

THE
Bassessy
ONE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
LESLIE NORTH

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BLURB

My new nanny posting with Irish billionaire Declan Byrne and his adorable niece, Catie, feels so right—at first.

But everything—and I mean *everything*—is wrong about Declan. We first met on a flight where he basically told me that it'd be “grand” if I could stop talking. I can't help it. I'm a nervous flyer. He's a total grump. He obviously doesn't like me. Too distractingly gorgeous to be around for any length of time. And he's made it clear that as soon as he can find another nanny, I'm gone.

This Minnesota girl is made of tough stuff though, so I *know* I can make it through one Irish summer with one sexy Irish curmudgeon.

At least I thought I could, until he became that much harder to resist. Because the more I work with Declan, the more I realize there's something growing between us...an attraction that's impossible to resist. Declan hides a kind heart behind his stormy, gruff demeanor. And that *accent*. That suave Irish brogue makes my insides melt.

The cardinal rule of being a nanny is to not get involved with the family. To maintain a professional distance.

Sleeping with Declan would definitely cross that line.

Some rules are meant to be kept.

Others are meant to be shattered.

MAILING LIST

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CONTENTS

1. Declan
2. Olivia
3. Declan
4. Olivia
5. Declan
6. Olivia
7. Declan
8. Olivia
9. Declan
10. Olivia
11. Declan
12. Olivia
13. Declan
14. Olivia
15. Declan
16. Olivia
17. Declan
18. Olivia
19. Declan
20. Olivia
21. Declan
22. Olivia
23. Declan
24. Declan
25. Olivia
26. Declan
27. Olivia
28. Olivia
29. Declan
30. Olivia
31. Declan
32. Olivia
33. Declan
34. Declan
35. Olivia
36. Declan
37. Olivia
38. Declan
39. Olivia

[Epilogue](#)

[End of The Bossy One](#)

[Free book offer](#)

[Thank you!](#)

[Make an Author's Day](#)

[About Leslie](#)

[Also by Leslie](#)

DECLAN

An Irishman walks into an airport.

And wishes it was a bar.

Not the best of setups, especially when I was the Irishman, but what can I say? I was overtired, stuck in a hellish airport...and I'd had *fucking* enough.

I wasn't usually like this, mind you—I might not be a saint, but I did know how to be a polite enough member of society. Of course, whether the Chicago airport was a part of society or the seventh circle of hell...well, the jury was still out on that one.

First, they'd kept my incoming flight on the tarmac for so long there was a chance I was going to miss my connecting flight. But I'd still thought I had just enough time to grab some damn food from an airport kiosk.

That was when the cashier confiscated my credit card and accused me of identity theft because, and I quote, "You can't possibly be Declan Byrne. As if he'd ever fly coach."

Because, obviously, Declan Byrne was so rich he must have wings made of money.

If only.

Now I was hungry *and* running late. Everywhere I turned, there was some meandering idiot with a suitcase blocking my way, acting like they'd never been in a damn airport before. The last twenty-four hours had been a

nightmare, and all I wanted to do was get on the damn plane that would *finally* take me to the sister who needed me.

I was panting when I got to the gate and shoved my ticket at the airline staffer.

He squinted when he saw my name. “Ha. Declan Byrne. Just like the Irish guy who invented that pathetic social media platform. Everyone acts like Snug is so great, but in my opinion it’s just for losers who hate humor. Did you know my account got flagged just for making a few harmless jokes about that bitch who won the Nobel Prize?”

I gritted my teeth.

For a split second, I considered buying the stupid airline and getting his contract flagged, same as his “harmless” comments had been. Lucky for him, I had bigger fish to fry.

He smiled conspiratorially. “Wonder what old Declan’s doing these days, eh?”

Seriously?

“I’ll tell you what he’s doing,” I replied. “He’s waiting for you to scan his fucking ticket.”

That did it.

His eyes widened, and he scanned the ticket so fast you could’ve mistaken him for a member of a Formula 1 pit crew. I ignored his mumbled apologies, rushed down the ramp, and onto the plane. I hadn’t flown economy in years, but this had been the fastest way to get to Faribault-Northfield, Minnesota. My business partner was already using our company’s private plane, and there had been some kind of paperwork hang up when I tried to charter a private one.

Contrary to popular belief, a gigantic pile of money isn’t the same as having a genie in a bottle. Then again, I think even a genie would have trouble finding Faribault-Northfield on a map. My sister wasn’t kidding when she said she wanted peace and quiet in the US.

If only she had found it.

When I got into my seat—if you could even call the scuffed-up chair a seat—I collapsed in relief.

“Passengers, please take your seats,” a flight attendant said. “We’ll be closing the cabin door soon to prepare for takeoff.”

At least there was no one sitting next to me. Maybe I could finally relax enough to get some damn sleep. With some luck, by the time I opened my eyes again, I’d already be at—

“Sorry, sorry! I got here as fast as I—oh, sorry!”

I heard a commotion up toward the front of the plane, and then a pretty redhead appeared, apologizing profusely as she hauled an over-packed duffel bag up the aisle. “I’m so sorry! Ooops, didn’t mean to... Shoot, was that your head, sir?”

I massaged my forehead, feeling a headache coming on. I just wanted to get to my sister Sinead and her daughter Catie. But no, I was on a damn plane, waiting for Miss Over-Packed Duffel Bag to find the right angle to squeeze her bulging bag in the overhead compartment across the aisle from me.

“It’s fine,” she said valiantly, smiling at no one in particular. “I’ve almost got it.”

She hopped in place, trying to shove her bag into the compartment with her shoulder. It was useless. If this was a cage match, that bag of hers would’ve been the clear favorite.

“Jesus,” I swore under my breath. I stood up, trying to grab the bag from her hands. “I’ve got it.”

Apparently, I’d picked the one woman who was allergic to accepting help.

“Thanks, but I’ve got it,” she said, her voice coming from somewhere on the other side of the giant duffel bag. All I could see were her fingers, buried so deep in the canvas you’d think she was hauling a concrete slab.

“Clearly you don’t,” I grunted. “And you’re holding up the rest of the plane.” I wrested the duffel from her—and the concrete slab she’d hidden inside it—

and shoved it into the overhead compartment.

“I said I was fine.” She looked up at me, disheveled locks of fiery red hair falling across her face. “I get that you’re trying to be helpful, and flying is probably stressful for you. But—”

I slammed the overhead compartment closed and sat back down in my row.

“Seriously?” she continued. “I appreciate the help, but—”

“You’re welcome,” I cut her short, praying to God this put an end to whatever conversation this woman wanted to have. Unless she was carrying a dead body inside that duffel bag—you never know with people—there was nothing more interesting right now than falling asleep.

“If everyone could please take their seat,” the flight attendant said again, sounding a little desperate.

But the woman didn’t move along and take her seat. Instead, she started fishing for something in her purse. Her wide hazel eyes took up her whole face, which was delicate and sprinkled with freckles. Her bright red hair spiraled in messy curls around her flushed cheeks.

If I wasn’t in such a rush, and she wasn’t such a walking disaster...

No. She wasn’t my type. Too clumsy, too talkative, too...*much*.

She fished her phone out of her purse and frowned at the screen. Then she looked up at me with narrow eyes.

“What?” I demanded.

If she recognized me and decided now was the time to lodge a customer complaint...

Instead, she held up her phone, showing her ticket info. “I think you might be in my seat.”

Fuck me, I thought, as I reluctantly surrendered the aisle seat.

Of course I had a seatmate...and of course it’d be this woman.

I grunted and moved over to the window seat, which had significantly less

leg room. With my knees pressed tight against the front seat, I felt like a coiled spring someone had tried to squeeze into a sardine can. Just what I needed.

Her shoulder bumped mine as she took her place. She smelled like lavender.

“Wow. Good thing I’m short.” She looked at me, her right eyebrow lifting into an arch. A thin, amused smile dawned on her lips. “These seats must be really uncomfortable for tall people like you.”

I didn’t say anything. *Please God, let her not be one of those women who says every single thought that comes into her mind.*

“Not that I’m short-short. Actually, I’m average. The average American woman got shorter this year.”

Apparently, God didn’t like me very much.

She took a deep breath. With a quick gesture, she finger-combed her disheveled hair. “Look, if we’re stuck together, we might as well get along. Let’s start over. I’m Olivia.” She held out her hand to me and smiled, rueful.

As if I’d ever need to know this woman’s name.

I didn’t say anything, but my glower must have been eloquent, because her wide, genuine smile faltered a bit. Just enough to make me feel like an arse. Reluctantly, I took her hand. “Declan.”

“Declan. *Lovely* name. I don’t think I’ve ever met a Declan.” Her smile returned to full bloom. “Don’t you think traveling’s better when you get to know the people around you?”

I snorted. I needed to make a new friend on this trip like I needed a hole in the head.

“No,” I said shortly, and took my hand back.

This was going to be a long flight.



A half hour later she was still talking. I couldn't tell if it was her personality, or her own perky way of punishing me for my earlier rudeness.

Maybe both.

Her voice had a soft, pleasant warmth to it, but dear God, did there have to be so *much* of it? So far she'd opined on which airlines had the best miles plans, the institutional discrimination against left-handed people, why outside concerts were more fun, the relative shortage of pop songs about women named Olivia, and the year her favorite shade of purple was invented.

"Oh, excuse me, can I have a glass of white wine?" Olivia asked the passing flight attendant. "It's been a rough day."

"We're not doing full beverage service on this flight," the flight attendant said. "It's only an hour and forty minutes. Also, it's eleven in the morning." There was more than a hint of judgment in the flight attendant's voice.

"Oh." Olivia deflated. "Sure. That makes sense."

The flight attendant walked away. Olivia stayed silent.

"Finally," I muttered, slouching deeper into my seat.

"Oh, *now* he talks," Olivia huffed.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I demanded.

"Nothing. None of my business." She mimed zipping her lips.

Right.

I waited, counting in my head. 1, 2, 3, 4...

"It's just that I've met your type before," Olivia burst out. "You're the type of guy who's only interested in talking if you get to judge and mock people. Because God forbid you get over yourself and just be *friendly*."

"I am friendly."

If this sounds like I was caving, that's because I was. Then and there, I would've confessed to murder if that made her shut up for more than five consecutive minutes.

“You’ve barely said a word to me,” she retorted. “And you only answer in grunts. That’s not what I’d call friendly.”

“I—”

“Am I annoying you? Because if I am, I won’t say a word more.” God himself was laughing. “I just thought this flight would go by faster with some conversation, that’s all. Besides, and I’m not proud to admit it, I’m a nervous flyer. Being God knows how many miles up in the air, it makes me nervous. And after the day I just had...I needed the distraction. But, fine, message received. Loud and clear. I won’t say a word more.”

I held my breath.

“Not even if you ask me to,” she continued. “Okay, maybe if you ask me nicely. But otherwise—”

“Seriously?” I looked up at the ceiling and rolled my eyes. “I get the nervous flyer thing, but you really need to take a deep breath here. I mean...bloody hell.”

“That was uncalled for.” She sounded genuinely hurt. Then her eyes narrowed. “I don’t know who you are but—”

“I’m just a guy with a growing headache,” I volleyed back, my annoyance getting the best of me. “And your endless talking isn’t helping matters.”

“You know what... No, no, I’m not sinking to your level.” She crossed her arms and looked away from me. She was probably going for calm superiority, but she just looked annoyed.

Since sleep clearly wasn’t happening on this flight, I checked my phone. Luckily, the plane had Wi-Fi.

But I found myself at a loss of whom to message. I didn’t particularly want to reach out to any of my real friends. What would I even say? *Funny story. My sister just told me she’s an alcoholic and asked me to look after her kid while she’s in rehab.*

I wasn’t ready for that.

Instead, I logged onto Snug, the social media app my friend Anil and I had

launched five years ago, and pulled up my chat with @1000words. She ran a popular blog on Snug reviewing children's picture books. Everything she'd recommended, my niece Catie had loved. One of my replies on a review had triggered a conversation and then, eventually, a friendship. I had no idea who @1000words was in real life, and she definitely didn't know who I was. Unlike most of the other billionaires I knew, I hadn't been born with money. My anonymous Snug account was one of the few places where I got to let my guard down and be that regular guy again for a few minutes.

Maybe that's what made @1000words easier to talk to right now.

Any new picture book recommendations? I'm about to spend sixteen hours traveling with an easily bored six-year-old, and I'm not above bribery.

She didn't respond.

Of course she didn't.

The way my luck was going, she'd probably decide to go on a digital cleanse or something else equally idiotic.

"I don't normally drink in the morning," Olivia said defensively to me.

Did she seriously think that I was still thinking about her? Like I had nothing better to do than ponder the drinking habits of the most annoying seatmate in the world?

I could use a drink, I thought, then remembered Sinéad and winced.

"If you must know—"

"Please don't," I muttered.

"I was fired today," Olivia said. "Again."

"How?" I asked, incredulous. "It's not even noon and you've been on a plane for most of the morning."

Even she couldn't be that incompetent.

"Oh, don't be a pedantic jerk about it. Technically, I was fired yesterday," Olivia admitted. "But I haven't been to bed yet. When a family fires you, it's best to leave as soon as possible."

“A whole family fired you?” I asked, confused. I had a vision of some beleaguered office manager calling his mom for support just so he could get a word in edgewise as he tried to shove Olivia out the door.

“Just the parents. I’m a live-in nanny,” she explained, which I guessed made sense. When she wasn’t snapping at me, she had an open, pretty, approachable air that reminded me of my favorite first class teacher. Except no one would have dreamed of firing Mrs. Malone.

Damn. I should probably hire a nanny for Catie, I thought. I’d be working, and since it was summer, it wasn’t as if I could send her off to school. I’d rushed to the States so fast I hadn’t considered what lay beyond the immediate future.

“They kept asking me to do things that were bad for their kid,” Olivia said, true anger leaking into her voice for the first time since she’d stepped on the plane. She clearly didn’t like me. But whatever these parents had done had obviously made her absolutely furious. “They signed Wyatt up for so many activities he developed an ulcer from stress. I didn’t even know an eleven-year-old *could* get an ulcer. But somehow, I’m the bad guy for refusing to take a crying kid to a violin teacher who yells at him.”

When she was angry on behalf of a child, she didn’t look annoying. She looked fierce.

It suited her.

“How does one hire a nanny?” I asked, figuring I might as well get something useful out of the conversation.

“You lie and say you’ll respect the nanny’s childcare expertise.” Olivia’s sarcasm would have been more biting if she wasn’t struggling not to yawn.

Clearly, she wasn’t as used to sleepless nights as I was.

“Did you respond to an ad online, or did they reach out to you?” I prompted. “I know someone who might need a nanny.” If I told her it was me, she might try to turn the rest of this flight into a job interview. And while she clearly cared about children, I was looking for someone less...her.

Olivia bent down to root around in her purse. Her shirt road up in the back,

showing a swathe of smooth, fair skin. She straightened and handed me a business card. “Here. I’m a vetted nanny with Sunny Days Childcare. Your friend can go online and fill out a form saying what they’re looking for. They’ll send your friend a selection of potential nannies. If your friend’s Irish too, he or she will want to check the box requesting someone who’s willing to travel internationally.”

“Grand.” I accepted the card and put it in my wallet. Since she’d helped me, and I’d grudgingly given up hope of anything resembling peace and quiet, I figured I could return the favor. Even if she was the worst seatmate in the history of the world. “You know, losing a job can be an opportunity to redirect your career. Look for ways to improve yourself so it doesn’t happen again.”

Olivia tilted her head, jaw tense. “Improve myself? Are you saying it’s okay for parents to give their children stress ulcers?”

I massaged the bridge of my nose, wishing I hadn’t said anything.

“Or the time before that when—”

“Wait, how many times have you been fired?” It couldn’t have been more than three, right? No one could possibly get fired that many times without learning their lesson.

Olivia crossed her arms, mutinous. “None of your business.”

Fuck. It was more than three. If she wasn’t so annoying, it would have been almost impressive. The eighth wonder of the professional world—the unhirable woman.

“At this point, I’d be looking for the common denominator, sweetheart,” I said.

“How dare you,” she said.

I hit the call button to summon the flight attendant and reached for my wallet.

“Yes?” the flight attendant asked when she reached me.

I handed her a €100 bill. “Please get this woman her damn white wine.” If she’d been up all night, then I was pretty sure that one drink would be enough

to make her fall asleep. Maybe then I'd finally have some silence. Already this flight felt longer than the one from Dublin to New York.

The stewardess took the bill discreetly, then returned with a plastic cup full to the brim of white wine. After some hesitation, Olivia accepted it. Hopefully, that would steady her nerves and, as a bonus, earn me a few minutes of silence.

"I still think you're a condescending ass," she told me. "I'm just drinking it because it would be a waste not to."

"Oh my God. Drink the wine, don't drink the wine... I couldn't care any less. I get it, you don't like flying, you're having a rough day, and you clearly need to vent. It's just..." I raked a hand over my face. "I really don't need to hear every bloody thought that runs through your head. Believe it or not, I have a lot on my plate right now, and you're making it impossible to think straight."

Olivia gaped at me, stunned.

For a moment I wondered if I'd gone too far.

Then she faced forward, studiously ignoring me and blessedly, *silently* drank her wine.

Sometimes going too far is the only thing that gets the job done.

After about twenty minutes, I glanced over and realized Olivia had fallen asleep. I rescued the half-empty cup from her hands since it was tipping in the general direction of my lap. Next to me, Olivia released a delicate little snore.

Christ, she can't even sleep quietly, I thought.

I nudged her shoulder gently, hoping to jostle her into a position that would result in less snoring.

It worked. She frowned in her sleep, readjusting her position. I felt a surge of victory, until she shifted and dropped her head down to my shoulder.

I froze. Her wild, curly hair felt soft against my jaw. I ran through various options for getting her off me, but discarded them all since they came with

the risk she'd wake up and start talking again.

She sighed in her sleep and nestled closer to me.

Something in my gut liked that. Not that I'd ever admit it.

I didn't move for the remainder of the flight. When we landed a half hour later, I rolled my shoulder.

"Wake up, *a chara*," I said gruffly. The term meant friend, unless you were annoyed, in which case...well, it still meant friend, but with a more sarcastic edge. "We've landed."

Olivia jolted upright. She blinked, taking in the people around us unbuckling and queuing to get off the plane. Her hair was mussed on one side from where she'd fallen asleep on me, and I could see faint lines on her cheek from the texture of my sweater.

She looked soft like that. Sure, she was chaos incarnate and annoyingly talkative. But there was a sweetness to her when she let her guard down. Someone should protect that.

Not me, obviously. But someone.

"Oh my God," Olivia said. "I'm so sorry I fell asleep on you."

"It's fine," I said, handing her back her half-drunk plastic cup of wine.

"I mean, you don't even *like* me," she said. "Either that or you just hate people. And then I went ahead and..." She gestured helplessly to my shoulder, indicating where she'd fallen asleep. Unfortunately, she was holding the wine with the hand she was empathetically gesturing with.

It sloshed out of the cup and drenched my face.

This. Fucking. Woman.

Any sympathy I'd felt for her vanished. In fact, it more than vanished. It curled up in a deep dark hole where no one would ever find it and died a really quick death.

I wiped the wine off of my face. She stood frozen, blocking the aisle—and my exit.

“Move.” I took a deep breath. “Out.” Another. “Of. My. Way.”

“I’m so sorry—”

No, no more of this.

“Just move.”

She flinched and stepped out of the way.

I shoved past her and sped up the aisle. The only bright side in this whole goddamn day was that I was never going to see *Olivia* ever again.



Sinead and Catie lived in half of an old house that had been turned into two apartments. I’d barely knocked when the door opened, and Catie came flying into my arms.

“Uncle Declan!”

I dropped my overnight bag, scooped her up, and hugged her tight. She was taller than she’d been at Christmas, but she still had the round cheeks, bright blue eyes, and wispy brown hair I remembered. She clung to me tightly.

“There, there,” I said softly, rubbing her back. “Your mum has explained that you’re visiting me, right?”

She nodded, looking worried.

I tugged her ear, and she giggled.

“It’ll be brilliant, I promise. Now go get your suitcase. I need to talk to your mum.” I set her down, and she dashed to her room.

I poked my head in rooms until I found Sinead, sitting in a small, cluttered kitchen. She looked thinner than the last time I saw her—too thin—and her dark hair was lank and lifeless. She was hunched over the kitchen table, but she looked up at my entrance and her stark blue eyes—the same color as mine—looked weary and washed out.

I sat down in the chair across from her and cleared my throat. “I’ve found a

good treatment center nearby. Serenity Lake. They suggested a sixty-day stay.”

“What? No, that’s too much. I want to do St. Marks for thirty days. It’s cheaper.”

Damn her stubbornness. I’d throw her over my shoulder and cart her off to Serenity Lake myself if I had to.

“I don’t care about the cost,” I gritted out. “This one’s better. And I’ve already signed you up.”

She opened her mouth to argue, then closed it and sighed. “Fine. Fine. Thank you.”

Watching the fight go out of her that fast scared me. It wasn’t like her at all. I reached for her hand. “What happened, love?”

She pulled away. “It doesn’t matter. I realized I had a problem, so I’m fixing it.”

I frowned. It did matter, damn it. What she was going through mattered to me. But I didn’t want to push her. Not when she looked like she was barely holding herself together.

Catie came into the room, dragging her pink-and-purple suitcase behind her. “I’m ready,” she announced.

Sinead looked toward her daughter. “Did you pack any clothes? Or just toys and books?”

Catie looked sheepish.

Sinead stood and took Catie’s suitcase. “I’ll make sure you have everything else you need.” Then she left. I caught her wiping at a tear as she stepped out of my sight.

Searching for something to distract Catie, I remembered Olivia’s business card in my pocket. “Want to help me pick your new nanny? They’ll look after you while I’m at work, so I want it to be someone you like.”

Catie hesitated. “Can we find someone whose favorite color is also purple?”

I smiled, my heart cracking a bit. I wanted to make sure Catie only ever remembered this as a fun summer holiday when she'd been spoiled rotten. "Absolutely," I promised.

OLIVIA

One day after the most unpleasant flight of my life—including the flight where a child threw up on me—I was lying on my couch, re-watching *You've Got Mail* for the millionth time. I was still feeling like crap after being fired for the fifth time in two years, and I needed a comfort movie. And this was the ultimate comfort movie. Tom Hanks, Meg Ryan, and the cutest children's bookstore in the whole world.

But today as I watched Tom Hanks flirt with Meg Ryan, introducing her to the adorable kids playing his aunt and his brother, I sat straight up, suddenly realizing I never sent @DBCoder the picture book recommendations he'd asked for. I'd gotten his message when I was stuck on that hellish flight, but had completely forgotten about it, distracted by the rudest seat mate ever.

Imagine trying to give career advice to a complete stranger, then telling her to shut up when she gently pushed back.

Sure, his accent had been hot. Okay, all of him had been hot. He'd worn an expensive cable-knit sweater that made him look cuddly and strong at the same time, and brought out the piercing blue of his eyes. His jawline was strong. His hair was thick and dark. His skin was flawless. He looked, frankly, a little photoshopped.

But no amount of hotness could make up for bad manners, as far as I was concerned. Lusting after a hot, rude guy was a mistake I would have made at 21. Not 28.

No, at 28 I preferred to focus on fictional men played by Tom Hanks who understood that the way to a woman's heart was discussing books—and buying books for kids. That was what had brought @DBCoder and me together in the first place.

I crossed the room to inspect my bookshelf, looking for something new I could recommend to him. There wasn't much of a room to cross. Since I spent most of my time living with the families I nannied for, my own "apartment" was just the spare room over my friend's garage that I rented at a deep discount. It had a bed, a toaster oven, and almost enough room for all of my books. I'd amassed quite a collection of titles for kids of all ages, but picture books were definitely my favorite, and I prided myself on being something of a connoisseur. Occupational hazard of being a nanny—if you're going to read the same book to a toddler fifteen times in a row, you want to stack the deck in your favor by making sure you have books on hand that won't make you lose your mind. I'd started the @1000words blog on the suggestion of a friend, and it had blossomed into a really fun hobby—which had, in turn, led to some great virtual friendships.

I was trying to remember if I'd recommended *Tacky the Penguin* on my book blog yet, when my phone started buzzing. I glanced at the screen and my stomach knotted painfully.

Sunny Days Childcare. They were probably calling to tell me they were going to drop my nanny profile from their app. They'd threatened to before, but the mom of the first family I'd nannied for had the wealth and influence to convince them to give me another chance.

Apparently, I'd run out of second chances.

I took a deep breath, sat down on the rug, and answered my phone. "Hello?"

"Olivia. This is Vanessa from Sunny Days Childcare. We need some additional information not included on your profile."

Wait, I thought. *They're not getting rid of me?*

"Are you right or left-handed?" she asked briskly.

"Left," I answered.

“Which is Eric Carle’s best book?” she asked.

I blinked. That was a highly specific question. Most people would have said *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, which was certainly a good one. But I liked the writing in one of his less popular ones better. “I like *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?*”

“Hmm,” Vanessa said. She didn’t sound happy. I wondered if that had been the wrong answer.

“What’s your favorite color?” she asked.

This was such a weird conversation. How could any of this possibly speak to my qualifications as a nanny? “I love all colors,” I said diplomatically. “It’s important to enjoy colors the child likes.”

“*Your favorite color,*” she demanded.

“Purple,” I said.

“Dammit,” she muttered.

I let my head thunk back against my bookshelf. It would be just my luck if I got kicked off of their bougie platform because I had the wrong favorite color.

On the other end of the line, Vanessa gave a long-suffering sigh. “We were going to dismiss you after the feedback from your last clients. But due to the *highly* detailed mandatory requirements of a new client, you are our only viable option.”

My heart sped up. I was getting one more chance.

“If you can get to the airport by 4 p.m. today, the job is yours. But it’s a trial basis only—”

“Yes!” I interrupted, scrambling to my feet. “Yes, I can be at the airport.”

“I’ll email you the relevant information,” Vanessa said.

“Thank you, thank you,” I said. “I won’t let you down.”

Vanessa’s silence was telling. “This is your last chance, Olivia. So for the

love of God, just do what the client asks.”

She hung up before I could explain that I wasn't *trying* to be difficult. The clients just kept asking for dumb things.

This time will be different, I told myself, as I opened my suitcase and started tossing things in. This time I'd be lucky enough to get a good client, and a great kid, and everything would work out.



I was waiting in baggage check area, near the Delta sign, where I was supposed to meet my new boss: an uncle who would be taking care of his niece for two months in Ireland, and needed some extra help. But they weren't here yet. I checked my watch, worried I'd gotten the time wrong.

“You've got to be fucking kidding me,” a man's deep voice said behind me. Except he had an Irish accent, so it sounded more like *feckin'*. A sexy accent that sounded alarmingly familiar.

“Uncle Declan! That's a bad word,” a kid's voice scolded.

I turned around, my stomach sinking. Sure enough, it was the rude stranger from the plane. He looked about as thrilled to see me as I was to see him.

He knows I just got fired, I realized, feeling my cheeks flush with embarrassment. *Why would he want to hire me?*

The kid looked sweet, though. She had her hand in her uncle's, and she was bouncing on her toes, looking nervously around at the airport.

Focus on the kid, I reminded myself. I might be bad at pleasing temperamental parents, but I was really, really good at taking care of children.

I gave the girl a big smile. “Are you Catie Byrne?”

“Yes! How did you know?”

“Because I'm your new nanny, Miss Olivia. It's very nice to meet you.” I squatted down to her level and held out my hand for her to shake. She did.

“You’re left-handed like me,” she told me. “And from the same city as me. And we have the same favorite color.”

The eccentric questionnaire suddenly made a bit more sense. I snuck a glance up at Declan.

“Catie helped come up with the job requirements,” Declan confirmed. He still didn’t look happy to see me. Actually, that was an understatement. He looked as if we were in an apocalypse scenario where he and I were the last two humans on earth and he would rather do a U-turn and walk all the way to Asia than risk crossing paths with me again.

Still, he’d listened to his niece’s opinions on an important decision. So maybe he wasn’t so bad. I stood up, determined to feel optimistic.

Declan didn’t say much as we checked our luggage and he bought my plane ticket. Catie was shy at first, but with a few questions I managed to get her talking. In a half hour, we’d made it through security and were weaving our way through the airport to our gate.

Catie’s eyes lit up when we walked past a café with giant, frosting-covered cookies in the display case. “Can I have one of those?” she asked me.

Declan was checking his phone, barely listening. That didn’t bode well. All signs pointed to another parental figure who paid more attention to the urgent issue on their phone than the child in front of them. If possible, my opinion of Declan sank even lower.

I didn’t *get* people like that. Here was this bright, curious kid, who clearly loved her uncle, and he couldn’t give her the time of day.

What a bastard.

“We have to check with your uncle,” I said, fighting the urge to glare at said uncle. “I don’t know what your healthy eating rules are yet, or if you have any allergies. Plus, it’s almost dinnertime.” Also pouring tons of sugar into a child right before a transatlantic flight seemed like a bad idea.

I looked at Declan pointedly.

“She can have anything she wants,” Declan answered distractedly. He dug

out his wallet and passed me a glossy black credit card like it was spare change.

I opened my mouth to gently suggest a less sugary alternative, but then I remembered I was supposed to try to do exactly what the client asked.

I blew out a sigh and headed over to the cookie display case, Catie's hand in mine.



Sixteen hours later I found myself in Ireland, dragging my and Catie's suitcases behind me.

We'd flown in a private plane this time. It wasn't my first time flying private—one of the hazards of nannying for the rich and rude. But it was the first time the flight crew had ever been that deferential and eager to please. Apparently, Declan was a bigger deal than I'd realized. That didn't help my nerves much—flying was definitely not one of my favorites things—and the knowledge had made my stomach twist uneasily. In my experience, the more “important” the people I worked for were, the worse they were at being a decent boss and a present parent.

I'd done my best to shove my nerves aside for the rest of the trip. Now that we'd finally landed in Shannon, I noticed something else weird about the airport.

No one was rushing. The place was calm and quiet, which I found highly unnatural for an airport.

At least this didn't seem to have anything to do with Declan.

Welcome to Ireland, I thought.

Declan walked next to me, his overnight bag slung over his shoulder. A sleeping Catie had her head nestled on his other shoulder as he carried her like she weighed nothing at all. Even in her sleep, she held on tight to him.

Either she was naturally cautious, or something had happened in her life to make her feel insecure, even in her sleep. I thought of the note Sunny Days

Childcare had sent me, letting me know the mom was in rehab, and that I wasn't supposed to mention it to either Declan or Catie.

I cleared my throat. "So, are all Irish airports this calm or—"

"I appreciate your willingness to take this job. But you should know this is temporary," he interrupted.

Right. I'd forgotten how much he hated small talk, aka being a normal human being.

"Yes." I gave him my best cheery professional smile. "The job description mentioned this was only for a few months."

"No," he said gruffly. "I mean your agency offered to send me another candidate as soon as they find someone else who meets all of my requirements. And given our...interaction...on the plane, I'm inclined to accept their offer. If I believe whoever they find is a better fit for Catie than you..." His tone said he imagined they would be.

My mouth felt dry. If I lost this job, I'd lose my spot at Sunny Days. And while there were other live-in nanny agencies in Minnesota, they paid a lot less and didn't vet the nannies or the clients, which meant you'd spend a lot more time hunting for jobs, and a lot less time working.

What if I had to stop nannying entirely, and find some soul-sucking office job? Or leave Minnesota, and start over somewhere new, where I didn't have any friends or connections?

I clamped down on the panic-inducing thought.

That wouldn't happen. All I had to do was win Catie and Declan over.

I realized Declan was still waiting for my response.

I tipped my chin up and gave him my most dazzling, confident smile. "Good idea. Catie deserves the best possible nanny."

I just had to show a rich, grumpy asshole that that was me.

Easy, right?

DECLAN

“This is beautiful,” Olivia said softly, looking out the passenger window. I tried to see it through her eyes. Fields of emerald green grass, cut through with old rock walls, underneath a thick layer of mist. A few of the towns we’d passed through probably looked quaint to her eyes, with their narrow streets and short, colorful buildings.

But to me it just looked like home.

“We’ll be there in about ten minutes,” I said.

“Why don’t you live in Dublin? That’s where your company is headquartered, right?”

So she’d looked me up. I wondered what she was getting up to when she’d been so quiet on this flight.

“Dublin’s not so far. Only two hours,” I said. “And most of Snug’s workers are scattered all over the world.”

“Do you work from home most days?” she asked.

“I will while Catie’s here.” I turned onto the lane that led to my mansion.

Olivia shifted in her seat. I couldn’t tell if she was pleased or displeased by that revelation.

We drove in silence until I drove up the driveway and Olivia got a look at my home.

“Oh. My. God,” she said.

My architect had replaced the crumbling Victorian mansion that once stood here with four floors of gleaming glass and polished concrete, complete with an indoor pool in the basement.

“I don’t remember this,” Catie’s voice said from the backseat. Her voice sounded small and uncertain in a way that hurt my heart.

“I didn’t realize you were awake, *a stór*,” I said gently. “You probably wouldn’t remember. You and your mum moved away when you were two. Normally Granny and I come to see you.”

I parked, then I led Catie and Olivia inside and started the tour. Everything was spacious and posh, decorated in what my designer called “earth tones and natural textures.” Whatever that meant. I just knew it felt relaxing every time I stepped through the door.

“Here’s the nice big living room your granny uses when she hosts her book club,” I told Catie, leading her through one room and into another. “And here’s the smaller one *I* like, with the massive telly.”

Catie pointed at a wall with some art on it, relaxing enough to smile. “I recognize that.”

I grinned. “This is where I normally video chat you from.”

I looked over at Olivia and caught her watching me and Catie with a smile on her face. She quickly looked away, turning to inspect some photos on the wall.

Unfortunately, that gave me the opportunity to inspect her ass. She had a *great* ass. I feared the rest of her would be equally magnificent, if she ever took that sweatshirt off. I knew Olivia was pretty, but thus far, I’d largely managed to ignore it.

Now that Olivia was living with me, it would be harder to ignore. That might become a problem.

“Who’s this?” Olivia asked, pointing to a striking photo of my da perched on the edge of a boat.

“My grandad,” Catie piped up. “He’s dead.”

“Oh. I’m so sorry,” Olivia said, throwing me a sympathetic look.

I hated that look.

I cleared my throat. “Anyway. The kitchen is that way.”

I showed them the rest of the first floor, with its gleaming kitchen, home gym, and library. I gave Olivia the rundown of my various staff who kept the place running (gardeners, a private chef, housekeepers, et cetera.). Generally they tried to be discreet and do their work when I wasn’t around, or when I was locked up in my office working. I liked my privacy and had never quite gotten used to having staff wandering through my house. But I needed help keeping a place like this running, and people in town needed the work.

I led them up to the second floor, which had the bedrooms and my office. “That’s mine,” I said, gesturing to the door at the far end of the hall.

Catie didn’t listen. She’d found a picture I’d taken of her, Sinead, and my mum having a picnic in the backyard of this house, right after it was built. She stared at the photo of her mum, transfixed.

Olivia looked at me expectantly.

“Most of the other rooms are guest rooms. You can have...er, this one.” I led Olivia to the guest room farthest from mine. It was decorated in shades of pale, creamy yellow and vintage white furniture.

A sunny room for an obnoxiously sunny woman.

“It’s lovely. Wait, is that...?” Olivia said. She ran a reverent hand over one of the chairs. “I saw one of these in a museum once, in an exhibit about the Gilded Age. And now one’s *in my bedroom?*”

I shrugged. It looked like a chair to me.

I half turned to the door. “Anyway. Let’s go—”

“What hours would you like me to work?” Olivia interrupted, then bit her lip. “I’m sorry, I don’t mean to interrupt. But I have a few questions about the work expectations. I find it’s normally best to clear those up early, if that’s all

right with you?”

“It is.” I crossed my arms. “What do you want to know?”

She pulled out a small notepad from her sweatshirt pocket and a pen from her messy bun. “My contract gives you 50 hours a week of my time. When would you like to use them?”

“When I’m at work. But my schedule varies.”

She opened her mouth like she wanted to press for more info, but then she snapped it closed, scribbled something in her notepad, and moved on to her next question. “What’s Catie’s daily routine look like?”

Fuck, I thought. I have no idea.

“She can do what she wants. She doesn’t need a routine.”

Olivia’s eyebrows shot up. “That’s...are you sure?”

I wasn’t. “Do you have any other questions?”

Olivia sighed and added something else to her notebook. I got the sense I was being evaluated—and failing.

“Is there any subject in school she’s struggling with?” Olivia asked. “Anything she could use some extra tutoring in during the summer?”

“She’s smart,” I said defensively.

“I didn’t say she wasn’t smart,” Olivia said in a placating tone. It made my hackles rise even more. It felt like she was trying to manage me. I’d spent enough of my early career trying to manage inept bosses to know when someone else was trying to do the same. And I didn’t need her disapproval.

What if she’s right? What if you’re a bad caretaker for Catie? I squashed the thought.

“Any dietary restrictions?” Olivia chirped. Her smile was bright, but she was clenching her pen so tight her knuckles had turned white.

That answer I knew. “None. But you don’t have to worry about what she’ll be eating. My chef makes lunch and dinner.”

I heard a crash from another room.

“Uh-oh,” Catie said, her voice sounding farther away than the hallway.

Even I knew that was a bad sign.

I ducked into the hallway and followed Catie’s voice to my office. Catie stood in the center of the room, staring down at the floor, where my work laptop’s screen was bent at an unnatural angle.

She looked up at me, eyes wide with the fear of getting in trouble. “I was trying to dry it off. After the water spilled on it.

I winced. Sure enough, a half-filled mug I’d forgotten about lay on its side, water spreading rapidly across my desk.

“Shit, shit,” I muttered, as I yanked off my sweater and did my best to sop up the mess before it could reach anything else important on my desk. Olivia jumped into action beside me, grabbing files of paper and moving them away from the spreading water. We got everything cleared away before I had to resort to stripping off my T-shirt as well.

When we’d finished, I looked at my laptop and winced. It wasn’t the cost of replacing it, it was the hours of work I’d just lost. Normally I backed everything up at the end of the day, but my last workday had been interrupted by Sinead’s call for help.

Catie’s lip trembled, and I realized she was trying not to cry.

“Hey, hey,” I said, kneeling in front of her to give her a hug. “It’s all grand. You didn’t do anything wrong. I’ll fix it. Brave girls don’t cry, right? Can you be brave for me?”

Catie nodded.

Behind me, Olivia cleared her throat. “Actually, crying is nor—never mind, we can talk about that later.” She wrote something else down in that damn notebook.

I pulled back to check Catie’s face. “You good now? Do you want to see your room?”

Her frown gave way to tentative enthusiasm. “I have a room?”

“Of course.” It was the one I’d originally had designed for her when she and Sinead lived here, and I’d never been able to bring myself to change it to anything else. A little over a year ago, I’d finally swapped out the crib for a big-kid bed and had my designer update the décor and toys, in the event Catie and Sinead ever did come back to visit.

I stood, led Catie out of the room, and pointed to her room, which was right across from mine. Catie dashed in ahead of me, gasping when she saw the shelves of toys.

Olivia moved to follow her, but I stopped her with a hand on her arm. “You thought I did something wrong in there, didn’t you?”

“No, of course not...” Olivia was the least convincing liar I’d ever met.

“Hand over your notebook,” I ordered.

She looked mulish, but she did as I asked.

In looping, feminine writing she’d written *Explain emotional authenticity*. Below that she’d written *academic aptitude test: support passions + round out challenge areas* and *get Declan’s work schedule from his assistant every Friday if he has one?*

“Emotional authenticity?” I demanded, zeroing in on the most outrageous. “What the hell does that mean?”

Several expressions flickered across her face in quick succession. It was kind of fascinating how I could see everything she felt clearly spelled out—from nervousness about speaking out to that same stubborn spirit I’d seen when she’d talked about her former charge with the ulcer.

“You told her not to cry,” Olivia explained. “But expressing our emotions is healthy. Otherwise we—” I literally saw her bite her tongue, cutting herself off.

“Oh, don’t stop now,” I goaded. “Otherwise what?”

She glared me at me. “Otherwise, we grow up into grumpy, bossy people.”

“For Christ’s sake.” I scowled and lowered my voice, so Catie wouldn’t hear. “I don’t need you to be her teacher, or an armchair therapist. I just need you to let her be a kid on summer break. That’s all. And keep her out of my office unless it’s important. Understand?” I held out her notebook.

“I understand,” Olivia said, snatching back her notebook.

“Miss Olivia!” Catie called. “Can you read me a story?”

“Sure, sweetie,” Olivia said, stepping into the room. She gasped when she saw the floor to ceiling wall of bookshelves. The picture books were all on the bottom, where Olivia could reach. I normally bought two copies whenever I sent Catie a book. That way I could keep one copy and read it over the phone to her. But after @1000words and I had gotten into a conversation about books we’d loved as tweens and teens, I’d also started stocking the higher shelves with stuff I thought Catie would like when she was older. Plus a few books I’d had as a kid that I didn’t want to get rid of.

Olivia traced her hands over the spines reverently, her disappointment with me temporarily forgotten.

“This is way better than the grown-up library downstairs. I feel like Belle in the scene where she walks into the library,” Olivia joked.

“What’s that make me?” I asked. “The Beast?”

Olivia threw me a wicked smile over her shoulder, and I felt my blood heat.

Then she caught herself, smoothing her expression into something bland and cheerful. “Catie, what book do you want us to read?”

My phone started buzzing—a text from my friend and lawyer Thomas Maher.

I have news. Give me a call?

“I’ve got to make a call.” I glanced at Olivia and Catie, who were already settling into the giant purple beanbag chair in the corner. “Will you be all right?”

I wasn’t entirely sure which one of them I was asking, but Olivia nodded and Catie was already engrossed in her book, so I headed back into my office and

shut the door.

I called Thomas. “What is it?”

“Hello to you too,” Thomas answered. He was an exceptional lawyer, but he loved a good conversation, and you couldn’t rush him for anything. It was one of the many reasons he’d chosen to set up a practice in Galway over the hustle and bustle of a Dublin law firm. “Are you going to make me rush through this?”

“I am. Catie’s in town.”

“What? That’s brilliant,” Thomas’s voice sounded like he was beaming. “We’ll have to have you and Sinead over for dinner. How long are they staying?”

“Sinead’s not here,” I said. “Just Catie and an unhinged nanny. She’s staying for two months.”

Thomas fell silent. When he spoke, it was tentative kindness. “When you say two months, you wouldn’t mean sixty days, would you?”

I sat heavily in my chair, remembering that Thomas’s father-in-law had been in and out of rehab for the past decade.

What if rehab doesn’t help Sinead? a frantic voice inside whispered.

I refused to listen to it. “I’d appreciate your discretion.”

“Of course,” Thomas said. He cleared his throat. “Maybe this isn’t the best time for my news, then.”

“Please, go ahead,” I said, rubbing my forehead. “I need the distraction.”

“I’ve heard rumors that the O’Rourkes are thinking of selling property,” he said.

I straightened, feeling like a jolt of bad electricity had been shot through my system. The O’Rourkes were the scum of the earth. They were the reason I didn’t believe in forgiving your enemies.

A family of petty landlords, the O’Rourkes had been the richest family in Ballybeith for generations—and they’d gotten that wealth on the backs of the

poorest families in town. They'd killed my da, when the family's current patriarch, Mark O'Rourke, decided to drive home drunk when I was in high school.

They'd never faced a single consequence for their actions.

I'd spent the last sixteen years waiting for a way to make them pay.

"Why would they sell now?" I asked, trying to keep my vicious excitement in check.

"You know the son, Seamus? Apparently, he was put in charge a year ago, and he all but ran the business into the ground, wasting money on high-end improvements and renting to people who couldn't afford to pay, then letting them live there for free for months."

I frowned. "Is it some kind of insurance scam? That makes no sense." If anyone else had been responsible, I'd have said it sounded generous—wildly, stupidly generous. But generous was not a word anyone associated with the O'Rourkes.

"I think he's just incompetent," Thomas speculated. "Mark came out of retirement and demoted his son. He's jacked up rents, but it's not enough. Word is he'll have to sell one of his properties."

I held my breath, imagining buying the iconic O'Rourke mansion and razing to the ground. I imagined Mark O'Rourke's rage and grief. Short of killing someone, destroying that mansion was the only way to make the O'Rourkes feel a fraction of what my family had felt. With any luck they'd flee town in shame, and sell their properties to someone else who would run them responsibly.

Maybe then my da would have justice. And I wouldn't feel this jagged, clawing rage in my heart, shading everything I did and experienced. Maybe all my successes would feel different, would feel like enough, once I finally had the one thing I truly wanted.

"Do you think he'll sell the mansion?" I asked.

"It makes sense to. It's their most valuable property," Thomas said. "Do you still want it?"

I could practically taste revenge on my tongue. “I do. Set up a shell company, though. They’d never sell to me.”

“What’s your budget if they put it up for sale?”

“Anything,” I said, viciously. “I want that house.”

“Why?” Thomas asked. “What are you going to do with it?”

“Stop their hold on this town,” I said. That was all he needed to know for now. The house was something of a local landmark—he might not like the idea of me tearing it down. But I could work him around to it. I just needed to get the place first.

I thanked him, said goodbye, and started to hang up.

But Thomas had one last thing to say. “Sinead will be fine, Declan. You know her.”

“I do,” I said.

That was the problem. Sinead was one of the only people I’d never been able to control.

Unbidden, an image flashed in my mind of Olivia with her damn notebook, fighting me on every instruction I gave her.

It felt like more and more of my life was being upended by uncontrollable women.

OLIVIA

The next day I woke up in my peaceful yellow room, determined to start fresh. My first day on the job had not been...ideal. My boss clearly knew nothing about modern childcare. It was frustrating because there had been moments when he seemed to care deeply about Catie, and she him. But then he'd all but vanished for that business call. And when he had come back, he'd barely listened to anything Catie or I said. He'd just nodded absently and agreed with anything Catie said.

"But that was yesterday," I reminded myself. Today would be different.

I found some neatly folded bath towels in the wardrobe and headed to the bathroom. Declan had his own bathroom attached to his room, but Catie and I would be sharing the one in the hall.

I propped my phone on the window ledge and hit my favorite playlist, keeping the volume low so as not to disturb anyone. Then I got naked and tried to turn the shower on.

It was harder than it looked. There were six knobs and two showerheads—and no matter which way I turned any of the knobs, it always seemed to come out cold.

I stood in the bathroom shivering, goose bumps rising on my skin.

You can do this, I told myself. *You can take a cold shower.*

I lasted approximately four seconds before jumping back out of the shower.

There was a simple solution for this. I could ask Declan.

But I could just picture his smug face. The one he'd used when giving me career advice. No, I couldn't bring myself to ask Declan for help.

I studied the shower. Maybe the problem wasn't that it was a fancy rich person shower. Maybe the problem was that it was a fancy European shower.

If that was the case, then maybe there *was* someone I could ask. I didn't know if he'd be awake at 6:40 a.m., but it was worth a shot.

I snapped a photo of the shower controls and sent it to @DBCoder, zooming in as close as I could so that the shower control took up the whole screen and he could actually read the various buttons.

If you can tell me how to turn on the hot water, you'd be my hero. You're the only nice Irish person I know, I typed, and hit send.

He surprised me by responding back immediately.

Unfortunately, he just sent a string of laughing emojis.

Don't mock my pain, I typed. *I am wet, naked, and cold in a foreign country.*

Two of those are good things, he typed back.

My stomach fluttered. Every now and then one of us would say something that strayed perilously close to flirting, but then the other one of us would chicken out. There was something undeniably fun about flirting with a smart, funny guy. But then I'd imagine what it might be like to meet each other in real life, and my courage would fail me.

This time @DBCoder was the one to shift the conversation back into safer territory.

Sorry, he wrote. *You have no idea how badly I needed that laugh. That's a pretty common shower set up. Sending over instructions now. Let me know if they work.*

I followed his instructions when they came through, including waiting five minutes for the water to heat up. When I saw the shower start to give off visible steam, I almost cried in gratitude.

I sent him a thumbs-up, then set my phone aside and hopped into the shower.

When I finished and toweled off, I saw he'd sent me one more message before signing off. *Welcome to Ireland, a chara.*



I stepped out into the hallway, wrapped in a towel, and all but ran into Declan. I squeaked and stumbled back, clutching at the front of my towel to keep it from falling or flapping open.

Declan grabbed my arms to keep me from falling back and tumbling down the stairs. His big hands rested on my bare skin a few seconds longer than he needed to before he released me and stepped back.

“I didn’t mean to scare you,” he said, his voice gruff. “I just wanted to show you how to use the shower. Someone pointed out it might be confusing for Americans.”

I did *not* want to think about what conversation of his could possibly have included me, his showerhead, and my lack of intelligence.

I raised my chin. “I managed just fine without your help.”

“Are you sure?” he insisted. “The place was renovated not that long ago, but some bathrooms might still have the old—”

“Not a problem,” I interrupted. “Like I said, I managed just fine.”

“Grand,” he said. “Grand.” He stepped to the side to let me pass, at the same time I stepped to the side to move around him. We did that a few more times until he solved the issue by turning sideways and stepping around me with his back toward the wall. I slid past him, trying to ignore the scent of freshly showered man.

Why did he smell so *good*?

When he was no longer right in front of me, I remembered there was something he could help me with. I turned back, just in time to catch him checking out my ass. I ignored the flutter of awareness that sent through me.

“What’s a *chara* mean?”

“You say it with a ‘k’ sound, not a ‘ch,’” Declan corrected. “It means friend. Unless you’re being an arse, then it’s sarcastic.”

So @DBCoder wasn’t flirting when he called me *a chara*. He was just being friendly.

Well, I’d never turn up my nose at friendship. Especially friendship that came with hot water help.

Declan cleared his throat. “Was there anything else you needed, or...?” He was having a hard time keeping his eyes from straying below my collarbone, and he didn’t seem happy about it.

I almost laughed, but that would have felt too much like poking the wild, grouchy beast. “No,” I said, and fled for the safety of my room.



I did my best to coax a sleepy Catie out of her shell over a breakfast of eggs and toast. Declan hid behind his laptop, his fingers flying so fast I found myself wondering if he was just hitting the keys for effect. His brain and his hands couldn’t possibly work that fast.

I didn’t think he was listening to me and Catie at all until I suggested she and I go on a walk to Ballybeith’s town center today.

“You should go to Galway instead,” Declan said without looking up from his laptop. “There’s more to see, and it’s actually got a toy store for Catie. There’s nothing to see in Ballybeith.”

I tried to be patient. “That’s a good idea for another day, but I don’t have a car. I don’t even know if my license is valid here.”

“It is,” Declan said. “Just remember what side of the road to drive on. And you can take one of my cars. Or you can use my driver, if you prefer.”

Just like that, my plans for a nice quiet walk where Catie and I could get to know each other and our temporary home went up in smoke. I briefly closed

my eyes and counted to ten until I felt calmer. I was still going to do my best to be quiet, polite, agreeable...but surely I could do that while still expressing *some* opinions, right?

I rose. “Declan? Can I have a word in private?” I nodded toward the next room.

Declan finally looked up from his computer. He stood and followed me out of the kitchen.

I crossed my arms. “I appreciate your input, but I think it’s best if our first day is just about settling in and getting to know her new home.”

“I really don’t think you understand how small Ballybeith is,” Declan said. “It’s an hour walk round trip that will take you past a pub, a church, a restaurant, a grocery store, *and nothing else.*”

I opened my mouth to argue, but he pulled out his wallet and produced a credit card, which he casually pressed into my hands. “Buy her whatever she wants, all right?”

“I don’t think she needs—”

“Actually, some of the smaller places only take cash. You might need this.” He handed me three €50 notes.

“That’s very generous of you, but if you could just listen to me—”

“Olivia, I have other things on my mind today. Do you have a problem following simple instructions?” Declan demanded.

In that moment, I almost hated him.

But I couldn’t lose this job. I *couldn’t*.

So I made myself smile. “Galway it is. I’ll take your car.” The last thing I needed was some snooty staffer who was loyal to Declan following me around and reporting back to Declan about every move I made.

Maybe I’d find a nice park or museum in Galway that would work just as well for a quiet heart-to-heart. I didn’t trust my wrong-side-of-the-road driving ability enough to try to have a serious conversation while driving.

I returned to the breakfast table and feigned enthusiasm for Galway. Catie seemed at least mildly interested, and I tried to take encouragement from that as we finished our breakfast and got ready to head out.

The drive to Galway ended up taking half an hour. Declan's sleek black car was the nicest thing I'd ever driven, but driving on the wrong side of the road made me feel like I was in a bad dream. When I realized the public park I'd spotted on my map was on the far side of the street, I chickened out and parked the car, deciding to stroll down Shop Street instead, until Catie and I found a cute café.

I had to admit, it was charming. Brightly colored old buildings lined the stone streets, populated by a mix of pubs, boutiques, and chain stores. Not the first thing I'd recommend to a jetlagged six-year-old missing her mom, but at least there was plenty to see, like a violinist busking in the street.

Catie stopped to listen. "Can we put money in his jar?" She pointed to a mostly empty jar that held one or two lonely bills.

"Sure," I said, before I realized the only cash I had on hand was what Declan had given me. And the smallest bill he'd given me was a €50 note.

Catie looked up at me, waiting eagerly.

Well, he did say to give her whatever she wanted, I told myself as I passed her the €50. And Declan could certainly afford it. Catie crept closer to the violinist, then dropped the money in the jar and dashed back to me, grabbing my hand.

I smiled, and we kept walking. I loved this part, getting to know a new kid.

We passed a toy store. Catie craned her neck back to look at the shop window. "Can we go in there?"

"Maybe another time," I said. I knew from experience that once a child got an exciting new toy, it tended to take up their whole focus for the rest of the day. "Oh, look, a bookstore!"

Catie perked up.

As we stepped inside, I fell in love a little. The whole place was decorated to

look like a fairy tale, with a friendly stuffed dragon hanging from the ceiling and a magical forest painted on the walls. Catie dropped my hand and raced to the nearest shelf, yanking a book off it.

“Careful!” I cautioned.

“She’s fine,” the employee behind the register reassured me. She was a pretty, plus-sized young woman with bleached blond hair and a richly colored dragon tattoo that popped against her pale skin. She wore a cute graphic T-shirt for a band I didn’t recognize, and a big, warm smile. “We love enthusiastic customers.”

“Well, we’re definitely enthusiastic,” I said.

Another child approached Catie and asked about the book Catie was holding. Catie hesitated, holding the book protectively to her chest. I leaned forward, prepared to step in if it turned into a tug of war. But then Catie changed her mind and shyly offered the book.

The other child accepted it, and gave Catie a crumbling cookie from her pocket in return. Catie took a bite before I could stop her.

“Well. That looked hygienic,” the cashier said dryly, and I laughed. She continued, “Can I help you find anything in particular?”

“We’re just browsing,” I said.

“You sound American,” the woman said. Her name tag read Molly. “Are you on vacation?”

“Sort of. She’s visiting her uncle,” I nodded to Catie, who was now following the child with the pocket cookies to another bookshelf. “I’m her nanny.”

Catie bounded back to me. “How many books can I have?”

“One for today,” I said. “But we can come back another time and buy more.”

I could see the wheels turning in Catie’s head as she decided whether to accept that deal or start pouting. Luckily, she seemed to come down on the side of acceptance. She went back to the shelves and started seriously considering her options, while her new friend offered unsolicited opinions.

“Remember when making friends was that easy?” Molly said. She sounded a little wistful.

“We didn’t know how great we had it,” I agreed, and Molly laughed.

We chatted a bit more until I excused myself to help Catie make her selection. She had me read six different books to her before she finally picked one. We bought the book, waved goodbye to Molly, and headed out the door.

“It seemed like you met someone nice,” I said. “But as a general rule of thumb, maybe avoid food that’s got lint stuck to it.”

Catie nodded but didn’t say anything.

I tried again. “What did you talk about?”

“Lots of things.” Catie shrugged her little shoulders. “Then she asked if I would be her friend, and I said no because I don’t live here, and after that she didn’t want to talk to me anymore.”

I felt my heart pinch a little. “You can be friends with people even if you don’t live in the same place. Like you and your uncle Declan.”

“Family has to call you when you don’t live in the same place,” Catie said slowly and clearly, like she was worried I didn’t understand. “But friends don’t. They can forget you.”

Understanding dawned. “Have you moved around a lot, honey?”

She nodded.

“You know,” I said speculatively, “you can be friends for just a little while, while you’re both in the same place. Those kinds of friendships are good too.”

“Do you have friends like that?” Catie asked, curious.

I opened my mouth to say yes, but realized it felt a little dishonest. I’d had so many different jobs in the past few years, at some point I’d stopped making as much of an effort to connect. I’d be friendly with the chefs, gardeners, and cleaning people who made up the rest of the staff of the family who hired me. But I couldn’t remember the last time I’d made friends with someone I didn’t

work with.

Catie was still waiting for my answer.

I wanted to set a good example. But more than that, I realized I was tired of feeling so damn lonely.

“You know what?” I said to Catie. “I’m going to go make a friend.”

I turned around and marched us back to the bookstore.

Molly looked up from the graphic novel she was reading. “Welcome to...oh, you’re back. How can I help you?”

I stuck out my hand. “I’m Olivia. I realized I didn’t introduce myself.”

Molly looked at me like she thought I might have been hit on the head.

“We’re working on making friends,” I said. “And I’d like to be yours.”

“Ooooooh,” Molly said, catching on. “Nice to meet you. Let’s be friends.”

We shook hands.

Catie studied us with wide eyes. Probably trying to decide if we were for real.

Molly leaned over the counter and offered her hand to Catie. “I’m Molly. Will you be my friend too?”

Catie shook Molly’s hand cautiously. “I’m Catie. I will think about it.”

That surprised a laugh out of Molly. “Good for you, kid. Don’t settle.” She glanced at me like she was making a decision. Then she scribbled something on the back of one of the store’s business cards and passed it to me. She lowered her voice. “If you’re serious about the whole friend thing...”

“I am,” I assured her.

She beamed. “Text me. We can grab a pint.”

“Absolutely.”

As I walked out the bookstore, it occurred to me I no longer had only one friend in Ireland.

I had two.

DECLAN

“**A**nd then we saw a guy playing the violin who had an orange scarf, and we put money in his jar,” Catie said as she shoved gourmet macaroni and cheese into her mouth at dinner. When my chef heard Catie was coming for the summer, she’d enthusiastically embraced the menu challenge.

Olivia smiled at Catie with real affection in her eyes as she ate. It lessened some of the guilt I felt about essentially abandoning Catie with a stranger her first day in Ireland.

Catie was still talking. “And then we went to the bookstore, and we bought a book, and Miss Olivia made a friend, and then I asked if we could go in the toy store, but Miss Olivia said not today.”

Olivia stiffened.

I narrowed my eyes at her. “Did she?”

Olivia shoveled macaroni and cheese into her face, her expression overly innocent. Her terrible poker face would have been cute, if I wasn’t annoyed at her for blatantly ignoring my instructions.

“Also, there was a stuffed animal dragon at the bookshop,” Catie continued blithely.

“Maybe they’ll sell it to me,” I deadpanned, mostly to get a rise out of Olivia.

Olivia’s eyes sparked. “Not everything’s for sale.”

“Most things are,” I countered.

“When’s my mom coming?” Catie interrupted. “Is she done at the hospital yet?”

Olivia and I instantly shifted our attention back to Catie.

“What do you mean, honey?” Olivia asked.

“Mom said she had to see a doctor while I visited Uncle Declan and Grandma, and that she would come here to get me when she was done,” Catie explained. “And it only takes a day for a doctor’s visit. Unless you break your leg, then you have to go back and take the cast off.”

My heart ached. That’s why Catie seemed to be handling everything so well. She thought her mum would be here soon. “The kind of visit your mum needs takes a lot longer than one day, love. I’m afraid she won’t be here till August. But I promise, we’ll have so much fun. And you can call her every night. She loves you very much, and I’m sure she misses you, too—but she needs this time to get better.”

Catie looked back and forth between me and Olivia, her voice rising in pitch. “What do you mean? Is she really sick? Is that why she has to stay so long?”

“No, no she’s fine,” I reassured.

“Then why isn’t she *here*?”

Olivia’s face gentled. She took a deep breath. “Catie, your uncle’s right. The most important things for you to remember are that your mom loves you and that she is going to be absolutely fine. The truth is—”

“The truth is, your mum got an important work opportunity,” I cut in. “We’re all very proud of her, but it means she has to stay in the States for the next two months. But she’ll meet you here in August, just like I said.”

Catie thought this over, eyes big and uncertain.

Olivia opened her mouth, and I shot her a *Don’t you dare* look.

Olivia closed her mouth.

Catie nodded decisively. “I want to go home, then. Mom and I can come visit

you together once her job is done.”

Shit, I thought. I hadn’t anticipated that. “That’s not realistic, love. Plane flights cost money. And besides, we want to let your mum focus on her important work. I promise we’ll have fun here. We can go to the toy store—”

“I don’t want to go to the toy store! I want to go home!” Catie’s face was flushed, and she was blinking a lot, like she was trying not to cry. “Mom says you can buy anything you want. So I want you to take me home.”

“Love, that’s not an option,” I said gently.

“You’re not listening to me!” Catie stood up so fast, she knocked her chair down. “I hate you!”

I stood. “Catie, wait—”

But she was already running upstairs to her room.

I hesitated, listening to her angry little feet storm away from me. Every instinct I had said to go after Catie and comfort her, but I had no bloody clue what I would say. Everything I’d tried had only seemed to make it worse.

“So,” Olivia said, almost to herself, “that went well.”

“Oh, and you would have told her the truth?” I snapped. ““Catie, your mum’s an alcoholic, and she’ll live with that disease for the rest of her life, even if the treatment she’s on now helps her figure out how to control it. Also, there’s a genetic factor, so you might be at risk too. Isn’t that grand?””

“Obviously not like that.” Olivia stood and started clearing the table. “But yes, it’s always best to tell kids the truth. An age-appropriate version of the truth, but the truth, all the same.”

I grabbed the salad bowl and followed Olivia into the kitchen. “There *is* no age-appropriate version of this. Trust me.”

Olivia set the plates down on the counter and turned to face me, hands on her hips. “So it’s better for her to hate you for it?”

“I can be the bad guy, if it means shielding her from something that would crush her,” I said stubbornly. “If rehab works, and Sinead gets sober, Catie

never has to know.”

Something like sympathy flickered across Olivia’s face. “Declan. You have to know that’s not realistic.”

Maybe I did. But in my experience, “it’s not realistic” was the thing people said right before they gave up. And I wasn’t ready to give up.

“I’m not telling her the truth about her mum,” I said, deadly serious. “Neither are you. And that’s final.”

“But—”

“Cross me on this and you’re fired, Olivia. Understand?”

She pressed her lips together and took the glass salad bowl from me, setting it down on the marble counters with enough force that it cracked.

It took her a moment to realize what she’d done. “Oh my gosh, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to do that...”

“It’s fine,” I said, feeling worn by the turn the night had taken. “I’ll toss it in the bin.”

But Olivia beat me to it. When she was done, she said, “Maybe you should call Sinead? It might calm Catie down to hear her mom’s voice.”

“I will,” I agreed. Then I noticed. “You’re bleeding.”

“What? Oh.” She blinked down at her left hand, surprised.

“I’ll get you a plaster,” I said. I was pretty sure there was a first-aid kit in the pantry, next to the bottled water and emergency torches.

“A what?” Olivia asked, confused.

I found the first-aid kit and squirted some antibacterial stuff on a bandage. “Give me your hand.”

“I can do it myself,” she protested.

“Sure, like you could get your suitcase into the overhead,” I said.

Olivia gave an exasperated sigh, but surrendered her hand. I carefully

covered up the small spot of blood, trying not to notice how soft her skin was.

Olivia pulled her hand away from mine as soon as possible and ran her fingertips around the edge of the plaster, as if to double-check my work.

“You should go call Sinead,” Olivia said. “I’ll clean up dinner.”

I took her at her word and went to go sort out the women in my life.



“I don’t like lying to her,” Sinead said, about a half hour later. She’d claimed that rehab was going well, and I’d decided to believe her. One of the reasons I’d picked this treatment center was because they customized their program based on the needs of the patients. In Sinead’s case, that meant letting her have daily calls with her daughter, even though their standard program didn’t allow phone calls during the first few weeks.

“Nor do I,” I said. “But I think it’s better to shield her for a bit. When something bad happens to your parent...” I didn’t have to finish that sentence. Sinead knew how rough it had been the summer our da died. I didn’t want Catie to feel even a fraction of that. I knew Sinead didn’t either.

“Fine,” Sinead agreed. “For now.”

“For now,” I agreed.

“Can I talk to my kid?”

“Sure,” I said.

I went and knocked on Catie’s bedroom door. “Catie, love? I’ve got your mum on the phone for you.”

Catie opened the door. Her eyes were red-rimmed. “She’s my *mom*. Not my *mum*.” But she took my phone and held it to her small face. She went and sat on the pink beanbag chair with her back to me.

I wanted to respect her privacy, but I also wanted to be there if she needed me, so I retreated to my office, leaving the door open. I messed about with some work stuff, but mostly I was focused on the little voice in my

guestroom. I couldn't quite make out her words from here, but I relaxed when Catie's initial monosyllabic answers gave way to longer monologues.

A notification from Snug popped up onscreen, saying I had a message from @1000words.

I immediately clicked, grateful for the distraction.

Can I ask you a work thing? What do you do when a boss wants you to do something dumb?

Get a new job, I responded, and she sent back a laughing emoji.

I smiled, liking that I'd made her smile. *Seriously though,* I continued, *it depends on the type of the boss. Are they the ok sort, who can listen when you explain why they're wrong? Or are they an arrogant arse who thinks their word is gospel?*

I got the symbol that meant she was typing. Then deleting. Then typing.

Finally she sent, *I think maybe both? There are moments when I think he's ok, but then he just... ARGH.*

I snorted a laugh at her frustration. I'd had bosses like that.

You're not going to like it, I wrote, *but at the end of the day, your job is to protect yourself. Not him or his business interests. So if he's telling you to do something dumb, just do it so you don't get fired. If it blows up in his face, that's his problem, not yours. And maybe start looking for jobs. Maybe another one in Ireland so you can stay in the area. ;)*

She didn't respond for so long, I double-checked to see if she'd logged off.

But she was still there. Maybe the winky face had been too much. There were moments where we approached flirting—there was a memorable conversation on her birthday, when she'd had too much wine, and complained about being single and asked what I'd do if I was there with her. Despite that tantalizing prompt, I'd remained a gentleman.

Mostly.

But we usually didn't go there, so maybe she wasn't in the mood now.

My computer pinged, and I straightened.

I know that's good advice. But the thing is, there's a kid's well-being at stake.

My fingers flew. Screw the fucker. If there's a kid at stake, follow your gut. I hesitated. Let me know if you need help.

You already have, she responded.

“Uncle Declan?” Catie called. “I’m done.”

I sent a quick goodbye to @1000words and logged off. Then I approached Catie’s room. She didn’t look as upset as she had before, so I risked sitting down on the carpet next to her.

She handed my phone back without saying anything. But she didn’t say she hated me, which I considered progress.

“Did you get enough to eat?” I asked.

She nodded.

I cast about for something else to say. My eyes fell on the bookshelves. I remembered what Olivia had said about kids needing structure and routine.

I was used to structure and routine feeling stifling. But you could have good routines too.

“Do you want me to read you a book?” I asked. “Like I do over the phone, when your mom has to work late?”

Catie nodded, tentative.

“Maybe we could do that every night,” I say. “After you finish your talk with your mum. I mean mom,” I corrected myself.

This time Catie’s nod was firmer. She picked a book about purple elephants and snuggled up against me.

For the first time all night, I relaxed.

OLIVIA

Catie and I stayed close to home for the next few days, developing our own little routine. First, breakfast and playing outside for a bit. Then we'd head inside for some educational games and activities. I had plenty of favorites online that I'd bookmarked, and it didn't take long to find some that matched Catie's abilities and interests. Sometimes Declan would eat lunch with us, if he wasn't too busy. Then Catie and I would go on a walk down to the heart of the village and back.

Declan had been right. It was a ridiculously short walk through town, and nothing much to do beyond walking. But everyone we passed gave a friendly wave at Catie, who would shyly wave back. After our walk, we'd read for a bit, then play whatever games Catie wanted until dinner. Declan was almost always there for dinner, though he tended to vanish back to his office afterward. But he always emerged in time to read her a few books and tuck her in for the night.

This day was a bit different, though. Declan had needed to head to Dublin for work, and he'd shared that Catie's grandma, Marie, was champing at the bit to see her granddaughter. So at 7 a.m. sharp, we had all piled into the car so that Declan could drop Catie and I off at Marie's house in Galway on his way to work.

Normally, I would have protested the early hour, but the other option would have been another stressful day driving on the wrong side of the road, or using the driver Declan kept on staff. I'd run into Declan's private chef the other day, and she'd given me the scoop on what I needed to know about

working for Declan. Specifically, she'd explained that the "driver" Declan kept on staff was a kindly villager in his seventies who was brilliant at keeping Declan's cars in top shape, but no longer felt confident driving anywhere outside of the village. Since Declan preferred to do his own driving anyway, he hadn't noticed. And since none of the rest of the staff needed a driver, it wasn't a problem. I didn't want to be the reason an old man lost his job, so I'd promised her I could drive myself if I needed to.

Which was how I ended up spending the wee hours of the morning in a small, enclosed space with Declan.

Catie was in the back of the car, soundly asleep again. I'd say this for her: she was the kind of child who could fall asleep anywhere.

I snuck a glance at Declan, who stared straight ahead, a mild frown creasing his gorgeous brow. "Thinking about work?" I guessed.

"Hmm?"

"You were frowning," I explained.

"And you were staring?" he countered.

I felt my cheeks heat, so I turned to look away. Maybe I *had* been watching Declan, more than I normally would with my employers. But none of my employers had ever looked like Declan.

His low, quiet voice cut the silence. "I was thinking about a friend. They asked for advice, and I haven't heard how it turned out."

That was...a more human response than I'd expected. Most of the time he was this scowling, grumpy, chronically busy billionaire. But every now and then he'd show a flash of vulnerability.

We drove the rest of the way in silence.

We double parked in front of his Marie's brightly colored row-house, and Declan carried the sleeping Catie inside. He was so careful with her, you'd never think he was the sort to lie to a child to make his own life easier.

And yet, he clearly was.

Marie opened the door before Declan had a chance to knock. She was tall and dark-haired like Declan, with striking blue eyes. But she had as much silver in her short hair as brown, and there was a soft, round feel to her I couldn't imagine on Declan.

As I stepped inside Marie's house, the first thought I had was *warm*. From the blond wood floor, to the light-yellow walls, to the hand-crafted quilt folded at the end of the couch, it all felt so homey. There was even a roaring fire. An archway behind the couch seemed to lead back into an equally cozy kitchen.

"Here, put her on the couch," Marie said. "She can keep sleeping, but wake her up just enough so she knows you're leaving. I don't want her feeling she's woken up in a strange place."

I glanced at Marie with respect. It was clear the woman understood children.

Declan did as she said. Catie gave him a sleepy hug, then slumped back into the couch. By the time Declan walked out the door, she was fast asleep again.

"You're the nanny, right? Olivia?" Marie asked.

"Yes," I said. "It's nice to meet more of Catie's family."

"Would you like a cup of tea? I figure we can have a nice chat, then you can have the morning off to do whatever you'd like while Catie and I make soda bread."

"Oh. Thank you." Declan had mentioned something about my taking the morning off yesterday, but then Catie had spilled a glass of apple juice I'd promptly switched focus.

I wondered if there was a café nearby I could go to. I should have brought a book. Maybe I could go by the children's bookstore and see if Molly was there?

But once I sat down in Marie's kitchen, I had a hard time motivating myself to leave. As I cradled a mug of tea in my hands, Marie's lovely accent made small talk around me as I sipped the tea and let the caffeine hit my system. She told me all about how Declan had wanted to buy her something grander, but she'd known that she'd feel lonely in anything bigger. Besides, it was a

short walk to the bay, and she loved the hustle and bustle of the city.

When the talk turned to baking, I found myself asking, “Do you make soda bread often?”

“Well, now and again. More often this time of year, since I’m trying to perfect it before the festival competition. More tea?”

“Sure. What type of festival?” I asked.

“Do you know that old 70s film, *The Deer and the Warrior*?”

I shook my head.

“Well, it’s considered quite a classic, and it was filmed in Ballybeith. Since that’s the only claim our small village has to fame, we’ve been throwing a summer festival to celebrate it ever since. It’s a weeklong affair, culminating in a big party around a bonfire.”

“And a soda bread competition,” I said.

Marie smiled. “And a soda bread competition.”

I looked around the homey kitchen, feeling a type of longing I rarely did. Most of the places I worked in were elaborate mansions. But this place—this place felt like a home.

I wondered what it would be like to stay in one place for decades, participating in local traditions.

“I’d love to learn how to make soda bread someday,” I said, feeling a little wistful.

Marie cocked her head. “Would you like to learn to, today? I assumed you’d appreciate a few hours to yourself, but if you’d like to stay...”

“Yes,” I said, a little surprised at how quickly I agreed.

Marie laughed. “That’s what I like about Americans. Always quick to say yes.” She glanced off in the direction of where Catie was still sleeping. “I didn’t realize how early this would be for Catie. Why don’t you and I start on the bread now? Then Catie can have a treat when she wakes up.”

So she taught me how to plump the raisins in a bowl of water, then measure the ingredients into a big bowl and stir. She turned on a radio, alternately chatting with me, or humming along to the music.

“So have you always lived here?” I asked.

Marie’s smile faded a bit. “No. My husband and I lived in Ballybeith for many years. It’s where Declan and Sinead grew up. But after my husband passed...well.” She poked at the dough and, apparently determining it was firm enough, she tipped the bowl over and scooped it into a round cake pan. “I stayed until Sinead graduated secondary school. But after that, I moved here. I’ll always love Ballybeith, but it’s nice to buy your groceries without anyone giving you a pitying look.”

I knew what she meant. I’d lost my own parents when I was in high school. Starting college and meeting new people had felt like a breath of fresh air.

I looked down at my own dough, wondering if Declan had been around the same age as me when he lost his dad. “I’m sorry you lost someone you loved.”

“Thank you, dear.” Marie’s smile was bittersweet, but quietly resigned. “It’s been years, but I’ll never forget what a big help Declan was. All I wanted to do was cry, but he was so strong, making sure Sinead kept up with her schoolwork, making sure we all had something to eat every night.” She fell silent. “I regret how quickly he had to grow up, but I’m proud of him too.”

“As you should be,” I said. I didn’t have to like the man to admit Declan Byrne was impressive. Perhaps more impressive than I’d realized.



Catie and I ended up spending most of the day at Marie’s. There was a heartbreaking moment when Catie first woke up—she’d had a bad dream about her mom finding a new job and a new kid, so she never came to Ireland to get Catie. But once Marie and I had reassured her that that was never going to happen, Catie had been able to perk up and enjoy the rest of the time with her grandmother.

Now Catie and I were finishing the day off in the children's bookstore. But whereas before Catie had enthusiastically pulled the books she wanted, now she half-heartedly ran a hand over the book spines, without actually taking anything off the shelf. All her delight at seeing Grandma seemed to have worn off.

"You okay, kiddo?" I asked.

She nodded glumly.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

She shook her head.

I sighed. Declan was supposed to be coming back through town soon and picking us up at the bookstore, but part of me wanted to change plans and take Catie to that toy store, just to see her smile.

I settled on the carpet besides Catie, pulled out a picture book I recognized, and followed a hunch.

"Do you want to read this one? It's about a mom who has to go to work. But then she comes home."

Catie scooched next to me to peer at the book. "Does her kid help her get ready for work? Like if she has a really bad headache, and she needs someone to get her water and saltine crackers so that she feels okay in time for work?"

"Is that how you help your mom?" I asked.

Catie nodded.

My heart twisted as I realized Catie was probably describing helping her mom with a hangover.

"If I'm not there, who will help her feel better for her important work?" She repeated "important work" carefully, using Declan's exact phrasing.

I felt a spurt of frustrated rage. Maybe Declan really thought he could shield Catie, or maybe he was just avoiding a difficult conversation he didn't have the guts for. Either way, Catie was the one suffering. She might not know the

word “alcoholic,” but on some level she knew her mom wasn’t okay.

“You know, I think your uncle found some people to help your mom feel better,” I hedged.

Catie scowled. “You’re *lying*. You’re doing the thing adults do where you say it’s okay and it’s not. Mom needs her crackers. I need to go home.”

“Catie—”

“No!” She scooted back from me as fast as she could, accidentally bashing her head into the bookshelf. She started tearing up, her face flushed. I reached to try to soothe her, but she got even more upset when I touched her, so eased back and waited.

I knew from experience that sometimes the best you could do with a fussy child was sit back and wait for them to calm down enough to let themselves be comforted.

Except Catie wasn’t upset because she got her second-choice snack, or didn’t want to wear her sunscreen. The poor kid was scared for her mom, and angry and hurt that the adults were keeping her in the dark.

I thought of that message I’d gotten from @DBCoder.

If there’s a kid at stake, follow your gut.

That was the answer, I realized. I couldn’t keep lying to Catie about something this.

Even if it meant I got fired.

I set the book aside and shifted so that I could face Catie squarely.

“Catie, remember when your mom told you that she was going to the hospital? Well, there are different kinds of hospitals. Some help your body get better. And some help your mind and your emotions get better. Your mom’s body isn’t what’s wrong.”

Catie watched me, eyes wide, a little frown between her brows.

“But her mind and emotions need some help right now. Sometimes when she’s sad, she drinks something that makes her feel better. It’s called alcohol.

But if you drink too much alcohol, it makes you sick—gives you a headache and makes your stomach hurt so that you can't eat anything but crackers." I saw Catie's eyes widen as understanding kicked in. "It also makes it tough to make good decisions," I added as I took Catie's hands. "But your mom is very smart and very brave, so she made the hard, important decision to try to stop drinking so much. So she's staying at a special hospital for a few months so she can learn how to do other, healthier things when she wants to feel better, instead of drinking. The good news is, she's getting help, and she's going to be okay."

Catie's eyes were still wide, but her frown had faded. "What about her important work?"

"That was a silly story Uncle Declan made up to explain why she had to be away for so long. He said it because he didn't want you to worry. But sometimes silly stories like that accidentally make us worry more, right?"

Catie nodded vigorously.

"So now that you know the truth, you don't have to worry about helping your mom get to work. She's going to focus on getting better, and you can focus on having fun with Uncle Declan and Grandma and me." I made my smile bright and confident. "Your mom will be here before you know it. Okay?"

"Okay," Catie said. "Can I pick out a book now?"

"Sure," I said. I stood up, and nearly bumped into a man about my own age who had come to a halt behind me. He was average looking with brown hair, brown eyes, fair skin. The most notable thing about him was that he was in far too fine a suit for a children's bookstore. I wobbled a bit, and he instinctively steadied me with a friendly hand.

"Sorry, I...your little girl. It's amazing. She looks exactly like my sister when she was younger." He shook himself out of whatever he was feeling and gave me a sheepish smile.

Molly bustled over to restock some books. "Hey, Seamus. I see you've met the youngest Byrne." She smiled at me and Catie. "Catie dear, it looks like your uncle Declan just parked out front."

The man—Seamus—stiffened. He glanced at Catie. "I think I might know

your mum, dear. How old are you?”

“Six,” Catie said proudly.

“Six,” Seamus repeated faintly. “Wonderful age.”

The shop bell rang, and I looked up to see Declan striding in. His face split in a grin when Catie ran up to him, holding the book she’d picked. Then he looked past me, and his face turned icy.

“Seamus,” he said, his voice sharp enough to cut glass.

“Declan,” Seamus responded, his voice only marginally warmer.

Molly winced and found an excuse to duck behind the register and away from the men.

Seamus tried for a smile. “I just met your adorable niece—”

“I’ll thank you to stay away from my family,” Declan interrupted. He tossed some bills on the counter, took Catie’s hand, and abruptly left the shop, slamming the door behind him.

I scurried out of the shop after him, more than a little confused. “Declan, what was that about?”

He waited until Catie was settled in the backseat of his car, then shut the door and turned to face me. His face was so hard, it was almost frightening. “I want you to keep Catie away from Seamus O’Rourke, and his whole fucking family. Understand? They’re bad news, the lot of them.”

I nodded, wondering what the O’Rourkes could possibly have done to earn Declan’s wrath.

As we drove home, I tried not to think about the most recent rule of Declan’s I’d broken—and what kind of wrath he might rain down on me when he found out.

DECLAN

Olivia had only been on the job for six days when I got an email from Sunny Days Childcare, saying they had a new nanny available who met all my requirements, and asking if I wanted to interview her. I stood in the kitchen eating a late breakfast over the sink and eyeing my phone, feeling irrationally torn over how to respond.

On the one hand, I could tell that Olivia had been making an effort to follow my rules for Catie. She hadn't told Catie the truth about Sinead. And she'd found a middle ground between strict discipline and spoiling Catie rotten. If Catie wanted something, Olivia either said yes, or she suggested they get to it later in the week instead, so Catie had something to look forward to. Personally, I thought Catie deserved anything she wanted immediately, with no strings attached, but Catie seemed happy enough with the arrangement, so I'd been willing to live with the balance Olivia had struck, at least until I had a better option.

I'd gotten used to seeing her around in the mornings, still soft from sleep, with all that unruly hair of hers piled on top of her head in a way that exposed her graceful neck. To hearing her voice drift through the halls of my house. To glancing out the window and seeing her and Catie laughing in the backyard.

Sometimes when she smiled at Catie it was hard to look away.

I shoved those thoughts aside. Simply getting used to a woman was no reason to keep her on staff.

You know how much Olivia needs this job, something disturbingly like my conscience whispered.

It's just business, I told myself, and typed out an email telling them I had time for an interview this afternoon.

The doorbell rang, blasting a terrifyingly chipper ABBA song through the whole house. I winced. I'd made the mistake of mentioning over dinner that my doorbell could be programmed to play any music you could stream online. Now Olivia and Catie kept changing it. Under the guidance of her new nanny, Catie had discovered a love for Swedish disco.

I went to open the door and found my friend Thomas standing on the front step. As always, his lean, sandy hair was a welcome sight. But his face looked grim.

"Are you here as my friend or as my lawyer?" I asked.

"Both," Thomas said. "It's about the O'Rourkes."

I led Thomas back into the kitchen and started filling the electric kettle for tea. I was doing my best to appear calm, but my whole body was tense. "They're not selling after all?"

"They're selling. But they're not selling the mansion," Thomas said. "They've listed two of the smaller properties."

I slammed the kettle down on its base with more force than necessary. I'd always known there was a possibility they wouldn't choose to sell the mansion. But I'd wanted my revenge badly enough that I'd only focused on the outcome I wanted.

"Do you want to buy the smaller properties?" Thomas suggested helpfully.

"No," I gritted out. "It has to be the mansion. I want him to fucking suffer." The O'Rourke family had been a poison in this town for far too long. Playing fast and loose with other people's lives, and then hiding behind their money and power when disaster struck. That mansion was more than their ancestral home—it was the symbol of their position in town. They sat in that house and moved the rest of us around like chess pieces.

No, it had to be the mansion. I need Mark O'Rourke's power to come to an abrupt, public, humiliating end. And I was finally so close to it that I could fucking *taste* it. Somehow, some way, I *had* to make selling the mansion their only option.

"Is this a bad time?" Olivia asked timidly from the doorway. "I was going to grab some snacks for Catie."

Thomas and I turned to her. Her red curls were scooped up in a perky ponytail, and she wore leggings and a comfortably worn T-shirt that clung softly to her curves. Nothing fancy at all, just relaxed and natural...and very, very pretty. Thomas gave her an appreciative look, and I felt my hackles rise a bit, even though I knew Thomas was very happily married. And even though I knew it was none of my business who appreciated Olivia.

"It's not," I said firmly. "Thomas, this is Catie's *nanny*, Olivia. Olivia, this is Thomas, my friend and lawyer."

"Nice to meet you." Olivia gave a friendly smile, then crossed to the kitchen to pull out a plate of snacks my chef, Maeve, had prepared in advance for Catie, apparently inspired by something Americans called "Lunchables." Maeve and Olivia had bonded, apparently, and it had led to a variety of... interesting additions to my usual menu.

"Don't mind Declan's temper," Thomas said to Olivia. "We're going up against a local bully in a business dealing, but they seem to have outmaneuvered us."

"Temporarily," I said.

Olivia grabbed a juice box and closed the door with her hip. "Well, is there anyone else you can bring onto your side to stack the odds in your favor? I used to nanny for a CEO, and that was his go-to tactic whenever he was losing."

Thomas shook his head. "Unfortunately, that doesn't really apply here."

I straightened, the beginnings of a strategy unfolding before me. "Maybe it does."

Olivia saluted me with the juice box and left the room to return to Catie.

When my eyes returned to Thomas, I found him watching me with eyebrows raised. “So. *That’s* your live-in nanny.”

“Shut it,” I said. “She’s staff. And anyway, she’s annoying.”

“You don’t look at her like she’s staff,” Thomas said mildly. “Or like you find her annoying. You know, it might be good for you, spending time with a sunny, can-do American. It could brighten up some of that gloom you’re always carrying around.”

I crossed my arms, ignoring his efforts to get under my skin. “Here’s what I’m thinking. Is there a way to get the city council to tie up the sales of the smaller properties in red tape? If Mark O’Rourke needs money now, and we can find a legal way to delay any other sale for long enough...”

“He might move on to listing a different property,” Thomas finished. “I’ll look into it.”

I grinned, wolfishly satisfied. I was going to get those bastards yet.



After Thomas left, I found myself unable to settle back to work, so I wandered out to where Catie and Olivia were playing in the backyard.

Or rather, Catie was playing. For reasons I tried—and failed—to fathom, she seemed to be turning over every stone she found in the overgrown garden, and holding up the bogs she found for Olivia’s inspection.

Olivia’s chipper voice rang out as I approached.

“Oh! That one’s so big!” She edged back from the worm Catie was proudly holding.

“You hold it,” Catie ordered.

“Um, that’s okay.” Olivia took a step back. “How about you return it to its home when you’re done holding it?”

“But it’s so *cool*,” Catie pressed, and I swallowed a laugh at the look on Olivia’s face.

Apparently, I'd found my insanely chipper nanny's weakness.

"Here," I said to Catie. "I'll hold it."

Catie dropped the worm into my hand. It was cold and slimy, but undeniably fascinating.

"Did you know that if you cut a worm in half, both sides will still live?" Catie told me eagerly.

"Actually, that's only true for some kinds of worms," I said. "For this type, only the tail half lives."

Catie looked down at the worm in my cupped hands. "Which half is the tail half?"

I gave Olivia a mischievous look.

"No," Olivia said, waving her hands. "Absolutely not. We are not cutting bugs in half."

"Probably for the best," I agreed. "Want to put this back in the garden, love?" I asked Catie.

She took the worm and placed it back in the dirt.

Olivia breathed a sigh of relief.

Maybe playing with bugs brought out the annoying little boy in me, but I heard myself telling Olivia, "Careful. There's a snake by your left foot."

"What?!!" Olivia jumped to the right and clutched my arm, peeking back over her shoulder with terror. I was probably an arse for enjoying the sensation of her pressed up against me like that.

I lost the struggle to contain my laughter, and Olivia slowly relaxed as she realized I was pulling one over on her. She released me, trying to look stern as she shook her finger at me. Fortunately, she had enough of a sense of humor not to be too angry over the prank.

"That wasn't nice," she said mildly.

I grinned. "Whatever made you think I was nice?"

I held her gaze long enough that a blush spread across her cheeks.

That blush *did* things to me.

I stepped back, rubbing the back of my neck. Maybe Thomas had a point.

“When my mom comes back from the special hospital, we can look for bugs together,” Catie announced.

My eyes sharpened. “The special hospital?”

“For your brain and your feelings, so that you can get better if you drink too much alcohol,” Catie recited. “Do you think Mom will like worms better, or spiders?”

My eyes snapped to Olivia’s. I felt heat rush through me. And this time it wasn’t lust. It was rage.

And to think, just minutes earlier, I’d actually been feeling guilty about the idea of interviewing other nannies. Meanwhile, she’d been blatantly disobeying me, all because she thought she knew what Catie needed after six days better than I did after six years.

Olivia tilted her chin up, defiant. Like she’d been spoiling for a fight ever since we’d met on that damn plane. I thought back on all the things she’d told me—all the parents she’d defied because, as she claimed, she was looking out for the children. Was that how she’d describe this to some poor soul stuck next to her during a flight when I kicked her the hell out of my house and my niece’s life?

“I need to talk to you,” I growled. “Now.”

OLIVIA

I set Catie up with an iPad so that she could watch an educational cartoon, then dutifully trudged up to Declan's office. My stomach was twisting in knots, and my breath felt shallow.

This was it. I was going to get fired. And Sunny Days Childcare had made it very clear if this job didn't work out, I wasn't going to get another chance with them.

Two months. I'd just had to get through two lousy months with Declan Byrne—but I hadn't been able to do it.

I thought of Declan on the plane, snidely suggesting that if people kept firing me it was probably my fault. I hadn't wanted to consider it, but what if he was right? Was I being too stubborn? Somewhere along the way, had I become a bad nanny?

But no, I refused to believe that. Everything I'd done had been in Catie's best interests. Maybe if I just explained to Declan...

I held onto that hope until I opened the door and saw his stormy face. He stood with his back to the window, so that I had to look into the painfully bright sky to try to meet his eyes.

When Declan spoke, his voice was deadly quiet. "I told you I wanted Catie shielded from the ugliness of her mother's situation at all costs. I told you that if you ripped that shield away from Catie, just so you could feel better about not lying, I would fire you."

I crossed my arms. “That’s not what happened.”

“Oh? Did someone else tell her?” His voice dripped sarcasm.

I didn’t say anything.

“Enlighten me, Olivia,” Declan taunted. I felt like I was being dared to stick my head into the lion’s mouth.

He probably meant to intimidate me. But instead it just made me angrier.

Maybe he was going to fire me. But that didn’t mean he could stop me from fighting for Catie. And honestly, if I was going anyway, I might as well be honest. At this point, I had nothing left to lose.

“Catie asked me who was going to help her mom with her hangovers,” I said.

Declan looked like he’d been punched. “She doesn’t...she doesn’t know...”

“She *does*,” I insisted. “Catie might not have words for it, but she knows something is wrong with her mom. Something that leaves her with headaches and an upset stomach at the start of nearly every day. Something that has a *six-year-old* thinking she needs to be there to get her painkillers and water. And your stupid lie about work was giving her all sorts of brand-new worries. She was having *nightmares*, Declan, worried that her mom was going to mess up her big, important job because she didn’t have Catie there to help her feel better every morning.”

Declan’s face hardened. “You still had no bloody right to make that decision on your own. You should have come to me.”

“You don’t listen!” Something in me snapped. I felt positively wild, furious at Declan—at *all* the parents and guardians I’d dealt with—who never actually stopped to notice what impact their bad choices had on their children. “None of you listen to me, and your kids pay the price.”

We glared at each other. The air crackled with tension.

The worst of it was, I’d started to think Declan wasn’t like the others. Like maybe, just maybe, he cared more about Catie’s happiness and well-being than his own pride.

Say you understand, I thought. Say you'll listen.

“I’m through arguing about this. Get out.” He strode to his desk. “The agency found me a replacement this morning. I have no doubt she’ll be a more accommodating fit than you.”

For a moment, I couldn’t breathe. And then reality sank in.

Declan was firing me. He wasn’t even giving me the courtesy of looking at me while he did it.

I turned and stormed out, slamming the door behind me.

My hands were shaking.

I knew it shouldn’t get to me. God knows I’d been terminated often enough. But there was something about this time that felt different. More personal than it ever had before.

I blinked, realizing I was on the verge of crying. The longer I stayed, the more I risked Declan or Catie seeing me breaking down. I didn’t want that for Catie, because I liked her. And I didn’t want that for Declan, because right now, I hated him and his stupid, beautiful face. He didn’t deserve to see how much he’d upset me, how hurt I was at his callousness.

Normally, I’d wait for my employer to buy my ticket home, but I didn’t want to wait. I had enough miles to get home right away without having to spend a fortune. I kept saving them for vacations I never took.

I stormed into my room and started packing. It didn’t take long. I was almost done when I heard the doorbell blasting the catchily optimistic “Take a Chance on Me.”

My mom had loved that song.

My throat tightened. I shoved the thought aside, zipped my suitcase, and went to open the door.

Catie beat me to it.

“Grandma!” she cried when she opened the door and saw Marie. “Uncle Declan and Miss Olivia are fighting, so I get to watch a video on Miss

Olivia's tablet."

"Oh," Marie said, and then she saw the suitcase I was holding. "Oh."

I winced.

Marie handed Catie a loaf of soda-bread covered in clear plastic wrap. "Can you be a good girl and take this to the kitchen for me?"

Catie nodded and scampered off.

Marie shut the door and looked at me apologetically. "I know Declan can be harsh, but you're so good for Catie. I'm sure once you get to know him better —"

"This isn't my choice," I interrupted, because it hurt to listen to her optimism. I wanted this to be something time could fix, but it just wasn't. I collected my tablet from where Catie had abandoned it and tucked it into my shoulder bag. "I'm sorry, but I have to go."

Marie sighed, but she didn't protest. "Are you off to the bus stop, then? It'll take you into Galway. From there, you can catch one to the Dublin airport."

I nodded, then hesitated. "I was going to wait until Declan got off work for the day. But if you could watch Catie, then I'll be free to go right away. I'd rather..." I swallowed past the tightness in my throat. "I'd rather not linger."

Marie looked sad, but she nodded reluctantly. "Of course."

"Thanks."

Now comes the hard part, I thought.

I went to the kitchen, where Catie had industriously pulled a chair over to the cupboard, so she could climb up and pull down some plates for the soda bread.

"Hey, hon," I said, doing my best to keep my voice bright. "We're going to change things up a bit. I have to go home. But your Grandma's going to watch you for the rest of this afternoon, and after that, your uncle Declan is already finding an awesome woman to hang out with you during the day, like I do."

Catie turned to look at me, wearing the little worried frown between her eyebrows that meant she was trying to figure something out. “When will you come back?”

My heart twisted. “I’m sorry, honey. I don’t think I am.”

Catie’s face grew increasingly upset. “But...but you made a friend at the bookshop.”

I smiled, crouching down. “I did. And I’m glad I got to be her friend for a little while, even if I need to go now. Just like I’m glad I got to be your friend, too.”

Catie’s lower lip trembled. “I don’t want you to go,” she said.

“Oh, honey.” I took hold of her hand, squeezing it gently. “It’s okay to feel sad when people have to leave. I’m sad, too. But I am also so, so happy I got to spend this time with you.” I spread my arms. “Can I have a hug goodbye?”

She clambered off the chair and gave me a hug.

I held her close and let her sweet scents of grass, dirt, and little girl sweat wash over me.

I love my job, I told myself as I blinked back tears. I love my job, I love my job, I love my job...

But as I pulled away, I forced a smile for Catie’s sake, and walked out the door with my suitcase, I couldn’t lie to myself.

Sometimes I hated my job too. Especially walking away from kids who needed me.

I tried not to think about Declan or Catie as I walked the fifteen minutes to the bus stop, dragging my suitcase behind me. The day was warm enough I found myself working up a sweat. When I got to the bus stop, I could feel my T-shirt sticking to my back.

I scooped my hair into a messy bun to get it off my neck and checked the bus schedule on my phone.

The next bus didn’t come for an hour and a half.

Shit, I thought. And then, since no one was around, I let myself say it out loud for good measure. “Shit.”

Cursing was something I rarely did, since there was almost always a child around who might overhear and repeat it later. But I didn’t have to worry about that anymore since, thanks to Declan, my nannying career was in the toilet. “Damn. Hell. Shit.” I kicked the side of the bus stop, which made my eyes sting. “THIS SUCKS,” I hollered to the sky.

An old woman in the house across the street peeked out from behind her curtains with a scandalized look.

I covered my mouth, regretting my outburst. I gave a cringy, apologetic wave. She must have decided not to worry about it, because she let the curtains drop and retreated back into her house.

I sank down onto the bus stop bench, feeling suddenly exhausted. I tried so hard with this job. And now here I was, where I always was.

Alone.

Fighting off the feeling, I sent an impulsive message to @DBCoder. *You don’t live in Dublin by any chance, do you?*

As soon as I sent it, I regretted it. I had a hard policy against meeting anyone I met through my blog in real life. The one time it had happened, it hadn’t been my choice, and it had gone badly enough I’d swore never to repeat the experience. No matter how lonely I might feel right now.

Forget I said that. It’s just a crappy day.

Crappy was an understatement.

Any chance you can talk right now? I really need to get out of my own head. I’ll even let you nerd out about that famous conman you like, the one who stole the airplane.

Nothing.

I stared at my phone for a while, before I admitted to myself @DBCoder probably wasn’t on Snug right now. Or if he was, he was tied up with something that was keeping him from responding.

There were other people I could message. Friends back home. The mom from the first family I'd ever nannied for, who loved me like a daughter and still reached out every few months to make sure I was doing okay.

But if I called someone I knew in real life, I'd have to explain the mess my own life had become. They'd want to offer suggestions, advice. With @DBCoder I could just vent and know that I'd get comfort and commiseration in return. I wanted to talk with him, or no one at all.

So I popped in my headphones, blasted my Zen playlist, and repeated the mantras I'd been using since college.

Life is change.

It's okay to let go. It means you can live in the moment and increase the next good thing.

Unfortunately right now, it was hard to believe anything good was coming my way.

DECLAN

Five minutes into my video interview with Ava Chase, I felt immensely confident in my choice to get rid of Olivia.

Ava was polished, prompt, and professional. We were on the same page about everything, from the importance of letting kids relax and enjoy their summer holiday, to the importance of shielding children from difficult adult subjects.

I smiled at the pretty woman on my screen. She wasn't quite as friendly as Olivia, but I honestly liked that. Ava felt like what she was going to be—an employee who understood where the lines were drawn. She would be a lot more peaceful to live with than Olivia had been.

Fifteen minutes into the interview, I was running out of reasons not to hire her on the spot. She was perfect. Honestly, it was hard to believe that she shared so many similarities with Olivia.

Left-handed. Loved purple. Loved Olivia's favorite picture book.

Something about that niggled at my brain. I couldn't figure out what it was until it hit me.

Ava hadn't disagreed with a single thing I'd said during this entire interview.

Olivia's accusation rang in my mind. *You don't listen. None of you listen.*

"...and that's why I believe a live-in nanny is always the best childcare structure for every family," Ava finished.

I tilted my head, deciding to test my newly formed theory. “I’m not sure I agree with that. Catie’s mom has never had a live-in nanny, and I think she did just fine.”

Ava paused. And then she gave a charming laugh. “Oh, of course, I don’t mean when the mom is available to be a full-time stay-at-home parent. But in all other scenarios, a live-in nanny makes all the difference.”

“Sinead’s a working mom,” I said.

Ava beamed. “We’re in total agreement. As you say, it’s a different scenario when a working or stay-at-home mom is available.”

Suddenly, it didn’t seem like such a coincidence that Sunny Day Childcare had been able to find another nanny who checked all my boxes.

I pulled up Ava’s resume, scanning the names of the people she’d worked for. It read like a who’s-who of rich and powerful parents. “Can you tell me about a time you disagreed with your employer over what was best for the child? How did you work through that?”

“I’ve been lucky enough to avoid those scenarios by choosing my employers carefully,” Ava chirped. “I’ve worked for amazing parents and guardians whose childcare philosophy I support 100%, so there’s never been a conflict of interest.”

I blinked. There was no possible way that was true. One of the families on her resume was a single-mom influencer who’d risen to prominence on Snug with a blog about something called *Beyond Gentle Parenting*.

Meanwhile, she’d also worked for famed venture capitalist Kevin Frost, my friend Grayson’s cousin. And I knew for a fact that Kevin thought kids these days would be better behaved if harsher punishments hadn’t gone out of fashion.

When my co-founder Anil Patel and I were building Snug, we’d never wanted to hire yes-men. We wanted to hire the best of best, who cared enough about their work to challenge us if we were wrong.

We wanted people like Olivia, I realized.

I'd been interpreting Olivia doing the one thing she knew would get her fired as proof of her arrogance, her defiance. But there was another way to look at it.

When faced with either protecting her job or doing what she thought was best for Catie, Olivia picked Catie.

Looking at the woman on the screen in front of me, I knew. There was no way she'd be brave enough to take that risk. There was no point continuing this interview.

"Thank you for your time, Ms. Chase," I said. "I'll be in touch."

"Excellent. I look forward to supporting Caitlin."

I ended the video call without bothering to correct her about Catie's name. I was confident in my decision, but fairness demanded I confirm my hunch.

I checked the time and texted Grayson. He lived in New York, but he normally rose early. *Do you remember a nanny who worked for your cousin? Ava Chase? Blonde, polished, agreeable...*

Grayson responded quickly. *Don't date her.*

I snorted. There was a story there, but I didn't have time for it. *She interviewed for a job with me. Thoughts?*

This time, Grayson's response was more measured. *She's reliable, smart, and works hard. But at the end of the day, she puts her own ambition ahead of anything else, including the kids she takes care of. She likes being close to power.*

That explained the warning about dating her. Grayson's father was one of the most powerful businessmen in the UK, and Grayson himself was climbing fast in the American tech world. I thanked him and sent Sunny Days Childcare a brief message saying I wouldn't be hiring Ava.

Then I went downstairs to try to smooth things over with Olivia. I still wished she'd consulted me before telling Catie the truth. But I could also admit I hadn't always been in a listening frame of mind when Olivia tried to disagree with my childcare decisions.

With Snug I could listen to opposing opinions because being wrong in business happened to everyone sometimes. You listened, learned, fixed your mistakes, and moved on. But with Catie, I didn't want to make a single mistake. And that meant I'd dismissed Olivia, instead of hearing her out.

As I rounded the corner into the kitchen, I was surprised to hear my mum's voice. She sat at the kitchen table with Catie. Catie was picking at a slice of soda bread, her face glum.

"What's this?" I asked. "Why the sad face, Catie?"

Mum threw me an exasperated look. "Well, you fired her nanny."

"What?" I shook my head. "That's rubbish. We had a *disagreement*."

Mum pursed her lips. "Well, she thinks you fired her. She was practically crying when she hugged Catie here goodbye."

I felt carved out, unsettled. "She's...gone?" I couldn't believe she'd just leave like that. Without saying goodbye to me. Without giving me a piece of her mind.

Where the hell would she go? She didn't know anyone in Ireland.

"She can't go," I said. "I need her."

"Well, you best get to groveling then," Mum said. "She's taking the bus to Dublin. If you leave now, you might be able to catch her."

I started to leave, then turned around, crossed to Catie, and kissed her on the top of her head. "I'll fix this, sweetheart. Promise."

Then I raced out to go catch my runaway nanny.



When I screeched to a halt in front of the bus stop, I breathed a sigh of relief. Olivia was still there. She sat cross-legged on the bus-stop bench, eyes closed, head tilted back to lean against the back of the bus shelter. She didn't open her eyes when I got out and slammed the car door behind me. She'd retreated to her own little world.

I was used to thinking of her as gregarious, perpetually energized, and open. I'd lived with her less than a week, but I already knew her emotions had a way of spilling over until they infected the whole house. Seeing her all contained like this...it felt wrong. I wanted to hurt the bastard who did this to her.

Except the bastard was me.

This isn't about you, I reminded myself. This is about Catie.

"Olivia."

Her eyes flew open, and she yanked her headphones out of her ears. She scrambled to her feet. "Declan. What are you doing here?"

"You're the best nanny for Catie, and she deserves the best," I said. "So you have the job until Sinead finishes rehab. No more trial period. It's yours."

Olivia didn't say anything. No happy exclamation. No sassy comment about how she knew I'd come around. She just watched me.

I gestured to the car. "Come on. I'll drive you home."

"Declan..." she said, making no move to gather up her things.

Shit, I thought. How badly had I messed this up?

"I'll give you a raise," I said. "Name your price."

"It's not about the money," Olivia said, which was such an Olivia thing to say.

"Then what is it?" I asked, impatient.

Olivia twisted her right hand back and forth around her left wrist. Like she was nervous about whatever she needed to say. "I can handle it if we disagree sometimes. But I can't handle working for someone who doesn't listen to me, or for someone who makes decisions based on what's easy for them, instead of what's best for the kid."

I took a step closer to her. "I have *never* made a decision about Catie based on what's easiest for me. I might have made mistakes. But that was never the reason."

“Then why?” Olivia protested. “Why were you so intent on avoiding a difficult conversation? She’s tough enough to handle it.”

“Just because she’s tough enough to handle it doesn’t mean she should have to!” I took a breath, forcing myself to calm down. “Look, I...you know my da died when I was a teen.”

She nodded, her eyes warm with understanding.

I rolled my shoulders restlessly, not wanting her sympathy, but knowing I needed to say this. I needed her to trust me enough to come back. “My mum was...she loved him so much, she couldn’t...so I ended up doing a lot of things that needed to be done. And all the adults around, they just said, ‘Be strong for your mum,’ and ‘You’re the man of the family, now.’” I stuffed my hands in my pockets and looked away. “I overheard my aunt once, asking if they were all putting too much on my shoulders. And my uncle just said, ‘he’s tough enough to handle it.’”

Olivia took an instinctive step toward me, her hand reaching out, then falling to her side. “Oh Declan.”

I shrugged. “It doesn’t matter. I was practically an adult. And once we got through the first year, it got easier. I’m fine.” I flashed her a crooked smile, but she wasn’t fooled, and I felt my smile fade away. “The point is, I know what it’s like to have something horrible happen to your parent, and wish that you had the option to hide, and distract yourself, and just be a kid a little longer. And Catie...she’s so *young*.”

Olivia reached out and touched my arm. “I know.”

“I may have over-corrected,” I admitted. “A bit.”

“A bit.” Olivia’s smile was wry but gentle.

I cleared my throat. “Anyway. I’ll try to get my demons under control. And I *will* listen to you when you bring up a concern. I can’t promise I’ll always agree, but I’ll hear you out. So if you’re ready to come home—” I broke off as Olivia rose up on her tiptoes and wrapped her arms around me. I inhaled, startled, my hands settling tentatively on her lower back. She felt warm and feminine in my arms, and I tried not to notice her lavender scent, or soft curves, or... Fuck, it was no use. It was impossible not to notice Olivia. It

always had been.

“You shouldn’t have had to go through that alone,” Olivia said firmly. “There should have been someone there to shield you, like you’re shielding Catie.”

My throat tightened. “It’s really not a big deal,” I said, my voice gruff. “I didn’t say any of that to get your pity.”

“It’s not pity,” Olivia said. “It’s understanding.” She fell silent, then said, “My parents died when I was in high school too. Boating accident. They went out on the ocean with a friend and got caught in storm. The Coast Guard never found them.”

“Oh, *a ghrá*.” My arms tightened involuntarily around Olivia. “I’m sorry.”

She kept her head tucked into my chest. “What’s that one mean?”

“Hmm?”

“A *ghrá*. You haven’t used that one before.”

I froze. I’d used the term for “love” without thinking. It was a slip of the tongue, but Olivia might read too much into it if I gave her the literal translation.

Down the road, a bus lumbered toward us.

I released her. “It means friend,” I lied.

She tilted her head up, and Christ, she was pretty.

“You said *a chara* was friend,” Olivia pointed out.

“I did. So will you come back?”

Olivia smiled. This time her smile felt relaxed, settled. “Yes. As long as you keep your promise to communicate.”

I grabbed her suitcase and tossed it in my car. “I don’t think you’ll let me do anything else.”

The bus came to a halt in front of the stop, but I waved it on.

Olivia was coming home with me.

OLIVIA

“So what do you think we should do for your weekly treat?” I asked Catie. I’d decided it would be good to instate a weekly routine Catie could look forward to. And this week, I definitely felt like I’d earned a treat myself.

After all, it was a mere two days since the great Declan Byrne followed me to a bus stop and begged me to come back because he finally realized I was the best nanny in the whole wide world.

At least that was the joke I’d made to Molly when we went out to the pub last night. I’d glossed over the whole thing until it sounded like a funny misunderstanding. I’d done it partly because it would feel like a betrayal of Declan’s trust to repeat any of what he’d actually said. But I’d also kept silent because if I thought about the whole thing too long, I found myself getting emotional.

It was hard to think about Declan going from being a kid who just wanted to be told that everything was going to be all right to a man determined to protect a little girl he loved from ever experiencing half of what he had.

I couldn’t think about how in all the families who had fired me, Declan was the only one who had realized he was in the wrong and chased after me. I was used to seeing value in my work, even if no one else did, but with Declan, for the first time in years, it felt like someone else saw my value. And it was the grumbly, emotionally constipated, lethally gorgeous Irishman who slept down the hall from me.

But I couldn't think about it. So instead I was throwing myself into my job.

Catie stared up at the ceiling and swayed back and forth a little bit, considering. "We go to the bookstore all the time anyway, so that's not really a treat. And Uncle Declan lets me have ice cream every night."

That he did. Declan was an undeniably soft target for Catie's sugar cons.

Catie brightened. "I want a movie night. On the big TV, not a laptop. With popcorn."

I smiled. "That sounds perfect."

"And you and Uncle Declan will be there, so it will be like a family movie night," Catie added.

Oh. A *family* movie night.

No matter how many families I worked for, it always caught me off guard how quickly kids included me in their understanding of "family." It was a bittersweetness I was never prepared for.

Catie was waiting for an answer, so I made myself smile. "That sounds like a great idea. But I don't know your uncle's schedule. How about you go wash your hands for lunch and set the table, and I'll ask Uncle Declan what he thinks."

Catie bounded off, murmuring to herself about the merits of potential movie picks.

I climbed upstairs and knocked softly on Declan's closed office door. I didn't want to interrupt him if he was in a meeting.

"Come in, Olivia," he called.

I opened the door. "How did you know it was me?"

Declan's fingers flew across the keyboard as he talked. "You're the only one who knocks that softly. It's the only soft thing you do."

"Hey. I can be soft," I said defensively.

His smile was crooked, and a little bit wicked. "I'll bet you can."

I fought off a blush as he came to a stopping point on whatever he was working on and turned his chair to me. Why was I blushing?

“What can I do for you, Ms. St. James?” Declan asked, his tone something that almost sounded like it bordered on affectionate. Weird—I must have heard him wrong.

“I want to build in a fun activity Catie can look forward to each week. She wants a movie night with all of us.” I couldn’t quite bring myself to say *family movie night*. “But I know you’re busy, so...”

“No, that sounds brilliant.” His phone started buzzing. He glanced at the screen, then swiped to answer it. “Let’s do it tonight, yeah?”

I nodded, scurrying out as he took his business call in his firm *I pay your salary so impress me* voice.

I closed the door and blew out a breath. Apparently, I was having a movie night with the Byrnes.



Declan was still in his office at seven thirty when I started the microwave popcorn. Catie skipped into the kitchen, looking adorable in her purple butterfly pajamas.

I did a double take. Did those butterflies have fangs?

Catie put her hands on her hips. “Where are your pajamas?”

“You don’t have to wear pajamas to watch a movie,” I said.

“But it’s movie night,” Catie protested.

Declan strolled into the kitchen. “Mmmm, that smells good.”

I flashed him a smile, relieved he’d actually showed. Then my heart flipped. Soft pajama pants—printed with something that looked like computer code—were slung low on his hips. And a gray T-shirt curved around his biceps in a way I’d be thinking about for a while.

He looked...intimate. Casual.

He'd completed the outfit with lime green fuzzy socks, which was possibly the only thing he was wearing that wasn't inexplicably sexy.

"You're wearing the socks I gave you!" Catie beamed.

Dammit, I thought. Now the socks were sexy too.

Declan raised his eyebrows. "Where's your pajamas? It's movie night."

"That's not a thing," I protested, laughing.

"It is in this family." Declan grinned, his eyes lingering on me a little longer than they needed to.

Or maybe it just felt that way. I turned to pull the popcorn from the microwave and dump it in bowl. The back of my neck felt flushed. "Catie picked that new animated movie about the crow who solves mysteries. If you want to go cue it up..." I trailed off as Declan's phone buzzed.

He glanced at the phone and swore. "Sorry. This is important. Give me fifteen minutes. When I come back, I want to see you in proper movie night attire."

My heart sank as he walked away. I'd seen this show play out a million times. Dad promises to be there for a family thing. An important business matter comes up. I explain to a hurting kid that Dad won't be joining us after all.

After our conversation at the bus stop, and Declan's eagerness this afternoon, I'd let myself believe Declan might be different. I knew he wanted to give Catie everything she wanted, but I wished he'd been honest with himself about whether he could take the time away from work.

Because at the end of the day, intending to keep a promise wasn't the same thing as actually keeping it.

I glanced at the clock, trying to figure out how long I should wait to break the news to Catie that our plans had changed a bit.

I dragged my feet, making extra popcorn, pouring drinks, even changing into

my pajamas. Finally, I headed into the TV room and settled on the couch next to Catie. “Hey, hon. Slight change of plans. Uncle Declan had to take a business call, but—”

“But he’s done now,” Declan announced, striding into the room and plopping down on the couch on the other side of Catie. “Were you going to start the movie without me?” He made a tscking sound.

I couldn’t believe it. His call had *actually* wrapped up on time. “Sorry,” I said. “I’ve never seen an important business call wrap up that quickly.”

“Oh, it didn’t,” Declan said. “I tagged in Anil. That’s the point of having a business partner, right?” He reached a hand into the bowl, scooping up a truly massive amount of popcorn and grabbing the remote.

The movie started, but I wasn’t really watching. I was still stunned Declan had chosen time with his niece over personally managing a business matter.

Billionaires didn’t *do* that. Especially not the young, hungry, self-made ones.

As the movie unspooled, I found myself increasingly aware of Declan’s physical presence. The easy drape of his arm along the back of the couch. His low, surprised laugh when the movie would slip in a joke for adults. The way he absently scratched the dark stubble along his jaw as he and Catie debated theories about which character had stolen the crow’s bottle cap.

I shifted, restless. Sure, Declan was attractive. But I’d been able to ignore that—mostly—when he was just some arrogant asshole I worked for.

He was still arrogant. And at times, he was still an asshole. But he could also admit when he was wrong, and I’d come to see that he always put Catie first.

He was generous too, even if he tried to hide it. I’d found out last night that while Molly lived in Galway now, she’d grown up in Ballybeith, a few years behind Seamus and Sinead in school. She’d been delighted to share all the gossip she had on the Byrnes. Two years ago, Declan’s lawyer Thomas had become the sole administrator of a mysteriously funded foundation that always seemed to have a grant available to help anyone in the village going through a hard time. Thomas was tight-lipped about who funded the foundation, but everyone knew it had to be Declan.

I'd also found out from Molly that while Declan had a friends-with-benefits relationship with a few similarly minded women in Galway, according to the local gossips, he hadn't had a serious relationship in years.

I glanced at Declan's dark profile, wondering what it would be like to be one of the women who casually rang him up when they were in the mood. Did he normally invite women here, when he wasn't hosting a six-year-old? Or did he show up on your doorstep, smile wicked and eyes hungry as he followed you inside and pressed you against the wall, caging you in with his body?

I shivered.

"The movie's not *that* scary," Declan teased.

"I'm not scared," I muttered. "I'm cold."

Declan yawned and went to return our empty dishes to the kitchen. Evidently, he didn't mind missing the crow's adorable duet with a puppy.

I tried to return my focus to the screen. It worked until Declan returned from the kitchen and tossed me a spare sweatshirt.

I caught it, confused, until I remembered I'd told him I was cold. This time he sat next to me, since Catie had used his absence as an opportunity to sprawl out on the other half of the couch.

It was amazing how much space a wiggly six-year-old could take up.

I pulled the sweatshirt on, since the alternative was confessing that I was thinking dirty thoughts about my boss.

The sweatshirt was loose and big in a way that made me feel...delicate. Sheltered. Worse, it smelled like Declan, which was some combination of fresh soap, aftershave, and something I couldn't identify. If I'd been alone, I might have done something really embarrassing, like sniff the fabric, just to figure out what that third scent was.

I supposed I could understand why, if you wanted casual sex, you'd go for someone like Declan. What I couldn't wrap my brain around was, how did you walk away from a man like Declan, once you'd had him?

Or was he always the one to walk away from you?

Declan leaned over and murmured in my ear. “Bet you ten euro the cat did it.” His low, rough voice sent a delicious chill running over my skin.

It also made me realize I’d completely lost the plot of the movie.

“No bet,” I bluffed. “It’s obviously the cat.”

“Shhh!!!” Catie ordered. “Stop talking.”

Declan and I exchanged a chastened look, though Declan didn’t look particularly sorry. I felt like the good student who’d been lured into talking during class by the bad boy.

We managed to stay silent for about an hour, when I noticed a faint snoring sound and realized Catie had conked out.

I nudged Declan. “She’s out. I can put her to bed, if you’ve got things to do.”

Declan flashed me a smile. “And miss finding out who stole the bottle cap?”

“You said it was the cat,” I reminded him.

“The cat got alibied a half hour ago. You’re not paying attention to this at all, are you?” Declan said.

I crossed my arms and settled deeper into the couch. “I might have other things on my mind,” I admitted.

“Like?”

As if I was going to answer that.

Instead, I said, “Thanks for the sweatshirt.”

“It was as much for my benefit as yours,” he said.

“What?”

“That tank top. It...never-mind.” He leaned forward, stretching. “You’re right, we should call it a night.” He turned off the movie, gently scooped up Catie, and carried her upstairs.

I watched them go, feeling a rush of affection mixing with something dangerously more complicated.

I flopped back on the couch and stared at the ceiling, reluctantly admitting to myself that I had the hots for Declan.

This is not a problem, I told myself. As long as he doesn't find out. And as long as it doesn't go further than occasionally admiring his arms. And his voice. And his brain.

“Nope,” I said to myself, cutting off that train of thought. “Don’t go there.”

This wouldn’t be a problem. It couldn’t be.

DECLAN

Thomas worked fast. Four days after Olivia suggested we recruit other people into our fight to take Mark O'Rourke down a peg, I found myself sitting in Ballybeith's only decent restaurant across from councilman John Kelly. He was eighty years old if he was a day, and he didn't believe in talking about business until he'd had a chance to inquire about the health and well-being of my family, Thomas's family, and anyone else he could think of.

Thomas, bless him, handled most of the small talk.

Finally, John leaned back in his chair. "So. Thomas mentioned you had some concerns about our plans to repeal the modern building rule."

"We do." I leaned forward, eager. Thomas had dug up an old law the town council had put on the books back in the seventies. In the wake of the success of *The Deer and the Warrior*—and the tourist money it brought—the council had passed a law making it harder to sell "modern buildings," which in this case meant anything built after 1976. The goal had been to preserve the character of the town by making it harder for anyone to make a quick profit building and flipping tourist hotels, movie souvenir shops, et cetera.

The law was, frankly, unnecessary. The movie wasn't *that* popular outside of this region. But most of the buildings the O'Rourkes owned had been built after 1976. That meant as long as that law was still on the books, Thomas could use it to tie the sales up in red tape...until O'Rourke had no choice but to put his mansion up for sale—a building that definitely predated the movie

seeing as it was *in* the movie.

“You have to admit,” John said, “It’s a silly law. O’Rourke says it’s standing in the way of all sorts of progress.”

“The only thing it’s standing in the way of is O’Rourke taking advantage of this town,” I said. “He already hurts his tenants by constantly raising their rents. If you repeal this law, he can sell their homes out from under them, with no warning. This way at least, there’s time for people to prepare. And time for interested parties to consider the sale and make sure it’s in the best interest of the town.”

“Interested parties, hmm?” John said, eyes sharp. He was old, but he was no fool. “And how might this law benefit yourself? Your dislike of the O’Rourkes is...warranted. But we can’t make policy to punish a single man.”

Why not? I thought.

Luckily, Thomas jumped in then, listing a host of practical, fair reasons to keep the law on the books. I was watching John’s expression closely, trying to figure out how our arguments were landing, when a flash of red hair distracted me.

Olivia.

I knew it was her day off. Mum was watching Catie, and Olivia had mentioned that she’d be meeting up with Molly. I just hadn’t realized they were getting lunch here too.

I tried to ignore Olivia and focus on the conversation in front of me, but my eyes kept going back to her. She looked different. She’d swapped out her usual practical jeans and T-shirts for a light green sundress that nipped in at the waist and fluttered around her legs as she walked to her table. Dresses like that made you think of summer picnics and lazy days in the sun. Of playing with the skirt if you could get away with it, easing it up bit by bit to see what the woman wearing it had on underneath.

Her hair was different too, falling loose and lovely around her face instead of her normal practical ponytail or messy bun.

I thought that skimpy tank top she’d worn to movie night was distracting. But

seeing her like this... She didn't look like my nanny. She looked like a beautiful young woman on her day off. When she laughed at something the waiter said, I found myself clutching my fork tighter.

"And do you agree with Thomas's assessment?" John asked.

What?

Thomas kicked me under the table.

"I do," I said. "Absolutely."

Thomas leaned forward. "We're not saying keep the law on the books forever. We're just saying, it's worked well for us for all these years. Let's not be hasty getting rid of it. Study it a bit. Hold a town listening session. Take your time on something that could impact our town in unpredictable ways for years to come."

"O'Rourke wants it repealed at the next meeting," John said. "He may have implied that having this law on the books makes it harder for him to commit to hosting the festival at his mansion every year."

Bastard, I thought. The film's most famous scenes had been filmed in and around the mansion, which made it the ideal location for the festival. Plus, it was one of the only spaces in town big enough for the event.

"If you let him pressure you like this, he'll know it works," I said bluntly. "And he'll do it again."

John sighed, clearly conceding that I was right. "He will at that." He drummed his fingers on the table. "Well, boys, you've convinced me. But I can't speak for the other two council members. We'll see how the vote lands."

"Of course," Thomas said, exchanging a victorious look with me. We both knew the other council members always voted with John. We'd done it.

As we wrapped up the meeting with more mandatory small talk, I noticed an unwelcome figure by Olivia and Molly's table.

I tensed. Seamus O'Rourke. He was chatting with them as he picked up his takeaway order.

There he stood, smiling and laughing guilelessly, as if his family wasn't responsible for decades of problems in this town. Olivia casually adjusted the strap of her sundress as she smiled up at him, and I wanted to punch something.

Thomas nudged me, and I realized John was saying his goodbyes. After the old man had shuffled out of the restaurant, Thomas turned to me. "What's with you?"

"Sorry," I said. "Got distracted."

Thomas followed my gaze. When he looked back, his smile was mischievous. "Ah."

"Shut up."

He held up his hands in surrender. "I didn't say anything. On another topic, Clara was thinking we could have Catie over for a playdate with our Jane. They're about the same age."

"Sure," I said, distracted.

Olivia glanced over, as if sensing my eyes on her, and our gazes met.

"Oops," Thomas said. "She caught you pining. Now you have to go say hello."

"I wasn't pining—" I tried to argue, but Thomas was already heading out the door.

Unfortunately, he was right about one thing. It would be odd if I didn't say hello now.

That was the only reason I walked over to Olivia and Molly's table. It wasn't because of the way the sunlight glinted on Olivia's curls, or because I felt a near primal need to drive Seamus away from her.

It did improve my mood somewhat that Seamus paled as soon as he saw me. "I've just remembered...I've got to..." He nodded goodbye to the ladies and beat a hasty retreat with his sack of takeaway.

Molly brightened when she saw me. "Declan. Hey! I feel like I only ever see

you at the store.” She turned to Olivia. “He’s been one of our most loyal customers since Catie was born.”

Olivia smiled at me over her pint. “I believe it.”

I felt the back of my neck heat. I reached for a topic change. “Thomas suggested having Catie over for a playdate with his daughter. Could you arrange that?”

“Sure,” Olivia said. “That’s a great idea. She needs more friends her own age.”

“That’s what I was thinking,” I said, and Olivia smiled at me. When had her approval started to feel like sunlight?

“Sit down and have a pint,” Molly invited. “I’m trying to persuade Olivia to do a project with me, and I need reinforcements.”

“Oh, I’m sure he’s too busy,” Olivia said.

I was. But I heard myself saying, “I think I can spare a few minutes,” as I took a seat and signaled the waiter. “What’s this project, then?”

“Well, I’ve always wanted to illustrate a book, but it turns out I’m shite at writing them,” Molly explained. “But Olivia here majored in creative writing. She even *has an idea for a children’s book*. But she won’t tell me because she says it’s silly. Which is dumb, because clearly we were destined to meet and write the bestselling picture book of all time.”

I looked at Olivia, impressed. “You’re a writer?”

“Was,” Olivia corrected. She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “A lifetime ago. Then I discovered my true calling.”

“Nannying for rich tossers?” Molly asked skeptically.

“Molly!” Olivia said.

“What? Oh.” She rolled her eyes. “Present company excluded.”

I laughed.

Olivia looked so flustered, I decided to come to her rescue. “I think she

means helping children and giving them the support they need.”

“Yes,” Olivia said gratefully. “That.”

“Even the ones with tossers for uncles.”

This time Molly was the one who laughed, while Olivia covered her face with her hands. The conversation moved on, and I was surprised to realize how much fun it was. I’d never paid much attention to Molly since she was several years behind me in school, but she had a wicked sense of humor, and it was fun to watch her make Olivia laugh.

It was also fun to get to know Olivia outside of her role as my employee. There was something about hanging out away from the house, without Catie, that made it feel okay to ask her more personal questions. I learned she grew up in a southern California beach town, but moved to Minnesota for uni when she got a full ride. She’d traveled extensively with the families she worked for, but this was her first time in Ireland.

And, if Molly’s teasing was to be believed, she didn’t have a boyfriend.

I’d kind of assumed that was the case. Olivia had never mentioned one, and she wasn’t exactly the type to keep her thoughts to herself. And even if she was capable of exercising un-Olivia-like discretion, what guy would be okay with sending his woman across an ocean to spend months living in a strange man’s house?

But it was nice to have it confirmed. I didn’t let myself think too hard about why that was.

Before I knew it, two hours had passed, and Molly had to head out to her shift at the bookstore. That left Olivia and I to walk home together.

It felt nice to stroll along together, enjoying a rare, balmy day. “So what’s this idea you have for a book?”

“Oh no,” Olivia said, and then laughed. “I am *not* telling you, of all people.”

I cocked an eyebrow. “What do you mean ‘of all people’?”

“Because you’re...you.” She gestured to me helplessly. “You’re freakishly successful. You built a billion-dollar company. Your dream re-shaped the

tech world. Meanwhile, my dream is a few lines jotted down in a Word doc I haven't opened in five years ago."

I homed in on the important part of what she just said. "So it's still a dream of yours?"

She chewed on her lip. "I don't know. It's been so long since I wrote fiction. What if I'm no good?"

"You probably won't be," I said. "Not at first. But then you learn from the failures, and you try again, as many times as you need to until you succeed."

Olivia threw me an amused glance. "I have a hard time imagining you failing over and over again. Wasn't Snug basically an overnight success?"

"Snug wasn't the first start-up I worked at," I said. "I even dropped out of uni to work at the first place because I believed it was going to change the world."

"What happened to it?" Olivia asked.

"It went belly-up seven months in. They still owe me a month's worth of pay. But I learned a lot. I also met Anil, who'd been smart enough *not* to drop out of uni." I shrugged. "I'm not saying everyone has to have some big dream, or that it's not gutting when you gamble and lose. But isn't it better to take a chance? Especially if you've been thinking of it for five years?"

Olivia didn't say anything, but her expression turned thoughtful.

"Plus, if you do publish your book, I know the best children's book reviewer in the business," I joked.

Olivia rolled her eyes. "Of course you have a publishing connection. Is there any industry you don't have a foot in?"

I thought of all the companies that used Snug to promote their businesses. "Not really."

She sighed, exasperated, but there was fondness in her eyes. Her hand accidentally brushed mine as she walked, and I had the weirdest instinct to catch hold of it and lace my fingers through hers.

No, I told myself. *She works for you. And even if she didn't, you're not the hand-holding type. And she very much is.*

So I shoved my hands in my pockets and changed the subject to something less personal, trying very hard not to feel like a schoolboy walking his crush home.

It almost worked.

OLIVIA

It had only been two days since my day off, and I was already desperate for my next one. Normally I loved my job, but today Catie was getting on my last nerve. It had taken a full half hour to get her dressed, since she kept getting distracted by the toys and books in her room.

Then she'd spilled orange juice on herself at breakfast, and we'd had to start all over again.

Most days I could roll with the inherent chaos of small children, but today...

Don't think about what today is, I told myself.

"Come on," I urged Catie. "Let's go out back and kick the soccer ball a bit. Burn off some of that restless energy."

She stamped her foot. "I don't *want* to go outside. I want to watch a movie. I want—"

"Sometimes you have to do things you don't want," I said, frustrated. "So let's take a deep breath and stop whining about it, okay?"

Catie looked shocked. Then her lip quivered as she tried not to cry.

"Oh honey, I'm sorry." I crouched down to her level and pulled her into a hug. "I shouldn't have snapped at you. It's absolutely okay for you to be honest about your feelings and talk about what you want. I just had a bad night's sleep, and it's making me grumpy. I'm very sorry." I pulled back and squeezed her shoulders. "You didn't do anything wrong—I'm the one who's

having a bad day. You are such an amazing kid, okay?”

“Even when I’m whiney?” She sniffed a glob of snot back into her nose.

“You’re not whiny. I shouldn’t have said that,” I said. “But even if you have a bad day sometimes and need to whine, you’re still amazing. I promise. Let’s get you a tissue, okay?”

Catie nodded. “I can go get the soccer ball so we can go outside.”

“That sounds like a perfect plan. Thank you for being so helpful,” I said. Catie perked up a bit at the praise and headed off to go find her soccer ball.

I stepped into the hall to find a tissue box and saw Declan just around the corner.

My stomach clenched. How long had he been there?

I could be firm with kids, but I almost never lost my temper like that. Declan and I were finally in a good place, but if he thought I was being an unprofessional jerk to his niece...

“Are you all right?” he asked.

Shoot, I thought. He heard.

“I’m so sorry about that,” I said. “I promise it will never happen again.”

“I know,” Declan said. Gently, he added, “I’m guessing this is about more than a bad night’s sleep?”

I looked away. I wanted to tell him not to pry, but I’d lost that right when I’d snapped at Catie. “Today’s the anniversary of my parents’ death. I didn’t realize it would affect me this way. Normally I take a few days off, and go to the lake where we used to vacation together. But this year I’m in Ireland, so...” I shook my head. “It’s no excuse.”

Declan studied me, his face impassive. A part of me wondered if he was calculating how quickly he could find a less emotionally damaged nanny.

Instead, he said, “Give me twenty minutes.”



Twenty minutes later Declan interrupted my and Catie's game of "try not to kick the soccer ball into the flowers" to announce that he was taking the day off work, and we were all going to some place called Salthill.

Catie whooped.

"It's a beach, not a lakeshore," Declan said to me. "But I think you'll like it."

He was right. In less than an hour, Declan and I were spreading out a blanket on the sand while Catie scoped out a spot to build her sandcastle. Compared to wide open Pacific coast beaches I'd grown up with, Salthill felt small and quaint. We sat on a thin strip of sand. There was a boardwalk at our back with stores catering to beach goers. Farther down the boardwalk, a Ferris wheel rose over everything.

It was probably more crowded most of the time, but since we'd hit it in the middle of the week, it wasn't too bad.

It was a gorgeous, sunny day, but at only sixty-five degrees, I was feeling a bit silly for wearing my swimsuit under my T-shirt and jeans. "Is it always this cold?" I asked.

"What are you talking about?" Declan stripped off his shirt, revealing a lean, muscled chest with a shadow of dark chest hair. "This is summer weather at its finest."

"I think everyone in California would disagree," I joked.

He flashed me a smile. "You're not in California, *a chara*."

Declan held my gaze, and I felt something twist and flutter in my stomach. Then he turned his attention to Catie. "Want to go get water for your sandcastle?"

"Yes!" She took Declan's hand and skipped down toward the water, bucket in hand. They looked sweet together.

They looked like a family. My eyes stung.

I took a long, deep breath of salt air. I rubbed at the ache in my chest with the palm of my hand and told myself it was okay. My parents hadn't had a long life. But they'd had a good life. They'd liked their jobs, and they'd loved each other. They'd loved our family vacations on the lake. They would have loved today.

I lay back on the blanket and stared up at the blue sky as I listened to the reassuring roll of the waves and scrunched my toes in the sand. I lost track of time. When the sound of Catie and Declan's conversation brought me back to earth, I realized I felt more peaceful than I had in months.

I sat up so I could watch Catie and Declan's attempts to build a sandcastle. Eventually, Catie decided that Declan was doing it wrong, so he was banished to the blanket with me.

"Thanks for this," I said quietly to Declan. "I don't know how you knew, but it's exactly what I needed."

"You haven't seen anything yet," Declan said, keeping his voice light. "There's a fish and chips stand over on the boardwalk that tastes like summer holiday. We'll go there for lunch."

"That sounds perfect." I reached in my tote bag and pulled out a tube of sunscreen. "Hey, Catie, come over here and put some sunscreen on. We don't want you to burn."

"Uncle Declan doesn't have to wear any," she argued.

"Uncle Declan's going to wear some too," I said.

"I am?" Declan asked.

"You are," I said firmly. As a lifelong redhead, I knew it was better to deal with the inconvenience of sunscreen than the pain of sunburns.

Declan let out a groan almost as theatrical as Catie's, and I smothered a smile.

After years as a nanny, I was fast and efficient at sun-screening wiggly kids. I was done with Catie and myself in a matter of minutes. Declan, meanwhile, was still grumbling as he haphazardly slapped it on his limbs. To be fair, he

had more skin to cover than I did.

“Do you want me to do your back?” I asked, and then instantly regretted it. The last thing I needed to do was run my hands over his broad back.

“That’d be grand, thanks,” Declan said, turning to me.

My mouth felt a bit dry as I rose up on my knees to get a better angle on his shoulders. He stiffened when I touched him, but started to relax as I worked the sunscreen into his skin, inadvertently giving him a bit of a massage.

Okay. Maybe it wasn’t *that* inadvertent. But in my defense, he was magnificent. It was pure instinct to let my palms linger on the slope of his shoulder blade, the graceful line of his spine, the dip of his lower back.

“Mmm.” Declan’s head fell back. “That feels good.”

“Your reward for wearing sunscreen,” I said dryly. At least I intended it to be dry. It came out a tad breathless.

Declan turned to face me when I finished. “Do you want me to do you?”

I plucked at the fabric of my T-shirt. “No need.”

“You’re not going swimming?” Declan asked in disbelief.

I looked at him like he was crazy. “That water does *not* look warm enough for a swim.”

“Eh. Only about five degrees cooler than the air.”

I shook my head firmly.

“Chicken,” Declan said, a challenging gleam in his eye.

“I am not!”

Declan just grinned at me, smug. Like he knew his goading would work.

And damn him, it did.

“Fine,” I said, stripping off my T-shirt and jeans. “I’ll get in the water.”

“That’s my girl,” he said, the warmth in his voice doing something to me. I

could feel his eyes on me as I rubbed the lotion on my legs. A tiny, vain part of me wished I'd worn a sexier suit. But I'd packed for work, not vacation, so all I had was my practical black one-piece. At least the halter-top design made my boobs look amazing.

I passed Declan the sunscreen and turned my back to him. "Your turn," I said, trying not to think too much about this.

Declan gently scooped my hair to the side and tucked it over the front of my shoulder to expose my neck. Then he spread sunscreen over my upper back in smooth, easy strokes.

"Can you, um, get under the tie at the back of my neck?" I asked awkwardly. "It moves a bit, and then I get burned..."

He gently lifted the back of the tie and used his fingers to work the sunscreen all around the base of my neck. When he finished, my breath felt a bit shallow.

I popped to my feet, avoiding his eyes. "Right! Time for a swim."

Catie was more than happy to join me, but I didn't take her out farther than my hips, and I kept her hand in mine. I didn't know the tides here.

But Declan did. He swam out farther, weaving through the water with a fluid, masculine grace before coming back toward Catie and me. As the water got shallower, he moved from swimming to striding through the water. I watched the water sluice down his chest and thought the kinds of thoughts straight women always think when watching hot men emerge from water.

He splashed me and Catie, who shrieked. Catie and I returned fire until we were all soaked, cold, and laughing. When we walked back up to our blanket, Catie returned to her sandcastle masterpiece, while Declan and I flopped down on the blankets.

"I like the idea of going somewhere good on the anniversary of a loved one's death," Declan said quietly. I understood instantly that he was talking about his dad. "Mostly I avoid the people and places I don't want to be. But I like the idea of going *to* something instead."

"What was he like?" I asked, rolling my head to look at him.

Declan smiled up at the sky. “He was just this calm, good man. He saw the best in anyone and everyone. I remember going to get a glass of water one night when I was maybe ten. One of his mates was over, clearly upset about something. I just remember my da saying, ‘You know it won’t come to that. You’ve got a whole net of people here to catch you, starting with me.’”

“That’s beautiful,” I said.

“He loved Ballybeith,” Declan said. “Even the shit bits.” He rolled his head to watch me. “What about you? What were yours like?”

“Adventurous. Happy.” I smiled. “He worked in real estate, but it was just a job—a way to pay the bills. He loved coming home to me and my mom at the end of the day. Sometimes, when the mood struck them, instead of going to bed, we’d all pile into the car in our pajamas and drive down to the beach. Then we’d park and listen to music while they talked softly in the front seat, and I fell asleep in the backseat.”

“What type of music did you listen to?” Declan asked.

“If my dad picked it, the Stones. If my mom picked it, ABBA.”

“That explains my doorbell,” Declan said, and I laughed. And laughed. I kept laughing, much harder than the joke warranted, until I realized that at some point the laughter had shifted to quiet tears.

“Hey, hey.” He threaded his hand through mine and squeezed. “It’s okay.”

But I don’t have a net of people to catch me, I thought. It’s just me.

And yet, with his hand strong in mine, though, I didn’t feel so alone.

Catie clambered onto the blanket. “Can we read now? Wait, why are you crying?”

I yanked my hand away from Declan as we both sat up. I discreetly swiped at my eyes. “I just remembered something that made me sad. But I’m okay. And I would love to read with you. Let’s see, which books did you bring...” I reached for the tote bag of Catie’s books, feeling confused when I pulled out two identical copies of *Emmy Lou’s Beach Day*.

“Why do you have two copies?” I asked, confused.

“One is mine, and one is Uncle Declan’s,” Catie explained. “That way he can read them to me over the phone.”

Oh. Oh, this man. I felt something ache in the vicinity of my heart.

“Yeah, but that’s for when you’re in the States,” Declan said. “We don’t have to do it when you’re here.”

“This one is for me and Miss Olivia,” Catie said. “And this one’s for you. She’s going to read, and you can follow along.”

“Very sensible,” Declan said, his face solemn and his eyes dancing as he accepted the book.

“Read the book now,” Catie said, leaning her damp, wriggly body against my side so she could see the pictures. Both of these books would probably have sand in their spines for the rest of their lives. A matching set, in more ways than one.

I read to Catie and Declan, knowing I was in the midst of a moment I’d cherish for the rest of my life. And most of it had to do with the man lying on his stomach next to me, dutifully flipping through a picture book because his niece told him to.

DECLAN

I'd proposed a beach day for Olivia, but I hadn't realized how much I needed it too.

Anil and I were in the process of deciding whether to acquire a new tech company in Prague that would add organic in-app video to Snug. Right now people could watch linked videos in the app, but it was primarily a text platform. Adding video would help us compete with all the video-based social media platforms. But it would also change the feel of the platform.

It was a tricky balance in tech. Fail to keep up with the times, and miss out on new users. Change too much, and you lost existing users—and risked wading into an area where you really couldn't provide as good an experience as the competition. Needless to say, it was a stressful state of affairs.

It had felt good to unplug for a few hours and listen to the waves. Even Sinead had noticed I sounded more relaxed when I talked to her that night.

Although it was a good thing the water was cold. Olivia's demure swimsuit had clung to her curves in a way that had me fantasizing about untying that little bow at the base of her neck so I could finally...well.

As my grandad used to say, cold water is a gentleman's friend. My gran used to scold him when he said that in front of the little kids, but he wasn't *wrong*.

The next morning, I strolled into the kitchen to make myself a cup of tea while Olivia and Catie were having breakfast.

“Uncle Declan! My mom said last night you have a boat.”

“I do.” I grabbed my favorite mug out of the cupboard.

“Can we go out on it today?” She practically bounced in her chair with enthusiasm.

It was on the tip of my tongue to say yes when I remembered what Olivia had said about structure. “Not today, love. I have work. But we could go out this weekend?” I glanced at Olivia to see if I’d handled that right.

She gave me an approving smile. “I think this weekend would be a great idea.”

Catie heaved a dramatic sigh and returned to her breakfast. “I guess that’s okay, too.”

I bit back a smile. Sinead had been a drama queen too at that age. The women in my family had big emotions.

I made my tea and returned to my office, my new weekend plans already making me feel more optimistic about the workday ahead.



Saturday morning dawned gray and misty, but I didn’t mind. That’s what sweaters were for. Besides, the mist would burn off. I helped Olivia and Catie climb aboard *The Selkie*, the sailboat I kept docked in Galway Harbor. It was big enough to be comfortable with all three of us, but small enough I could easily steer it by myself.

I made sure everyone was in their life jackets and knew the safety rules before I turned on the inboard engine to steer us away from the dock. Once we were out in the open water, we’d have enough wind I could shift to using the sails to navigate.

It was early enough in the morning that the still-waking-up Catie was happy to sit still and stare wide-eyed at everything around her.

I glanced at Olivia and saw her hand was tight on the railing.

I frowned. Was she nervous?

Olivia saw me watching her. “How long have you had this boat? Is this a new hobby?”

“I bought it a few years ago. But I’ve been sailing since I was a boy. My mum’s da was a fisherman.” I smiled into the wind. There really was nothing like being out on the water. “Are you feeling queasy? It’ll calm down once we’re out there,” I assured Olivia.

“No, I...my parents.” She grimaced. “I used to love boats.”

Shit. I felt like a fucking idiot. She’d told me her parents had died in a boating accident.

“We can turn back,” I said, quietly enough that Catie couldn’t hear. “I’ll make up an excuse.”

“No,” Olivia said stubbornly. “I’ve been on boats since. One of the families I nannied for loved yachts. If I do it often enough, then it won’t...” She tilted up her chin. “I want to do this.”

I felt a fierce swell of affection for her. I’d always had a weakness for brave women.

“Here,” I said, beckoning Olivia over to me. “I’m going to show you how to steer. You’ll feel better if you’re in control.”

I scooted back, so Olivia could sit in front of me. “You want to straddle the wheel and look forward.”

She did as I instructed, and I realized that an unintentional benefit of my plan was essentially having Olivia in my lap. She was short enough I could see over the top of her head, with her curls brushing against my lips.

“See how my arm is on top of the wheel? Slip your hand under mine. I’ll guide you.”

She nodded, all focus, and did as I said.

I wonder if she’d be this sweetly trusting in bed? a traitorous part of me wondered. Or would she be stubborn and fiery, fighting me every inch of the

way?

I crushed both thoughts, focusing on instructing Olivia so she could feel comfortable again. “Keep it slow and steady. The key is small, gentle movements. A delicate touch goes a long way.”

“Like sex,” Olivia said, and then she clapped her free hand to her mouth. “Forget I said that.”

Not a chance in hell, I thought.

I cleared my throat. “Any questions so far?”

“Yes. Is it a problem that I can barely see over the wheel? What if I hit something?”

I laughed and continued explaining the ins and outs of sailing to Olivia until she started to relax. When we were out on the water, I cut the engine. Olivia even steered for a bit by herself, although I stayed seated behind her, ready to take over if she needed help.

When she handed the wheel back to me, she looked over her shoulder with an elated grin. “That was amazing.”

Her face was just inches from mine, her cheeks flushed and her eyes full of life. I had the sudden urge to just lean forward and kiss her. It felt like the most natural thing in the world.

And that scared the shit out of me.

I leaned back to give her room to stand up. “Can you help me with the sails? Then we can ask if Catie wants to learn how to steer.” I winked. “Don’t worry, she won’t get to try it by herself for a few years yet.”

“Sure.” She stood and moved away, spreading her arms in an easy stretch as the wind whipped her hair. It looked like she was hugging the world. “Ah, this is good. Days like this, I remember why this is the best job in the world.”

“Is it, though?” I blurted on impulse. “Even when people aren’t...well...firing you, you still have to deal with challenging parents. You don’t get to stay in one place, or have a home of your own.”

“I have a home,” Olivia protested.

“If you lived there all the time, not just between jobs, would it be enough?” I asked.

She didn’t answer, but the look on her face told me it wouldn’t.

“If you don’t want to put down roots there, it’s not a home,” I said.

“Not all of us need to stay in the town we’re born in,” she said pointedly.

“Fair enough,” I allowed. “I guess...you’re obviously brilliant at what you do. But have you ever thought about doing something else? Something that lets you stay put for a while?”

I didn’t know why I was asking. I didn’t know why I cared about her answer.

At least that’s what I told myself.

Olivia ran a hand along the railing, deciding how to answer. “I find it’s better not to get too hung up on the idea of permanence.” She flashed me a smile. “That way you can really live in the moment. And it doesn’t hurt as much when something good ends.”

As I showed her how to raise the motorized sails, I chewed over her words. I couldn’t tell if it was the wisest thing I’d ever heard, or the saddest.



I could have stayed out on the water forever, but there were only so many safe things a restless six-year-old could do on a sailboat, so I brought us back into the harbor after a few hours. I docked the boat, cut the engine, and lowered the sails while Olivia put the life jackets away.

I hopped onto the dock and helped Catie hop from the boat to the dock.

“Did you have fun?” I asked.

“Yes! Can we do it again soon?”

“We can,” I said. I held out my hand to Olivia. She took it, and leapt lightly to the dock, landing closer to me than either of us had intended.

A blush spread over her face.

The kiss I hadn't stolen from her hovered at the back of my mind.

My phone started buzzing, and abruptly we released each other, stepping apart.

I checked the text from my assistant. Someone I'd been trying to get on the phone for weeks—a former software engineer at the company Snug was considering acquiring—was finally free to talk.

“I'm sorry,” I said to Catie and Olivia. “I have to take a call. Can you two occupy yourselves for a bit?”

“Sure,” Olivia said. “Molly thinks Catie's old enough to start the Magic Treehouse books, so we can head over to the bookstore to pick one up while you take your call.”

“Thanks,” I said. I dropped a kiss on the top of Catie's head. “Be good for Miss Olivia.”

Catie nodded, already distracted by the promise of new books. But not so distracted she didn't add, “You should kiss Miss Olivia goodbye too, so she doesn't feel left out.”

I opened my mouth and closed it, unsure how to handle that request.

But Olivia was clearly more used to the strange logic of children, because she laughed and made a joking show of tapping her cheek.

I leaned in to drop a quick, platonic kiss. But her skin was so soft under my lips, it softened me too. She smelled like lavender, sunscreen, and the sea. A crazy part of me wanted to press my face into the curve of her neck and inhale. For a heartbeat too long, my lips lingered against her cheek.

Then I pulled away, trying to pretend that nothing had happened. That she didn't affect me in ways I couldn't explain.

Olivia's smile was as normal and friendly as ever, but I thought her breath was a little uneven.

“Right. We'll just...” Olivia motioned behind her, grabbed Catie's hand, and

started strolling in the direction of Shop Street.

I turned blindly in the opposite direction, looking for a quiet place to take my call. I was trying to figure out what the hell was happening between me and Olivia, when I all but bumped into Mark O'Rourke.

The sight of him brought me sharply back to earth. He looked the same as he always did. Good suit. Gray hair. Ruddy skin. And a scowl that could frighten children.

Whatever fanciful thoughts I'd had about Olivia when we were out on the water didn't matter. Olivia wasn't a permanent part of my life.

This man unfortunately was. At least for now.

My lips thinned as I stepped around him.

"Don't think you can ignore me, Byrne," he barked. "I know what you're doing. I know you're the one blocking the sales of my buildings."

I stopped, delighted by the confirmation that my plan was working.

I turned back to face him and raised a brow. "I wasn't aware you needed to sell. Is it money troubles?" I inclined my head in mock sympathy. "Truly, that's too bad. It couldn't happen to a nicer man."

Mark's face flushed with mottled rage. "Back off, boy. Or else."

I turned on my heel and strolled away, whistling as I went. It took me a minute to realize I was whistling ABBA's *Waterloo*.

OLIVIA

After I put Catie down to bed, I retreated to my room to snuggle under the covers and scroll through some of my favorite book reviewer and author blogs on Snug. Declan had invited me to watch TV with him, but after the intimacy of this morning's boat ride, I needed a break from proximity to him.

It was intimate, right? I found myself wondering for the millionth time. There'd been a moment when I smiled at him, and his eyes dropped to my lips, and I could have sworn...

I blew out an unsteady breath.

Even *if* there had been a moment, it didn't mean anything. Declan was a hot, single billionaire with a sexy accent. Plus, he was a surprisingly decent man under his grumpy exterior. Most of the straight women he met probably thought they had "moments" with him.

Still. The way his eyes had darkened. The way he'd leaned in...

I kicked off the covers, feeling hot. When my phone buzzed with a message notification from @DBCoder, I was grateful for the distraction. We'd exchanged a few messages since the day Declan "fired" me, and @DBCoder had apologized for not seeing my message that day. Apparently, he'd been busy with a work thing.

Tonight's message read *Can I ask your advice?*

Always, I typed.

Is there ever a scenario where it's acceptable to ask out a woman who works for you?

Ooof. There was a thorny question. Before Declan, I would have said, "No, too messy, don't go there." I'd never been attracted to any of the men I'd worked for, and it would have made me deeply uncomfortable if any of them had made a pass.

But now I knew what it was like to meet someone through work and... wonder. I knew Declan would never ask me out. He valued our professional relationship, and even if he didn't, I wasn't his type. But for the sake of giving good advice to a friend, I tried to imagine what it would be like if Declan ever asked me out on a proper date.

Just imagining sent butterflies flapping in my stomach.

What if @DBCoder's girl was waiting with those same butterflies for him to make a move? On the other hand, what if she wasn't, and making a move would ruin a perfectly good working relationship?

You're not going to like this, I typed, *but the only scenario in which it's ok to ask out your employee is if you already know she's into you.*

That makes no sense, he shot back. *How am I going to know her feelings if I don't ask her out?*

You won't, I replied, *unless she tells you.*

He started typing, then stopped. I could imagine him turning my answer over in his head.

Sorry, I wrote. *I told you that you weren't going to like the answer.*

You did, he responded. Then *thanks*. He sent a gif of some actor I didn't recognize banging his head against a wall.

I laughed. Poor guy.

A part of me was envious of this real-world woman @DBCoder liked. But as long as I refused to take our relationship offline, I didn't have any right to be jealous of who he dated. Besides, he was my friend. I wanted him to be happy.

If it makes you feel better, you're not alone, I wrote. Before I could lose my nerve I added, *I sort of have the hots for a guy I work with. It's been...*

I searched for the right word.

Distracting, I finished.

Naughty girl, he teased. Then, *Does he work for you?*

I'd mentioned to @DBCoder that I worked in childcare, but we'd never gotten into specifics. For all he knew, I was a principal at a primary school or the admin at a nanny agency.

I imagined Declan reporting to me in some imaginary office setting. It was both hilarious and strangely hot. I snorted and typed *No.*

Then ask him out, @DBCoder said. *By your own rules, you're in the clear.*

That was bullshit. There were a million reasons why asking Declan out was a terrible idea, but I didn't want to get into them with @DBCoder.

He's way out of my league, I said instead, because that was true too.

His reply was instant. *I highly doubt that.*

I smiled. @DBCoder might be snarky, but he was sweet too. Guys weren't sweet like that in real life. At least, not the guys that I knew.

Good night, I wrote. *Go sign up for a dating app. Meet someone who doesn't work for you.*

Ha. Dating apps are a terrible idea in my case. But I appreciate the suggestion.

I logged off and turned off the lamp by my bedside. As I drifted off to sleep, I wondered idly what @DBCoder had meant by "*in my case.*"



I dreamed I was on Declan's boat, but instead of Declan being there with me, it was @DBCoder. He was a shapeless silhouette, in the way of dreams, but I *knew* it was him standing behind me, his palm skating over my stomach, as

he dropped a kiss on my cheek, then the base of my neck. It felt so good, but I knew it was wrong.

I can't, I said. *Not you.*

What if I was someone else? He turned me around, and then it wasn't @DBCoder anymore, it was Declan. And there wasn't anything hazy or shapeless about him. It was Declan kissing me roughly, Declan's hands on my hips, Declan boosting me up onto the railing of the boat, so that my legs could wrap around his hips.

I clutched at his shirt, a thrill shooting through me. Too late I realized we weren't wearing life jackets.

We'll fall, I protested.

Then we fall, Declan said, and then his hands were sliding under my sundress, cupping me, stroking me, as he bit my neck and ordered me to fall with him.

Or was he begging?

I twisted in his arms, and then I was twisting in the sheets, and then a wave swept me overboard and away from Declan, and I jolted awake as he called, "Olivia. You up?"

I blinked in the morning sunlight, pulse racing.

There was a gentle knock on my door, and Declan asked again, "Olivia?"

"Yes?" I was confused until I glanced at the clock and realized I'd overslept by over an hour. "Shoot." I scrambled out of bed, pulling a sweatshirt over my pajamas for a bit of additional modesty.

I yanked open the door and shoved my hair out of my face. "I'm so sorry. I overslept. Does Catie need help? I'll be there in a second."

"Slow down," Declan said, his grin lazy as he leaned against my doorframe. "Catie's fine. I'm just making eggs and bacon and wanted to see if you wanted some." His grin faded and he frowned. "You never oversleep. Are you feeling all right?" He reached out with the back of his hand to feel my forehead.

Unfortunately, that made me think of all the things his hands had been doing in my dream.

“You’re not hot, but you’re definitely flushed,” Declan said, sounding concerned.

I pushed his hand away. “I’m fine.”

He looked skeptical.

“Really! I’m fine.”

“Suit yourself. Breakfast will be ready in ten.” He looked me up and down one last time, biting back a smile. “Nice sweatshirt.”

I looked down, confused, as he walked away.

Then I realized that in my haste, I’d grabbed the sweatshirt he’d loaned me on movie night. Which meant he probably thought I was sleeping in his clothes, like a real weirdo.

Or like a woman with a crush.

I groaned, and went to get dressed as quickly as I could.

Fifteen minutes later, I walked into the kitchen and discovered “eggs and bacon” was a bit of an understatement. Declan had made eggs, sausage, potatoes, ham, toast, and—for some unknown reason—cooked tomatoes.

“What’s all this?” I asked. I watched Catie ferry plates to the table.

“Couldn’t sleep. Felt like cooking,” Declan said. “Hot water is in the kettle for tea.”

I turned to see he’d set out my favorite mug next to the kettle.

It was small gesture, but it made something delicious flutter in my stomach.

“Uncle Declan said my granddad used to make a big breakfast for everyone on Sunday so he didn’t have to go to church,” Catie informed me.

My eyes flew to Declan. I didn’t know why it felt significant that he was doing something his dad used to do, but it did.

Declan scratched the back of his neck, looking scruffy and adorably self-conscious. “Right,” he said gruffly. “Food’s getting cold.”

Catie carried most of the breakfast conversation, updating us on all the things she’d talked about on the phone with her mom last night. Apparently, two of the men in group therapy were “whiny bitches” but the rest of the people Sinead had met were “all right.”

“Let’s not say ‘bitches’ at the breakfast table,” I said.

“When can I say it?” Catie asked reasonably.

“When you’re older,” Declan said. He changed the topic before Catie could come up with a rebuttal. “Olivia, I wanted to say thank you for the advice you gave me.”

I blinked, confused. “The dating advice?”

He gave me a weird look. “What?”

I flushed, realizing I was thinking about last night’s @DBCoder conversation. Apparently, it wasn’t just my dreams that were mixing the men up. “Oh my gosh. No. Sorry, I was thinking of someone else.” I flushed harder, hating how rattled that dream had left me. I gulped my tea, obviously needing the caffeine. “What advice were you talking about?”

“Your suggestion about bringing more allies into a business fight to take down a bully.” He said it slowly, like he was a little worried I’d hit my head. “I took your advice, and it’s working.”

“Oh. That. Good.” I waved my fork as I talked, as if that would help me find smarter words.

It didn’t.

Declan smiled, affection in his eyes, and I both loved and hated that smile, because it was the exact smile he’d had in the dream.

I decided then and there I needed space from Declan. As much space as possible. “Catie, want to go to the bookstore after breakfast and visit Molly? Give your uncle some peace and quiet?”

“Yes!” Catie shoved toast into her mouth enthusiastically.

Something in Declan’s smile flickered.

Too late, I realized it was probably rude not to invite him too, since it was his day off. But I couldn’t help it.

I needed *space*, before I did something irreversibly stupid.



By the time Catie and I got to the bookstore, I decided the problem was that I had too much free time on my hands. Unlike some other employers I’d had, Declan actually respected my off hours. And that was leaving my brain far too much time to think things it shouldn’t.

As soon as Molly had a gap in the customers she was helping, I strode up to her. “I’ll do it. Let’s make a picture book together.”

Her face split with glee. “That’s frickin *brilliant*. I knew you’d say yes.” Then good-friend mode kicked in and she frowned. “Wait, why are you saying yes? Are you sure you want to? You seemed pretty against the idea before.”

I sighed. “Let’s say I need a distraction from...someone.”

Molly’s eyebrows rose. “Someone you’re living with?”

“No!”

“Uh-huh. I saw the way you looked at him at lunch the other day.”

I groaned and dropped my head into my hands. “Is it that obvious?”

“Not to him,” Molly reassured me. “Men are oblivious. Speaking of which, do you want to go on a double date with me and my on-again-off-again boyfriend? He’s got a cousin in town who’s apparently ‘not that boring.’”

I laughed. “You make him sound so appealing.”

“You said you needed a distraction,” Molly reminded me. “Come on. You can give me a fresh opinion on my man. Half my friends think I should bin

him for good and the other half think he's no worse than any other lad."

Privately, I thought if she had to ask what someone else thought about the guy she was dating, she already had her answer, but maybe Molly was right. A night out could be fun.

"Sure," I said. "Let's do it. It just has to be after Catie goes to bed, or a night when Declan doesn't mind me clocking out early."

Molly beamed. "Brilliant." Then her face got more serious. "Er, did you really mean it about doing a children's book together? Because I've got a friend who works for a small publishing company up in Dublin. She loves my art style, and she's said more than once I should pitch her if I ever find the right writer to partner with." She rolled her eyes, looking a bit self-conscious. "Or, I mean, we don't have to do anything that serious, we can just mess around..."

I hadn't known Molly that long, but even I could tell she didn't want to mess around on this project. She wanted to give it a real shot.

The more I thought about it, the more her enthusiasm sparked mine. "No, let's do it. Let's make something you can pitch your friend."

Molly squealed.

With any luck, I'd be too busy to think about sex with anyone—especially my boss.

DECLAN

I spent most of Monday in Dublin putting out one fire after another at work. When Sinead called for her nightly call with Catie, I was still on the road, a good twenty minutes from home.

“I can send you Olivia’s number,” I told Sinead. “She’ll put you on with Catie, if you’re in a rush.”

“Why would I be in a rush? It’s rehab. There’s nothing to *do*,” Sinead complained.

I laughed. “You can put that on the comment card when you leave. ‘Sure, they helped me with the addiction thing, but at what cost?’”

Sinead snickered. “See, that’s why I missed you. All the Americans here are too fucking serious.”

Outside, the countryside flew past as I drove. At this time of the day, with the sun setting, everything looked lush and gorgeous. Like home. “You could move back, you know. No serious Americans here.”

Sinead made a noncommittal sound and deftly changed the subject. “Speaking of which. How’s your American working out for you?”

It took me a moment to realize she meant Olivia. “She’s good. Catie likes her. She knows things about taking care of kids I never would have thought of.” Honesty made me add, “We had a bit of a rough go at first, but I apologized, and now we’re all grand.”

Sinead gasped loudly and theatrically. “*You* apologized? Declan.” She lowered her voice to a mock-whisper. “Do you like her?”

I rolled my shoulders. “*No*. I... I mean, it wouldn’t be professional if I did. So. *No*.”

I could practically hear Sinead’s delighted smile through the phone. “Oh my God. You have the hots for the nanny,” she teased, full of bratty-little-sister glee. In spite of myself, I was actually glad to hear it. She sounded like herself again. “Could you be any more of a cliché?”

I groaned. “It’s not that. I mean, yes, she’s fit. But it’s more...” I searched for the right words. I didn’t know how to explain it. “It’s just her. She’s brave, and she’s stubborn, and she’s got this smile...”

“Oh,” Sinead said, and this time there was no laughter in her voice. “This is real.”

“I don’t do *real*,” I protested.

“Maybe you should,” Sinead said.

I made the same noncommittal sound she’d made when I suggested she move back to Ireland. We Byrnes were excellent at avoiding emotional conversations.

But it occurred to me this was an area of my sister’s life I didn’t know much about.

“Have you ever had something real?” I asked. “With, I don’t know, a bloke in the States?” Was a bad relationship the thing that had tipped her over into alcoholism?

“What, like falling in love and all that? No,” Sinead said. “It’s not exactly easy to date around as a single mum.”

I felt a twinge of guilt, for all the little ways her life was harder than mine.

Sinead’s voice softened, turning reflective. “I think the closest I’ve ever come to love was with Catie’s dad. But we were both so young. I knew he wasn’t ready to be a parent.”

I blinked, surprised. When she'd first gotten pregnant, Mum and I had pleaded with her to tell us who the father was, but she'd refused to answer. Eventually, we'd come to the conclusion that he was a one-night stand, and she was embarrassed to admit it. But if she'd had feelings for him, that mattered.

"Are you ever going to tell me who he was?" I asked.

"Wait, is that what this is about?" Sinead asked defensively. "Did you bring up relationships so you could pry into my past? I won't have your judgment, Declan."

"I'm not judging you," I protested.

"You're always judging me," Sinead shot back.

"I just don't *understand* you," I said, frustrated.

"Maybe it would be better if you give me your nanny's number," Sinead said. "I should talk to my kid."

I bit back my frustration, sent her the number, and ended the call.

Sinead and I had fought plenty as kids. We both had big emotions, and while we loved each other, the ways we picked to show it didn't always mesh. I tried to show my love by looking out for her, taking care of things for her—but it never seemed to work out the way that I hoped. But she'd also known that I always had her back. And there had been good days too, when a rare mood would strike her, and she'd decide we were going on some kind of adventure, whether that meant going down to the shop for crisps and candy bars or a day at Salthill.

I saw that side of her in Catie. That impulse to seize the day and do something marvelous.

So why couldn't Sinead and I manage a proper adult relationship? I didn't want to bicker like children. I wanted to *help*.

Why didn't she trust me?



“Knock knock,” Olivia said cheerfully as she knocked on the door to my office. I didn’t particularly feel like working right now, but I had to catch up on emails, and it was better than thinking about my inability to have a functional relationship with my sister.

“Just wanted to say Catie’s down for the night,” Olivia continued. “I’m glad you thought to give Sinead my number, in case you have to work late again.”

I grunted in acknowledgment.

“Okay, then,” she said. “If you don’t want to talk about anything, I’ll just turn in for the night...”

“Grand,” I said, without taking my eyes off the screen.

Olivia turned and left.

Two minutes later she returned. “Nope, I can’t do it. I can’t leave you all grumpy and alone. You are in *such* a bad mood. Did something happen at work?”

“Work is fine,” I said. “I’m fine.”

“You’re not,” Olivia insisted, hands on her hips. “If it’s not work, is it your family? Is Sinead okay?”

“She’s fine,” I said. “She’s just Sinead. She’s got it in her head she can’t trust me, and if I ask an innocent question, I’m apparently trying to judge her past choices in men, which, let’s face it, were pretty atrocious. So if I *was* judging her, it would be absolutely warranted.”

Olivia raised an eyebrow.

“It’s fine,” I said. “I’m bloody *fine*. I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Okay,” Olivia said. “We don’t have to talk about it. Is there something I can do to distract you instead?”

My mind flew to all sorts of dirty, delicious things Olivia could do to distract me.

I cleared my throat and looked away. “That’s kind of you, but it’s not your job to manage my emotions.”

Olivia rolled her eyes. “I’m trying to do something nice for you, you idiot, because you were nice to me when I needed it. Why are you making it so hard?”

Because I’m not used to having someone who wants to make me feel better. Because you’re unpardonably lovely. Because I want to be at my best around you. The reasons immediately ran through my mind. I couldn’t say any of them out loud.

“I suppose I am,” I admitted grudgingly.

That earned a smile from Olivia. “Let’s make this simple. Want to watch a sappy movie with me and make fun of it?”

“You strike me as the type of woman who likes sappy movies.”

“I do, but we’re cheering you up, not me. And I know how much you like mocking sincere emotion.” She waved a hand at my face. “Especially when you’re all grumbly like that.”

I conceded her point.

“So,” Olivia said, leaning forward with an air of contagious mischief, “what’s the sappiest, corniest, most ridiculous movie you know?”

I thought about it.

And then I grinned.

Ten minutes later we were downstairs in front of the telly, watching *The Deer and the Warrior*.

Olivia frowned in concentration as she watched a man with flowing locks and an equally flowing medieval-style shirt stride down the stairs of a Victorian mansion covered in deeply old-fashioned woven tapestries. “What time period is this supposed to be in?”

“They were all set to film in a local castle, until the roof caved in and brained the original lead,” I explained. “After that, they prioritized functioning roofs over period accuracy.”

Olivia gaped at me. “You’re making that up.”

I grinned. Olivia had probably grown up on Hollywood movies that more or less made sense. She wasn't prepared for the glorious camp classic she was about to witness.

Olivia fell silent as she watched. "I don't get how this is a romance. He's just going deer hunting."

Onscreen, Fionn drew the string of his bow back, ready to slay the skittish doe onscreen, when his second-in-command stopped him and explained that obviously the doe was really a woman under a curse.

"Wait... *That's* our heroine?" Olivia asked, outraged. "She's not even human!"

"It's a classic for a reason. Heroines are better when they can't talk back to you," I said.

Olivia hit me on the head with a pillow. I laughed, catching her wrists before she could strike again. Olivia's eyes sparked and she bit back a smile as she tried to free herself from my grip so she could take another swing. The effort made her face flush, and I found my eyes dropping down to her mouth, to the way her breasts heaved under her tank top with her panting breaths.

I had the sudden urge to press her back into the pillows and kiss her like I'd been wanting to, for longer than I wanted to admit.

Olivia's lips parted.

She's probably about to ask what the hell you're thinking, my rational self-reminded me.

I released her abruptly and focused on the movie.

At least I tried to focus on the movie. But at the same time, I was aware of every movement Olivia made. Every time she laughed or gasped or tucked her hair behind her ears. When she repositioned herself and ended up scooting closer to me on the couch, I caught a whiff of that lavender scent she always smelled like.

Was it soap? Perfume?

I imagined her dabbing perfume on her wrists and neck, one tiny bit of

femininity before she spent her days chasing after a rambunctious child. I imagined her soaping herself off at the end of a long day, in a hot shower, using her own delicate scented soap instead of whatever my housekeeper stocked.

Fuck. I shifted, trying not to get hard. Trying to hide it if I failed.

“Wait, why is she turning into a human now?” Olivia asked.

“Because they’re on Fionn’s land now. Her curse breaks when he brings her into his home.”

Olivia tilted her head. “That’s kind of lovely.”

“Sinead likes that part too,” I said. “Actually, she likes this whole movie. I don’t know why.”

Olivia sent me a knowing look. “Is that why you picked it tonight?”

I didn’t answer that.

We watched as the heroine introduced herself as Lady Sadhbh. Fionn instructed his people to care for her. Sadhbh met Fionn’s sister, and the two became fast friends.

“The sister’s not in the original legend,” I pointed out.

“I’m guessing the 70s folk-rock music isn’t either,” Olivia said.

“No, that part’s original,” I joked, but it felt hollow. Olivia hadn’t pressed me to keep talking about Sinead, and I felt oddly disappointed. A part of me wanted to talk about her now, I realized. Maybe because it was easier to talk about important things when we were both staring at a dumb movie, instead of each other.

“I don’t know who Catie’s father is,” I admitted. “I always assumed Sinead didn’t know, or at least that he was someone she barely knew and that was why she never tried to get him involved. But today she admitted she was basically in love with the fucker. And yet, she won’t tell me who he is because she thinks I’ll judge her.”

“And that hurts you,” Olivia said quietly, understanding.

“No,” I protested. Then I relented. “Maybe a little.”

Olivia reached over and slipped her hand in mine. “Just do your best to keep showing up for her, and give her time. She’ll tell you when she’s ready.” She gave my hand a brief squeeze, and then let it go.

I fought the urge to reach for her.

Onscreen, the movie had moved on to the sequence where Fionn courted Sadhbh. So far he’d picked a wild rose for her, sang a throaty folk song, and hit a man who insulted her. “Do women really find this romantic?” I asked, mostly because I needed to change the topic to something light and easy.

“It’s not the things he’s doing so much as the way he’s doing them,” Olivia said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You see the way he looks at her, like she’s the best thing in the world? And the way he holds on to her until the last possible second, like he doesn’t want to let her go?” She made a show of fanning herself. It was kind of cute.

I grinned. “Is that what you’re waiting for? Some guy to moon over you and hold your hand?”

Olivia snorted. “In real life, guys aren’t waiting to fall in love with you. And when they are, it gets creepy fast. That’s why I love movies.”

I frowned. I didn’t like the idea of Olivia doubting that any man would be lucky to have her. And I definitely didn’t like the idea of some guy making her uncomfortable or ruining romance for her.

“It sounds like there’s a story there,” I prompted.

Olivia made a face. “It’s not a big deal. Just a bad experience with a guy on a dating app.”

Everything in me went still. “Olivia. What do you mean by ‘bad experience?’”

If some bastard hurt her...

“It started off fine. We matched on the app, went on a few dates, et cetera.

But when we were getting to know each other online, I mentioned this silly blog I ran on Snug. So then he created an anonymous profile and used it to get to know me online, pretending to be a random reader.” Olivia pulled her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around them, protecting herself as she told the story. “He didn’t tell me until we’d been dating for like a month.”

“What a creep,” I said.

“Right? I think he thought it would be romantic or something. Two people who keep crossing each other’s paths until they fall in love. But in real life it just felt...invasive. Like he was spying on me or manipulating me.” She wiggled her shoulders like she was shaking off a bad memory. “Anyway. I dumped him and blocked him online. And after that, I kept my blog and my real life separate.” She cocked her head at me. “What about you? Are you waiting for some grand romance? The perfect woman?”

But I wasn’t ready to let her brush off what had happened to her. “What’s the creep’s name? Do you have his contact info?”

“Why?” Olivia asked.

“I’m going to ban him from Snug,” I said, dead serious.

“It wasn’t that bad,” she protested. “Men are creepy on the internet all the time. You can’t ban them all.”

“Yes, I fucking can,” I said.

Olivia smiled. “Aww. You want to do the cyber equivalent of punching the guy who insulted my honor.” She turned back to the movie. Her smile softened. “You’ve got more ‘hero’ in you than you think.”

That was bullshit.

But I pulled out my phone and shot Anil a text, reminding us both that we should review Snug’s policies about cyber harassment, and see if there were any areas where we could improve.

“So what was your blog about?” I asked, trying to lighten the mood. “Fan fiction about your favorite TV show? Nannyng tips? An expose on every

dumb boss you worked for?”

Olivia laughed, and it slid through my veins like whiskey.

“Actually,” Olivia joked, “it was fan fiction for *The Deer and the Warrior*. I’m actually obsessed with this movie. It’s why I took this nanny job. I’m hunting for an Irishman who will promise to save me from evil wizards. It’s a highly specific fetish.”

“In that case...” I smirked, deepening my voice and thickening my accent as I looked deeply into Olivia’s eyes, and recited one of the movie’s most famous lines. “Lass, I canna ignore the call of battle. But tonight, we dance. So be kind to your man and give me one last taste of what I’d die to protect.”

At first, neither of us could keep a straight face. But as I got to the last line, the words didn’t feel quite as ridiculous as they should. If Olivia kissed me by an ancient bonfire and sent me into battle to protect her, I was beginning to think I’d go.

Olivia’s eyes darkened, and I felt my own pulse pick up in response.

Wait, was she really into this?

Because I had this whole fucking movie memorized.

Abruptly, Olivia scooted away and turned back to the screen. The color was high in her cheeks. “I forgot to say. Molly invited me on a double date this week. Is there any night where you’d be okay with me leaving work early?”

Her words felt like a cold bucket of water. She didn’t want me to kiss her. She wanted my permission to go out with another man.

I felt like swearing or kicking something. She was tangling me up in my own emotions—and the worst part was that she had no idea what she was doing.

“Pick any night,” I said gruffly. “I’ll make it work.”

I hated the idea of her going out with another man. But unlike Fionn, I didn’t have a right to my jealousy. This wasn’t a love story, and Olivia wasn’t my woman.

She was just my nanny. And she was casually turning my world inside out.

OLIVIA

The day after Declan casually turned me into a pool of lust by quoting a line from a bad movie—God, I was so pathetic—I’d waited until Catie was down for the night, then borrowed one of Declan’s cars to meet Molly at a Galway pub and hammer out our book idea. I didn’t particularly like driving after dark on the wrong side of the road, but I didn’t think my hormones could stand another movie night with Declan.

The man was so hot he was practically radioactive. I was pretty sure I’d remember him growling, *Be kind to your man and give me one last taste* when I was an old lady in a retirement home.

At least meeting up with Molly was productive, I mused while driving home, exhausted but buzzing with creative energy. She loved my idea for a story, about a little duck who’s separated from his mom, and gets through a number of challenges by asking itself, “What would mama say?” and then following the advice. It would be a gentle little picture book that would help kids process the emotions that come with being separated from a parent, either temporarily or permanently.

The only thing Molly and I disagreed about was what type of animal it should be. She was rooting for a porcupine.

I was driving on autopilot, brainstorming potential cute animal narrators, when a car rounded the bend and came straight at me.

Shit, I thought, realizing with panic that I’d drifted to the right-hand side of

the road. I spun the wheel as the other driver slammed their brakes, but I over-corrected and I slid off the road, straight into a short rock wall.

I sat in the car, my heart hammering, as I began to realize how bad that accident could have been. If I hadn't turned the car.

The other driver, an older man dressed in a sweater and cap, got out of the car and stormed toward me. I opened the door, numbly realizing we probably needed to exchange insurance information. Unfortunately, I had no idea what Declan's insurance information was.

Oh God, I thought. I have to tell Declan.

"What the hell were you thinking?" the man demanded.

"I'm so sorry," I said. I fumbled through an apologetic explanation. I must have seemed pretty pathetic, because the man's expression shifted from anger to concern.

"American, are you? Got confused over which side of the road to be on, I'd wager. Well, I suppose there's no real harm done," he said gruffly. "Looks like you bashed up your car a bit."

I felt like I was going to throw up. I'd ruined Declan's horribly expensive luxury car.

"Miss, you seem rattled. Is there someone I can call to take you home?"

"No, I'm fine. I can call him myself. Thank you." The man left, and I dug out my phone. Fingers shaking, I called Declan.

If he fired me this time, I'd actually deserve it.

"Olivia?" he answered. "What is it? It's late."

Just hearing his voice made me feel more anchored in my body, less dazed. Unfortunately, that also made the reality of the situation sink in. I felt my throat ache with unshed tears. I really didn't want to leave Catie and Declan. Not yet. I wasn't ready.

"I've been in an accident," I made myself say. "It was all my fault. Your car's banged up—"

“Where are you?” Declan demanded. “Are you okay?”

I looked down at myself. “I think so. Um...I’m on that road into town with the tree...” I squinted at the road sign up ahead at the corner, and read it out to Declan.

“I’ll be right there,” Declan said, his voice emotionless.

“I’m so sorry,” I said again, but the line had already gone dead.

I tried to get out of the car to inspect the damage, but I realized my legs were shaking, so I sat back down sideways in the car and put my head between my knees. I stared at my feet planted in the roadside gravel and tried to breathe deeply.

I didn’t know if I stayed like that for ten minutes or twenty, but I’d finally started to calm down when I heard a familiar car screech to a halt, and Declan leapt out. He strode across the road and crouched down before me, one knee planted in the gravel. His hands traveled frantically over my arms, my neck, the sides of my face.

He didn’t look at the car at all.

“Your car is ruined,” I explained, in case he hadn’t heard that part over the phone.

“No signs of concussion,” he said, checking my pupils. “You can move everything? Toes and fingers?”

“Of course,” I said, confused. “It was a small accident. Your airbags didn’t even go off. But the side of your car—”

“Oh, thank Christ,” Declan said, and crushed me to him in a hug, one of his big hands cradling the back of my head.

It felt so good to be held, but I couldn’t figure out why he cared this much about me. I was just the nanny.

And then I remembered how his dad had died.

He’d be like this about anyone he knew who was in a car accident, I thought. Something about that realization gave me permission to lean into the hug,

breathe his scent, and fully relax for the first time since I'd gone off the road. He wasn't mad.

He kissed my forehead, and my stomach flipped.

"What happened?" he asked.

"I got distracted and started driving on the wrong side of the road," I admitted, feeling ten kinds of stupid.

He pulled back and held my face firmly between his hands. "If you're ever feeling too tired to drive, or you have too many drinks, or you're just in a bad mood and can't focus... Anything at all, you call me. Promise? I'll come get you myself. Or I'll send a car if I can't."

I nodded, my mouth going dry at the fierceness in his voice.

"Promise," he demanded.

"I promise," I said. "Where's Catie?"

"Sleeping at home. I called Thomas to watch her."

I made a mental note to do something nice for Thomas as a thank-you.

Declan was still looking at me like I was a precious thing he'd almost lost. It was doing uncomfortable things to my heart.

Suddenly, I was a lot less interested in going on that double-date tomorrow. Which proved that I needed to go on it. I needed to get over this silly crush I was developing on Declan before things got any more complicated between us.

"Can we go home?" I asked Declan.

"Yes, *a ghrá*," Declan said. "We can go home."



The next day with Catie was blessedly uneventful. Thomas brought his little girl over for a playdate, so I spent an easy day lounging on the patio while Catie showed her new friend the best places to find bugs in the garden. I was

there if they needed anything, but I also knew that genuine childhood friendships needed room to bloom. And I wanted Catie to have more friends her own age.

It also gave me time to write the first draft of my book. Picture books didn't take long to write, but they could take forever to rewrite.

Declan was as good as his word and came out of his office to take over with Catie when it was time for me to get ready for my date.

The problem was, I didn't really want to get ready. Instead, I read my draft through one more time. I wasn't quite ready to share it with Molly, but I wanted to show somebody.

On impulse, I opened Snug and sent the draft to @DBCoder.

Don't laugh, I wrote, but I'm trying to write my own picture book. I'd love your opinion. But please be gentle.

I stared at my phone, waiting for a response. I could see he was online. Then I noticed the time and swore. I barely had any time to get ready. Molly's boyfriend's cousin was picking me up in twelve minutes.

I spritzed some product on my curls and swiped on some makeup. Then I threw on a slinky black dress that made my boobs look amazing and didn't wrinkle in a suitcase. It was more formal than I'd normally wear on a first date, but I hadn't exactly been planning on going on dates when I packed. A simple pair of black pumps completed the look. I dug out my jewelry bag and added dangling teal chandelier earrings that popped against my hair, silver rings, and some teal-and-silver bracelets I bought at a street fair.

I surveyed myself in the mirror. The dress was more clingy than I remembered. I sucked in my stomach and straightened my spine, but that only made me look stiff and unnatural.

"It is what is," I said. It wasn't like I was super committed to impressing this guy anyway. Frankly, I was just glad Molly would be there, so the date would be at least a little fun.

I grabbed my purse and headed downstairs. I popped my head in the kitchen, where Declan was making some sort of stir-fry. "That smells amazing. But

Catie doesn't like it when her food touches."

Declan pointed to microwave without turning away from the stove. As if on cue, it dinged. "She's getting chicken nuggets. Don't worry." He glanced back over his shoulder and grinned. "Go have fun on your..." His words trailed off as he saw what I was wearing.

I shifted my weight, self-conscious. "Is it too much?"

Wordlessly, he shook his head. "You look... You look good." He grabbed his bottle of beer off the counter and took a swig. He looked me up and down again, his knuckles white where he gripped the bottle.

"Who's this man who's taking you out?"

"Molly's boyfriend's cousin," I said.

"Molly's boyfriend has a lot of cousins." Declan grunted. "And some of them are arseholes."

"This one's named Brendan Carr," I said.

"Brendan's all right," Declan allowed, grudgingly. But he didn't seem happy about it.

The doorbell rang, blasting ABBA's "Take A Chance on Me" throughout the house.

"That's probably him," I said, suddenly nervous. "You know, if you ever want to go out with somebody, I can watch Catie at night too."

He looked at me inscrutably, then went back to poking at his stir-fry.

"Don't wait up," I joked.

His shoulders tensed almost imperceptibly.

Why was he being so weird?

The doorbell rang again, and I hustled to the door. I didn't have time to figure out Declan's moods tonight.



The food was amazing. Molly looked like a total babe, in a fluttering blouse that showed off her tattoos. Her boyfriend Oisín was sweet, if a bit weird. And Brendan Carr was an absolute gentleman who gave me his full attention, offered to pay for my dinner, and didn't check his phone even once.

The only problem was I was deathly bored.

"There's plenty of folks looking for more affordable rentals right now," Brendan explained. "Ever since Mark O'Rourke took over from his son Seamus, he's kept raising the rent on all his properties."

Brendan worked in real estate, and, apparently, kept tabs on the local market.

"That's Mark for you," Molly said. "If he didn't host the summer festival every year, he'd have no goodwill in this town at all."

"He hosts the whole festival?" I asked, confused.

"Just the final day of it. *The Deer and the Warrior* was filmed at the O'Rourke mansion, so on the last day of the festival there's a giant bonfire party in his garden," Molly explained. "Everyone gets trashed. It's amazing."

"He does contribute to the local economy," Brendan allowed. "Or at least his mansion does. Without the mansion, there'd be no festival. And without the festival, half the businesses in Ballybeith would go under."

The conversation moved on, but I found myself tuning out.

My phone buzzed, and I snuck a look at it under the table.

It was a message from @DBCoder. *I love your book. It's fucking brilliant. When can I find it in stores?*

I felt myself blushing and fought back a smile.

Then his next message came through. *I was actually thinking of you today. I think we should meet up, before you leave Ireland. I know you're on the fence about it. But the truth is, you might be one of my favorite people. Promise me you'll think about it.*

My stomach swirled with a whirl of panicking butterflies. I loved that he

wanted to meet me. But it terrified me too.

What if @DBCoder wasn't as great in person as he was behind a screen?

What if he was?

“Olivia? What do you think?” Brendan asked.

I looked up, startled, into the perfectly pleasant face of the man I was supposed to be on a date with.

Molly came to my rescue. “We’re deciding whether or not to get to dessert. Oisin has to leave since he has an early start tomorrow. But there’s no need for you and Brendan to cut the night short.”

I decided that was my cue. “Actually, I just got a text about work. We should probably call it a night.”

We paid the bill and said goodnight. When Brendan offered me a ride home, I politely demurred. I’d rather pay for a cab than spend another half hour in polite, boring conversation that he’d probably expect to end with a kiss I didn’t actually want to give.

When the boys left, Molly and I found ourselves alone outside the restaurant.

Molly slid me a look. “I’m guessing the ‘work thing’ was an excuse to get out of more time with Brendan?”

I winced. “He’s nice, but...”

“Dull as a rock,” Molly finished. She looped her arm through mine. “Want to go to the pub and talk about books?”

“God, yes,” I said. “Also, Oisin’s a sweetheart who’s absolutely smitten with you. If you like him, ignore what everyone else says.”

“I knew I liked you,” Molly said.

I laughed, and let her lead me to the pub.

DECLAN

Three hours after I'd put Catie to bed, I was still hammering out work things on my laptop.

It didn't mean anything that I was working in the living room, where I'd be sure to spot Olivia as soon as she came home. It didn't mean anything at all.

So far I'd checked off three projects on my to-do list, and called Thomas for an update on our real estate fight against O'Rourke. Apparently, when the town council refused to lift the old law, O'Rourke had given up on selling his first-choice property. He was now in the process of trying to sell his third oldest property, which, unfortunately, wasn't the mansion. But Thomas had assured me he'd found a way to drag out that sale, too. There was an error in the will that passed the property to the person who sold it to O'Rourke. If the will was deemed legally invalid, then the property might belong to a local music teacher, instead of O'Rourke. And if O'Rourke didn't own it, he couldn't sell it.

According to Thomas, no judge would actually take the property away from O'Rourke. But the local music teacher was one of the many people in town Mark O'Rourke had pissed off, and she was willing to help Thomas make O'Rourke's life a nuisance for a month or two.

I thought of O'Rourke's angry face the other day on the sidewalk and felt a wave of satisfaction. Despite his attempts at haughtiness, I'd been able to see that he was a man desperate for money. That meant he wasn't going to be able to wait two months for a legal decision. That left him with two older

properties that could be sold—one of which was the O'Rourke mansion.

I smiled wolfishly, practically tasting victory.

Then I glanced at the clock.

Victory would taste better if I knew Olivia wasn't out laughing up at another guy. Wearing a dress that poured over her curves in a way that should be illegal, and heels that made her legs and ass impossible to look away from.

Don't think about that, I ordered myself.

I typed out another email to my assistant. Then another to our head programmer. Then another to Anil.

If I just kept working, I wouldn't think about Olivia.

Hell, I'd even asked out @1000words, although I didn't think meeting an anonymous pen pal for a friendly coffee was what Olivia had meant when she suggested I go on a date.

I checked my phone, but @1000words hadn't responded yet. It had been hours, and I could tell she'd read the message.

So now I had two women to avoid thinking about.

I sent Anil another email. I was surprised when I got a notification that I had an incoming video call from him less than a minute later.

I answered, and his friendly face filled my laptop screen.

"Hey," I said. "Did you see my email about the possible fixes for that bug? I like option A, but—"

"This is an intervention," Anil interrupted me. "Step away from the computer. Have a life. Ask a girl out."

I scowled. "I did."

"Ooooooh," Anil said, with instant sympathy. "She turned you down?"

"She hasn't answered. I'm trying not to think about it. Or the fact that my nanny is out doing God knows what with Brendan fucking Carr." I ran a hand

through my hair.

“How dare she,” Anil said, because he was nothing if not a supportive friend. And then he asked, “Who’s Brendan Carr?”

“Some guy I went to school with. Good at rugby. Bad at women.”

“And yet, your nanny likes him,” Anil pointed out mildly.

I flipped him off.

“Why do you care who your nanny goes out with?” he asked.

“I don’t,” I protested.

Anil snorted. “What’s going on? I’ve never seen you like this about a woman.”

“I don’t *know*,” I said, frustrated. “She just...and she was wearing this dress...”

Anil blinked. “Wow. I didn’t believe Thomas, but it sounds like he’s right. You’ve got it bad.”

“I do not,” I said. Then the rest of what he’d said registered. “Wait. You and Thomas talk about me? You barely know each other.”

“Rude. We met at the thing in Dublin last year and we’ve kept in touch. Unlike *some* people, Thomas thinks the memes I send are funny.” He checked his watch. “Right, I have to go meet up with a singer/actress who just dumped her boyfriend and wants me to console her.”

I sighed. “Don’t let her break your heart. When are you going to stop letting women use you as a rebound?” If my problem was being too unattached in romantic relationships, Anil had the opposite problem. He was a hopeless romantic, and since he became filthy rich, the women of Dublin used him like target practice.

“Better to take a risk than spend my nights torturing my colleagues and employees with endless emails,” he shot back. “Seriously, though. Stop working. Your assistant is worried about you.”

He logged off, leaving me staring at a blank screen.

I checked the clock. It was after midnight. How long was Olivia going to stay out with this guy?

I felt tense, restless. Olivia didn't strike me as the type to go home with a guy after a blind date. She wouldn't feel safe yet. She'd need more time to get to know someone.

Shit, what if something had happened? What if he'd been a bastard, or there'd been an accident on their way home, or...

If she needs you, she'll call, I told myself firmly. And if she doesn't call, it's none of your business.

I stood up and started pacing. The problem was, it *felt* like my business. Olivia was in a foreign country, and she barely knew anybody but me. She was too sweet for her own good, and she was wearing a dress that looked like sin itself, and it was driving me out of my mind.

I wasn't a man used to standing on the sidelines. I was used to going after what I wanted with everything I had.

And what I wanted was Olivia. I couldn't deny it anymore.

Fuck professional boundaries. She was mine.

I was striding to the door, with some hazy idea of going after her, before I remembered I couldn't leave Catie alone in the house.

I closed my eyes and pressed a fist to my forehead. "I'm going mad," I muttered.

That's when I finally heard it. The sound of a car in the driveway.

I was deciding whether to retreat to the living room, so it wouldn't look like I'd been up waiting for her, when the door opened and Olivia stepped inside. Her cheeks were rosy, and her hair tumbled down around her shoulders in wild curls.

"Oh, Declan. You're still up." She smiled sleepily. She looked like she'd had a great time.

I wanted to punch something.

“How was the date?” I made myself ask nonchalantly.

“Eh. He wasn’t you.” She bent to take off her shoes, giving me a clear view of soft, creamy cleavage. “Molly and I went for drinks after and *that* was fun.”

My pulse seemed to slow down, like a predator who’d spotted a weakness. “Olivia. What do you mean by ‘he wasn’t you’?”

She jerked upright and blushed. “I didn’t say... Well, I didn’t mean... I mean, I did, but I work for you, so it’s not appropriate...” She swallowed. “It’s not appropriate to want—”

I cut her off with the kiss I’d been holding back for far too long. My mouth found hers a second before I backed her into the door, and *fuck*, she was sweet. Her lips parted for me with the softest gasp, and then her hands were in my hair, and she was kissing me back. Giving as good as she got, like she always did.

I wrapped my hand around the back of her neck, and she shivered.

“Fuck appropriate,” I growled. “If you want it, it’s yours.”

I didn’t quite dare say what *it* was. My body. My time. Maybe even my heart. I didn’t know how hot this thing between us would burn, or how long it could last, I just knew I was done trying to fight it.

Olivia’s head fell back against the door as she looked up at me, eyes dark with desire. She looked so good, I had to kiss her again, and then I had to trail my lips over the soft skin of her neck, until I found a spot that made her moan and clutch my shirt, arching into me.

My hands found her hips, pressing the softness of her body against my hard cock.

“Oh,” she gasped. And then a smile fluttered across her face in a way that was sweetly, deliciously feminine.

I was on the verge of ordering her to take off the dress so I could give her all the pleasure she wanted, and then some. Until she couldn’t think straight. Until she couldn’t think about anyone but me.

I knew she'd say yes, even if she regretted it in the morning, when the weight of our professional relationship came crashing back on to us.

The words were on the tip of my tongue, when someone knocked on the door.

Olivia jumped, ducking away from the door and me.

"Olivia?" Molly called from the other side of the door.

I swore and turned to yank open the door.

"Oh, hey, Declan," Molly said, completely unfazed by my scowl. She leaned around me, holding up a phone for Olivia to see. "You left this in my car."

"Oh my gosh! Thank you," Olivia said, stepping forward to take the phone.

"Yes, thank you," I said, trying to close the door on her.

"Actually, can I use the bathroom while I'm here?" Molly said. "I think that last beer just hit me. Also, Olivia said you have the fanciest bathroom she's ever seen."

I sighed and opened the door wider, giving in to the inevitable. Olivia pointed her toward one of the bathrooms.

And then Olivia and I were alone again.

"Well. Um. Goodnight," Olivia said, and turned to go.

I caught her arm. "Oh no you don't. We have unfinished business."

She bit her lip. "Don't you think it should stay unfinished? Would a one-night stand really be worth the risk of messing things up between us?"

Yes, I thought. But something about the idea felt off. Insufficient.

I wanted more than one stolen night, I realized. I wanted to be the one taking Olivia out, making her smile and laugh for hours. I wanted her to come to my bed without regrets. And I wanted her to stay there, for as many nights as she'd give me.

I eased my hand down her arm, trailing my fingers against the back of her hand. “Let me take you out tomorrow, Olivia,” I said. “On a proper date. One that doesn’t end with you hiding in a pub with Molly.”

She arched a brow. “And where does a ‘proper’ date end?”

I moved closer, lowering my lips until they hovered a hairsbreadth from hers. “Wherever you want it to, *a ghrá*.”

She leaned into me, restless and eager, and I felt a surge of masculine victory.

Still, Olivia bit her lip, uncertain. “Declan, if we start something... It could get complicated. Even more complicated than a one-night stand. What if it ends badly? Or gets messy?”

It was already messy. I’d spent the last few hours out of my mind with jealousy. But that wasn’t her problem. It was mine.

I reached up and ran a thumb over her lower lip. Marking my territory until she let me return. “We’ll keep it light and fun. I promise.”

She hesitated.

“You deserve someone spoiling you for a bit,” I said, my voice low and soft. “Let me give you that, Olivia.”

She searched my face. I did my best to look casual and relaxed, and not at all like I was dying to fuck her against this wall.

I heard the sounds of a door opening and footsteps in the hall. Molly would be back out here in seconds.

“Light and fun,” Olivia repeated. “You promise?”

“Absolutely. Exactly what you want.” And then I stole one last kiss, to hold me over until our date.

OLIVIA

What did you wear to a date with a man who'd already seen everything in your wardrobe? Declan hadn't been able to get a babysitter for tonight since his normal babysitter was, well, me, so our big date was functionally just another night at home. That should have helped the date feel more casual and low stakes.

Instead, it reminded me how entangled we already were in each other's lives.

I blew out an anxious breath and changed outfits yet again. I checked the time. Declan would be done putting Catie down for the night in a few minutes. My whole body was churning with a mix of nerves, dread, excitement, and lust.

I needed to talk to a friend. I grabbed my phone, then hesitated. For some reason it felt weird to go to @DBCoder for advice about this. I'd politely declined his invitation to meet in person, and he'd been nice about it, but I wasn't sure where that left us.

Instead, I called Molly. "Hi. What do I wear to a date?"

"You're going on a second date with Brendan?" Molly asked, deeply skeptical.

"No, um. This is a first date," I said.

"Who else do you know... Ohhhhhhhh," she said, understanding dawning. "Declan finally noticed you have the hots for him."

I rubbed my hand over my face. It sounded so undignified when she put it like that.

“Wear the sundress you wore when we went out to lunch,” Molly said. “He couldn’t stop staring at you.”

“Thanks,” I said, turning around to rummage for the sundress in my closet, before the rest of her words hit me. “Wait. He couldn’t take his eyes off me?”

“Like a kid in a candy store,” Molly said. “You were so oblivious.”

“Then why didn’t you *tell* me?” I asked, exasperated. I pulled the sundress over my head and slipped on my sandals.

“I thought you were pretending not to notice because you were trying to avoid dating your boss,” Molly said. “What happened to that, by the way?”

“He kissed me against a door, and I lost my mind,” I said. I groaned. “Ugh, this is a mistake isn’t it? He says we can keep it light and fun, so it won’t end badly. But is that even possible?”

“If there’s anyone who can do it, Declan can,” Molly said. Unfortunately, that wasn’t a yes.

Molly must have sensed my doubt.

“Look, do you *want* to go on this date?” Molly asked.

“Yes. God, yes.” Just remembering the way he’d kissed me last night had my whole body waking up. I’d never been with someone like Declan. And I couldn’t quite believe he was interested in me.

“Then relax and enjoy yourself,” Molly said firmly. “You deserve something fun.”

I’d barely hung up the phone when there was a soft knock on my bedroom door.

My stomach flipped.

“Olivia?” Declan said, his voice soft and low so as not to wake Catie. “Meet me in the backyard when you’re ready.”

“Okay,” I said.

I dabbed on some minimal makeup, scooped up my curls into a high ponytail, and went outside to see what Declan had planned.

When I took a step out back onto the patio, I gasped. Out in the garden, Declan had set up a gorgeous, candlelit picnic. He was dressed in a white button up and black slacks, but his rolled-up sleeves and bare feet kept the overall vibe casual and intimate, despite the designer clothes. He belonged here, in this twilight garden that looked like something out of a fairy tale. He was anchored in this land, in this community, and I was just passing through.

Light and fun, I reminded myself.

“This is beautiful,” I said, as I approached the picnic.

“Don’t be too impressed,” Declan said. “Maeve made everything, and a friend who works in decorating did the rest.”

I slipped off my sandals and stepped onto the red cashmere picnic blanket. “So you didn’t personally scatter all these white rose petals? There goes my sex drive.”

“I take it back,” Declan lied, his smile boyish and wicked. “If décor does it for you, then I placed each rose petal by hand. Grew them too.”

I laughed.

We stood there looking at each other for a moment, not sure how to proceed. The moment felt achingly fragile.

“Christ, you’re beautiful,” Declan said into the silence.

I blushed, avoiding eye contact as I sat down and arranged myself on the picnic blanket. “You see me every day.”

“I think it every day,” he countered, joining me on the blanket.

Breathing felt suddenly difficult.

Declan cocked his head. “Olivia, do you not know you’re ravishing?”

“Could I have some of that wine?” I blurted, gesturing to the bottle he had

propped against the picnic basket.

His smile went crooked. He uncorked the wine and poured me a glass. “So you can’t take a compliment. What else don’t I know about you?”

I thought about the book review blog I ran on Snug. A part of me wanted to tell him because I thought he’d get a kick out of it, given how much he loved reading to Catie. But ever since that bad experience with Eddie, I’d kept a kind of firewall in place—none of my real-life friends knew about my online hobby.

“Nothing important,” I answered him. “I’m just me.”

“Well.” Declan held up his own glass in a toast. “Here’s to ‘just you.’ The woman who wrecked my peace and saved my summer. *Sláinte.*”

“*Sláinte,*” I repeated, his compliments going to my head faster than the wine.

We talked for a while, about my impression of Ireland, and his plans for the garden, and a company he was thinking of acquiring in Prague. He told me funny stories about growing up in Ballybeith, including a prank he and some other boys had played with a sheep at a football game.

I was still laughing when he opened the basket and started setting out one dessert after another. Cream puffs, strawberry shortcake, lavender ice cream, chocolate tart, and tiramisu. “I didn’t know what you liked best,” Declan explained.

“You could have asked,” I said.

“Where’s the fun in that?” he teased, popping a cream puff into his own mouth.

I tried the lavender ice cream first, because, hello, *ice cream*. It had begun to melt a bit while we talked, but it was still delicious.

Declan smiled. “I should have known you’d pick the lavender.”

I raised my eyebrows in a question.

“You smell like lavender,” he said. “Your soap, or perfume, or... I don’t know, but you smell like it.” His voice lowered. “I like it. I have since the

airplane.”

“It’s my lotion,” I said, my tongue thick. He paid attention to what I smelled like?

He leaned back lazily, a king at ease. “Do you put it on in the morning, right after you shower? Or at night, right before you go to bed?”

I felt flustered. “Why do you want to know?”

He smiled. “So I can fantasize. Obviously.”

I set the ice cream aside, feeling out of my depth. He was so *much*. I thought I was used to his presence, but I realized I normally saw him when he was handling five things at once. His work, Catie, how best to help his sister. Now Declan was giving me his full focus.

It was heady, but confusing.

“Don’t make fun of me,” I said.

“I’m not,” Declan said, surprised.

“You know what I mean,” I said. “The effusive compliments, the jokes about fantasizing about me...you don’t have to do that. I don’t need the whole seduction routine. We know each other. You can just tell me what you think.”

Declan studied me, a faint frown between his brows.

Then he straightened, slowly and purposefully. I tried to look away, but he leaned forward, gently but firmly nudging my chin up to make sure I saw his face.

“It’s not a routine. I *am* telling you what I think, Olivia. I’ve been thinking it for some time now,” he said. “The fact that you don’t believe me makes me think you don’t know me as well as you think you do. Or maybe it’s yourself you don’t know.”

I looked up into his dark, haunting blue eyes, and swallowed. I’d never had a man be so open about his desire for me. I thought of the way his hands had gripped my hips last night, of the way his mouth hungered after mine, and shivered.

His expression shifted. “Are you cold, *a ghrá*?” He turned around and rummaged for something behind him, then twisted back around to drape a men’s cardigan over my shoulders.

It smelled like him. Warm and safe.

I thought that Declan wrapping me in his clothes might be my new kink.

“Does *a ghrá* really mean friend?” I blurted. “Because you don’t say it like it means ‘friend.’”

“Ah.” Declan scratched the back of his neck, looking sheepish for the first time tonight. “That’s because it means *love*. I didn’t mean to say it the first time. It just...slipped out. So, I, er, lied.”

Something glowed warm inside me, as I finally started to believe his compliments.

Declan Byrne had been calling me *love*. He thought I was beautiful. He knew how I took my tea and noticed the scent of my lotion. He said he fantasized about me, and he kissed me like he was starving for me.

On impulse, I rose up on my knees, so that for once, I was the one who was looking down at him. I cupped his gorgeous face and kissed him.

If last night’s kiss had been a furious storm, this one was soft summer rain. His hands found my lower back, and he guided me into his lap while our mouths played. He tasted like wine, and man, and something intoxicating I couldn’t describe. When I nipped his lower lip, he *growled* and yanked me closer, so that I could feel his erection hard against my backside.

I can have sex with him right now, I realized. There was no reason not to, other than the ones I’d already ignored by going on this date in the first place. Catie was asleep. Declan’s backyard was private. We were alone under the stars.

Declan’s thoughts seemed to follow the same path as mine. “We don’t have to,” he said, his voice ragged.

“I know,” I said, and kissed him again.

Our embrace turned hotter. The cardigan slipped from my shoulders, and I

unbuttoned his shirt far enough to run my hands over his firm, lightly furred chest, and clutch at those strong, broad shoulders.

“Is that...is that all right?” I panted.

In answer, he tugged the neckline of my sundress below my breasts, swearing gratefully when he realized I wasn't wearing a bra. The way he caressed my body was downright worshipful. Then he bent and sucked the tip of my breast, and any remaining doubt about how far I'd let him go flew out the window. I wanted more. More of this overwhelming pleasure. More of him. More of everything.

“Please,” I begged. “I need...”

His smile was cocky but warm, appreciative. Like he knew he was in charge, but he didn't take it for granted. “Where do you need me, Olivia St. James?” His lips found the place on my neck I liked and lingered until I moaned. “Do you need me here?” He pinched my nipple, rolling it between his fingers, and I squirmed helplessly on his lap. “Maybe here?”

“You know where,” I said.

His hand slid lower, edging under my skirt, until he was stroking my damp panties. “Maybe it's the language barrier,” he said, teasing me with his words and his fingers. His low voice in my ear sent shivers down my back. “You'd call this your pussy. I'd call it your cunt.”

The crude words were one more naughty sensation pushing me toward the edge.

“Whatever you call it, it's lovely,” Declan said, his voice ragged. He tugged my panties aside, so that he could touch me directly, and I nearly expired on the spot. “You're so damn lovely, Olivia. I can't wait to lick you here. Fuck you here.”

“*Declan*,” I whimpered, rapidly losing my ability to say anything else. There was a buzzing in my ears. He stroked me, and my breath grew ragged, until the buzzing stopped. Then it started again.

Wait. That buzzing wasn't in my head. It was a phone.

“Is that your phone?” I asked.

“Hmm?” His eyes were dark and hungry in the candlelight. He was so turned on he looked drugged, and I felt a rush of feminine satisfaction.

“I think your phone’s buzzing,” I said.

He blinked, coming back to the earth. He fumbled in his pocket and checked the screen.

It was the number for his landline. Declan didn’t use it much, but he’d made a point of showing Catie how to use it in an emergency.

Immediately, his demeanor shifted. He answered, worried. “Catie? Sweetheart, are you all right?”

“I can’t *find* you,” Catie all but sobbed. “I can’t find anyone. Miss Olivia is gone. Mom was gone in the dream, and now you’re gone—”

“I’m out in the backyard,” Declan assured her, moving me off his lap and hurrying to his feet. “Miss Olivia is too. But I’m coming right back in. Take a deep breath. It’s okay, love.”

He rushed toward the house, then looked back at me, conflicted. “I’m sorry, I’ll clean this up—”

“No, go,” I reassured him. “I’ll take care of all this,” I said, gesturing to the picnic.

His lips thinned, like he wanted to say more. But then he nodded once and hurried inside. There was a scared little girl who needed him, and that trumped everything else—as it should.

My heart twisted in my chest as I watched him go. My body was cooling down, but my emotions weren’t. Dating Declan was fun. But I was fooling myself if I thought I could separate the playful, suave man who’d courted me from the flawed, real, deeply responsible man who’d do anything for the people he loved.

I packed up the picnic and blew out the candles. It was cold, so I wrapped myself in Declan’s cardigan before carrying everything inside. I was putting the food in the fridge, when I had an idea.

Maybe Declan was on to something, when he'd mentioned spoiling Catie rotten.

I poured a glass of milk, then I took the chocolate tart and tiptoed upstairs.

Catie's door was open, and the light by her bed was on. Declan sat on Catie's bed, with Catie doing her level best to burrow into his chest while he patted her back.

"It's all right," he said, his voice low and soothing. "It was just a bad dream. Your mom is safe, and so are you."

"I can't get it out of my head," Catie whispered.

"Maybe this will help," I said. "Have you ever had dessert in the middle of the night?"

Catie's eyes went wide. She nodded slowly. "Sometimes. With my mom. If we can't sleep, then she claps her hands and says it's a Magic Night and we get up and eat cookies."

I smiled. "I think tonight is a Magic Night. I don't have cookies, but I have chocolate."

Catie perked up and reached for the plate.

I set the milk on bedside table and handed her the plate. She dug in, cheering up a little with each bite.

Thank you, Declan mouthed, as I retreated toward the door.

Catie looked up. "Can you stay?"

Her small voice cracked my heart open.

"Sure," I said, sitting down next to Declan.

"You could have some too," Catie said, generously offering me a handful of chocolate tarte.

"Thank you," I said, delicately accepting her gift.

"You can share it with Uncle Declan," Catie instructed.

I bit back a smile. If her bossy side was coming out, she was feeling better. Declan's arms were full of gangly niece, so I fed him, holding up a bit of the messy, crumbling tart to his lips.

Heat flashed through me when his lips touched my finger.

I don't think I can keep this light and fun, I realized. He was too much. Too perfect. Too him.

But I didn't walk away. Instead, I kept vigil with Declan, until our girl was tucked back in bed, and smiling in her sleep.

DECLAN

Catie gasped when she saw the inside of the fridge the next morning. “Can I have dessert for breakfast too?”

“You cannot,” I grumbled. “It’s Magic *night*, not Magic morning. Eat something healthy. Like spinach.”

Over at the table, Olivia grinned into her tea. “How’d you sleep, Declan?” she asked innocently.

I speared her with a look. “I slept like a man who’d been...interrupted,” I finished, mindful of the little ears over by the fridge.

Olivia had the insolence to look amused.

Women were horrible creatures. Horrible, wonderful creatures.

I couldn’t wait to try for date number two. And this time, I had no intention of being interrupted. I’d find a damn babysitter, even if I had to drop €1,000.

Olivia smiled at me, and my pulse sped up. The woman was dangerous.

After breakfast, Olivia lingered in the kitchen, while Catie dashed off to go get dressed for the day.

“So I was thinking,” Olivia said. “I thought we could all do something together today.”

I put my dishes in the sink. “I’m listening.”

“Today’s the last day of the summer festival, right? The big party at that mansion? Why don’t we all go together?” she said casually.

I felt like she’d thrown a bucket of ice water on my good mood. “There’s not a single thing on earth I want badly enough to set foot on that man’s doorstep.”

“But—”

“He killed my father, Olivia,” I said bluntly. “I’m not going, and I forbid you and Catie to go.”

Sympathy filled her face. “Declan, I know what it’s like to lose somebody.”

“Not like this, you don’t,” I snapped.

She flinched.

I knew that was cruel of me, but I needed her to understand. “Your parents... it’s terrible what happened, it absolutely is, but it was an accident. For me it’s different. Mark O’Rourke has never faced a *single fucking consequence for what he did.*”

Olivia’s voice gentled. “I just thought, this is a community event. Something the whole town participates in. Don’t you want Catie to have a chance to experience it? Don’t you worry that you might be letting your hatred of O’Rourke build a wall between you and the rest of the town?”

I couldn’t believe I was hearing this. “How are you not getting this, Olivia? Mark O’Rourke was *drunk*. He was drunk and reckless, and he killed my dad. So no, I’m not going to his damn party. And no employee of mine is either.”

When I saw Olivia’s face, I realized I’d gone too far.

She didn’t look pissed. No, she looked terrifyingly calm. She took a deep breath. “I realize this is a sore spot for you, so I am going to forgive you for what you just said. But Molly invited me to go to the festival with her, and I’m going to accept. You might be my boss, but it’s my day off. And you don’t get to control where I go, or who I see. *Ever.*”

“Olivia...” I warned.

She slammed her dishes down on the counter. “Declan, it’s clear we’re not going to agree on this. I thought this would be a good way for us to spend time together. Obviously I was wrong. Enjoy your day with Catie.” Then she stormed out of the kitchen.



I spent the rest of the day throwing myself into work, while Catie slouched in the beanbag chair and watched cartoons on one of my spare laptops.

I’d been going at it for several hours when my phone buzzed with an incoming video call from Anil. “I’m taking away your email privileges. I can’t believe you just called one of the most influential tech journalists an arse.”

“He *is* an arse,” I grumbled.

“Arse is a bad word,” Catie chimed in from the corner.

“Is that Catie?” Anil asked. “Catie, why is your uncle in such a snit?”

“He had a fight with my nanny,” Catie said.

I whipped my head toward Catie. “You heard that?”

Catie gave me a judgmental look. “You shouted and then she left. You keep doing that.”

“I didn’t...” I scrubbed a hand over my face. “Look, it’s complicated,” I said to Anil. “But I’m right about this.”

Anil looked skeptical. “You know how we say that in business, it’s better to be flexible and successful than stubborn and a failure, even if you’re right?”

I didn’t like where this was going.

“The same applies to your personal life.”

“Screw you,” I said and hung up.

Catie gave me another judgmental look.

“I know, I know, ‘screw’ is a bad word.”

Catie stood up. “Can I have one of the desserts since you said so many bad words?”

“You cannot,” I said.

She crossed her arms. “It’s past my snack time. I’m hungry.”

I looked at the clock and barely refrained from swearing again. She was right. It was almost dinnertime.

Over at the festival, the kids would be leaving, and the adults would be cranking up the music, lighting the alcohol, and bringing out the whiskey.

The thought of Olivia dancing around a bonfire with some drunken lout was like acid churning in my stomach.

Anil’s advice might have been right in most cases, but not this one. I wasn’t going to betray my father’s memory just because a pretty American asked me to.

I was right about this, and that was what mattered.

Wasn’t it?

“You can go have the strawberry shortcake,” I told Catie. “It’s got fruit, so it’s healthy.”

She perked up and left the room.

I needed to talk to someone who would understand. Anil and Olivia hadn’t known my da. They didn’t get it. So I called my mum and told her the whole story, minus the part about my dating Olivia. “I can’t believe she’d even ask me to go. It’s disrespectful. And insulting.”

She sighed. “Oh Declan. Don’t you think you’re being a bit harsh, love?”

I stared at my phone in shock. “Mum, none of *your* friends would expect you to go.”

“They didn’t expect it, no,” Mum allowed. “But they always invited me, so that I knew I was welcome, whenever I was ready. You know my friend Moe

works for Mark—she runs the party every year. And a few years ago, I realized I was ready. So I started going again.”

“What?” I barked. I tried to lower my voice, not wanting her to think I was shouting at her. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Darling, you can be a wee bit huffy when you think you’re right,” she said gently. “I love you. But you’re my son, not my keeper. I won’t have you trying to control my life the way you do with Sinead.”

I sat down in my office chair, feeling like the world wasn’t as steady under me as I’d thought. “I don’t...I don’t control her, Mum. If I could, she wouldn’t live across a bloody ocean.”

“That’s *why* she lives across a bloody ocean,” Mum corrected me. “Remember her first boyfriend, back in secondary school? You kept pointing out he was horrid until she dumped him.”

“He *was* horrid,” I protested.

“What about the daycare she wanted to send Catie to? You pressured her into sending Catie to a fancier one because you were paying for it,” she reminded me.

“Not fancier,” I said, defending myself. “Better. Shouldn’t Catie have the best?”

Mum sighed. “I’m not saying you’re entirely wrong, Declan. I’ll never forgive Mark O’Rourke. Ever. If I hadn’t had you two to care for, I might have killed him myself after the accident, for taking your da from me.”

My gut twisted. There was something in her voice that made me think she wasn’t exaggerating.

Unbidden, I thought how I would feel if a drunk driver killed Olivia. I’d murder the fucker with my bare hands.

“But I realized that wasn’t what your da would have wanted,” Mum said. “And he wouldn’t want you missing out on something good for his sake.”

“The festival’s not that good,” I grumbled.

“I’m not talking about the festival,” Mum said evenly, and I realized she’d seen more in my initial explanation than I’d wanted to admit. “Would you rather sit home, nursing an old wound? Or would you rather go to that lonely, beautiful girl who’s waiting for you?”

I opened my mouth, then closed it. I tried again. “How do you know she’s lonely?”

“The same way I know you are,” Mum said.

I thought of how happy Olivia had looked when she’d asked me to go with her. And how quickly I’d snuffed out her happiness with my own pain. I didn’t want that for her. I didn’t want that for *me*, either.

Maybe I could put a pause on my feud with the O’Rourkes for one night, if it made her happy.

It was a little scary to realize how badly I wanted to make her happy. It was an instinct that felt so deep and true that it was a part of me, like the way a bird just *knows* which way to fly. Somewhere along the line, Olivia had started to feel like my map. Her opinions my due north.

The problem was, I had no idea where she was leading me.

“Are you going to the festival tonight?” I asked abruptly.

“No, I just got home.” She yawned, overly casual. “I was going to have a quiet night in. But I’d love to have my favorite granddaughter stay the night. If, hypothetically, there was somewhere you needed to be.”

I glance at an old family photo I had on my desk, of all of us together. Mum, Da, Sinead, me. That photo used to show everyone I cared about. But that wasn’t true anymore. It didn’t have Catie. It didn’t have...anyone else.

I looked at that photo and made my decision.

OLIVIA

“I still can’t believe you asked Declan to come here,” Molly said, shaking her head over a pint of Heineken. “Way to poke the dragon.”

She, Oisin, and I were clumped near a hedge in the O’Rourke mansion’s famous garden—famous, that is, to fans of *The Deer and the Warrior*. Unlike Declan’s wild, overgrown garden, this place was manicured to within an inch of its life. Hedges were orderly, trees were tidy, and flowers were organized by color.

The only thing unruly was the bonfire, which various village men were busy coaxing higher and higher. The fire was blasting so much heat, I worried it would melt the ice in my drink.

“It wasn’t that big a deal,” I protested, mostly because I didn’t want it to be a big deal. I knew I should have stayed calm and talked it out with him. But as soon as he’d said the words *I forbid you*, I’d seen red.

Oisin cleared his throat. “The thing is, Mark O’Rourke is kind of the worst. Everyone knows it, but if you stay in Ballybeith, you have to pretend he isn’t, because sooner or later you’ll need something from him. A house to rent, a loan, a job. The only person who always fought back was Mr. Byrne.” He sipped his beer. “And when he died, Declan took up where his dad left off.”

“So...it’s not just Declan being upset about his dad’s accident?” God knew that was a big enough reason for Declan to be upset.

“The accident is likely most of it. But it’s also about Mark O’Rourke being a

proper bastard.”

“If he’s so bad, why do you come to his party?” I asked, feeling a little indignant.

“Because it’s good craic,” Molly said. “And it’s not really Mark’s party. It’s ours.” She said the last part with quiet pride, nodding to all the people around us.

People were laughing, telling stories, and eating and drinking. Two young women stood farther away from the noise, rocking their sleeping babies as they chatted. The musicians returned from their break—a fiddle player, a flautist, an accordion player, and a man with a flat hand drum. They settled back into their seats and started playing. Once the music started, people stomped their feet and sang along. An older woman stood up and start stomping and shuffling her feet with rapid fire movements I couldn’t quite follow.

It was like I’d said to Declan—like Molly had said just now. Mark O’Rourke might have been hosting the party, but it didn’t belong to him. It belonged to all of Ballybeith.

Still, I was beginning to understand why Declan had lashed out so viciously and the line I was asking him to cross.

I spotted Declan’s friend Thomas across the fire and waved. He was with his wife, Bridget, who I’d met when she’d stopped by to pick up her daughter after Catie’s playdate.

Thomas waved back enthusiastically and led Bridget around the fire toward us. “Olivia! I didn’t realize you were coming.”

“Molly invited me,” I said.

“Cheers to that,” he said, and we all clinked glasses.

“Want to hear something funny?” Molly asked. “Olivia asked Declan to come.”

Thomas sprayed a mouthful of beer directly into Oisín’s face.

“You *what?*” Thomas said.

Bridget handed Oisín a paper napkin.

“I didn’t *know*,” I said, beginning to feel worried. I thought this thing between me and Declan was just a normal fight. But what if my coming here had broken his trust in some fundamental way that was never going to heal?

The conversation moved on, thankfully. Then the musicians shifted into a catchy song everyone but I knew, and the couples abandoned me to dance around the bonfire.

I wrapped my arms around myself. Without my friends to distract me, I noticed the evening air had turned chilly. As I watched all the couples dance in the golden, flickering light of the bonfire, I felt a wistful ache. I wanted someone to dance with. I wanted to belong.

You have someone to dance with, I reminded myself. *You just stormed off to the one place he can’t follow you.*

This was ridiculous, I realized. Yes, the festival was fun. Yes, I’d wanted to come. But I wanted to spend the rest of my night with Declan more.

Hopefully, I hadn’t ruined things too badly between us.

I caught Molly’s attention and signaled that I was heading out, then started weaving my way toward the garden’s exit.

I set my empty glass on a table, then bumped into a man, who automatically reached out to steady me. It took a moment for me to recognize Seamus O’Rourke.

“Olivia!” he said cheerfully. “You came! Fantastic!” The drink in his hand had turned his cheeks pink and his natural charm into outright exuberance.

I smiled and tried to step around him.

He didn’t get the cue. “Is Catie with you?” he asked, looking around hopefully.

“No,” I said.

“Ah. Because of Declan,” he said, sounding a bit disappointed. Then he perked up. “Do you know if Sinéad’s coming back to visit this summer?”

I shrugged noncommittally, fairly sure Sinead wouldn't want me spreading her business around. "Do you know Sinead well?" I asked.

He looked away. "I used to," he said quietly. He smiled ruefully. "Ran into her, the last time she was in town. She said...well." He laughed wryly. "Some women have a way of making you rethink your life choices, don't they?"

"Sure," I said, not quite following.

"Oh!" Seamus said, spotting a woman about twenty feet away who looked vaguely like him. "Excuse me. I need to go talk to my sister. She lives in London these days to avoid our dad, so I hardly ever get to see her." He squeezed my shoulder affectionately and rejoined the stream of the crowd.

I watched Seamus greet his sister with a massive hug, lifting her off the ground. I smiled. I knew Declan had his problems with Seamus—well, specifically with Seamus's dad, but it seemed to have soured him on the whole family—but a man who loved his family that much couldn't be all bad.

I was about to resume my path to the garden exit when I heard a gasp, and then murmurs. Everyone was craning their necks and standing on their toes to see something.

"What is it?" I asked the old woman next to me.

"A damn miracle," she said. "It's James and Marie's boy."

And then the man in question stepped into view, and my heart just *shimmered*. It was Declan, tall, proud, and handsome as ever. His dark hair and blue eyes made him look especially striking, like a fairy king invading the human court.

When his eyes locked on mine, I felt more than seen. I felt claimed.

People parted for Declan as he strode to me.

"Declan, I...what are you doing here?" Then a moment of fear stole through me. "Is Catie all right?"

"She's fine. She's with my mum." He came to a halt in front of me. For a moment, I thought he would reach for me, but he stopped at the last second

and put his hands in his pockets instead. He looked over his shoulder to see everyone staring at him. Hastily, they looked away.

He rolled his eyes and turned back to me. “Look, I don’t particularly want to be here. But you said it would make you happy. So...”

My heart was beating too fast, my body understanding things my mind wasn’t ready to.

I wet my lips. “I...I don’t think I realized the extent of what I was asking for, Declan. When I asked you to come, I really just wanted to spend time with you.”

He smiled, a certain light in his eyes that was just for me. “That’s convenient. Because I want to spend time with you.”

“Oh.” I was blushing. I couldn’t quite believe he was here. The proudest man I knew was temporarily laying down that pride to show up for me. Even though we’d fought. Even though he didn’t agree with me.

No one had ever done that for me before.

He glanced around. “Weren’t you supposed to be here with Molly?”

“She’s dancing,” I said. “So is Thomas.”

He held out his hand. “Shall we join them?”

“Oh, I don’t...some of these people really know what they’re doing.”

He laughed. “I won’t make you step dance, if that’s what you’re afraid of. Come on, *a ghrá*. Dance with me.”

I slipped my hand into Declan’s and let him pull me toward the bonfire. As we approached, the musicians finished their frenzied reel and slipped into something slower and softer. A middle-aged woman with a wineglass in her hand sat down next to the musicians and started singing something sad and lilting in Gaelic.

Declan pulled me into his arms. I looped my hands behind his neck, and we swayed together in the flickering firelight.

“What’s this song about?” I asked. “It sounds so sad.”

“It’s an old trad tune about Fionn and Sadhbh. They sing it every year.”

I leaned against him, liking the possessive, protective feel of his hands on my waist. “It sounds so much sadder than the movie feels.”

“Most of the song is about the end of the tale,” Declan explained. “The part where the dark wizard shows up when Fionn is away at war. He turns Sadhbh back into a deer, and Fionn never sees her again, no matter how hard he searches.”

“That was my least favorite part of the movie,” I said. “She finally found a home, and then it was ripped away from her.”

“It’s not all bad,” Declan said, smiling down at me. “He finds a fawn in the woods and recognizes it as their child. And when the child comes home, the spell is broken again, and they live happily together.”

“But what about Sadhbh?” I pointed out. “We don’t even find out what happens to her. We just know she loses her home, and her man, and finally her child.”

“Shhh, love.” Declan cupped my cheek. “It’s just a story.”

I didn’t realize I was upset until I felt his calming touch against my skin.

I closed my eyes briefly. “I know. I’m being silly. I just wish she had a happier ending.”

“Then let’s give her one.” He spun me out, then brought me back close into his arms. “She escapes the wizard and builds her own home. When she steps over the threshold, she becomes a human again. And this time, the wizard can’t touch her ever again because she carries her home in her heart.”

“What about love? Does Fionn find her again?” I asked.

“Does she want him to?” Declan asked. His eyes were piercing in the twilight. I felt like we were talking about more than a made-up story.

Before I could answer, the song ended, and the music shifted again, this time something fast and jaunty. There was whooping and stomping from the other dancers, and before I knew it, Declan and I were pulled into a circle of dancers clasp hands and spinning faster and faster around the fire. The

music soared, and the sky spun, and when everyone threw their hands in the air and let go of each other, I found myself falling back, dizzy.

Declan caught me easily with one arm behind my back and pulled me tight to his chest, laughing down at me.

I leaned against his chest to brace myself and felt his heart pounding under my fingertips.

“What’s that line from the movie? ‘Sir, you have stolen my breath.’”

Declan dropped his voice into a comical brogue. “‘Fair play, for you have stolen my heart.’”

“‘Then steal a kiss, my lord, for it is yours,’” I said cheekily, feeling pretty proud of myself for remembering the line. The words didn’t actually make sense when you thought about it—if it was his already, then it wasn’t stealing—but the phrasing certainly rolled off the tongue.

Declan looked at me, eyes dancing. And then without warning, he dipped me backward in a swoony kiss, just like in the movie.

At first I clutched at his shoulders, laughing against his mouth as people around us whooped and cheered. But as his lips lingered against mine, and I realized he wasn’t going to drop me, I felt myself relaxing into his arms. Relaxing into him. Trusting him.

The music changed again, to something dark and driving and romantic, with a drumbeat that matched my racing pulse. Declan straightened and pulled me out of the dip, so that we were both dancing together again. But now that we’d found our way back to each other, we couldn’t seem to keep our lips apart for long. I felt as hot and hungry as the fire blazing at my back.

Declan brought his mouth to my ear. “Come home with me, Olivia,” he said, his voice husky. “‘Be kind to your man.’”

I shivered, remembering what came after that particular movie line...and understanding exactly what Declan was asking me.

“Yes,” I breathed. “God yes.”



My heart raced as we drove home. I couldn't quite believe this was finally happening. The wild scent of summer air swirled around us.

I cleared my throat. "Do we have to pick Catie up from your mom's? Maybe we should do that now, before we... Although it's probably not great to do that with Catie in the house. Not that I'm loud. At least I don't think I'm loud. But you might be loud. I nannied for this couple that was *not quiet* to put it politely, and then their kid asked what those sounds were, and let me tell you, that is not a conversation I ever want to have again—"

Declan took my hand and wordlessly brought it to his lips.

Something lovely fluttered in the base of my stomach.

"I've taken care of it, *a ghrá*. We have the house to ourselves for the night."

That may have been the single sexiest thing a man had ever said.

In no time at all we were pulling up in front of the house. I felt like everything inside me was sparkling and dancing with delicious anticipation. Declan helped me out of the car, like we were in some kind of old-fashioned fairy tale. Then he led me inside the mansion without releasing my hand.

As soon as we stepped inside, we were surrounded by darkness. Apparently, Declan hadn't bothered to leave a light on when he left. The only illumination came from the stars outside.

"You're trembling," he said, squeezing my hand. "Is it the dark, or...?"

Have you changed your mind?

He didn't need to finish the sentence.

"No. I mean, yes. Yes, I want this. And it's not the dark, it's just..." *I can't remember the last time I wanted something as much as I want you.*

But I couldn't say that.

"It's just I'm waiting for you to kiss me," I said, half laughing at the giddy awkwardness of it all.

Declan tugged me deeper into the house and toward the stairs. “If I kiss you now, I won’t stop. And I’d rather do this on a bed, wouldn’t you?”

I shivered at the undisguised want in his voice.

My heart pounded as Declan led us up to his room, our footsteps the only sound in this giant, lavish house. Once we were in his room, Declan shut the door and flipped the light switch. I blinked up at the sudden wash of light.

“Do you...have a chandelier above your bed?”

“You can file a complaint with my decorator,” Declan said. And then his lips were on mine, and he was kissing me, and all I could think was *finally*.

I kissed him back with everything I had. He felt so damn good under my hands. Strong and masculine and perfect. I couldn’t stop smiling, and for some reason, neither could he. Declan and I fell into his bed, laughing and gasping as we stripped each other bare.

During our interrupted picnic, he’d been the one firmly in control. But now his control was fraying under the weight of his desire. His hands were a little too rough as he helped me out of my clothes. His breath went ragged when he finally saw me in nothing but my panties.

I’d never felt sexier.

“God, Olivia,” he said, his eyes tracing my naked curves. “You’re so fucking beautiful.” He traced a hand between my breasts, like I was something precious he was scared to ruin with his touch.

“Not too many freckles?” I teased.

“I love your freckles.” Declan crawled over me, caging me in with his heat and strength. “I have dreams about your freckles. They’re stars, and you’re my constellation.”

My heart snagged. How could he just say something like that?

Declan kissed his way down my body, unaware he’d casually dropped the most romantic sentence of my life. He found the tip of my breasts and sucked until I was shaking and gasping beneath him. When I didn’t think I could take any more, he moved to my other breast. And then to a sensitive spot on my

rib. All the while he murmured profane compliments I couldn't quite hear against my skin. I was so lost in his words and his touch, it took me a beat to come back to earth enough to realize what he was about to do.

"Oh, you don't have to..." I said, but he was already peeling my panties off and positioning his face between my thighs.

He inhaled appreciatively and kissed my hip.

Was it possible to die of lusty anticipation? Because I thought that might be about to happen to me.

"What's that line that turns you on?" Declan murmured. "Be kind to your man, and give me a taste of what I'd die for?"

"That's not... He wasn't talking about *this*," I said, flustered and turned on all at the same time.

Declan grinned up at me, wickedly playful. "How do you know?"

And then Declan lowered his mouth to me, and I lost my train of thought entirely. He was touching me, tasting me, and letting out ragged moans like I was the one doing *him* the favor.

Was I breathing? It was possible I might have stopped breathing. Air didn't feel necessary when his mouth was doing *that*. When he eased two fingers inside me and did something magical with his tongue, I came hard, pleasure washing over me as I clutched the headboard with one hand, and Declan's hair with the other.

He looked up at me, grinning.

I gasped, thighs quivering. "That was... I mean..."

"You're welcome," he said, cocky as all hell.

Normally, I would have taken him down a peg for a comment like that, but I felt too damn good. He *deserved* to be arrogant about that. He deserved a medal for that, and possibly a tickertape parade.

Declan moved away, and cool air washed over me.

"Where are you going?" I asked, twisting toward him. I wasn't ready to let

him go, even for an instant.

“Condom,” he said. He snagged a packet from his bedside dresser and dropped it on the pillow beside me. Then he added another two for good measure.

I laughed. “Isn’t that a little optimistic?”

“I feel very optimistic right now,” he said, wrapping a hand around my waist and pulling me toward him.

I giggled, feeling gloriously feminine. “Do billionaires have fancy designer condoms, or do you use normal ones like everyone else?”

He smothered a laugh and kissed my neck. “Absolutely. Designer condoms. Made of gold dust and orchid petals.”

I giggled, but then his mouth found mine, and I wasn’t laughing anymore. There was something too unguarded, too reckless, about the way he was kissing me. We’d agreed this would be a fun, casual thing. But in this moment, I could have sworn I mattered to him. That *this* mattered to him.

That it mattered to me.

I shoved the dangerous thought aside and gave myself over to the sensation of Declan’s body against mine. His lean muscle. His hungry mouth. His clever, clever fingers.

I learned things about him too.

When I skated my hand over his chest and down his stomach, his breath hitched. When I placed a gentle kiss above his heart, he pinned my wrists to the bed and kissed me with savage passion. And when I moaned his name while my fingernails scraped his back, he damn near lost his mind. By the time Declan finally sheathed himself and slid into me, we were both gasping and desperate.

As he rocked inside me, our eyes met, and for a second the world seemed to still. It was just me, and him, and the way the chandelier light backlit him, so that he looked like some kind of fallen angel.

And then I hauled in a jagged breath, and the world started moving again. I

watched with awe and hunger as Declan moved over me, in me, with me, finally losing every last shred of his control.

It was the hottest thing I'd ever seen. I couldn't get enough of him like this, open and unguarded.

"Touch yourself," he commanded. Or maybe begged. He moved my hand between us. "I want to watch you come while I'm inside you."

I nodded, something in me responding to his wildness. The pleasure was already so overwhelming, but I showed him how I liked to be touched when I was at my most sensitive. Together we found a rhythm, until it became too much, and I moved my hand so that I could cling to him, gasping as the pleasure rose and rose until all I could do was *feel*, as Declan cried out and gave a savage thrust.

When his greedy hands wrung a final orgasm out of me, I followed him over the edge with a secret beating in my heart—If I spent even one more night in his bed, I wasn't sure I could stop myself from falling for Declan Byrne.

DECLAN

I lay in bed facing Olivia, absently tracing the bones of her hand. I was exhausted and sated, but I still couldn't seem to stop touching her. This felt too good, too perfect. I couldn't shake the feeling that we were on borrowed time. That having anything this good was just asking for disaster of some kind to strike.

Olivia yawned and snuggled deeper into her pillow. "What time does Catie get back?"

"My mum's dropping her off around noon. So you can sleep in." I had an early morning meeting I couldn't move, but I liked the idea of Olivia naked and slumbering in my bed.

She smiled at me sleepily. "You really are good at everything."

"Only because I learn from my failures." I kissed her fingertips. "My first one-night stand was not particularly satisfying for anyone involved."

She stilled.

"Not that this is a one-night stand," I hurried to add. "Because it's not."

"I know," she said, even as her smile put distance between us. "Light and fun, though, right?"

"Light and fun," I repeated, the words feeling strangely inadequate for what we'd just done.

Olivia rolled onto her back and stared up at the ceiling. “Maybe that’s why I’m awful at relationships. Maybe I only have these crazy high standards for men because I’m scared to fail a relationship, and lose someone else I care about.”

Her words stole my breath. Olivia presented such a confident, sunshiny presence to the world. She made a living starting over in new places, with one new family after another. But she was also the girl who hated the part of the story where Sadhbh disappeared into the woods, never to return home again. She was the girl who’d lost people she loved, and was scared of losing more.

I wrapped an arm around her waist and tugged her to me, fitting her back to my front. I knew too well that people came in and out of your life in ways that you couldn’t control. But if it had been in my power, I would have made it so that Olivia never lost anyone again.

“Either that, or I’ve been scarred by one too many bad online dates,” Olivia joked, and I laughed because it was clear she wanted me to.

“Do you...do you think the fear of failure might extend to career stuff?” I asked. I meant, *Do you think you could be happy doing something besides nannying? Something that lets you stay in Ireland?* Having an entire ocean between us didn’t sit right with me. The thought of it was enough to make my heart tighten.

Olivia looked over her shoulder and mock-glared at me. “That is annoyingly perceptive. You’re ruining my afterglow.”

“Can’t have that.” I kissed the spot behind her ear, then the base of her neck, then the back of her shoulder. I ran my hand along her side, stopping at the softness of her thigh.

“Mmm.” Olivia sighed happily, snuggling into the soft bed. “Magic hands.”

I liked hearing her voice when she was happy. “Tell me about your book. You said Molly’s submitting it to a publisher, but you didn’t tell me what it’s about.”

She hesitated. “No criticism, okay? It’s too new. You can only say, ‘Yes, Olivia, you’re a genius.’”

I laughed into her hair. “I can handle that.”

She started talking, telling me a story about a little duckling who’s lost his mom, but when he runs into trouble, he remembers his mom’s advice, and it helps him.

The more she talked, the more I could have sworn I’d heard it before.

Then it came to me in a moment of blinding clarity.

@1000words. This was exact same story @1000words was writing.

@1000words, who was temporarily in Ireland. And who had a crush on a guy she worked with. And who’d complained about a demanding boss who didn’t want what was best for a kid. And who’d needed help figuring out my showerhead.

@1000words was Olivia. Olivia, who’d told me she had a blog on Snug. Olivia, who loved all the picture books I’d gotten for Catie based on @1000words’ glowing reviews.

Suddenly, a lot of things made sense—including my attraction to both women. I hadn’t seen it first, because Olivia hid her vulnerabilities around me, and @1000words hid her real life. But they were both smart, kind, and unafraid to tell me the truth, even when it was something they didn’t want to hear.

It felt like I’d been assembling two halves of a puzzle, and finally slid the halves together so I could see the whole picture.

It felt like fate, which wasn’t something I’d ever believed in. But right now, with Olivia in my arms, it seemed like I could believe in anything.

I opened my mouth to tell her, when I remembered what she’d said about the creep who’d met her in real life, then stalked her blog and lured her into a fake friendship.

This wasn’t the same thing, *at all*.

But would Olivia see that?

I didn’t want to mess things up between us, and I sure as hell didn’t want to

say anything that would make her feel uncomfortable, or worse, unsafe.

I decided to test the waters. “It’s so weird how people meet. You sat down next to me on a plane, and then you turned out to be the only possible nanny for the job. What if we’ve crossed paths before, and not realized it?”

Olivia made a sleepy sound, only half-listening.

I pressed on. “You write a blog on my site. What if I’ve read it, without knowing? That would be romantic, right?”

Olivia shuddered. “No thank you. My blog’s anonymous for a reason. Plus, it would remind me too much of that guy who cyberstalked me.”

A ball of tension settled in my stomach.

Olivia pulled away from me and sat up, covering herself with the sheets. “Declan, did you look up my account and find my blog up when I told you I had one? Is that something you can do as the owner? Because that’s really not cool.”

“No!” I sat up. “I mean, I could, with your email address. But I didn’t.”

Olivia clutched the sheet to her body, looking brittle.

“I swear,” I said, rubbing her shoulders. “I wouldn’t betray your privacy like that.”

Olivia relaxed and blew out a sigh of relief. “Sorry, I…” She ran a hand through my hair. “I guess that experience with Eddie freaked me out more than I realized. Thinking you know someone, and then finding out you really don’t.”

I pulled her back down under the covers and hugged her to my chest. “You know me, Olivia. I promise.”

She nodded, wrapping herself around me in return.

I held her until she fell asleep.

I stroked her hair, trying to tell myself I hadn’t just made a huge mistake by staying silent. But she’d been so rattled. And what we had was so new.

I'll find a way to tell her, I promised myself. When the time is right.

Maybe I could drop clues, so she could figure it out herself, like I had. Maybe that way, she'd feel more in control, less blindsided.

Or maybe I was fooling myself, and the best way to handle this was to ghost @1000words and hope Olivia never put two and two together. But that felt like both a dick move, and, illogically, like I'd be losing a friend.

Outside, rain fell soft against the windowpane. I reached to turn my bedside lamp off and let darkness wash over us. I breathed in Olivia's scent and tried to block out my doubts.

I'd never felt like this before—obsessed with a woman. Desperate to make what we had last as long as possible. It was ironic, since this was the only relationship I'd had that couldn't possibly last. Sinead would come back for Catie, and Olivia would move back to the States.

The distance wasn't an insurmountable obstacle—I could fly there every week if I needed to—but I knew I wouldn't be able to handle it. After all, can someone really survive if their beating heart is on the other side of the world? No... hour-long facetime sessions and weekly dates wouldn't be nearly enough. I needed her with me.

Of course, asking Olivia to stay for me wasn't an option. It was far too early. But if I helped her find another reason to stay in Ireland... If I helped her figure out how to monetize the blog she clearly loved, maybe get some sponsorships, so she didn't have to nanny anymore...

I drifted off to sleep, restlessly searching for answers I wasn't sure existed.

OLIVIA

I whistled to myself as I flipped through picture books, waiting for Molly to finish her shift here at the bookstore so we could work on our book, as we'd planned. She was actually running a little behind schedule, keeping me waiting, but I didn't mind. An entire display of books could have fallen over on me and I probably wouldn't have minded. Three nights of Declan was enough to put any woman in a bulletproof good mood.

Three nights was also enough to make me admit I was very much at risk of falling for him. I kept trying to keep things light, keep my heart safe. But the truth was, I was weak around him, and he always managed to get under my guard, even in the moments when I least expected it. I'd spend a couple of productive minutes thinking of something that didn't involve him at all, and then he'd steal a kiss when Catie was in the other room, or text me something private when we were surrounded by other people, and my head would fly back up into the clouds again...or, occasionally, to the bedroom. His texts ranged from filthy to sweet, and sometimes both. By the time Catie was down for the night, it was too easy to lie to myself.

One more night won't hurt.

You can keep this casual.

It won't break your heart when you have to leave.

When Molly asked me to hang out after work so that we could discuss some changes her publishing friend wanted us to make to our book proposal before

sharing it with her boss, it had been almost a relief to say yes. I couldn't think clearly with Declan around. He made my *giddy*, like some teenager with a crush. I needed to spend time with Molly, getting my head on straight and my hormones back to a normal level.

"Olivia! I hoped I'd find you here," a man's voice said behind me.

I turned to find Seamus O'Rourke smiling at me, a little nervously.

"Oh?" I had no earthly idea why he'd be looking for me.

He took a step forward. "It's Declan. I need to talk to him about something important. But every time I try to set up a meeting, he ignores my calls and emails. I was hoping you could put in a good word? Since you got him to come to the summer festival party last weekend?" He smiled hopefully. "*No one* has ever gotten him to do that, so it's obvious he really listens to you."

I held up a hand. "I'm going to stop you right there. I appreciate that the dynamic between you and Declan is...complicated, and that it's not really because of anything *you* did, personally. But I'm not going to be your go-between. Declan makes his own decisions."

I moved to step around him, ready for this conversation to end.

Seamus blocked me. "It's about Catie," he blurted.

I frowned, confused. "What—"

"I'm her biological father," he said on a rush, keeping his voice low so no one overheard. "I had no idea, until I saw her in the bookshop, and she looked so much like my sister. I've been trying to reach Sinead, but she's not answering her phone, and she hasn't posted anything on social media."

Probably because she's in rehab, I thought.

"So I tracked down Sinead's best friend from school. She confirmed I'm the dad," Seamus finished.

I felt a stress headache coming on. I didn't want to know this. I didn't want to get sucked into Declan's feud with the O'Rourkes.

"I know what you're thinking. What kind of selfish git doesn't know he has a

child?” Seamus scrubbed the back of his neck, uncertain. “Seven years ago, Sinead and I were on and off. We were off when I found out she was pregnant, and since she didn’t say anything to me about it, I figured she’d found some other bloke.”

“Seamus,” I said. “You need to talk to Sinead and Declan about this. Not me.”

“So help me talk to them,” Seamus begged. “I just want to get to know Catie while she’s here. I understand if Sinead doesn’t want to tell Catie yet about who I really am. I’ll follow any rules she lays down. But if I could just come over, you could say I was a family friend. That would work, right?”

I hesitated. This wasn’t a decision I could make for Sinead—or Declan, while he was Catie’s guardian. But Catie might wish she knew her father one day. And as far as I could tell, Seamus truly meant well, and he seemed so excited to learn that he had a daughter. Surely that was a good sign.

“I’ll talk to Declan,” I said at last. “But I can’t promise anything.”

Seamus smiled in eager relief. With a sinking heart, I noticed where Catie had gotten her dimples.



That night I was in my bedroom getting ready for bed when Declan strolled in wearing nothing but low-slung gray sweatpants. “It occurs to me,” he said, “I have a pool in the basement. And you’d look great swimming naked.”

I smiled and squirted lotion into my palm. I’d skipped my bedtime rituals the last few nights, and I didn’t want my skin to start getting dry and itchy. “Is everyone in your family an insomniac, or is it just you?”

“Just when I’m trying to work out a problem.” He poked at the jewelry and makeup items I’d left scattered on the top of the dresser, picking things up and absently sorting them into rows and categories that probably only made sense in his head.

“What problem are you trying to solve?” I asked.

Declan shrugged off my question and flopped on my bed, the picture of easy, masculine grace. He looked like he belonged on a billboard, advertising something expensive and irresistible. “Come swimming with me.”

I could feel my blood heating on cue.

I sighed. “I really do need to get some sleep.”

Declan opened my lotion and sniffed it. His smile softened. “This smells like you.”

“Well, arguably I smell like it,” I pointed out, but he was already taking over for me. He draped my leg over his lap and started massaging lotion into my calf muscle.

I moaned. Catie had me on the run most days, and it wasn’t like I really had time to stop and stretch in between chasing her around. “That feels good.”

“I could get used to this. Helping you rub your lotion in hard-to-reach places every night.”

“*Declan*,” I scolded, laughing.

“I was talking about your back,” he said, faux innocently. “How’d your thing with Molly go?”

“Good,” I said. Seamus’s request flashed through my mind. “I ran into Seamus O’Rourke.”

Declan’s hands tightened on my calf. “Did he upset you?”

“No. He doesn’t seem as bad as his dad,” I said. “He mentioned he was trying to get in contact with you about something important.”

Declan’s eyes flashed. “Seamus is a spoiled rich kid who thinks his charm absolves him from the harm his father inflicts on everyone else. He and I have nothing to discuss. *He* might consider the situation important, but I highly doubt I’d agree.” He scowled. “Why was he talking to you?”

“I, um, guess he noticed that you went to the festival?” I tried to make it sound like it wasn’t a big deal. “And heard it was because I asked you to?”

“Jesus Christ.” Declan’s face shuttered. He shoved himself away from me,

swinging his legs over the edge of the bed, his back to me.

I felt panic swirl in my chest. I didn't want him pulling away from me. I didn't want him to regret our night at the festival, or anything it led to.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I'm sorry, I won't talk to him again."

"I'm not mad at you," Declan said. "I'm mad at *him*. Him and his whole fucking family."

What if part of his family is your family, too? I thought. But he wasn't ready to hear that. Not yet.

I opened my lotion to him and held it out to me, so that the soothing lavender scent wafted between us. "Help me with my back?"

He looked over his shoulder, skeptical. "You actually lotion your back?"

"No," I admitted. "I just like you touching me."

Something in his expression shifted. "I like that too," Declan said, his voice gruff. He accepted the lotion.

I pulled off my shirt and lay stomach down on my bed, letting Declan distract himself with my body. As the pleasure from his touch swamped me, I told myself it would be better for everyone if Declan could find a way to make peace with Seamus. Catie deserved to have her uncle and father on speaking terms.

I just had to figure out a way to make Declan see that.

DECLAN

Olivia was still tense. Over the past few nights, I'd become an expert in Olivia's body. And right now she was hard and braced, where I wanted her soft and relaxed. Olivia and I hadn't exactly fought just now. But she'd put up a barrier between us when I'd snapped about Seamus.

I didn't like it. I didn't like it one damn bit.

Everything about that family was poison. The urge to whisk her away from the O'Rourkes and their toxicity felt powerful, primal.

"Come to Prague with me," I said.

She rolled over on her back so she could look up at me. Christ, she was beautiful like that, with her breasts bare for me, and her red curls spread across the pillow around her like some kind of wild angel.

"You mean on your business trip?" she asked.

"Catie asked if she could go with me earlier today. I think it's a brilliant idea." I ran a fingertip under the swell of her breast. "But I wanted to see what you thought first."

A smile lit her whole face. "That sounds wonderful. I've never been to Prague."

"You'll like it," I assured her. "You both will."

I'd make sure of it.

Olivia smiled up at me, her eyes bright with happiness. I had a powerful urge to kiss her, but I knew if I did, I wouldn't stop. She'd made it clear she'd prefer a good night's sleep over a late-night tryst this evening, and I needed to respect that. *Especially* because of the inherent power imbalance in our relationship.

It didn't feel like a power imbalance, though. The longer things went on between us, the more I realized that while I had the money, she had everything that actually mattered. Hell, I'd gone to a fucking O'Rourke party, just to make her smile.

My palm rested on her stomach, as low as I'd let myself go tonight. She looked up at me from under her eyelashes, and my cock swelled.

"Right," I said roughly. "That's settled. Good night." I dropped a kiss on her forehead and stood to go.

Olivia's mouth fell open in surprise. "I thought...you really only wanted to go swimming?" She looked pointedly where my tracksuit bottoms did nothing to disguise my hard-on.

"You said you needed sleep," I said, trying to sound patient and unbothered when really what I felt was grumpy. Christ, she was making this hard.

"And...you're giving it to me?" she asked, understanding dawning.

I nodded, the movement jerky. I was torn between wishing she'd put a shirt on and praying she wouldn't. "I'll give you anything you want, Olivia."

"Well," Olivia said, her voice husky. "Suddenly I'm not feeling so tired." She crawled to the edge of the bed, hooked her fingers in my waistband, and tugged me close enough so she could free my aching cock. She leaned in and placed a kiss on the tip.

"God, Oliva," I said, my hands in her hair. She smiled up at me with wicked promise. Then she took me in her mouth, and neither of us slept for a long time.

I lost all track of time for hours. I only looked up and realized it was midnight when Olivia nudged me out of a pleasant doze as she lay, cozy and sated, nestled in my arms. "Your phone's buzzing," she said sleepily.

I reached for my discarded tracksuit bottoms and tugged them over so I could silence my phone. That's when I saw the text message from Thomas.

O'Rourke gave up on selling the second property. Too much red tape. He's moving on to another option. Not the mansion yet, but if we can find a way to delay this sale too, we'll have him.

I sat bolt upright in bed, a thrill of adrenaline shooting through me. This was it. We almost had him. *Go at him with everything you've got, I responded. Spare no expense.*

"Who's that?" Olivia asked. "Don't they know how late it is?"

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell her, when I remembered how our last conversation about the O'Rourkes had ended. "No one. Work stuff."

"Being a billionaire cannot possibly be worth it," Olivia joked, but the joke didn't quite reach her eyes. She could tell I was keeping her distanced from this on purpose.

I tossed the phone aside and reached for her. "It wasn't until I started sleeping with the staff."

Olivia laughed as I covered her body with mine and proceeded to distract us both.



I woke up with a pounding in my head, then I realized the pounding was on the door.

"Miss Olivia?" Catie called through the door. "I can't find Uncle Declan."

Olivia glanced at the clock and swore. "We overslept," she hissed. "Quick, get behind the bed."

"I'm not going to hide like a teenager—"

"Yes you are, Declan Byrne. I swear to God..." Olivia shoved me off the side of the bed, and I hit the ground with a thump.

“Your door is locked,” Catie informed Olivia, like it might have been an oversight.

“One second, sweetheart,” Olivia said, hastily pulling clothes on and motioning me to scoot out of sight.

I grumbled but acquiesced, sliding under her bed.

At least there were no dust bunnies. I’d have to give my cleaning crew a raise.

I heard the door open and saw Catie’s stocking feet burst into the room.

“Let’s go get you breakfast, hon,” Olivia said, trying to usher Catie back out of the room.

“I need to find Uncle Declan,” Catie said. “So I can ask him something.”

“Okay,” Olivia said. “Let’s leave my bedroom so we can go look for him.”

Silence fell while Catie thought about that solution. Then she clearly came up with a better one. “Or I could ask you instead.”

“Sure thing,” Olivia said, her voice increasingly harried. “Let’s go down to breakfast and talk about it.”

“I already made myself breakfast,” Catie announced. “I had ice cream.”

I would have been impressed with Catie’s stubbornness, if I wasn’t trapped under a bed naked.

“That’s not…” Olivia trailed off, clearly regrouping. “Okay, Catie, what do you want to ask me?”

“Can Imani come over to play?” she said.

Who’s Imani? I thought.

Olivia must have looked equally confused, because Catie elaborated. “I met her at story time at the bookstore.” She kept talking, explaining that the playdate with Thomas’s daughter was okay, but she didn’t share Catie’s interest in bugs. “Imani likes bugs. And books. So I have decided we can be friends.”

That sounded like solid, straightforward logic to me.

But Olivia reacted like it was some sort of big emotional breakthrough. “Oh, *honey*. I’m so glad you decided you wanted to make friends.”

Something in my chest twisted. Catie hadn’t wanted to make friends?

“That’s a wonderful idea,” Olivia said. “I’ll see if Molly knows Imani’s parents, so we can ask her over. But if that doesn’t work, we’ll just ask her over the next time we see Imani at story time. Do you know what you want to do with her? Maybe a tea party here at the house? Or a beach day at Salthill?”

I coughed, reminding Olivia that I was still here, before she got too deeply into planning mode.

“You know what, let’s talk about it over breakfast,” Olivia said brightly.

“I already had—”

“Ice cream is not breakfast,” Olivia said, firmly steering Catie out of the bedroom.

After they left, I showered and dressed and sent a few pressing work emails. Then I went downstairs to check on Olivia, who was doing breakfast dishes while Catie colored in the next room. She and I needed to have a conversation.

“What the hell was that?” I asked, keeping my voice low enough so Catie wouldn’t overhear me. “What happened to ‘always tell kids the truth’?”

Olivia scrubbed at a frying pan. “There’s a difference between lying to a kid who asks you a direct question and simply neglecting to tell them about an adult subject they haven’t even thought to ask about.”

I crossed my arms. “So if she asks about us, you’ll tell her the truth?”

“She won’t ask about us if we’re discreet,” Olivia countered. She looked cheerfully prim and professional, wearing the mask she’d worn when I’d first hired her.

I didn’t like it.

I moved closer to her and took her by her shoulders, forcing her to face me.

“Olivia, why is it so important to you that she doesn’t find out we’re dating?”

She chewed her lip. “Kids don’t deal well with instability. I don’t think it’s a good idea to introduce your romantic partner to your kid, unless you think it’s something that could last.”

The knowledge that this thing between us was only temporary hung unspoken between us. There wasn’t much potential for long term. Not unless Olivia uprooted her whole life. I opened my mouth to argue, then closed it.

“You said light and fun,” she reminded me, searching my face. “Unless you changed your mind?”

I felt like I was standing on a cliff, with the ocean crashing on dangerous rocks far below. If I said yes, and she wanted the same thing...

But what if my yes scared her off before I’d had time to line up business opportunities for her and convince her to stay? No, that couldn’t happen. Sure, maybe I was acting out of fear...but Olivia was far too precious for me to risk it all in a roll of a dice. You didn’t get to build a tech empire by being reckless, and the stakes here felt even more important than anything I’d ever faced in a boardroom... I needed to be smart.

I needed to buy some time.

“I promised you light and easy,” I repeated. “Just like you wanted.” I forced a smile and let my hands drop from her shoulders.

This time she was the one to take a step closer to me. “Why do *you* want to tell her?”

“Other than the desire to avoid hiding under a bed in my own home?” I grumbled. I sighed and ran a hand through my hair. “I suppose I’m worried about the secrecy. What if it comes out by accident, and she’s hurt or confused that we kept it from her?”

I couldn’t help but think about the looming secret I was keeping from Olivia. The secret I still didn’t know how to tell her about.

Olivia studied me. There was something going on behind her eyes that I couldn’t read. Slowly she said, “I think it’s okay to keep a secret until the

other person is ready to hear it. Would you agree?”

“I would,” I said. “But I think that logic is easier to swallow when *you’re* the one keeping the secret.”

Olivia looked away, returning to the pan in the sink. “We’ll tell her if she asks,” she promised.

I hoped she’d feel the same way when I told her the truth about who she’d been confessing her anonymous online secrets to. I turned and walked away, my heart heavy.

DECLAN

The next day I was at my desk looking over my itinerary for my trip to Prague when my phone started buzzing. I answered it without looking at the number. “Declan Byrne speaking.”

“Declan. Hi,” Sinead said. “Do you have time to talk?”

I straightened. “Is everything all right?”

“I’m grand,” Sinead reassured me. Then she half-laughed at herself. “Well, I’m an alcoholic in rehab. But, you know, aside from that.” She blew out a breath. “My therapist thinks I should tell you about, um, my rock bottom. You know why I finally admitted I had a problem.”

I’d wanted the same thing, but now she sounded so uncomfortable, I felt myself getting defensive on my little sister’s behalf. “Screw your therapist. You don’t have to tell me anything you don’t want to. Okay?”

“Okay,” she said, sounding a little more sure of herself.

Silence grew on the line between us.

“I’m taking Catie and Olivia on my business trip to Prague,” I said, just to have something to say. “Catie asked to go, and I couldn’t say no.”

“You never could,” Sinead said, sounding sad and fond at the same time. “You’re a good sort, Declan. I probably don’t say it enough.”

“Mum thinks I’m controlling. She said I get huffy.”

Sinead laughed. “Well, that’s true too.”

I grinned. This time the silence between us was comfortable.

“I think I want to tell you,” Sinead said at last. “About my ‘rock bottom.’” I could practically hear the air quotes.

I blinked, surprised. “Okay.” I rose and closed my office door, so neither Catie nor Olivia could overhear my half of the conversation. Then I stood in the middle of the room, bracing for the worst.

“I didn’t drink when I was bartending. At least not more than a pint or two,” she explained. “But sometimes I’d stick around after I clocked out, to chat with my friends, and have fun for a while. My friend normally babysat Catie when I had late shifts—Catie would sleep over at her place and come back in the morning, and it didn’t make any difference if I came home a little later. So I’d stay for an hour or so and pretend... well, pretend my life wasn’t a mess. Anyway.” She took a breath.

I waited.

“I thought I was sober enough to drive that night. I wasn’t. I...” She took a deep breath. “I was too drunk, Declan. Too drunk to know I was driving in the wrong lane. I had to swerve to avoid hitting another car... In the end, I just cut through a garden and hit a mailbox, but... God, I could’ve hit a kid. I could’ve crashed, died, and...”

She paused and, even though she didn’t say the words, I knew exactly what she meant.

“Jesus Christ, Sinead.” I sat down in my chair, my knees giving out on me. I thought of the wreckage from our da’s accident. I thought of going to the morgue with Mum to officially identify the body and claim his belongings. At the last second she’d flinched away from looking at Da like that, so I’d done it instead. “You could’ve...”

“I know,” she said, her voice gutted. “I could have done the same thing to some other family that O’Rourke did to ours.”

I was probably a selfish bastard, because at the moment I didn’t care about that. “*You* could have been hurt.”

“I know,” Sinead repeated. “I know.”

We sat in the silence together.

“Anyway,” Sinead said. “There you have it. Rock bottom and a wake-up call, all in one. I called a cab, and then I googled rehab facilities, and then I called you. I didn’t tell you because I was ashamed,” she explained. “But apparently, shame can be a trigger for relapsing. So. There you have it. Don’t hate me.”

“I could never hate you,” I said instantly, meaning it with every fiber of my being. “I love you Sinead. I love you so fucking much.”

“I know,” she said, and this time I could hear she was crying.

We stayed on the phone together until she sounded good again, and she hung up to go play checkers with her roommate.

I sat alone in my office, somehow raw and numb at the same time.

If I were a praying man, I’d thank God for that mailbox. I didn’t want to think about how close I’d almost come to losing someone else I loved.

I sat there, staring blankly at the wall, until my phone buzzed with a notification from @1000words.

I checked the screen.

I can’t believe I’m saying this, but this woman at Snug contacted me, and apparently there’s a publishing company that wants to sponsor my blog????!!!

I smiled. When I’d mentioned Olivia’s blog to an employee who worked in our corporate partnerships division, I had no idea she’d find an interested company that quickly. I knew @1000words—Olivia—was good, but I was glad someone else was finally noticing.

That’s fantastic. You deserve it. I wrote back.

Do you think I should take it? she asked. *It’s not set in stone yet. They want me to do a video, where I’m reading one of their books. And if they like it, I’ll post it, and they’ll pay me.*

You should definitely take it, I said, confident my employee wouldn't have sent her a bad deal. It's the next professional step. Who knows? If it goes well and you decide you want to pursue more sponsorships, you may even be able to quit your day job.

I hit send, feeling optimistic for the first time all day.



Maybe it was the news about how close I'd come to losing Sinead, but at dinner that night with Catie and Olivia, I found myself noticing all the little details. Catie's mile-a-minute talking. The taste of the fresh brown bread Maeve had made for dinner. The flash of laughter in Olivia's eyes when I made a dirty joke that went over Catie's head.

I was so damn lucky, I realized, to get to have this summer with Olivia and Catie. That would be true even if Olivia left Ireland when her contract was up. Of course, that was the last thing I needed, but...right now, I was happy, which was more than a lot of people got.

After dinner, Olivia sent Catie upstairs to change into her pajamas. When Olivia hung back, saying she had something important she wanted to talk to me about, I couldn't help the greedy hope that flared to life in me.

Maybe her picture book sold. Maybe she wants to focus on her blog full time. Maybe she's quitting nannying, I thought.

Maybe she's staying in Ireland.

Does that even matter? The thought came unbidden into my mind. Ireland, States...hell, Antarctica. Wherever this woman goes, I'll follow.

"So." I looked at her across the dinner table, keeping my face neutral and utterly free of the hope that was clawing at my insides. "What did you want to talk to me about?"

Olivia took a deep breath. She clasped and unclasped her hands like she was nervous.

I gentled my voice. "Whatever it is, you can tell me."

“I think you should consider being a little nicer to Seamus O’Rourke,” Olivia said.

“What?” I felt like I’d been slapped.

“He’s been trying to get in touch with you to talk about something, but you’ve been ignoring his emails. What if it’s important?” she said.

“Fuck him,” I snarled.

Olivia flinched.

I hated that I’d made her flinch, but I was doing all I could to control my temper. Why did she keep bringing Seamus up? Why didn’t she *listen* to me?

“I need you to understand,” I said, my voice deadly serious. “I will never, ever have anything to discuss with that man. The whole family is rotten and needs to be stopped.”

“You can’t mean that,” Olivia said. “I know Seamus’s father is horrible, but surely you wouldn’t judge a man by his last name.”

“I would, and I do. I swear to you, Olivia, one day I’ll buy their damn mansion and raze it to the ground,” I said. “So that they can feel a fraction of the pain they’ve inflicted on my family.”

“But—”

“No.” I stood and stormed upstairs to my office, not bothering to clear the table. I heard Olivia’s steps chasing after me.

“Declan, wait. What if the thing he has to tell you affects—”

I whirled at the top of the stairs and looked down at her. “This is none of your business, Olivia. Why do you even care?”

How could you take his side over mine? I wanted to demand. But I wasn’t ready to expose that vulnerability, not even to her.

Olivia opened her mouth, then closed it. Maybe she’d realized she didn’t have a good answer. Maybe she had one, but wasn’t willing to share it with me.

I wasn't sure which option was worse.

Olivia blew out a breath and shook her head, like she was trying to take a step away from our argument. "I need some air," she announced shortly. "I'm going on a drive."

My blood ran cold at the idea of her driving when she was upset. It hadn't been that long since Olivia had called me from the side of the road after her accident.

"No," I ordered.

She crossed her arms. "I said I'm going on a—"

"And I said no, you aren't."

Her mouth gaped open. "*Excuse me?* Did you seriously just *forbid* me from doing what I want?"

"No, I mean..." My hand clenched and unclenched on the railing. "Let me drive you. Or have Molly pick you up. Hell, call a cab since you clearly have some weird hang-up about using my driver. I don't care, just please... please don't drive when you're upset. If you had another accident, I couldn't..." My pulse was hammering in my throat. I fought off images of my da in the morgue, of Olivia in shock after she'd driven my car off the road, of Sinead crying alone in rehab while she told me about her own close call.

Some of what I was feeling must have shown on my face because Olivia's voice gentled. "I'll be fine, Declan," she said. "I promise. But I can't live my life hemmed in by your fears of the past."

This time I was the one who flinched.

Was that what I was doing?

Olivia climbed the stairs until she could take my face in her hands and give me a quick, achingly gentle kiss. "I'll be careful. Can you put Catie to bed?"

I nodded, wooden.

Then Olivia walked out the door, leaving me frozen on the stairwell.

I fucking hated Seamus O'Rourke.

OLIVIA

“Ooof. You look like you could use a beer,” Molly said as she let me into her apartment.

“No thanks,” I said. As mad as I was at Declan, I’d promised him I’d be careful, and I intended to keep my word. “I have to drive home after this.”

Molly stepped back from the door and beckoned me into her apartment. It was a small, oddly shaped living room and kitchen space, but the couch looked comfortable and all the art on the walls gave the space a friendly, eclectic feel.

“So what did you want to talk about, then?” Molly padded into the kitchen and put the kettle on. Then she pulled some mugs down from the cupboard.

“I need you to keep what I’m about to say between us,” I said. Molly had already told me her roommate was out for the night, so I didn’t have to worry about anyone overhearing us.

Molly raised her eyebrows. “Okay. Consider these lips sealed. What’s up?”

“Seamus O’Rourke is pretty sure he’s Catie’s dad. And he wants Declan’s permission to get to know her while she’s here, only Declan refuses to even talk to Seamus. So now I’m caught in the middle.”

Molly blinked several times in a row. “Okay. Processing *that* bombshell. Why are you caught in the middle? And what flavor of tea do you want?”

I examined the boxes Molly held up and pointed to the peach flavor.

“Seamus asked me to help persuade Declan to hear him out,” I said. “I guess since Declan came to the festival for me, Seamus thinks...”

“That Declan would walk on hot coals for you,” Molly finished. She plunked a Barry’s tea bag in her own mug, thinking. “He’s not entirely wrong there.”

I felt myself blush. I knew Declan liked me. But he was so moody and inscrutable, it was hard to tell if he liked me as more than a friend he could hook up with.

“The problem is, Declan completely shuts down every time I bring up Seamus’s name,” I said. “He’s never going to read that email, is he?”

“I should say not,” Molly said. The tea kettle went off. She poured hot water into each of our mugs, and handed mine to me. We each added our preferred levels of milk and sugar and then settled on her couch.

“I was thinking...” I said. “Maybe if I can show Declan that Seamus is an okay person, then Declan will agree to meet with him.”

“No, no, no, *no*,” Molly said with uncharacteristic bluntness. “That is a terrible idea. You only have one option here. Tell Declan what Seamus told you, and then butt out and let Declan make his own decision. The last thing you want is to be caught in the middle of a decades-long grudge.”

I leaned forward. “But if I could help him make a fresh start...”

But Molly was shaking her head so vigorously I couldn’t finish the sentence. “You Americans are all about fresh starts. But we Irish know sometimes there’s too much history for a fresh start. If Declan wanted to see Seamus as anything but an O’Rourke, he would have done it by now.”

I sighed and sank back into the couch. Some part of me knew Molly was right. But I couldn’t quite bring myself to admit it.

Declan was going to be *furious* when I told him. What if the fact that I’d kept the truth from him, even for a few days, destroyed what we’d built between the two of us?

“I can’t believe Sinead shagged Seamus,” Molly marveled. “Wonder if he was any good?”

I groaned and dropped my head back against the couch. “Not the point.”

Molly snickered into her tea.



Molly and I hung out for another hour, chatting about her life. It was a welcome distraction for me. But as I drove home my thoughts returned—inevitably—to Declan. I couldn’t ignore what Seamus told me, and rob Catie of the chance to have a relationship with her father. That meant I had to bite the bullet and tell Declan.

I didn’t want to do it tonight, when we were tired and raw from fighting. I could tell him tomorrow, but I knew Declan’s work was only going to get busier leading up to the Prague trip.

I’ll tell him after Prague, I promised myself.

I knew it was selfish, but I needed a few more days with him, where everything was perfect. Or at least as close to perfect as Declan and I were ever going to be.

My phone flashed with an incoming message from @DBCoder. *Was just thinking about you. How are you?*

I drove on, wondering how I could possibly answer that.

I could say, *I have to tell someone something he doesn’t want to hear, and I’m worried he’ll hate me for it.*

I could say, *I’m falling hard and fast for a man. We were supposed to keep things casual, but I don’t think I can. When I asked him point-blank if he wanted something more, he said no, he wants to keep things casual.*

I could say, *That sponsorship offer I told you about? I’m scared to take it. I’m scared to want something more than nannying.*

I was out in the country now, not far from Declan’s home. On impulse I pulled over and grabbed my phone to respond to @DBCoder.

Honestly? I’m not great right now, I typed. I told you about that guy I work

with?

His response was quick. *I remember. What did he do?*

I struggled to put my response into words. Declan hadn't done anything *wrong*, per say. Couples fought. And even when we'd been fighting, he'd been worried about me driving off into the night and getting in an accident. Even if he said he wanted to keep things light and easy, I was certain that on some level he cared about me. And because it was Declan, it was a fierce, protective kind of caring that took my breath away if I thought about it too long.

I wasn't upset because what Declan had done. I was upset because I was worried about what he *would* do someday.

There's this man he hates. And he gets so furious every time I bring up this man, I wonder... If I ever make too big of a mistake, will he start hating me like that?

@DBCoder's response came immediately. *Of course not. No one could never hate you. You're YOU.*

I smiled sadly at my phone. *You can't know that*, I wrote.

I could see that he was typing. It was a long message, based on how long it took him. But in the end, all he did was say, *I'm sorry he hurt you.*

I started to thank him, but something about it felt weird. I realized that as much as I'd wanted to talk to someone about my problems with Declan, it felt wrong to do it with @DBCoder. The crush I'd had on an internet stranger paled compared to the real, messy, tangible feelings I had for Declan. But I still didn't want to go behind Declan's back and talk about his failures to another man who'd once (sort of? maybe?) asked me out.

Thanks for listening, I wrote. *But maybe we should go back to talking about picture books. It doesn't feel right talking about him with you.*

I could see that @DBCoder had read my message. But instead of responding to it, he logged off.

It was probably a good thing, but I still felt a spark of frustrated

disappointment. Why were the men in my life so unnecessarily complicated?

I started the car up again and drove home.

When I stepped inside, I saw the light was on in the living room. Declan had waited up for me, just like he had the night I'd gone out with Brendan Carr. The night when I'd accidentally admitted I had feelings for Declan, and he'd slammed me into a wall and kissed me like he was starving for me.

My stomach gave an uneasy, tense flutter. Even when we were fighting, I wanted him.

Declan closed his laptop and stood. "I wanted to say I'm sorry I lost my temper. It wasn't about you. And, to be clear, there is absolutely nothing you could ever do that would make me as angry at you as I am at the O'Rourkes."

I hesitated. It was exactly what I'd needed him to say. And yet, some part of me couldn't trust it. Normally when Declan and I fought, the ensuing compromise we reached was hard won, with each of us giving a little. For him to just say exactly what I wanted to hear, with no compromise on my part...it felt too easy.

Then again, maybe I was overthinking it. Maybe I'd become as addicted to fighting with Declan as I was to everything else about him.

He was still waiting for my response. His shadowed face looked at once vulnerable and determined in the lamplight.

"I forgive you," I said.

Declan visibly relaxed. "Do you want to watch a movie or something?"

"No, I think I should...I could use an early night." I turned and fled before he could coax me into another perfect, messy, complicated night with him.

If only I could flee from my growing feelings.

DECLAN

Three days after our fight, things still felt off between me and Olivia. It wasn't anything I could put my finger on—we were just more careful with each other. And it wasn't the same. I missed the way her personality took up the whole room when she was genuinely relaxed and happy. I didn't like seeing her so uncertain, almost diminished.

I sat in my office and stared blankly at my email inbox.

After my initial apology, I'd tried wooing Olivia out of her shell with family movie nights, skinny-dipping in the pool after we put Catie down for the night, and—of course—plenty of sex. For a moment or two, I'd have her with me entirely, like it used to be. And then she'd draw into herself and slip away from me. It felt like there was something on her mind she couldn't tell me.

If I were in a cheesy romance like *The Deer and the Warrior*, I would have grabbed her by the shoulders, shook her, and demanded she tell me her secrets. Then I could have given her a punishing kiss and crushed whatever demons were haunting her.

Unfortunately, Olivia didn't want me to slay her demons. She wanted me to be *civilized*.

Damn it.

I grimaced. Then I dug around in my inbox until I found the most recent missive from Seamus O'Rourke. If Olivia needed me to meet with Seamus to prove I was the bigger man and not some raging beast she needed to fear,

than I could do it.

I would meet with Seamus, he'd be an arse like always, and then I could hate him for being an arse instead of solely for his last name. I hoped the distinction would be enough for Olivia.

I dashed out an email telling Seamus I could meet him in three hours at a hotel bar in Galway, but only for fifteen minutes. It was mostly frequented by travelers and tourists, so I doubted anyone from Ballybeith would see us.

Seamus's confirmation was embarrassingly grateful. He used three exclamation marks.

"Have some dignity, man," I muttered.

Three unfortunate hours later, I stepped into the hotel bar. It was a historic hotel, with low ceilings, dark wood tables, and unremarkable oil paintings on the walls. I spotted Seamus sitting at the bar, twisting a pint of beer nervously in his hands. He'd already drunk over half of it.

"Fuck it," I muttered, and headed over to him.

Do it for Olivia, I told myself.

When Seamus spotted me, he nearly fell off his stool in his enthusiasm to stand and greet me. When he found his balance, he held his hand out to me to shake. "Declan."

"O'Rourke." I didn't shake his hand. I sat down at the bar next to him.

"Can I get you something to drink?" he asked.

As if this was a bloody social call.

"What do you want, Seamus? Are you here to warn me away from interfering in Mark's efforts to sell your buildings?" I asked.

"What?" Seamus shook his head, confused. "This isn't about business. It's personal."

I laughed, the sound cold and callous even to my own ears. "There's nothing *personal* between us. Nothing."

Seamus twisted his glass nervously, but stubbornly. “How’s Sinead?”

I all but growled. “Keep her name out of your mouth.”

Seamus held up his hands in surrender. “Jesus, you’re jumpy. I meant no disrespect. It’s just that she hasn’t been answering her phone.”

Because she’s in rehab, your arse, I thought. But what I said was, “That probably means she doesn’t want to talk to you, Seamus. And if you think I’ll put in a good word for you with her, you’re dumber than I thought.”

Seamus clenched his jaw. I could see my taunts were getting to him. He was flushed.

Go on, I thought. *Show me your true colors.*

Seamus met my gaze squarely. “I wanted talk to Sinead and you because I’m Catie’s dad. And I want to be a part of her life.”

“You *what?*” I could feel the blood rushing in my ears. It wasn’t true. It wasn’t *possible*. I simply couldn’t believe that Sinead would have ever taken up with this bastard.

On the other hand, it suddenly made sense why she wouldn’t want to tell me. And it was completely in fucking character for Seamus O’Rourke to abandon my sister and leave Catie to grow up without a dad.

And now he wanted to be involved, after all these years?

That was fucking rich.

“You bastard,” I snarled, lunging for him, and he ducked away from me, falling off his barstool and landing hard on the ground.

He scrambled to his feet and backed away from me. “It’s like I told Olivia. You don’t need to tell Catie she’s mine if you don’t want to. I just want to spend some time with her, while she’s here...”

But I’d stopped listening. I was hearing his first sentence on loop.

It was like I told Olivia...

I didn’t want to believe that Olivia would betray me like this. That she’d talk

to Seamus behind my back and keep a secret this big from me.

But my stomach was sinking. Now I knew why she'd been so dead set on me talking to Seamus.

“Stay away from my family,” I ordered. “Or else.”

Seamus flinched.

I stormed out of the dark bar and out into the sunlight. Outside, people were walking up and down the narrow streets like nothing extraordinary had happened. But my whole world felt like it had been turned upside down.

Sinead had trusted an O'Rourke, and he betrayed her.

I'd trusted Olivia, and she betrayed me.

The part of me that had begun to open up, begun to fucking *hope*, the more time I spent with Olivia, closed down like a gate slamming shut. I needed to remember the truth—if I didn't keep my guard up, people would hurt my family. Even the good people could be manipulated and twisted by the horrible ones.

I couldn't trust anyone to have my back. Not really.

I jumped in my car and drove back home, my rage burning hot and mean.



I slammed the front door behind me and stalked through the house until I found Olivia. She was playing outside in the backyard with Catie.

“Olivia. Inside. I need to talk to you.”

“One second,” Olivia called. “Let me finish this up...”

“Now,” I barked.

Her eyes widened.

Olivia patted Catie on the shoulder and gave her some instructions, then followed me into the house.

“Declan, what’s wrong—”

“How long have you known Seamus was Catie’s dad?” I demanded.

She flinched. “Five days.”

I hadn’t realized how badly I wanted her to say *What are you talking about? Seamus is obviously lying* until she spoke.

“I was going to tell you,” Olivia rushed to explain. She reached for my arm, but I yanked it out of her grasp and stepped back.

She swallowed and tried again. “I thought if you could see him as a person, instead of just an O’Rourke, then you wouldn’t react like this. You could see the good side.”

“What *good* side?” I demanded.

“Catie could get to know her father. And maybe you...” She bit her lip.

“What? Spit it out,” I demanded.

“You could participate fully in this town, in your community, without feeling like you have to block yourself off from everything in order to avoid the O’Rourkes all the time,” Olivia said. “I don’t want you to go back to being alone in this big, empty house when I leave.”

The reminder that she was leaving felt like whiskey poured on an open wound. It killed any last instinct I had toward tenderness.

“You’ll never understand me, Olivia. You’ll never understand what my family went through. And you’ll never understand I why I hate *them*.” I shook my head. “And if you don’t get it, I can’t trust you.”

“I understand more than you think.”

“You didn’t even understand how to turn on the fucking *shower* until I told you.” I turned away from Olivia because I couldn’t stand to look at her right now and stared out the window to where Catie played peacefully in my garden. When I spoke again, my voice was deadly quiet. “How can you understand what it’s like to grow up mere kilometers from the man who slaughtered your father? With everyone around you bowing and scraping

toward him, because even after he *kills someone*, they don't dare stand up to him?"

At first Olivia didn't say anything. Then she spoke, her voice was shaky. "You didn't tell me how to work the shower. @DBCoder did."

Her words sent a bucket of ice water down my back.

I turned to face her, not sure what I was going to say, if I could still explain it away.

But she saw the truth written all over my face. "You're him. You're @DBCoder."

I couldn't lie to her. Not like this.

"I am," I said.

She backed up, getting as far away from me as she possibly could.

I took half a step toward her, my hand outstretched toward her. "Olivia, please, don't be scared—"

"I'm not scared," Olivia said. Her cheeks were flushed. "I'm fucking *furious*."

I could feel the foundation of our relationship crumbling. But I didn't know what to do to stop it. I didn't know if I *wanted* to stop it, after what she'd done to me.

"How long have you known?" Olivia demanded.

So I told her.

OLIVIA

Declan shoved an impatient hand through his hair. “I figured it out about a week ago, when you told me what your book with Molly was about. I realized it was the same as the one @1000words—you—were writing.”

I wrapped my arms around myself, trying to hold my world together. “You mean right after we had sex for the first time.”

At least Declan had the grace not to defend himself.

But I *needed* him to defend himself. I needed a reason to keep believing in him—believing in us—because right now I was coming up short.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” My voice came out jagged and sharp.

“I started to, but you kept saying that having someone you knew in real life find your blog would make you uncomfortable, and you got more and more upset the longer we talked.” He opened and closed his hand in a helpless, aborted gesture. “The last thing I wanted was to make you uncomfortable. You have to believe that, *a ghrá*.”

The endearment sliced my anger, leaving my heart bloody and exposed. I’d *trusted* him.

I’d complained about my boss *to my boss*. I’d vented about my lover *to my lover*. I’d talked about my blog *to the man who built Snug*.

Now that I thought about it, every time I’d complained to @DBCoder about some glitch or bug on Snug, it had been magically fixed within a couple of

days.

“Is this some weird quality control thing?” I asked, trying to make sense of things. “You befriend Snug bloggers anonymously to do some sick form of customer research?”

“No,” Declan said, taking a step toward me. “I have an anonymous account so that I can enjoy the site as a regular person without anyone trying to impress me, or get funding, or bitch at me. And yes, using the site as a regular person gives me insight into how to improve it. But that’s not *why* I do it.”

“And you just, what, stumbled across my little book blog? Out of all the *way* more popular blogs on Snug?” I felt a sick sort of laughter building in my chest. Rationally, I knew it was probably nothing more than coincidence. After all, I’d been chatting regularly with @DBCoder long before I’d actually come into Declan’s life. But it felt like the universe was mocking me.

“I told you how I found your blog. I was searching for books to send Catie.”

I remembered his first message, all those months ago. *Hi, love the blog. Just wanted to say I bought “Brown Bear, Brown Bear What Do You See?” for my niece, and she loved it. Got any other recommendations for a little girl that’s into bugs?*

I felt like I was looking at our past on a split screen. On the one side, all of my memories of striking up a friendship with a charming stranger on the internet. On the other side, Declan alone in this empty mansion, clicking through my reviews, looking for books to send Catie. Declan, one of the most powerful men in the tech universe, sending funny cat videos to cheer me up on a bad day. Declan’s online persona coaxing me through those first few bad days in Ireland, even as his real-life self made my life hellish.

Declan, asking me for advice because he liked a woman who worked for him.

I scrubbed my hands over my face. “This is too confusing.”

“Which is why I didn’t tell you,” Declan said. He closed the gap between us and gripped my shoulders. “Would it really have been better for me to dump all this on you when you were naked and vulnerable and falling asleep in my bed for the first time?”

No, I thought. Yes. Maybe.

I shoved myself out of his grasp. “That wasn’t your decision to make. I thought I could trust you, but now I don’t know if I can. I feel violated, Declan.”

“Now you know how I feel about you keeping everything Seamus said a secret,” he snapped.

“Oh, that is *not* the same thing.” I jabbed a finger in his chest. “I was trying to protect you. You were trying to manipulate me.”

“Damn it, I wasn’t trying to manipulate you. I was trying to control the situation.”

Angry tears snagged in my throat as I realized an uncomfortable truth.

Declan Byrne was always going to try to control every situation he was in. It was what made him formidable in business. It was what made him a rock his family could lean on. And yes, it was part of what made him so magnetic, so devastatingly hot.

But it also meant that he and I could never really meet as equals in a relationship. I couldn’t trust him not to try to control everything about our situation—including how much of myself I gave to him.

He couldn’t help it. It was how he was built.

I refused to let myself cry, so instead I placed my hands on his chest and shoved.

He didn’t move an inch.

“Damn you, Declan Byrne,” I swore.

“Stop fighting!” Catie cried from the doorway. Panic made her voice rise and break. “Stop fighting right now!”

Declan and I sprang apart. We exchanged a guilty glance before we both shifted into problem-solving mode.

Declan sank to his knees in front of Catie. “It’s all right, love. Sometimes adults fight. But we still respect and care about each other.”

Do we? I thought peevishly, even though I knew he was right. I pulled a few tissues from the tissue box and joined Declan on the ground so I could wipe at Catie's welling tears.

"He's right, hon. Everything's okay."

"B-but the last time you fought he, he fired you and you *left*," Catie said, stumbling over her words in her distress.

Declan grimaced. "That was pretty shit of me, wasn't it?"

"You said a bad word," Catie said, wide-eyed.

"Well, I did a bad thing," Declan said. He met my eyes, and some sort of apology passed between us.

"I did too," I said. "That time, I walked away, instead of taking some calming breaths and getting more information about the situation."

Catie chewed her lip.

"I know it can feel scary when adults fight." I tucked a piece of Catie's hair behind her ear. "But sometimes adult fights are just about us saying difficult, scary things, so that we can get on the same page again. So in a way, this fight was a good thing."

Declan cocked an eyebrow at that, as if to say, *Aren't you laying it on a bit too thick?*

I sent him back a pointed look, trying to communicate, *She's crying and she's six. There's no such thing as too much reassurance.*

Declan cleared his throat and tugged Catie in for a gentle hug. "The point is, I'm not firing Miss Olivia, and she's not leaving. She's staying with us until your Mom comes to pick you up. I promise."

Catie hugged him back tightly. She turned her head to look at me. "What were you guys fighting over?"

Shit.

"Um. Well. You know the saying, 'Secrets, secrets are no fun, keeping secrets hurts someone?'" I said. "Well, we forgot that advice and kept some

secrets, and we accidentally hurt each other. But now we told each other the secrets, so it's going to be okay."

It sounded so simple when I said it like that.

The problem was, I didn't know what "okay" would look like for us going forward. Could we get past this as a couple? As friends? Or would we fall back into being polite and professional strangers living in the same house, the way we had in the beginning?

My heart ached at the thought.

"What were the secrets?" Catie asked, curious.

"Hey, I have an idea!" Declan interrupted with phony cheer. "Let's call your grandma and see if she wants to come over for dinner."

Ten minutes later, Catie was sitting in the other room, chattering away happily with her grandma.

Declan returned to the kitchen somewhat sheepishly, his hands in his pockets.

"I know you prefer telling the kids the truth, but the thing about Seamus..." He trailed off, keeping his voice low and quiet.

I nodded. I personally thought Catie should know about her biological dad. But that wasn't my decision to make, and blurting it out in the middle of Declan's kitchen while Catie's mom was an ocean away seemed like a mildly traumatizing way to handle the situation.

Maybe Declan was rubbing off on me.

Or maybe he was used to living with darker secrets than I was.

"I am sorry," I said softly. "For not being open with you. I didn't mean to hurt you."

"I didn't mean to hurt you either," he said. "Trust me, that was the last thing I wanted." It wasn't exactly an apology, but his voice was broken enough that I knew how badly he meant those words.

"Going forward we can..." I said at the same time he said, "Maybe we should..."

We laughed weakly. But it was something. “Go ahead,” I said. “What were you going to say?”

Declan closed his eyes briefly, like even he didn’t like what he was about to say. “Maybe we should take a break from...from being anything more than two people working together to care for a child. Maybe we should focus on looking after Catie and figuring out what we both want going forward.”

I felt like he’d knocked the wind out of me. I eased backward, gripping the counter for support.

“I promised you something light and fun. Not...this mess,” he said.

I wanted to say that this mess had been inevitable the moment I started falling for him. I wanted to say that a “break” wouldn’t fix what was wrong with us. Either we trusted each other, or we didn’t. Either we wanted the same things, or we didn’t.

If I were braver, more honest, I would have told him that even with the tangled emotional mess between us, and all the pain we’d caused each other, he was still the best thing I’d ever had. I would tell him to walk with me, not away from me.

If I were kinder, I would have told him we should just end it now. There was no future for us here. Even if we managed to patch things up between us for the time being, we would just be delaying the inevitable. We were just too different...I wanted to look forward, to shine a light on what might lie ahead, but Declan was too guarded, too consumed by the shadows of his past. In the end, we would just hurt each other.

As hard as it was to accept, even if this felt right, it wasn’t necessarily right. For God’s sake, this was the second time Catie had caught us arguing, and that wasn’t something I wanted to happen for a third time. Better to make a clean break now—or as clean of a break as we could make, with my heart beating raw on the floor between us.

Instead, I was selfish enough to want more time with him, and cowardly enough to want to protect my heart. So I made myself say, “Sure. Maybe a step back is for the best.”

Was it my imagination, or did he look disappointed?

If he did, he covered it up quickly. "It's my fault," he said. "I let it get too intense, too quickly. For both of us."

My heart leapt. It had been intense for him too?

Declan looked away. "I should go talk to my mum and Catie." He turned and left.

Hope, I decided, was a painful, foolish thing.

OLIVIA

An unexpected benefit of Declan's mom coming for dinner was that she invited Catie to spend the next day with her. She also kept the conversation afloat, while Declan brooded into his whiskey, and I radiated false cheer and ate too much ice cream.

Honestly, bless Marie.

The next morning, I decided to do the responsible thing and use my unexpected free time to start sending in my resume for upcoming nanny jobs on the Sunny Days Childcare site. After Declan told them I'd passed my trial period with flying colors and he wanted to keep me on through the end of his contract, Sunny Days HR had green lit me to begin applying for future jobs again.

I'd put off actually logging on and looking for other jobs partly because I'd been busy, and partly because I didn't want to think about my time with Catie and Declan coming to an end. But yesterday had reminded me that I couldn't afford to be too sentimental. As much as I might feel like I was part of the family for the time being, at the end of the day, this was a job, and I was just passing through their lives. Staying wasn't an option, not after all that had happened, so I needed to start figuring out where I was going to go next.

I made myself a cup of tea. Then I returned to my bedroom, where I pulled on Declan's sweatshirt to ward off the early morning chill, then popped open my laptop.

I scrolled through the job openings. There was a Chicago family whose nanny requirements screamed “high maintenance.” A scatterbrained Hollywood actress who lived on a Montana ranch in between films, and needed a nanny for her new stepchildren. That sounded promising, until I checked the ages, and realized the stepchildren were seventeen and eighteen.

No thank you, I thought. I’d nannied younger teens before, but at that age, they’d resent the insult to their independence. And they’d be right.

I kept scrolling. There was a fairly normal sounding family that would be vacationing in Faribault-Northfield for a few weeks in late August and wanted a nanny so the parents could enjoy a little alone time while they were there. Normally, I avoided jobs that short, but the idea of getting to stay close to home for a few weeks enjoying a low-stakes job sounded like just what the doctor ordered.

I polished up my profile and started to type up an introductory message to the couple.

A knock sounded on the door.

I jumped, nearly spilling my tea.

It was Declan. It had to be. My stomach twisted.

“Come in,” I called.

He did, slouching against the doorframe. His dark T-shirt pulled tight across his chest. I knew from experience that those shirts were incredibly soft, almost as pleasing to the touch as the skin beneath it. A small, weak part of me wanted to go to him and bury my face in his chest.

How messed up was it that he was the one who’d hurt me, and he was also the only person I wanted to go to for comfort?

Maybe that’s not messed up, an old voice whispered. *Maybe that’s how it’s supposed to be.*

The voice sounded a lot like my mom’s, I realized.

I brushed off the thought, unsettled.

Declan cracked a crooked smile. “Glad to see you’re not taking a break from stealing my clothes.”

I flushed. “Do you want it back?”

The wicked spark in his eyes dimmed. “Keep it,” he said gruffly. “You can take it back to the States for all I care.”

I swallowed. “Did you want something?”

“Right.” He straightened. “Are you still up for going to Prague with me? Catie still wants to go, but if you’d rather not, since we’re... If you’d rather not go, I’ll explain to her that my plans changed.”

I blinked. I’d forgotten the trip to Prague was tomorrow. “She’ll be disappointed,” I said.

“She’ll get over it. I’ll take her somewhere better after you leave.” He studied my face. “I don’t mind being the bad guy, if you need to be here.”

If you need to be away from me. That was what he wasn’t saying.

Frustrated tenderness welled up in me. Declan was being so *him*. Willing to rearrange his plans and bear the brunt of Catie’s disappointment if that was what I needed.

Damn the man.

“What about you?” I asked. “Would it be easier to focus on your work if I wasn’t there?”

He laughed, not unkindly. “A *ghrá*, I’ve never had trouble focusing on business, and I never will. I’m not built like that.”

I felt a rush of sadness at his words. Maybe that was our problem. He could always put me out of his mind when he needed to, and I never seemed to be able to put him out of mine.

“I’ll go,” I decided. “I don’t want to disappoint Catie. When’s the next time I’ll get to go to Prague?”

Declan picked up a knickknack off my bedside table and began inspecting the grumpy frog statue with an air of studied casualness. “You could stay in

Europe for a bit after your job here ends. Buy a Euro Rail pass, do the backpacking thing.”

Something in my chest tightened. It was the closest Declan had come to asking me to stay in Ireland after my work with him ended. And I had a feeling it was the closest he was going to get.

I gestured to my laptop. “I’ll probably have to get back. Most of the nannying jobs I’m applying to would start fairly soon after this one ends.”

Declan’s hand tightened on the ceramic frog. “You’re already looking for other jobs?”

“Declan,” I said, helpless. Why did he have to make everything so much harder than it had ever been before? Why did he have to make me wish I was the kind of person who stayed?

But I wasn’t. I was a fairy-godmother/nanny. I blew in to people’s lives, carried them through a rough patch, and then flew on to the next job when they didn’t need me anymore.

Declan sat the frog down with more force than was necessary. “So you’re not going to do the sponsorship, then. Become a professional blogger.”

I inhaled sharply. This was the first time since yesterday’s fight that he’d referenced something we’d talked about as @1000words and @DBCoder.

Something uncomfortable occurred to me. “Did you get me that sponsorship offer after you found out who I was?”

He clenched his jaw. “So what if I did? You’re better than half the professional bloggers on that site.”

His high regard warmed me as much as his high-handedness made me want to bang my head against my desk. “Declan, I don’t want to get professional opportunities because I’m *sleeping* with you.”

“You’re not sleeping with me now,” he pointed out dryly.

I made an inarticulate groan that sounded something like *ARGH* and buried my head in my hands. “Why are you so impossible?”

And he *was* impossible. Everything about him—about us—was impossible.

“Hey.” Declan’s voice gentled. He drew closer and knelt in front of where I sat. His hands were big and warm as he coaxed mine from my face, so that he could meet my eyes. “It wasn’t like what you’re thinking. When any of the Snug employees see a high-quality blog that could be a good fit for sponsored content, we send it over to the team that handles corporate partnerships and advertising. That’s all I did. And your blog was so great, they found a potential sponsor in less than a week.”

Oh. That wasn’t so bad.

Then I ran that timeline through my head and narrowed my eyes at Declan. “If it didn’t have anything to do with us sleeping together, why didn’t you recommend my blog to your sponsorship team before you knew who I really was?”

He looked down at our joined hands, his curled protectively around mine. “Is it horrible to admit I’m a selfish bastard who didn’t feel like sharing you with the world?”

Something warm bloomed in my stomach.

It took everything in me not to lean forward and kiss his mouth so I could taste the flawed, perfect words coming out of them.

Abruptly he dropped my hands and stood. He turned on his heel and headed to the door. When he looked back over his shoulder, any trace of greedy tenderness was gone, hidden behind an impassive mask.

“We leave from Dublin at half past ten tomorrow. So make sure you and Catie are completely packed tonight. We’ll leave early in the morning.”

And then he was gone.

I stared after him, wrestling with my emotions.

Then I turned back to my laptop and resumed planning for a future without Declan in it.



I probably would have appreciated the glamor of a private plane more if I wasn't half-asleep and unsure of where I stood with Declan. Ever since he'd walked out of my room yesterday, he'd maintained an air of cool, stoic distance. He was his normal warm self with Catie, but with me, he was back to being the curt, powerful man he'd been when we first met.

Normally, I would have dealt with his cooling temper by dialing up the sunshine wattage of my own personality, but I'd woken up at the crack of dawn to coax a grumpy six-year-old out of bed and sunshine just didn't feel like it was in my repertoire today.

We all buckled in as the flight attendant ran through the safety information and the lavish in-flight menu with equal amounts of detail.

Declan barely listened, already scrolling through work emails on his phone.

"Can I have *two* chocolate cookies, Uncle Declan?" Catie asked.

"You can have whatever you wa— I mean, that's a lot of sugar," he corrected himself, finally looking up from his phone. He glanced first at Catie, then at me.

"How about one cookie?" I suggested. "But we have to wait until the plane takes off."

Catie wrinkled her nose at that, but was quickly distracted when the plane took off down the runway, gaining speed. The force pressed us back into our seats, and Catie grinned wildly.

"I *love* this part," she said. When the plane left the ground, and the friction of the runway evaporated, she spread her arms wide, palms down, like she was the plane. "We're *flying*," she said, awestruck.

Declan and I shared a smile, delighted by this kid who temporarily linked us. His smile was wide and unencumbered, and I felt something inside me relax in response.

I'd missed that smile.

"This one isn't the same plane as the one we took before, when we flew to your house," Catie asked, looking around confused. "That one had red seats.

And different cookies. There were no chocolate ones.”

That surprised a laugh out of me. She was right. Did the man actually have two private planes? And if he did, why had he been flying coach when we met?

“It’s not my personal plane, it’s the company’s,” Declan explained. “And some other executives were already using it when your mom called and asked me to come pick you up. So I flew coach to get to you and your mom as quickly as possible, and then I rented a different one for us all to go home. I’m sorry if their cookies weren’t up to snuff.”

“If you waited until the company people were done, we could have used this plane,” Catie said thoughtfully. “It’s important to take turns, Uncle Declan.”

“I didn’t want to wait,” Declan said. I thought of that first day I’d met him on the plane. I’d written him off as a hot antisocial grump. But now I realized he must have been jet-lagged and wrecked with worry over Sinead. He’d just found out his sister was struggling with alcoholism, and I’d been whining to him about losing a *job*.

No wonder he hadn’t wanted to talk to me.

“Besides,” Declan shot me a wink, startling me out of my thoughts. “You get better nanny recommendations flying coach.”

I laughed. Maybe this trip wouldn’t be so bad. Maybe we’d moved past the most painful parts of being “on a break” and could shift into something more comfortable. Something like friendship.

Maybe.



Once we arrived at the hotel, we split up for the day. Catie took a nap, and Declan met up with a British billionaire he knew named Grayson Frost. Apparently, the man lived in New York and was focused on expanding his business into the tech world. I couldn’t quite tell from the way Declan talked about him whether the man was a friend or a rival.

Maybe, in Declan's world, it was the same thing.

After Catie woke up from her nap, she decided she wanted to go for a swim in the hotel's ritzy pool. I pointed out that Declan had a pool at home, and there was a whole city outside to explore. She pointed out that this pool had a waterfall and super fluffy bathrobes for when we were done swimming.

I couldn't argue with that logic, so we exhausted ourselves swimming. Then we went up to our hotel suite—three bedrooms, a sitting room, a business suite, and a gorgeous balcony—and ordered room service on Declan's credit card.

When Declan finally got back to the hotel after his night out with Grayson, Catie and I were eating strudel and watching a Czech movie, making up our own dialogue since we had no idea what the characters were saying.

Declan leaned on the wall and watched us with a fond look in his eyes. But when he caught me watching him, he straightened and retreated to the business suite. He didn't come out again until it was time for him to read Catie her bedtime story.

I stacked our dirty dishes on a tray and listened to Declan's soft baritone drifting out from the other room as he read to Catie. I enjoyed that sound more than I wanted to admit.

When he finished reading the book, I scurried out into the hallway to drop off the tray so housekeeping could pick it up. The door swung closed behind me.

I huffed, realizing I'd been locked out.

I knocked on the door softly, careful not to wake Catie. She normally drifted off toward the end of Declan's last book of the night.

When no one came to the door I knocked a little harder.

This was going to be so embarrassing if I had to go down to the check-in desk and ask for help. At least I was pretty sure how to say *stupid American* in Czech. The phrase had come up several times in the movie Catie and I were watching.

I was about to give up, when Declan opened the door. "What are you doing

out there?” he asked, a smile lurking in the corner of his lips.

“I got locked out,” I explained. “My keycard is inside.”

“You should keep it in your pocket,” Declan said, stepping back to let me into our rooms.

I gestured to my camisole and pajama shorts. “What pockets?”

His eyes darkened as he took in my relative lack of clothing.

A delicious thread of anticipation stretched between us.

Stop, I told myself firmly. *There’s nothing to anticipate.*

I tried to step away from Declan and bashed into an overstuffed armchair. Declan caught my hips to keep me from tumbling backward.

“Thank you,” I said. The words came out breathier than I intended.

His hands spread on my hips. “I’m done with work for the night. We could have a glass of wine on the balcony. Or play the X-rated version of that movie game you were playing with Catie.”

Everything in me wanted to say yes. Which was why I knew I had to say no.

That thread of anticipation tangled into something complicated and agonizing.

I stepped out of his grasp, careful to avoid inconveniently placed furniture. “That does sound fun. But I think it’s probably best if we avoid old habits, right?”

Declan didn’t answer me. He just looked at me, his eyes dark and hungry.

Why did he have to *look* at me? I felt my resolve beginning to crumble.

“We both have full days tomorrow,” I babbled. “I’m going to turn in for the night.”

I grabbed for the closest doorknob I found, grateful when it did indeed turn out to be my room. I shut the door behind me and leaned on it. I closed my eyes and blew out a long sigh.

This *taking a break* stuff wasn't for wimps.

DECLAN

“Mr. Byrne. It’s a pleasure to meet you in person.” The middle-aged white man in front of me was short and balding, but his smile was genuine and his handshake was enthusiastic.

“Mr. Ludvik Klima. I presume?” I asked. Ludvik was the CEO of Orel, the video streaming start-up Anil and I were considering acquiring. I appreciated the fact that he’d come down to the building lobby to meet me in person. Many CEOs would have sent an underling to meet me, to emphasize their own power. But Ludvik clearly preferred a more human touch.

It was a smart move. Orel wasn’t a big enough company to pull off “powerful.” But if they’d built a positive, functional workplace culture, one that could retain their best employees over the long run? That counted for something, at least with me.

Olivia would like him, I thought. I shoved the thought out of my head.

“Please, call me Ludvik,” he said. “We look forward to discussing the benefits of Snug acquiring our company. Although, between the two of us, there have been other offers.”

I knew that. Grayson had said as much last night over dinner. The little Czech video streaming start-up had caught the eye of important people in the tech and investing world. But I wasn’t about to let the pull of competition sway my decision.

“I look forward to meeting your team,” I said. “I have some questions about

your second-quarter growth records from last year.”

“Absolutely, absolutely.” Ludvik ushered me into the elevator and up to his company offices.

Over the next few hours, I met with every important person at Orel, and some of the unimportant people too. Everyone was cheerful and kind. Parts of their coding were genuinely ingenious. But I couldn’t ignore the fact that their recordkeeping was a mess, along with some of their company protocols.

You could get away with a certain level of sloppiness as a start-up. But not at a global company like Snug. Integrating Orel into Snug would be a challenge, to put it mildly.

Normally I thrived on meetings like this. Anil specialized in charming potential partners, but I was the one who came in, asked uncomfortable questions, and poked around until we knew whether it was a sound investment.

But this time I found my mind wandering.

It didn’t help that I’d tossed and turned restlessly all night, tortured by images of Olivia on the other side of that wall, in her skimpy camisole. Sometime after midnight I’d given up and stroked my cock, desperate for some goddamn relief, however brief.

I hadn’t been this horny since I was a fucking teenager.

I returned my focus to the meeting, where Ludvik’s CFO was explaining the type of funding they’d require to expand their capabilities to the level they’d need if Snug implemented their tech on our app.

My phone buzzed in my pocket. I discretely checked it under the conference room table.

Catie’s face beamed up at me from the screen. She was standing in front of an ornate old clock that took up two floors of an old stone building.

Catie wanted you to see the Astronomical Clock. Next up, we’re catching a puppet show at the National Marionette Theatre.

I grinned, imagining how much Catie and Olivia would both like that. I

wished I could see their faces as they explored this beautiful city for the first time.

“Mr. Byrne? Does that answer your question?” the CFO asked.

I snapped my gaze up to find everyone staring at me. “It does, thank you,” I bluffed. “Send me those numbers so I can share them with my team, would you?” *And so I can figure out what I missed while I was thinking about Olivia.*

The presentation continued.

I should have put my phone on *do not disturb* after that. These people deserved my full attention. And I owed it to Snug to be at my best.

Instead, I kept my phone at hand, guiltily checking it every time Olivia sent me a photo of her and Catie touring a castle, or eating at a farmers’ market, or wandering through a park. She even sent one of Catie standing in front of what looked like a mural dedicated to John Lennon and the Beatles.

You don’t want to know what we’re spending on taxis, Olivia wrote. But we’re having a blast. Wish you were here.

An ache I couldn’t identify twisted in my chest.

I loved business meetings like this. But for the first time, I found myself wishing I was somewhere else.

When we broke for lunch, Ludvik led me through the streets to a nearby bistro. “I think perhaps there is someone very important on the other end of your phone, yes?”

I started. I thought I’d been more subtle than that.

But Ludvik didn’t seem insulted. Only a little mischievous at having caught me off my game. I could see why his employees liked him.

“My niece,” I said. “She’s touring Prague today. The updates I’ve been getting are pictures of the places she’s seeing.”

“Ah! I’m glad she is enjoying our fine city,” Ludvik said. “Does she have a tour guide?”

“She’s with my girlfriend,” I said, without thinking. It wasn’t until the words were out of my mouth that I realized how right they sounded. Olivia and I might have been a mess. We might have been on a break. But she was *mine*, all the same.

Some of what I was feeling must have shown in my face, because Ludvik was watching me with a speculative look in his eye. “I sense some complication in this relationship?”

I grunted.

He clapped me on the back. “I will make a reservation for you and your family at the best restaurant in the city. Your woman will love it.”

I didn’t think a restaurant reservation would fix what was wrong between me and Olivia. But I thanked Ludvik. Then I turned the conversation back to business, doing my best not to think of her.



Olivia did indeed love the restaurant Ludvik suggested. At least she loved the photos she found of it online. It was a quaint little hole-in-the-wall in the Lesser Quarter, with checked tablecloths, candles on every table, and, if the reviews were to be believed, amazing food. So when I wrapped up my last meeting of the day at Orel, I returned to the hotel to meet up with Olivia and Catie so we could head there together.

“Ready to go, girls?” I called, stepping into the sitting room area.

Catie was sprawled on the couch in her favorite dress, flipping through a picture book. “Miss Olivia’s zipper is stuck. I got a book about puppets at the museum.”

“That sounds fun,” I said. I knocked on Olivia’s partially open door. “I hear you could use some help.”

Olivia opened the door, flushed from struggling with the zipper on a vibrant green dress. It was a lightweight fabric that clung to her torso and hips and flared out around her thighs. It looked classic and glamorous and made her red hair shine like gorgeous fire. I tamped down a fantasy of tipping Olivia

back onto her bed and rescuing her from all of that pretty green fabric.

“I swear it zipped this afternoon in the changing room,” she said.

“You bought yourself a dress?” I hoped she’d put it on my credit card. She deserved to spoil herself.

“It’s a celebration dress,” she said. “I got good news today.”

“Oh?” I said.

Was it the kind of good news that would give us more time to figure out what we were, or the kind that would pull her away from me faster?

“I’ll tell you at dinner,” Olivia said. She turned to give me her bare back. The zipper was stuck about an inch below her waist. “Can you zip me up?”

She wasn’t wearing a bra, and that realization went straight to my cock.

I took hold of the delicate zipper and pinched the fabric. My knuckles brushed the warm, soft skin of her back. Olivia inhaled sharply.

I struggled to remember why I’d thought a break was such a good idea. It was physically painful to ease the zipper up, hiding all that deliciously bare skin from view.

“Done?” Olivia asked. Her voice was breathy.

“Done,” I said. My own voice was embarrassingly raspy. You’d think I’d never seen a woman’s back before.

Olivia slipped on her heels, and we headed out to the restaurant.

The reviews were right. The food was amazing. And the waiter was even able to suggest something a picky American six-year-old loved. The only possible criticism was that the place was so small, Olivia ended up all but pressed into my side as we ate—but I certainly wasn’t complaining about that.

“So what’s this good news?” I asked, needing a distraction to keep me from jumping her.

Olivia beamed. “I got word from Molly today. Her publishing friend liked our book proposal. And they had something go wrong with one of their other

book projects, so now they have a hole in their schedule. It's a tiny local press, so we won't make much money, and hardly anyone will read it, but—"

"Wait. You got a book deal?" I asked. "You're going to be a published author?"

Olivia bit her lip and nodded. She might be downplaying her accomplishment verbally, but her face was glowing.

"I'm so fucking proud of you," I said.

"Bad word," Olivia and Catie said in unison.

I rolled my eyes, and Olivia laughed.

I watched the line of her throat, the brightness of her smile. I wanted to kiss her so bad. I thought I'd been starving for her before we'd hooked up. But *knowing* her mouth was a goddamn miracle, and not being able to taste it was...

Olivia met my eyes, and her laughter died out. She must have seen the hunger in my eyes because her own darkened.

"Are you going to *acquire* the video company you came here to see, Uncle Declan?" Catie asked. She said *acquire* like it was a foreign word she was very proud of herself for learning.

I turned to her, grateful for the distraction. "I'm not sure yet. If you could pick any company to buy, which one would you want to run?" I asked.

"The zoo," Catie answered immediately. "Obviously."

"Which one?" I asked.

"All of them," she said.

After that, Olivia and I kept the conversation mostly focused on Catie. Olivia was probably doing it because she was a good nanny who loved children. I was doing it mostly out of self-preservation.

I studiously kept my mind away from Olivia in that green dress—and what she wasn't wearing beneath it.

After dinner, we wandered a bit through the historic neighborhood admiring the dignified old buildings. But Catie had had a long day, and I quickly ended up carrying her. Olivia hailed a cab like a pro, and we headed back toward the hotel.

Catie was out like a light by the time the cab reached its destination. I carried her up to her bed. Olivia carefully peeled off Catie's shoes and tucked her under the covers.

"You're going to be a good mom someday," I whispered, without thinking.

Something wistful flashed across her face. "Maybe." She kissed Catie on the forehead. "My current career doesn't lend itself to meeting anyone I could start a family with."

You met me, I wanted to say, but I stopped myself just in time.

Was I actually considering suggesting I was someone she could plan a future around? Because that was bullshit. I didn't do relationships. I didn't even fall in love, not the way Anil and Thomas and most of my other friends did.

We finished tucking Catie in and retreated to the sitting room.

Olivia and I stared at each other awkwardly. Without the buffer of Catie between us, the sexual tension crackled dangerously between us.

"Well. Good night," I said abruptly.

"Wait. Could you...?" She turned around and gestured to the back of her dress.

I steeled myself to wrestle with temptation. But this time the zipper was easy, sliding down to the sweet curve of her ass in one fell swoop.

For a moment we stood motionless, the only sound in the room our ragged breathing. Then Olivia muttered a thank you and retreated to her room, shutting the door firmly in my face.

I poured myself a glass of whiskey from the minibar and headed out to the balcony. The evening breeze was cool, but it did nothing to cool the heat in my blood.

I stared out at the city surrounding me, an uneven mix of modern and ancient. Architectural purists might have called the juxtaposition messy. But there was something real and wonderful in that mess.

And Olivia could have been out here sharing this moment with me, if I hadn't suggested that damn break.

"I'm such a fucking eejit," I muttered.

Yes, I wanted Olivia to understand me, and that meant I wanted her to understand I was absolutely right to hate and distrust the O'Rourkes. But did that truly have to come between us? She was the only woman who'd ever turned me inside out like this, and I had less than a month left with her.

Was I really going to spend it brooding alone on a cold balcony, when I could be in a warm bed with Olivia, driving us both mad with pleasure?

"Fuck that," I said decisively. I tossed the rest of my whiskey back.

And then I went to go seduce my woman.

OLIVIA

I rolled over for the millionth time, trying in vain to find sleep. I should be nothing but happy. Declan and I had found a way to shift into something like friendship with each other. My time with Catie was a resounding success. Prague was amazing. And I was about to become a published author.

Instead, all I felt was this gnawing emptiness. I was so aware of my body. Almost as aware as I was of Declan's body, probably slumbering soundly on the other side of the wall.

Someone knocked on my door.

I sat up, clutching the blankets to my chest. I'd tossed my dress on the chair in the corner, and crawled into bed in nothing but my panties.

"Olivia," Declan called softly through the door.

God, I loved the way he said my name.

"I need you," he said, his voice low and rich.

I shivered, then scolded myself. He didn't mean he needed me like *that*. He probably meant it in a professional way. In a friendly way.

"I'm coming." I scrambled out of bed and pulled a camisole on. Then I wrapped myself in one of the hotel's bathrobes.

I opened up the door and tilted my head up to look at him. His eyes were dark, and he was looking at me the way he had for a few heated moments at

dinner.

He was looking at me the way he did when he was pounding into me, claiming me as his.

I swallowed, my mouth dry. “Declan, what do you need—”

He cut me off with a kiss. His mouth was like water in the desert, and I breathed him in, so damn grateful it hurt. He tasted like coming home, and dangerous decisions, and *him*.

I broke away. “Declan. We can’t.”

But we can, I thought. We must.

He followed me into my room and closed the door behind him. That closed door felt like a delicious promise I wasn’t strong enough to resist.

But I tried. “You wanted a break.”

“I was an arse.” Declan closed the distance between us, cradling my face in one of his hands. The warmth of his skin seeped into mine, gentle tendrils of fire finding their way deep into my core. “I don’t need us to agree on everything. I don’t need to know where this is going. I just need to touch you.”

I needed to touch him too. I pressed my palms to his chest, telling myself I’d shove him away any second now. But I knew that was a lie. Resistance was futile.

“Why waste what time we have left?” he asked. His lips found my temple, then the spot behind my ear, then the sensitive curve of my neck.

My breath skittered, and I clutched at his shirt. My fingers twitched as I felt the buttons against my knuckles, the urge to feel his naked chest under my palms threatening to overwhelm me. “Declan, we have real disagreements. We see the world differently. We can’t pretend that doesn’t matter just because we miss the sex.”

“Of course, we can,” he said and laughed into my neck. He palmed my ass, bringing me to my toes and pressing me against his hardness. And dear God...he was so damn hard. “It was fucking good sex.”

The words were crude and so was his touch. It made me feel bold, wicked, wanted. And that was it—I abandoned any pretense of resistance and surrendered to him. I closed my eyes, the thrumming of my heart like that of a war drum, and melted into him. My lips found his, and I kissed him back, losing myself in his scent, his touch, his taste. This time he was the one to break the kiss, but it was only to guide me backward onto the bed.

“We shouldn’t,” I said, even as I wound my hands in his soft hair, and shivered against the rough prick of stubble on his jaw. “We said we wouldn’t.”

“Just kissing, then,” Declan said and, even though I knew that was the mother of all lies, I let him guide me back onto the bed. The mattress shifted under our weight as he crawled over me, his hand shaking as he tugged at the tie on my robe. “I could live on your kisses, Olivia.”

I shook my head, blushing. “You’re being ridiculous.”

“I am not.” He traced his hand reverently over the thin fabric of my camisole. My pulse pounded at his touch.

Muscle memory fused together with lust, and I started on the buttons of his shirt.

One more time, I told myself. I just need one more time.

Declan caught my wrists and pinned them above my head with one hand. “Don’t distract me, *a ghrá*. I haven’t had you for days. I intend to savor you.” He looked straight into my eyes and, even though I could have said a million different things, I said nothing. “And I intend to take my time.”

Jesus. Fucking. Christ.

How was a girl supposed to resist that?

I felt helpless, and turned on, and cared for, and...

His mouth found my breast, sucking me through the thin fabric of my camisole, and I lost the ability to think.

“I’ve missed you so damn much,” he murmured, his voice broken. “I miss spending time with you, and I miss hearing you laugh, and I miss you

storming into my office and ruining my concentration. Do you know what you do to me, Olivia?”

“It’s only been three days.” I gasped, arching helplessly under the onslaught of his mouth. His stubble, his lips, his tongue...my senses were overpowered, flooded with pleasure.

“I *know*,” he said, like he was mad about that. Like he intended to punish and worship me for it.

So I surrendered. I surrendered to his hands on my body, by turns hungry and gentle. I surrendered to his mouth, and his words, and this spell he was casting. He acted like I was special, the only woman in the world for him. And for those precious minutes, I let myself believe it.

“Delicious,” he murmured, his lips slowly making the hike down to my belly. “Every inch of you is...” He didn’t finish his sentence. Instead, he pressed his mouth against my underwear, the pressure of his touch nearly driving me mad. I arched my back and, on instinct, threaded my fingers on his hair.

For a moment there, I wasn’t even sure if I was breathing.

“Delicious,” he finally repeated, using nothing but his teeth to peel my panties off. He threw them to the corner and dove back in for me. At times gentle, at times rough, he did what he’d promised—he savored me, and he took his sweet time doing it.

I bit down on my bottom lip, trying not to moan, but it was impossible. Every stroke of his tongue, every deliberate movement of his fingers...it was all too good.

I felt electric—I felt *alive*.

“Declan...” I breathed out, his name rolling off from between my lips as if it weighed a ton. “Declan, I... I think I...”

“Don’t,” he said, his lips moving almost too tenderly against my aching body. “Don’t think.”

What else could I do but obey?

I closed my eyes and let a tidal wave of pleasure wash over me, my muscles

tensing and spasming in turns. With my heels digging into the mattress, I held tight to his hair and pressed myself against his mouth, momentarily losing all control.

“Yes,” Declan said once I’d collapsed. “Just like that.”

“We are...” I was so out of breath it was hard to speak. “We are not done.”

I forced myself up and rolled on top, taking control, so that I could kiss him as much as I needed. Declan let me. He was a man drugged with desire. Desire for *me*. Then again, it was mutual—had I ever needed anyone as much as I needed him?

I loved the way his hands tensed on my hips when I softly bit his bottom lip. I loved the smooth strength of his arms, his chest, his thighs. I loved the way he spanked me when I teased him a little too long, and threatened me with wonderful things if I didn’t let him inside me *now*.

I loved the way he groaned when I gripped his cock and brushed him against my entrance.

“Shit. Wait. Condom,” he gasped. “I didn’t bring...”

“I’m on birth control,” I said. “And I’m clean. You?”

He nodded, then kissed me, and we stopped talking after that.

The time for words had passed.

We joined, doing it as slowly as we could, and I could feel his heart thundering under the palm of my hand. We didn’t move for a long time, just savoring the closeness of our bodies, and then he was kissing me again. We were moving, our bodies rocking against each other, until I lost track of where my pleasure ended and his started.

What if he’s the only man in the world for me? The thought was dangerous, unthinkable, terribly vulnerable. But in that moment, it was true too, and I came hard and long, gasping for breath in my lover’s arms.



I woke gently in the morning, slowly becoming aware of the sound of Declan's steady breathing, and the weight of his arm on my waist. The early morning light played across his face, highlighting his dark lashes, his sharp nose, his tousled hair.

I bit my lip. Part of me felt like something important had changed. We'd made it past our first big fight as a couple—not that we were a couple, exactly. We were something more than a fling, but less than official boyfriend-girlfriend status. An affair, perhaps?

I smiled to myself. That sounded suitably European and glamorous.

But my smile died away quickly. His thirst for revenge still worried me. I knew the O'Rourkes had hurt him deeply, and I understood him wanting to protect his family and community against them. But that wasn't the same thing as actively hurting them. Revenge was appealing in theory. Unfortunately in reality, it always seemed to bring unintended consequences, usually to innocent bystanders—like Catie—who got hurt along the way.

Then there was my half of our fight. With the distance of a few days time, I could forgive him for not telling me he was @DBCoder. I had my own emotional baggage about my online world and my real world intersecting, and I'd projected those fears onto his actions in a way that wasn't fair to him. With my new perspective, I could see that he'd been trying to protect our relationship.

What worried me was that his version of “protecting our relationship” involved withholding information from me. If this was going to last, we needed to be able to communicate with each other.

But by definition, we *couldn't* last. Even if Declan was the relationship type—which he wasn't—I was going back to America in less than a month. The distance scared me, and the last thing I wanted was to be together but apart. Maybe I could stay here in Ireland. Maybe I could—

No, Olivia, don't play with fire, my inner voice chimed. *Don't break your own heart.*

“Stop it,” Declan mumbled sleepily.

“What?” I asked.

“You’re staring at me and overthinking everything. I can feel it.” He cracked one eye open and glared at me accusingly.

I couldn’t help it. I giggled.

He smiled and tugged me closer, tucking me under his chin. He sighed elaborately. “Go on. Tell me what you’re worried about, so I can convince you you’re wrong.”

Admitting there was a part of me that wanted our relationship to last felt far too personal, so instead I said, “Tell me about your handle. @DBCoder. Why’d you pick it? It’s a reference to that plane hijacker you like, right?”

“DB Cooper,” he confirmed. “Hijacked a plane in the 70s without hurting anyone, then parachuted away with a bag of stolen cash never to be seen again. I’ve always liked the idea of someone who broke the rules, got rich, and made a clean getaway.”

I wiggled my toes, liking the feel of our limbs tangled together in the soft hotel sheets. “You got what you wanted. You got rich. And you didn’t even have to hijack a plane.”

“Yeah.” He trailed his hand up and down my spine in a lazy path. “I used to envy the money the most. Now I envy the clean getaway.”

I rolled back far enough to see his face clearly. “What do you mean?”

“Nothing. Just... Running Snug comes with a lot of power, but it also comes with certain responsibilities. Sinead could run away to the States when she wanted to. And I...can’t.”

My heart skipped a beat. Was he saying what I thought he was saying?

“I never realized you wanted to live anywhere but Ireland,” I said carefully.

“I didn’t. I don’t. My mum’s there. My friends are there. Plus, if I leave, there will be no one to stop O’Rourke from bullying the whole bloody village.” He sat up and swung his legs over the bed, turning his back to me. “But...you know. The thought crossed my mind about a week ago. And as soon as it did, I realized it wasn’t an option.”

A week ago, I thought, feeling a little breathless. That was a little after we’d

started sleeping together.

Had Declan thought, even for a second, about moving to the US for me?

Declan stood and tugged on his pants. “The less interesting answer is that @DBCoder is just my initials plus my job.”

I blinked. He was right. *Declan Byrne, computer coder*. “When you say it like that, I feel stupid for not putting it together sooner.”

He laughed.

I reached for my robe. “Aren’t you going to ask me about my username?”

He looked up from buttoning his shirt. “@1000words? It’s a reference to that saying, ‘a picture’s worth a thousand words’ because you review children’s picture books. Right?”

“Right.” I wrinkled my nose. “I guess I’m not particularly mysterious.”

His smile was crooked. “You’re mysterious enough for me.” He reached for the belt of my robe and tugged me in for a kiss. I fell against him, tempted to give in to the pleasure his mouth offered, but something nagged at me. Something I needed to know the truth about.

“You said you recommended my blog for sponsorship because I was good and deserved it. Was there any other reason? Anything at all?”

Something I couldn’t read flashed in his eyes.

I waited.

If this was just about money and him thinking every joy-filled hobby had to be turned into a side hustle...

“I wanted you to have options,” Declan said at last. “In case you decided you were tired of fixing other people’s lives and wanted to stay somewhere long enough to build a life of your own.”

“Oh,” I said.

He wasn’t outright telling me he wanted this thing between us to last. But in his own way, he’d made a plan to make it possible.

Hope flooded through me. *He wants a future, too.*

But if we were going to try to hold on to each other, then I couldn't brush aside everything that had driven us to take a break. The gap between *affair* and *real relationship* felt full of questions that could tear us apart again.

"It's just one sponsorship," I hedged. "And they could still say no."

"They want a video of you reading, right? I could help you film it," Declan offered. "When we get back home."

When we get back home. He probably didn't even notice his words. The casual way he offered his home to me.

I reached up to touch his face. "Thank you."

This time, when Declan leaned down to kiss me, I ignored everything but him, and kissed him back.

DECLAN

I yawned and sat down at my desk with a mug of tea, content to be back home. After a few more meetings, and a half day of sightseeing with Olivia and Catie, we'd flown home late last night. I'd decided Orel wasn't a good fit for acquisition at this time, but I was still happy with the trip.

Catie had loved the adventure. And I'd fixed what was wrong between me and Olivia. I'd sit through any amount of boring meetings for results like that.

I was whistling ABBA to myself when my cell buzzed with an incoming call from Thomas.

"What's up?"

"He's selling it. O'Rourke is selling his fucking mansion," Thomas blurted.

My eyebrows shot up. Thomas hardly ever swore. But if there was ever a moment that justified it, this felt like it. Hell, I wanted to commission some fireworks to blast in the sky saying, "Fuck Yes."

My heart thudded. Now that the moment was here, I couldn't quite believe it was true. "I thought he still had one more property he was going to try to sell? How'd you block that?"

"Lots of bureaucracy, sweet-talking, and favors. Also, I owe someone a hand-knit sweater. You don't want to know," he said. "The point is, we stalled the sale long enough, and it got us the end result that we wanted. Mark O'Rourke put the mansion on the market ten minutes ago. Your shell company is set up

and ready to go. This is really it. It's happening."

"That's grand, Thomas. Fucking grand." I leaned back in the chair, letting the news finally sink in.

We'd done it. *I'd* done it. The revenge I'd fantasized about for fourteen years was finally coming to pass.

"I wanted to confirm you still want to buy and to get your budget before I move forward with the next steps," Thomas said.

Olivia won't be happy. I shoved the thought aside. This was one area of my life where Olivia didn't get a say. It would have felt like a spineless betrayal of my da to let his killer off the hook, just so I could avoid a difficult conversation with a woman.

I forced myself to ignore the uneasy feeling in my chest.

"Do it," I ordered. "Whatever the cost. There is no budget—spend whatever you have to to lock him in and outbid any competition. But use the shell company. He won't sell to me."

"Got it." There was silence on the other end of the line while Thomas scribbled down notes. "You know, sometimes it helps loosen up a buyer if you can make them certain promises about what the space will be used for."

My grin had a hard, cynical edge. "Don't make any promises. But imply it's being purchased on behalf of a flighty rich American who loves *The Deer and the Warrior*, who will probably tire of it and put it back on the market in a few years."

"Leaving the possibility on the table that he can snap it back up when the family finances are in better straits," Thomas finished. "Got it. Keep the hints vague and let Mark's imagination fill in the rest. Just out of curiosity, what are you actually going to do with the mansion? You've been chasing it so hard, I know you must have a plan for it."

I was about to answer, when I thought of all the other people in Ballybeith Thomas did business with. A few of them might be upset when I razed the mansion. The mansion was linked to the festival, which brought in the tourists who filled the coffers for plenty of local businesses. They couldn't

see that O'Rourke was a cancer in our town, and this was the only way to keep him in check.

I didn't want to put Thomas in a difficult place with any of his other clients down the road. So all I said was, "Don't worry about that for now. I'll loop you in once the sale has gone through."

We chatted for a bit, and then I ended the call so I could plug in my headphones and hop on another video call with Anil.

He looked disgruntled when he logged on.

"What's wrong with you?" I asked.

"A good morning to you too," he said sarcastically. "I think my date last night stole my credit card."

I winced. "What do you mean, you think?"

"I can't actually remember how many credit cards I have." He groaned and ran a hand through his hair. "I have to start dating better women."

"Or take a break from dating," I suggested. "Sometimes the right woman just comes into your life."

He gave me an intrigued look. "That sounds surprisingly optimistic, coming from you. Are things going that well with Olivia?"

I avoided *that* conversation by clicking into our company calendar. "I'm thinking of working in Dublin for most of next week, given everything on the schedule."

"Agreed. Especially if we might acquire Orel," Anil said. "You're welcome to my guest room, if you want to stay up here for the week while we hash things out. It'll save you the bother of having to deal with a hotel."

I shook my head. "I don't think we should make an offer on Orel. They're good people, and there is a lot that's intriguing about their product. But there's too many sloppy elements in their business model that would become huge issues when we plugged them into Snug and scaled up." I sighed. "I'll send you the files so you can make your own decision, but I don't think it's a good fit."

“Nah, I trust you,” Anil said. “Although if we pass, Grayson Frost is going to be unbearably smug at the next tech conference.”

I snorted. “We can’t make business decisions based on avoiding things that will make Grayson smug.” Grayson was competitive, with the brain to back it up. He won in business more often than anyone else I knew.

“Shoot! My credit card company is calling,” Anil said.

I signaled that he should take it, and we ended the call.

I took off my headphones and jumped when Olivia cleared her throat.

“How long have you been there?” I asked, trying to remember what I’d said when Anil had teased me about her.

“Just a few minutes.” She shifted on her feet, nervously awkward. “I, uh, wanted to pick a time when you could help me film my sponsorship video?”

I grinned, glad she was really doing this. “Absolutely. We should do it during daylight, so you can have natural lighting. Either that, or I could hire a camera crew from Dublin to come out here...”

“Natural light is fine,” she interrupted. “When’s the next slot you’d have time during daylight?”

I opened my calendar and winced. We might not be acquiring Orel, but my schedule was still plenty packed. I didn’t want to pick a fifteen-minute window when I’d have to rush Olivia. I wanted to be able to give her all the time and focus she deserved.

We could do it over the weekend, but unfortunately, the weather was supposed to be absolute shit.

“So you’re not buying Orel? I thought you liked them,” Olivia said.

“I do,” I said. “But they’re too messy right now.”

“Then why not work with them to improve?” Olivia asked. “Why walk away from everything just because it’s not perfect?”

There was something in her voice that made it sound like she was talking about more than a potential business deal for Snug.

I turned my chair around to face her. “There’s a world full of potential business partners out there. It’s better in the long run to wait until you find the right one, rather than wasting resources on a company that’s the wrong fit.”

“Oh.” She crossed her arms and looked down at her feet.

Understanding dawned. “Is this about the company that offered to publish your book? Because if there’s something you don’t like about them, I can help you and Molly break the contract and look for another publisher. You don’t have to settle.”

She shook her head. “No, it’s not about that. I was just curious about how you think. How you decide what’s worth investing your time in.”

“Ah. Well. I’m an open book. Any time you want business advice…”

“I know who to come to.” She smiled, but there was something uncertain at the edges that I didn’t like to see. “So what day should we film the sponsorship video?”

I scratched the back of my neck. “Is nine days from now too late? If it is, I can cancel—”

“Nine days from now is fine,” she said. “Thanks. I should go. I think I hear Catie calling me.”

I frowned. I didn’t hear anything.

Then again, I’d probably ruined my ears long ago listening to headphones at full volume.

Olivia left.

I returned to my work, trying to shake off the feeling that I’d missed something important.

OLIVIA

“Thanks for watching Catie,” I said when Marie showed up to whisk Catie away for an afternoon of treats at Grandma’s.

“Of course. Declan said you needed his help with a work thing,” Marie said.

I felt myself blushing. “It’s not really a work thing. I mean, it could be. It’s a trial video for a blog sponsorship.”

“Ah,” Marie said, understanding dawning. “Like those makeup tutorials on the internet.”

“Sort of,” I said. “Except, um, mine’s a book review blog.”

It was the first time I’d said that out loud. But if I went through with the sponsorship, and I put my face all over my blog, the carefully built wall between my online life and my real one would go up in smoke. I might as well start getting used to that now.

I waited for the earth to open and swallow me whole, but it was...fine. If anything, it felt good to take credit for something I’d worked so hard on.

Then Marie’s eyes widened. “Wait—don’t tell me you’re the one Declan’s always on about. The one who put him on to all of Catie’s favorite books?”

Now my cheeks were *really* burning. “That’s me.”

“And here I thought you met on a plane.” Marie shook her head. “Sons. They never tell their mums anything.”

Not wanting to explain that can of worms, I called for Catie and helped get her ready to head out the door.

After Catie and Marie had left, I finally admitted I couldn't put recording this video off any longer. When Declan had said he wouldn't have any time to help me for over a week, I'd thought it was a blessing since I hadn't felt ready yet.

Now I wondered if putting it off so long had been a mistake. I'd built it into this huge thing in my head. What if my voice sounded weird? What if everyone made fun of my outfit? What if I mispronounced the author's name? What if the camera broke, and we couldn't do the video in time, and the publishing company decided they didn't want to do a partnership with me after all?

I blew out a breath. "Just do it," I ordered myself.

I jogged up the steps to the second floor and retrieved the book from my room. Then I went to go find Declan, but he wasn't in his office. I wandered the mansion looking for him until I found him setting up a camera in a small room on the first floor I'd never noticed. It had large windows that looked out over the side of the house.

"I thought we were going to do it outside?" I said.

"I checked with one of our photographers on staff," Declan said, fussing with the camera perched somewhat precariously on a tripod. "We want natural light, but we don't want you in direct sunlight. Can you sit in that chair?"

He pointed to a small green armchair facing the camera.

I settled in, suddenly very aware of my elbows and knees. What did Declan see when he pointed that camera at me?

"Is that what you're wearing?" he asked.

I looked down at my buttery yellow T-shirt. "You don't like it?"

"I love everything you wear," Declan said, and there was enough warmth in his eyes I knew he wasn't lying. "But the staff photographer said yellow can wash out people with fairer skin tones."

He stated the words precisely, like he'd memorized the photographer's exact instructions.

I felt a spurt of guilt. He'd put so much effort into this, and here I was dreading it.

"Yellow is friendly and will pop against the chair," I said. "Besides, I don't need to look like a model."

"Sure." Declan nodded. He fiddled with the camera again. "Okay. Go."

I blinked. "We're starting?" I yelped. "I'm not ready!"

Declan laughed and turned off the camera. "It's fine. Take a deep breath. Do you want to do a practice run before we record?"

"Yes," I said gratefully.

But the practice run didn't go very well. Declan kept making me hold the book at different angles until he found one where viewers would easily be able to see it while I was reading. I felt my arm cramping as I tried to maintain the awkward angle. I stumbled over the sentences as I tried to read them upside down and at an angle.

"That's grand," Declan said encouragingly. "Let's try recording one, yeah?"

I didn't want to. I wasn't ready. But I made myself nod and flip back to the beginning of the book.

I started to read the book. "Once upon a time—"

"Do you think you should introduce yourself?" Declan interrupted. "Maybe the title of the book too?"

I smacked myself in the forehead. "Sorry."

"It's fine." His smile was so warm and confident, it made me feel like even more of an inept fraud. "Let's go again."

Declan hit record.

I fumbled through an introduction. Then I started reading. The words felt stiff and awkward on my tongue. At first I thought it was my fault. Around our

fourth take, I started to realize the problem wasn't me. At least not entirely.

This was a bad book.

The writing was clunky. The plot about a pig who made friends with a squirrel was boring. And the *Grown-ups always know best* moral of the story felt frustratingly dated. Convincing kids to blindly trust every adult they met was dumb advice. This was the kind of book I normally mocked on my blog. And now I would be getting paid to recommend it.

I thought of what Declan had said about choosing business partners. How it was better to choose someone perfect than invest time and energy in someone who wasn't.

I stumbled over a word. "Shoot. Should we go back to the beginning?"

Declan grimaced. "Let's keep going. We can edit something together if we don't end up getting a perfect take."

There was that word again. Perfect.

I wondered if he wanted perfection in his romantic relationships too. Maybe one of the reasons he didn't feel the need to resolve any of our big tension points was because it wasn't an efficient use of his time.

Why try to fix it, if we were already too imperfect, too messy?

The fears built and swirled together until everything felt tense. My breathing was too shallow. Declan might have been standing only a few feet away, but when he was on the other side of that camera, the distance between us felt vast.

"We're still filming," Declan reminded me. "You can start reading again whenever you want."

"No," I said. "Turn it off."

"Olivia, relax. We have plenty of time to get this—"

"I said turn it *off*," I ordered, standing.

Declan paused the recording, looking wary. "Do you want a break?"

“No! I don’t want to do this. I hate being in front of a camera. And this book is bad.” I shook it at him for emphasis. “My blog makes me happy. I don’t want to ruin that just for money.”

Declan stepped out from behind that damned camera. He crossed the room to me and cupped my face. “Breathe, *a ghrá*.”

I inhaled deeply, then blew it out. It helped some.

“The book you’re writing, it’s about advice your mum gave you, right?” Declan prompted.

I nodded.

“What advice would your mum give you right now?”

Any calm I’d gained vanished. “I don’t *know*.” I stepped back from Declan and ran a hand through my hair, frustrated. “None of her advice had to do with anonymous blogs, or becoming an influencer, or dating a career-obsessed billionaire.”

I waited for Declan to snap at me and deny he was career obsessed. It would be almost a relief to fight. All the tension building in my body needed somewhere to go.

Instead, he met my eyes and slowly, deliberately, laced his fingers through mine. “Come on. Let’s get some fresh air.”

I grumbled, but let him lead me through the house and out into the garden. A light breeze brushed against my skin, and I could smell the sweet, delicate scent of flowers blooming. We wandered through the overgrown garden paths until my shoulders relaxed.

“Fine,” I admitted grudgingly. The corner of my mouth quirked up. “Maybe I needed a break.”

“You don’t say,” Declan teased. Then his voice quieted, and he squeezed my hand. “I know it’s hard on you that your mum isn’t here. It’s hard for me that I can’t go to my da for advice, too. But when I think back on the years I had with him...I remember some specific things he said, yes, but mostly I remember how proud he was of the person I was growing to be. How

confident he seemed that I was going to be able to do anything I set my mind to. Maybe, when the person you go to for advice isn't there anymore, you have to trust that they helped turn you into the best version of yourself—one who's equipped to handle whatever surprises life throws your way. And then you start listening to your own gut."

The words hit uncomfortably close to home. The problem was, when it came to Declan, my gut was saying two different things.

Part of me was saying, *I want to stay in Ireland with Declan after this job ends*. But another part was saying, *This thing with Declan is far too fragile. I can't count on it*.

"That's pretty good advice," I said. "But it's not always so easy to put into practice."

He stopped walking and turned to face me, gently tilting up my chin so he could see my face. "What's the real problem, Olivia?"

I sorted through all of the little things that had upset me today, trying to pick the most important one. "I really don't like that book."

Declan nodded, his face as serious as if we were talking about an important deal for Snug. "Then we'll ask for another book or reach out to alternative sponsors. You're too talented to give up at the first hurdle."

"That's the other problem." I rolled my shoulders and stepped back out of his grasp. "You keep treating me like one of your business projects. I'm not sure if I even want to become a sponsored blog. Maybe I just want to be a nanny who reviews books for fun."

"Bullshit." Declan glared. "If you wanted to be a nanny forever, you wouldn't have studied creative writing at uni. You wouldn't have *sold a book*. You wouldn't have built a blog read by people all over the world." He advanced until we stood toe to toe. "You want more, even if you're scared to admit it."

The accusation hit my heart like an arrow, piercing past my defenses... because he was right. A part of me *did* want more. I wanted a family, and I wanted a home, and I wanted to take a risk on a potentially unstable artistic career.

I'd been trying so hard to live in the moment and cherish what I had instead of mourning what I didn't, I'd slowly stopped paying attention to that part of me that dared to dream bigger.

I crossed my arms. "Maybe I have trouble admitting what I want. But you do too."

"I do not—"

"You keep trying to help me on business things that we both know would make it possible for me to stay in Ireland," I said. I knew I should stop talking, but the words were flowing now, and I couldn't hold them back. "But you can't bring yourself to ask me to stay in Ireland. You can't even bring yourself to say you *want* a real, serious relationship."

Declan looked stunned. "Is that what you want? For me to ask you to stay?"

I threw my hands up in the air. "I don't know! I just...you...argh. I can't *think* around you."

I turned around and stormed back into the house.

For once, Declan let me.

DECLAN

I watched Olivia stomp away from me. Her yellow shirt made her look like a shooting star getting away from me as fast as she possibly could.

Did she actually want to stay in Ireland? Or did she just want me to want her to stay?

I knew I wanted more time with her. But I couldn't shake the feeling that actually asking her to stay implied promises I wasn't ready to make. I would be asking her to give up the career she'd had since college and the country she'd had since birth, all for a relationship I wasn't quite willing to name. As much as I wanted to say, *Stay*, it wasn't fair for me to ask her for that unless I could offer her something better in return.

I hesitated, unsure whether it was better to go after Olivia or give her some time.

My phone buzzed while I was making up my mind. I frowned, not recognizing the number.

"Hello. You have Declan Byrne."

"Declan, hello! It's Colm from the *Ballybeith Press*. I'm sure you know it?"

I rolled my eyes. The *Ballybeith Press* was a digital newsletter that got emailed to everyone in town once a week whether they wanted it or not. It didn't matter how many times you unsubscribed yourself from the list, someone else would helpfully add you back on. Colm had retired from his

actual career about five years ago, and since then, all of his free time went into our little local newsletter.

“Sure, Colm. What can I do for you?” I kicked a rock. It was probably another bloody fundraiser. I never resented donating money to support village stuff, but I hated the song and dance and endless small talk that went with it. I wanted to wrap this up, so I could go inside to Olivia.

“As you may know, someone bought the O’Rourke mansion yesterday. And a certain town councilman hinted that someone was you,” Colm said.

I raised my head, focusing on the conversation for the first time.

“I’d love to do a brief piece for tomorrow’s newsletter. Announce you as the new owner, explain your plans for the property, that sort of thing.” He laughed. “I still can’t believe O’Rourke sold it to anyone, let alone you. And the sale was so fast!”

I grinned, wolfish. It *had* been a fast sale. O’Rourke had been desperate to sell, and I’d made a cash offer well above asking price. He probably thought he’d gotten the better end of the deal.

Little did he know.

“Declan?” Colm prodded. “Can you confirm you’re the property’s new owner?”

What the hell, I thought. I hadn’t planned to make a big public announcement. But now that the property was officially mine, this was as good a way as any to rub Mark O’Rourke’s face in it.

“Yes, I’m the new owner of the O’Rourke mansion,” I confirmed, liking the taste of the words on my tongue.

“Well, may I be one of the first to offer congratulations, then,” Colm said. “What are your plans for it? Will you be living in the place? Using it for office space? Turning it into a *Deer and the Warrior* museum?”

I savored the moment, picturing Mark O’Rourke’s face turning red with rage.

“I’m going to raze it to the fucking ground. And you can quote me on that.”

“You can’t...I mean, you can, but...why?” Colm blurted.

I let the silence build between us. “Mark knows what he did,” I said at last. “Have a nice afternoon, Colm.”

Then I hung up.

My revenge quest had finally come to a close. I’d expected it to be satisfying, and it was. But at the same time, a part of me worried how Olivia would take the news.

Would she understand why I’d needed to do this? It didn’t seem likely. My one consolation was that she didn’t read the *Ballybeith Press*. I had time to find the right moment to break it to her.

But first I had to patch things up with her.



I found Olivia in the basement pool. She was swimming laps, her form elegant and her focus complete. Her red hair flowed behind her, making her look like something out of a myth.

I watched her swim for a while, just for the pleasure of it. Then I stripped down to my boxers and joined her.

I sliced through the water, fast and sure, until I caught up with her. She started when she noticed me and sputtered to the surface.

“Don’t scare me like that!”

“Sorry,” I said, trying to sound contrite.

“No, you’re not,” Olivia said.

My grin faded. “Well, not about startling you. But I am sorry for pushing you too hard this morning. I support whatever decision you want to make with your blog.” I didn’t admit that she was right about how badly I wanted to ask her to stay, though. I couldn’t start that conversation until I knew how it ended.

Ripples traveled back and forth between us as we both treaded water.

“I’m sorry too,” Olivia said. “I shouldn’t have flipped out on you.”

I noticed she didn’t admit I was right about her wanting more than a life as a nanny.

Fair play to her.

It felt like as much as we cared about each other, every time we patched over one crack in our relationship, another one appeared.

You’ll have more than cracks when she finds out you’re razing the mansion, a voice in my head said.

I ignored it. I didn’t want to think about the O’Rourkes, or my past, or her future. Right now I just wanted to live in the moment with Olivia.

I swam toward her, wrapping an arm around her waist to tug her toward me.

She laughed.

“Make it up to me?” I suggested. The water had darkened her eyelashes, and her eyes looked green as the sea.

Olivia looped her hands behind my neck. “I thought you were supposed to be making it up to me.”

I kissed her. She tasted like chlorine and summer and *her*. “Maybe we make it up to each other.”

She searched my face. When she nodded, it felt like she was agreeing to more than the make-up sex.

Maybe this was how you built a relationship. You just kept making it up to each other, coming back together, patching over cracks, for as long as you possibly could. Even if it was messy. Even if it was humbling.

Even if the woman you were falling for was goddamn impossible to hold on to.

I kissed her, fierce. Her lips were equally hungry. It was hard to get the right angle in the water. It felt like the first time again, as we bumped and crashed

and fell into each other. Olivia used my shoulders to get a better angle, and as she pushed up from the water and kissed me from above, we finally got it right.

I drank from her lips. She kissed me so damn good I forgot where we were, and we temporarily sank below the water.

Olivia disentangled herself from me and shot back up to the surface, laughing. “What the hell was that?”

“You distracted me,” I grumbled.

Olivia tossed me an impish smile. And then she dove back under the water, swimming to the wall.

I gave chase. I was always chasing this woman.

I hit the wall a second after her, caging her against it. This time when she wrapped her legs around my waist, I could brace us against the wall and keep us steady.

If only there was a way for me to keep us steady in the rest of our lives. I shoved the thought away and leaned in, my voice soft and low in her ear. “Distract me some more.”

She shivered. “Got anything in mind?”

I lowered the neckline of her swimsuit below her breasts. The neckline and the water pushed them up, plump and begging for my touch.

“There,” I growled. “That’s a start.”

She made a little sound in the back of her throat that was half gasp, half purr, and all feminine. I lifted one of her breasts to my lips and bit, just hard enough to make her buck and squirm against me. Then I soothed her with my tongue, murmuring curses and endearments in the same drugged language. I lost myself in the slick feel of her skin, the way I could make her breath speed up, the way she gave herself over to me—and gave as good as she got.

When I couldn’t take it anymore, I lifted her from the water and set her on the lip of the pool. Then I spread her thighs and kissed her through the fabric of her swimsuit.

She moaned, lacing her hands through my hair to guide me where she wanted me.

The first time we'd done this she'd been shy, almost apologetic. Now she understood I needed this as much she did. She understood what a fucking privilege it was for me to worship her like this.

"Your hands," she gasped. "I need you to touch me too."

I slid two fingers under the suit, stroking her the way she loved. Giving her every touch she craved.

When she came apart, the glorious sounds she made echoed in the tiled room. I nearly came, just from hearing her like that.

I rested my head on the softness of her thigh, trying to get my own breath back. Olivia ran her hand through my hair, idle and gentle now that I'd taken the edge off for her.

Meanwhile, I needed her. Hard, fast, and now.

I cast about the room for someplace to fuck her, but everywhere but the pool was too hard. I didn't want her bruised, and I also didn't want to be gentle. Not tonight. Not when the outside world was pressing down on us and it felt like I could lose her any second if I didn't hold on tightly enough.

She tugged my hair lightly. "You need to fuck me hard, don't you?"

It was halfway between a tease and a scold, and it made my problem worse. It *did* something to me when my clean-mouthed Olivia talked dirty.

She stood up and peeled herself out of the swimsuit, looking for all the world like Aphrodite coming out of the ocean. If Aphrodite was red-haired and covered in freckles, which in my opinion, she should have been.

Even after what we'd just done, Olivia still blushed at my frank interest. Then she bit her lip and walked toward a shelf of towels. She unfurled them all, one after another, making a bed of softness in this concrete room. Then she sank down on all fours, adjusting the thick pile of fabric, until she had it to her liking.

Olivia looked back over her shoulder and *winked*. "Will this do, boss?"

I burst out of the water so fast a surge of water came with me. In a matter of seconds I was naked and kneeling behind her. I gripped her soft hips and nudged her thighs farther apart.

“Lower,” I ordered, my voice dropping in tone until it become a half growl. I laid my hand on her lower back, my splayed fingers caressing her smooth skin, and moved it up the grooves of her spine. I pushed her down until her breasts were touching the floor, her body bending into the most wicked of curves. “Yes, just like this.”

She shivered and complied, her body melting under my touch. “Yes, boss.”

I smacked her ass. “Stop that. You’ll give me some nanny fetish.”

“Only fair.” Olivia laughed, breathless, as she pressed her hips back toward me. But there was a helpless edge to her laugh, like she’d given up fighting how much we wanted each other. “You gave me a sleeping-with-my-boss fetish.”

I thrust into her, hard. She was wet and ready from my mouth, but she still gasped, surprised. That soft gasp echoed on the tile around us. She dropped her forehead to the towels and groaned. “God, Declan. It feels so good.”

I set a hard, punishing pace. One that wouldn’t let either of us think about anything outside of this room. One that would leave our minds and bodies spent for hours afterward.

Maybe I did want to bruise her a little. She was leaving marks all over my life. It seemed only fair to return the favor.

We used each other until I’d completely lost track of time. Then I changed the angle, and she started crying out again, little jagged things, as her back arched, and her hands spread and clenched on the towels. As she clenched around me, I felt her pull me toward delicious oblivion. I pulled out with a roar and finished on her back.

Then I rolled her over and gently laid her down, kissing her while we both got our breath back. I reached down with one hand and carefully massaged her knee. “Was that too much? Did I hurt you?”

She bit her lip, searching my face. “I think,” she said carefully, “we’ll hurt

each other no matter what we do. We might as well have fun while we're at it."

I frowned. Some bone-deep part of me revolted at the idea of hurting her, even a little. "That wasn't an answer."

"I'm fine, Declan," she said. She smoothed my hair back. "I liked it—especially that part at the end. You sounded like an animal. Positively feral."

"You make me feel feral," I said. I gestured to the mussed towels around us. "Obviously."

She looked up at me, wide-eyed. Then she closed her eyes and shook her head. "You *say* things like that, and I...I don't know what to do with you."

I stared down at her. She really had no idea what a miracle she was. I'd *never* let anyone tear open my life like this before.

"Believe me," I ordered. I kissed her once, like her belief in me was a pact we could seal together.

Believe me when I show you how much you mean to me, I thought, Even if you can't always understand me.

We went upstairs and cleaned up, too exhausted to think about the cracks in our relationship.



When I rolled over the next morning, Olivia was already awake and scrolling through her phone.

I kissed the back of her neck. "Don't tell me you're checking your email so early in the morning."

"I always check my email first thing every day, in case Sunny Days Childcare sent me anything I need to respond to," Olivia said. "Plus, I like the newsletters."

"The newsletters?" I said.

“There’s a news round-up I like. Some nonprofits I give to. A few authors I follow. Local stuff from places I’ve lived. I like seeing what everyone’s up to,” she said.

“Aww,” I said. “You actually read your junk mail. How did I not know that about you?”

She rocked her ass against my cock in retaliation for that remark. I swallowed a groan and tried to roll her under me, more than willing to be distracted from this particular argument.

She giggled and wiggled away from me. “Hold on, I just got my first issue of the *Ballybeith Press*. Molly signed me up—she said it’s a hoot.”

My lust-fogged brain took a second too long to process her words.

Olivia stiffened against me.

I reached for her. “Wait. Let me explain.”

But she was already scrambling out of bed, clutching the sheet to her chest. “How could you, Declan? Is this true?”

Something cold and heavy settled over my chest. She was looking at me in horror. Like this was the one thing she might not be able to forgive.

She was waiting for an answer. Waiting for me to deny it.

Unfortunately, a denial was the one thing I couldn’t give her. “It’s true.”

DECLAN

I braced for Olivia's anger. But it was worse than that. She didn't look angry.

She looked disappointed.

She turned away from me to tug on the shorts and T-shirt she'd discarded on my floor last night. "I don't understand, Declan. Without that house, there's no summer festival. And without that festival, half the town's businesses will close."

"Those businesses will be fine," I insisted, "once they pivot to a new business model."

Olivia whirled to face me. "*What* new business model? According to Molly, Ballybeith gets smaller every year. And you're killing the last thing that was bringing outsiders in."

I threw the covers off and stood, yanking my trousers on. "Sure, blame the shrinking town on me too. Not on Mark O'Rourke, who's been raising rents so high he's been driving people out for decades." I jabbed a finger to emphasize my point. "I did this town a favor, getting that mansion away from him. Now he can't hold the festival over the town's head. Someone had to stop him."

"I get that." Olivia stepped toward me, her hands spread in supplication. "I get it. You did a good thing buying the mansion. But you don't have to raze it. Let it stand, and let people use it for the festival." She walked closer, her

hands settling lightly against my chest. “You already won. You beat Mark O’Rourke. You can stop now. You don’t have to hurt the town. You don’t have to hurt Catie.”

I flinched away from her touch. “That’s what this is about, isn’t it? God forbid I piss off the man who abandoned Sinead. The man who abandoned *Catie*.”

I should have known Olivia wouldn’t understand. Like everyone else, she saw Seamus’s charming smile, heard his friendly words, and didn’t look any deeper. But still, Olivia choosing Seamus over me felt like a knife to the belly.

Olivia crossed her arms. “This isn’t about Seamus. It’s about Catie. She deserves to make her own choices when she grows up. And you’ve just made it all but impossible to have a positive relationship with half of her family.”

“*They’re not her family,*” I snarled. “*They killed her family.*”

Olivia stepped back under the force of my rage. Some distant part of me noticed she looked scared.

Ashamed, I stepped back, trying to get control of my emotions. “Olivia. I want you to believe me that I am doing this not despite the town, or Catie, but *for* them.”

“But what if you’re wrong—”

“I’m not done yet,” I said, my voice brooking no argument. “I believe destroying that mansion, destroying the O’Rourke legacy, benefits everyone. But even if I didn’t, I’d still fucking do it. Because he killed my da. And no one in this town, this town of people you’re so desperate to save, held him accountable for that.”

Her chin quivered.

My voice dropped, deadly quiet. “If no one else will punish Mark O’Rourke, then I will. And damn the consequences.”

Olivia stared at me, eyes bright, face flushed. She started to walk out the door, then stopped and turned back to me. “I was going to stay in Ireland for

you,” she said. “After last night, I thought...I thought it was okay that you weren’t brave enough to ask me to stay, because I could feel it in your touch, in your heart that you wanted me to—and that maybe we could have a future together. I thought I could be brave for both of us.”

She was going to stay? Everything in me leapt at the idea.

“But I can’t do that,” Olivia said, an awful finality in her voice. “I can’t risk my future on someone who’s so set on revenge, no matter the cost. *Please*, Declan. Stop living in the past.”

I felt my anger start to turn on her. How dare she tell me she was considering staying right when she was making it clear she’d changed her mind? Did she enjoy toying with me? “At least I learn from my past,” I said. “You’re so scared to look at what you’ve lost, what you *want*, you’ve spent your whole career running from it. Hiding in other people’s lives, in other people’s families—”

“Stop,” Olivia said, covering her face. “I can’t do this.”

“Oh, that’s mature. Check out of the conversation.”

When she lowered her hands, I saw what she’d been trying to cover. She was crying.

I felt those tears like a punch to the gut. I wanted to fall to my knees and kiss each drop away. At the same time, I wanted to yell at her that she wasn’t the only one in pain.

“I wasn’t talking about the conversation, Declan,” Olivia said, swiping furiously at her tears with the palm of her hand. “I was talking about the relationship.”

I stopped breathing. She didn’t notice.

“I can’t do this if you’re determined to be the worst version of yourself,” she said.

Something in me snapped. “Well, I don’t want to be with someone who only wants me when I’m doing exactly what she wants. I deserve more than that.”

Olivia looked down at the floor. I could feel her withdrawing into herself.

Going some place I couldn't reach her.

I hated it. "Olivia, wait..."

She looked up, her eyes clear and certain. "I think we both deserve more, Declan. We can't give each other what we want. It's done. It has been for a while, I just couldn't admit it."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I knew she'd be angry about the mansion. I just didn't think she could walk away so easily.

But of course she could walk away. This was what Olivia fucking *did*. She'd made a life of living in the present and fleeing as soon as that present got hard.

"At least we've only got ten more days together," Olivia said, in a hollow imitation of a joke. "Once Sinead arrives, you'll never see me again."

"Why wait?" I said bitterly. "Mum and I can handle Catie for ten days. We don't need you."

She looked alarmed. "Declan, we promised Catie we wouldn't do this. We promised I'd stay, even if we fought—"

"I don't give a shit what I promised!" I said. The reality that she was leaving hurt so bad I wanted to double over and brace myself on something for support. But I'd be damned if I let her see me fall apart. I'd be damned if I'd let her spend the next ten days being lovely and professional and *her* while I crumbled in front of her. "Do you really think it's better for Catie to watch the adults she loves seethe at each other for ten days?"

Olivia grimaced. "We can keep it professional—"

"I *can't*," I said. "Not with you. Never with you."

She looked somewhere between touched and alarmed.

Humiliation crawled up the back of my neck. I turned away. "Pack your stuff and say goodbye to Catie. I'll buy your ticket and call you a taxi.

The silence between us grew thick.

Then Olivia turned away and did what she was told.



The house was quiet after Olivia left. Catie didn't want to talk to me. Instead she lay curled up in her room, watching cartoons on my tablet. She emerged once to get a snack, defiantly meeting my eyes as she grabbed five cookies and took them back to her room.

I didn't have the heart to scold her. I felt numb.

Olivia had left. She'd finally fucking left.

I'd poured myself a glass of whiskey, but it sat on the kitchen table next to me untouched.

I told myself it would have felt like this sooner or later. Olivia was always going to leave. This changed nothing but the timing—and I was right to end it now. I could hardly betray my principles, could I? Promise I wouldn't raze the mansion, just for another week of bliss in her arms?

I pressed my fist to my hand and breathed. This was the real reason I'd needed her out of the house. Because I could already feel myself crumbling. I could already feel myself wanting to go to her room, and open the door, and coax her into believing this was one more crack we could patch over.

I should strip the sheets in her room, I decided. My staff normally handled that, but I needed to get every trace of her out of my life immediately. Eventually this numbness might wear off, and then I might do something weak like press my face to her pillow and breathe in that damn lavender scent.

I went upstairs and opened the door to her room. But Olivia had beat me to it. She'd stripped the old sheets off and scoured the room of every trace of her.

The only thing she'd left behind was the old sweatshirt she'd borrowed from me. She'd folded it neatly and placed it on the chair by the window.

Something about seeing that sweatshirt by the chair shattered my numbness. She was gone. She was gone. Olivia was gone. And I'd never see her again.

I'd wanted her to take that sweatshirt, damnit. She'd liked it so much, and I'd

liked the idea of keeping her warm, even after we parted. But I hadn't really *said* that, just made jokes about it.

Just like I hadn't told her how badly I wanted her to stay in Ireland. Just like I hadn't told her how I felt about her. I hadn't told her I'd lost the ability to picture a future without her. I hadn't told her she'd somehow become my true north.

I hadn't told her I loved her.

I grabbed the dresser for balance. She'd told me she'd decided to stay in Ireland. And instead of telling her I fucking loved her, I'd put her on the first plane out.

I'd been too obsessed with winning the argument, with defending myself, to hear what she'd really been saying. I'd heard, *You can never make me stay now when what she'd been trying to say was I was so close to staying, please give me a reason to.*

"No," I blurted into the empty, silent room. "No, this isn't how this ends."

I'd won her back two times already when I'd fucked up.

Third time's the charm, I thought.

I grabbed my phone and called her, but it went to voicemail. I pulled up our message thread to text her, but I didn't know what to say. There'd been a connection over text, but we'd only truly connected in person. *Don't get on that plane*, I wrote. *Wait for me, Olivia.*

She didn't respond. I had no idea if she'd see it. I had no idea if she'd wait. But I knew I had to try.

"Catie! Get your shoes on!" I yelled, racing downstairs to grab my keys. "We're going to the airport!"



I didn't drive nearly as fast as I wanted to, not with Catie in the car with me. But we still made the trip in record time. I parked illegally, grabbed Catie,

and raced into the airport. Shannon was a small, quiet airport. One glance told me Olivia wasn't in the departures area. She'd already gone through security.

I checked my watch. Olivia's flight didn't board for another half hour.

I headed to the nearest airline counter. "I need two tickets."

"Where to?" the employee asked.

"I don't care. Anywhere."

"Sir, that's highly unusual. Do you have luggage?" He looked at me suspiciously.

"Uncle Declan," Catie said, "I don't have my passport."

"Are you her legal guardian?" the employee asked. "Because if not, the child needs ID."

"She's six," I said. "Never mind. We aren't going anywhere. We just need tickets so we can get through security. There's someone I need to talk to."

"Sir, we can't do that," the employee said.

"*Please*," I said desperately. I opened my wallet and dropped every bill I had on the counter. "I'll buy your most expensive ticket."

Catie tugged on my shirt. "Why won't they let us see Olivia?"

"They will, love," I promised. "They will."

"I will *not*," the employee said, indignant.

I slammed my hands flat on the counter. "The woman I love is about to get on a plane and I haven't told her...she doesn't know... She's not answering her phone. *Please*."

The employee looked torn. "If you have a specific destination in mind, and the child has official ID, I can help you. Otherwise, there's nothing I can do."

I ran a hand through my hair. I wasn't going to be able to get Catie through security. Not before Olivia's plane took off. And I couldn't leave her behind

in the lobby while I went ahead.

“Fuck,” Catie said, like she was testing out the word. “Did I use it right?”

“You used it right,” I said. I thought through my options. “Could you get her a message? You could tell her I’m here. I’d pay you anything you want—”

“Declan?” Olivia said behind me.

I turned toward her, my heart pounding in my chest.

Her eyes were red-rimmed, like she’d been crying, and her hair was a mess. She looked like that first day on the plane when I’d met her and her oversized suitcase. But that day she’d had a spark in her, even if she was upset.

This time, it was like that spark was gone.

“Someone said a single dad was losing his mind in the lobby and throwing money at people,” Olivia said. “After reading your text, I took a gamble that it was you.”

I cracked a smile. It felt like I could breathe for the first time since she’d walked out of my bedroom this morning.

I reached for her. “Olivia, I—”

“No,” she said, holding up her hands. “I just came out to tell you to go home. We can’t keep doing this.”

“But I love you,” I said. The words sounded naked and stark in this gray airport. “I love you, Olivia. Stay with me. Please.” I held out my hand to her, desperate to touch her. To make everything right. “You wanted to stay with me once. I promise I can make you want to stay again.”

But Olivia was shaking her head. “You don’t get it, Declan. Of *course* you could make me want to stay. But it wouldn’t be good for us. We can’t keep hurting each other over and over, without ever resolving any of our actual issues.”

Honestly, that sounded like half the couples I knew. I didn’t see what the problem was, if we loved each other.

Maybe that’s the problem, all my doubts whispered in my ear. *Maybe she*

doesn't love you back.

Catie was looking back and forth between me and Olivia anxiously. I hated that she was seeing this.

“We just need time,” I said to Olivia, my eyes begging.

It was the only answer I had, and a part of me already knew it wasn't good enough. But I couldn't give in yet.

Olivia took a deep breath. “Would you consider getting your revenge on the O'Rourkes in a different way? *Any* other way, except destroying the mansion. Something that doesn't hurt...” Her eyes dropped to Catie. “Anyone else.”

I swore. This again.

“You know I can't,” I said. “I can give you anything else, but not that.”

Olivia picked up her suitcase. “Then I can't do this. I'm sorry. Goodbye, Catie. Declan.” She turned, and I saw her wiping at her cheeks as she walked away.

I caught up to her and grabbed her arm. “Wait.”

“My plane is leaving. The one *you* bought me a ticket for, Declan.” She snatched her arm from my grasp. “Don't follow me again. Let me go. It's better for both of us.”

The devastating thing was, I could tell she meant it this time. She meant every word of it.

So I stood there, broken-hearted bastard that I was, and watched Olivia St. James walk away from me.

I didn't move until Catie slipped her small hand into mine. “Let's go home, Uncle Declan.”

I nodded, and together we turned around and walked toward something Olivia didn't have—home.

OLIVIA

I love you, Olivia. Stay with me. Please.

I cried myself to sleep as those words echoed in my head and my heart across the Atlantic, and then half of North America. Every part of my body ached with tension, grief, and loss. It didn't matter whether I was awake or dreaming. I kept seeing the raw vulnerability on Declan's face as he told me loved me. The hopeful look on Catie's as she waited for my response.

But love wasn't enough this time. He was asking me to give up the life I'd built in America, the career I'd built as a nanny. And yet he couldn't even give up this idea that hurting Mark O'Rourke justified hurting everyone else around him.

I'd always hated when my friends defended the jerks they dated by saying, "Oh, but he's not an asshole to *me*. He loves *me*."

I knew Declan's situation was more complicated than that. Yes, he'd made a choice that was going to hurt people—but it wasn't because he was mean or didn't care. If anything, he was willing to do it because he cared too much.

But I also couldn't stand by and watch him go down this path, waiting for the day revenge swallowed him whole. Sinead wasn't the only Byrne sibling to have developed an addiction while trying to live with the burden of their loss and grief. She was just the only one who'd been brave enough to ask for help.

So I avoided conversation with the nice, cute man sitting next to me on the plane who offered me tissues. I didn't say a word to the cab driver who took

me home when I finally landed in Faribault-Northfield. And I didn't realize until the next morning, when I was unpacking my suitcase, that I'd completely forgotten to tell Molly I'd left Ireland.

I stared down at the notebook in my hands, the one I'd been using to draft our story.

Just the thought of opening it hurt. The experience of writing this story, of *believing* in this story, was too wrapped up in Declan for thoughts of it to bring me any comfort now.

I could have tried to keep working on drafts with Molly. The editor at the publishing house hadn't wanted that many changes, after all. I didn't want to be the kind of woman who passed up the opportunity to become a published author because of a man.

But it wasn't just any man. It was Declan. And I knew in my heart that continuing to work on this book would be like tearing stitches from a fresh wound, over and over again.

I checked the time to make sure Molly would actually be awake with the time difference, and then I called her.

"Hey!" she said brightly. "Was just about to call you. Want to ditch Declan and grab a drink with me tonight?"

I snorted out a laugh, then swallowed the lump in my throat. "I would, but I'm back in Minnesota. Declan and I broke up. And I...I don't think I can do the picture book anymore." I went on to explain that she could have the rights to everything I'd written so far, and how sorry I was.

Molly interrupted me as I was trying to convince her to find another writer to get the book to the finish line.

"That is absolute bullshit. I'm not getting another writer. We'll talk about this in a month, when you've had some time and you're not all..." She searched for words. "Emotionally goopy."

My heart ached at her kindness. "In a month, I'll be nannyng again. And there's never any way to tell how much time I'll have on my hands with a new family. I might not have a minute to spare for anything but my day job.

Our editor needs our next draft before then. Really, don't wait for me."

Molly protested, but I apologized again, made my excuses, and hung up the phone.

I stared down at the suitcase I'd been living out of since my first nannying job.

I should have stuck with being the person who helps other people's families, I thought.

Letting myself dream of having my own family again...it hurt too damn much when that dream fell apart.



When Sunny Days Childcare called and said they had a time-sensitive job interview available for me today if I wanted it, I was grateful for the distraction from my own misery. I dragged myself into the shower, changed into something respectable, and logged onto the video-chat to fake a smile and meet my potential future employees.

Fifteen minutes into the interview, I could feel my smile cracking.

"We don't believe in nap time," the mom explained.

"I thought you said your kid was two? That's a developmentally appropriate age for a nap," I said.

"If he naps, he's too energetic when we get home from work," the dad explained. "If you keep him up during the day, then he's out like a light right after you leave. It's much more efficient."

"But it's worse for your kid," I said.

The mom narrowed her eyes at me. "You sound like our last nanny. She refused to use the bespoke baby lotion I bought for our little Trent, just because she thought it was giving him a tiny, barely there rash."

"Now, now," the dad said. "Let's not jump to conclusions. Sunny Days assured us that Olivia here would be *very* accommodating." He lowered his

voice and reminded his wife, “*She nannied for the man who invented Snug.*”

The mom got a crafty look in her eye. “I suppose you could introduce us, if we gave you the job?” She patted her hair. “You know, I’m something of an influencer.”

I stared at her in disbelief. Had the parents always been this bad?

They had, I realized. They’d just gotten bad so slowly I hadn’t realized. The first family I’d worked for had been truly wonderful. But just about everyone between them and Declan had been different and increasingly less tolerable brands of awful.

I don’t want to do this anymore, I realized.

Declan had been right. It was time for me to start building my own life instead of trying to fix other people’s—especially when those other people acted like these two.

“I’m not interested in this job anymore,” I said. “Hire your old nanny back, and let your kid take a nap.”

I hung up, surprised to realize how much lighter I felt. When push came to shove, I hadn’t been brave enough to quit my job for Declan.

But I could quit it for *me*.

And I didn’t think I would have been able to do that before Declan. His vision, his confidence, his bravery...somehow, it had rubbed off on me.

If you can walk away from nannying, I told myself, *you’re brave enough to write that book. Even if it reminds you of Declan.*

I didn’t want to be the kind of person who ran from my past. Even if my past was memories of a beautiful man who’d broken my heart.

I emailed Sunny Days to tell them to delete my profile from the website.

Their response was two words: *Good riddance.*

For once, we agreed with each other.

I called Molly, pacing anxiously as I waited for her to answer. It would be

late for her, but she tended to stay up late.

“I’m back in,” I said, as soon as she answered. “I want to work on the book.”

“I found a new writer already.” Molly yawned.

“What!?” I yelped.

“Kidding. You deserved it for running out on me, though,” Molly said. “What changed?”

“I quit nannying,” I explained. “I know it will take a while to turn writing into a profitable career. But I’ve got this blog on Snug that already has a sponsorship offer. To be honest, I don’t much like the offer itself, but if I can get one offer, then I think I can find a better one. And if nothing else comes through, then I’ve got plenty of savings to live on, since most of my jobs since college included room and board.”

“I love it,” Molly said. “Dream big.”

“Speaking of improving things... I think I want to make a bigger change than the editor asked for,” I said. I ran my hand through my hair. “There’s was something Declan said the other day that made me realize there’s a better way to end the story.”

Molly hesitated. “Are you sure this is a good idea and not a weird way of processing grief? I like the one you already wrote.”

It was a fair question. But...

I shook my head. “I know in my gut. This is a better ending. If I send it to you, can you mock up some illustrations to share with our editor?”

Molly sighed. “Fiiiiiiiiine. But I’m trusting you on this.”

“Good,” I said.

For the first time in a long while, I was trusting myself too.

DECLAN

I sat on the back patio and watched Catie off in the distance, studiously digging for bugs. It had been three days since Olivia had left. Catie and I were doing our best to build a routine around the Olivia-shaped hole in our lives.

I was back to being the responsible adult, which meant keeping cookie consumption to a healthy level and encouraging outdoor play over screen time. Olivia had been right about that. I didn't want Catie to suffer just because I'd fucked everything up.

And by everything, I mean *everything*.

Thomas had been furious when he found out what I intended to do with the O'Rourke mansion. He'd accused me of sabotaging the town's economy and community for my own private crusade. Worse, he didn't believe me when I said that I'd kept him out of the loop for his own benefit. He felt used.

The last time I'd driven through the village, there had been a tiny girl and her grandma standing in front of the O'Rourke mansion with signs that said Save Our Festival.

Everyone thought I was the villain in this saga.

I might have cared more if I didn't miss Olivia so damn bad. Anil innocently teased me about her in our video call the day after we broke up. Apparently, my face had been so distraught, he thought she'd died or something.

The previous night I'd found myself watching *The Deer and the Warrior* late at night after Catie went to bed. Maybe it was the whiskey or the truly terrible dialogue, but when Fionn came back from battle and found his bride gone, I'd cried like a baby.

Not that I'd ever, ever let anyone know that.

My phone buzzed with an incoming call. I recognized the number as Sinead's rehab facility. For a second I just stared at it. I'd been avoiding having a real conversation since I found out who Catie's biological dad was. It had been easy, since mostly she wanted to talk to Catie. But this wasn't Catie's bedtime.

"Hello?" I said, trying to keep my voice light. I'd decided I didn't want to make her talk about Seamus if she didn't want to. I didn't want to bring up anything that would make her recovery harder.

"Mum's worried about you," Sinead said. "She said the whole town hates you because you're going to destroy the old O'Rourke place. I can't believe Olivia dumped you at an airport. It's like *Love Actually*, but depressing."

I groaned. "How did Mum know about the airport?"

"She didn't. Catie told me that part. She's very proud she used the f-word correctly."

"Sorry about that," I said.

Sinead shrugged it off. "She's a Byrne. She was going to start swearing eventually. But seriously. How are you?"

My instinct was to assure her I was fine. I didn't want anyone worrying about me, especially Sinead. I was used to being the tough, capable older brother she could lean on in a crisis, not the other way around.

But I needed advice. And Sinead was the only person I trusted to give it.

So I told her the whole unflattering story. I told her about all the fights Olivia and I had been having, including the one about Seamus, and how they all centered around the same big thing—she thought I was living in the past, and I thought she was scared to face her past so she could actually build a future.

“You get why I have to raze the mansion, right?” I said. “After what he did to Da?”

“I get why you want to,” Sinead said carefully. “Believe me, I want him hurt too. He smirked at me a few days after Da’s funeral, and I almost stabbed him with a pocketknife.”

I smiled at the image. That was Sinead. Tough as nails.

“I don’t know if Olivia’s right, about you living in the past,” Sinead said. “But you shouldn’t destroy that old house, Declan. If you hurt a bunch of innocent people just because you’re putting your family above everyone else...that’s a slippery slope. And at the end of that slope are people like Mark O’Rourke.”

I opened my mouth to argue. Then I shut it.

I’d asked Sinead for her advice. And she’d served me an uncomfortable truth that was going to keep me up all night.

“How are you handling the break-up?” she said, her voice softer now.

I opened my mouth to make a joke, but what came out was, “I thought loving her would be enough.” I hunched over, staring blindly at the ground. “I’ve never fallen in love before. Maybe I did it wrong.”

Silence fell on the other end of the line, like she was searching for something helpful to say.

“Sometimes it’s not just about loving someone. You need them to love you *and* make the healthy changes you’re asking for in order for a future together to seem possible,” Sinead said at last. She took a deep breath, then continued. “I loved Seamus when we were young. He was fun and nice to everyone and always made me feel taken care of when we were hanging out. But he also turned into a wimp around his dad. The worst side of him always came out when he was trying to live up to Mark’s expectations.”

I wasn’t sure what any of that had to do with my situation. But she was finally opening up about Seamus, so I held my tongue.

“I was okay with those issues when we were just hooking up. But they

weren't okay with me anymore once I realized I was pregnant with Catie. So, I never told him she was his," she said.

I blinked. I'd assumed Seamus had known about Catie for years. If he'd only recently realized...

I still hated him. But I could also sympathize with wanting to meet his kid.

"My point is," Sinead said, "you're not asking Olivia to go on casual dates. You're asking her to give up her career and move to a foreign country for you. So, she needs more than love. She needs to know you're as invested in building a future together as you're asking her to be."

I stayed silent, processing her advice.

If Sinead was right, and I'd been in the wrong with Olivia...then I'd given up my own shot with her for no reason.

Across the yard, Catie held up a worm in triumph.

"Want to talk to your daughter?" I asked. "She's investigating the local worm population."

"That's my girl," Sinead said warmly.



My mum was babysitting Catie that afternoon so I could do some work. But instead of working, I found myself in the hotel pub in Galway, staring morosely at a pint of Guinness.

Was there a way to get revenge on Mark O'Rourke without hurting anyone else?

On the other hand, what if I was so desperate to find a way back to Olivia, I was fooling myself into thinking I could find a way around destroying the mansion?

"You going to drink that or just stare at it?" the bartender asked.

I grunted.

My phone buzzed. I glanced at it absently, my heart freezing when I saw the name.

@1000words. Olivia had messaged me.

I tapped the phone, hungry for her words.

I don't know if it's ok to message you like this. But we were friends on here first. So, here goes—I made a change to my picture book I'm proud of. I think you'll like it. Want to see it?

I could hear her voice in my head as I read, and it felt like warm sun on a winter day. It wasn't enough, but it was *her*. I almost told her to show me her book. A part of me was willing to take a tepid online friendship, if that was the only part of Olivia I could have.

I started to type out that response, but then I stopped. I was fooling myself. For a brief, glorious summer, Olivia had let me fall in love her. Having tasted that, I could never go back to less.

I deleted my initial message and started again. *I can't go back to being just your online friend, Olivia. I respect that you don't return my feelings. But I'm not ready to be friends just yet.*

I sent the message before I could overthink it. Then I turned off my phone and downed half my beer in one gulp.

“You all right, *a chara?*” a man said from down the bar.

I looked up, surprised to hear someone speaking Irish in a pub that catered to tourists, and came face to face with Seamus O'Rourke.

“Shit. I didn't realize it was you,” Seamus fumbled. “Your clothes are all wrinkled, and you haven't shaved, and your hair is...” He swallowed. “It's your shoulders, too. They're sort of, um, hunched? And defeated? I...didn't know your shoulders could do that.”

I glared at him.

“Right. I'll just go sit over there,” Seamus said, sliding off his barstool and gesturing vaguely to the tables behind him. He walked away.

I went back to my beer.

Until the steps did a U-turn and approached my end of the bar.

Seamus stopped just out of punching range and took a breath, clearly nervous.

Jesus Christ, I thought. If the wimp gave me crap about buying his fucking house...

"I wanted to thank you for taking care of Catie," Seamus said. "Both this summer and before. Everyone I've talked to says she's a great kid, and I know that's partly because you were there for her when I...wasn't."

I looked at him squarely. I waited for him to start making excuses about how he would have been there if only Sinead had told him.

But he didn't. Instead, he said, "I wanted to ask what I can do to prove to you and Sinead that I'm ready to be part of Catie's life."

He waited, determined. For the first time, I could imagine some of what Sinead might have seen in him.

"That's a question for Sinead," I said slowly. Then, because I didn't like owing him anything, I admitted, "I may have overreacted the last time we talked. I didn't realize you'd just found out yourself."

Seamus nodded, eager to find common ground. "At first, I was mad Sinead hadn't told me. But my sister reminded me what an immature prick I was back then. Totally under my dad's thumb. Plus, there's the bad blood between our families."

I arched a brow. "Is that what we're calling your dad killing mine?"

He winced and flushed. I expected him to leave or start making excuses for his parents. Instead he nodded and said, "You're right. Euphemisms only protect the wrong-doers, eh?"

I blinked. Was he truly that easy-going? Or had he actually grown up?

Seamus set his drink down on the bar and looked me straight in the eye. "I'm sorry I didn't stop my dad that night. I knew he was drinking too much. I

never stood up to him when he was like that because he got so nasty. But I should have. James was such a good man. I threw up when I found out it was him my dad killed.”

It was strange. The angry teenager in me was hearing the thing I’d wanted since that horrible night—for someone to take responsibility for it, and then to look me in the eye and apologize.

But the other part of me was a thirty-year-old man who knew it shouldn’t have been a teen’s responsibility to stop his dad from driving drunk.

“You were a kid yourself,” I said gruffly.

“You would have stood up to him,” Seamus said. “Sinead too. Sometimes I think that’s why I first loved her. She’s fearless.”

He wasn’t wrong. But I could finally admit it wasn’t the whole story either. Seamus might have some advantages that we didn’t, but he’d also grown up with a bastard of a father.

“We had someone to teach us how to be fearless,” I said.

We drank in silence for a bit.

“You probably don’t remember this, but there was this football game at a park in Galway when I was, I don’t know, ten? Anyway, I’m rotten at football, and my dad yelled at me a bit before going back to his office to do some work. I was just relieved to see him go.” Seamus laughed, like what he was describing was some funny, quirky anecdote, instead of another reason Mark O’Rourke deserved a fist to the face. “Anyway. You and your family were in the park that day, having a picnic or something. James came over to me and made a point of telling me what a great job I’d done cheering everyone on my team and making them feel better, even though we were losing. He said there were more important things to be good at than winning.” Seamus looked down at his drink. “I didn’t really get it at that time. But those words stayed with me. Came back to me on days when I needed them. I think he was one of the first people to show me there were other ways to be a man than the shit my dad did. Anyway.” He raised his pint. “I’ll leave you be. Cheers.”

He turned to go.

Reluctantly, I realized that Olivia was right. Mark was awful, but the rest of the O'Rourkes weren't the monsters I'd made them out to be. Seamus was trying his best. His sister was empathetic enough to understand why Sinead hadn't told Seamus about Catie—and to defend her for it.

Slowly, a plan began to fall into place. A way to punish Mark and protect Ballybeith from him, without hurting anyone else.

Unfortunately, I'd need Seamus's help to pull it off. But that didn't seem like nearly as awful a prospect as it would have earlier. Still not something I was looking *forward* to by any means—but maybe something I could live with.

“Seamus,” I said.

He turned around, eager as a puppy dog.

Christ, this was going to be painful.

I indicated the barstool next to me. “Sit down. We have things to discuss.”

OLIVIA

I strolled down to the lake, my hands in my pockets. With no nannying jobs on the horizon, I'd taken to going on walks by the lake every afternoon. I needed the fresh air, exercise, and a reason to actually put on real clothes. It also gave me something to do while I waited for Molly to call me back and tell me whether or not she liked the new ending I'd written for our book.

Now that I'd written it, I honestly couldn't imagine any other way for our story to end.

But what if I was wrong? Was Molly taking so long to call me back because she was trying to figure out a nice way to tell me my idea was bad?

I pulled out my phone to try to distract myself from my fears. I could call a friend to chat, or play some music, or sit down by the lake and mindlessly scroll through social media...

I blew out a sigh. "No. Breathe. Let yourself feel it all," I told myself.

Declan's comment about my running from my painful past had stuck with me. So I was trying, bit by bit, to be fully honest with myself, instead of constantly reaching for a distraction.

The lake came into view. I wandered down to the shoreline. Then I took off my shoes and waded into the water, letting myself name the thing that really scared me.

I'm not worried Molly will suddenly think I'm a bad writer, I thought. I'm

nervous because that ending puts a part of Declan in our book. And everything involving him feels vulnerable and personal right now.

With the fresh, cold water lapping at my ankles, I breathed in that nervous energy. And then I did my best to set it free. Molly would call when she called. And that was okay.

I'd found my lake walks were a good way to give myself the space to let my mind wander toward things I normally shied away from. Old fights I'd had with my parents that I'd tried to forget because it felt disloyal to think about a stray comment that had hurt my feelings when they were both dead and I'd do anything to have time with them again. Creative writing dreams I'd had in college. Every child I'd ever nannied...and the way I still carried them in my heart, all these years later.

I thought all those big emotions I'd had in Ireland had come from being around Declan. But more and more I realized they'd always been there, hidden under the surface. Falling for Declan had just set them free.

I owed him so much, and that had me feeling guilty about the way we'd ended things. I thought showing him the changes he'd inspired in my book could be a way of thanking him for the changes he'd inspired in me. Even if we couldn't be together.

I'd been utterly unprepared for his respect.

I respect that you don't return my feelings.

It had been two days, and I still couldn't get those words out of my head.

Did he really think he was unloved?

Declan was the most justifiably confident man I knew. He always seemed to know his own worth, from the boardroom to the bedroom, and everywhere in between. In eight years of nannying, he was the only client I'd ever had who'd tempted me to lay down my professionalism and just be *me*. I'd told him how close I'd come to giving up everything I knew to be with him.

I thought he knew how I felt.

It would have been cruel to us both to say those words in the airport and then

get on a plane anyway.

But maybe it was worse to leave him in the dark like this, thinking he was unwanted, unloved. When the truth was, I cared about him too much to stick around and watch him destroy himself.

My phone buzzed. I checked it and immediately answered when I saw it was Molly. “What did you think?”

“You were right,” Molly said. “This book ending is fucking brilliant. I’ll never question your creative instincts again.”

I grinned, relieved. “Would it be easier to finish the book if I came back to Ireland? I could use my airline miles.”

“I mean, obviously I’d love to see you. But we can finish the book online,” Molly said. “It might make more sense to save your miles and use them to come out when the book is published? You know, for book signings and stuff.”

I stared ahead at the lake. That would be over a year from now. The idea of waiting a year to bump into Declan made my eyes sting. The idea of him spending a year thinking his love wasn’t the most precious thing anyone had ever given me felt morally offensive.

“Sure,” I said. “That makes sense.”

Molly made a suspicious sound on the other end of the line. “Why do I get the feeling that you’re fishing for a reason to go see a billionaire who keeps making you cry?”

I blew out a sigh. “I don’t like how we ended things. Also, I didn’t say goodbye to you, or Marie, or Thomas. Everyone was so lovely to me, and I just fled.”

Molly sighed. “Look, my couch is yours any time you want it. I would fucking love to work on this book in person with you. I’m just saying, it’s okay to protect your heart. It’s not like Declan Byrne has to save up his airline miles, right? If he wanted to ‘end things on a better note,’ he’d be at your fucking door by now.”

I kicked at the lake water, watching the drops fly up and scatter, forming ripples. “I told him to stop chasing after me. I just don’t know...”

“...if he stopped chasing because he’s respecting your wishes or because he just doesn’t want to?”

“That,” I said. I groaned. “I’m beginning to see the appeal of breaking up via evil sorcerers who turn you into an enchanted deer.”

“Sure, keep it simple,” Molly agreed.

I laughed. Despite the heartbreak, despite the uncertainty, I laughed.

“You know,” Molly said suddenly. “I just realized. There’s no possible way to finish this book unless you come to Ireland. I’m sure of it.”

My heart lifted at the thought of going home. “Really? You think I’m doing the right thing?”

“Better. I’m doing what our book says, and listening to my gut,” Molly said. “And my gut says you need to be in Ireland right now.”

It was only after we’d hung up that I realized I’d just thought of Ireland as *home*.

DECLAN

Two days after my fateful meeting with Seamus in a bar, I found myself in Mark O'Rourke's hastily rented Galway office. Once upon a time he would have taken this meeting in his mansion, but I'd made sure he couldn't do that anymore. I was working on being a better, less vengeance-driven person, but I had to admit that part still felt *very* good.

Seamus sat to my right, his face nervous but resolute.

Don't crumble now, I thought. Seamus had leapt on my plan with enthusiasm when I'd proposed it. But making a plan over pints in a pub was different from actually facing down the man who had bullied you since childhood.

Mark addressed Seamus. "I agreed to see you. Not him. He betrayed our family. And you have too, if you're spending time with him."

Seamus paled.

"Lovely office," I cut in dryly, trying to draw Mark's ire before Seamus could lose his nerve. "Not quite as good as the old place."

Mark rose and slammed his hands on the desk. "Get out of my office, you bastard."

I slouched in my chair, mostly because I could tell it pissed Mark off. If this was going to work, Mark needed to feel like he was truly out of options. "Originally, I planned to turn your ancestral home into a pile of rubble."

I let that sink in.

Mark fumed.

“But Seamus has proposed another option,” I said. “One I think you’ll like better.”

Mark gritted his jaw. Glanced at Seamus. “Is this true?”

“I’d listen to him, Dad,” Seamus said.

Slowly, Mark sat back down behind his desk. “You have five minutes. Then I throw you out of office.”

Good, I thought, the predator in me sharpening its claws for the kill. Mark was listening. And that meant Seamus and I had a shot. “I’m willing to let the mansion stand, if you permanently retire and reinstate Seamus as head of the O’Rourke family business.”

Mark guffawed. “This buffoon? He drove us into the ground. *He’s* the reason we have to sell.”

“He’s also the only reason I haven’t called in the bulldozers yet,” I said.

Mark hedged. “You’d sell the mansion back to me?”

I barked out a laugh. “Fuck no. You’ll never cross that threshold again, as long as I draw breath.”

Mark glared at me, furious. I held his gaze, letting him see the truth of that threat in my eyes. Until he finally understood that he had nowhere else to turn.

“Then what’s in it for me?” Mark’s eyes darted back and forth between me and Seamus like a cornered rat.

God, he was pathetic.

I couldn’t believe he’d convinced so many people to fear him for so long.

“Your dignity and your family legacy,” Seamus said. He leaned forward. “In one version, you retire magnanimously. Declan’s agreed that the mansion will go to my oldest child when he or she turns eighteen.”

That particular deal point had been surprisingly easy for me and Seamus to

agree on, once I'd decided not to level the mansion. It should obviously go to Catie.

"You'd have to have a child first," Mark grumbled, but I could tell he was listening. He probably had visions of molding and shaping some future heir.

As if Sinead would ever let him get away with that.

Now that Seamus had played the angel offering a way out, it was time for me to play the devil.

I speared Mark with a glance. "Of course, in the other version, I destroy the mansion. The rubble heap becomes a very public monument to the worst defeat of your life. And then I will proceed to drive you out of business, one property at a time." I grinned like a shark. "That's my favorite option personally, but Seamus insisted you'd see reason and choose the other plan."

Mark shifted. "I'll need time to think about it."

I gritted my teeth. That wasn't what I wanted to hear. But this mattered enough to do it right. I opened my mouth, prepared to give Mark till the end of the day to think it over.

But Seamus surprised me.

"No. You won't," Seamus announced, sounding genuinely imposing for the first time in his life. He stood and presented his father with a contract Thomas had drawn up last night. "You'll sign here right now, to pass the company over to me. Or we'll leave this meeting, and I'll tell everyone you chose to turn our home into rubble instead of accepting Declan's generous offer."

I bit back a smile. The kid had finally grown up.

I glanced down at my watch, feigning boredom. "You've got sixty seconds to think it over. After that, I call the bulldozers."

Mark blustered and shouted for approximately 59 seconds, but Seamus didn't flinch. And at last the second, Mark caved and signed the papers. He held the pen so tightly his knuckles were turning white, the point slashing his signature over the dotted line with the violence of a knife slash.

And, just like that, it was done.

Seamus and I strode outside onto the sidewalk with a signed contract that would make life better for everyone in town.

I glanced at Seamus. “You did good in there.”

“I imagined what Sinead would say,” Seamus admitted, somewhat bashfully.

I laughed.

I turned to him and held out my hand. “Let me know if you need business advice. I can help you find a middle ground between Mark’s predatory practices and your...” I tried to think of a generous way to say *your terrible but well-intentioned business decisions*.

“My previous choices?” Seamus suggested.

“Sure. That.” We shook.

As I walked away, I felt the familiar buzz of victory. But this time, the victory wasn’t tinged with dread of what other people would think. It felt clean. Right.

Like something Da would have approved of.



Five days later, Sinead finally came home. I’d never forget Catie’s joy when she saw her mum at the airport for as long as I live, or the way Sinead clutched Catie close and wept, murmuring, “I’m here, baby, I’m here.”

Instead of driving back to my house, we stopped in Galway to meet my mum for lunch. Afterward, we all went for a walk along the water. Catie was up ahead with her grandma, but she kept peeking back to stare at Sinead, a giant smile on her face.

I cleared my throat. “I set up a bank account in Catie’s name and put some money in it for you both.”

I’d put a million dollars in it, to be precise.

“You didn’t have to—”

“That way, if you ever need money, you can use it without having to justify your choices to me.” My smile was crooked. “Someone mentioned I can be overbearing. And it’s possible that I don’t *always* know what’s best.”

Sinead stopped and faced me, hands on her hips. “You bastard. You know I can’t turn down anything that will help Catie.”

I grinned and dropped a kiss on the top of her head. “I love you too.”

We started walking again. I updated her on my new plan for the O’Rourke mansion. “I’m thinking of turning it into a community center and naming it after Da. I know you’re heading back to the States, but if you ever wanted to move back, I was thinking you could help me run it.”

I stuck my hands in my pockets and faced forward so she wouldn’t notice how badly I wanted her to say yes.

“...I’ll think about it,” Sinead said. “One of the things I realized in rehab is that the reasons I left don’t matter as much anymore. And the things pulling me back are stronger than ever.”

I bit my cheek to keep from smiling too hopefully.

Sinead was in recovery. And she and Catie might be coming home for good.

We started walking again. “What did Olivia say when you told her you’re turning the mansion into a community center?”

“I haven’t told her,” I said.

She slugged me. “*Why?*”

I shook out my arm where she’d hit me. “She told me to stop chasing her. I don’t think ignoring her wishes is the way to win her back—if she even wants me back.”

“Why wouldn’t she want you back?” Sinead asked, confused. “*She was going to move to Ireland for you.*”

I shook my head, ruthlessly shutting down the hope trying to flicker to life at her words. “She reached out a while back to talk about something that matters a lot to her. You know, as a friend. I was in a bad place, and I shut

her down. She hasn't tried to talk to me since."

Sinead looked disappointed. "That's too bad. I wanted to meet her."

I changed the topic. "Catie can't wait to show you the bugs she found. She was keeping them in a shoebox, but I convinced her to upgrade to a terrarium."

Eventually we wound our way back to the car. We were saying goodbye to my mum, when Catie spotted Molly across the street and started jumping up and down.

"Mom! That's the lady who sells me books!" She pointed.

Molly and Sinead's faces lit up when they saw each other. I was surprised for a second but then realized I shouldn't have been. Sinead had been closer to Molly in school than I was.

"She's illustrating Olivia's book," I added, and then wished I'd bit my tongue. I sounded like a teenager talking about my crush.

Sinead got a gleam in her eye. "Well, we have to say hi, then." She towed Catie and my mum across the street. I followed warily.

They'd barely made it through two minutes of small talk when Sinead blurted, "You're Olivia's friend. Tell Declan he's being an idiot. He won't go after Olivia even though he's clearly head over heels for her."

Sinead gestured to me, as if my longing for Olivia was written all over my face.

Who knows, maybe it was.

I crossed my arms and scowled at my brat of sister. "She told me to let her go."

Sinead arched an eyebrow. "And your gut's telling you that's the right thing? To let her go?"

I clenched my jaw. I knew she meant well, but this wasn't a game. "It doesn't matter what my gut says."

Molly was watching this exchange, wide-eyed. "Um. I think there's

something you should see, Declan.”

She dug in her bag and produced a folder of what looked like sketches for a picture book. Underneath, I recognized Olivia’s words.

Pride and pain mixed equally inside of me.

I turned the pages carefully, newly awed that Olivia could create something like this. It wasn’t until the end that I noticed the words changing from what I remembered. The last ending had been about how you could always remember the advice of the people you loved who were gone, and how those words would guide you through.

This ending was different. In this one, the duckling realized that sometimes he would encounter situations his mom hadn’t given him advice for. But in those moments, he could listen to his own heart, because he knew the people who loved him had raised him to have a good, smart heart.

My hands tightened involuntarily on the pages.

It was what I’d told Olivia in the garden.

I’d thought she wanted to show me the change in her book as a way of re-establishing our casual online friendship.

But what if she’d been showing it to me to tell me to follow my heart?

“Breathe, Declan,” Mum said.

I inhaled sharply, the warm scents of a summer afternoon flooding me. I felt like I was coming back to life. Suddenly, the world was full of hope. And it was fucking beautiful.

Olivia was giving me permission to follow her one more time. And this time, I wasn’t going to waste my shot.

OLIVIA

Exactly six days after I told Molly I needed to see Declan one more time, I found myself racing through the Minneapolis airport to get to my gate. One thing after another had gone wrong this morning. If I missed my flight because my rideshare driver didn't believe in maps...

I skidded to a halt in front of my gate just in time to hear the announcement that my flight had been delayed by an hour and a half.

Oh.

Well, that was anticlimactic, I thought.

On the bright side, now I had time to eat real food.

I craned my neck until I spotted a coffee shop a few gates down.

As I strolled to the coffee shop, I checked Snug. I'd been corresponding with a potential sponsor, and I wanted to see if they'd gotten back to me. But when I opened the app, I found hundreds of notifications. At first I thought it was some kind of tech glitch.

Then I thought a bunch of spammers had left hundreds of comments on my blog. I scrolled, confused, until one comment popped out at me.

Love your voice! I'm so glad @DeclanByrneOfficial included you in his top ten freshest voices. He hasn't done one of those in forever.

Three clicks later, I was scrolling through the most recent post from Declan's

official Snug account. He'd done a post a few hours ago shouting out ten blogs on Snug.

I came in at #2.

The competitive part of me was indignant until I saw that #1 was a UN ambassador literally saving the world from climate change.

Which, you know, fair enough.

As I clicked back to my blog, the magnitude of what he'd done for me sank in. My follower count had already risen by 92%. My engagement rate was through the roof.

If my numbers kept going up like this... It would change the kind of sponsors I could attract. It gave me more power.

It gave me *options*.

I'd broken his heart in an airport. But he was still going out of his way to make my life easier.

I started walking toward the coffee shop again, my heart doing twisty somersaults between love for Declan, grief at losing him, and bittersweet hope because at least I'd soon get to see him one more time.

I was waiting in line at the coffee shop when I glanced to the other restaurant across the way. It was one of those overpriced cocktail bars. Since it was only 11:15 a.m., it was empty save for one dark-haired man, hunched over and scribbling on a napkin. A very *familiar* looking dark-haired man.

No, I thought. It couldn't be him. I'm just seeing what I want to see.

But my body believed it, even if my mind didn't. My pulse raced, and a tornado of butterflies swarmed in my stomach.

He glanced up, and our eyes locked.

In that moment, time stopped.

Declan was in the same airport as me. It felt like serendipity. It felt like fate. It felt like a second chance.

Then reality reared its ugly head, and I realized the most obvious reason Declan would be flying commercial through Minneapolis.

I hurried to him.

He threw down some bills on his table and met me halfway.

“Is Sinead okay?” I blurted.

“Of course. She’s fine.” He frowned, confused.

I rubbed a hand over my heart, words like *relapse* and *accident* fading away. “Oh. Good. I just couldn’t think of any other reason you’d be in Minneapolis.”

He looked at me like he was drinking me in. “Can’t you, *a ghrá?*”

My heart fluttered dangerously.

As amazing as it was to see Declan here, I realized it complicated my plans. I didn’t know how much time I had before our paths uncrossed, and he had to catch his plane to wherever he was heading next.

Someone knocked into me with a suitcase, and Declan caught me to him.

His eyes darkened, and for a moment I thought he was going to kiss me.

Yes, my soul begged. *One more time.*

But that wasn’t fair to him. Not when I’d put his heart on the line, and I’d been the one to say no.

Declan’s hands ran up and down my arms, like he was reassuring himself I was really there.

I knew the feeling.

He cleared his throat. “Join me at the bar? There’s something I want to talk to you about.”

I wet my lips. It would have been easy to let him take control of the situation. But I needed to say this before I lost my nerve.

“Me first.” I drank in his gorgeous, familiar face. “Even though it’s over

between us, I need you to know how amazing you are. You changed my life for the better. You gave me the courage to pursue a dream I'd almost forgotten I had."

He cupped my cheek with one hand. "Olivia," he breathed.

"But most importantly, you reminded me how much I want a family. Even though it didn't work out between us in the way that I hoped, I want you to know that I love you, Declan," I confessed. "I'm never going to regret the time we spent together."

His eyes were almost frighteningly intense. Did he think I was ridiculous, blurting all this out? Too little too late?

"It's just, your message made it sound like you thought I didn't return your feelings. And I do," I babbled. "I need you to know that I do. You were the best choice I ever made."

Declan's eyes searched mine. "And you're saying all this even though I told you I couldn't change? Even though I swore I'd demolish that mansion?"

I swallowed. "I know it doesn't change anything. Maybe I shouldn't have said anything. I just needed you to know that...I see you. And you're magnificent."

Declan closed his eyes and pressed his forehead to mine. "God, I don't deserve you."

You could. You do, my heart whispered. But he'd made his choice, and I'd made mine.

He pulled back just far enough to see my face, but he didn't let go of me. His hands slid down my arms, until he found my hands, and took them.

"I was working on this speech over in the bar. I wanted to get it perfect before I told you I was in town. But apparently you're leaving town, so..." He laughed, rough and uncertain.

He's nervous, I realized. I couldn't remember ever seeing him nervous. Not even when he'd been chasing me to an airport and declaring he loved me.

He took a breath. "You were right, Oliva. I was holding onto the past two

tightly. I was obsessed with a revenge plan made by a grieving teenager. You reminded me that I *could* change my plans. And you gave me something worth changing my plans for.”

My heart was racing. I didn’t quite dare believe my ears. If he did the one thing I’d told him I needed him to do so we could be together...

“You were also right about Seamus being different from his father. So I leveraged the threat of destroying the mansion to get Mark to sign over his whole business to Seamus, permanently. Sinead’s going to help me to turn the mansion into a community center. We’ll still host the festival,” Declan assured me.

My breath felt uneven. Was I crying? I felt like I was on the verge of crying. He was giving me the thing I hadn’t dared hope for.

“I’m also trying to help Seamus learn how to run a fair, ethical, *financially solvent* business,” Declan said. “He was texting me questions on the plane. I swear, he’s dumb as an ox when it comes to numbers.”

That startled a laugh out of me.

“It’s up to Sinead whether she wants Seamus to be part of Catie’s life,” Declan added. “But I’m not going to stand in the way anymore.”

I nodded, my throat tight.

I’d asked him to *consider* not destroying a building. And he’d come up with a whole host of solutions, all of them so much better than anything I could have imagined.

I squeezed his hands fiercely. “I told you. You’re marvelous, Declan Byrne.”

He shook his head, stubborn, and in that instinctual obstinance I saw the grumpy, aggravating man I’d fallen for. And I loved that side of him just as much as the newer, more vulnerable one he’d flown across an ocean to show me.

“I only did any of this because of you. Not for you, but *because* of you. You changed my life too, Olivia. Over and over again,” he said, affection and exasperation warring in his eyes, before settling into something that looked a

lot like wonder. “You make me better. I was a mess, but now...it’s different. I feel different. I...” he hesitated, looked straight into my eyes, and smiled. “I love you so fucking much.”

“Poetic,” I teased.

He gestured to the bar with our joined hands. “There’s a stack full of napkins in there covered in terrible metaphors for what I feel for you. But the thing is, you’re beyond words, Olivia.”

Okay, I was definitely crying now.

He gently wiped my tears with his thumbs. “Give me another chance, *a ghrá?*”

“Yes. Yes. God, yes. As many as you want.” Our lips found each other, and it was more than simple sparks. It was a roaring bonfire, hot and strong and true. “Don’t ever send me away again.”

“Never,” he promised. His lips found my eyelids, my nose, my cheek, before brushing against my lips. “Don’t ask me not to follow you. That nearly killed me.”

“Never,” I agreed. “From now on, we both get as many chances as we need.”

“Good,” Declan agreed. The word was an ending, but it was a beginning to.

He kissed me one more time, only stopping when someone accidentally knocked over my suitcase. He grabbed the handle, smiling at me.

“Now, for the love of God—please let me change your ticket from whatever horrible place you’re headed off to, and let me take you home,” Declan ordered.

I smiled and showed him my ticket on the phone. “That was always the plan. I just didn’t know you were coming to escort me.”

Declan stared at the phone, stunned. “You really were coming to tell me you loved me. That’s... Jesus.” His throat worked, like he was struggling with his emotions.

“Well, that and I’ve got a dream career to pursue,” I teased.

He dragged me away until he found a private corner where no one would see us. Then he pulled me to him and kissed me like he meant it.



Forty-five minutes later, I was dashing through the airport again to get to my gate. But this time, Declan and I were running together.

EPILOGUE

“Olivia! Sinead needs more wood for the bonfire,” Molly called.

“On it,” I said.

It was the last day of the summer festival, and Sinead had outdone herself.

Granted, I’d only been to one festival previously, but I thought Sinead’s version was a huge improvement. She’d added two more days to the festival, one filled with family-friendly events, and one designed for adults but strictly without alcohol. Now that she was in a better place in her life, it didn’t bother her to be around other people drinking. But she wanted other addicts to feel equally welcome. She’d also reached out to film studies programs all over Ireland, which had led to a healthy influx of university students, some of whom seemed to be falling in love with Ballybeith the same way I had.

I headed to the shed where the wood was stored, passing where Catie was dashing around with her friends in an elaborate game of keep-away.

Catie had friends now. *Plural.*

I was so proud of her.

Her giggle rose above the noise of the party, light and carefree. The nervous girl I’d met in an airport clutching her uncle’s hand was long gone. There was no denying Catie was thriving, and it warmed my heart.

I opened the shed and stepped inside.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Declan asked from behind me.

“Getting wood,” I said.

I saw every dirty joke he could possibly make in response to that flicker across his face. But in the end all he said was, “Let me carry it for you. I need a break from Anil and Thomas.”

“Awww,” I teased. “Are the other kids making fun of you?”

“It’s horrible,” he said, his face serious even as his eyes danced. “Kiss me and make it better?”

“If you insist.”

He leaned against the shed wall and pulled me between his legs. It didn’t matter how many times we did this. Heat flared every time he kissed me.

“Fuck,” Declan groaned, dragging his mouth over my neck as his palm found my breast. “You’re so hot.”

I shivered under his touch. My breasts had been especially sensitive lately. According to Google, it was a side-effect of the secret I planned to tell Declan tonight.

“We had sex this morning,” I reminded him.

“*You* had sex,” he grumbled. “Sinead called with a picnic table emergency right after I finished going down on you.”

I ran my hands through his hair. “I’ll make it up to you tonight. We can do that thing you like.”

He laughed. “That doesn’t narrow it down. I like everything you do.”

I leaned in and rose up on my toes to gently nip at his ear. “I was thinking of that thing we did on your birthday.”

He froze. And then his eyes darkened, and he yanked me to him, kissing me in earnest.

At least until the shed door opened.

“Ooops,” Seamus said. “Sorry about that. Sinead wanted more firewood.” He grabbed two bundles of firewood. “The festival’s really great this year, isn’t it? That one vendor made your favorite cocktail, Olivia.”

“Seamus,” Declan said, his voice dark. “Get out of here. Or I am never giving you business advice again.”

Seamus beat a hasty retreat. He’d had a good year. His family’s business was on remarkably solid footing, and he’d done it without any of Mark’s predatory practices. With Sinead’s help, he’d become a good co-parent to Catie. He’d started wooing Sinead in earnest about a month ago, and Sinead was clearly enjoying it, though she hadn’t given in just yet.

But Seamus wasn’t about to risk getting on Declan’s bad side. Not again.

The door swung shut behind him.

Declan’s mouth lowered toward mine, his eyes hot with the kind of intent that made my stomach flutter.

I placed a hand to his chest. “He’s right. We should get back out there and say hi to people.”

“Or we could stay here. Lock the door,” Declan said. He toyed with the strap of my sundress. “See how quiet you can be while I make you come.”

My knees went weak, but I mustered the strength to swat his hand away from my dress strap. “Stop that. Molly’s editing friend was going to try to make it out today. I can’t be screwing you in a shed while she’s out there looking for me.”

Our book had just been published, but it was already getting great buzz. Buzz I was only too happy to help along with my successful, *sponsored*, blog. Once Molly’s publishing friend arrived, we were planning to discuss future book ideas.

Declan gave a long-suffering sigh. But he let me drag him from the cool, dark shed and back out into the party.

Marie appeared and handed me a raspberry margarita from the bar. “Here you go, love. It’s too strong for me, but someone said you love them.”

“Oh. Um. Thank you so much. But I just drank one.” I set it down behind me.

When I turned back, Declan was looking at me in concern. “What are you talking about? You haven’t touched a drop of alcohol all day.”

Marie’s eyes caught mine and widened in a question.

I blushed. She beamed.

Declan checked my forehead, oblivious. “Are you feeling sick?”

“I’m fine,” I protested.

But Declan still looked concerned. “You’ve been out in the heat all day. Let me get some water.” He turned toward the refreshment table, but I caught his wrist and lead him aside, a bit deeper into the garden. This wasn’t how I’d planned on telling him, but I was so excited, and the moment just seemed right.

I couldn’t wait any longer to share the news.

“Declan, I’m pregnant,” I said, smiling so hard I felt like I was going to burst.

For a second he just stared. I couldn’t read the intense emotions battling across his face.

“Declan?” I asked, feeling a touch uncertain for the first time since I’d read the results on the pregnancy test.

Then slowly, deliberately, he went down on one knee. “Olivia St. James. Will you take me as your husband?”

My heart soared. “Yes. Of course. Yes.”

He rose and kissed me. Around us, people clapped and whooped.

I broke away. “Wait. Unless you don’t want... You don’t have to marry me just because I’m pregnant.”

“Yes, he does!” Marie called, and then everyone started chiming in with their opinions.

Declan ignored them all. “Of course I want to marry you, Olivia. I’ve been

ready for months, I just didn't want to rush you. I was going to ask you tonight."

I must have looked skeptical because he made a strangled noise of frustration and grabbed my hand. "Come on. I'm not spending the rest of my life with you thinking I proposed for any other reason than irritatingly debilitating love."

He pulled me to the car and drove us home.

I twisted to look out the back window. "It looks like half the festival is following us. Your mom's leading the caravan."

Declan muttered darkly about small towns and women who would be the death of him.

When we pulled up in front of the house, Declan reached across me and grabbed a ring box from his glove compartment.

A very expensive-looking ring box.

It finally sank in. I covered my spreading smile with my hand. "Okay. I believe you. You want to marry me."

"You're not getting off that easily," Declan threatened. Or maybe promised.

He helped me out of his car like I was some kind of princess, and led me around to the back of the house. The other cars parked and followed us.

When we turned the corner, I gasped.

Declan had set up a picnic in the backyard, just like our first date. But it was even more romantic than before. Twinkle lights decorated the garden. The lawn was covered with rose petals and lavender. The scent was rich and heady as I spun around, taking it all in.

Declan watched me, a crooked smile on his face.

"You ready?" he asked when I turned back to face him.

I nodded.

This time when Declan went down on one knee, I could read everything in

his face. Love. Hope. Wonder. All of it shaded with a fierce determination.

“Olivia. Love. *A ghrá*. I’ve been calling you that since before I could admit to myself what you mean to me.” He took my hand and kissed the back of it reverently, like a knight in a fairy tale. “You’re the love of my fucking life. The mother of my child.” His eyes were bright and sure. “Marry me and share all the days of my life with me. Everything I ever was and everything I ever will be is yours.”

“Absolutely. Yes. That.” I fell to my knees and kissed him. He kissed me back, dropping the ring box in his haste to hold me tight. “I love you so much, Declan. Every side of you, every version of you. Now and always.”

“Okay, but what’s the ring look like?” someone called from behind us.

Declan laughed into my mouth, and the joy on his lips felt like a personal achievement. Declan had confessed one time, late at night, that he felt like I’d brought him back to life. I knew what he meant. After a lifetime shadowed by heartbreak, we’d brought each other out of the dark and into the starlight.

And we were going to live together under those stars for the rest of our lives.

END OF THE BOSSY ONE

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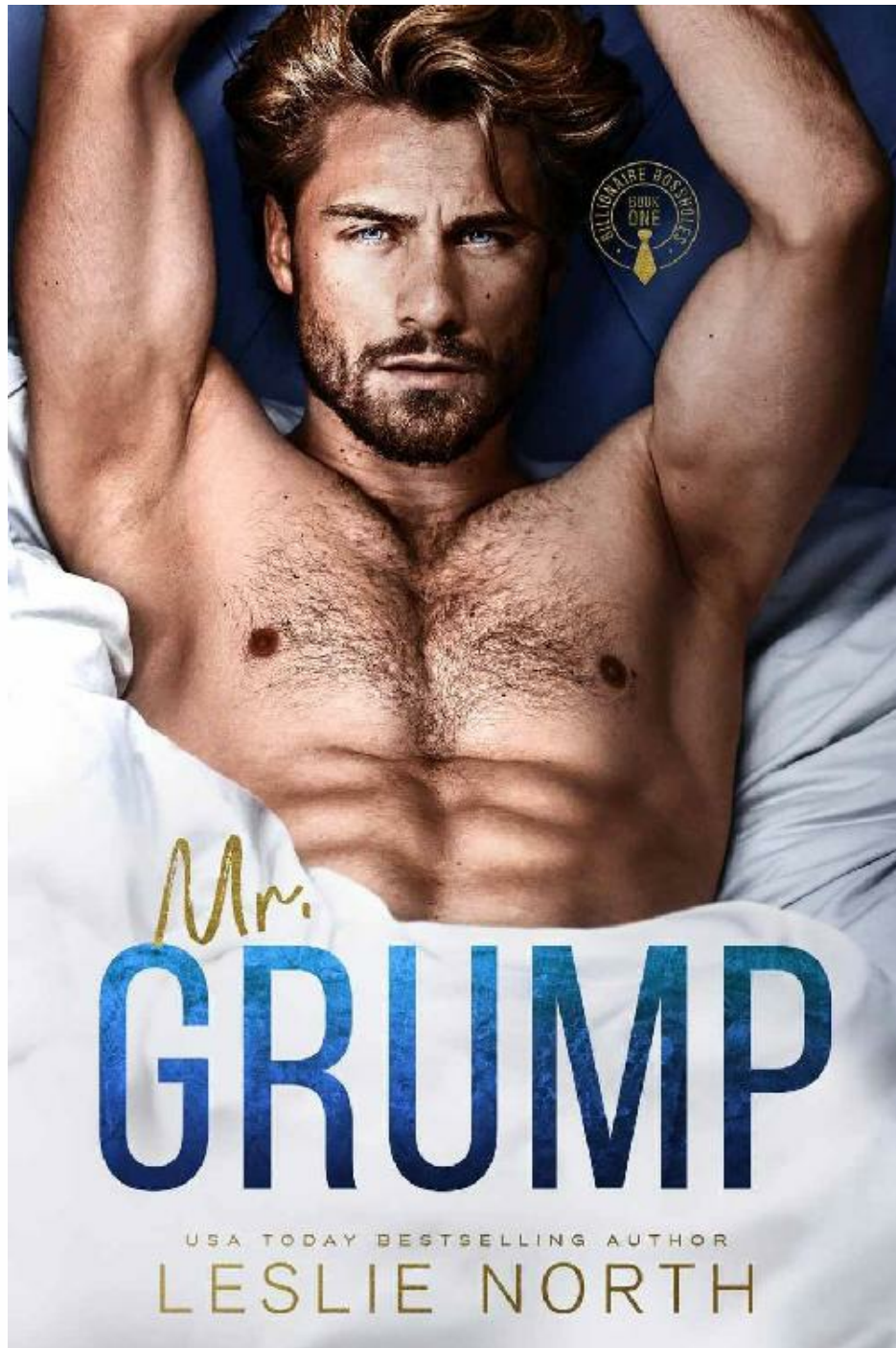
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BLURB

I have a confession.

I *hate* bachelorette parties.

A night of dick straws, awkward dancing and being told “it’ll be you soon,

Kaitlyn!”

Especially when it’s at a super swanky Miami club, exactly where I don’t belong.

Couldn’t get any worse, right?

Enter Mr. Tall, Dark and *I-didn’t-know-they-made-people-this-gorgeous*.

Grump supreme. His scowl has a scowl.

Especially after I knock a drink onto a VIP and myself.

He must be the manager of the club because he has keys to the penthouse above it.

A penthouse he offers to let me change clothes in.

A penthouse we screw *all over*.

Then, he gets a call and kicks me out.

Told you it got worse.

Ready for worser?

First day at my new job as a nanny and Mr. Scowl is my boss.

James Morris.

Billionaire club owner, deal maker, and first grade bosshole—if the tabloids are to be believed.

Also a single dad to an adorable daughter who needs my help.

But there's no way I can take this job—every time I look at him, I’m back in that penthouse.

And from the way he smiles when he looks at me, he’s thinking the same.

Then he tells me why this has to work. Why he needs me. Why I can’t say no.

New confession?

I hate my boss.

**Grab your copy of *Mr. Grump* from
www.LeslieNorthBooks.com**



EXCERPT

Chapter One Kaitlyn

There are two things I should've done: I should've stayed home, and I should've worn my glasses. Of course, I did neither of these things.

“The stairs, watch it!”

“Holy shit...!”

“She's gonna—!”

Club-goers are usually a loud bunch, but I didn't even hear the rest of that last sentence. My shoe landed on nothing but air, the club's strobing lights danced all around me, and next thing I know I was all-engines go, ready for takeoff.

My arms shot up as I lost balance, my ankle twisted as my shoe finally connected with the step, and I realized this was the end of the road for me. Instead of a long and fruitful life, it would all end with a sad obituary line: girl breaks neck in a nightclub.

But then, there was...*someone*?

All I could see was the blurry contour of a man, but I still held on to him as hard as I could. Except, instead of connecting with a warm body, my hand connected with a full tray of champagne flutes.

“No, miss! Careful!” the waiter—he was close enough for me to see he was a waiter—yelped, but it was already too late. I held onto the edge of his tray, the one carrying enough champagne to turn a bottomless brunch into a never-ending mimosa marathon, and pulled on it to steady myself.

The good news?

I did manage to steady myself.

The bad news? The waiter didn't.

The poor man stumbled, the tray flew up into the air, and a tidal wave of champagne washed all over us and whoever was in the blast zone. Well, at least I wasn't falling anymore. Instead, I was just drowning in champagne. Not a good way start to the night.

I rushed to help the waiter, definitely faster than I should've, and tripped again. The ground rushed up to meet me—again—and I braced myself for impact.

And that's when he showed up.

"You've gotta be fucking kidding me." His voice was deep, vibrant, *angry*. And then there was his hand. His long, strong fingers, were wrapped tight around my elbow, mercifully keeping me in an upright position while sending a pleasant shiver up my spine.

"I'm so sorry," I said. "I didn't see where I was going. It's not his fault. I didn't have my glasses on, and I... oh, hell with it." I pulled back from the man's hold, reached inside my purse, and grabbed my oversized hot pink, rhinestone-encrusted cat eyeglasses.

They weren't a fashion statement—instead, they were meant to be a joke. The kind of glasses to have around as back-up, nothing but a fun prop to get a laugh during a dinner party. Of course, God has a twisted sense of humor, and last night I sat on my regular glasses and my next batch of contacts didn't get here in time before Cassie's bachelorette party. Cue the unwise decision to not wear any glasses tonight.

As I balanced the glasses on my nose, the world came into focus.

"What in the world has just happened?" The owner of that shiver-inducing voice was still standing directly in front of me, his expression that of someone who'd just caught a trespasser trying to pocket the silver cutlery. Whether he was annoyed at me or the waiter, I couldn't really tell. "Are you alright...miss?"

The words coming out of his mouth were polite enough, but his face worded it differently: instead of '*are you alright?*' what I heard was '*are you alright in the head?*'

"I... Well, I..."

Jesus Christ, Katie, I thought, keep it together. You can do this. You can put a coherent sentence together.

Still, the words didn't come easily. In a futile attempt to clear my head, I turned my gaze to the poor waiter, his white shirt now a pale shade of yellow, and then back to the man standing in front of me. He was...

Damn.

He just *was*.

Tall and with broad shoulders, he wore a crisp black shirt that hugged his lean torso in the most appetizing of ways. His face had a blend of hard and smooth features—as if they'd been carved from marble and then carefully polished to perfection—and his eyes. They were just...

Focus, for God's sake, my inner voice commanded. I know it's been a long time, but not the time or place!

"Anybody home?" The man insisted, waving his open palm in front of my eyes. "What exactly happened here?"

"I'm so sorry," I repeated, quickly rushing to the waiter's side to check up on him. It was the least I could do. "I'm fine, really, I am. But you—"

"I'm fine, miss." The waiter waved me away as politely as he could, his eyes honing in on the carpet of shattered glass littering the club floor, and closed his eyes. I was having a bad day, but his didn't seem to be going much better.

And all because of me.

"Take care of this, Fernando," the brooding man in the black shirt said to the poor waiter. A quick snap of his fingers and a small battalion of waiters materialized out of thin air. Like a well-oiled machine, the group cordoned off the mess and started picking up the glass and moping the floor, working up a storm as the party raged all around us.

I hated it.

I had come here to have some fun, not to make people's lives harder. And this club... God, this club wasn't what I'd expected. At all.

Given its location on the top floor of one of the tallest buildings in Miami, I was expecting more of a Miami Beach vibe complete with neon and palm trees. But now, I was amazed at what I could only describe as elegance... on steroids. The interior was monochromatic navy with low leather banquettes surrounding the dancefloor, blue-black paint on the walls, and, looking up, chandeliers that shimmered like rain, all of which made Bloom feel more like a posh members-only club. Everything was lush and decadently comfortable, and I could not feel more out of place.

“I feel terrible, truly. I can pay for—”

“Certainly not,” the man—some kind of floor manager, I assumed—cut in. “Accidents happen and...” He narrowed his eyes at me, his expression going from annoyance to... shock? He was looking into my eyes hard enough to tear my soul to shreds, and my body heated up from the inside out. Only then did I realize he was looking at my glasses. “What exactly are *these*?”

Oh, his tone...I could tolerate some abuse, but not this.

“Glasses,” I replied, the word carrying a sharp edge. “You know, for seeing.”

“And are they working?” He shot right back at me, eyebrow cocked. His eyes weren’t lasers, but I could almost feel the eyeglasses’ plastic frame melting against my face.

Sure, I get it: as far as clubs go, Club Bloom was the pinnacle of the Miami party industry. You didn’t get in unless you were literally made of money or looked like a movie star. I was certainly not made of money, and I figured my glasses didn’t quite fit the Hollywood style...but I sure as hell didn’t appreciate being judged by my appearance. Even if I wasn’t particularly proud of it.

“Maybe something more practical would’ve been better,” he continued, eyeing up the stairs that had almost killed me. “How exactly did you miss these? They’re not hard to—”

“I wasn’t wearing my glasses,” I admitted. “Sure, I should’ve, because if I were, I—”

“Oh, so these don’t improve sight,” he said. “They just work in hindsight, huh? Got it.” He pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes for a

second, looking as if he were trying to stop himself from flattening me with his stupid puns. “I guess I can’t blame you for not wanting to wear them.” He pressed his lips together, an amused glint on his eyes. Clearly, whoever this guy was, he was struggling to keep it professional. He could tell I didn’t belong here, and he was having fun at my expense... and yet, as infuriating as this was, I couldn’t find the words to fight back. My brain was too preoccupied with the perfect symmetry of his jawline, and with the way his lips seem so damn kissable. The man was, obviously, one of fate’s cruel jokes: an attitude so abrasive he could strip paint off walls...but hidden inside a package so hot it should come with a warning label. “Look, it’s fine, next time just—oh.”

His eyes fell from my face to my body, and I suddenly became very conscious of how my dress was clinging to my curves. I didn’t remember it being so tight... or so uncomfortably wet.

“Oh, shit,” I muttered, patting the drenched fabric of my ruined dress. “I’m all—”

“Wet?” The man offered, that suppressed smirk now blooming on his lips. He paused for a heartbeat, struggling to wipe that stupid smirk off his face, and only then did he continue. “Apologies for all this, miss, truly. Our wonderful ladies’ lounge attendant has an entire dry cleaner’s closet of supplies and will get you tidied right up for the rest of the evening. Your evening’s festivities are on me, of course, as well as a replacement for...” he trailed off, trying to guess the brand of my dress and failing miserably. “... that.”

“There’s nothing wrong with my dress!” I pinched the wet fabric away from my torso. The movement pulled the dress tight against my ass and revealed a few inches more of my legs. Immediately, an uncomfortable warmth spread across my face as I tried to pull the dress back down.

“I didn’t say there was.” He pressed his lips together again—was he trying to keep himself from laughing?—and forced his eyes to move up from my neckline to my face. “You just look—”

“Wet, I know.”

“Please,” he insisted, making an effort to keep that professional tone of his, “let us—”

Uh-huh.

Enough of this.

“Not necessary. I can pay my own way, and I can handle this myself.” I rolled my shoulders back and straightened my back. I looked like a wet fish some alley cat had dragged from the street, and my stupid eyeglasses certainly didn’t help matters, but I still clung to what little dignity I had left. Whoever this condescending idiot was, I didn’t need his stupid assistance, nor did I need to be indebted to him... even if he had a *Danger! Nuclear!* ranking on the hotness scale. “Anyway, I don’t think I’ll be here long.”

“At least let me help you find your group,” he paused, and I could see him carefully trying to pick his next words. “Or your date, if that’s the case.”

“No date.” The words escaped my lips faster than my brain could process them.

“Oh?” His smirk was back. “And can I assume you’re not trying to get a date either? I mean, I hate to bring up the glasses again, but...”

“You listen here, Mr. 20-20 vision,” I snapped. “Not all of us are blessed with good eyesight, and I certainly don’t want or need a date. Even if...”

Even if that date was you, I almost blurted.

“Even if...?” He prompted, arms crossed over his chest. His eyes were locked on mine, and I could almost feel him trying to read my mind. The jerk was sneaking into my brain, disarranging my thoughts, and enjoying every second of it.

“I don’t have to explain myself to you!”

“Of course not. I just thought that you were about to say that...” He trailed off and, even though I knew he was doing it on purpose, I couldn’t help myself.

“That what?”

He shrugged. “I don’t have to explain myself to you.”

I wanted to strangle him.

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