoarse until I couldn’t anymore.

“Why do you care?” I ask in a weak voice. “What did you think would happen when you brought me to them? What could your intentions be beyond this?”

“I never meant you any harm from the beginning, Sarah,” Peter replies somberly. “But the sieges against St. Kateri and St. Damian failed. The Order’s leadership needed some kind of victory. And they believe Boston and

the Morrigan vampires are the weakest.”

“Why?” I whisper.

“Because they don’t feed from people,” Peter admits. “Feeding from the source naturally makes a vampire stronger. Faster, better. But they’ve an entire system of blood donation to never harm a human being.”

“Why would that make the Order hate them? Wouldn’t that endear them somehow?” I rasp.

“I wish it did,” Peter says quietly. “But they can’t have that kind of moral dilemma on their hands either. Not when generations upon generations have been taught their kind are little more than soulless monsters, bound to a pagan goddess.”

It’s Peter’s voice alone that keeps me conscious. I’m afraid to fall asleep. “But you’re one of them,” I mumble, head lolling as I’m tempted to shut my eyes. “Why?”

Peter sighs. “I don’t have a choice. They’ve marked me.” He makes a jerking motion with his head toward his shoulder, wincing. “It’s their idea of redemption. A mark of the cross that’s enchanted. I must obey their orders when they give them, regardless of whether I wish to. It bars any communication with the Morrigan. I cannot ask for Her help or speak of Her to those who do not know.”

“You took the Oath?” I hate the Lilymen more. Peter could’ve been with the Brotherhood the entire time. He could’ve been surrounded by friends, happy, watched over. Michael wouldn’t have turned him away, surely, if he knew that none of this was Peter’s choice. My mind swims. Even Cillian . . .

“Centuries ago,” Peter breathes. “Rest, Sarah. You’re going to need it.”



Tracking time becomes difficult for me, then impossible. When I try to rest, I have no idea how long I’ve had my eyes shut. Over and over again, the

Lilymen take me out of the cellar, cover my head with a burlap sack, and drag me to a separate room where they strap me to a chair.

I learn their names. Robert Edevane is the one who delights in beating me. William Wright appears to be an officer or a leader of some kind; everyone listens to him, and he oversees most of my interrogation. There's a man named Phillip; another, James. But not all of them bother with me, and from what I can tell, there are at least a dozen here in this place.

They demand, again, to know where Cillian is. Their intel is outdated, ending with Sean Moore. Peter's reconnaissance has given them some clues, but little substance. They know the Mannock is a gathering place, but they can't risk storming it outright. Determined to pick the vampires off, one by one, they order me to tell them where his lieutenants are. *Who* they are. William doesn't seem entirely convinced it is Cillian, still intent upon Michael. At the very least, I've sown a small seed of doubt.

They return to the same questions—how many there are in the Brotherhood. Where they're located. They shout and snarl at me when I answer I don't know. They bust my lip with a backhand or pummel my hungry stomach until I can't breathe. They slip my fingers into a wooden contraption that looks medieval; the witch-breaker, they call it. Grasping a metal rod, they twist and twist until they crush my fingers between the two wood boards.

Other times, they douse my head in a pail of water and hold it there until I nearly drown. When I come up, they ask me questions again, but I can only beg for them to stop, sobbing.

I say nothing. The urge to break is always there, and I'm on the precipice, but I latch on to the faces of my friends, and I don't give them away. When I'm close to passing out, they remove me and put me back into the cellar.

I made the mistake of uttering Her name once. When I lost count of how many times they questioned me, tortured me, I whispered for Her.

Enraged, they beat me. I tasted my own blood in my mouth. She wasn't

there. I hoped for Her, wished for Her, silently begged that She see me.

Yet I felt no presence. Nothing at all that would cause me to believe She bore witness to my pain and degradation.

When the Lilymen bring me back, I hear Peter weeping softly for me.

“How long has it been?” I ask weakly. “A day? Two days?”

“Three,” he answers miserably. “You’re going to die soon, Sarah, if this continues. *Please*, cooperate.”

My eyes are so swollen I can barely see.

They leave me in there for two days without food, and only offer me a pail to relieve myself in and a ladle of water to drink. The hunter assigned to attend to me is so young. Sixteen, seventeen at most, wiry with a mop of blond hair. A hunter’s son, perhaps.

“Please,” I whisper to him as he gives me water. “Set me free.”

His youthful expression hardens into something stern. “You did this to yourself, witch. Death is your mercy. It’s the only way we can save you from the clutches of your pagan devils.”

My heart sinks. I’ve been holding out hope that the Brotherhood will arrive, that Cillian will come from me. But with each new fervent attempt to rip any and all knowledge from me, the dimmer things become.

Now I know they mean to kill me.

I lie motionless as the young hunter walks away, staring at the floor. I listen as he similarly feeds Peter a minuscule amount of blood, though there’s clearly trepidation in him, getting up close to something he was only ever meant to kill.

I don’t speak until after our little prison guard is gone. He leaves the keys to our shackles hanging up on pegs on the far wall. A way to taunt Peter. If he tries for them, the contraption around his neck causes him great pain. He can only stare at freedom, out of reach.

“Tell me about when you took the Oath, Peter.” I slump against the wall behind me, the stone cold against my back. “Please.”

It's hard for me to see. My face is bludgeoned, and Peter's voice is the only comfort I have in this place that I'm still alive and fighting when they all expect me to fold.

Peter doesn't answer at first. Then he heaves a long sigh. "It was shortly after we burned Drogheda." His voice is weary, forlorn, like he's been fighting for far too long and yearns for sleep. "And I couldn't stomach all we'd done. Everyone laughing, sneering, mocking the priests and friars crying out in St. Peter's church while they burned alive. I thought Catholics were wicked, with their pagan teachings, far detached from the pure vision of the true God." His shackles scrape against the floor.

"I remember hearing about that," I murmur. "Why'd you hate them so much?"

Peter scoffs. "Hate is an easy thing. Many innocent Protestants had been murdered years earlier in a Catholic uprising. It enraged me in those days when I thought about it. It was how we justified our ruthlessness. It was revenge. And I thought I wanted it too, but—those were peaceful men. And they didn't deserve what they got." Peter's words are thick with regret. "So many innocent people dead. And for what?"

"What did you do?"

"I couldn't live with myself," Peter answered. "I fled Cromwell's army, but my home was far away across the channel, and I didn't know the landscape. I got lost, wandered in circles. Dressed the way I was, not a single farmer would dare lift a hand to help me. Except one. He was an old shepherd, tending his flock with his dog. He gave me what little food and drink he had. His accent was so thick it was hard to understand him at times, but he shared stories with me over a fire, old tales and myths. He told me about Her, about the Morrigan and Her immortal soldiers."

I hang on to his every word, allowing his story to transport me away.

"But the enemy was behind me. When the sun rose, the cavalry spotted us. They killed the shepherd and his dog and dragged me back. They declared

me a godless traitor. They flung a noose over a tree and hung me there without bothering to try to break my neck. They let me choke under my own weight. But not before . . .”

“Not before you spoke Her name,” I finish for him.

Peter nods. “I did it. God forgive me. I uttered Her name before I died. Time stopped. She came to me. She freed me from the rope. All I had to do was bend the knee. And when I returned, I was filled with a desire for vengeance. They thought they were being attacked by wolves that night, the cavalry I slew and feasted upon.” His laugh is bitter. “If only they knew.”

“And now you’re with the hunters hellbent on finishing what Cromwell started,” I mutter.

His grimace reveals his fangs. “They caught me in 1841. I’d become bold, feeding upon landowners instead of the farming poor. The peasants were starving, you see. Potato crops all rotten. Not much blood to be had, when they could eat little more than grass or the leather of their shoes, if they had any. The Lilymen caught me, branded me with the cross, made me susceptible to their every command. They sent me to America to hunt—Irish, Sicilian, Greek, Creole. It didn’t matter. I was good at tracking and killing many.”

“If you’re unable to disobey, why chain you the way they have?”

Peter shrugs. “Allowing me to board a plane, wear nice clothes and operate alone reminded me of my own dignity. They couldn’t have that, I suppose. I’m used to it by now.”

My mind is far away, thinking about his tale, how isolated and alone Peter must’ve felt for hundreds of years. I think of Ireland. I’ve never been there. I would’ve liked to visit it someday, when I had the means, to see where my family came from. Will I ever see it now? Will I ever see Cillian and my friends again?

Get up, Sarah. I can’t let such bleakness defeat me. I can’t give up. Not now. Not after hearing all this.

“Well.” Grunting, I push myself up as best I can, peering up at my bindings. “I’m not.”

“Sarah? What are you doing?”

My fingers are ruined. Shattered, smashed, I don’t know how many bones are broken. I grit my teeth. “Nobody’s coming for you or me. And I won’t last much longer like this. I’m getting us *both* out of here.”

“You can’t,” Peter hisses, bewildered. “Sarah—”

“You are probably one of the most powerful vampires in existence,” I retort, keeping my voice low. “Aren’t you sick and tired of taking their orders? If we can get away from here, they can’t order you around. And if we can get to St. Winifred, I’ll bet the druids there can do something about that brand.”

“It doesn’t work that way,” he says as I tug at my left binding, then my right, testing both. The left side seems weaker. “They’ve ordered me to fight for the Order of the Lily. I can’t do anything else even if I escape. To hunt others like myself—it’s an impulse I can’t help. I’ll always do it. Even if I’m far from other Lilymen. Their commands still reign. Regardless, they’ve confiscated my trinkets. I cannot day-walk.”

“Just tell me where they’d put them. I’ll get them for you.” Working myself up and simultaneously steeling myself for another bout of unfathomable pain, I look at him. “If I set myself free and get you out of that thing, are you going to put me back in chains?”

Peter gazes at me, then shakes his head. “No. It’s not so specific. But—”

“That’s all I need to know.” I slip my left hand through the cuff, gritting my teeth so hard to stifle my own shout of agony that my jaw aches.

If I’m going to die anyway, I might as well try and go down fighting.

I pull at my other cuff, stretching myself through the same blinding pain as far as I can reach with my mutilated hand for the far wall where the keys to my chains hang on wooden pegs. I manage to knock the keys to the floor and drag them toward me. I struggle for endless minutes to get the key into my

right cuff with my swollen fingers. Each second that passes by makes my stomach somersault.

If someone walked in right now . . .

With a click, my wooden binding comes free, and I'm able to take the key with my less damaged hand and free both my ankles. I stagger freely toward Peter. I haven't walked once on my own since arriving here. My legs are weak. "Here."

Trembling, I get his neck out from the contraption that holds him rigid, wincing when I see it's made with spikes that literally pierce his neck. If he tried to struggle out of it, it would only cause him pain. Or perhaps sever his head from his body. Is that how one kills a vampire?

"They're monsters," I whisper. "All of them."

Peter growls under his breath, taking the key from my shaking hands. "Someone's coming. You must hide. Quickly!"

I nearly trip and fall in my attempt to move toward the door, ducking between the wall and a tall utility shelf. Fearing someone might hear me breathing, I cover my mouth, tears in my eyes. My fingers are so swollen. There are tools I could use to defend myself, but I can't grasp them.

The cellar door lock unlatches swings open. My heart thunders.

It's James, one of the men responsible for netting Rory in my living room.

His eyes widen when he sees our empty chains. He opens his mouth as though to shout for the others, but in a whirl of movement and wind, Peter descends upon him and snaps his neck with one savage twist. He drags the man inside and shuts the door softly.

"We have only moments." Peter's voice is low, guttural, like he's fighting within himself. "Forget my talismans. The night was my ally for hundreds of years before I gained them. You need to run."

"Come with me," I whisper. I'm scared I won't make it if he doesn't. I can barely stand as it is.

“I can’t in my current state. My urges will only hinder you, and if we are seen, one command from them—I don’t want to hurt you, Sarah.” When Peter lifts his gaze to me, his eyes are churning storms of crimson and gold. When he opens his mouth, his fangs are prominent.

“Peter, please. I need you.” I choke on the words. “I can’t do this alone.”

“You can. You must. Go.” He sounds more beast than man. “Go now. And stay out of sight. *Go*,” he insists, and when he moves, I flinch, worried he might lunge at me. Instead, he descends upon the fallen man and sinks his teeth deep into his throat, drinking deep and without restraint.

I open the door and slink into what lies beyond it, trying to make sense of where I am. The walls are lined with weapons of all kinds and makes, from guns and ammunition boxes labeled *silver* and *wolfsbane*, to crossbows, bows and arrows, axes, blades. Entire centuries lay mounted upon these walls, and I have no skill with any of them.

Except a pistol.

My hands are ruined, but maybe with pressure I could pull a trigger if I needed to. But how to even load it with bullets? *Fuck, I hate this*. Peter was right.

I just need to get out.

I continue down the hall of weaponry to wooden stairs that lead upwards. Each step is torment. I fear I’ll be caught and thrown right back into that cellar every time the stairwell creaks under my weight, but I press on, praying to God.

But then with a soft breath, I stop. I’ve said Hail Marys and Lord’s Prayers my entire life. I need something else.

Someone else.

Filled with fear and hope, I speak to the Morrigan.

“I want to take the Oath,” I whisper to Her as I do my best to press forward. “Please help me escape from these people. *Please*. I know I’m just a waitress, and You’re a goddess. Far above me. To You, I’m nothing. No one.

But I'll fight for You with everything I've got. Just please help me return to the people I love."

I feel nothing. Not like the vampires do. There's no tingle through my body, no shiver or crawling sensation I'm being watched. The words I speak, even with my raw, rasping throat, dissipate into nothingness. I do what I can to revitalize the last remnants of my determination. I don't want to die. I want to live. On my terms. If wicked men like the Order of the Lily exist, I want to be stronger, fiercer. I want to protect the people I love from them. I can't do that in my current state.

I turn a corner and spot a man in white and gold robes walking by with a companion, armed to the teeth. Watchers, maybe. Or are they preparing for something?

I don't know, and I can't linger. *Keep going, Sarah.*

I spot a door on the other side of what appears to be a foyer. In the hall there are rows of doors. This place is larger than I thought, and I don't know where to go from here. But if I hesitate, I increase the chances of getting caught.

I spot a sign on the wall: *Sunnyside Senior Living.*

Wait—is this an old retirement home? I think I've heard this name in the news. I could've sworn it was shut down years ago. Perhaps that makes it the perfect place for an order like theirs.

Crouched down, I make my way as fast as I can down a corridor. When I hear approaching voices around another corner, I duck into a slightly ajar side room, press my back to the wall, and wait them out.

I wish my heart would stop beating so hard. I'm scared they'll hear it.

Just a little farther, I think when the coast seems clear and continue on. I spot a somewhat aged exit sign with an arrow mounted on the ceiling above me. *Just a little more.*

But someone grabs a handful of my hair and yanks me backward with force. Letting out a cry, I slam to the ground hard on my shoulder, wincing as

two Lilymen stand over me.

“Persistent,” William Wright rumbles, his thin mouth unimpressed and unforgiving. “But weak.”

“James Holton is dead, sir,” a Lilyman calls from far down the corridor. “Blackwood is gone. There’s no sign of him!”

“Unfortunate.” William’s fury is muted. This all seems like little more than an inconvenience to him.

I’m picked up by a set of strong arms, weeping. I was so close. I was almost out, and then what? I should’ve stayed with Peter. I have no shoes. There’s snow on the ground. Would I have lasted out there?

Isn’t it better than the alternative?

“Shall I take her to the cellar again, my lord?”

“No,” William Wright replies, peering at me. “She has outlived her usefulness. It is time we demonstrate God’s mercy and release her from the pagan shackles that bind her to hell.”

“Sir?”

There is no mercy in his response. “Fire is how we deal with witches, my friend. Bring her to the pyre.”

My heart pounds, mind reeling through images from history books, depictions of women being tied to stakes and burned alive for witchcraft and devil-worship. None of it feels historical or far away. Not anymore. I kick and struggle, but it’s no use.

Cillian, I implore silently, desperately as my hopes are swiftly getting snuffed out by the promise of an end, sacrificed to flame and darkness.

Where are you?

CHAPTER 16

Under Siege



Cillian

“I’m not waiting another day,” I snarl, pacing back and forth in front of Michael and Leigh. “You have no idea what they might be doing to her. I don’t care if Cezar is not yet here. I won’t wait another second!”

Beyond reasoning—that’s where I am. It’s a miracle I haven’t launched myself across the room, taken my best friend by the scruff of his coat, and shaken him. With the help of my brethren, the entirety of the Brotherhood combed those northern woods for seventy-two hours. Every cabin, every lake house, every dilapidated, abandoned storage shed was checked for signs of Sarah.

It was Sean who found them barely an hour ago. Despite my reservations about—well, everything to do with him, he never faltered, relentless in his determination to hunt them down. He enjoys it, the promise of battle. I can see it in his face.

From what we can gather, it’s a small cell of Lilymen, and by no means their primary force, all hunkered down in a closed-up retirement home on the banks of a lake frozen for winter. I haven’t rested. I will *never* rest. I’ve

ignored my thirst ever since discovering her missing, making me all the more irritable.

“We have to come at them full force, Cillian. And if they’re using magick, they may make portals to other locations to bolster themselves with reinforcements. We need stronger soldiers here for this assault,” Michael reasons.

I know he’s right, but I hate it. “She could be *dying*.”

“They won’t kill her when she knows so much,” Leigh tries to reassure me, but it does little to quell my anger. “She’s too valuable to kill. We have lookouts posted every hour of every day, Cillian. We need to have patience here.”

“Don’t talk to me about patience!” I snap. Despite Michael’s hackles rising at me addressing his wife in such a way, I drive on furiously. “If Leigh had been in there when she was a human, would you wait? If Mickey was taken prisoner, would you *ever* fucking wait? How can you ask this of me?”

Leigh clamps her mouth shut, and Michael sighs softly. “Cillian—”

“Do what you want. But I’m not waiting.” I whirl on my heel and stalk away. “I lost one woman I loved. I’m not losing another.”

I storm out of the abbey and into St. Winifred’s open courtyard, greeted with snow and wisps of my breath. My shoulders heave.

“Bravo, mate,” Sean croons from where he sits perched on a nearby stair ledge, unbothered by the snow that keeps on falling, like it’s been doing for days. He claps his hands together slowly. “Tellin’ them to shove it where it hurts.”

I’m not in the mood for his banter, trying to make sense of my own thoughts and emotions and make a plan somehow. “You’ve made it clear you only care about yourself, Sean, so do what you do best and fuck off.”

“You wound me, Darragh.” Sean clutches his hand over his heart, hopping down into a snowbank then trudging onto the cobblestone path, blanketed with white. “I happen to agree with you. Waiting for the Spaniard

isn't something we can afford. Whatever his hold up is, the girl is in danger. I know all too well what the Lilymen do to their prisoners."

I'm about ready to tear out his throat for what sounds to me like mockery. But he holds up his hands. "The question is—what are you going to do about it?"

Seething, I try to control my breath. When I adjust the cuffs of my coat, I notice my hands are turning ashen. I can't keep forgoing my need to feed. The longer I go without blood, the more I'll weaken and eventually shrivel up. But my ability to drink is now linked to Sarah. I can barely stomach the thought of another's essence on my lips.

"I don't give a damn what the rest of you do," I growl. "I'm going to get her. And I'm going to get her *now*."

Sean's face brightens with a wicked, triumphant smile. "There's a good lad." He claps my shoulder hard with merry laughter. "Let's go kill some fuckin' Lily cunts."

"Not without us."

I turn, shocked when I see Michael, Leigh, Rory, Desmond, Eamon, Sinéad, and all the others turning out, filing from the priest's office and the abbey to join me near the sleeping fountain.

"You're right," Michael assents. "Time is of the essence. And we can't wait any longer for Cezar. We'll have to make do with what we've got."

"And you've got us." Thomas Coffey steps forward, his priest cassock billowing in the breeze. Joe Brown stands beside him, three other druids behind them. "Whatever god or goddess the Order of the Lily serves, they'll have to contend with ours. If not the Morrigan, then they'll answer to Our Father for their atrocities. They're bound for hell, either way."

A roar of agreement is taken up by my brethren, clamoring around me, stoking their bloodlust.

Michael places his hand on my shoulder. "You were always the commander, Cillian. The first to charge, and the last back. You protected me.

Kept me alive. You fought harder and with more heart than ten of me. Will you lead us in this? Drive these trespassers, these murderers, from our shores?”

I offer him my hand, my heart lifting. “Only if you’re with me, brother.”

“Every fucking inch of the way.” Michael’s teeth gleam. He bellows across the courtyard, “To arms, lads! Let’s show these hunters what it’s like to be hunted!”

“About fucking time!” Sean is the first to transform, taking to the air as a crow while the others quickly follow suit. Before long a large murder of crows circles the cathedral.

“Tommie, you’ll fly with me,” I say to the archdruid.

“With pleasure, Mr. Darragh.”

Tommie’s hands crackle and snap with light. He issues an order to the others in Gaeilge, and they similarly begin to conjure. He and the other druids shrink, smaller and smaller, giving life to the legends and myths older than Merlin of druids being able to change their shapes. I change from man to bird, hopping in the snow and extending my wing to him.

“Never ridden a vampire before.” Thomas Coffey clambers upon my back until he sits between my wings. “Don’t drop me, now.”

When I feel his hands gripping my feathers, and I’m certain he’s secure, I lift into the air. Sean carries Joe similarly. Michael, Leigh, and Sinéad take the other three.

Determination renewed, I silently will Tommie to hang on tightly to me as I furiously beat my wings, taking lead at the front of the murder. They flank me quickly, banking left with me around the cathedral tower.

I’m coming, Sarah.



Sarah

Night has fallen. The cold bites at my bare feet, but that won't matter in a short time. My arms and legs ache. I've been tied to the tall round stake behind me for only a few minutes, slouched as I watch several members of the Order come and go, carrying bundles of firewood and arranging them in a circle around me.

I could beg, plead, ask them to reconsider. Give them false information. Straightening against the stake, I tilt my chin up and breathe in the cold air deeply.

I will not give them any more satisfaction than they've already taken from me.

I'm not sure where this bravery is coming from, but if this is how I die, so be it. I wanted more time. Time with Cillian, with Rory. The others. I wanted to get used to the idea of living forever and what it might mean. I was looking forward to becoming eternal, of proving myself as a worthy warrior. Even though I've never been a soldier or a combatant, I was ready and willing to learn so that I could properly protect my friends, my family. I was so sure I could prove myself.

I would have remained with Cillian until the end of days. Worked to cherish and build our bond, so that our love would grow stronger. Rory said he'd never stay in Boston, not permanently, but after being held captive, what do I care if he wanted to return to Ireland?

That's when I accept it, wholly and completely. If he left Boston, if he went anywhere, I would've gone with him. I'd follow him to the ends of the world. If war is all he knows, if it's something he'll always return to, then I'll grow accustomed to and ready for war.

Every battalion needs music to guide it onto the field. Pipes, drums, song. That could've been me.

This is my first taste of what war is like. Torture. Pain. Fear. I've done nothing to deserve this, but it's been wrought upon me, the horrors of it

embedded into my flesh, my bones. Despite everything, I've endured. Hoped and waited for reinforcements that haven't come.

My prayers to the Morrigan have gone unanswered. There's nothing for me here. No luxury to daydream about possibilities.

I am truly alone.

"Gag her," William Wright orders, overseeing the pyre being built. "She mustn't be able to call upon the Morrigan in her death throes."

I glare at him, my mouth twisting in a snarl as one of the Lilymen comes around behind me to tie a band of cloth in my mouth.

"You asshole! No! No! N—" I turn my head to avoid it, but it's forced into my mouth, muffling my screams.

"No!"

The roar comes from somewhere else. A body blurs as it collides at high speed with the man gagging me, sending him flying into a tree where he crumples to the ground.

"Do not touch her," Peter Blackwood snarls, hunched over and glowering at William as he loosens the gag from my mouth. "She is innocent!"

Peter. He's still here. He could've escaped, gotten as far away from this place as he could, so at least he wouldn't be chained or abused the way he has been. Maybe he would've still hunted, but the Morrigan vampires are smart. Perhaps in time, they would've caught him, made sense of the mark on his shoulder.

Instead, he's here for me. And while I'm grateful, defending me only means he'll be returning to the cage they keep him in. A noble fruitless gesture, done for my sake.

I wish I had druid magick or some way to free him. But neither of us are much help to the other.

"Blackwood," William bellows. "You cannot disobey me. You will be silent. Stand aside!"

Peter goes rigid, loathing in his face as he has no choice but to do as

William says while another hunter douses a portion of the firewood with splashes of gasoline from a can. The smell of it burns my nose. I don't have the strength to struggle anymore. Instead, my mind wanders to the Morrigan, to God, to everything I've known my whole life and what I've come to learn this past month from the Brotherhood. I'm not certain there's any hope for me left that I can muster or cling to.

I hope someone up there greets me as a friend, I consider bleakly. I hope everyone knows I tried.

One match, and the flames lick up along the wood, smoke billowing into the air.

“At least allow her to speak her last words, for pity's sake!” Peter cries. “Even the worst of criminals over the ages have been allowed that dignity.”

William pauses, contemplative, then nods. “Be ready to stake her if she turns,” he says to Robert Edevane, who looks all too happy to be given such a job as he comes to pull my gag down. “Say your final words, witch. Beg for redemption. Repent! Implore our Heavenly Father for forgiveness.”

I can't help myself. I snort. Then I start to chuckle, which turns into a full-bodied laugh, loud and merry. Maybe it's happened. Maybe I've finally cracked.

They stare at me in confusion, William demanding, “Demon spawn! You dare mock the Grace of God!”

“I'm not laughing at God,” I manage, trying to calm myself. I'm somewhere between fear and resignation. I can feel the heat beginning to crawl toward my toes. “I'm laughing at *you*.”

William's jaw juts out. He hates me for every reason imaginable—I'm descended from a long line of Irish Catholics. I'm a woman. I'm a friend to vampires. He may burn me alive, but I'll have the last word.

I glance from him to Robert Edevane. “You asked me where Cillian Darragh is. He lives right in the house next to me. Peter never told you that, did he? He knew. You could've laid a trap, brought me home to wait for

Cillian there. But you didn't. Peter didn't *let* you."

Peter remains standing where he is, glowering at the Lilymen with intense hatred, satisfaction glinting in his eyes when they recognize their control over him only allows for so much, so far. I want to make them afraid, as frightened and unsure as they made me feel.

"And when my Cillian finds out what you've done me?" The smoke makes my eyes water, but it can't wipe the smile off my face. "Guess what happens to you?" I'm staring directly at Edevane. "Especially you, asshole."

Edevane bristles, loading a bolt into a crossbow. He aims it at me, and I exhale, tensing as I prepare for the arrow.

"The Morrigan, Goddess of War, Mothers, and Maidens," I whisper, even as my heart sinks. I know She can't hear me. "Please accept me into Your army—" I squeeze my eyes shut as the gag is forced upon me by another hunter somewhere behind me. I swallow my fear. But the bolt never comes.

Edevane yowls.

I open my eyes just as the crossbow burns his hands. He drops the scalding weapon, and it sizzles as it lies armed in the snow.

My breath is robbed from me as I stare up at the approach of dozens of crows, diving down over the frozen lake. I must be imagining things—but no. Tiny figures leap off the backs of several of the crows and change in size, from small and faerie-like to full-grown men dressed in black cassocks and high white collars.

Bishop Thomas Coffey, the Archdruid of St. Winifred, bellows in Irish even as the gathered Lilymen scramble. His druids take cover behind trees and cast spells that travel through the air like green lightning, knocking hunters off their feet.

Snow envelops me, whirling around me like water and dousing the fires that nearly claimed my feet. Druid magick. It must be. Coughing, I watch in amazement as the crows change in shimmering gray mists from animal to man.

Cillian stalks across the frozen lake, his face the color of ash, crimson eyes aglow as he sets his gaze upon me. *He's here*, I think in weary relief. *He came for me*. I want to speak, to cry out for him, let tears flow freely, but I have none left to shed. My hope soars. I'll be free. I'll be safe. The life I imagined with him is no longer a dream. There's still a chance.

Shock registers on his face at the sight of me—my bruised face, my ruined hands. His body shakes. He's incensed, roaring as his brothers and sisters land beside him. He charges forward, and they surge along with him, following his lead and wielding nothing but their fangs, hands, and a unified battle cry.

William panics, calling to the others as they fall back to their compound. "To the armory! Send word to the High Inquisitor, summon the rest—take them down! Blackwood, kill them! Kill them all!"

Windows slide open. Wooden bullets and rowan arrows begin to fly. Desmond Moore lands on the rooftop and swings down into one with a shattering of glass.

Men scream.

My pulse pounds in my ears as I wiggle and writhe until I manage to get the gag out of my mouth, gulping down deep breaths of bitterly cold air. *Hurry. Hurry!* I need to get off this pyre.

A stray bullet whizzes by my head, nicking my hair. Cillian snarls and takes down a Lilyman, ripping out his throat and drinking deep.

"Please don't," I beg softly to Peter as he takes his place in front of me, shoulders bunched and teeth bared. His face is twisted with sorrow and frustration. "Don't hurt them!"

"I don't have a choice, Sarah," Peter hisses. "I'm sorry."

Color returns to Cillian's skin. He is vibrant, renewed, not unlike how it was when he drank from me. His face is one of disgust, and he nearly wretches, even as the body of the Lilyman twitches in its death throes beneath him. When he rises to his feet, red stains his mouth, and another snarl

rumbles in his throat as he faces Peter.

“I’ll kill you, Darragh,” Peter growls. “Don’t try it.”

“He doesn’t have to.” Sean lands next to him and extends his arms, taunting. “Been a long time, hasn’t it, Blackwood, old chum?” He mocks his British accent.

Peter’s eyes flash, and he scoffs. “You’re not nearly old enough to be addressing me, Moore.”

“You won’t be wiping the floor with me this time, boyo.” Sean plants his legs apart, grinning like a demon. “Come on, then!”

The men charge each other and collide. When Peter strikes Sean, Sean goes flying through the air, flipping backward, and lands on his feet. He skids across the ice with a snarl and hits the trunk of a tree so hard it cracks.

Sean shakes himself out of his stupor and laughs. “Now it’s a real fight.” He sprints forward again as Cillian lunges.

Peter blocks his blows with ease, almost like they’re dancing, not fighting.

“Fight their control, Peter, please! Don’t hurt them!”

He either can’t hear me or ignores me as Cillian’s aggression makes it impossible for him to show mercy. Fury is painted across his face.

“I’m getting tired of you Fenians sprouting up everywhere I go.” Peter gnashes his teeth, more monster than man.

Cillian lacks Peter’s smooth precise strikes, and in his determination to hit him, blow after blow, he overextends himself. Peter takes advantage of the opening, grabbing him by the throat.

“Well, you’d better get fucking used to it,” Cillian sneers. “We’re not going anywhere.”

Peter throws him back as Sean catapults himself at Peter’s stomach and takes him down, but only for a moment.

I wriggle against my restraints, powerless. “Peter, stop!” I cry.

“I can’t!” he bellows as Cillian goes crashing through the forest. But

Cillian comes right back with immense speed, refusing to stop his offense.

I tear my gaze away as Sinéad lands behind me, Eamon covering her. “I’ve got you, Sarah,” she whispers hurriedly, snapping my ropes like they’re little more than thread. “You poor thing. What have they done to you?”

“Don’t worry about me,” I answer. “Help Cillian! Please!”

“Eamon.” Sinéad barely has to ask. Eamon’s deceptively youthful and innocent face has already melted away into something vengeful as he rushes Peter from behind, claspng him around the neck and holding on as he attempts to unbalance him, moments from trying to rip through Cillian’s chest.

The others move too quickly for me to keep track of, but one vampire is pelleted with arrows, crumpling into the snow next to his brother, who roars and pushes forward toward the decaying building, following Michael and Leigh as they lay siege to the doors. They slam into the barricade once, twice—that’s all it takes. The crumbling entrance gives way to the Morrigan leaders’ power, and they pour into the interior, out of sight.

Tommie shouts to his druids, “Go with them—we can’t let them open a portal!” His hands burst into green flames, his words muted as a border forms around the building.

Is he trapping them? Ensuring there’s no way out?

The druids are just as formidable as the Brotherhood, if not more so. I’ve never seen them in action, but there’s fury smoldering in their dark expressions and death at their fingertips. They’re just as ruthless in their pursuit of justice for their fallen.

Sinéad is the only person holding me up at present, her arms wrapped around my waist. “I need to get you out of here,” she insists.

I weakly try to push away from her, watching as Peter continues his relentless assault upon Sean, Cillian, and Eamon. I’ve never seen Cillian harmed, but there are bruises on his body, and Eamon’s too. Sean’s barely holding on by a thread, his bravado starting to give way to concern.

Then Peter sees an opening. I shriek as he knocks Sean to the ground, raising his hand angled like a knife. With one harsh thrust, he shoves it through Sean's ribcage. Sean tries to gasp, but when his mouth opens, nothing comes out.

"Sean!" Sinéad and I shout together. "*Get up! Get up!*"

"He's got him by the heart!" Eamon cries, struggling to rise.

Then something slams into Peter's side and sends him sprawling. His hand is jarred from Sean's body with nothing to grasp, dripping dark scarlet.

Leigh straightens. She squares her shoulders and extends her hand, like she's beckoning something to her. Wind curls around her body, dark hair swaying behind her. There's no green left in her eyes; they churn crimson and gold.

I've never seen her look the way she does—fierce, fearless, righteously enraged. The High Queen of the Morrigan vampires stares Peter down, mouth twisted in a snarl, canines long and ready to bite.

Yet, she doesn't need to use them.

"Traitor," she speaks a single word. Her voice is deafening, as though she carries the voice of three women within herself, sending a pulse of terror through me that nearly causes my knees to buckle. Disembodied whispers engulf my ears until they ring, and I cover them.

Peter gnashes his teeth as though he's in pain, rising to his feet. His movement is stifled, like he's straining against something. Can he hear the whispers too?

Leigh remains where she is, steadfast. "Stay down," she commands, and his body jerks low to the ground, like he's been pushed, or an invisible force is attempting to harness him. "You are *mine*."

"You use Her Voice against me," Peter roars in a mixture of anger and pain. "You! A fresh Oatmaker, barely turned. Her tricks won't save you, my queen, if you attempt to fight me!"

His words give me hope. He's trying to fight it. He knows who Leigh is,

that she's High Queen; his use of her title acknowledges that. He's *warning* her to stay away. He doesn't want to harm her.

Then all the pressure upon Peter is released and the whispers, the calls of the Goddess, cease in a single beat of silence. His chest heaves, and there are tears in his eyes. How long as he been deprived of the Morrigan's touch, Her presence?

"I don't have to fight you," Leigh answers, her voice fading into the one I've come to know and trust.

In a cloud of gray mist and feathers, Cezar Monte Vigil nimbly lands beside Leigh with a bright charming smile, a pure silver blade gripped in his hand.

"Cezar!" I breathe in astonishment.

"Sarah, my dear," Cezar responds pleasantly to me, but keeps his eyes fixated upon his enemy.

Peter stiffens. "Monte Vigil."

"Good to see you again, old friend," Cezar says in a voice lighter and less concerned with the battle around us. He sheds his tailored brown coat and rolls up the fine white sleeves of the shirt he wears beneath it. "I understand you've been causing some trouble for my Irish brethren. We cannot have that, now, can we?"

No more words are spoken. Their clash is like a clap of thunder, two giants circling each other, striking, swinging, evading. The ice of the lake threatens to crack beneath them from their blows.

Cillian staggers to me. "Sarah."

Sinéad lets me go as I reach for him. "There's a brand on his shoulder."

"What?"

The words spill out of me in haste. "Peter's shoulder, i-it's how the Order of the Lily controls him! If you could cut it, maybe, or have the druids disenchant it, they won't be able to command him anymore, he'll be freed, and you won't have to fight each other like they want you to—"

Breath is stolen from my lungs as something pierces my back with a sharp stab of debilitating pain.

“Sarah!” Cillian shouts.

“Cillian . . .”

My hands bunch his shirt as my knees buckle. He catches me, and the world around me blurs.



Cillian

Two legends, centuries old, fight behind me, their battle shaking the trees, shattering the ice. Their noise fades, replaced with ringing, like I’ve just been under artillery fire and a shell has exploded over my head. I’m robbed of my senses, unable to hear my surroundings, as Sarah jolts and lurches forward with a silent cry, her legs and limb stiff with the impact.

“Sarah!” I bellow as she falls, an arrow embedded in her back. She clings to me weakly, her eyes wide in shock. Leigh and Sinéad rush toward us as I gently try to lower her to the ground on her side.

Sinéad stops me when I reach for the bolt protruding from her. “Don’t! It’s the only thing keeping her blood inside her now. If we take it out, she’ll bleed to death.”

Leigh shouts for Joe Brown’s help. My hands shake as the worst of my fears come to fruition before my eyes. Sarah on the brink, tears brimming her bruised eyes, the rise and fall of her chest as she shakily breathes. Her heart rate is so fast, adrenaline coursing through her.

Then that fear blossoms into rage. I look around for the hunter responsible and spot him standing among the trees several meters away. Our eyes meet, and he jumps, discarding the crossbow from his singed hands.

Growling, I rise to my feet. “Stay with her.”

I stalk forward through the snow, ignoring of the cold, past Joe Brown as he kneels beside Sarah, and the besieged retirement home. The Order of the Lily has fallen. Michael has the leader gagged on his knees, a prize for Thomas Coffey. He’s overseeing the carrying out of bodies, our adversaries slain.

Spotting me, he calls, “Cillian?”

“No prisoners, Mickey,” I answer, seething. “Leave not a single one alive.”

I can hear my quarry’s pounding heartbeat, his gasps for breath as he tries to run through terrain soft and thick with new snow, bogging down his steps. I allow the distance to extend between us. I want him to think he has a chance when he has none.

Then when I’ve had enough, I make swift work of the distance between us. He weaves through trees, trying to evade me, but I circle around him and catch him by the throat, slamming him down into the earth with a snarl.

I do not know this man. His palms are burned by druid magick, and he shakes like a leaf in the wind. I break his arm with a single snap. He yowls in agony. Then I break the other.

“What kind of a man,” I growl, “kills innocent people? Women? Children?”

Even through the pain of his broken limbs, the man spouts drivel. “God does not suffer the pagan horde. No matter—no matter if they are male or female, large or small—”

“I don’t recall reading that in the Bible as a boy. But I remember this . . .” He doesn’t need his kneecaps anymore, so I break those next with a sickening crunch as he howls and writhes about like a worm. “Those who live by the sword, die by the sword.” I loom over him, snarling. “And I am your sword today.”

“Go to hell, demon!” His words are braver than his body, defiance mixed

with terror in his face.

I bare my teeth and hiss, “*You first.*”

His ribcage is kindling against my hand as I punch through his frail human body and wrench out his heart, beating wildly in my fist. He dies with his mouth open in horror, trying in vain to gulp down air.

Then he sags and is no more.

Wiping myself clean with the snow, I take hold of his boot and drag him back to the others, handing him over to Aodhán Feeney, who has been piling up Lilymen for the druids to burn with Desmond and Oscar.

“See you made quick work of one Mr. Edevane,” Aodhán muses. “We’ll make firewood of him shortly, I promise.”

“Grand,” I grunt. “It’s all he’s good for.”

Our ranks part for Thomas Coffey, who strides through the snow, slow and sure. William Wright quakes on his knees, from cold and fear both, perhaps, as the archdruid takes off his hat and crouches in front of him.

“Ninety-four people.” Tommie’s voice is dangerously soft. “Ninety-four human beings, who never did you a lick of harm. What’s that like, doing Satan’s work?”

Wright’s lip quivers as he stares forward.

“You know how they used to deal with witches in Massachusetts?” Tommie continues. Growing weary of the man’s false bravado, he takes Wright by the jaw and clenches, giving him a shake so that he’s forced to look helplessly into Tommie’s cold blue eyes. “Of course you do. They learned it from *your* kind.”

A grotesque satisfaction takes hold of me as I witness this exchange. Whether or not Wright had a direct hand in her sadistic torture, this man is responsible for everything that’s happened to Sarah. Would that I could end him myself, but Tommie’s claim on this pound of flesh is far greater than any one vampire’s.

“You know,” Tommie says, so calm in his speech like he’s delivering a

homily to children instead of the man who likely took part in the murder of his father and mother. “The funny thing is, the Lord Almighty says we ought to forgive our enemies. I’m not sure you understand that tenant.”

The man shakes, whimpering.

“Fortunately, I do. The Morrigan will forgive me easily enough. Vengeance is a part of Her repertoire, and one She falls back on mightily. But Christ will forgive me too. That’s the beauty of it.”

He leans in, murmuring to the man and holding him with a viselike grip on his shoulder. “I can go to Confession for killing you, and He’ll forgive me a thousand times for this. I’m not sure I even need to ask.”

Wright openly weeps now. For his own life, more than the ones he’s taken, and the reckoning that comes with it. I exchange glances with Michael, who nods at me somberly.

The archdruid yanks Wright’s cross talisman from his neck with a short swift tug. Rising to his feet, he tosses it into the fire. He speaks a word in Gaeilge, one I don’t know. Then Wright begins to sweat, gasping and moaning. Then he falls and squirms in the snow, screaming until his lungs give out.

Tommie motions to the druids, who approach him obediently. “He won’t be hunting anyone anymore. Lock him in the cellar.”

Nodding, they pick Wright up and drag the howling, crying leader of the Lilymen back inside the abandoned living center.

“What did you do to him?” I ask softly as he passes me.

Tommie pauses, placing his hat back on his head. “He’ll live through every single kill he wrought upon the people of St. Leonard. Every stab, every shot, every slice. Until he can’t take it anymore.” He glances at me, blue eyes reddened. “A straight ticket to hell was too good for the likes of him.”

Michael pats him consolingly. Tommie rubs the corners of his eyes, his tough front crumbling away, and I step back as the two embrace.

Returning to the lakeside, I find Joe, Leigh, Sinéad, Rory, and Eamon all around Sarah's body. Sinéad has placed Sarah's head in her lap as she lies sideways in an attempt to make her comfortable. The bolt is still embedded in her back, and the color is leaving Sarah's skin.

I fall to my knees next to her. "Sarah!" I brush my hand over her hair and try to pull her from Sinéad, but Sarah's pained cringe and the tensing of her body render me incapable of doing so for her comfort. Leigh managed to clean up the bruises on her face, so she's no longer black and blue.

"This can't be happening," I whisper, at a loss, lightly caressing her face. She's still awake, but her eyes seem far away. There's blood upon her lips. "No, no, no. Sarah! Why?" I look to Leigh and Joe desperately. "Why isn't she tended to? What's the point of your power, of the druids and your magick, if not this?"

Rory is ashen, crying, rivulets of tears staining his face and beard frozen upon his cheeks. Tears stream down Sinéad's face as she weeps softly. Worse for wear from his battle with Peter Blackwood, Eamon can only manage to tiredly put his arm around her and stares downward. Leigh, too, is crying.

"The arrow is in her lung—" Leigh begins, hands trembling.

"Cillian, the torture she's been put through," Joe explains. "It's lack of food, exhaustion, extreme trauma, now the arrow. It'd be too much for even the most battle-hardened man. She's hanging on, but only just."

I look to Leigh. The sounds of Sarah's slowing heartbeat thunders in my ears. "You have to heal her! You have to!"

"She's refused, Cillian," Leigh whispers.

"What do you mean?" I'm fighting a losing battle with panic. *No. No, this cannot be happening. Not again. Not her.* "Fix her. Jesus Christ, Leigh, fix her! Goddammit. We're going to lose her! I-I'm going to lose her—" I choke on the words. "Rory, tell them!"

"Lad," Rory begins softly, and shakes his head.

"Cillian." Sarah's voice is soft, weak. She reaches a hand for me. "It's

okay.”

“No. No, it’s not okay. You need help, and you need to let them give it to you.” I take her hand in both of mine, squeezing. She is so very cold. “There’ll be time for you to take the Oath later, in peace, in safety, like Leigh did. Not like this.” I press her hand to my cheek, fighting a losing battle with the desire to weep. “I never wanted it like this. Not for you.”

Sarah’s eyes are glossy and staring past me. I’m not sure if she can see me anymore. Sinéad’s lip quivers as she gently rakes her fingers through Sarah’s hair.

“Don’t cry, Cillian,” she whispers. “I’ve made my peace with this. I decided . . . a while back this was inevitable. Wasn’t it? I’d have to try to meet Her. Eventually.”

Her words do little to assuage me. Not when I know the truth. “She doesn’t always choose those who call to Her at their end.” My voice cracks. “If we had more time, we could make certain—”

“It’s all right,” Sarah murmurs, her voice soft and halting. Her eyes shimmer. “It’s better this way. To get it over with. I couldn’t live with it. Living for years, wondering if I’m good enough. If She’ll take me.”

I press my lips against her cool hand, losing my composure. “I can’t do this,” I whisper. “I can’t walk through eternity without you there next to me. I can’t.”

Michael stands beside his wife, removing his hat. The Moore twins are in my peripheral, similarly removing their caps and placing them over their hearts, heads bowed.

“You can,” Sarah mumbles. “You’re stronger than you know.” She swallows. “Grandpa . . .”

“Yes, love, I’m right here.” Rory comes closer and gently presses his hand over Sarah’s shoulder, his tone paternal, pained. “I’m here.”

“You’re . . . alive. They . . . didn’t . . .”

“Not much can keep me down for long,” he promises. “You don’t have to

worry about an old fellow like me.”

“I . . . did good, didn’t I?” Sarah’s voice is fading. “I didn’t tell them anything. They broke my hands, and they . . . but I . . . I didn’t break. I did good?”

Rory’s shoulders shake, his expression twisted with sorrow as he looks at me and nods, doing his best to keep his voice level. But he breaks, and his words are peppered with weeping. “You did so good, Sarah. You protected your brothers and sisters.”

Sarah’s beginning to lose focus. I can only hold her hand, helpless and fighting my own tears. I cannot speak. If I do, I will cry out.

Leigh gently caresses her arm. “Call for Her, Sarah. Can you do that?”

“For the Morrigan?” Sarah says airily, like she’s lost in the middle of a daydream. “I already did. I didn’t see Her, I couldn’t sense Her, I—” When she coughs, she sputters up blood. Her lip quivers, and she looks younger now, more vulnerable than she’s ever been. “Dad?”

I slouch over as my body shudders. Rory’s sobs are audible, carrying on the air.

Sinéad reaches for me, clenching my shoulder. “It’s okay,” she tries to soothe through her own tears. “She’s hallucinating. It’s normal, remember? Her mind is racing and showing her things that are important. It’ll be over soon.”

“I can’t—”

Eamon comes to me and wraps his arms around me. I lean into him, my hands still clenched around Sarah’s.

“I love him,” Sarah murmurs. “Can you tell Cillian for me? Tell him I love him.”

I break apart, my shoulders sagging as I begin openly weeping with Rory. “And I you,” I manage to say. “The closest thing to heaven a man like me could hope to get.”

Sarah stares upward and smiles. Her light grasp upon my hands loosens.

Her gaze becomes fixed. Her smile fades. Held in Sinéad's lap, her body stills.

My heart is rended. I can't move, can't breathe. All desires beyond joining her are muted, unimportant. I've failed her. I should've kept her safe, kept her close, and it was me letting my guard down that caused her to be here in this place. Guilt wracks me. I should be dead. Not her.

Anyone but her.

"I didn't want it to be this way," I mutter, gazing at her. Even in death, she is beyond beauty. Pale, still, like a painting captured by the strokes of masters. I was given beauty, soft and fragile, and like a child I shattered it.

"It's not your fault." Sinéad touches Sarah's hair. "You waited for me when I was like this. Now we'll wait for her."

"We will," Eamon agrees. "She's one of us. No matter what happens, she'll always be one of us."

They all try to sound so certain, for my sake and their own. But I can hear the underlying doubt, the worry that after all of this, it's in vain. That the Morrigan won't hear Sarah the way She did us.

Pagan gods are fickle. Warm one moment, cold the next. Forgiving, then petty. Angry, then joyful. As enslaved to their emotions as we are.

How can anyone hope to anticipate their whims?

Rory weeps, rubbing his eyes and his nose on his sleeve before rising to his feet. "Let's bring her inside. Get her out of this cold. Let me—"

"No," I shake my head. "I'll carry her."

"She's my grandchild, Cillian."

"I know," I reply softly, bringing Sarah's body against my chest and lifting her, swallowing a sob when her head gently rolls back, hair streaming down toward the ground. "But she's the love of my life. Please, Rory. Let me carry her."

Like a funeral procession, they follow me into the abandoned compound. My brethren are in the midst of confiscating the armory they've discovered in

the cellar. Michael orders them to burn everything made of oak or rowanwood and take away the rest.

Leigh assists Joe and the other druids in healing vampires who have been shot with silver bullets, all lined up together like soldiers in a field hospital. The buzz of conversation dies when I pass with Sarah's body.

By Joe's hand, the crossbolt is removed from her back, the wound closed. She doesn't bleed anymore, and the hunger I fought since I met her diminishes into nothing. The monster inside me, once so tantalized by the taste of her, despairs with me. I press my lips to her temple as I gently lay her down on an unused cot.

I'll wait for you for as long as it takes, I promise in silence, gazing into her white face. And I'll join you if you never return, Oath be damned.

I know more than most that it takes time to clear a battlefield, especially a secret one. Druids work behind us to ensure no trace is left behind of what happened here today. I hear some of my brethren already calling it the "Battle of Boxford," reciting their siege against the Lilymen, committing it to our cultural memory. But I cannot move, cannot partake, as I sit beside Sarah. I keep her hand in mine, lost in every moment from our first meeting outside her front door, to New Orleans, to the promise of a life I'd never have to continue living alone.

I've been praying nonstop. To the Morrigan, since I doubt the Christian God will listen. I've sinned too much and too often. I beg Her to accept Sarah as a warrior. To make her one of us. I can only hope She hears me.

"Cillian." Eamon shuffles up behind me. "Blackwood was defeated. Cezar's offering the killing blow to you."

My expression hardens. I rise to my feet and go to the weapon supplies, picking up a silver dagger in a sheath.

Curious, Eamon follows me. "Thought you'd pick a stake, to be honest."

I find Cezar, the strongest and eldest of us all, standing above Peter Blackwood's prone form. The man is worn out, no longer fighting with

Cezar's boot resting square upon his chest.

"Oh, this'll be good." Sean Moore comes to watch, a smile upon his face. "It's about time this fucker got staked into the ground."

"Finish it, then." Blackwood sounds tired. Resigned. "Kill me and be done with it all. I deserve it."

"Take his shirt off," I command.

Eamon, Sean, and Cezar all stare at me, puzzled.

"What was that, mate?" Eamon asks, as though he isn't sure he heard right.

"Take it off," I repeat, unsheathing the dagger.

Hesitant, Cezar removes his boot and reaches down, ripping Peter's shirt off his body with a single harsh tug.

That's where I see it—a cross brand, obvious upon his shoulder.

I crouch over him, frowning. "Was Sarah telling the truth?" I hiss. "This is the cause of all our troubles with you?"

Peter hesitates then nods.

"Wait, what is that?" Sean asks, just as bewildered as the rest. "What are you doing? Gut him!"

With several long, deep slices, I cut the blade through the flesh of his shoulder, across the symbol of the holy cross. As I do so, it burns a bright white. Peter snarls and sucks air through his teeth, jolting. Cezar holds him still. The silver and the brand itself bring him unimaginable pain, causing his skin to burn and sizzle.

"Will that do it?" I ask. "Or shall I flay you for good measure?"

"I don't know," Peter admits. "I don't understand the magick itself, only what it does. Did." He stares at me, wary and untrusting. "Why? Why free me? Why not just kill me?"

"I'm asking the same question, mate," Sean remarks unhappily. When I straighten, he pulls me aside. "I'm all for nobility when the situation calls for it. This isn't one of them. He's a Cromwell lackey! Do you know how many

he killed over the centuries? The innocent people he murdered because they chose God and the saints over king and country?"

"I didn't do it for me," I answer heatedly. "Sarah asked for it. I'm honoring her wishes."

Sean laughs incredulously, stepping away. "This is a mistake. A big fucking mistake."

Peter looks at me as he sits up, favoring his injured shoulder. "Where is Sarah?" When I don't answer, his chest begins to heave, vampiric emotions gripping him just as tightly as they hold me. "Where is she?"

I swallow. "She's gone."

He falls silent, mouth slackened. Then his face falls, his lips twisting down, and he covers his face with his hand.

Cezar wears his grief more openly upon his face. He blinks away his tears, steadying his breath. "She goes with God." His voice is the only warmth within this place. Cautious, gentle, and sad. As though he understands how I feel, what I am experiencing. "*Requiescat in pace*, dear one."

"Are you certain of this, Cillian?" Eamon asks. "I hate to say it, but Sean is right. This man has been one of our greatest enemies for a very long time. It may not be safe to let him live."

I chew around words in my mouth before answering. "I am not the High King. It's not my decision. All I know is Sarah didn't want him to die. She thought of him as a friend, even until the end." I stare down at Peter as he attempts in vain to mask his grief. "Whether or not he deserves it is another matter entirely. I leave it up to Mickey and Leigh."

I drop the dagger in the snow and walk away.

CHAPTER 17

Forgiven Sins



Sarah

Green stretches as far as the eye can see. The roar of battle is gone. I am alone in a field, accompanied only by the sound of wind through the grass I graze beneath my fingers. The air is fresh and without the chill of winter.

I touch my face, then reach behind my back to find some semblance of the crossbow bolt that pierced me, but there's nothing to feel. Puzzled, I reach down to lift my shirt, intent on twisting it to inspect if there's any blood on me, but I'm not wearing it anymore. A long purple wool dress cinched at my waist with a brown leather belt is all I wear, no socks or shoes upon my feet.

I don't remember changing into this dress. My hands are no longer ruined. Strength has returned to my limbs.

Am I dead?

I can't swallow enough air, breathing in deeply through my nose, knowing a peace I haven't felt since before my parents died. Smiling brightly, I do the most natural thing in that moment—I pick up my dress and race through fields, reveling in the strength of my legs, unmarred by chains or

weakness. Laughing, I push myself harder, faster, never running out of breath or needing to stop and rest.

Slowing when I approach a circle of etched stones, my freedom and the happiness that accompanies it slowly fades. “I died, didn’t I?” I whisper. “This is heaven, isn’t it?”

It’s not how I pictured heaven. Stones weren’t something I expected, never having thought there could be anything special about an old circle of rocks. I thought there’d be golden gates, clouds everywhere, maybe some cherubs and a kind of sacred choir singing to herald my arrival. I walk around the stones, brushing my hands lightly over their cold surfaces and searching for any sign of the people I love.

“Mom?” I call. “Dad?” I twirl around, admiring the sky, the fields blossoming with pink heather.

But there’s no one. I am alone.

I spot a crow at rest atop the tallest stone, tilting its head back and forth in jutting motions. It peers at me, and I stare back at it.

“I didn’t think crows would be in the afterlife,” I say quietly to myself. It occurs to me the crow is far larger than any I’ve seen. A soft breeze tousles its glossy black feathers.

It caws.

Three voices woven together whisper over each other in a chorus carried on the wind.

Sarah.

The whispers dance all around me, sending shivers along my spine. It crawls up my bare feet, anchoring me in place. I remember now, why I died. Men were going to burn me for being a witch. But I wasn’t a witch. I was a waitress. I worked at a tavern with good people who weren’t always nice, but they were kind to me. And there was someone I cared for, more than all the rest. He drank my blood like it was a covenant, a promise, and he told me of this place.

Cillian.

Cillian was there when I died. His voice, his face, returns to me, and my heart suddenly aches.

I gaze up at the crow as it takes flight and lands on the ground in front of me. Then the bird disappears in black smoke and feathers.

I face . . .

Her.

And I am afraid.

It can't be anyone except Her. I've never seen Her before, and yet I know Her somehow, like a dread seeping through my veins and gripping my bones. Did I really choose to die and face Her in my last moments? I called for Her so many times in vain, for nothing and no one answered me in that horrible place filled with miserable, wretched people so determined to swallow up every single one of my hopes and dreams and plans for the future.

I gave up. A part of me wondered if She was even real, or if She was far too special for the likes of me. But now She is here, and I wonder if I'm a fool, calling upon a goddess so fierce and terrible with a naive hope that She might hear me and consider me a friend.

She is both frightening and magnificent. Gray mist drapes from Her mantle like a cloak and covers Her arms like elegant sleeves, billowing about the hem of Her raven war gown like the gentle pulse of a slow heartbeat. She wears silver armor adorned with white flowers. Her midnight hair is long, down to Her waist, braided and wild, and She wears a circlet with gems that glow. She looks neither young nor old. Somewhere in between, a woman in her prime, at her strongest.

“You have come to Me, Sarah.”

Her voice blasts through me like a bullet, causing me both pain and joy. She sounds like my mother. Like my grandmother, with Her Northern Irish lilt. Standing here powerless before Her, I feel like a child, peering up in wonder at all the ancestors who came before me, who've all come together in

the power and grace of a being I can't altogether understand.

Yet, I'm frozen, terrified. Though She's warm and comforting, like my mother, I see the icy cunning of someone capable of killing. A warrior.

A goddess of death.

And I must remember both aspects.

"I called for You in that awful place," I murmur. "I didn't know if You could hear me."

The Morrigan smiles faintly at me. "I always heard you." She speaks in three voices woven into one—a passionate maiden, a loving mother, and a tranquil elder, at peace in Her wisdom and years. "And I have seen you for many years. Since you were very small."

I swallow, humbled as I lower myself to my knees. "I didn't know. I—I never felt anything."

"It was not yet your time to know Me," She says soothingly, extending Her hand and gently placing it beneath my chin to lift my gaze. Her touch is ice. "Be not admonished. We are together now."

"My Lady, I know I am not worthy," I say softly, without even knowing what I'm saying or putting any thought behind the words. It's like She's drawing them out of me. "I know I'm not anything special. I—I'm a waitress. I could barely get a job in California. I've got a mean right hook, and I can carry a tune, but that's it."

The Morrigan laughs. She actually *laughs*. It's a music I can't compare to anything I've ever heard, as clear and as sweet as bells chiming.

"Your worthiness was never in question, Sarah," She says. "You were imprisoned by My enemies. You did not offer up My warriors, despite your torment. You did not falter. That takes great courage. In all the wars I have waged, in the battles I have seen, there are many soldiers who could not hope to withstand half of what you endured."

Hope lifts in my chest. "Then . . . You'll let me take the Oath?"

The Morrigan's eyes are like frosted glass, an unearthly blue. "There is

something you must see. Rise, and follow Me.”

All around us, mist settles in, so thick I can only see Her black silhouette a short distance in front of me. But as quickly as it came, the mist fades, and we’re in a lush green countryside with trees and rocks populating the grass, dirt roads, and simple fences.

My breath catches. *Is this Ireland?*

The world moves so fast I don’t have to, turning day into night, sending the sun fleeing toward the horizon as the bright blue sky fades into stars. The Morrigan and I remain still as we follow those winding roads until we stand in front of a large manor made of brick. Ivy crawls up its facade, and it boasts big glass windows.

There’s a glow of electricity inside, and in a stable nearby I hear the soft rumble of resting horses.

“This is beautiful,” I murmur, standing beside Her. “What is this place?”

She points across a large courtyard.

I gasp. “Cillian. Eamon!”

But they do not hear me. They both wear woolen coats and hats from long ago as they sit crouched with a band of men near the stables. Cillian looks much the same, but there’s no happiness in his face, or his eyes, his mouth void of the smile I’ve come to know. He wears the old-fashioned clothes I’m used to, a tweed cap pulled down over his head. Next to him, Eamon somehow looks younger and leaner, with wild auburn hair and wide eyes. They make their way toward the main house. A handful of men follow them.

“What is this?” I ask, looking to the Goddess standing next to me. “Is this—are we in the past? When?”

But She doesn’t answer.

The men signal to one another, and Cillian and Eamon kick the door in. I watch in shock as they pile through the house, returning cries of surprise from house servants with gunfire. There’s the sound of a struggle, of children and women crying, blows landing.

Then Cillian and Eamon drag out the man I can only assume is the landowner, blood streaming from his nose, and the other men yank a woman in a nightgown and three young children similarly dressed for bed, haplessly throwing them to the hard ground. Two guns are pointed at them, keeping them on their knees as they cry and wail for the man, the woman's husband and the children's father.

"Y-you're mistaken. I've nothing to do with this," the man pleads.

"You've everything to do with it." Cillian slams him with the butt of a rifle to quiet him.

I flinch.

"Ten men in this county executed under your orders, farmsteads burned." Eamon hasn't an ounce of mercy in his voice.

"I only followed the law," the man answers, holding his hands up. "Please. My family—"

Behind them, Cillian's men set the house ablaze. Flickering orange plays upon the faces of the children, tears streaming down their faces as they wail, the air heavy with smoke.

My stomach somersaults as I fight the urge to reach out and touch them, comfort them. But I hold myself back. I try to think, to make sense of it all.

"This is the War of Independence, isn't it? Or the civil war after? One of them?" I say to the Morrigan, but She only watches.

Cillian raises his rifle and fires one shot into the man's head. The landowner falls in a heap as his wife screams, all while their big house burns, enveloped in flames. The men stand back, staring at their handiwork, their faces hard and without pity. Then they disappear into the darkness without another word.

"Why are You showing me this?" I whisper, my heart breaking.

"It is important you know what Cillian is," the Morrigan answers. "And he is not a man of peace."

She waves Her hand, and suddenly we're somewhere else, in a large city,

where Cillian is overseeing the breaking of barrels with Eamon at his side. They kill distillery guards by snapping their necks and burn what I can only guess is a rival liquor den.

Then we watch men storm a wind-scorched beach on an overcast day under heavy fire. Cillian, wearing an American soldier's tan uniform and a netted helmet, leads the way, and when others aren't looking, he moves in a blur from place to place, a nested machine gun going silent as he tears an enemy's throat out.

The Morrigan moves Her hand again. "He will never be a man of peace."

I swallow, nearly shutting my eyes when the bloodshed around me is too much for me to bear. But I cannot look away. Every move Cillian makes, snuffing out life, speaking with dying allies to urge them to use the Morrigan's name in their last breaths, he seems unhindered by a conscience.

"I know," I whisper.

"And yet you still desire him?"

"I do," I say a little louder, turning to Her. "You're not showing me everything. Just the worst things. You're not showing how he kept Mickey alive during the Great War, how he provided for his siblings, or how he's renovating his house for his niece and her children. How he was happily married and devastated when his wife died. How he helped Sinéad when she was abandoned and dying after childbirth. How he saved so many. Every man is capable of good *and* evil. I believe everything he did was for a reason, even if it wasn't peaceful. I'll never be able to understand because I didn't live it. I wasn't there."

"You excuse the blood upon his hands?" the Morrigan asks.

"I don't excuse anything." I insist. "But sometimes, even the most honorable men kill." I swallow down anxious bile and drive on. "You could show me every sin, every flaw, and it wouldn't change my mind. I still love him."

I watch Cillian hunkered down in a foxhole in Korea, moonlight playing

over his helmet, his lapels turned up while he gazes at a dented and creased old picture of a beautiful woman with blond hair. Then he puts her away with a long sigh and huddles with his rifle, keeping a watchful eye on his slumbering companions.

“See there?” I point. “I know this was in the fifties. He was at least thirty years turned. He’s a vampire. He didn’t need to wear a uniform or armor, or carry a gun. He could kill anything that came his way with his hands, his teeth. But he’s looking out for the men next to him.”

“He is a very good soldier. And he has brought many into My ranks,” the Morrigan agrees. “You see how he yearns for belonging. Survival of one’s family is what drives the greatest warriors, not vengeance or hate. For too long, he has grieved, allowed resentment and anger to color his decisions. He needs a reason to live beyond the drums of war. Without it, there can be no victory.”

She circles me. “Without you, he will never find balance. And that is what I require of My men.” Her blue eyes fixate upon me. “You are driven by family. By loyalty. Trust. And others will learn best from a spirit like yours.”

“Then . . .” I shake, not daring to dare ask again.

The Morrigan smiles. “You’ve proven yourself courageous and wise, my little crow. Bend the knee.”

I drop to my knees instantly, bowing my head.

“I will speak the words,” She says. “And you must speak them back.”

I repeat each and every one with all the fervor of a sinner redeemed. Instead of feeling heavy, like I’m being bound or chained to Her, I’m freed.

My body seizes with a sudden lurch. The fragility of my mortal body is removed, like poison being drawn out of a wound and replaced with strength and agility. My chest heaves as something awakens in me—a deep, gnawing hunger. A vicious and unforgiving monster is roused from my subconscious and brought to the forefront, primal and dangerous.

The transformation is uncomfortable, on the precipice of pain, and I

groan, panting as new fangs elongate in my mouth. I tumble forward and hold myself up on my hands and knees in front of Her billowing blackened skirts.

I roar, and my voice shakes the ground beneath me.

She leans over me with a fierce and triumphant flash of Her teeth, displaying fangs just like mine. “You are Mine,” She hisses possessively, tapping my forehead with a single long finger.

The Oath is taken. Darkness swallows me.

And I am Hers.



Breath fills my lungs, and I jolt upright with a loud gasp, clutching my chest. My body is renewed. I teeter as I’m swarmed by a blur of bodies, feeling hands upon me, steadying me. The lights flickering above my head are so bright. I can hear dishes clinking, loud music, a dozen conversations, the caw of crows outside. It’s all too much.

“Sarah.”

Cillian’s voice thunders in my ears, tinged with relief, and yet it’s far too loud. All of my senses are overwhelmed, leaving me dizzy. He embraces me as I catch my breath, squeezing me tightly, and I wrap my arms around him in return.

“I-it’s so much,” I whisper against his ear. “So much all at once. I can’t focus, I can’t—”

Something lurks in the back of my mind, something separate from me and yet still me, like a shadow waiting for a frightened child to fall asleep. It hungers, and when the salted smell of sweat touches my nostrils, my eyes fly open. I push Cillian away, snarling in my throat.

Without thinking, without doing anything but giving into hunger, I lunge for the closest human in my proximity, taunted by the blood pumping in his veins. I’m ready to bite, my new foreign fangs long and poised to feed.

Rory catches me before I can sink my teeth into my quarry. I struggle against him, growling.

Father Joe Brown stumbles away from me, his hands winding through the air as he prepares a defensive spell. While slightly taken off guard by my speed, he doesn't appear entirely surprised or even frightened by me. "Well, that was close. Guess you won't be needing me?"

"Easy—easy, girl!" Rory says as I continue fighting him, but he holds me tight, and I can't break away. "That's enough!"

Michael speaks directly to Joe. "Sorry for the scare. We have her handled. Thank you for coming over and checking on her."

"You don't have to thank me," Joe says, peering at me as I stare ravenously back at him.

It's Joe, I remember through a foggy, thirsty stupor. The priest. The druid healer from St. Winifred. I like Joe. The recognition is almost childlike when it dawns on me, and I try to force myself to slow down. I still my wriggling and attempts to break free, listening to Rory's words as he continues to try to calm me.

"Odd," Joe says. "I don't think I've ever seen your vampire women act so feral. Leigh was so much more controlled, after she changed."

"She went through quite the ordeal before this," Michael replies, Leigh standing beside him. "When her human body was injured. She's been without sustenance a long while. Cillian and I were similar when we turned."

I hear their words, but none of them really make sense to me at the moment. Rory holds my arms and legs in a viselike grip as Cillian reaches into a cooler by my bedside and pulls out a bag of donated blood. He warms it between his hands before he begins feeding it to me.

Everything slows with that first taste. I thought it would be metallic, like copper, but it's sweet and satiating. My muscles relax. The intensity of the electricity and the sound of everything all around me become more manageable.

Rory's voice is soothing as he pushes my hair back with his calloused hand. "There's a good girl. There, now. That's better, isn't it? Can't have you trying to eat our good druids, now, can we?"

I slouch forward, embarrassed. I look up at them with tears in my eyes. I'm mortified. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry!" The horror of my actions is almost unbearable. I'm close to sobbing.

"That's her amplified emotion too, all in the matter of the first five minutes." Rory chuckles, gently rubbing my shoulder. "It's all right, Sarah. We know. We know all about it. Don't we, Cillian?"

Cillian. I meet his eyes. His shoulders slowly unwind in relief, and he exhales slowly, his misty gaze locking me in and holding me firm. Overcome with intense affection, I reach for him as Rory slowly releases me from his strong grip.

Cillian pulls me in, not caring we're surrounded by others. His mouth crashes against mine, embracing me tightly. "I thought I'd lost you forever."

"I did too," I whisper, curling up into his arms, never wanting to leave. This is where I belong. Where I've always belonged. Where I'm safest. Cillian's scent comforts me in a way it never has before, as does his closeness, his warmth, the soft slow beat of his heart.

"Your heart beats," I marvel softly. "I can hear it now."

"It always did," Cillian murmurs, burying his nose in my hair. "It was your blood and your presence that helps it remember what to do. So long as I have you, it always will."

When I turn my head, I see Rory brushing away tears of his own. I reach for the lapel of his coat and pull him in, and he wraps his arms around both of us in a hard bear hug that squeezes air audibly from Cillian.

"Easy, McCready." He chuckles. "You'll snap me in two."

Rory snuffles. "You damned kids are going to send me to an early grave."

Sinéad pounces on me. I squeak as she embraces me even harder. "You're so fuckin' mean to me, scarin' me to death the way you did," she

says.

“I’m fine, I promise,” I offer, hugging her back tightly.

We remain a pile of hugging vampires for a long while until the others pull away, allowing me to look around. I recognize this room, the bed I’m resting in. I’ve been here once before, the first night I was attacked. It’s the small apartment, above the tavern.

“You brought me back to the Mannock?”

“Of course. We couldn’t leave you in that cold and bitter place. The Mannock is where you are safe and welcome,” Michael explains. “Rory and Cillian haven’t left your side for three days.”

Mannock Tavern. My body decompresses that much more. The familiar scents of the kitchen, the murmur of the patrons downstairs, Brigid’s Boys playing reels and jigs—all of it serves to ground me now that it isn’t flooding my senses.

“Three days?” I peer at Michael and Leigh, then at Cillian. That hits me hard, and I’m on the cusp of becoming emotional again. “I missed Christmas, didn’t I?”

“Just the day itself,” Cillian reassures. “If it’s Christmas you want, it’s Christmas you’ll have. With Rory, me, whomever you like.”

“It’ll be the finest Christmas you’ve ever had,” Rory agrees with a smile and a nod. “With your family and friends.”

“You all need to stop.” Sinéad rubs her eyes as she straightens. “You’re going to make her cry.”

“Why, because you’re crying?” Eamon asks, teasing.

“Shut up. I’m not crying. I’ve something in my eye, that’s all!” she scolds, and Eamon smiles in a way that’s reserved for only her, one I know well.

It’s all so familiar. The banter. The people surrounding me. It feels like home. And I do weep, despite my best attempts not to. Cillian keeps his arm around me.

Michael kneels before the bed where I lay. “I owe you an apology,” he says softly.

I stare at him in confusion. “What do you mean?”

“I should never have allowed the Order of the Lily to fester,” he says. “That blame is reserved for me. And many lives were lost because of my lack of foresight. Yours was almost one of them.”

“Mickey, you couldn’t have known—” Cillian begins.

“No, I’m the king. No matter how much I loathe that title, it doesn’t make it any less true.” Michael’s eyes are so blue, peering past my every defense. I have to look away to Leigh for a moment, who brushes away my tears in remorse.

“It’s my fault too,” Leigh admits. “I hope you can come to forgive us somehow.”

“There’s nothing to forgive,” I insist. “The Lilymen are to blame for all of it, not you. I’ll never blame you. You’ve all become family, and I—”

“Everyone’s going to start with the waterworks if this keeps up.” Rory chuckles. “We should probably let her rest a bit. Give her some space. Sarah, you’ll be happy to know your house has been made safe. By the strongest kind of magick there is, if I do say so myself. And yes, I’m a wee bit biased.”

Joe chuckles, nodding proudly. “We’ve planted spells around your house, in the ground. No enemy can ever cross your thresholds, nor can they press any attack upon your home.”

“Thank you.” I cling to Cillian. My thirst, though satiated, is still present, and when I look at Joe, all I see is prey. I don’t like it. I don’t trust myself. As though Cillian senses my trepidation, he holds me closer.

“So . . . I can go home?” I whisper. “I’d like to go home.”

“We’ll go home.” Cillian nods to the others as they all step away and disperse. Rory picks up his instrument. Michael and Leigh lock their hands together, Sinéad and Eamon following them.

“I’m starving,” Eamon remarks. “What’s the special for tonight?”

“I’ll tell the boys to make everything on the menu for you,” Sinéad replies. “How’s that?”

“Don’t toy with my heart like that if you don’t mean it, Sinéad.” Eamon laughs. “I could eat everything in the house.”

Joe gingerly hands me a piece of paper, dipping back away from me with care. “This is the number to my reach me and my wife directly, if ever you need anything.”

I take it gratefully. “Thank you, Joe. I’m so sorry about—”

“Think nothing of it,” Joe interjects. “You can’t help what you are, and Charlie and I haven’t forgotten all you did at St. Winifred. When things are less overwhelming, feel free to stop by. Anytime.”

He places a hat on his head and gives me a farewell smile before disappearing down the stairs.

“Are you ready?” Cillian whispers against my ear. “To go home?”

Slowly, I rise to my feet. Nothing hurts anymore. All my injuries are gone. My hands and my fingers are intact. I am brand new. Strong. Vigorous. The torment of those last few days before I took the Oath seem like long ago, and I’m unsure if it’s due to something the druids might’ve done to my mind, or if it’s the goddess’s will.

I am ready—for everything and anything. Nothing and no one will ever underestimate me anymore. I will be strong enough to protect the people I love.

“Yes,” I say, taking his hand. “Take me home.”



When we arrive home, I can no longer contain the emotions within me. These new senses I’ve been given can trace everything—the faint remnants of my father’s cologne in the closet, my mother’s face cream I haven’t had the heart to throw away.

Cillian holds me close as I weep into his shoulder, unfazed by my outburst. “It won’t always be this way,” he promises.

“Is this what it was like with you, when you . . .”

“When I found Helena?” he finishes, lifting my chin and pressing his forehead to mine. “Yes. I was beside myself. Torn in two.”

“I feel them everywhere in this house,” I whisper. “It hurts, and yet I never want to leave.”

“Then we won’t,” Cillian replies. “We’ll stay here for as long as you like. Months, years, centuries. And I’ll be here. Whenever you need me.”

His words only awaken another need. My kiss against his lips is desperate, hungry, arousal and a need for comfort fueling me. He meets my fervor with eagerness, picking me up and carrying me upstairs, setting me down only to help me pull at his clothes and remove mine.

Every touch, every kiss, smolders against my skin, my lips. Cillian’s eyes gaze into mine as he aligns himself and hurls his cock inside me. The fever breaks as he rests on top of me while we’re made one, slowing it all down, sensing my need before I voice it.

“I love you, Sarah,” he whispers, cupping my face. He throbs within me, and I pulse around him, every inch of our bodies awakened and attuned to the other. I am helpless against those eyes and the feel of him in me, while I wonder in amazement if this was destined, if I was made for this man, and if he in turn was made for me.

“I love you.” I lean into his palm, kissing him. He rocks his hips, and our lovemaking overtakes all. There is nothing but him and me in this moment.

Cillian tends to me for the entirety of the night, using his tongue and fingers in between, never resting until I am fully satisfied. When he allows himself to finish at last, he comes deep inside me, flooding me with his warmth and nearly collapsing on top of me.

I wrap my legs around him and refuse to let him go. He doesn’t seem to mind. “What if we lived together?” I murmur.

Cillian lifts himself up on his elbows, smiling at me. “Ooh, living in sin?” His expression is wolfish.

“Is that what you call it?”

“I’m a man of old-fashioned taste.”

“And I’m pretty sure what we just did was out of wedlock.”

“So it was, but that’s what Confession is for,” Cillian replies, earning my laughter as he searches my eyes. “What if you married me instead?”

“You better watch it,” I retort playfully. “I know you’re teasing, but I’m tempted to say yes just to make you run off.”

“Say yes,” Cillian replies, not bothered in the slightest. “Become mine, and only mine. Forever. And I will worship you until the end of days, and in the afterlife that follows.”

My heart might burst out of my chest. “And if there is no afterlife for beings like us?”

“Then I’ll follow you into the darkest nothing.” Cillian’s warm brown eyes bore into mine. “And with you, I’ll remain.”

His words steal all reason and logic away from me. How can any woman say no to that? “I’d want to wear my mother’s wedding dress. I-it’s a bit out of style, but it fits me.”

“I happen to like out of style,” Cillian muses, caressing my hair from my face. I still feel his cock inside me and the warmth of his seed as he begins to finally soften. He slips out and pulls me into him. “Is that your way of saying yes?”

“If I actually say yes, I’m going to start crying, and I won’t be able to stop,” I admit, already on the cusp of becoming blubbery.

Cillian laughs. “So long as they’re tears of joy.”

“Bigger and better than joy.”

The tender passion in his kiss renders all other words useless.



The next morning I accompany Cillian back to Mannoek Tavern for my first vampiric tribunal. The “Closed” sign is posted on the door, and the blinds are drawn like normal, but inside, we’re met with a sea of faces, and I’m greeted by at least a dozen vampiric women I’ve never met, all eager to introduce themselves and shake my hand.

“About time we had another sister,” says one.

“Heard about what you did. You’re a brave one,” says another.

“Move over, all of you!” a familiar voice calls.

The women all part as Vera Monte Vigil walks toward me with a bright smile. “I saw her first.”

“Vera!” I exclaim with joy as she embraces me tightly.

She pulls away, cupping my face. “Look at you,” she coos, almost maternal in her caress of my cheeks. “How strong and healthy you look now. Cezar was right in sending you here. I’m only sorry your transformation was so violent. We never wanted that for you.”

“I know,” I reassure her, and we embrace again. “I have so many questions—about you and Cezar, and—”

“We’ve all the time in the world,” Vera says. “Don’t worry. Now, you should probably learn the names of all your new sisters . . .”

The women all speak over one another all at once with such excitement that Cillian chuckles and steps in. “Easy, now. You lot will have your turn with her after business is settled. Let’s not overwhelm her.”

But I’m excited too and looking forward to knowing them all.

The tables have been set aside. The chairs are lined up. Vampires are everywhere, and three druids are present too—Tommie, Joe, and a third I don’t recognize, but he looks like a younger, leaner version of Joe with kind eyes.

Six vampires, three men and three women, sit together on the stage where Brigid’s Boys usually plays, all serious of face. I recognize one as Fionn Bradigan, the bar’s security. When I smile at him, he nods back.

Rory rises from his seat, his voice projecting throughout the pub. “We are here to resolve three matters. The High King and the High Queen are present.” He gestures to Michael and Leigh, sitting to the side. That’s curious to me.

“So they don’t make the decision?” I whisper to Cillian.

“They have the final say,” Cillian answers. “But only if they deem it necessary.”

This feels like a courtroom or something democratic. For that, I respect them all the more.

Rory continues. “First is the matter of Eamon Callaghan, sentenced in 1970 for sedition against the High King. He served nearly thirteen years of his five-hundred-year sentence. But for his bravery in saving the lives of druidwives and their children from the St. Leonard massacre, many have requested his sentence be reviewed. We ask for the appointed judges’ final decision.”

Eamon sits in a far corner next to Sinéad. He looks a bit nervous, glancing about before lowering his head, staring at his lap.

Fionn rises to his feet. “In the case of Eamon Callaghan, we the appointed pardon him of all charges,” he says. There’s a communal gasp then a clamor of delight. “And we insist that he be reinstated into our numbers as a free man and brother starting today.”

Cheers and applause rise into the air. Eamon sags in relief. Sinéad touches his shoulder, urging him to stand, and he does somewhat awkwardly, looking around as he’s praised. Several go to him and clap his back. Rory offers a handshake, but Eamon hugs him instead, nearly unbalancing him.

Rory lightly pats his head. “You deserve it, lad. You done us proud.”

“Thank you.” Eamon pulls away and rubs his eyes, sitting back down. “Thank you all.” He leans into Sinéad when she hugs him.

Cillian gently rests his head against mine.

“The second matter is that of Sean Moore,” Rory continues as the noise

dies down. “He has expressed his desire to join our Brotherhood for the first time.” His declaration is met with a few suspicious whispers, so he holds up his hands. “Now, now. I know many of you have long memories. But Our Lady has always intended for us to be one grand force, instead of many smaller ones, and we have become by far the largest of Her armies, right here in Boston. Bygones must be bygones. Save one. Fionn?”

“We, the appointed judges, agree that Sean Moore should be part of the Brotherhood,” Fionn replies, though he doesn’t entirely look happy about the decision. “With the understanding that he follow our laws, that he does not feed directly upon the populace or instigate altercations with our brethren—”

Sean stands with a languid stretch, declaring, “Both reasonable demands, to which I shall adhere.”

“—and that his brother, Desmond Moore, agrees to his inclusion,” Fionn finishes.

“Ah, fuck,” Sean mutters. “Lovely.”

“This ought to be interesting,” Cillian remarks into my ear as I press into his side.

Slowly and more deliberate in his movement, Desmond rises to his feet, having been seated next to Cezar. He doesn’t answer right away. When at long last he speaks, the entire room is silent, entranced.

“I will not bar my brother’s entrance. I am neither his keeper nor his enemy. And he is welcome to join our numbers.”

Fionn nods to the other judges, who all seem to agree. “Then it is decided. The case is dismissed.”

Sean doesn’t receive quite as warm a welcome as Eamon—far from it. Everyone present seems to regard him like a stray cat, uncertain if he has fleas. But Sean doesn’t seem to notice. His smile is big and bright, but it doesn’t meet his eyes, which are set upon his brother as he sits back down.

There’s a coldness there. A disdain. Though I don’t know why, and I doubt I’ll ever know the cause of it, I make a mental note: *whenever I resume*

working at the tavern, do not under any circumstance sit those two men close together.

“The third matter is that of Peter Blackwood,” Rory continues. “An Englishman and previously a hunter belonging to our sworn enemies, the Order of the Lily.”

Some of the gathered begin to jeer.

Fionn, who only just sat back down, shoots to his feet and snarls. “There will be order!” he barks. “Oi, shut your faces, or I’ll have you thrown out. This is a tribunal, not a public execution. Pipe down.”

Begrudgingly, they obey. I’m filled with pity as Peter is brought out in wooden cuffs, looking utterly defeated and resigned to his fate. It hurts to see a creature as old as him bound in the same way the Lilymen kept him in the cellar, though I realize there’s no trust between him and any of the people around me.

“Peter Blackwood stands accused of the deliberate hunting and murder of our own people, believed to have begun as early as the late 17th century,” Rory continues. “As well as being personally responsible in some part for the St. Leonard massacre. What say you, Blackwood?”

“Do what you will,” is all he answers.

I can’t accept that. My emotions—no, my very being—will not allow it. Not after all his attempts to spare me and my life.

On impulse, I step forward. “Wait.”

All eyes turn to me.

I hesitate. Cillian peers at me, but then gently rests his hand on my back. “It’s all right,” he whispers, tone supportive. “Go on.”

I take a moment to gather my wits and courage, weaving through the crowd both standing and sitting and approaching the judges. “He had nothing to do with the massacre at St. Leonard. And . . .” I try not to sound nervous. “He made multiple attempts to save my life when I was held hostage.”

The judges appear surprised by this.

Sinéad calls from where she sits, “Both Peter and Sarah are telling the truth. My ability tells me so.”

“While that may be true,” Rory rumbles, pensive as the judges speak softly to one another. “This man has killed many of us over the centuries. Does saving one pardon the others?”

Peter’s gaze lifts to mine. He looks so weary, and yet there’s a spark of hope behind his eyes, however dim.

I continue. “He was under the Order’s control. They branded his shoulder with an enchantment that robbed him of his free will. He took the Oath, same as we all did. He bent the knee.” There’s a hush when I mention the Oath, though I take care not to speak the Morrigan’s name. “They severed his connection to Her with their magick—”

“Hypocrites!” someone shouts. “Bloody hypocrites, the lot!”

Fionn is on his feet again, looking murderous as he stares daggers at the cajoler.

“He had to follow every order, every command, of these human hunters. I believe if he had his free will, he would never have done those things,” I finish.

Murmurs move through the tavern.

Peter lifts his head and speaks softly, calmly. “Begging your pardon, Sarah. I appreciate your attempt to vouch for me. But you are wrong.”

My heart sinks.

He continues, speaking truthfully, solemnly, like a convicted man on the way to the gallows. “I took the Oath during Cromwell’s destruction of Irish cities. I was aimless for a time, feeding and existing for a few decades. But I was never friends with others who served Her. Conflicts were many. When I thought stray vampires were bringing too much attention to our existence, I hunted them down and killed them without guilt or shame. The Lilymen didn’t enslave me until the time of the Great Hunger.” He bows his head. “There is much for me to atone for, and no forgiveness to be earned.”

Cezar Monte Vigil rises. “That is not so,” he says in his deep Spanish accent. “I too worried about sparing this man at first. But Sarah’s words have reminded me of another way. There is always forgiveness, and sins can be washed clean. I know many of you have turned your back upon the teachings of the Church and cannot find it in your hearts to serve both Christ and the Phantom Queen. But I believe this man should not be held accountable for culling strays, nor any killings he made when he was not in control of his own blade. Cillian himself destroyed the Lilymen’s mark upon Blackwood’s shoulder.”

No one looks more surprised than Peter, staring at Cezar in astonishment. “How can you defend me,” he sputters, “when you and I fought so many times over the years?”

“I’m with him.” Sean points at Peter. “Enchantment or not, this man is a right cunt.”

“That’s enough,” Michael bellows. “Cezar, what are you suggesting?”

Cezar waits for the buzz all around us to die down. “I know what it is like to walk through the ages. Many of you are still young, not yet a century. But I have seen many, and I understand this man better for it. Allow me to bring him with me to California. To St. Kateri. There, he will rest and tend their trees for a time—not as a prisoner, but as a protected guest. The druids there can help him acclimate to a life outside of his religious slavery. And when he is ready and his wounds and prejudices have healed, he may return here, as a member of our Brotherhood.”

“That’s insane!” someone shouts.

I step back, leaning into Cillian, and the clamor of protest against Peter cuts me deeply. But I can appreciate their reluctance. Many of these resentments run deep, and with good reason.

“That’s not a bad idea, actually,” Rory mutters, turning to me and nodding with a faint smile. I know I’ve done the right thing, but I’m bolstered by my great-grandfather’s quiet approval.

After a soft discussion among themselves, the jury of six makes a decision. Fionn calls to Michael, “We the appointed refer this judgment to the High King and High Queen.”

Michael and Leigh exchange glances as I wring my hands, hopeful. I don’t want Peter to die. In my heart, I know he doesn’t deserve it.

Leigh speaks first, her voice gentle and thoughtful. “Being enslaved to murderous hunters seems like punishment enough for his sins, doesn’t it?”

Michael hums. “What do the druids say?”

Tommie’s expression, though still darkened by grief, remains the same. “We hold no hatred and demand no restitution from a man who had no personal hand in the murder of our people.”

“Our first Protestant. Funny how things work.” Michael nods in approval at Cezar. “Very well. We will give him over to your care, Cezar.” He motions. “Free him.”

Overwhelmed by this decision, Peter’s mouth opens, yet he can’t seem to formulate words as Aodhán Feeney unlocks his wooden shackles, setting him free. Unbound, Peter straightens and steps off the stage, away from the judges, scanning the crowd before he fixates on me. I offer him a sympathetic smile.

“All business here is concluded,” Rory announces. “For the Brotherhood.”

The cry is taken up by others. “For the Brotherhood!”

It rings out loud and clear throughout the Mannock as their numbers disperse. Those who work at the tavern move the tables and chairs to their rightful places. I take the only opportunity I have to approach Cezar, reaching out and touching his arm.

Curious, he turns toward me. The warmth in his eyes remains the same when he recognizes me. “Ah. Miss Sarah. You’ve done quite well for yourself, as I thought you might. How are you liking it here among my brethren?”

“*Our* brethren, now. Is that why you sent me here?” I ask him. “You thought I’d be a good addition?”

“I did indeed. Though one can’t comprehend the whims of a goddess, I thought She might like you.” He gestures across the tavern. “And I knew they all would too. But that was just one slim possibility. I sent you here because it can be a place of safety and great love. Vera and I never wanted you lonely.”

“I definitely haven’t been that,” I agree, grateful. “And I don’t know how I’ll repay you both for putting me on the road to where I am now.”

Vera joins us. “Don’t give us too much credit.” Her tone is mirthful. “It’ll go right to his head.”

“So it will. I cannot congratulate myself for your initiation into our numbers,” Cezar agrees with a soft laugh. “I simply pointed you in the direction. It’s your feet, your heart, your journey, that brought you here and now. Not mine.”

He glances at Cillian, who’s speaking to Michael, occasionally glancing in our direction. “I see you have found the other half of your soul.”

“I really wasn’t expecting that.” My gaze meets Cillian’s, and warmth fills my chest when he smiles at me. “But I’m so glad I did.”

“Indeed! You have grown since we met you,” Vera says.

“And now you are a warrior true.” Cezar speaks with zeal and pride, wrapping his arm around his wife. “Like my Vera, you will be a formidable ally upon the field in the end of days.”

“I hope so,” I say. “Thank you for offering to take Peter with you. Even when I know you’ve fought.”

“Where others see enemies, I see potential friends,” Cezar replies sagely. “And we need all the friends we can get, if the Order of the Lily is at full strength. The little gang we slew in those woods—they are only the beginning. And he will revel in the hunting of them more than anyone else, I think, when it becomes time.” Cezar taps his temple with a glint in his eye. “Kindness and efficiency go a long way.”

“I’ll remember that,” I say with a soft chuckle.

Peter slowly walks over to us. “You didn’t have to speak up for me the way you did.”

“You’re my friend,” I reply, touching his sleeve. “Aren’t you?”

Overwhelmed, he bows his head and nods. “I will endeavor to be worthy of it. If I return.” He regards Cezar somewhat warily.

Cezar laughs. “Fear not, old friend. You are tending trees, not taking any of the holy sacraments. Your Protestant sensibilities may remain intact.”

“Good,” Peter mutters. “Because if you lot think I’m going to wear a St. Michael pendant any day soon, you’re out of your bloody minds.”

Vera takes my hand, squeezing. “Give me a call. Now that we’re sisters, we can talk as much and as long as you like.”

“I will,” I promise her.

That’s the last I hear from them today. Cezar, Vera, and Peter slip away without another word.

Ironic how a Spaniard and an Englishman have somehow perfected a proper Irish goodbye.



A week later, my Christmas tree is still up, and my house is bursting at the seams with Morrigan vampires.

Presents wrapped in paper and ribbons—some rather crudely, but they did their best—are piled under the tree. It’s my first attempt at putting together a gathering for the people I know and have come to love that doesn’t take place in our favorite Irish pub.

To make things simple, I introduced the idea of Secret Santa, but having immortal creatures draw names from a hat proved to be a little more complex than I hoped it would. None of them can keep a secret very well, and after we’ve eaten freshly baked cinnamon rolls from my oven and drunk hot

chocolate, they're all forgoing the secret part of the exercise entirely.

Rory proudly showcases a guitar he received from Leigh, plucking Christmas songs on its strings as he sits by the warm fire, singing softly and looking as happy as can be.

"Aha." Brody points to Sinéad as she opens her gift and withdraws a beautiful new winter coat. "That's from me. I picked it out. Do you like it? It matches your complexion!"

"I don't think you're supposed to tell, Brody," Fionn remarks, leaning against the mantle and nursing his own blood-spiked drink.

"I love it," she squeaks, yanking Brody into a hug and nearly toppling him over.

"Cuban cigars?" Eamon gawks, opening his gift. "This is the best Christmas ever! Thank you, Mickey!"

The noise and conversation lift my spirits in ways it hasn't for a long time. As I clean up a little in the kitchen, Cillian encircles his arms around me, holding a small box beneath my face.

"I traded Leigh for your name," he admits, pressing kisses against my ear.

I laugh softly, drying my hands on a towel and taking it. "You all really don't understand Secret Santa." But I can't help hoping when the box fits in my palm. "Is this what I think it is?"

"Probably," Cillian says.

I open it. My breath catches. The ring is simple and elegant—a solitaire diamond on a gold band. I never thought I'd have one of my own. Love always seemed so out of reach. And now it's all around me.

Cillian helps me slip it onto my finger. "I'm going to spend the rest of my time on this earth being worthy of you wearing this, Sarah McCready."

"You already do." I wrap my arms around him and kiss him deeply. "And we are going to properly celebrate our engagement tonight when everyone goes home, I promise you that."

He grins. "I look forward to that. Immensely."

“You know we all have super hearing,” Eamon calls from the living room. “It’s Christmas, kinda, could you wait to be nauseating until we’re gone?”

“No,” Cillian calls back, kissing me again.

I laugh softly. “It’s your first Christmas in a while, Mr. Darragh. How did you like it?”

Cillian gazes into my eyes. “It’s everything I never thought I’d find again. It’s home. It’s you.” He rests his forehead to mine. “And I plan on protecting it with every bone in my body.” His hand grazes my back. “I love you.”

I smirk at him. “I know you do. We’ve got a house to finish, don’t we?”

“That we do, aye,” Cillian agrees. “Think it could use a woman’s touch. Any ideas?”

“Oh, I’ve come up with a thing or two.” I smooth my hands over his chest. “I want you to know how proud I am of you. How far you’ve come when you’ve been through so much.”

Cillian stares at me quizzically. “What do you mean?”

I consider telling him the things the Goddess showed me, but then I think better of it. “You’re a good man,” I reply. “And I want to go wherever you go. I know that’s Boston for now, but when wanderlust takes your feet and carries you elsewhere, I want to follow you. Whether it’s to Ireland or China or Alaska or the Antarctic. If you feel called to find more for the Brotherhood, you don’t have to be ashamed. I know it’s something in you that you can’t always ignore.”

Cillian strokes my cheek with his thumb. “I don’t know what I did to deserve you,” he murmurs. “But know that I’ll never go anywhere without you. I can’t. To be parted from you . . . ”

“Is to be without breath?” I offer, smiling.

“That’s rather poetic,” Cillian says softly. “I do like that.”

Eamon wanders in, looking around. “Any more sweet rolls?” he asks hopefully.

He's already eaten a dozen. I hold back laughter. "There's more in the oven. Be patient."

"Yeah, and you're going to let me have one this time," Brody says, coming in and shouldering him. "Last batch, I didn't get any."

"I can't help it!" Eamon insists. "I get so hungry."

"Fucksake." Cillian rolls his eyes and takes both men by the scruff of their shirts, leading them back out. "All right, that's enough from you two. You're spoiling the moment. Out!"

"Hey! The kitchen is a public space!" Brody protests.

"Yeah, I have rights, you know!" Eamon huffs.

After all but tossing them back into the living room with the others, I grin as Cillian returns, grumbling, "No respect."

I distract him with a sweeter kiss. "Help me with these dishes?"

He steals several more as he slips his arms around me, hands resting on my ass. "Yes, ma'am."



Six months later

Hearing the car before I see it, I slip out onto the front porch, appreciative of the warm June air and the clouds in the sky.

It's my first summer as a vampire, and in those first few months, I've confirmed what everyone suspected—we women can control our thirst easier than men. More self-control, more empathy, more everything. And even though I don't tempt fate by getting too close, I can be in proximity to a human without instantly snapping and attempting to devour them whole.

The hunger is still a driving force. So I'm told it will be, for the next ten to twenty years. But I find ways to distract myself, and helping my new

husband finish renovating his old Boston home was top priority.

A crow flies over my head, headed straight into my open window. I hear the heavy thud of Cillian's feet down my stairs, excitement in his voice. "She's here. She's made it!"

An unassuming little car rolls up. The back doors open, and two young boys all but spill out, carrying rockets and planes in their hands. They dart all around the front yard, chasing each other as their mother rises into view, gazing at the house with tears in her eyes. She covers her mouth, slowly walking up the front pavement and staring at the exterior. Then she spots me and timidly waves.

I wave in return. "Hi there!"

"Hello," she replies, tentatively approaching me. "I . . . suppose I'm to be your new neighbor."

"Is that right?" I ask, offering my hand. She smells delicious, but it's Cillian's family running through her veins, and that makes her all the easier to resist. She's a beautiful woman, dark-haired with soft brown eyes, on the leaner side. She's dressed in blue jeans and a simple T-shirt. "How exciting. I'm Sarah."

"Anna Darragh," she says with a bright smile, her voice light and sweet with her natural accent. "These are my boys. Patrick is seven, and Kieran is five." The boys are loud and laughing as they stretch their legs. "Apologies. It was a long way here. They've been cooped up."

"You don't have to apologize. Welcome to the neighborhood," I say as Cillian comes out and joins me. He's tense, a little nervous, so I gently take his hand. "This is my husband, Cillian."

Anna's eyes light up as she shakes his hand.

"Hello," he says. "Welcome, Miss Darragh."

"What a coincidence! Cillian was my uncle's name," she says. "Well, great-uncle, technically."

"It's a good name," Cillian agrees wryly. "Rather attached to it myself."

“It is,” Anna admits, looking somewhat saddened. “He passed away rather suddenly a few months ago. He left us this house, and I just wish I would’ve had the chance to thank him in person. I never got the chance to meet him. I don’t have any photographs of him or anything to even hang up on a wall to remember him by. It’s funny I’d have a neighbor with the same name.”

“You know, that is *funny*,” I remark, looking at Cillian with a subtle *I-told-you-so* smile. “Guess the universe has a sense of humor.”

“Must mean it’s meant to be,” he declares, winking at me. “I’m sure he knows how grateful you are. Don’t worry. We hope you’ll the house. I know he enjoyed getting it ready for you.”

Anna beams at his words, wiping tears from her eyes. “Thank you. You’re so kind. I’m glad he had neighbors like you in his last days.”

“If you or those boys ever need anything,” I tell her, “you just let us know. We’re happy to help.”

“Thank you, Sarah . . .” Anna pauses.

“McCready,” I say, looking to Cillian with a wry smirk. “Sarah and Cillian *McCready*.”

Cillian plays along with some amusement. “Pleasure to meet you.” His eyes trail to his nephews, happily playing in the yard. “And I think you’ll like it here. Plenty of friends for those boys to make on this street. Very safe neighborhood.”

He can say that because he enforces it almost religiously, a silent protector along this whole road.

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Anna chuckles. “Any advice for me?”

“Oh, just keep an eye out for crows,” I reply sweetly. “They have a tendency to get a little mischievous around here.”

“Good to know. I’ll be certain to keep that in mind when I’m out in the garden.” Anna steps away, waving. “Nice meeting you again.”

“You too!” I call as Cillian’s arm snakes around my waist.

He rumbles in my ear. “I really have to pretend to be a McCready now? The injustice.”

“You’ll just have to make your peace with it,” I murmur back to him, nuzzling my temple against his. “You’re the one who didn’t want her knowing.”

“She’s got wee ones,” Cillian answers softly. “And ours is not a kind world to innocents like that. The longer they have their mother and their own lives apart from ours, the better.”

“I agree,” I whisper, looking up at him. “What if we had one?”

Cillian blinks at me. “Had one what?”

“A life,” I say dryly. “You silly man. A *baby*.”

Cillian is stunned. I kiss his cheek to bring him out of it. “Well, I hate to tell you, but my artillery ain’t exactly firing live rounds anymore.”

“I know that,” I say, squeezing him. “It’s not like my ovaries work now either. But when my hunger is fully controlled, maybe at the turn of the century, we could always adopt one.”

“That could be dangerous,” Cillian says, uncertain. “A weakness to be exploited by our enemies.”

“Or a joy that’s only ours,” I reply. “And a future Morrigan vampire we can raise in a loving environment with a village of protection at our backs.”

“You make a compelling argument, Mrs. Darragh.”

“I’m not just a pretty face.”

Anna opens her door with her key for the first time, the boys bouncing at her side, eager to see their new home.

I can see the pride swelling in Cillian’s chest, bearing witness to his family finally arriving in the home he’s toiled to make safe and comforting.

He takes my hand and guides me back into the house. “We’ve got a few decades to think it over, aye?”

My heart is full. “Plenty of time.”

Epilogue



August 2, 1983

Michael,

As instructed, I've sent our fleetest and most capable to all four corners of the earth to get a better idea of how large the Order of the Lily has become. I anticipate their return by the end of the week. We should continue writing missives in this way while the damned Feds conduct their investigations on Larry Dunne and the Irish Mob. Last thing we need is for them to pick up our conversations over the telephone.

Do they really think we can't see their surveillance vans? Silly Americans.

Sarah and I will remain in Ireland until the end of the year. This honeymoon is something she and I both needed. Being able to show her everything from our past, in Dublin and outside of it, has been healing for me. I even brought her to Helena's resting place, and we left flowers upon her grave.

Keep an eye on Brody for me, as he writes to tell me he's still a bit shaky around mortal folk. Tell Fionn not to let him spend too much time with Sean

Moore. He's a good boy, but an impressionable fellow. In fact, don't let any new bloods hang around with the likes of Sean at all, ever. I'm still not sure it was a good idea to admit him into your good graces, but I suppose time will tell.

Sarah tells me Peter Blackwood corresponds with her regularly. He is forming a slow friendship with Cezar Monte Vigil in California as he rests from his ordeals at St. Ketari. Catholic and pagan ways are foreign to him. But he's begun to commune with the Morrigan again, his connection to Her restored. And with time, Sarah is certain he will become a force to contend with on our side.

I was more than surprised by your last letter. The Hecatēi, upset by Blackwood's pardon? I hadn't known he'd hunted them just as viciously as he hunted us in days long past. Do your best to entreat and reason with Antonio Briganti, since Constantino and that fucker Carmine will find any reason to start a feud anew. After all, they've several vampires from the time of the Borgias. Surely it can't be that threatening to them that we have an ex-hunter in our midst.

I can't explain why, but I have a creeping feeling that they're up to something. I'm not sure what it is, yet, but time will tell.

Keep me posted.

*Your dear friend,
Cillian Darragh*



Desmond Moore

It's an odd thing not to spend my time wandering aimlessly across America,

little more than a vagabond atoning for sins I'll never be forgiven for. Yet, here I've lived in Boston for the past thirteen years. Roots have finally grown where I thought there could be none.

And pretending to be human is easier than I thought.

It's past five o'clock, and the office—*my* office—is closing. Law has changed within the past hundred years since I've practiced it, but I've had nothing but time on my hands, and I'm finally caught up. It's easy for me to get what I want when I'm in the Brotherhood. A law degree, an implemented paper trail stemming from my original alma mater in Cambridge.

If any human were to go digging, they'd find nothing amiss. And that's the way I prefer it.

I glance up at the sign of my practice: *Moore & Associates*. It's been six months since I officially opened. I specialize in civil prosecution, and seeing as we have a judge in our Brotherhood too, it can only benefit us, having me in the wings if ever something might threaten our hidden world.

I'm packing my briefcase in my car next to my violin case when I hear the flapping of wings behind me. When I turn, my brother Sean stands before me with a wolfish smirk.

He ambles around my champagne Buick Regal, admiring it. "Drowning in money these days, are we, brother?" He clicks his tongue, peering at my office. "Come a long, long way from the coffin ships."

Sean and I don't normally talk. This is more than unusual. I have to keep myself guarded and ensure I don't open up too quickly. He's waiting for me to make a mistake like that again. Show my naivety, playing on my desire to mend fences that are beyond broken.

I learned well enough from the last time he pretended to be amenable to allow bygones to be bygones. "What do you want, Sean?"

"Now, what kind of a way is that to greet your long-lost brother?" Sean replies, coming to face me with a *tsk*. "I'm part of the Brotherhood too, you know. You can't ignore me forever."

I snort, shutting my car trunk. “I never did the ignoring. That’s been you for a very long time.”

“Well, you deserved it,” Sean replies. “But who knows? Maybe I’m coming around.”

“Doubtful,” I reply dryly, not about to be drawn in again. We haven’t marked each other’s presence since December, and this is too random. Too out of the blue. He’s either up to something or possibly just bored. That’s often his way. “What is it you *really* want?”

Sean hums. “I want you to pack up this cute little practice of yours and leave Boston. Go back to California, back to your Spaniard friend. Or back to the mountains in—Montana, was it? Wherever you skulked around. I don’t care.”

“Indiana.” I frown. “This is my home now, just as much as it is yours.”

The smile fades from Sean’s face, replaced with nothing but hatred. And if I’m honest, I hate him too. Everything about him. The fact that he’s impulsive, reckless, self-serving. That he revels in promiscuity when we were taught to be better than that. How he’s following the rules for now, but I know deep down he won’t be able to keep it up forever.

He’ll do something stupid. Get himself thrown out, exiled. And it’ll be me everyone mistrusts, because despite everything awful Sean has done, I’m always there if he needs my protection.

Because he’s my brother. The only one I’ve got. No one gets to clean his clock except me. And I’ve walloped him plenty of times. Something he’ll never admit.

“You still think you’re better than me, don’t you?” Sean says, his voice dangerously light, the way it gets when one little word can set him off and cause him to swing. Except I don’t fear him or his tantrums. “Desmond Moore, the perfect son. Mum’s favorite.”

“That’s not true, and you know it. She loved you more,” I grunt, fetching out my car keys. I don’t need to drive. I can fly. But I need to keep up

appearances. “If you’re here to pick a fight, just say so. We’ll skip the talk, and I can wipe the parking lot with your sorry arse now.”

“So prim and proper, pretending to be some uppity lawyer,” Sean answers gleefully. He holds out his hands briefly. “But I’m not here to pick a fight. See? Hands to myself. But I am here to tell ya.”

“Tell me what?” I grumble, tiring of this.

“Leave Boston,” Sean replies. “Because if you stay, I’ll burn everything and everyone you love just so you can feel how I felt that day. You have my solemn word.”

He means it. Every word. Sighing heavily, I give him one short glance as he stands there watching me intently, thumbs in his belt loops. Then I slip into the driver’s seat. “Go home, Sean.”

Sean’s eyes flash gold. “Final warning.”

“I said, go home.” I shut the door. “Leave me in peace.”

He walks up and leans down to peer into the driver’s window, wiggling his fingers at me. “Have it your way, brother,” Sean says, too cheerily.

When I check my gas tank meter and look back, he’s gone, the parking lot vacant and the beating of his wings already far off.

I slouch in my seat, pinching my brow.

Trouble is my brother’s middle name. I’m not sure when or where he’ll make good on his threat.

But it’ll come. It’ll be when I expect it least.

And likely, I’ll deserve it.



***Desmond, Sean, and the other members of the Morrigan Brotherhood will
return.***



The Saga Continues

SACRED BLOODLINES, OLD RITUALS.



SOUTH BOSTON, 1959.

Thomas Coffey, the newest ordained priest at the Cathedral of St. Winifred, has quite a dilemma: he's actually a druid, descended from a long line of magic and secrecy. Now that he's of age, he needs to find a wife worthy of the Druids and their ancient traditions that have endured over thousands of years.

His father insists he chooses a woman from their own kind. But there's only one woman Tommie has eyes for- one he hasn't seen in years. And when he spots Molly Shea onstage dancing at the local jazz club, he's determined to secure her heart.

Family approval be damned.

Dancing is all Molly can do to stay afloat when her brother gets himself into trouble with the wrong people. She never imagined she'd run into Tommie Coffey, her old Catholic-school-yard bully, while struggling to make ends meet.

Tommie is forbidden fruit, but she can't afford to be tempted when she has a hard deadline. If she doesn't pay her brother's debts, her family will be

punished, and worse . . .

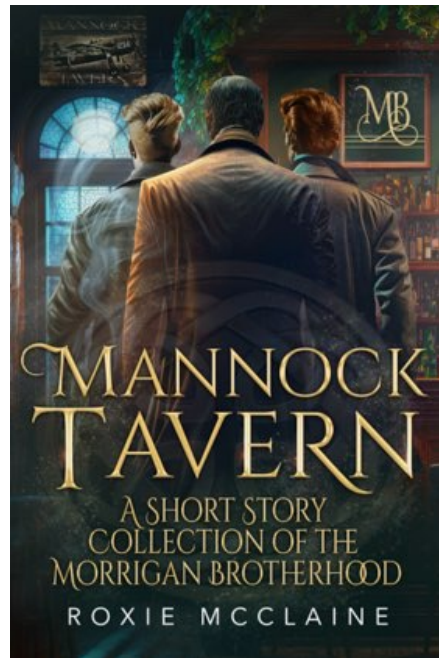


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About the Author



Roxie McClaine is a sci-fi, fantasy, and paranormal romance author. A military wife and mother, she currently resides in the American Southwest with her husband, two children, a dog, and a cat.

Roxie is *barely* descended from any Irish heritage but has loved Irish music and fairy tales ever since discovering them as a child.

She continues to actively research both mythological and non-fiction Irish history for fun and hopes to visit Ireland with her husband someday.

